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# Danse Macabre: the Ballads of Svetlana Makarovič

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## 1. The Poet In Historical Context

By general consensus, Svetlana Makarovič is the »first lady« of contemporary Slovenian poetry. A complex artist, she is the author of a distinguished poetic opus of extraordinary power of expression. If she wrote in a language of »greater diffusion«, she would certainly be regarded as a prominent figure in the European literature of the past few decades. We hope that this publication may help to contribute to the deserved international acclaim of her profoundly moving voice.

To aid the foreign reader in understanding the poetics of Svetlana Makarovič more easily, it is essential to provide some literary and historical background. Svetlana was born just prior to the World War II in a bourgeois family in Maribor. Although she has rarely shared memories of her childhood, it may be assumed that her grim view of human destiny has its roots partly in her early experience of growing up during the war, as well as in her rejection of the stifling drabness of life in the first post-war years in Yugoslavia. She was smothered on the one hand by the double-standard narrow-mindedness of her immediate environment, and on the other by the ideological dictates of the communist regime. Her organic, physical need to reach out for air, light, and freedom was a response to the feeling of being suffocated in a society that was without doors and windows. Rebellion against puritan hypocrisy, the aggression of social institutions and a patriarchal social order, against dictates or taboos that deny people the right to be who they are, runs through her poems as the central theme throughout her maturing as a poet.

At the level of the sociology of culture and psychology of creativity, Svetlana Makarovič stands out as an unusual individual: an upper-crust woman who has chosen the rhythm of

folk songs as her medium of expression, an artist of the highest rank who enjoys great popular acclaim, a representative of the elite culture who opposes the fascist »democracy« of the majority by demanding rights for the disenfranchised, for minorities, for the different, for others. A fascinating artist, an upright and dignified spirit.

Having graduated in acting at the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film and Television Broadcasting in Ljubljana, she initially worked in the theatre for a few years but has lived as a freelance writer most of her later life. In this regard, her remarkable courage and persistence in fighting for better social conditions for artists and for the rights of authors are noteworthy. To some extent, the obstacles she had to contend with were certainly due to her gender: the status of women as inferior in traditional society was particularly persistent and abasing in the arts, which were then an almost exclusively male domain. It is thanks to Svetlana Makarovič that this monopoly in the covertly machistic society was broken. And such merits are, as we know, won dearly.

Nature richly endowed her with talents: a gifted poet and actress, she is also a superb pianist, singer, and composer who has put many of her own ballads and chansons to music. Svetlana's recital performances are as riveting as they are harrowingly beautiful. She also works in the visual medium and has illustrated some of her stories for children. Svetlana Makarovič is a true artistic polyglot.

The intense period of her relationship with poet Gregor Strniša was fruitful and rewarding for the work of both. Strniša is the author of one of the most original poetics of the second half of the 20th century, which integrates Celtic and Germanic mythology into a strikingly modern concept of consciousness that the poet himself had dubbed »cosmic«. Both poets, Gregor Strniša and Svetlana Makarovič, draw extensively on folk lore, especially on balladic poetry, yet they each developed this resource in a distinctly individual fashion: Strniša by innovatively synthesizing the unearthed remains of the language of folk poems and by utilizing processes that are characteristic of modern lyrical poetry, and Svetlana Makarovič by faithfully maintaining the rhythm and lexis of the traditional ballad, while her heartbreaking ballads speak of the dehumanized nature of the modern world.

Writing for children and adolescents is a vital dimension of Svetlana's literary opus: her fairytales (such as *Cosies on the Flying Spoon*, *Mišmaš Bakery*, *Sapramouse*, and others) felicitously merge traditional storytelling with her personal, singularly authentic modern poetics. Children and adults alike adore her puppet plays. On the surface, the warmth of Svetlana's works for children appears to be incongruent with the terrifying atmosphere of the ballads she writes for adults, yet a more thorough observation reveals a deep common denominator – the expression of violence and pain inflicted by institutional society on vulnerable individuals (children and animals).

Her early volumes of poetry were written in a social context that continued to be marked by the ideological control of the communist regime. The first wave of departure from the prescribed official aesthetic of social realism had already taken place in the early fifties with the co-called poetics of *Intimism* in the work of poets Ada Škerl, Jože Udovič, Ivo Minatti, and the »group of four« who appeared on the literary circuit together in 1953 with a poetry volume *Pesmi štirih* (*Poems of the Four*) – their names are Kajetan Kovič, Janez Menart, Tone Pavček, and Ciril Zlobec. The next generation was no longer content with the pastel tones of an intimist retreat into privacy, but instead revolutionized poetic language and, with an immense artistic and civic integrity, criticised the establishment. Gregor Strniša, Dane Zajc, and Veno Taufer constituted the core of this generation. Their daring new poetry was part of the socially critical literary and theatrical movement that introduced *Existentialism* and triggered a series of cultural and political breakthroughs, such as the publication of magazines *Beseda*, *Revija 57* and *Perspektive*, which were nevertheless all banned after a few years and their authors persecuted by the authorities. The formation of true Slovenian dissidents took place in this circle, although in the former Yugoslavia the expression was not even in use. By the end of the fifties, two talented younger women poets joined this courageous generation of writers – Saša Vegri and Svetlana Makarovič. Saša Vegri astounded rancorous philistines with her bold new erotic lyricism, after which she, regrettably, more or less fell silent; Svetlana's early mastery of language, on the other hand, expressed a vitalistic desire for a realisation of intimate happiness in the violent and ravaged world. The

illusion of the possibility of happiness, so authentic and moving, which was characteristic of her first two poetry collections, *Twilight* (*Somrak*, 1964) and *Midsummer's Night* (*Kresna noč*, 1968), disappeared irretrievably in her subsequent volumes: since her collection *The Deadly Nightshades* (*Volčje jagode*, 1972), Svetlana Makarovič has put to verse spine-chilling violence of the society against the individual. In this tenebrous world, one is either the henchman or the victim – and often both. The volumes *The Heart Potion* (*Srčevac*, 1973), *Wormwood Woman* (*Pelin žena*, 1974) and *Time of War* (*Vojskin čas*, 1974) attest to the final maturity of the poet. Her selected poems (*Izštevavanja*, 1977) achieved extraordinary popularity. Since then, the poet has continued to perfect her already well-founded poetic world. Of her later poetry collections, the titles of two extraordinary volumes are *Neighbour Mountain* (*Sosed gora*, 1980) and *That Time* (*Tisti čas*, 1993).

Looking back, we may say that despite her occasional involvement in collectivistic projects, Svetlana Makarovič has always been an individualist artist whose authenticity cannot be reduced to fit the programmes and manifestos of the various groups and movements of the past decades. Even the similarities that she has in common with other poets of her generation are superficial and elusive.

## 2. Phenomenology of Evil

The ballads of Svetlana Makarovič present a genuine phenomenology of evil. Like several other Slovenian poets in the fifties and the sixties – most notably, Dane Zajc – Svetlana Makarovič transcends the comforting romantic notion of the Self as innocent victim and of evil as always inflicted by others.

For Zajc, a human being is always as vulnerable as it is dangerous, as mortal as it is lethal; his evil is many-faced, from the face of Man to its socially institutionalized and metaphysical aspect. Svetlana Makarovič – particularly in her mature poetry, in her ballad-writing phase – likewise perceives evil as an all-encompassing force that, as well as having a human dimension, also has a superhuman nature; it is both natural and supernatural. She discerns the innumerable forms and appearances of the phenomenon of evil with the precision of a scalpel. Her

creative effort is centred on the poetic »analysis« of cause and effect, on the strategies and tactics of evil. Her ballads are a treasure-trove of all the possible, dialectically contradictory, relations between the victim and the executioner.

There is a parallel, worthy of note, to be drawn here between Zajc and Svetlana Makarovič, along with a no less noteworthy difference. Both poets have profound empathy with the suffering of children, whom they understand exceptionally well and with whom they identify; both are authors of superb literary works for children and teenagers. The thematic-specific distinction between them lies in Svetlana's realisation of the fact that apart from the children, the main victims of patriarchal society are women.

Through her poetry, Svetlana Makarovič brings to life many beings from Slovenian mythology that had been more or less consigned to the attic of collective oblivion: *desetnica* - the tenth daughter, *kresnik* - the summer solstice bonfire spirit, the spring-announcing deity of *Zeleni Jurij* - 'Green George', *Pebtra* - the witch or sorceress, *sojenice* - the Fates, *škopnik* - the night spirit, and so on.

The character to which the poet returns, almost obsessively, time and time again, is the Tenth Daughter. According to lore, the tenth daughter has to leave the safety of her home and fend for herself in the cruel world. The myth of the Tenth Daughter is suggestive of the utter poverty of the ancient Slav community, the family's inability to provide for all children, but it is also indicative of the monstrous logic of banishment from the safety of home, family, home village: vulnerability and disenfranchisement cause the Tenth Daughter to suffer at the hand of her own kinsfolk and to eat the bitter bread of exile.

As is characteristic of powerful and authentic poetry, cruel rites of the ancient tribe as a way of punishing rebellious and powerless individuals can be seen as a metaphor for the discriminatory attitude of contemporary society towards those who somehow differ from the majority, be it sexually, ethnically, politically, religiously, or in any other way. The Tenth Daughter is thus a mythical name for the exiled and the displaced. Through poetic revival of the myth Svetlana Makarovič restates the issue of violence that is committed by the authoritarian community against the individual, and more notably, against women.

But if the revived image of the Tenth Daughter remains faithful to the myth's original meaning, the poet has reinterpreted other characters in an authentic and fertile manner; such is her treatment of the familiar symbolism of 'Green George', the personification of the Earth's protector who dispels winter and ushers in the spring. The custom of the celebration of Green George in Slovenia still takes place in Bela Krajina (White Carniola), a lovely but poor farm region in the south of Slovenia. Oton Župančič, one of the greatest Slovenian poets of the first half of the 20th century, was born there; the musicalness of his language won the admiration of Roman Jakobson and led him to analyse the poet's work. In contrast to the canonized Župančič, whose Green George is depicted in the traditional fashion, as a creature of the light, Svetlana Makarovič gives a grim, monstrous vision of the rite of spring in the cycle of poems entitled *Zeleni Jurij* from her early volume *The Deadly Nightshades (Volčje jagode, 1972)*. Here, she masterfully adopts and elevates the rhythmic and lexical qualities of the folk poems in honour of spring, but inverts the celebration of Green George into its opposite: human beings have maimed this bright figure, they have put out his eyes and he returns to them as Grey George, the avenger who goes from door to door to put out people's eyes. »*Of what he has received, he gives a hundredfold*«, says the closing verse.

In the work of Svetlana Makarovič, the motif of vengeance is a frequent one. Victim turns henchman and renders evil for evil. The vicious circle of evil perpetuates itself without end.

Victims in the ballads of Svetlana Makarovič are frequently young girls or young women; hence, they are doubly vulnerable: as a child and as a woman. In a number of ballads, whose central theme is the tragic fate of a pregnant woman who loses her child, this double vulnerability is intensified even further.

One of the key realisations of Svetlana Makarovič, which has not yet received the attention it deserves, is the close connection between the principles of power and sexuality. Armed with the courage of necessity to utter the appalling truth, the poet provides insight into a terrifying truth about violence: that it is motivated and determined by gender. It is no coincidence that the witch occupies a central place in the gallery of Svetlana Makarovič and that death by fire, at the stake, is an obsessively recurring motif in different forms.

### 3. The Modernized Ballad

The ballads of Svetlana Makarovič not only grow out of the Slovenian folk tradition; they also give new vigour to the metametric characteristics of other types of ballad that exist in the broader European context.

In traditional literature, metre was regarded as a natural dimension of poetic expression. In the 20th century, the use of classical forms, founded on laws of metre and their limitations, ceased to be taken for granted but was rather the result of the poet's personal choice. With Svetlana Makarovič, the choice of metre is also semantically motivated, for the metric substance of her lines sounds as unavoidable as destiny. If we may permit ourselves some licence of expression, the *metre* in the poet's verse embodies the *metronome* of fate.

Literary critics established very early on that the poet has put the rhythm and vocabulary of the folk song to good advantage, but it satisfied itself too soon with making only a blanket judgement, namely, that the tragic element in Svetlana's poetic message is a given of the modernisation of old folk ballads. In a nutshell, many interpreters of her poetry have overlooked – or more precisely, overheard – the fact that the tragic effect of Svetlana's ballads originates largely from rhythm, which in turn is based on metre, and that the metre is strongly and profoundly semanticised. In other words: the metre in these poems does not work merely as metre, the substance and the intrinsic code of verse rhythm to which the syntax must submit and that forms the fundamental relationship governing the poetic word. In Svetlana's ballads, the role of metre is far subtler – it carries the meaning of the message.

Metre is always predetermined by elements of the line, the law, regularity, and order – in prosody, metre is even the synonymous with the law, regularity and order, which the proponents of normative poetics have celebrated as a value and the advocates of modernist »freedom« of expression have attacked with equal vehemence. The long-standing use of traditional poetic forms once also provided the reassuring feeling of being safely anchored in the known familiar world. Medieval and Renaissance poetic forms utilize the reiteration of elements at different levels to recreate the circular structure of the »eternal recurrence of sameness« as reassurance of

the meaningfulness of the Cosmos, of society, and the individual's place in both.

The metre of Svetlana's modernized ballads evokes the same feeling: that the world is based on law, regularity, and order. Yet this law happens to be the law of violence, the regularity the unavailability of a difficult and fear-instilling death, and the order the prison of fate. In the world of Svetlana Makarovič, we feel the reassurance, not of the certainty of safety and warmth, but of their opposites – the certainty of extreme danger and frostlike coldness of human relationships. The alternation of accentuated and unaccentuated syllables and the exactness of the rhyme reverberate like the footsteps of Fate closing in on us. Ultimately, death will come with the same certainty as the unaccentuated syllable follows the accentuated syllable, as certain as the reverberation of the rhyme at the end of the line. Death is measured. More accurately: death is the measure, and we are all measured, weighed, and counted. Let us listen to the poem *The Clock (Ura)* from the collection *Mountain Neighbour (Sosed gora, 1980)*, where counting has a triple meaning: thematically, the counting of hours; metrically, the counting of accents and syllables; and existentially – the counting of the living and the dead, the counting out of the dead from the living:

*The first hour beats,  
           death still has not come,  
 the second hour beats,  
           mist there is outside,  
 the third hour beats,  
           quiet hunger,  
 the fourth hour beats,  
           bellishly brash,  
 the fifth hour beats,  
           thin trace of tears,  
 the sixth hour beats,  
           door locked shut,  
 the seventh hour beats,  
           beasts chained up,  
 the eighth hour beats,  
           cries to the skies,*



*the ninth hour beats,*  
     *witch-curses' rattle,*  
*the tenth hour beats,*  
     *dried-out apple tree,*  
*the eleventh hour beats,*  
     *death still has not come,*  
*the twelfth hour beats.*

The odd lines on the left-hand side that count the hours create the effect of a refrain that builds up in a pronounced and eerie gradation arising from the tension of expectation. The even lines, set to the right, determine the content and complement the terrifying imagery of the meaning of hours, which we know from the start – from the introductory lines »*The first hour beats, / death still has not come*« – are the last hours we have left, our final hours. Repetition of the second line – »*death still has not come*« – at the end of the poem intensifies the »suspense« of the poem (to use the cinema jargon) to the utmost. The poet has prepared the meaning of the final, twelfth, hour so well it needs no further explanation and on »*the twelfth hour beats*« the poem ends. Full stop. Because we know. We know what this means. We know that no time is left, when the clock strikes twelve. The poem enters silence, the after-silence. The reader is left to recite the poem to himself to the end, on his own. In his own silence. The silence that echoes with the terror of the unspoken word.

Silencing of the ultimate line is a crafty »device«, suggestive of the technique that was used very advantageously by French poets of the 14th to 16th century in the form known as the *rondel*.

The smooth, metrically flawless rhythm of *The Clock* vitally enhances the effect of ominous predetermination.

A large majority of the poems by Svetlana Makarovič are built on the trochaic tetrameter, one of the oldest and the most widely utilized forms of versification not only in Slovenian, but also in world poetry. This verse is the successor of the trochaic tetrameter of Ancient Greece, a long verse that was split up in the Middle Ages into two shorter lines of trochaic dimeters (dipodies) or tetrameters (octosyllables). This form is frequently utilized in the so-called rhythmic verse of Medieval Latin poetry; it is particularly efficient when used

with the trochaic heptosyllabic line (also heptosyllabe or catalectic trochaic tetrameter). In addition to the trochaic octosyllabe, the so-called »*vagant verse*«, which is a combination of trochaic heptosyllabe and hexasyllabe, also occurs frequently in the famous collection *Carmina Burana*. A pendant to the trochaic tetrameter in the Middle Ages is iambic tetrameter; it too came into existence with the break-up of a longer iambic tetrameter. In the Middle Ages, all these ancient rhythms came to form the rhythmic foundation of folk ballads, Slovenian ones as well; this is why it sounds more familiar to us than any other rhythm, and Svetlana Makarovič has put this fact to excellent use.

Trochaic tetrameter is also found in lullabies, count-out rhymes and other types of children's play. In *Ritmul copiilor – La rhytmique enfantine*, a treatise published in 1967, Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu concluded that the underlying »infant rhythm« of children's songs practically all over the world is based on the trochaic tetrameter. I endorse this conclusion, having verified it with my own experience: when I served as chief editor of *Kurirček*, a literary magazine for schoolchildren, I found that children naturally tend to write in the rhythm of trochaic tetrameter. Small wonder: this is the rhythm they suckled with their mothers' milk and absorbed through play at the tenderest age!

The frequent choice of this rhythm by Svetlana Makarovič therefore is no coincidence: the poet has picked trochaic tetrameter and other kindred rhythms because they broadcast the genre-specific signal for the ballad and because their sound is by far the most familiar to us. People sense these rhythms under their skins, which is why their emotional impact reaches deepest.

The tragic element in Svetlana's ballads thus does not originate solely from the word-heard but rather, in the words of Yuri Lotman, in the »*co- and counter-action*« of the sound and meaning, in rhythm and rhyme on the one hand and the meaning of words on the other. It is not the text that counters the song's cheerfulness and triggers the feeling of sorrow, but rather the cheerfulness of the tune that deepens the tragic effect of the text and charges it emotionally in a way that non-poetic meaning of words never could.

The synthesis of the tune's merriment and the graveness of the vocabulary invariably produce grotesqueness. The gro-

tesque is a modernized version of the tragic. It is the cheerfulness of the hurdy-gurdy. Nothing is more saddening than the lively cheerful rhythm of the hurdy-gurdy. The dance of death is a merry one. Death's stride is a merry one. Merry is the voice that counts the strides and the days.

Count-outs, with their delightful wordplay, occupy an important role in children's games. Enumeration and counting have an important role in the ballads of Svetlana Makarovič. Let us listen to The Counting Rhyme (*Odštevanika*), whose striking, shocking end is also the outcome of surprise due to the poem's intonation, which is based on the child-like innocence of the tune:

*Red cherries I love to eat,  
black ones even more,  
people I love to avoid,  
more gladly every year,  
on the threshold they were standing,  
cherries they were counting,  
these are mine, those are yours, and those are his.*

*Red poppies I love to look at,  
black ones even more,  
fog and darkness I love,  
more so every year,  
on the threshold they were standing,  
lives they were counting,  
these are mine, those are yours, and those are his.*

*Little songs I love to sing,  
yet even more I love to swear,  
I love it also when I'm quiet,  
more so every year,  
on the threshold they were standing,  
the dead ones they were counting,  
these are mine, those are yours, and those are his.*

The counting of elements renders it possible to set up mathematical sets. Statistical counting enables a survey of the human masses. Counting establishes order in the army and in society. Whoever does the counting has power over animals and humans, over every existing thing. Who is the one doing

the counting? Whose voice is it that counts us one by one? Let us listen to the answer given us by Svetlana Makarovič in the ballad Counting Out (*Preštevanje*):

*This is the voice which is counting out,  
counting out your days,  
counting in equal measure  
animals and people  
and all around you,  
and all that seems to you  
because of you  
is being born and living,  
skulls are whitening  
rolling round the world,  
to count out, count out,  
order there must be, order.*

*Do you know that the wind wilts,  
that the tree is drying out,  
do you know that all you see  
is only half alive?  
Ever quieter it is on the field  
of the great wide world,  
ever louder grows the whisper  
of counting out,  
and you know that some morning  
you too will be counted out,  
to count out, count out,  
order there must be, order.*

*O black grain of death,  
when to the world you are born,  
o black grain of birth,  
when you leave it again,  
and when they count you out  
from the other side, from the dark,  
perhaps you will discover all,  
perhaps also you will not,  
perhaps it will be a moment,  
perhaps a thousand years,  
to count out, to count out,  
order there must be, order.*

The poet certainly depends on the rhythm and lexis of the Slovenian folk song. Poeticized characters set on the stage of her ballads are modernized versions of the figures from our mythological lore. But the Slovenian poet has also utilized, in a fruitful and innovative manner, some of the features that are typical of the Italian dance *ballata*, the French *ballade*, and the English or Scottish *ballad*.

A deeply influential theory of the ballad was already worked out by Goethe in the »Notes and Treatises«, which he wrote to accompany his »West-Eastern Divan« (*Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständnis des West-Östlichen Divans*, 1819), differentiating between »natural« forms (*Naturformen*), namely the epic (*Epos*), lyrical poetry (*Lyrik*) and drama, and the historically constituted »artistic poetic forms« (*Dichtarten*), which he enumerated (in accord with the German alphabet) as allegory, **ballad**, cantata, drama, elegy, epigram, epistle, epic poem, novella (*Erzählung*), fable, epopee (heroic poem), idyll, didactic poem (*Lehrgedicht*), ode, parody, novel, romance, and satire. He gives the natural forms his famous definitions: epic poetry is »clear narrative« (*klar erzählende*), lyrical poetry is »enthusiastically agitated« (*entusiastisch aufgeregte*) and the drama »personal agent« (*persönlich handelnde*). The three natural forms derive from a primordial literary form, »pre-historical poetry« or »proto-poetry« (*Urdichtung*), which is thought to be similar to the ballad. Goethe's thought eloquently expounds the significance he attributed to the ballad. Goethe knew well of what he spoke, for he wrote some of the most forceful ballads in German and world literature. Goethe very accurately felt that the ballad comes into being at the crossroads of epic narrative, lyrical poem, and drama. By virtue of its verse form and emotional impact it belongs to lyrical poetry, by narrative diction to the epic, and due to its dramatic atmosphere and frequent utilization of dialogue, it is related to drama. These general characteristics of the ballad are also true of the texts of Svetlana Makarovič.

A significant characteristic of normative aesthetics was the prohibition of genre mixing. Goethe's pondering on the »pre-historic« or »proto-poetry« (*Urdichtung*), from which individual genres were thought to derive, was in fact one of the fruitful and far-reaching attempts to transcend the constraints of genres in theory and practice. Goethe's concept of the common origin of literary genres is a good explanation of the literary

and historical fact that some genres (most notably folk songs), which we hold to be primeval, are a mixture of genres. As we have seen, ballads are a good example of a hybrid genre. Goethe saw the possibility of genre mixing, not only at the source of literature, submerged in the darkness of time, but also in modern time: »One may combine all three elements (*lyrical, epic and dramatic*) and vary poetic genres endlessly.«

Let us refer, in this context, to the macro-structural rhetoric figure of *gradation* as an essential characteristic of the ballad. From the outset, just as in Ancient Greek tragedy, we have a precognition of the truth and, at least at the subconscious level, know what it is, but its dreadfulness forces us to delay the moment of its recognition. Structurally, the ballad is founded precisely on the *deferment* of the truth as the source of dramatic suspense. A desperate but weakening defence against the truth gradually increases the tension. Svetlana Makarovič is a master of slowly measured »doses« of the truth and of the emotional gradation of the ballad.

The principle of delaying the recognition of the truth by increasing the tension is most strikingly expressed in *English* and *Scottish ballads* whose sombre atmosphere, versified rhythm and structure are very similar to Slovenian folk ballads.

Yet English and Scottish ballads, which mostly originate from the late Middle Ages, are not the oldest. The entire ramified ballad family are the progeny of their proto-mother, after which the genus was named: *balada* or *dansa* are names of Provençal origin that signify a dance song, a meaning that is also shared by the Italian medieval *ballata* (the source being the verb *ballare* – *to dance*). By comparing the structure, nature of the genre, and the meta-metric meaning (communicative potential) of the Italian *ballata* with characteristics typical of Svetlana's ballads, we find that the verse rhythm of her ballads is extremely light-footed, playful, and that it corresponds to the dance origins of the ballad as a genre. Even her voice, embodying the fragileness of the individual, frequently addresses the community/society as the source of aggression and evil. Not infrequently, the chorus, the collective, the plural subject in first person, raises its voice as well, be it as the exponent of evil or as its victim. The structural interplay between the soloist and the chorus of the »proto-ballad« is thus »transposed« by the poet to the level of communication and thematized as the central issue of human existence.

In addition to the Italian dance *ballata* and the *English* or *Scottish ballad*, we are also familiar with the third genus, whose origin lies in French medieval poetry – *la ballade*. If the Italian *ballata* falls in the category of a dance song and stanzaic form, and the English *ballad* is a form of narrative which permits a variety of verse and stanzaic forms (with a tendency to use *ballad rhythm* and *ballad stanzas*), the French *ballade* is a distinctly, strictly defined poetic form; not determined merely by the genre, it prescribes precisely the poetic form on all three levels of organisation of the text – the rhythm of the verse as well as the stanzaic structure and the composition of the poem as a whole.

The French ballad has many subgenres, although most of them generally follow the three-stanzaic structure with a shorter final stanza. The three-part pattern of the ballad was established by Guillaume de Machaut, the leading French poet and composer of the 14th century, and its final form perfected in the second half of the 14th century by Eustace Deschamps, his pupil, who attached a terse summation, the so-called *envoi* (address, dedication), to the three-part structure as a closing stanza. The distinguishing characteristic of the French ballad is its very rigorous rhyme: the entire text is usually based on three or four rhymes and the arrangement of rhymes in every stanza follows the same pattern. The *envoi*, which functions as an explanatory or commendatory resume of the poem, in the formal sense reiterates the metric and euphonic structure of the second half of the longer stanzas. All four stanzas end with the same verse, which plays the key role of a refrain. Such »close-knit« form permits an unusual and refined melodiousness of the text.

As an art form, the French ballad achieved its height with the harrowing examples that sing of the unfortunate destinies of the three poets who wrote them: the would-be king, Prince Charles d'Orléans (1394 – 1465), who spent a significant portion of his years held captive by the English; François Villon, a vagabond who probably ended his life on the gallows, and a woman poet, Christine de Pisan, who expressed her pain on the death of her beloved husband in a widely known ballad but who is better known today for *The Book of the City of Ladies*, a utopian treatise that is extolled by feminists as one of the first programmes for women's equality.

The most elegant of variants is the form dubbed by the French literary theory as *la petite ballade*, also known by its Italian name, *baladetta*. It was raised to immortality by Villon with his *Ballad of the Ladies of Bygone Times* (*Ballade des Dames du Temps jadis*), famous for its refrain »*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?*« – literally: »*But where are the snows of yester year?*«.

If we compare the structure of the French *ballade* with the Counting Rhyme (*Odštevanka*) and Counting Out (*Preštevanje*) ballads by Svetlana Makarovič, we will be surprised to find that our contemporary Slovenian poet instantiates faithfully and with precision the structure of the French ballad: the three-stanzaic form in which the final verse (sometimes the final distich, too) is repeated as a refrain. The reiteration of the refrain at the end of every stanza is also typical of some of her poems with a larger number of stanzas, but it should be pointed out that the three-stanzaic form is not the only possible structure of the French ballad: *le chant royal*, regarded as the most demanding of subgenres, consists of five longer stanzas that are identical in their arrangement of eleven-line verses each and a five-line envoi at the end, so that the ballad has sixty lines in length. The structural similarity between the composition of medieval French ballads and the modernized ballads of Svetlana Makarovič is therefore quite evident.

To conclude, our poet revives, and in her own personal way develops, not only the heritage of the Slovenian folk ballad, but also the abundant heritage of other genres and forms of the ballad that are native to Europe: with her playful rhythm, literally a dance rhythm, she connects to the character of the Italian *ballata*; with the stanzaic structure and utilization of refrain, to the French *ballade*; and with her verse rhythm, frequent use of four-liners, and the sombreness of the message she delivers, to the English and Scottish ballad. It is thus evident that the nature of the ballads of Svetlana Makarovič cannot be understood properly only in the context of the traditional Slovenian ballad. Yet neither has Slovenian folk ballad come into being *ex nihilo*, as nothing more than the fruit of the Slovenian heart and soul, as one might be led to believe on the basis of the ethnocentric assertions of the traditional Slovenian literary history and ethnography; rather, it is the result of an overflowing of various poetic genres and forms from one language into another, from one people to another.



In this regard, the highly important role and the unmatched artistic achievements of the ballad in German literature must be mentioned, from the medieval folk literature to later art(ificial)istic ballads.

The issue of whether structural similarities between the ballads of Svetlana Makarovič and non-Slovenian types of ballad are the result of her conscious artistic decisions falls beyond the scope of this analysis and would be better investigated from the psychological aspects of creativity. I see her extraordinary and fertile connectedness with the sumptuous palette of possibilities afforded by the ballad subgenres as the deep artistic intuitiveness of a poet who has sensed the abundant, inwardly ramifying, potentials of the ballad and who has, by researching and developing these potentials, come closest to fundamental realisations of the ballad across different languages and national literatures. The conclusion about the pan-European dimension of her work is valid, not only at the formal level, but also with respect to the artistic worth of her poetry: as the structures of Svetlana's ballads connect Slovenian heritage with the traditions of other European nations, so her artistic vision grows from a Slovenian vision of the world and transcends it into a universal account of human destiny. Svetlana Makarovič is a great European, as well as a Slovenian, poet.

*Translated from the Slovene by Mia Dintinjana,  
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