
Vlado Žabot and the Question of Identity

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Born in 1958 in the village of Šafarsko, not far from the town of Ljutomer and right next to the Croatian border, Vlado Žabot grew up in Prekmurje, a region where Slovene culture has always had to define itself in relation to the cultures of Croatia, Hungary, and Austria. Although Žabot's literary works are rooted in the mysticism of Prekmurje and bring the regional folk tradition to life, it would be a mistake to view his writing simply as a form of "localism"; the topics he explores are universal and have to do with the question of self-identity on a fundamental as well as a cultural level.

Žabot belongs to the group of the Slovene prose writers who appeared on the scene at the turn of the 1990s. Slovene literary critics tend to refer to these writers as the generation of the nineties, and their writing has generally been described as postmodernism.¹ Among other things, these writers' works are marked by a distrust of imposed "absolute truths," a skepticism about uniformity for the sake of higher values, and a great variety of individual poetics. Their literary approaches were seeking an answer to the specific cultural situation. For Slovene culture, the 1990s represented a new period for two important reasons: first, on the local political level, Slovenia proclaimed its independence in 1991, thus ending the nation's centuries-long subjugation to foreign powers, and second, on the economic and cultural level, globalizing processes in the nineties introduced the threat of cultural amalgamation. Given the new conditions, which shaped ways of thinking on both the individual and national levels, these two developments influenced the processes of identification in different ways.

¹ See Tomo Virk, *Postmoderna in "mlada slovenska proza"* (Maribor: Obzorja, 1991), among others.

When a country has not yet developed its own identity, literature and art assume the role of sustaining and shaping national awareness in order to preserve and develop the community that created them.² These functions, along with the aesthetic function, were assumed by Slovene literature, especially in the period from the early nineteenth century to independence in 1991, a period in which writers were particularly interested in those European literary trends that strived to express national awareness. Literature helped define the cultural self-identity of the national community that lived between the Austrian-German, Italian, Hungarian, and Croatian ethnic spheres, in a place where Slavic culture interacted on a large scale with Germanic and Romance cultures and, to some degree, also with the Hungarian culture, to form the specific character of Slovene culture. Literature served as a guide for this dynamic cultural identity.

With independence in 1991, the function of legitimizing the corporate existence of the nation, together with its culture and history, passed largely to the institution of the state. Writers no longer felt obliged to serve the national cause, since the identity of the nation was now self-evident. Political processes converged with cultural/civilizational ones, such as globalization, defining a stance toward the whole, fragmentation, and specialization; with a general distrust of public spectacle; with the privileging of appearance over fact; with terrorism; with the mechanisms of social manipulation, advertising, mass information, the technologization of life, and so on. In the light of such concerns, it was not the corporate life of the nation that was under threat - this, after all, was protected by the existence of the Slovene state; now it was the private individual who felt threatened, who found little to ensure the stability of his or her existence. The condition for the individual's being-in-the-world, to borrow Heidegger's term, became the ability to interact with the Other as a way of preserving one's own (and also the Other's) integrity, inasmuch as the individual is defined through continuous becoming, which is

² See two studies by Janko Kos, *Pregled slovenskega slovstva* (Ljubljana: DZS, 1976) and *Dubovna zgodovina Slovencev* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1996), among others, as well as Z. Darasz, *Problemy autoidentyfikacji kulturowej i narodowej w literaturze słoweńskiej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1995).

the condition for the character and consistency of the individual in distinguishing one's self from the Other.

Žabot's writing is saturated with a magic that brings the reader into the created imaginary world. At the same time, his narrative is constructed - stylistically, through the presented world, and in the image of the main character - in such a way that doubts necessarily arise as to the plausibility of this world. Consequently, the reader is, equally, both immersed in the magic's illusion and suspicious of it. Žabot's masterly use of language conveys strong sensory impressions - and, above all, instinctual feeling - through its use of sound and words associated with the senses (visual, aural, tactile, smell, taste), its evocation of public atmosphere, and its skillful use of stylistic levels, all of which are set in a narrative technique that, while closely related to stream of consciousness, at times almost approaches realistic description.

The recipient of this magic is caught up in a web of experiences both existential and mystical, and a primitive eroticism that verges on animal biological determination and pornography - as well as obscure myth and psychological manipulation. The narrator becomes the possessor of this recipient, who is placed either in a natural rural landscape that recalls Prekmurje, or, as in *The Succubus*, in an urban environment where fear lurks in the shadows with some unidentified evil. The human individual must confront a threat that comes not only from nature or civilization, but also from himself, for he projects himself onto his surroundings. In the rural setting, Žabot's protagonist is lost in nature (forests, water, marshland, roots, sounds), while in the city, he is dominated by the products of civilization, a culture of images and mass spectacle. In both environments, sensory impressions are subjected to the filtering mechanisms of culture: the mythologizing of nature and the mystification of the city. These mechanisms are the result of the memory that is preserved in language, in its vocabulary, grammar, and stylistic modes, in the works of culture (in the broad sense of the word), and in the memory stored in the body. Memory, therefore, is what makes self-identification possible, even as it marks the boundaries of the individual.³

³ On the position of cognitive psychology with regard to memory and cognitive mechanisms, see E. Rosch and B. L. Lloyd, eds., *Cognition*

Like Žabot's other protagonists, Valent Kosmina, the protagonist of *The Succubus*, is dominated by the desire for love. The history of his involvement with women, which is presented in the form of fleeting images in his consciousness, comprises a string of disappointments. His various embodiments cause Valent to be lost in multiplicity. The reason behind this multiplicity is a woman who, like the demonic succubus of legend, preys on men's minds with her beautiful appearance. But in his striving to meet the expectations of the age and to satisfy his own desire, Valent not only does not know who he is; he loses himself also in the aim of his quest. Women flicker before him like pictures from advertisements, magazines, movies, and sometimes in a quasi-literary performance. They are distinguished by the female attributes of corporeality or by the aesthetic category of beauty. Although they attract Valent, he does not engage with them, and the desire to possess them exposes his weakness. He balances on the edge of the real and the unreal, like characters from other Žabot novels based in the world of nature. Love, too, possesses a cultural memory of the forms in which it was felt. To go no farther than its external appearance, its cultural appearance, leads to the loss of the existential, metaphysical, epistemological, and creative meanings of love, which determine the essence of human nature. Žabot, it seems, tries to attain the conditions that indicate the meaning of love, and he seeks them in the entanglements of the unconscious mind, in animism and mythology, in which he finds evil alongside that which he desires.

Fictional probability allows Žabot to use the game of make-believe in creative ways, despite it being constantly bracketed.⁴ In his writing, the characters are performers who play different parts in stories that are, usually, physically implausible. They are the products of the plots the author creates, and as such, constitute a rationale that allows the psychological identification

and Categorization (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978); on the linguistic categorization of the world, see also C. Hágège, *L'homme de paroles* (Paris: Fayard, 1986); on the literary possibilities presented by language memory, see M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁴ See Kendall Walton, "Uznanie fikcji: zawieszenie niewiary czy udawanie wiary," tr. P. Mróz, in M. Gołaszewska, ed., *Estetyka w świecie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984). The term comes from Walton.

to take place. Make-believe, then, although it plunges the protagonist into paranoia, can also serve as a means for acquiring self-knowledge. If a person confronts different parts of himself, then he multiplies his life, like a child who plays games and thus enriches his life.⁵ Unusual stories constitute constructions that are created by the need for a mimetic representation of reality. They are identifying plots, but lack the simplicity of an emblem. They require the interpretive effort of the reader, who assumes a different attitude to them. The reader's feelings range from getting caught up in the imaginary world to rejecting its images as being the product of self-definition. Žabot provokes the reader. He develops his story in a way that makes sure that the reader will find him- or herself in the world the author creates. Again and again, he makes the reader pause, because virtually no events are presented in a simple cause-and-effect order. The whole story is blurred.

Despite this fact, the narrator always starts in the physical space and focuses on it. A description that begins realistically or tells of ordinary events changes into a chain of entangled situations and appearances that cannot be clearly explained. This is not the kind of space that points to some direct referent; rather, it is the projection of a psyche dominated by libido. A small detail can assume a gargantuan character in this space, but it sacrifices the carnivalesque optimism for the sake of the dominating darkness of the primitive.⁶ What interests Žabot is not the enlightened identity of the individual, but rather the inward identity of one who lives, and tries to understand himself and the world, from the perspective of magic. Thus, sensations and animistic experiences prevail over intellect, for intellect would make it impossible to attain a sense of mystery, since reason is responsible for the picture of the so-called objective reality. Objective reality, however, turns out

⁵ See Yu. Lotman, "Kukly v sisteme kul'tury," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo v SSSR*, no. 2 (1978).

⁶ On the carnivalesque, see M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984). On the primitive, see C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1991). The conception of the individually and culturally motivated unconscious derives originally from Freudian psychoanalysis, in particular, the concept of the Id; Freudian psychoanalysis also provides the basis for Žabot's belief in the organizing strength of the libido.

to be simply a game of perspective – a game in which meaning lags behind.

The complexity of Žabot's prose, its multilayered nature, does not easily succumb to interpretation, for it does not allow itself to be confined to the order the interpreter would wish to impose. Just like the meaning hidden within it, this prose grows continually more opulent even as it becomes more elusive. Its essence resides in the author's ability to mine the creative magic in language, a magic that makes it possible for implausible worlds to exist with varying degrees of probability. Continuous discovery, the exploration of the region between what was and what is, can happen only through anomaly – that which goes beyond the conventional norms of knowledge and life. Literature possesses the capacity for creating mythic reality, which is something experienced writers are familiar with, and which has nothing in common with mystification, with covering things up. The literary creator discovers the world and diagnoses it, as well as the individual's position within this world. He employs ways of accessing meaning that are different from those that form the basis of scientific knowledge. The writer's primary tool is language and the imagination it conceptualizes, intuition, intellect, feelings and sensations. Žabot's stance toward fiction, among other things, derives from this. He does not question its existence in spite of the fact that literary fiction is surrounded by question marks. As a result, the reader agrees to be possessed, to be carried off (as Kendall Walton puts it), remaining in an ambivalent state of dependence on it: a state of both surrender and distance.

Through the creative reality of magic, such writing calls on the reader's capacity for empathy, which serves cognition. Magic provides a way to approach the mystery of the human individual, which is connected with the telluric forces of the earth and the cosmos. In Žabot's prose, the experience of the individual is not only what seems to have already happened and should be forgotten, but also what resides deep in the unconscious mind; what is obscure and, although appealing, raises hopes that can never be fulfilled. This leads to the porousness of the characters and worlds in the novels *The Old Pillar*, *Pastoral*, and *Nights of the Wolf*, as well as in the early short-story collection *The Bukovo Mother*, which anticipates Žabot's other works.

These novels are dominated by a semantics of night, dusk, mist, wind, roots, cracks, humming, mud, stickiness, mucus, blackness, water, sawdust, and decay – a semantics that underscores the fluidity and variability of the created worlds, which go through multiple metamorphoses. This is not about the closed space of the illusion, but about demonstrating the influence of an environment and experiences that originate in different temporal dimensions. Such elements constitute the cognitive experience of the human being, which is what defines the identity of an individual. Žabot believes that within each individual destiny is concentrated the experience of at least several generations. This experience is retained in linguistic memory as well as in the body's memory. As the successor to many generations, Žabot's protagonist defines himself through his interactions with the Other and with his surroundings; that which resides in the unconscious mind is thus activated. The world molds the individual and, at the same time, is itself shaped by what the individual projects onto it. Consequently, a person is responsible as well for the evil that surrounds him.⁷

In constructing the emotional and cognitive world of his protagonists, Žabot focuses on corporeality, animal passions, and eroticism. The libido releases the past and present experience of the body, the body's memory.⁸ Fear and tension dominate in a world of mysterious forces and the potentiality of life, as well as in the presented worlds of the novels *The Nymph* and *The Succubus*. If the protagonist wishes to survive, he must directly confront the illusion and evil that surround him and at the same time engage with life's mystical and mythic elements. His paranoia stems from the forces that drive him, although he is not fully aware of them. Various persecution manias, especially when based in a usually covert eroticism, send the protagonist of *The Succubus* plummeting into the

⁷ On Heidegger's view of the existence of the human being in the world, see K. Michalski, *Heidegger i filozofia współczesna* (Warsaw: PIW, 1978). On the darker levels of human consciousness, see E. Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974).

⁸ On the body as a sign of identity of the psychophysically axiological individual, see A. Lowen, *The Language of the Body: The Physical Dynamics of Character Structure* (Alachua, Florida: Bioenergetics Press, 2006).

abyss. Valent Kosmina's world is one of extreme shifts, as is also the case with the protagonists in Žabot's other novels. In this world, fear never goes away and the individual must define himself in its presence.

The Slovene writer Jurij Hudolin has remarked that Vlado Žabot writes big stories in small landscapes.⁹ This observation captures very well the combination of universality and local focus in Žabot's prose - a prose that deserves the reader's attention, as well as the attention of the translator, because of its artistic value, its anthropological perspective, and its metaliterary reflection on plot structure. Paradoxically, the image of the magus is brought to life in the reflected perspective concealed within the fragmented narration. We see the presented world through the eyes of this magus, who takes possession of the fictional world by means of the word. And he places the reader in the midst of it all, with all his impulses, frustration, distance, passivity, and curiosity about what will happen next.

⁹ J. Hudolin, "Paranoja," in V. Žabot, *Sukub* (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2003).

About the authors

Vlado Žabot (b. 1958) made his literary debut in 1986 with a collection of short stories entitled *The Bukovo Mother* (*Bukovska mati*). These stories anticipated some of the major concerns in the novels that followed: *The Old Pillar* (*Stari pil*, 1989), *Pastoral* (*Pastorala*, 1994), *Nights of the Wolf* (*Volčje noči*, 1996), *The Nymph* (*Nimfa*, 1999) and *The Succubus* (*Sukub*, 2003). He has also written prose for children and teenagers: *Dotty and Fluffy Go Looking for Mickey* (*Pikec in Pubec iščeta Mihca*, 1990) and *The Secret of Fairyvale Swamp* (*Skrivnost močvirja Vilindol*, 1994). In 1996, he received the Prešeren Fund Award (Slovenia's most respected prize in art and culture) for *Pastoral*, and the following year, *Nights of the Wolf* won the prestigious Kresnik Prize for Best Novel of the Year.

Žabot graduated from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana, where he studied Slovene and comparative literature. Besides his literary writing, he also contributes articles to magazines and newspapers. Since 2003 he has been the president of the Slovene Writers' Association.

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