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Two Melancholic Essays on Slovene Literature

Andrej Inkret

It is a fact that Slovene literature is almost unknown beyond the region encompassed by the language, the exceptions of yesterday and today simply proving the rule. And to any better informed stranger, it might also seem to be some phantasm of an exclusively local, if not provincial character and significance.

However, the fact is that none of the poets and other men of letters who have contributed to the almost two centuries long tradition of Slovene lay literature, from the Enlightenment and Romanticism onwards, have ever managed to break through into the general consciousness of European literary and spiritual tradition. Right up to the present-day all have remained only and solely Slovene writers. Even those evaluated by literary history and current criticism in Slovenia as of the highest poetical or literary worth have only experienced some few, sporadic, more or less courtesy translations into other languages. But though this is unequivocal, some of these, in their inventiveness, attractiveness, entirety and – if one wishes – in the universality of their artistic formulation, are by all valid axiological standards up to the standard of so-called European literature. Irrespective of the fact that this imaginary “European” axiology is extremely approximate and in some profound, historical sense somewhat arbitrary, Slovene literature has never had any influence upon it. This fact is probably sorrowed over, be it silently or vocally, by all of us here who have dealings of any kind with literature. And this in Slovenia, where from times past literature has enjoyed a special national and social regard. Also known only too well to us is that the history of literature in Europe is, in both essential ideas and stylistic parameters, the history of Slovene literature. Throughout, literature in Slovenia has lived in close communication

with the European literary and spiritual complex - nevertheless this communication has only been one-way.

Early utilitarian and mostly religious Slovene literature had its beginnings in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century but the first truly literary texts in Slovene came into being only two centuries later. Though Slovene literature has thus been “bound” by its language borders, it has never felt inferior or claustrophobic and only rarely has it permitted autarchic desires and xenophobia. If I paraphrase Wittgenstein: the bounds of its language are not the boundaries of its “world”.

Ideas and stimulation from the European context have been used openly and without prejudice in Slovene literature, but within its own geographical, historical, spiritual etc. context it has never “placed” any original initiatives of its own. Considering the special national and historical fate of Slovenes, this was objectively impossible for a long period, at the same time perhaps subjectively also undesired. Revealing its own main task and significance in its “inner” witness to the specific actualities and authentic perspectives of the Slovene community, Slovene literature devoted itself to this with particular perseverance and especially intense efforts of form.

To continue: it is precisely literature that has in some profound, subtle sense safeguarded the Slovene community from the historical damages so frequently launched against it by the colonialistic appetites of stronger and more expansive nations in the region. Numerically small, resulting in historical and above all topical political deficiencies, Slovenia has often been witness to attempts at a self-defensive “inclusion” in various pan- and south- Slavic concepts, some of which have originated here. In recent times other ideas have suggested a gradual “dissolution” into some kind of trans-national “working-class” that would become the sole social reality in some kind of trans-national “working-class” that would become the sole social reality in some approximated communistic future. Ideas about the (self) cessation of the Slovene nation are frequent and relatively broad in dimension. It is unnecessary to emphasize that ultimately it is all the same whether these ideas appear under the name of some universal “liberating” or eschatological vision or originate from some chiefly partial party appetite.

Sooner or later their starting point is the same and voluntaristic. From the modern social, political and ultimately economical point of view, the Slovene national existence is marginal and unproductive and in this light, probably even irrelevant.

As the eminent topos of the Slovene language, and certainly also with the ideological schemes more or less explicitly formulated in its poems and tales, Slovene literature was for a long time, perhaps right up to the end of the First World War, the primary, fundamental and at the same time the most representative form of the self-substantiation of Slovenes as a legitimate national community and indeed a handy substitute for the historical State that Slovenia's past was unable to project. It was certainly the chief generator of the Slovene collective consciousness in the ethnic and often in the political sense. Literature was the highest national institution and authority, though a biography of its most important writers is as a rule witness to social unsuccess and tragedy and despite the fact that, even today, Slovenes almost always detect their significance only posthumously...

It is therefore possible to say that we Slovenes are in some way a "literary" nation. For a longer period the national question in Slovenia was also the literary one, so that the history of the Slovene national spirit covers in great measure the history of Slovene literature. Even today the anachronistic idea of literature's constitutive, "orpheic" character and mission can still be found in Slovenia. And Slovene writers are still obliged to annual every social and moral deficiency of the prevailing political power merely by the authority of their literature...

As mentioned, the most important works in Slovene literature - really the only ones under serious discussion - maintain their validity even according to so-called European standards. Slovene literature can never, ever be comprehended as an instrument administered by some a priori (religious) or voluntaristic (political) idea, as the manifestation of some nationalistic self-will. Just the opposite: its poetical works contain detectable tales of original and fundamental human problems, where national identification (descent, language, affiliation to any particular social group and its cohesive spiritual tradition etc) is but one of the elements inevitably subsumed to man's humanness.

Whenever this “tale” is literature and whenever it is poetry, that vulgar, nationalistic ideology asserting that man’s essence is defined and determined by his group appurtenance, as expressed for example in the following absurd statement “I am as much a man in as much as I am Slovene”, is completely foreign to Slovenia.

Certainly clear is that the ontological starting point of every valid literary witness or poetical “tale” is the complete opposite. Only in my essential humanness is my Slovene essence also fated. In other words, my existential truth is not formed solely by the truth of my Sloveneness, however binding and fateful this may be for me. There is always a difference between them that cannot be overcome by anything.

This difference is the one of man’s irreducible humanness, at its living and individual core constituting the consciousness of boundless liberty, at the same time the consciousness of an irrevocable end and death. Similarly, that of the human affiliation to collective traditions and cultures, to this or that form of social-historical power and action, institutions etc, where freedom and death lose their status as man’s ontological definitions, altering into the problem of “transfer”, into a matter of ideas and ideologies, will and power. It is here, in this difference, that the “space” opens up into which literature or artistic articulation of the complex truths of the human world belongs.

As I see it, the authentic literary, and thus also “European” dimension of Slovene literature lies in its open and uncalculating witness to existing human problems, essentially defined by the national element, with its own language (the sole instrument of every literature) determining, linking, without there being any possibility of its actual extent being touched.

Even though the question of the nation is so indistinguishably linked to that of literature, the fact is that Slovene literature in itself “knows” precisely that man does not belong “genetically” to a particular nation but simply regards it as a system of cultural and social values, consequently arbitrary ones. Such appurtenance is of course based on a free, open, critical and also radically sceptical relation to national qualities, inclusive of the total right to renegation.

Also ultimately true is that amidst Slovene writers who have made their name, there are none who have abandoned Slovene to write in any other language. Though bilinguality has long been almost unavoidable at the pragmatic level for Slovenes, it appears only sporadically in our literature and rarely solely on account of tendencies of form. The two hundred year experience of Slovene literature is a reliable witness that to writers here their fated Slovene “essence” is more powerful than the original freedom that is theirs as modern people.

Or can it be that freedom reveals itself here, in their persistent, stubborn and certainly irrational (and impractical) fidelity, with which they enclose themselves within the “narrow” confines of Slovene, the only language they can possibly write in?

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Slovene verbal art is essentially characterized by a kind of radical ambivalence concerned as much with its poetical structure as its social circumstances. In the past Slovene literature established itself as a special form of national mythology, as such preserving its “aura” in one way or another until the present day. As poetry it had also been for a long period an exclusive, artistic play with language and an esoteric existential, historic witness. Needless to say in this its own, certainly essential dimension, it was without any decisive influence on the actual and concrete (inter)human life of Slovenia.

Traditional Slovene (self)comprehension of poetry is Orphean. As one of the smallest of European nations, without its own political past and which organized itself into a national state only after the Austro-Hungarian break of 1918 (and even this was a multinational framework known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes i.e. a state with a limited authority and Balkan denotation plus a large part of its national territory beyond the state boundary) the verbal arts signified to the Slovene the most “natural” substitute and compensation for objective social and historical deficits. Actually literature had become the prime definition for the Slovene national spirit and the representative manifestation of its identity as far back as the Protestant books of the 16th century - including a complete translation of the Bible - reaching its particular apogee

with the first-class poetical formulations of France Prešeren originating during the first half of the last century within the context of European Romanticism. For long centuries the Slovene identity was almost exclusively a matter of language. Thus it is logical that poetry, in which language achieves its ultimate and most complex realization, became established as the most direct, reliable and authentic expression of the Slovene nationality principle.

Thus Slovenes as a national community were united, substantiated and legitimized by the poetical Word. Poetry was of “mythological” origin and foundation, was a representative expression of their independent, common existence and social practice, even ultimately representing a Slovene “defence” against the colonialistic pressures of greater nations in the region and also against the self-destructive temptations of Slovenes themselves. In a manner of speaking poetry was “everything” truly authentically and unambiguously endowed upon Slovenes by the past and by tradition. Poetry was witness to Slovene history and poetry was itself that history. The history of Slovenes is in great measure “covered” by the history of Slovene literature. Even in the Second World War, during the National Liberation rebellion that prevailed as the first and most important historical action by Slovenes, the military units were named after Slovene lyricists and literary men took up important commands in the political and military resistance leadership.

Nevertheless, as mythology Slovene verbal art functioned in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, at the ontological level it substantiated the Slovene ethnic existence and its national Idea, on the other it was in ceaseless, frequently tragic conflict and dissent with the current social, historical truth of Slovenia. In a real, social sense, almost all the best Slovene poets have been unsuccessful, unhappy persons. Poets died young, impoverished, ill and humiliated. Honour and renown are theirs only with posthumous rehabilitation. The figure of the “drunk” and “cursed” poet is typical for Slovene poetry.

Poetry therefore represents the Slovene initiation and apotheosis on the one hand, on the other the same verses are

constantly professing disappointment, despair and anger at the actual “ontological” state of Slovene affairs. To the Slovene poet his *native land* is “the image of Paradise” but at the same time “a cold homestead” of discord, shameful arguments and “wrathful tempests”. The homeland is now “like health”, now again “as a whore” mocking those who love her. It was from a poetical pen of the second half of the 19th century that the thought came that all Slovenes should be sacrificed to the Slovene “idea”... In short, poetry in Slovenia is mythology, simultaneously it is a relentless, radical “criticism of everything existing”, frequently of its own self-destruction: the ideal voice of Utopia, at the same time a dystopian hopelessness.

Thus, in the face of its own “elected” status, Slovene verbal art was never an unambiguous and pragmatic manifestation of a monolithic common conscience or national ideology. The “Sloveneness” to which poetry with its own language belonged in an essential way and in which it played a mythical “Orphean” role, was almost always marked with an essential scepticism and tragic irony and not infrequently with resistance and a catastrophic sarcasm. It is precisely because *both* were present in its lines that it can also be spoken of as true and authentic poetry...

Accordingly, poetry was never solely a foundation for the Slovene national conscience and social action but was in some manner always their problematization. As poetry, it was of course, characterized by universal human problematics so that its most valid formulations contain scarcely any trace of national(istic) ideologies or provincial xenophobia. Equally it was as poetry founded on the inalienable autonomy of its own poetical language. The usage of this language in practical national or social matters is of itself questionable, or at least ambiguous.

The mythological role played by poetry amidst Slovene often blocked its poetical autonomy. Whether poetry wished it or not, it was already a priori set at the heart of Slovene problematics and was thus always employed in the constructive, historical national axiom, although its own comprehensions of actual life in Slovenia were quite unsuited to this for they were frequently tragic and dystopian. It is directly from here that the

ceaseless Slovene problems with the verbal arts and their “irresponsible” creators originate. To Slovenes poetry is far too important to permit it to be left to poets. Herein the fact that frequently Slovene poetry was able to release its own linguistic, artistic, testifying energy only in conflict with the current state of the so-called “nation” and its practical “politicians”.

In consequence, one of the most persistent, one could say obsessive themes of Slovene verbal art is, of old, the conflict between poets and so-called “society” - a conflict that is always traumatic for the poet, witness as it is to some fundamental disparities between the poetical vision of the truth and the prevalent “national” values or norms. This is, of course, the conflict between the autonomy and freedom of the individual, subjective man and the rigidity of the national multitude, above all the ideological and political power applied to its affairs at an ontological level. The conflict between the poet and “the people” (set at an ontological level by poets themselves) is the structural constant defining the essence of Slovene verbal art right through various idea-stylistic variables up to the present day.

Needless to say, this conflict would not contain anything “Slovene” did not verbal art function simultaneously as mythology, thereby - desired and demanded - as the common voice and obligation. The fact is that poetry in Slovenia cannot step beyond this obligation although nowadays it does “participate” in it only “per negationem”.

Thus the role of poetry amidst Slovenes remains invincibly ambivalent. It represents a witness to the fundamental truth of a “Slovene spirit” and also relates ever anew the traumatic tale of its actual social and historical insufficiency and suppression. Only with difficulties and great resistance does poetry establish itself as essentially individual, open and free, solely responsible to itself for the existential or artistic “play” of its language: willingly or unwillingly, it is still always also some kind of generally linking “voice from the deep”. Even today, when verses and tales can no longer have an “Orphean” function, literary writers remain the primary harbingers of that Slovene truth not dependent upon any current political conjunctures or in conflict with the ruling political power. The traditional position of poetry itself affords the literary writer

the authority of some kind of “national” politician, that is the politician as an “independent” moralist, critic and testifier. However, this speaks not so much about poetry as about contemporary Slovene society.

In this sense, events in Slovene poetry during the past fifty years have been more than characteristic; a period in which Slovenes rose in a National Liberation war, military victory allowing new organization into their own state, thereby finally annulling their own historical arrears. One would expect poetry to now abandon its traditional “mythological” burden and “return to itself”. Nevertheless, even after 1945 with its National Liberation, it remained in essence, particularly in its social habitus, what it had long been to Slovenes: one of the key factors and expressions of their spirit.

Consequently it has been demonstrated that the postwar Slovene state with its own national institutions and its own sovereign operative authority could never replace the symbolic function of poetry. Not merely because the political power that came into authority with the 1941 - 1945 uprising and revolution was founded in a trans-national communist vision - a politics that combined its own proletarian class ideology with the national principle for which it could also call upon Cankar's - of course literary! - syntagma of the Slovene nation as a “people - proletariat”. The essential reason that poetry did not liberate itself of its mythological function was that the postwar Slovene state was organized according to Stalin's model and social life therein was carried on under the exclusive and totalitarian dictates of the ruling Communist Party.

In this fresh, nationally realized but culturally and socially closed Slovene world, poetry still represented a hypothetical asylum of freedom, the possibility of an imaginary or verbal setting up of autonomous, individual “discourses” opposed to the voluntaristic, political monolith ruling society. No longer was poetry merely a symbol of the integrating “national” obligation, it had opened up as a space for the differentiation and pluralization that were not actually possible in society itself.

In consequence, it occurred as a quasi-real setting up of authentic (inter) human values and dialogue, as an aligning of

the fundamental and irreducible truth of the human fate that cannot be possessed by any, however radical (or “revolutionary”) political pragmatics – and which probably in its own paradoxicality belongs to poetry in an original manner. Above all it occurred as a persistent and incalculable reflection of man’s social, religious, moral, artistic etc. troubles caused by the totalitarian political context of the new state of Slovenia (together with its frequently frustrating position within the framework of the Yugoslav Federation). With this, its language was always politicized anew however much it tried to open up fresh semantic spaces beyond its political complex, and however secreted it was in esoteric, metamorphic “codes”. Poetry – even though against its own will – has remained “mythologized”...

Precisely because it was still the fictional compensation for deficiencies in actual social and political life, and on account of its own aesthetic structure and own social habitus, poetry has remained to Slovenes what it had long since become: a prime national “*politicum*” that always signifies “*more*” than the words related in its poetical formulations, and which, despite its own moral etc. authority, is without any operative and practical power. The artism of Slovene poetry accordingly always remains a vast, global metaphor. The sphere of ideas of its existential, aesthetic etc. “*play*” is stil always political and nothing at present indicates that anything will alter.

But, as already stated, – this is the “fate” that Slovene poetry is not writing of itself.

(1987-1988)

Translated by Anne Čeb