

A TWOFOLD COMMITMENT TO LANGUAGE

Jože Snoj*

With respect to the theme of this year's Bled International Writers' Meeting, "BELONGING TO A MINORITY vs. BELONGING TO A MAJORITY," as a Slovene writer I would like to say something about my own instrument of self-expression, the Slovene language: about how I experience the commitment to my language in the same way as any literary craftsman belonging to any nation experiences the commitment to his language—something outside of the assigned Congress theme, therefore; but also about how I think I experience and live that commitment as a writer belonging to a small nation in a kind of twofold manner—within the theme, then, too. And finally (allow me a tiny drop of authorial imagination) also about how important, in both a foreseeable and also a mysteriously unforeseeable way, for small nations at home are their linguistically cultural minorities, spread around the world—although they are incessantly threatened by being drowned in foreign-language oceans, and although this drowning sooner or later inevitably comes to pass. I shall deliberate on this, using as an example our unfortunate diaspora in Argentina.

The first two subjects of my deliberation appear to have no noticeable links with the third. It appeared like that, unexpectedly, to me also, when I found the subjects spontaneously thrust upon me in this order. And there had to be a few days' arduously relentless self-examination for me to discover that third subject!

Then I crossed out everything I had written that had to do with the stated topics. And so now, after attempts at more or less theoretical analysis, finally I am left with a personal consideration of my above-mentioned discussional starting-points. Suddenly, then, the subject of my reflection is no longer the official theme for discussion at this year's Bled Festival; rather I, in my capacity and my manner of responding to it, am myself choosing the subject. Henceforth this paper is an attempt at the case-history of a certain reaction of mine, which I increasingly suspect to be experience-based, and yet for all that no less painful. Whether I like it or not the paper deals, very simply, with the case-history of the frustration of a writer—generically stated, of a poet—belonging to a small nation.

* * * * *

Am I therefore what I—convinced as I am of the autonomy of my own language and of my work in it—never dreamt of being: creatively frustrated?

And how is that frustration shown?

Not on the ontologically poetic level of language, that's certain. When I, as a literary craftsman, enter on that plane with language, I feel myself to be an equal among equals, thrown with equal ruthlessness into the drama which is called art, which is and remains a tragic monologue: the calling up of the sacred (*sveto*) from timelessness into the world (*svet*) of the temporal and the transitory, which is echoed only by presentiments of fata-morgana-created lights (*svetloba*) shining into the gloom of the physical mass and the biological instincts of our earthly life.

I deliberately strung together words like *sveto* - *svet* - *svetloba*, since I would briefly like to show the incredible precision with which etymology and ontology correspond in the existentially essential semantic concatenations of the Slovene vocabulary (another such concatenation being *bit* - *biti* - *bitje* - *ubiti*)¹; and thereby, at least from afar, to call attention

to the matchless poetic weight and expressiveness of the Slovene language.

No, it is not in the firmament of this language—of such a language—as an instrument that I can locate my authorial inferiority complex. For there are no such things as great and small languages: there are only different containers for the same contents; just as great poets are not great because they wrote or write their poetry in world-wide languages. The worldly potential of any language, if we discount its secondary civilizational benefits, is no kind of advantage to a poet.

And if there is no advantage, what then am I lacking? May that which is non-essential for a poet writing in any of the major world languages, yet be somehow significant for a poet belonging to a small nation and writing in a language of limited use? So significant even, that (as soon as he pays heed in his musings to the ontic amount of the quantitative smallness of his ethnic and linguistic cultural base) he feels the weight of the commitment to the language of his poetry **in a kind of twofold manner**, as I found myself writing (as it were against my will) in my introduction?

In any case, it is that feeling of **twofold-ness** that encompasses my spiritual involvement; it is in the interaction of my ontic givenness and ontological fatedness that my specialness (the specialness of a poet of a small nation) exists; and right now I do not know what that specialness is: merely an additional test, or something additional that is essential to poetic experience.

So, before I may talk about my twofold commitment to the language which is the writing of poems, I must first say something about that commitment itself.

* * * * *

Committing oneself means submitting oneself unconditionally to something or to somebody, to their tender mercies. All of us who submit ourselves to the evocation of the eternal from the temporal, commit ourselves to the word, to its tender mercies.

For it is impossible to call except with the word. And since the word “calling” is in its original etymology the same as “shouting”,² a loud explosion of the inner spiritual tensions in a creature, tearing itself out of what is merely felt into consciousness, the semantic matrix of the articulated word remains filled with the call. This fullness is the meaningless emptiness of the silence into which it was shouted out. The sonorous hollowness is therefore that most alarming, and also most deceptive and most elusive thing, that the word has inherited from it.

However, a shout is in fact uncommunicative, too. Whoever finds that he is moved to shout merely from a superabundance of his very self, for that person it is a question above all of being unburdened. He does not expect a reply, and out of the deafness of the unconsciousness into which he shouts from his loneliness, a reply is unattainable.

But the first step is taken: he hears himself, he listens to himself. In this first moment of mental effort (for he has to calm down and concentrate in order to listen) he encounters silence for the first time, and he becomes aware of it. Because it does not answer, he realizes that the silence does not recognize him, and is therefore inimicable to him. Getting an answer would have meant conquering the silence. Or if not conquering it, then at least outwitting it.

And, in that strong desire for an answer which confronts him with **to be or not to be**, he recalls a trick which is perhaps not a trick at all, but a God-inspired plan involving him, or else something that may be called the mutual reinstatement of God and man.

In his soul, which for the first time becomes a yearning one, he splits into two parts: with the first, corporeal and mortal, part he remains on the earth; the other, invisible and

eternal, part he dreams up for himself in heaven. Now that he compares himself with Something or Somebody that comes from himself, he himself becomes that Something: Something that wishes to be someone, and his shout is transformed into a call that is an invitation to discussion.

Therefore, while for him in his communication with his fellow humans the semantic matrices of words are being luxuriantly (and how deceptively!) filled and multiplied with meanings, that invitation to the dialogue with God which (it seems) made both man and God exist, still remains one-sided: a monologue, merely. In this monologue, which is called poetry, the primary nature of the word insolubly continues to be shown as the ensuing fundamental ontological legacy of the shout: the word's original uncommunicativeness, its self-fertilizing echolessness.

And to that word—as the bearer of historical languages, and transitory, as well—we submit ourselves, to its tender mercies; for with the word each of us for himself, each time afresh, re-establishes the utopia of dialogue, the utopia of poetry. This is that weight of commitment to language which everyone who binds himself thereto must take on his shoulders, and for which all must make allowances.

All the languages we write will die out; all the brilliant personal styles will be sung to their conclusion; all our stylistically notional goals will be exceeded; all the devices and contrivances of genius will become out of date; with each passing day in the Towers of Babel which each of us personally builds from words against the boundless mute skies, the volume of silence becomes ever greater and ever denser; for the soundlessness which all true poetry comes to is only another form of that first shout with which everything began . . .

* * * * *

Absurdity on absurdity, and the weight which (how absurd!) is the first and the only condition for the buoyant power of the ever-self-revitalizing utopia of poetry, is growing heavier and there is no stopping it. But why—and here I return to my basic consideration—why should a poet of a small nation feel it **in a twofold manner**?

Here the ontological interpretation fails; the psychological one must be called on for help. The interpretation is simple, but its results are extremely complicated.

The poet who writes (let us say) in English is surely aware of the temporal transitoriness of his language and of all his own work in it. But I am convinced that it does not even enter his mind that the transience may actually be realized quite soon, perhaps even tomorrow.

The Slovene poet, the poet of a nation that is small in numbers, writes poetry from day to day; and all the knowledge that he has gained from his descent and from his upbringing, from history and from personal life experience, teaches him that even that yesterday almost did not occur.

But not that Slovene might not have been an old and noble, a hard-wearing and tested language; but that all the time (the day before yesterday, even, and perhaps again today!) it hung, hangs and will hang on a thread.

And not because it might not have been perfected and diversified to suit all the spheres of today's human activity, but because it is difficult to defend with a scanty less than two million speakers among hundreds of millions of others!

The poet of such a language, of so permanently threatened a language, let us say the Slovene poet, is therefore inevitably the more sensitive to the ephemerality of all human actions; **he is by the same token also more committed to it**, since for him that ephemerality of nations, of languages, of cultures and civilizations is not fundamentally distant,

but a practical everyday matter, since it happens to him in front of his door, under his very roof, under his window and on the street.

He gets up and he goes to bed with it and in between (in the whole history of the nation it has happened like this) he assumes the roles and the obligations which are practised by ideologues, politicians, generalissimi and statesmen among his enormous, dangerous neighbors. When he restores the utopia of poetry he does so (this first happened consciously with France Prešeren in the romantic spring of nations) through the absurdity of Sloveneness, that is, the absurdity of his existence. For testing the fundamental human existential perseverance in what is senseless, just because that perseverance has no sense, he is faced—more or less according to the Tertullian *credo, quia absurdum est*—with substantial numbers of calculations with the inescapable negative summative result for his two-million-strong nation, the rational logic of which he must day by day invalidate with senseless irrational hope.

The miracle of existence of this nation on its most exact neck of land between the Ancient Renaissance South and the Modern Germanic North is a true product of poetry—the ludicrous result of the fact that Slovene poets and authors, from the Protestant Primož Trubar in the sixteenth century and the romantically free-thinking France Prešeren in the nineteenth right up to today, did not want to give up writing in the language into which they were born. The common folk provided the language and the poets; the poets preserved the language; and the language gave birth to the nation. And all that—and I hope it is now evident enough—at the cost of a double encumbrance, a twofold commitment to one's own language.

* * * * *

Following the model I have just presented it would be possible to discuss also how the loneliness of the poet, who is (in one way or another) a “member of a minority” in the face of eternity, of history, of society—how this loneliness is so much the greater, the less he (as the poet of a small nation) is audible to his fellow humans and above all to those like himself (for poetry is essentially untranslatable); but that that loneliness which possesses him, as he faces the original muteness of the poetic word, is virtually unbearable, if that word is abnormally threatened even in its historical existence and if he must continually be conquering the feeling, too, that the peak of his creative power(lessness) can at any moment coincide with the physical termination of his language. But if in the light of what I have considered thus far I wish to throw light on my own ludicrous (I am convinced: my poetically ludicrous) idea about our national diaspora in Argentina, I must first mention two psychological consequences of the twofold burden, already described, that is borne by a poet of a small nation.

A sickly, defenseless child is usually the favorite of his parents. The care and fear they expend on him raise their love to a morbidity which (and something similar is already becoming apparent, in the figurative meaning I am using here) often degenerates into something detrimental for him.

The poet of a small nation loves his language, which offers him so little and gives him so much, to a similarly morbid degree. A Slovene poet loves the Slovene language like himself (and we know the narcissistic loneliness with which poets love themselves!) At certain moments so much, indeed—and I would say this of myself, with respect to my “Argentine vision”—that he would be ready to sacrifice himself for it, and thereby (in a paradoxically consistent way) sacrifice the language itself, with which he stands or falls and which stands or falls with him.

The condition under which something so pervertedly consistent might occur to him (a

threatened people always feels like a chosen people, and a chosen people is, among other peoples, always in a sacrificial, suicidal position!), is that he equates the Slovene language with Slovenedom; that, in short, he transfers the morbid attachment from the creator to the creation: from the language which formulated the nation to the nation thus formulated.

The Slovene poet so loves his people, this sickly threatened child of his, that (judging, in horror, by my own self) he would for their sake be ready, in a fit of sickly ethnic rapture, to finish up by sacrificing the Slovene language itself! So far (looked at with a stricken measure of critical distance) are we driven by our human, our national distress. As, let us say, the Jews have immemorially been driven . . . That we should be, although we should be no more . . .

* * * * *

Recently, all "Slovene" as I am in my nebulously utopian and drownedly diminished way, I have concerned myself with the phenomenon presented by the real fact that the descendants of our emigrés, in their "search for their roots" (this is a world-wide tendency and I find it one of the incomprehensible signs of the times), have begun to be aware of their Sloveneness, in some fashion, even though perhaps for generations they have not known the Slovene language. There has now been nearly two hundred years of catastrophic emigration of Slovenes from Slovenia (on which we must blame the fact that nowadays Slovenes are not numerically equal to, let us say, the Scots, the Irish, the Finns, the Danes, or the Norwegians, with whom—as we have recently been made aware by Dimitrij Rupel's culturological research—we shared the same starting-point back in the 18th century); and after this length of time the opportunity apparently has arisen for us in a sublimated kind of way to collect at least a small part of what we, industrious and gifted as we are, have given to the world. I think that in the next, imminent century—which, as is forecast, will be the century of planetary cybernetics and above all of informatics—language will not be the only formative constituent of peoples and nations, although it will surely remain the most important one. Other, hitherto restrained and concealed, constituents will flash onto the scene: genotypical, historico-cultural, economic, and many other factors.

With an autonomous, sovereign Slovenia as a powerful and productive genetrix; with the already attested, and further strengthened, bond with which this unique morsel of European earth chains us—Slovenes the world over—to itself; and with a little spiritual obligation, similar to that of the Jews, it may—in my daydreams—happen . . .

And already in my mind's eye I am in Argentina, among the Slovenes in their almost fifty-year, simultaneously Dante-esque and Babylonian, political exile. The revolution washed them up in their thousands onto that far continent, and both their Sloveneness (which for them here was a religion) and their religion (which became Sloveneness for them over there) preserved them right up to the present day in their compact (dia-)spore: with all the linguistically cultural and other activities that are important for a miniature ethnic organism. They may have achieved it also (and in this respect our single organized emigrational wave was essentially different from the others that were more or less spontaneously dispersed) because they arrived there representing the whole range of social strata, from peasants and laborers to top-level intellectuals.

I do not really know anything factual about them, so much were they isolated from us by the victors, who were burdened with the weight of their consciences and of their persecution complex, and so much did they—who were burdened with the weight of injustice, and also of blind ideological opposition and fear—in turn isolate themselves from us and from themselves.

And yet I am aware of them as of the enormously irrational power of a small nation

which—like any unit of energy—can not exist in vain, without apparently nonsensical sense. For what possible reason and for the sake of what unexpected eventuality did we Slovenes (as God in man, as man in God) have to obtain our relocated I, our second You? So that—surely—in this tragic dispersedness we should as humans fulfil ourselves, we should build ourselves up, and thereby should preserve ourselves ethnically in a new ethos, a new morality.

And maybe (and here, with your permission, the authorial imagination that is linked to my deliberations comes into play) maybe for some other reason, too.

Maybe—my daydreams start—maybe, among those of our people in Argentina who will perhaps, constrained by life there, already have drowned in the sea of Spanish, maybe somebody will be born, some genius, who in perfect Spanish will write about himself, about his people, about his Argentine Slovene ghetto: in a word, about our “Slovenehood.” As Bellow, as Singer did . . . about the Jews.

And in my vision and in my rapture, which bring tears to my eyes, I forgive this person—mark this!—even his loss of that most important thing which I, which we have: what I, what we are made of in the first place: the Slovene language. As a sacrificial gift, too, for all those who were not allowed, or who will perhaps some day not be allowed, to speak and live Slovene here where we are and where, by all the rights of the sacredness and consecratedness of human life, we should be: in Slovenia.

Ljubljana

NOTES

* This is a translation of the paper presented to the Twenty-First International Writers' Conference, Bled, May 11-15, 1988. I hereby acknowledge the painstaking assistance of Velemir Gjurin in this translation; all remaining infelicities are my own. —Tom Priestly.

1. Respectively, “existence - to be - being/beating - to kill.”
2. Viz., *klic* and *krik*.

POVZETEK

PODVOJENA IZROČENOST JEZIKU

Pisec uvodoma ugotavlja, da kot slovenski pesnik doživlja izročnost slovenščini enako kot katerikoli drugi besedni umetnik svojemu jeziku. Ker za moč poezije razširjenost kakega jezika ni pomembna in ker na ontološko-poetski ravni doživlja slovenščino kot izjemno izrazno, se kot pesnik malega naroda ne počuti manjvrednega.

Spričo načelne ontološke omejenosti pesniške besede in njene vsakokratne historične minljivosti zatorej načelno ni prizadet bolj kot pesniki drugih narodov. Podvojeno pa je v tej izročnosti frustriran zato, ker je njegov maloštevilčni jezik že vso zgodovino fizično bolj ogrožen od velikih jezikov. Zato ob tem občuti podvojeno bolečino, z njo pa — psihološko — tudi podvojeno ljubezen do svojega naroda.

Ta narod se je bil prisiljen izseljevati v svet — zadnjič po revoluciji 1941/1945 tudi množično v Argentino. Podobno židovskemu — táka je piščeva vizija — se utegne kdaj začeti umetniško izpovedovati tudi v drugih jezikih, na primer v španščini.

In sklepni paradoks: še svoj jezik bi slovenski pesnik žrtoval za svoj narod (se pravi, svoj jezik)!