

## **JACK TOMŠIČ'S POETRY: THE SPIRITUAL, ETHNIC, ACCULTURATIONAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTION OF LITERATURE**

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Cultural activities were, besides religion, one of the main unifying forces for many Slovene emigrants to the United States of America, particularly for those who left their native country in the final decades of the nineteenthth and the first decades of the twentieth century. They provided the emigrants with relative emotional stability, ethnic identity and creative spiritual and social activity especially in those areas of culture which are closely connected with speech, singing, dancing and the written word, either for straightforward information, as in newspapers, or for emigrants' imaginative appreciation. Culture became an important mental link with their native land and also a form of social companionship urgently needed in a foreign land; its aesthetic function was often only of secondary importance.

The process of acculturation usually took the whole life-span of the first generation of emigrants, for most of them did not know any English upon their arrival in the U.S.A.; therefore, being without the ability to communicate with people in their new environment, most emigrants suffered a strong feeling of loneliness and isolation. Many of them had only little formal education, and even those who were naturally gifted found it easier to be active in different cultural activities organized by various Slovene societies than in those spheres where a good knowledge of English was needed. Although they realized that eventual integration into a new society was unavoidable, they did not and could not abruptly sever links with their country of origin. The first generation of emigrants still considered itself as Slovene-Americans; this is not true any longer of the second and even less so of the third generation of immigrants, who declare themselves as Americans of Slovene ethnic background. (This fact is still largely misinterpreted in Slovenia when people speak about 'Slovene emigrants' in the U.S.A. and elsewhere.)

The choice of the first generation of emigrants to use the Slovene language for their artistic expression signifies, no doubt, their emotional attachment to their native land, and their frequent nostalgic desires to return to Slovenia (although this decision was rarely made, and even if it was made, a large majority of emigrants made the journey back again to the U.S.A.. A few of them, like

Louis Adamič, more or less immediately decided to learn enough English to use it as their means of communication, not only in everyday contacts but also for their literary purposes. This does not mean that they forgot their native country, but they definitely wished to achieve recognition in their country of adoption and primarily to reach wider audiences. Their attention was turned towards the future, and if they succeeded, like Adamič, they may represent the best synthesis of two cultures from among emigrants of the first generation; this was pointed out by Janez Stanonik in his article on Adamič.<sup>1</sup> But this was more the exception than the rule among those Slovenes who emigrated to the U.S.A. before the Second World War.

Slovene poets in the U.S.A. belonging to this period of mass migration mainly wrote their works in the Slovene language. It can be stated that the first generation of emigrant poets sees their native country almost as 'the Garden of Eden,' although they are aware that the New World offers them a bigger 'slice of bread' than Slovenia. Their poetry belongs to a type of neo-romantic movement, however; most of their works lack the artistic accomplishment and the multiplicity of visions so typical of the best romantic poets. Besides, their attitude to Slovenia is often rather naive and sentimental, whereas they may be quite critical towards the U.S.A.. With regard to the latter point Jack Tomšič is rather an exception, and he often expresses his gratitude to the U.S.A., and also his criticism of Slovene weaknesses. If poets of the first generation try to write poetry in both languages, the effect of these works is somewhat dubious, because it seems as if they thought in one language and then translated their work into the other language. Taking this into consideration, one comes to the conclusion that it is wiser if poets decide either to keep their mother tongue or attempt to begin to write in the second language, like Adamič, for bilingualism in poetry is extremely hard to achieve. Of course, if they kept to the Slovene language they ran the danger of writing in a kind of old-fashioned Slovene, being out of touch with the everyday development and changes occurring in the language. Many poems of the poets who belonged to the first generation of Slovene emigrants to the U.S.A. thus have a ring of artificiality, an unnecessary patina which is not in agreement with the content of the poem. This view may sound too harsh, but this would be so if one doubted the sincerity of their expression and particularly the social and cultural value of their work. These authors are artistically most

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<sup>1</sup> Janez Stanonik, "Historical Survey of Researches on Adamic," *Louis Adamic. Symposium*, ed. Janez Stanonik (Ljubljana: Univerza Edvarda Kardelja, 1981) 71.

successful when they sing about their own experiences and feelings, and not when they try to follow previous masters and deal with historical or patriotic themes or when they try to follow them in their metrical variety, because then their poetry becomes stereotyped, and even long-winded.

Among those Slovene emigrants who went to the U.S.A. in the period around the turn of the century and continued to write poetry up to 1970s or even 1980s, the most noteworthy are Janko N. Rogelj (1895-1974), Ivan Zorman (1889-1957), Ana Praček-Krasna (1900-1988), Katka Zupančič (1889-1967) and Jack Tomšič (1897-1994), with Ivan Zorman being usually considered artistically the most successful among them.

Rogelj's poems were first printed in a collection in 1967 in Ljubljana. The speaker expresses in them his nostalgic feelings about his native land and he describes the hard life of immigrants, which is occasionally crowned with success, and sometimes viewed with slight irony. Zorman had some beautiful love poems, but he also wrote patriotic poems and poems showing the immigrants's home-sickness. A distinct social message is evident in poems written by Praček-Krasna, who also excels in poems about youth. Her collection *Za boljše dni* (1950) was also published in Ljubljana. Katka Zupančič is one of the most prolific Slovene immigrant poets, who wrote many poems for young readers as well as poems expressing her social protest against the exploitation of workers in the U.S.A.. Jack Tomšič, whose work I am going to interpret in some detail shortly, also treats in his poems the themes just mentioned in the works of his contemporaries, besides the theme of nature, the feeling of an exile in a state of emotional diaspora, war, his native Slovenia and Slovenes whom he admires for their upright, morally correct behaviour, even when they are faced with oppression, derision or even death.

William Boelhower says in his study on immigrants' autobiography that for them "America was an idea before it was a geographical reality."<sup>2</sup> The myth about the U.S.A. which was spread in the European countries of emigration almost a hundred years ago pictured the U.S.A. as a country of unlimited possibilities for anybody willing to go there. There were few voices which warned young men and women that this slogan was only relatively true, but most of them who were inclined to take this step would not listen to them, anyway.

Jack Tomšič was born on 9 July 1897 (as Jakob Tomšič) in the village of Bač, near the mountain Knežak, Notranjska region,

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<sup>2</sup> William Boelhower. *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States* (Venice: Essedue edizioni, 1982) 222.

in Slovenia, which was at that time still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His formal education ended after four years of elementary schooling and then he had to start working as a laborer. The terrors of the First World War deeply shocked him, and then he was emotionally very upset when his village and other parts of the Primorska region were ceded to Italy. Departure for the U.S.A. was then also a sort of emotional relief to his hurt soul. He longed to see the world and because he knew that many Slovenes had already left for Cleveland, this city also became his destination in 1922. He worked there in various factories until his old-age retirement. After eight years of solitude in the U.S.A. he went back to Slovenia to find himself a wife, who became his life-long companion. Jack needed more than just material comforts to give meaning to his life and so he soon became one of the most active members of various Slovene societies; he especially loved good singing. While still at home he began to write poems in Slovene language and he continued writing them until his old age. Tomšič died on January 6, 1994.

Although he returned to Slovenia several times, he was not at home with his parents when they were dying and this thought obviously troubled him considerably and he wrote several poems on this subject. Tomšič cherished his youthful dreams about a free, independent Slovenia, in which there would be plenty of opportunities for everyone to earn a decent living at home and not be forced to live abroad. His spiritual life was closely intertwined with Slovene cultural life in Cleveland, its singing societies, the fraternal organization called the Slovene National Benefit Society, the Slovene newspapers which were published in the U.S.A., e.g. *Enakopravnost*, *Proletarec*, *Glas naroda*, *Jugoslovenski obzor*, *Prosveta*, *Slovene Diary*, as well as *Rodna gruda* and *Slovenski izseljenski koledar*, published in Ljubljana for Slovene emigrants. Two collections of his poems were also printed in Ljubljana, entitled *Pognale so na tujih tleh* (1968) and *Človeku pojem* (1989).<sup>3</sup> The first collection was partly subsidized by the Slovenska izseljenska matica, whereas the second one was published at the poet's expense. In the anthology *Naši na tujih tleh* (1982), edited by Jerneja Petrič, this critic views Tomšič as a typical self-made poet, who saw as his poetic ideal Slovene folk poetry, which influenced his verse regarding its simplicity of form and its contents.<sup>4</sup> This statement can be expanded at least with the

<sup>3</sup> Henceforward the collections are abbreviated as P (*Pognale so na tujih tleh*) and Č (*Človeku pojem*).

<sup>4</sup> *Naši na tujih tleh*, ed. Jerneja Petrič (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba and Slovenska izseljenska matica, 1982) 463-64.

names of two Slovene poets, Simon Gregorčič (1844-1906) and Miroslav Vilhar (1818-1871), both of whom lived and wrote about Tomšič's beloved Primorska region, the struggle of the Slovenes for their independence and sovereignty, and about the natural beauties of Slovenia. There are other themes in Tomšič's poetry, in addition to his love lyrics, for example socially committed verse, patriotic poems about Slovenia and also about the U.S.A., particularly as connected with Slovene cultural life.

Many of his poems are written in rhymed iambic or trochaic tetrameters or trimeters, in short lines which are melodious, suitable for singing and easy to remember because of the rhyme or assonance. The mood is generally happy, joyful, light-hearted, although there are also poems in which the poet expresses various kinds of anxieties such as about war, poverty, people's lack of self-awareness, and so on. Even in poems in which a light mood prevails the ending may have a sudden turn in which Tomšič's basic seriousness about life becomes apparent, or vice versa, poems written in a melancholy mood may have an optimistic ending. His typical stanzaic pattern is the quatrain. His almost over-abundant use of rhymes may occasionally give an impression of monotony or repetitiveness, and therefore his use of enjambement contributes to the impression of spontaneity and colloquiality.

Kaj naj ti pisem?  
 Kaj naj ti pošljem  
 v pismu, ki pojde cez sirno morje?  
 ("Kaj naj ti pošljem," P 32)

The poet's directness and simplicity in creating various figures of speech, basically metaphors, similes and a visual type of imagery, provides his obvious link with Slovene folk poetry. Poems printed in both collections were edited by Marička Žnidaršič and Jože Šmit, respectively, therefore Tomšič's diction hardly bears any signs of datedness.<sup>5</sup> Technically Tomšič has nothing new to offer in Slovene poetry, but that was not his aim, anyway. He frankly tells his readers that his poems

umetne niso in ne zale,  
 a duh slovenski veje iz njih.  
 ("Ljudje, na naših tleh rojeni," P 13)

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<sup>5</sup> There are a few cases which call for correction, as in the poem "Zima" (P 34) the expressive word "plahta" in the line "pod plahto dobrega snega," sounds rather colloquial compared with its context, or in the same poem, line 8, the preposition "na" in the line "in vpijejo vsi na en glas," should be replaced by the preposition "v."

Nevertheless the poet sees himself as a gardener, albeit inexperienced, who tries to cultivate his "flowers," to make them more beautiful.

Tomšič's love poems can be divided into two groups. First, poems in which the speaker sincerely and seriously tells his beloved how much he loves her, how he is at a loss to express himself properly, how he feels an inner warmth in spite of the cold winter day, how his love is not only a question of emotions, but how he looks forward to their marriage and happy future love ("Povsod te iščem," Č 7; "Rad bi ti povedal," Č 66; "Zimska pomlad," P 31; "Sem te našel," P 39). Secondly, there are poems in which the speaker shows his indifference to his beloved, because his pleas were not answered. He tells her that he has forgotten her and threatens to find another mistress, or a simple peasant woman who will bear him children ("Ljubezen greje," P 37; "Vse je minilo," P 38; "Prevzeti ljubimec," Č 69; "Kmetico bom vzel," Č 65). Both types of poems are also known in folk poetry, although the second one, no doubt, has excellent individual representatives in English Cavalier poetry (Andrew Marvell, Richard Lovelace, Sir John Suckling), which is both linguistically and formally more developed and more refined, and is packed with witticisms. Tomšič's poems are, of course, closer to the style of speaking colored with undertones among simple Slovene farmers than to the aristocratic cynicism of Cavalier poets.

A large group of Tomšič's poems presents the emotional thrill of the poet towards the beauties of the countryside. The description and purity of nature is often contrasted with man's moral corruption or cruelty ("Gozdni vir," P 21; "Ustreljeni srnjak," P 26), or it is shown as nature's positive influence on man ("Pomladna," P 26). The experience of winter is different for carefree children and worried adults ("Zima," P 34); an expanded associative image is made between migrant birds and emigrants ("Slovo," P 27); nature, cultivated by a hard-working farmer, is compared to the poet's seeds ("Mlado klasje," P 17). It is customary for Tomšič to create life out of inanimate things, but the speaker's (moralizing) thought frequently underlines his poetic, sensory experience. There are a few poems though in which the poet lets himself be taken over completely by nature's miracles, without an accompanying meditation.

Ko v mrzlem zimskem jutru  
iz spanja se zbudim,  
pogledam skozi okno,  
začuden obstrmim.

....

Kdo spustil zagrinjalo  
 med tem je, ko sem spal,  
 in tiste rožne čipke,  
 Kdo jih čez noč je stkal?

(“Umetnik mraz,” P 23)

In Tomšič's landscape poems the simplicity of expression is obviously an advantage, particularly so because he is not a poet who would indulge in the multiplicity of meaning or the hidden symbolism so often present in the best kind of romantic poetry. Therefore such poems express his spontaneous reaction to a natural phenomenon, and do not necessarily include his rational judgement about the world, about man, his depravity and moral corruption.

A didactic note is also a regular component in Tomšič's social poetry. He writes with sympathy and compassion about the unemployed and the poor, and he also reminds his fellow men and his friends that they should help each other, that they should unite in order to make the world less miserable. Tomšič sees life as a constant struggle, which is “given” to mankind and which is worthwhile fighting for. As was said above, Tomšič often expresses his thankfulness to the U.S.A., which has provided emigrants with a better life, although this praise is generally included into another, major theme, which also shows some other aspects of emigrants' life. (“Brezposelni,” P 66; “Dobičkarji,” Č 48; “Trpinovo premišljevanje,” Č 58; “Pravi prijatelji,” Č 59; “Združimo se,” Č 53; “Ljudstvo, zbudi se,” Č 54). Even in a poem with a religious theme, treating man's salvation by Christ's birth, the poem ends with the speaker's appeal to mankind to find a star like the one that signaled Christ's birth, which will discover for mankind new ways, a new religion, true to their needs (“Noč spomina,” Č 57).

A large number of Tomšič's poems are devoted to Slovene emigrants in the U.S.A.. In a short poem entitled “Kdaj?” he points out that the sweetness of the mother tongue is most appreciated when we are away from home.

Kdaj najmilejša je beseda  
 materinega jezika?  
 Vprašajte tega, ki v tujini  
 sam v trpljenju se pomika

(“Kdaj?,” P 57)

The poet is pleased that the younger generations are willing to continue the work begun by their fathers so that cultural and social centers as well as churches will enable them to get together

and uphold their ethnic heritage ("Novoletno voščilo," P 70; "Obletnica," Č 4; "Naše zavetišče," Č 42; "Pojoča mladina," Č 76). These poems are often interspersed with the poet's advice that the immigrants' chance to survive culturally and ethnically is to hold together and pass their work on to the younger generation.

The poet is filled with concern about the political and economic situation in his 'old country' and he speaks about it with deep emotion and patriotic ardor. Tomšič is especially attached to his Primorska region and he laments the deaths of many who have given their life for freedom either before or during the Second World War ("Naš klic," P 43; "Slovenci," P 44; "Prisega begunke," P 45; "Vojak," P 46; "Partizanovo slovo," P 47; "Za narod ste se bojevali," P 49). In some of these poems the tone is rather pathetic, whereas in the poem "Mati išče grobove" (P 51) the speaker's voice truly expresses the mother's grief, caused by the fact that she does not know where her daughter and her son are buried. Tomšič's poems about his mother, the separation from her which prevents him from taking leave from her on her death-bed, belong to his best poetic achievements. So, in the last two stanzas of the poem "Materi v spomin" (P 52), Tomšič writes:

Ker sem od doma daleč proč,  
ne morem te kropiti,  
na grobu tvojem ni mi moč  
zdaj solze potočiti.

Po svetu seme bi nabral,  
rož žlahtnih, rožmarina,  
da bi na grob ga posejal,  
v znak tvojega spomina.

("Materi v spomin," P 52)

Tomšič shows great admiration for those Slovenes who contributed with their work and their integrity to Slovene national consciousness, who persevered in their adherence to their ideals, among them the freedom of Slovene people and their independence. Among his heroes — to whom he dedicated his poems (some even with an acrostic) — are Miroslav Vilhar, Etbin Kristan, Louis Adamič, Ivan Zorman and Ivan Cankar, all of them writers, whose political views are closely connected with the above-mentioned goals.

The final group of poems are those connected with Jack Tomšič's remembrance of his youth, his parents, his village and with the broader Primorska region. He combines the description of a beautiful mountainous landscape with historic events, the two

wars, people's sufferings and deaths, and in spite of all this also with his happy memories about his early years spent in Slovenia. The poet is obviously split between his feelings of belonging to the old and the new home, the old one being now only a kind of dream and the new one the reality which has filled most of his adult life. He expresses the wish to return, to see his parents again. These are poems which bring to the speaker emotional relief and which appeal to the reader's compassion for emigrants ("Očetu na grob," P 28; "Želja Slovenke v tujini," P 63; "Obisk," Č 12; "Vasica pod goro," Č 37; "Berač," Č 38; "Dom in svojci," Č 40; "Slovenski nagelj," Č 43).

In conclusion we can say that poetry written by the first generation of Slovene emigrants to the U.S.A. dating from the inter-war period and after World War II, still belongs almost entirely to the Slovene cultural heritage. Jack Tomšič and other poets relied, on the one hand, on Slovene poetic tradition, particularly as regards its formal achievements, and on the other, they opened up new thematic ground, i.e., they presented new attitudes and visions about the country of their birth and about their newly adopted home. Because they still felt like exiles their attitudes are somewhat ambiguous, emotionally exaggerated, although in some of their best works they undoubtedly speak with persuasive sincerity and depth of feeling. They are primarily important as literary creators living in a geographical and emotional diaspora, helping their fellow-countrymen to preserve their ethnic awareness.

Slovene literary critics and historians do not pay enough attention to these authors and their work, partly because case studies on individual authors have not been written yet, and partly because they still underestimate the cultural and social relevance of Slovene emigrant writers, not only for Slovenia and its cultural heritage, but also for the preservation of Slovene ethnic identity among Slovene immigrants. This paper will, hopefully, add to this awareness and also enrich our knowledge about Jack Tomšič's poetry and his contribution to Slovene emigrant literature in the U.S.A.

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## POVZETEK

**POEZIJA JACKA TOMŠIČA: DUHOVNA, ETNIČNA,  
AKULTURACIJSKA IN SOCIALNA VLOGA  
KNJIŽEVNOSTI**

*Izhodišče pričujoče razprave je, da je za prvo generacijo slovenskih izseljencev, ki so odšli v Ameriko v zadnjih dveh prejšnjega in prvih desetletjih tega stoletja, kultura bila bistvena predvsem za ohranjanje njihove emocionalne stabilnosti, etnične identitete, socialnega pomena, dočim je bila njena estetska vloga tedaj le drugotne važnosti. Izseljenci, ki so si doma zamišljali Ameriko kot raj, kjer vladajo neomejene možnosti, so - soočeni včasih tudi s kruto realnostjo - našli izhod iz krize tudi v kulturnem ustvarjanju. V osrednjem delu razprave sledi tematska in oblikovna analiza in interpretacija Tomšičevih pesmi. Nanj so vplivali zlasti slovenska ljudska pesem, Miroslav Vilhar in Simon Gregorčič. Tematski sklopi njegovih pesmi so: ljubezenska poezija (tudi z didaktično ali satirično poanto), pesmi o naravi, pesmi s socialno tematiko, pesmi o izseljencih in o Sloveniji ter pesmi posvečene njegovim idejno-književnim vzornikom. V sklepu je poudarjena misel, da je slovenska izseljenska književnost pomemben sestavni del slovenske literature in kulture, čeprav je njena osnovna vrednost v ohranjanju narodne zavesti in kulture med slovenskimi izseljenci.*