

LOJZE KOVAČIČ AND HIS *NEWCOMERS* I-III

Andrej Leben

Lojze Kovačič is one of Slovene literature's most atypical writers. His mother tongue was not Slovene but German. He was born in 1928 in Basel, the son of a Slovene emigrant from Cegelnica, a small village in Notranjska, and a German-speaking mother from Saarlouis, near Saarbrücken in Germany. He had two older sisters, Claire and Margit, and a niece, Gisela, Claire's daughter born out of wedlock. Before WW II, the family was exiled from Switzerland, where they had lived since about 1912, because Kovačič's father, who before WW I ran a fairly successful business as a furrier, had not applied for Swiss citizenship, hoping one day to return to Slovenia. So, at the age of ten, Lojze Kovačič came for the first time to his father's land, where the people spoke a language he did not understand. The emigration to Yugoslavia (or Slovenia) was a trauma. He arrived with his family as an unwelcome stranger from a multilingual city, first in the Slovene countryside and later in Ljubljana, where the first thing he had to do was to learn Slovene. He learned it with difficulty, speaking with a German accent that he never entirely lost. Nonetheless, by the age of fourteen he began writing his first Slovene-language stories.

Furthermore, Kovačič was one of the rare Slovene writers who wrote almost entirely about himself. In an interview in 2000, four years before his death, he even said: "I do sit in the story of my life, in its plot—now evidently more on the folding chair near the exit. Now that everything is behind me, I do know somehow that I was right because life brings such tense stories, shakes, dreams, awakes a thousand Is that are in oneself" (Zor-Simoniti 2000: 52).

By the end of 1945 Kovačič had lost his whole family. His sister Margit was in Switzerland, his father had died in 1944, and his mother, Claire, and Gisela were in a Carinthian refugee camp. Kovačič was given the choice of staying or leaving Yugoslavia with his family, but then he came into conflict with the police for selling an old sewing machine of his father's that had been declared state property. The literary critic Josip Vidmar interceded with the authorities on his behalf, and he was eventually allowed to stay. What worked in Kovačič's favor was his promise as a young writer. Nevertheless he found himself in a paradoxical situation in the new Yugoslav state: as a Slovene writer he was welcome, but as the son of a German mother he was viewed with suspicion and treated like an enemy.

All this is not only a part of Lojze Kovačič's biography, it is also more or less the main plot of his novel or "bacon" 'špeh' (Slovene slang for

a large, unwieldy magnum opus) (Kovačič 1985: 252, 391) *The Newcomers*, the text of which he finalized between September 1982 and March 1985, was published in 1984–85 in two books.

On the one hand we can read the text as an autobiography, set in the decade between 1938 and 1948, the year Kovačič was called up to serve in the Yugoslav army. On the other hand it is also a family and a social chronicle that is marked by the war, politics, and nationalistic and the ideological propaganda of these years. All these circumstances have greatly influenced the family members, yet “history” writ large remains in the background. It is merely accompaniment to the author’s subjective story, which in its own right gives another face to this chapter of Slovene and European history precisely because of its intimate character.

There is no doubt about the autobiographical character of Kovačič’s *Newcomers* and his other literary works because Kovačič was, fortunately, not only his own biographer, but also his own literary historian. We know many details of his life from his essay “Delavnica” (Workshop 1974), from several interviews and other texts, and, of course, from his books. We also know a great deal about his way of writing and his ethical and aesthetic positions as an author, which should remind us to be cautious when interpreting *The Newcomers* as a chronicle of Slovene history. The explicit reasons are several.

1. Kovačič bases his text on the aesthetic of the fragment. For him the only “face” that a modern creator can honestly wear is the fragment:

A fragment, a draft, or a sketch—always has a direction, but never an end. A fragment is the expression of a world which does not close itself or which cannot close itself anymore. A fragment always meant for me something like my fear of a formal completeness which constantly tries to overtake the spiritual; it expresses for me non-confidence in everything definitive, which constantly blocks me before reaching my own fulfillment. [...] The ruins of the Acropolis are the symbol of the sadness for the bygone whole, a fragment is to the contrary the promise of the whole and of perfection, which shall arise one day in the future, but which we will never conquer until we get the answer to all our questions. (Kovačič 1997: 27)

Formal and spiritual totality in literature is, accordingly, unachievable; it is maximally possible to achieve totality in the fragment. This position has broad applicability to cognition and creativity, as Kovačič shows by consistently linking literature and life. Life is also shattered, fragmented, has many parallel currents and influences the way a person expresses himself (Kovačič 1997: 9–10). Further, for Kovačič, life itself is a model

and a criterion for artistic creation. He speaks of the “life style of literature” in the sense of writing from inner freedom (1999: 121–22). A text for him is an *organism* (Kovačič 1993: 149) and therefore he finds that “not everything” is to be found in literature; there is only a literature of fragments, similarly to the way life is composed of fragments (Komel-Snoj 1997: 220). Kovačič asserts that “literature has never to be ashamed of life,” and it should return to where it has already been—to the letter, diary, and confessions (Kovačič 1999: 31, 133).¹

The Newcomers is in fact a retrospective diary. The author notes at the end of the first and second books when the narrative was finalized, and it is evident in the way the first-person narrator tries to deliver the story from a child’s perspective, free of any later evaluations or rationalizations. But, of course, the tale is the result of reflections on the past through memory. And memory—the memory of life and the memory of literature—is for Kovačič where life and literature can become equal in value and inseparable categories because in both cases

[...] there is only a kind of visual image left, a voice, light, a metaphor, the spirit of a room, a wall, a tree etc. Here, art and life, the effect of showing and the practice, which cannot as a whole stay and last with the human being, are together, eye to eye, and are equal in regards to their intensity and almost merge. This is a lot for art, we cannot expect more from it, because simply it cannot give more. (Kovačič 1997: 36)

Because of this, we can speak of an aesthetic of life characteristic of Lojze Kovačič’s writings. This aesthetic of life is grounded, on the one hand, in the experience of (lived) life and, on the other hand, in the experience of the aesthetic, for Kovačič emphasizes that an event in literature is not the same as an event in reality. Life in its chaos and totality includes all the brutalities of “modern” European civilization. The aesthetic is the only answer to the absurdity and totalitarianism of evil (Komel-Snoj 1997: 198).

2. Kovačič views life as the material a writer has yet to deal with² according to the principles of unconsummation and openness that enable him to write again and again about the same occurrences, including dreams, in order to plumb them or at least to clarify them from different angles. This approach

¹ See also the book titled *Pet fragmentov* (Five fragments) (Kovačič 1981: 288).

² Kovačič compares the work of a writer with the work of his father who was a furrier and who made in out of furs of different game animals, out of *living substance* hence, clothing—and similar to that, the writer also is, according to him, transforming, in the underground, symbols and personalities out of living substance through the content (Kovačič 1997: 15).

also allows him to compose from fragments of existing published texts a new book,³ or to create from different, yet unused notes a new textual unity,⁴ as well as to write on the basis of unpublished material a *counter-book* to the previous one because he is inspired by the will to “exhaust on paper all his life to the last possibility, until silence” (Komel-Snoj 1997: 201).

3. In the majority of Kovačič’s works the narrator is equivalent to the author. Kovačič suppresses the narrative illusion; he “becomes human” and wholly locates himself within everyday life (Dolgan 2004: 164–65). This is not to say that there is absolute identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. Kovačič, for instance, differentiates in principle between the inner process of creation, which transpires within, and the process of writing, which takes places without (Kovačič 1988: 111). He signals when changing from first- to third-person narration,⁵ observing himself as someone who is “completely unapproachable” (Kovačič 1993: 10). Elsewhere he “duplicates” himself in the protagonist, as in *The Newcomers*, where, at the end, he states that he quasi doubled himself, so as to tell the story of someone else, someone different from him (Kovačič 1985: 391).

4. Kovačič is fully focused on his own person, his own experiences, and his solipsistic point of view. So there is nothing strange about the fact that he also considers himself the primary addressee of his texts; moreover, Kovačič considers telling *oneself* and not *others* the “main achievement which one can realize,” because “there is nothing more fruitful for the reader than being present as a third-party witness for the consistent dialogue of the author with himself” (Kovačič 1997: 187). Hence, Kovačič expects from such a literature that

[...] it has to be “*entire*” and it shall not be written under any control of a certain meaning. [...] It should re-compose a human being inside himself like he re-composes himself in reality every day alone, the same way he is always the same and always different to himself; what he has accepted as belonging to him in this precise moment will be left aside the very next moment; nothing shall be bound anywhere, neither spiritually, nor finally: as unconvincing as life, open, an antithesis to everything, the chaos through which the human being walks in his cerebral, rather than in his sexual or inherited sphere. (Kovačič 1997: 187)

³ See the books *Preseljevanja* (Migrations 1974), *Sporočila iz sna in budnosti* (Messages in dreams and waking 1987) in *Tri ljubezni* (Three loves, 2004).

⁴ See the collection *Prah* (Dust 1988).

⁵ Especially in the books *Pet fragmentov* (Five fragments 1981) respectively *Tri ljubezni* (Three loves 2004) and *Vzemljohod* (Descention 1993).

Precisely in this *entireness*, which derives from the fragments and from the rejection of a *certain meaning*, Kovačič creates conditions that make it unimportant to the reader whether the persons and events described are “taken” from real life or whether the narration corresponds to reality or is imagined, invented.

Of course, Kovačič’s perception of reality is consistently limited by his decision to write only about himself. Aleksander Zorn has characterized Kovačič’s literary perception of reality as narcissistic, a radically subjective image of the world that appears as pure mimesis. This narcissistic reality is also the only possibility the literary world’s existence and the only real truth. It is the place where reality opens itself in an authentic way, where the writer can be sincere about his reality (Zorn 1987: 232).

Reality itself cannot be directly transferred to literature, it is transformed through the author’s memory, the process of creation, and it assumes its final literary form through the writing process. The world steps into literature only through this transforming process, and when the transformation is finished, the link between the world and literature breaks and literature becomes the author’s world of freedom (Zorn 1987: 234). Since literature for Kovačič always was one of the rare reservations for human freedom (Pibernik 1983: 101), Kovačič is defending freedom against the tyranny of the world (Zorn 1987: 235–36). So in fact Kovačič’s subjectivism takes place in the (fictional) world he creates as an answer to the real world, which is marked by non-freedom and totalitarianism and rejects diversity. Kovačič once characterized *The Newcomers* as a novel situated in a real environment, in a period full of concrete data, with which the main figure has his own inner relationship (Pibernik 1983: 120).

5. Kovačič himself was very sceptical of historiography. For him, history is a delusion, a bluff, when it is not a history of facts (Kovačič 1999: 15). In applying these observations to *The Newcomers*, we find that the text is composed of a number of mostly chronological fragments assembled into three larger fragmented parts, which taken together perform as a consistent tale. But the chronology is also interrupted by moments of retrospection and reflection, by the author’s voice, especially at beginning and towards to the end of part 3.

The text has a dynamic epic structure that includes many personal and intimate details, conflicts within the family, relations to the environment, to neighbors, and to the concrete effects of the social and political situation. But the narrator tries to reconstruct the past without any generalizations, simplifications, idealization, or apologetic interpretations—that is, in an authentic manner that includes the use of German words and dialog. He never argues in a moral or ideological fashion; he never emphasizes the political situation or ideological repressions in general,

whether in Switzerland, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, under the wartime fascist puppet regime, or Yugoslavia under the communists.

The historical background, especially during the war, breaks into the narrative only in fragments, represented by airplanes, soldiers, changing local administrations and organizations, newspaper reports, leaflets, political and ideological discussions, and the fear that people express or show. Nothing is commented upon or interpreted; nothing is invested with a particular meaning or sense. The tale, as tragic as it may be, flows in many directions, always from the point of view of the narrator's alter ego as a child or a young man. In other words, the hero lives his own life, oriented toward the future, and through him all the family members and the people he meets also live.

The narrator tells the story on the basis of the physical and psychological horizon of a ten year-old boy and the gradual evolution of that boy's experiences and consciousness. At the beginning, some elements of the fairy tale and the imaginative tale of adventure are present, but the tale quickly continues as a description of the reality of life, concerning the boy and his family as a disunited social microcosm in an ideologically suffused environment. With respect to the boy's mother and sister Claire, the story becomes a chronicle of desperation, while with respect to his father, it becomes a chronicle of frustration and resignation. Only the young boy seems to be different right from the beginning; he never gives up, he is looking for some kind of integration and partly he finds it in some friendships, but mainly in his contradictory confrontation with Slovene language and literature.

The story is about a family struggling for its existence on the lowest social level. This struggle for life has a highly ethical dimension that supersedes concerns with the ideologies and regimes that confront them. The Slovene-German newcomers from Switzerland remain outsiders, both to Slovene society and to the German occupiers. After the war, Slovene society rids itself of them when the main part of the family is banished from the country. Even Lojze Kovačič's decision in 1948 to join the Yugoslav army is a kind of exile—and yet another experience that threatens annihilation. Kovačič wrote about his existence as an outsider, reproducing his life and himself from his subjective perspective of chaotic and diverse life, a view that contradicts any monological view of reality and the past.

The Newcomers represents (formerly) suppressed history. It refers to historical facts that were suppressed in official post-war politics and history. The book is not a counter history to the official one but a highly subversive, because of its subjectivity, account, including the mimetic details of everyday life, showing the consequences of ideology, politics, and social crises without heed to post-war Slovene myths.

Examples of such non parallels between the family story and myths are:

- The Italian occupation seems to have its most dramatic effect in changing the sexual life of Ljubljana, a narrative focus that coincides with the puberty and first sexual experiences of the protagonist.
- During World War II, the family decides to move to Germany because they are not integrated into Slovene society and are, moreover, afraid of losing their apartment. But they decide to stay after they experience the degrading treatment of the German repatriation commission.
- Like one of his friends, the young protagonist initially wants to join the fascist-aligned "White Guard" in order to get away from school and home, while the communist-aligned OF, the Slovene Liberation Front, is hardly present, and mostly in connection with propaganda.
- The partisans are perceived as "bandits" who frighten the people.
- His sister falls in love with a German soldier who helps the family.
- The protagonist sympathizes with people (e.g., Tine Debeljak) who had to flee Ljubljana at the end of the war.
- When the partisans march into Ljubljana, most of the people celebrate, but the Kovačičs are terrified of being arrested.
- He describes the repression of the "Whites," the execution of thousands members of the Domobranci (the Nazi-allied forces) after the war, the so called Dachau Trials in Ljubljana, and the life of his family in the displaced persons camp in Carinthia.
- When he is confronted with the propaganda and activism of the communist youth organizations, he joins, but he is still hated and treated as a Nazi sympathizer and so loses his job and housing.

The suppressed history in *The Newcomers* finds expression in the disintegration of a family that does not fit in during a time of national antagonisms and social disintegration. The book is far from giving an answer to the question of who was right and who was wrong; it only shows a subjective, reconstructed, literary reality. Truth derives from the text, but if we deal with it on the level of history, which is also a construction, we encounter trouble. So, for example, Franc Zadavec (1997: 89) observes in his monograph on the Slovene novel of the twentieth century that Kovačič is "not objective" when he depicts the popular mood at the end of the war. Of course he is not!

Kovačič wrote the book after Tito's death, when the ideological, political, and social crisis in Yugoslavia was already obvious. That does not mean that he did not dare to write this chronicle or autobiography before that time; on the contrary, as early as the 1940s he came into conflict with the regime's ideology because, as a journalist at that time, he was writing about reality as he saw it; furthermore, we can find many ideologically questionable details of his personal story in a number of his other pre-1980 texts. Maybe he was also inspired by the books about other chapters of suppressed history that began coming out in the 1980s—about the Dachau Trials of 1948 in Ljubljana and the political prisoners on Goli otok (by Igor Torkar and Branko Hofman). Perhaps after his book *Five fragments* he really had to write another extensive text in order to eat and to pay the rent, as he mentions in *The Newcomers*. But more likely it actually took him that long to find a final form for this tale, since he published already in 1972 a text which was initially conceived as part of the *The Newcomers* (Kovačič 1972).

The Newcomers refers, as do many other literary works, to some of the same “blind spots” in recent Slovene history. But Kovačič's book is different from most of the others because it is pre-eminently a literary work. This is one of the reasons *The Newcomers* continues to attract many readers and why it has been or will be translated into other languages.⁶ It is a book that refers to an important, still controversial part of Slovene history but is not itself a part of that history.

University of Vienna

Works Cited

- Dolgan, Marjan. 2004. *Slovenska književnost tako ali drugače*, 141–65. Ljubljana: Slovenska matica.
- Komel Snój, Mateja. 1997. Komaj se rodimo, že pripadamo. In Lojze Kovačič, *Delavnica. Šola pisanja*, 189–225. Maribor: Obzorja.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1972. Opis neke slike, *Sodobnost* 20, no. 3: 233–55.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1974. *Preseljevanja*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1981. *Pet fragmentov*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1984. *Prišleki*, vols. 1–2. Ljubljana: Slovenska matica.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1985. *Prišleki*, vol. 3. Ljubljana: Slovenska matica.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1987. *Sporočila iz sna in budnosti. Opuskule*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.

⁶ Lojze Kovačič, *Die Zugereisten. Eine Chronik* (Klagenfurt: Drava, 2004–2006); Lojze Kovačič, *Los inmigrados* (Madrid: Siruela, 2007); Lojze Kovačič, *Les immigrants. Roman* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

- Kovačič, Lojze. 1988. *Prah. Dnevnik, zapazanja, reminiscence*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1990. *Kristalni čas*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1993. *Vzemljohod*. Ljubljana: Slovenska matica.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1997. *Delavnica. Šola pisanja*. Maribor: Obzorja.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 1999. *Literatura ali življenje. Eseji, članki, dnevniki*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba.
- Kovačič, Lojze. 2004. *Tri ljubezni*. Ljubljana: Sanje.
- Pibernik, France. 1983. *Čas romana. Pogovori s slovenskimi pisatelji*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba.
- Zdravec, Franc. 1997. *Slovenski roman dvajsetega stoletja. Prvi analitični del*. Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba; Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete.
- Zor-Simoniti, Alenka. 2000. Življenje je okno, literatura je zrcalo. Pogovor z Lojzetom Kovačičem. *Ampak* 1, no. 1: 50–52.
- Zorn, Aleksander. 1987. Tiranija resničnosti in rezervat svobode (Avtobiografski opus Lojzeta Kovačiča). In Lojze Kovačič, *Sporočila iz sna in budnosti. Opuške*, 227–54. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.

POVZETEK

LOJZE KOVAČIČ IN NJEGOVI PRIŠLEKI

Kovačičeve Prišleke lahko beremo kot roman, avtobiografijo ali pa tudi kot družinsko kroniko o dobi, ki so jo zaznamovali vojna, nacionalizem, ideologije in propaganda. Besedilo se dotika tudi nekaterih poglavij iz polpretekle slovenske zgodovine, ki sta jih uradna poveljna politika in zgodovinarstvo dolgo zamolčala, vendar z ozirom na Kovačičeva umetniška, estetska in etična načela, ki temeljijo na fragmentarnosti in odprtosti tako življenja kot literature, ne gre spregledati, da imamo najprej in predvsem opraviti s (re)konstruirano, literarno resničnostjo. Interpretiranje Prišlekov na osnovi t. i. zgodovinske resničnosti je zato skrajno problematično, hkrati pa se še pred zgodovinskim ozadjem tudi pokažejo subversivne razsežnosti besedila.