

CONTEXTUALIZING CONTEMPORARY SLOVENIAN LYRIC POETRY WITHIN LITERARY HISTORY

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Literary historians use numerous terms to describe post-World War II Slovenian poetry, among them intimism, neo- or post-romanticism, post-symbolism, neo-expressionism, surrealism, existentialism, modernism, ultramodernism, new avant-garde, concrete and visual poetry, ludism, linguism, new formalism, postmodernism, autopoetics, and yet others. Of these terms, only a few are used to denote literary movements in the proper sense of the word (primarily romanticism, symbolism, modernism, and in part, existentialism), whereas others denote a characteristic theme (e.g., intimism, existentialism) or style. Thus expressionism refers to expression of one's internal world through concrete phenomena; surrealism suggests associativity and daring metaphors; ultramodernism is a synonym for increasing opaqueness; and ludism, similar to linguism, denotes language play. Other terms may refer to formal characteristics (e.g., new formalism refers to returning to traditional forms), or genre (e.g., concrete and visual poetry), or draw attention to the coexistence of various poetics (e.g., autopoetics). This article attempts to reconcile competing and sometimes conflicting critical notions in order to suggest an overarching concern of Slovenian lyric poetry since at least 1980, or about the time when previously useful descriptors lose their explanatory value.

A number of scholars (e.g., Boris Paternu, Janko Kos, Jože Pogačnik, Denis Poniž, and Tine Hribar) have dealt with the issue of contextualizing Slovenian poetry after 1945 within literary history. My point of departure in considering the entire matter is Jože Pogačnik's *Slovenska književnost III* (Slovenian Literature III: 2001). The chapter on post-World War II lyric poetry was written by two scholars: Jože Pogačnik authored the first part, and Denis Poniž the second. They divided the work so that Pogačnik examined older poets (the youngest of whom were born around 1930), and Poniž focused on younger poets. Poniž directed more attention to poets born in the 1940s and 1950s. Those born in the 1960s and 1970s are less well represented.

Jože Pogačnik's contribution can be characterized as the work of a traditional literary historian. He studies the development of literary phenomena by casting them in broader literary-historical frameworks, for which he uses the terms "(literary) period," and occasionally also "stylistic formation," "current," and "epoch." He borrowed the term of stylistic formation from Aleksandar Flaker (1964). Because "literary period" denotes a new view of the world and life realized through style, the subject of Pogačnik's research is dual: one must study both formal and content-

related determinants. The form-content dichotomy is thus firmly anchored in the basic premise of the research.

Pogačnik's study excels in its clear methodological concept, unrivalled in Slovenian literary historiography. Discussions of new methodological approaches to writing literary history still today remain on the theoretical level, best exemplified by the volume *Kako pisati literarno zgodovino danes?* (Dolinar and Juvan 2003: 2006). The nineteen contributors offer various responses to the issue raised in the title. For our purposes, Peter Zima's contribution "Historische Perioden als Problematiken: Sozio-linguistische Situationen, Soziolekte und Diskurze" (Historical periods as problematics: Sociolinguistic situations, sociolects, and discourses) is of particular interest. It does not speak of abandoning periodization but suggests that "we should increase the complexity of our theoretical models" (278) in order to encompass the linguistic, aesthetic, and political heterogeneity of literary periods. According to Zima, despite their heterogeneity, individual periods such as romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism are relatively uniform because they deal with similar basic issues. Slovene literary historians' descriptions of lyric poetry ought to be weighed in light of Zima's point about internal heterogeneity and overarching unity.

A difficulty with Pogačnik's contribution to *Slovenska književnost III* is that it is adapted from the eighth volume of *Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva* (History of Slovenian literature, 1972). Without knowing that this work appeared in 1972, it is impossible to understand the claim that no study to date has covered literary events as activities with a common point of departure despite their various manifestations. There had in fact been several attempts of this sort. Those most committed to periodization belong to Janko Kos's foreword to the anthology *Slovenska lirika 1950–1980* (Slovenian lyric poetry 1950–1980, 1983) and Boris Paternu's "Sodobna slovenska poezija kot evolucijski problem" (Contemporary Slovenian poetry as an evolutionary issue, 1988), which are good examples of studies concerned with periodization. Kos identified two main movements in Slovenian postwar poetry: modernism and postmodernism. In his opinion, the rise of modernism began in the mid-1950s and reached its apex in the following decade; however, at the beginning of the 1970s it was radicalized and, around 1975, postmodernism emerged. Boris Paternu analyzed and named these events in a similar, but not identical manner. In his opinion, modernism lasted from the late 1940s to 1970, when a period of poetic pluralism emerged. Paternu divided modernism into proto-modernism (1947–49 to 1958–59), modernism (1958–59 to 1965–66), and radical modernism (1965–66 to 1970).

Pogačnik's periodization of 1972 differs from the more recent ones developed by Kos and Paternu primarily in its terminology. It does not use

the term “modernism” but refers instead to existentialism and structuralism. Pogačnik refers to Kos’s and Paternu’s older essays, in which Kos still discussed the literature of the absurd and avant-garde, whereas Paternu examined three periods: new realism (1945–50), the beginning of modern lyric poetry (the 1950s), and the third period, which could not be named yet because of its recentness (the 1960s). Pogačnik agrees with most of Kos’s findings, although he reproaches Kos for “not having sufficiently developed and worked them out” (Pogačnik 1972: 51). He criticizes Paternu in particular for not noticing that Tomaž Šalamun’s collection *Poker* (1966) opened a new era. It seems that Kos and Paternu took Pogačnik’s criticisms into account by moving away from his terminological solutions. His use of the concept of structuralism seems to be the most controversial. Darko Dolinar has shown that it was not widely accepted (2001: 552). The durability of the concept of existentialism is also questionable. Kos and Paternu rejected the use of existentialism as the name for a literary period; Pogačnik did not, although he was aware it was problematic. In his opinion, the existentialist literary current did not create its own, unique expression but selected and combined existing stylistic methods (Pogačnik 1972: 52). In Slovenia, Marjeta Vasič discussed the discomfort of French literary historians with the use of a philosophical name for literary works (1984: 29). Here it is worth recalling that the term “decadence,” which older literary historians used for a literary movement, can simply be described as an attitude toward existence that was present much earlier than the end of the nineteenth century (Vajda 1984: 32–33). In a similar way, the ahistoric use of the term “existentialism” would probably resolve problems with it.

In order to answer the question of which Slovenian poets Pogačnik characterized as existentialists, one must proceed from his view that a decisive literary shift took place between the 1950s and 1960s. The shift from external reality to human intimacy did not appear suddenly, but had already been signaled by the Partisan bard Matej Bor, as well as in the poetry of Ada Škerl and Jože Šmit. Ciril Zlobec, Janez Menart, Kajetan Kovič, and Tone Pavček reflected on private human existence in their works, while Dane Zajc, Veno Taufer, and Gregor Strniša highlighted existential issues in the proper sense of the word. Thus it seems that Pogačnik also counted intimists as existentialists (although he mentions Pavček’s loyalty to a romantic vision), whereas Kos linked them to the ideology of neo-romanticism. According to Pogačnik, a new shift in Slovenian postwar poetry occurred in 1966 with the publication of Tomaž Šalamun’s *Poker* and the emergence of avant-garde literary currents. Among these, the most important is concrete poetry, to which Pogačnik dedicated a considerable amount of attention, although Denis Poniž took over the presentation of all the other important representatives, except Franci Zagoričnik. For the period after 1965, Pogačnik uses the global term

structuralism; however, it is interesting that he noticed the signs that this period was concluding as early as 1972.

Among the content-related determinants of both literary periods, Pogačnik dedicated most attention to the philosophical influences of existentialism and structuralism, some of whose typical themes and ideas he identifies as dehumanization, depersonalization, and the decline of anthropocentrism. He discusses style in several chapters; in the shortest chapter, entitled “Sodobnost in književno izročilo” (The present and literary tradition), he mentions three formal and stylistic complexes arising from symbolism, expressionism, and new (social) realism. Pogačnik does not list their characteristics but only names the most important representatives of symbolism (Jože Udovič and Cene Vipotnik) and expressionism (Anton Vodnik and Edvard Kocbek). Surrealism probably deserved some mention as well. In the chapter “Oblikovna in stilna izhodišča” (Formal and stylistic points of departure), he lists certain characteristics that poetry shared before the emergence of structuralism (a tendency towards pure poetry, the predominance of small lyric forms, the exchange of metric compactness for the principle of semantic compactness, metaphorical or symbolic polysemy, a static nature, and approximation to prose expression). Concrete poetry established a new attitude towards language (language is primarily material, from which aesthetically beautiful combinations can be created).

Denis Poniž focuses on analysis more than on synthesis, uses certain concepts at the journalistic level, and does not connect them into a solid system, although it seems that he also places great importance on periodization. At the beginning he states that three “innovative currents” developed in Slovenian poetry during the 1960s: the poetics of language distress, concrete and visual poetry, and the linguistic current. The title of one of his chapters is “Poetika lingvizma in novega (jezikovnega) simbolizma” (The poetics of linguism and new [linguistic] symbolism), in which it seems that the two terms denote the same phenomenon. In the last chapter he discusses the decade 1965–75, during which linguism, concrete poetry, and new formalism were parallel yet in part opposing movements. These “movements” should probably also include ludism, which stressed language’s playfulness. Poniž also uses the term “ultramodernism,” and discusses ultramodernists and avant-gardists, but within a context in which there is no clear relationship to the concepts listed above. For example, it is unclear whether the “new symbolists” are adherents of ultramodernism. The status of “new formalism” raises doubts as well because one finds it difficult to agree that this is an independent movement (lacking any content-related determinants). Poniž establishes that after 1980 postmodernism increasingly gained in importance. He identifies “postmodernist” characteristics in the poetry of Tomaž Šalamun, Niko Grafenauer, Franci Zagoričnik, Milan Dekleva, Milan Jesih, Iztok Osojnik, Jure Potokar, Aleš Debeljak, Jurij Kovič, Maja Vidmar, Uroš Zupan, Aleš Šteger, and Jurij

Hudolin. Certain characteristics are more content-related (abandoning great stories to the benefit of minute, everyday events; focusing on the fate of the lyric subject; the feelings of a man without foundation, trapped in nothingness; melancholy; alienation; fluid awareness of oneself and others; awareness of the transcendence of poetic activity; and so on), whereas others are predominantly formal (citationality, fragmentariness, merging prose and poetic elements, intertwining various styles, fictitious and fantastic similarities, and so on). Yet listing characteristics cannot satisfactorily answer the question of which are the main determinants of (poetic) postmodernism. The majority of characteristics listed above could be connected with older literary movements, especially with romanticism and modernism. It is well known that, for example, fragmentariness is one of the features of modernist literature. Supposing that there is also a “postmodernist” fragmentariness, one should explain how it differs from the modernist one. Poniž does not mention Kos’s definition of postmodernism based on *Geistesgeschichte* (or any other definition), from which he could borrow the missing basic determinants.

Slovenian literary historians largely agree on the turns in the development of Slovenian postwar lyric poetry, although they sometimes use different names for the same phenomena or identify different fundamental characteristics. The strongest consensus has been reached with regard to Slovenian poetic modernism, which was the leading movement from the late 1950s to 1975 (or, according to Paternu 1970). During this period, important collections were published by Dane Zajc, Gregor Strniša, Venko Taufer, Franci Zagoričnik, Svetlana Makarovič, Tomaž Šalamun, Niko Grafenauer, and Iztok Geister; among younger poets, modernism can be observed in the earlier collections by Milan Dekleva, Milan Jesih, Boris A. Novak, and Aleš Debeljak; Iztok Osojnik, Andrej Medved, Ivo Svetina, and Matjaž Kocbek can also be characterized as modernists. Some scholars identified the period after 1975 (Kos 1983) or 1980 (Poniž 1989) as the period of postmodernism, whereas others talk about the period of poetic pluralism after 1970 (Paternu 1988) or the coexistence of various autopoetics after 1980. In Tine Hribar’s opinion (1984: 279), Slovenian poetic postmodernism lasted only five years—that is, from 1975 to 1980—with its most important representatives being Venko Taufer, Ivo Svetina, and Andrej A. Novak, who were programmatically “writing poems about the holiness of the world and methodically introduced the palimpsest procedure vis-à-vis tradition” (279). Later, Kos (2001) also drew attention to the fact that after 1970 one cannot talk about a leading movement, but of a combination of various movements—that is, postmodernism (he claims that Milan Jesih is the only true representative of poetic postmodernism), magical realism, neo-decadence, neorealism, and post-symbolism. He named this period the “Slovenian Postmodern.” According to Janko Kos, in order to judge whether a literary work is postmodern it is essential to

determine how truth and reality are represented in the work. Regarding Jesih's *Soneti* (Sonnets), he wrote that they could "be taken as a true example of Slovenian poetic postmodernism" if they were read in a manner that would convince us that in them "it is no longer possible to determine when a particular reality is still true, and what, in this ambivalent and even rather polyvalent structure of the world, ought to be true" (Kos 1995b: 141). This manner of reading *Soneti* is quite widespread, as is also the argument that Jesih's lyric subject plays various roles, so that it is never the same (Matevž Kos, Tea Štoka, Peter Kolšek).

Examining the literature on Slovenian poetry after 1970 or 1980, it is possible to conclude that two basic views took shape: the opinion that the poetry of that period can be characterized as postmodern, in opposition to the more widespread point of view that during this time no leading direction took shape, and that no single name can be applied to the period. The concept of autopoetics, which Tine Hribar used as a term referring to the diversity of poetry after 1980, has passed into common use. Today's poets also seem to be more accepting of it than of the much more evasive term "postmodernism," which is also overloaded with various meanings. Responding to the question of whether consciousness about the diversity of authorial writings can be enhanced through a complex theoretical model that would reflect the linguistic, aesthetic, and political heterogeneity of the period, and at the same time establish its unity on the basis of related issues, as Peter Zima suggested, exceeds the framework of this article. However, I would like to propose that a chief issue uniting much of Slovenian poetry of the last several decades is the identity of the individual. It is a focus of poets of diverse manners of writing, outlooks, and ages.

Contemporary individuals constantly create themselves and are their own legislators in the spirit of Nietzsche's prediction in *The Gay Science*: "We, however, want to become who we are—the new, unique, incomparable ones, who give themselves their own laws, who create themselves" (Beck 2003: 109). The topic of self-construction is certainly not new to lyric poetry because it is closely connected with its essence; namely, lyric poem can be defined as a means of self-expression and the self-construction of the lyric subject (the speaker). Romantic theories of lyric poetry naturally did not know the concept of the lyric subject, but treated poems as expressions of the author; however, various researchers confirmed the hypothesis that the lyric subject is created only with the poem and exists only within the poem (of which, for example, Jan Mukařovsky was convinced) by analyzing poetry from all periods. Thus, for example, it is typical of the lyric subject in France Prešeren's poems that it forms its identity primarily in relation to poetry, the nation, and a female object.

Contemporary Slovenian poets often answer the question "Who am I?" by telling "little stories" from everyday life. The term "little story" was

used by Andrej Blatnik in 1989 as a genre label for his short prose and as a response to Jean-François Lyotard's thesis on the disappearance of great stories (*grand recits*). Little stories can be found in the poetry of Milan Jesih, Boris A. Novak, Iztok Osojnik, Alojz Ihan, Uroš Zupan, Brane Mozetič, Peter Semolič, and others. The narrative style was also used by older poets with the difference that the younger poets do not create special metaphorical or symbolic worlds (such as Strniša's labyrinth, Zajec's desert, or Kovič's southern island), but seek to indicate a special, deeper meaning of everyday experiences, such as walking through a town abroad or in the garden, moving out of a shared apartment, and watching TV. There are few pure lyrics in the sense of direct presentation of the inner world, and there are practically no language experiments. The lyric subject constructs its identity by telling a story that can be more or less trenchant. It often remembers its childhood (e.g., Uroš Zupan and Peter Semolič) and seeks to identify itself with various roles, among which the role of a lover is very popular.¹

Most often the lyric subject seeks to resolve its identity problem by associating itself with the poetic calling. It may be the one that knows that it sees or feels more in everyday events, and is able to tell this in the form of a poem, so it does not problematize its situation (e.g., Alojz Ihan, and Uroš Zupan in his older collections). If a positive identification with the role of the poet-observer is not possible, the lyric subject is dissatisfied with itself (e.g., Tone Škrjanec). The feeling that the individual's identity is changing and unstable is typical of the poetry of Peter Semolič; his lyric subject is therefore melancholic. Based on the traditional conceptualization of the Slovenian poet as a combination of a genius and a kind-hearted drunkard, Milan Jesih created a special type of lyric subject by giving it the gift of self-irony. More recently, the self-irony of the lyric subject has also been typical of the poetry of Uroš Zupan and Iztok Osojnik.

The feeling that we do not live and work in closed nation-states and societies is not new to poetry, because poets have always known and praised spiritual freedom in exchanging themes and forms. The thematization of the feeling of a physical limitlessness is also not new to poetry (let us remember the transcending of limits in modernist poetry, such as in Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "Zone"). In contemporary Slovenian poetry, the lyric subject is often a traveler or visitor seeking to find his identity in foreign towns by observing the Other. The experience of the world's connectivity is also evident in the selection of books, films, music, and pictures that help the lyric subject construct its identity, which, in the spiritual sense, is notably cosmopolitan. Less frequently, the everyday experience of infinity is indicated with a banal product, such as the tobacco of various exotic brands in Uroš Zupan's poem "Kajenje" (Smoking).

¹ Brane Mozetič's works contain the most notable examples of homosexual love.

Constructing personal identity has once again become one of the main topics Slovenian poets focus on. Precisely because of this, one can speak of the lyricization of contemporary Slovenian poetry despite its notably narrative structure. Taking into account the focus on the “self” and its experiences, it seems that a great part of Slovenian contemporary poetry is close to romanticism, and therefore involves the revival or a reworking of a model that has displayed exceptional tenacity in the history of Slovenian poetry.

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POVZETEK

POSKUS LITERARNOZGODOVINSKE UMESTITVE SODOBNE SLOVENSKE POEZIJE

S problemom literarnozgodovinske umestitve slovenske poezije po letu 1945 se ukvarja vrsta raziskovalcev (B. Paternu, J. Kos, J. Pogačnik, D. Poniž, T. Hribar), ki se v glavnem strinjajo, kdaj nastopijo obrati v njenem razvoju, čeprav za iste pojave včasih uporabljajo različna imena ali za bistvene razglašajo drugačne lastnosti. Največji konsenz je dosežen glede slovenskega pesniškega modernizma, ki je vodilna smer od poznih 50. let do leta 1970 ali 1975. V članku po pregledu različnih prispevkov o slovenski poeziji po letu 1970 ali 1980 ugotavljam, da sta se izoblikovala dva osnovna pogleda nanjo: mnenju, da je poezijo tega obdobja mogoče označiti kot postmodernistično, nasprotuje bolj razširjeno stališče, da se v tem času ni izoblikovala vodilna smer, po kateri bi lahko poimenovali obdobje. Pojem avtopoetike, ki ga je Tine Hribar uporabil kot oznako za raznolikost poezije po letu 1980, je prešel v splošno rabo. Zdi se, da je tudi za današnje pesnike bolj sprejemljiv, kot veliko bolj izmuzljiv in s pomeni preobložen izraz postmodernizem. Odgovor na vprašanje, ali bi bilo mogoče zavest o raznolikosti avtorskih pisav nadgraditi s kompleksnim teoretičnim modelom, ki bi odseval jezikovno, estetsko in politično heterogenost obdobja, obenem pa vzpostavil njegovo enotnost na osnovi sorodne problematike, presega okvir te razprave. Namesto podrobne analize, ki bi morala zajeti različna problemska področja, skušam podkrepiti tezo, da je eden osrednjih problemov, s katerim se ukvarja novejša slovenska poezija, identiteta posameznika. Ob upoštevanju osredotočenosti na »jaz« in njegovo doživljanje se zdi, da je velik del sodobne slovenske poezije blizu romantiki, gre torej za ponovno oživljanje

ali predelavo modela, ki je v zgodovini slovenske poezije izkazal izjemno trdoživost.