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Slovenian Literature amidst Europe and History[1]

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Throughout the first centuries of its documented existence Slovenian literature was intimately linked to the religious and cultural centers of the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire, the outermost boundaries of which also embraced the Slovene lands.

Christianity began its diffusion among the Slovenes in the eighth century CE, arriving first from the Patriarchate of Aquileia to the west, but then primarily from Salzburg and Freising, both of which had sizable territorial possessions in the Slovenian lands. The oldest preserved document written in an early version of Slovene, the *Freising Fragments* (ca. 1000 CE), originated in Freising and testify to what by then was already a two hundred year-old tradition of missionary activity by the monks of Freising amongst the Slovenes. In the sixteenth century, the city of Tübingen became one of the main centers of the Protestant Reformation in Slovenia, with the first printed book in Slovenian, Primož Trubar's *Katekizem* (Catechism), being produced in the nearby town of Schwäbisch Hall. In 1584, the first Slovenian translation of the complete Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was published in Wittenberg, and in this respect the origins of Slovenian literature run parallel to the origins of Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, and Finnish literatures, all of which began with the spread of German Lutheranism into the lands of Central Europe and the Baltic Region.

After 1600, following the victory of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in the Slovene lands, a rich Baroque culture took root and flourished there, with influences from the Italian and Spanish cultural domains beginning to find their way into the otherwise modest Slovenian literary tradition, although even then contacts with the German literary tradition continued to predominate. A major example is the multi-volume, encyclopedic *Die Ehre des Herzogthums Crain* (The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola, 1689) by Janez Vajkard Valvasor, the first complete overview of the life and history of the Duchy of Carniola, which at that time constituted

[1] This overview of Slovene literature was originally commissioned by the Slovene Book Agency for inclusion in a much larger anthology of expert introductions to a wide range of facets of Slovenian culture that the Agency is planning to publish in separate English and German editions for the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair, at which Slovenia will be the Guest of Honor. Slovene Studies extends our sincere thanks both to the Book Agency and to Prof. Kos for their kind permission to publish the English translation of the article here. For more information about Slovenia as the featured publishing industry at the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair, visit https://sloveniafrankfurt2023.com/.

the core of the Slovene lands. The work was announced in the 1688 catalog of the Frankfurt Book Fair, the first documented contact of Slovenian culture with Frankfurt.

The withdrawal of Slovenian literature from the German cultural sphere got its major impetus from the Enlightenment toward the end of the eighteenth century. Thanks to models from the evolving Italian, French and English literary traditions, Slovenian literature, which until then had been almost exclusively a medium of religious and ecclesiastical discourse, made the leap to a secular and, for the most part, free-thinking literature spanning highly artistic imaginative poetry, drama, and prose narratives. Thus came into being a literature that is typically Central European, at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe and of the Germanic, Romance, and Slavic literary traditions. During the first half of the nineteenth century this process culminated in the poetry of Francè Prešeren (1800–49), who even today remains Slovenia's national poet, not just because his poem "Zdravljica" ("A Toast") provided the lyrics for the Slovene national anthem in 1991, but because his work remains both intellectually and aesthetically the greatest creative achievement of all Slovenian literature. For Slovenes, Prešeren has become what Dante is for Italians, what Goethe is for Germans, or what Pushkin is for Russians. In his poetry he combines elements of both the German and Slavic romantic traditions, as if deliberately aiming at the synthesis of classical antiquity and romantic vernacular that German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel had theorized about. Prešeren's influence on all subsequent Slovenian literature extends to domains that are not strictly literary, including his notion of national emancipation and his ambivalent middle ground between Christianity and free-thinking secularism. Both of these dynamics have characterized all major Slovenian poets and prose writers since Prešeren up to the present day.

During the nineteenth century Slovenia's literary connections to Europe shifted once again. While the German classics—Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, and Heine—remained the models for older generations of writers, the Russian classics—Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky—became a powerful inspiration for younger generations, with the French naturalists, decadents, and symbolists also exerting a growing influence on them by the end of the century. This gave rise around 1900 to a movement now known as early Slovene modernism, consisting primarily of younger poets and one of Slovenia's most important prose writers and playwrights of all time, Ivan Cankar (1876–1918).

Early modernism saw Slovenian literature expand from its provincial origins into the broader European cultural sphere, becoming modernist in the sense that we acknowledge today. The literature still retained the function it had inherited from Prešeren of affirming Slovene national identity and the goal of emancipation from Habsburg colonial rule, yet at the

same time it began dealing with the fundamental issues that had come to preoccupy Slovenes as they did all of Europe in the years leading up to WW I, assuming ever greater intensity through WW II up to the end of the twentieth century. It was only now that essential religious, philosophical, political, social, and moral issues came to the forefront. The longstanding tension between Christianity and secularism intensified to a breaking point that was not just literary, but above all social and political. During WW II, these tensions exploded in a civil war and, after the war, continued to shape the lives of Slovenes in Communist Yugoslavia. Catholicism, secularism, and Marxism continued to provide the foundation of Slovenian literature even after 1991, when the literature underwent a resurgence in the first ever independent Slovenian state. Its encounter just prior to that with three varieties of totalitarianism—fascism, national socialism, and communism—that first encroached on Slovenia right after WW I with the advent of Italian fascism constituted a particular challenge.

Between 1900 and 2000 Slovene literary modernism was inevitably shaped by the works of major European poets, prose writers and playwrights exerting an influence on a number of characteristic local writers in the vernacular who found ways to appeal to the concerns of their milieu. To this day the foremost among them is Ivan Cankar, who of the four great representatives of early Slovene modernism—the other three being Dragotin Kette, Josip Murn, and Oton Župančič—was the only novelist, short story writer, and playwright. Cankar lived most of his adult years in Vienna and his works dating to those years are often set in Vienna, though in contrast with the German-language works of Austrian writers Arthur Schnitzler or Robert Musil, which are set in Vienna's aristocratic and bourgeois milieu, Cankar's take place in the working-class suburbs and among the lower middle class. His novel *The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy* (*Hiša Marije Pomočnice*,1904) appeared in the same year as Musil's *Young Törless*. Both deal with adolescents living *in extremis*—in the case of Cankar's book about a group of terminally ill girls confronting life and death even more radically than in Musil's tale of adolescent boys at a boarding school torn between perverted sexuality and the attraction of pure spirituality. Cankar's most influential work, translated into numerous languages, was his 1907 novella *The Bailiff Yerney and His Rights* (*Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica*), which he wrote at a time when he was actively involved in politics, campaigning as a member of the leftist social democratic party for a seat in the parliament in Vienna. That same year Russian writer Maxim Gorky's socialist-inspired novel *Mother* was first published. Cankar's novella, however, transcends its anarchist and socialist ideational critique of labor and capital to become a timeless, poetic, and even Biblical parable of justice. His last book, *Images from Dreams* (*Podobe iz sanj*, 1917), deserves a prominent place alongside the great European literary works appearing during and immediately after WW I that confronted its cataclysm of death, suffering, and senselessness.

With its relentless interrogation of the meaning of suffering, guilt, and redemption, Cankar's work repeatedly opens itself to metaphysical insights and hints of mysticism, a trait which it shares with that of Franz Kafka, which, like Cankar's, emerged amidst the collapse of a Central European monarchy. Cankar's dramas, which depict the social and political conflicts of modern bourgeois society, are on a par with his prose works and to this day form the core of the Slovenian theatrical repertory. The most original of them is the poetic farce *Depravity in St. Florian Valley* (*Pohujšanje v dolini Šentflorjanski*, 1908) with its central figure of an anarchist artist who uses his art to provoke, trick, and humiliate the petit-bourgeois world around him.

After the war, Slovene literature continued to emerge primarily along the intellectual and literary lines that Cankar had set. The status of the Slovene nation and its culture amid the circumstances that ensued after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy provided the literature's principal subject matter. By dint of their geopolitical interests, the Slovenes had been drawn into a newly formed multi-national Balkan state under the leadership of war-hardened Serbia, yet with the optimistic hope that they would eventually achieve all rights of nationhood within a confederation of other South Slavic nations. Yet even Cankar had doubted that a Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (and, as of 1929, Kingdom of Yugoslavia) would serve them as an adequate solution. Disillusionment inevitably set in when they realized they were now facing even harsher political and social challenges than they had under Austria, with even greater consequences for Slovene culture and literature. Their impact was all the more severe, given the general state of Europe following the catastrophe of the Great War. Instead of peaceful renewal, the war was followed by a period of violent disruption, aggressive nationalism, revolutionary explosions and implosions, fascist and communist totalitarianism, humanist utopias and new religious quests. Post-war Slovene literature found itself in a state of intellectual chaos and moral uncertainty.

The situation was particularly dire for those poets and prose writers in the Julian March and western Slovenia who at war's end suddenly found themselves under Italian rule, which rapidly devolved into a nationalist and then fascist persecution of all manifestations of Slovene language and culture. These writers remained per force outside events in the Slovene (at that time Yugoslav) heartland and, as a result, were all the more vulnerable to the intellectual chaos that inundated post-war Europe. This is the milieu that gave rise to the most multi-faceted and most European of all post-war Slovene poets, Srečko Kosovel (1904–26), who, while still matriculated as a student at the University of Ljubljana, died during a visit home to his village Tomaj in the Karst, which was then under Italian rule. His poetry shifts from a simple attachment to the landscapes of his native Karst to a taut receptivity to events unfolding abroad throughout Europe, from devotion to the tradition of confessional lyric poetry to the use of bold, avantgarde experimental forms,

from demands for revolutionary transformation to despair over the chaos engulfing European civilization amid its "ecstasy of death," from fatalistic thoughts of his own demise to a quest for redemptive meaning in the religious experience of a personal God. Kosovel's poetry spans the contradictions that Europe's leading poets were putting into verse at that same time, from Federico Garcia Lorca and T.S. Eliot to Gottfried Benn and Boris Pasternak.

Between the World Wars, a number of poets and writers from the Julian March and western Slovenia fled Italian occupation into Yugoslav exile, prominent among them the writer Ivan Pregelj (1883–1960), the poet Alojz Gradnik (1882–1967), and the young Vladimir Bartol (1903–67). After a period of exploring the nihilistic "will to power" in a series of short stories informed by psychoanalytical and philosophical perspectives, in 1938 Bartol published his philosophical and historical novel *Alamut* as a parable of the rise of totalitarianism. When *Alamut* was published in a French translation after the author's death, it became a European bestseller lending itself to a range of relevant interpretations. In his story about the Islamic Ismaili sect of assassins cynically manipulating its members to carry out political assassinations, latter-day commentators and critics discovered an allegory of the policies of, successively, the Iranian imams, an Iraqi dictator, and finally the Islamic terrorist network Al-Qaida.

After WW I, Slovene literature in the province of Carinthia, most of which had been subsumed by Austria, with a much smaller, southern part going to Yugoslavia, was in a similar predicament as in the Julian March. That southernmost part of Carinthia was home to the most important Carinthian writer and one of Slovenia's leading writers of the interwar period, Prežihov Voranc (1893–1950). In his novels and shorter prose works he created an epic epitomizing the lives of Carinthia's peasants, crofters, and day-laborers. With respect to its content and style, his oeuvre stands on a par with the novels of Mikhail Sholokhov. The works of the Slovene writer display a strong socialist slant deriving from his post-war political engagement as a prominent member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and, since 1930, a representative of the Comintern dispatched to a succession of countries, although after WW II he withdrew from the Communist leadership. In his literary works these political convictions mix with a strong Christian strain derived from his Catholic upbringing.

In Slovenia's easternmost region of Prekmurje, which for centuries had been under the rule of the Kingdom of Hungary and was not united with the rest of Slovenia until 1920 as part of Yugoslavia, the first major writer is Miško Kranjec (1908–83), with his depictions of a Pannonian peasantry and petit-bourgeoisie that bear traits distinctly different from those of their Alpine counterparts to the west.

In central Slovenia at that time, literature took different points of departure from the predominantly rural orientation on the peripheries,

engaging instead with the intellectual and moral dilemmas of the educated urban populace by aligning itself with one of three then predominant world views—Marxism, free-thinking secularism or Catholicism. Marxism provided the foundation for the literature of social realism produced mainly by writers from the periphery. Prominent secular writers included the dramatist Slavko Grum (1901–49) and Božo Vodušek (1905–78), the leading poet of the 1930s. Grum's play *An Event in the Town of Goga* (*Dogodek v mestu Gogi*, 1930) is considered one of the greatest achievements of Slovene drama, with its grotesque plot involving the simultaneous unfolding of parallel scenes and sets of *dramatis personae*, its psychoanalytical setting, its black humor and sense of human beings entrapped in a web of existential senselessness. The play is a worthy extension of the late Strindberg's dramatic work.

The literary creativity of Catholic authors was in the ascendant at this time. The prose fiction of the mature Ivan Pregelj with his historical novels belongs here, as do the plays of Stanko Majcen (1888–1970) and the poetry of Anton Vodnik (1901–66), whose lyrics combine symbolist aesthetics with a Catholic spirituality free of ideological bonds.

This literature achieved a further high point with the poetry of Francè Balantič (1921–43) just before and during WW II. In 1941 the Slovene nation found itself divided into three zones of foreign occupation—by the Italians, Germans, and Hungarians, and confronted by the totalitarian regimes of National Socialism and Fascism with deadly threats to its continued existence. Resistance to this existential danger came spontaneously from multiple quarters, but leadership of the movement was seized by the Communist Party, which had spent two decades preparing for revolution and used the partisan movement to settle accounts with its social and political opponents, above all Catholics, but also the advocates of liberal democracy. When revolutionary violence exploded in the cities and countryside in 1942, an armed anti-Communist opposition emerged in the form of the so-called "Village Guards," followed after the capitulation of Italy in 1943 by the Slovene Home Guards, who swore allegiance to the new German forces of occupation. Polarization now divided the ranks of Slovenia's literati.

Both Catholic and secular poets joined the partisans, but one of the most prominent partisan poets, Karel Destovnik Kajuh (1922–4), had been a Communist since adolescence and wrote highly popular poems that were pointed in their political advocacy. Francè Balantič belonged to the opposing side, had spent time as a prisoner in an Italian concentration camp, then joined the Village Guards and was killed in a partisan ambush, burning to death in his Home Guard outpost when the partisans set fire to it. His lyrics, which incorporate both daring erotic imagery and a religious quest for redemption amid the moral crisis of an "unclean" time, lack any ideological admixture. He combined the classical forms of the sonnet and wreath of sonnets with a

modern poetic diction reminiscent of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mayakovsky. After the victory of the Communist Party his work was banned in Slovenia and preserved only thanks to the Slovene Catholic emigration to Argentina. In his homeland his work was not recognized again until after 1980, when the Communist system had already begun to collapse.

During the period from 1945 to 1990, when Slovenia was under the absolute control of the Communist Party (later renamed the League of Communists), Slovene literature experienced a renewed efflorescence, albeit in a different direction than the political authorities anticipated. Until Yugoslavia's break with the Cominform the authorities had prescribed socialist realist literature of the Soviet type, but after 1948 it gradually came to condone a liberalization of literature, on condition that authors not cross the line into political opposition of socialism as prescribed by Marxism-Leninism. Intimate lyrical poetry focused on private life was permitted, provided it didn't question the country's system of public affairs. Under this aegis the poetry of Ivan Minatti (1924–2004) and the four poets Tone Pavček (1928–2011), Janez Menart (1924–2004), Ciril Zlobec (1925–2018), and Kajetan Kovič (1931–2004) came into being. All of them remained faithful to their strictly confessional style of lyric poetry and composed in traditional forms. Some of them assumed public roles during the years of Slovenia's drive toward independence around 1990—Menart with pointed denunciations of the "Yugoslavization" of Slovene culture, Zlobec as a member of the collective presidency of the Slovene state-in-embryo, and Pavček by reading the "May Declaration" at a rally of the nation in 1989, demanding democracy and an independent Slovene state.

A considerable number of the poets, prose writers and playwrights who remained at a critical distance from the Communist government and ideology began moving in a different direction in the years following 1950, occasionally venturing into open opposition and dissent. As a result, the system began to set limits and sanctions on their work, trying and imprisoning a number of them, while hampering the lives of still others socially, professionally, and economically. Nevertheless, it was precisely these writers who created the work that most distinctively represents modern Slovene thought and remains relevant to the present day.

Foremost among them, both in terms of seniority and impact, was the poet, prose writer and political leader Edvard Kocbek (1904–81). After serving in the partisan movement as a Christian Socialist ally of the Communists and occupying a series of prominent political functions immediately after the war, in 1952 Kocbek was cashiered by the regime and expelled from public life for his condemnation of political violence and his published collection of four novellas titled *Strah in pogum* (Fear and courage). He re-entered public life in 1963 with the publication of *Groza* (Terror), a collection of poems. In an interview with Triestine authors Boris

Pahor and Alojz Rebula published in 1975 he spoke out about the partisans' guilt for the massacre of some 14,000 unarmed Slovene Home Guards forcibly returned by the British from Austria to Yugoslavia in the late spring and summer of 1945. The interview drew renewed political attacks on him by the regime, while prominent West European writers such as Heinrich Böll tried to defend him.

Kocbek's poetry is one of the great achievements of contemporary Slovene literature, containing elements of symbolism and surrealism while providing exceptionally sensitive testimony of Slovenia's twentieth century. It is the drama of an intellectual who as a member of the revolutionary partisan movement and of the system it gave birth to discovers his own implication in history, by turns with hope, doubt, fear, and despair, and with an awareness of guilt, yet with faith in redemption through grace. These attributes make Kocbek's poetry a unique achievement in all of European literature. This holds equally for his collection of novellas *Strah in pogum*, which takes issue with the Party's official way of depicting the partisan movement.

After Kocbek, dissent evolved in different directions among younger Slovene authors. The leading prose writer after 1960 was Lojze Kovačič (1928–2004), born in Basel to a German mother, who after the family's expulsion in 1938 from Switzerland to his father's homeland was exposed as a foreigner to a life of relentless poverty. After 1945, when the remaining members of his family were expelled from Yugoslavia to Austria, he remained in Slovenia alone. He first drew attention to himself with the publication in 1953 of the collection of stories *Ljubljanske razglednice* (Picture postcards of Ljubljana), a tribute to his adoptive hometown in the spirit of Joyce's *Dubliners*. In 1957 he was accused of defaming the Yugoslav People's Army and the magazine in which his text had been published was shut down. From that time until his death he published a series of novels—among them *Deček in smrt* (Death and the boy), *Resničnost* (Reality), *Pet fragmentov* (Five fragments), and *Newcomers* (*Prišleki*), in which again and again, Proust-like, he revisits his life's story with a mnemonic imaginative power that is precise in its depiction of significant detail, both erotic and otherwise, yet at the same time affords a panoramic view of historical events, conditions in wartime and life under socialism. In his final books—the novels *Basel* and *Otroške stvari* (Childish things)—he returns in memory to his birthplace and childhood in Switzerland. A contemporary of Kovačič was Saša Vuga (1930–2016), the master of a refined style verging on the baroque in his sprawling historical novels.

Simultaneously with Kovačič, two gifted young poets emerged in the years after 1950—Dane Zajc (1930–2016) and Gregor Strniša (1930–87). Zajc came from a partisan family that had seen two older sons killed in the war and the family homestead burned down to the ground. In 1951, the

Communist regime charged him with "speech hostile to the regime." Deprived of any chance of university studies or a proper profession, by 1970 he had achieved the reputation of Slovenia's foremost poet. He participated in Slovenia's campaign for independence and served as president of the Society of Slovene Writers, while the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences chose him as the country's candidate for the Nobel Prize for literature. In a succession of collections of poetry he developed a lyrical voice that was modern in both style and form, and in its content an ecstatic hymn to alienation in a world without mercy, replete with images of decay and death and a powerless presentiment of something transcendent. His distinctive voice is comparable to that of Paul Celan. Zajc's dramatic work was as original as his poetry. In his play *Voranc* he depicts peasant life torn between occupiers and partisans in light of the same existential elements that form the basis of his poetry.

Gregor Strniša was Zajc's poetic peer, except that instead of the latter's ecstatic ethical will, Strniša's is aesthetically static, given to visions of the absurdity of life and a mysterious horror at sensing traces of a hidden and dangerous "negative transcendence" in both people and things. It would be difficult to find a counterpart to Strniša's poetry anywhere in European poetry of the past century, except perhaps for the work of Gottfried Benn. Strniša's poetic dramas, such as his play *Samorog* (The unicorn, 1967), draw on the same mythical and medieval imaginative world for their material as his poems. His plays, which can be compared to the dramatic works of Michel de Ghelderod, are among the best that Slovene drama and theater have to offer.

Following Zajc, Strniša and their slightly younger contemporary Veno Taufer (b. 1933), there emerged a new generation of poets, the most prominent, celebrated and influential of which was Tomaž Šalamun (1941–2014). In contrast with the darker poetry of his predecessors, Šalamun introduced an ebullient neo-avantgarde style and spirit reminiscent of dadaism and surrealism, but without the earlier movements' socio-political and ideological charge, a poetry of free and playful linguistic creativity unbeholden to anything outside itself, capable of constant renewal and always surprising conceptual references that were aesthetically stimulating, self-sufficient and ultimately reduced to Šalamun's own poetic "I," independently of any transcendent context. Thanks to numerous translations Šalamun became the most recognized Slovene poet abroad, particularly in the anglophone literary world. Šalamun's polar opposite, with respect both to style and themes, was his contemporary Svetlana Makarovič (b. 1939), who is recognized as the leading woman poet of that time. Her poetic voice is formally traditional and lyrical, featuring themes and motifs deriving from folkways, and evokes ancient archetypes, magic, and spells while freighting a dark message about the forces of life, death and evil. A third leading poet of the post-Zajc and Strniša generation, but with an entirely different bent

from both Šalamun and Makarovič, is Niko Grafenauer (b. 1940) with his poetry of "classical" sonnets aiming for an ideal of absolute poetry along the lines of Stéphane Mallarmé, engaging in a hermetic play of words and phrases appealing to a poetics of pure sensuality, albeit with a certain melancholy over the absence of transcendence, rather than in the spirit of Mallarmé's erasure of the Void.

In the years when poetry was achieving its post-war peak, Slovene drama saw the premiers of its very best works. In addition to his topically and stylistically breakthrough novel *Črni dnevi in beli dan* (Dark days and broad daylight), Dominik Smole (1929–92) produced plays, the most celebrated of which were his *Antigone* (1960) and *Krst na Savici* (The baptism on the Savica, 1969). Ever since the Renaissance, dramatists have rewritten Sophocles's tragedy, with two of the most outstanding adaptations being those of Walther Hasenclever and Jean Anouilh. Smole's *Antigone* is every bit their equal. Although the classical heroine herself is physically absent from Smole's play, she is all the more powerful for her absolute invalidation of Creon's rule and of the Thebans subjected to it. In Slovenia the play was poetically symbolic and politically relevant. With Antigone's quest to find and bury the dead body of her brother Polinices, it alluded to the fate of the "traitors" murdered by the partisans during and after WW II, while it simultaneously pointed ironically to the conformist behavior of the new middle class that had emerged under Communist totalitarian rule. In *Krst na Savici*, Smole went still further to explore the nature of nihilistic rebellion leading to terror and chaos, in a way reminiscent of Sartre's and Camus's dramatic work.

With his influential play *Afera* (The scandal, 1961), Primož Kozak (1929–81) produced a kind of drama that was the anthesis of Smole's. Much the way the figure of Antigone served Smole, Kozak used the real life story of Jože Pučnik as the model for his partisan dissident whom the Party deposes for wanting to transform the movement into a genuinely democratic polity. In 1959, Pučnik had been sentenced to several years' imprisonment, after which he lived in exile in West Germany before returning to Slovenia to become one of the leaders of the independence and democracy movement. Where Smole used his material to create a highly poetic drama charged with intellectual symbolism, Kozak shaped his into a hard-charging drama that observes the unities of time and place. His play invites comparisons to Sartre's characters from the French wartime resistance but draws much clearer political and moral conclusions. In the 1960s, some younger playwrights began producing a Slovene version of the theater of the absurd, most successfully among them Peter Božič (1932–2009) with his *Vojaka Jošta ni* (Private Jošt is no more, 1962), a parodic portrayal of the new middle class which acquired problematic social and moral features in the light of Yugoslavia's official socialist dogma. This strain was further developed by

Dušan Jovanović (1939–2020) in an early turn toward politically engaged post-dramatic theater, as opposed to pure drama.

The main wave of post-war narrative prose came after 1970. This is the time when Lojze Kovačič, who remained the foremost author of prose fiction, published his most important and voluminous works. Alongside him appeared a range of distinguished writers, both older and younger than him, who shared a commitment to the same subject matter—the fate of the Slovenes during the civil war, in the years leading up to it and in the following decades under the rule of the Communists in their one-party state.

Among the finest authors of this period, the most popular was Vitomil Zupan (1914–87), an exceptionally independent personality, who emerged from a youth of wide-ranging travel and extreme hardship as a freethinking intellectual, served with the partisans in WW II, was sentenced after the war to several years at hard labor in prison for his "refusal to conform," subsequently became a free-lance writer under the Communist regime and, after turning fifty, finally enjoyed the recognition and acclaim of the younger, dissident generation for his written work. Zupan's novels, which emerged from his memoiristic and autobiographical accounts, are akin to the work of André Malraux and Louis Ferdinand Céline and in their overt sexual content reminiscent of the novels of Henry Miller. His novel *Minuet for Guitar* (*Minuet za kitaro*, 1975) is the best Slovene novel dealing with the partisan struggle, and his *Levitan* (Leviathan, 1982) is a vivid portrayal of a protagonist in socialist prisons, buffeted between merciless repression and sexual vitality.

Andrej Hieng (1925–2000) was stigmatized under the socialist regime for his bourgeois background and his service with the Home Guards during WW II. In his novels and other long prose works he maintains an aristocratic reserve and high aesthetic standards. In his last and finest novel, *Čudežni Feliks* (Miraculous Felix, 1993) he evokes the life of interwar bourgeois society as war, totalitarian violence and the tragedy of Europe's Jews draw ever closer to it.

The narrative work of Marjan Rožanc (1930–90) provides something like the perfect opposite of Hieng's novels. Rožanc, who grew up in a working-class suburb of Ljubljana, spent most of his working life as a tradesman. From a young age he was repeatedly prosecuted and jailed for spreading "enemy propaganda," and in 1964 the Communist government banned his play about the "working class question." A frequent theme in his novels is the conflict between sensuality and spirituality, frequently involving a religious quest. His most acclaimed novel is *Ljubezen* (Love, 1979), a coming-of-age tale set in a working-class suburb of Ljubljana under Italian occupation in WW II and riven between the Catholic "Whites" and the partisan "Reds."

A predominant feature of narrative prose after 1970 is that its foremost works devote ever more attention to the Slovene civil war and its long-lasting impacts. Vladimir Kavčič (1932–2014) drew material for his novels and short stories from his youthful memories of violence inflicted by both Germans and partisans in the wartime Slovenian countryside. His *Zapisnik* (Notebook, 1973), the publicity for which the Communist authorities tried to short-circuit, drawing the author into a protracted court battle, still managed to achieve wide acclaim. In the novel, Kavčič showed how the truth about wartime events and the partisans' guilt for deliberate, polarizing violence functioned as an invisible, relativized, chaotic, and dangerous factor in Slovenia's post-war Stalinist political trials.

Working along similar lines as Kavčič, yet in his own distinctive way, the prolific author Pavle Zidar (1932–92) in his important novel *Sveti Pavel* (Saint Paul, 1965) distanced himself from wartime events and devoted attention to the consequences of the partisan victory and Communist revolution, the social and moral crisis of the peasantry during the forced collectivization of agriculture and the persecution of the regime's remaining opponents. The point of the narrative is not to condemn the regime's ideology, but to recognize the tragic impact of the blows of history on individual human lives. The slightly younger author Jože Snoj (1934–2021) returned some years later to the events of the civil war when he used innovative narrative techniques in his novels *Gavžen hrib* (Gallows hill) and *Fuga v križu* (Gap in the cross) to chronicle death and destruction on both sides of the conflict.

The same subject matter remained relevant to writers born after the war, albeit from varying points of view onto historical reality. In her novel *Da me je strah?* (You think I'm afraid? 2012), Maruša Krese (1947–2013) recounted the fate of the partisan family into which she was born, portraying it from the family's own ethical perspective. Novelist Drago Jančar (b. 1948) has taken a vastly different standpoint to depict wartime events and personalities. After demonstrating his mastery of narrative in a series of novels, most of them set in various historical periods, he at last approached the theme of WW II in his novels *I Saw Her That Night* (*To noč sem jo videl*, 2010) and *And Love Itself* (*In ljubezen tudi*, 2017). In the former he uses a series of different narrators to depict the fate of an exceptional young middle-class woman who falls victim to a vengeful partisan unit, and in the latter he employs a half historical, half imaginative story to portray the lives of Slovenes in Lower Styria under Nazi occupation. Jančar is less concerned with ideological disputes than with the often tragic fates of individuals on the fundamental levels of love and survival. Alongside his novels, Jančar has also proven a successful dramatist. With his *Veliki briljantni valček* (The big, brilliant waltz, 1985) he produced the most remarkable Slovene dramatic text since Smole's *Antigone* and Kozak's *Afera* (The scandal). Since his young adulthood, when he was charged with activity endangering the state and

imprisoned, he has continued to be socially active, first as an essayist in the years leading to independence, in the leadership of various writers' associations and as a speaker at public assemblies and protests.

A similar role was played by the poets and writers gathered around the leading intellectual journal of the 1980s, *Nova revija* (The new review). Beginning in 1991, some of them assumed important political and governmental roles after having served as authors of a literature that since 1970 all the way up to the collapse of the socialist system had sought to influence the republic's political and social reality. Among them Dimitrij Rupel (b. 1946), who became Slovenia's foreign minister in 1990, had been an author of provocative novels that playfully parodied sensitive social and political issues of the day. Rudi Šeligo (1935–2004), who was appointed minister of culture in 2000, introduced the style of the French "nouvel roman" into Slovene literature with his short novel *Triptih Agate Schwarzkobler* (The triptych of Agata Schwarzkobler, 1968), adding an underlay of overt social analysis to his Slovene version of the new "reistic" narrative style. The first minister of culture in independent Slovenia was Andrej Capuder (1948–2018), a Catholic author who in his novel *Iskanje drugega* (In search of the other, 1991) returned to events of the Slovene civil war.

Along with the literature of the Slovene heartland, Slovene literature produced outside of Yugoslavia, in the Slovene enclaves of northeastern Italy (centered on Trieste and Gorizia) and south-central Austria (around the urban center of Klagenfurt) and further abroad in emigration, also underwent a revival from the 1970s onward. While the evolution and complexion of Slovene literature in Italy distinguishes it from its counterpart in Austria, in terms of subject matter the two are quite similar, since both are literatures of an ethnic minority living amidst an alien majority.

In Slovene-inhabited Carinthia (Austria) after WW II a number of authors began publishing collections of poetry, but among prose fiction writers Florjan Lipuš (b. 1937) clearly stood out. His novel *The Errors of Young Tjaž* (*Zmote dijaka Tjaža*, 1972), translated into German by his fellow Austrian writer Peter Handke, received accolades in both Austria and Slovenia. The novel, whose title and tone are reminiscent of Robert Musil's first novel, *Young Törless*, is the account of an adolescent who feels oppressed by his small-minded provincial surroundings, which serves as a metaphor for the plight of the Slovene minority. More recently, Lipuš as a prose writer has been joined by Maja Haderlap (b. 1961), who began her career with a number of remarkable books of poetry. She wrote her first novel, *Angel of Oblivion* (*Engel des Vergessens*, 2012, in German as a way of breaking through to Austria's majority German readership with her quintessentially Slovene subject matter, which deals with the fate of Carinthia's Slovenes during the war and in its aftermath and the partisan movement in Carinthia and Austria.

Like Peter Handke, a descendant of Slovenes on his mother's side, a number of other Germanophone authors of Slovene descent or born in Slovenia rose to prominence as authors in German. Friedrich Gagern (1882–1947), a scion of the noble Carniolan Auersperg family, wrote socially critical novels (*Ljudstvo* [The people] and *Cesta* [The street]) with vivid depictions of the Slovene and Croatian worlds in which he grew up. Alma Karlin (1889–1950), who was born and died in the Slovene city of Celje, was a world traveler and the prolific author of novels, stories and reportage published in Germany and widely translated into world languages about her encounters with the cultures of far-off peoples and lands. The most successful of these writers was Igor Šentjurc (1927–96), who began as a Slovene writer but, after resettling in Germany, wrote a large number of German historical and war novels that became popular bestsellers (*The Torrents of War* [*Der unstillbare Strom*] and *Vaters Land* [My father's country]).

As in Austria, after the war the Slovene minority in Italy produced a number of distinctive poetic voices and two major prose fiction writers. By the end of his life, Boris Pahor (1913–2022) was renowned throughout Europe for books that revealed the precarious lives of ethnic Slovenes in Fascist Italy and particularly their fate during WW II. His novel *Nekropola* (*Necropolis*, 1967) won widespread acclaim as a return in memory to the German concentration camps in which the author had spent the last year of the war and is one of the great masterpieces of its genre. The other leading Slovene writer of the Julian March was Alojz Rebula (1924–2018), whose novels are inspired with the spirit of Catholicism. At the core of his novel *Senčni ples* (The play of shadows, 1960), which has been recognized as one of Slovenia's key postwar novels, and his historical novel *V Sibilinem vetru* (In the wind of the Sybil, 1968) is the fate of a young intellectual in search of a firm philosophical and religious basis for his life in a spiritually impoverished age. In his last works he joined with his colleagues in the Slovene heartland in exploring the political situation following the revolution of 1945 and its consequences for society.

The waves of large-scale emigration of Slovenes that began in the late nineteenth century took Slovene literature into the new émigré communities of North and South America and Austria. In the U.S., a number of authors with outspoken socialist convictions were active. The most prominent of these was Louis Adamič (1898–1951), who in his memoiristic, autobiographical and journalistic works, all of them written in English, repeatedly revisited Slovene and Yugoslav themes, achieving international acclaim with his book *Dinner at the White House* (1946). Slovene literature proved to be far more dynamic in Argentina, which became home to a large Slovene community fleeing Communist rule in 1945 and subsequent years. Here poets, writers and playwrights emerged whose work supplemented the limited literary panorama that was allowed to appear in the homeland. The most important of these is Zorko Simčič (b. 1921) with his novel *Človek na*

obeh straneh stene (A man on both sides of the wall, 1957) about the fate of a refugee torn from his native environment and cast into an alien world. Simčič produced a sweeping portrait of Slovene emigration and its dilemmas in his novel *Poslednji deseti bratje* (The last surplus sons, 2012), which rightly belongs among the most important narrative works of recent years.

After 1990, the role of Slovene literature changed. Emerging from the Communist system that had controlled and limited it, with the advent of democracy in a sovereign state it made the transition to normal civilian life. The era during which its most important works had challenged the ruling system and paved the way toward democracy and independence was over. Writers whose central themes under socialism were the lack of freedom, violence, opposition and resistance, truth and falsehood, but also despair, the absurd and death as the negation of a socio-political system imposed from above, had fulfilled as prominent a function in society as statesmen. The literature they had produced was not just socially and aesthetically significant, but politically, as well. With the transition to a democratic state the emancipatory role of literary creativity was transformed. Processes were underway in the economic, social and political life of Slovenia that are generally described with the terms pluralization, privatization and decentralization. Analogous processes had begun to affect Slovene literature as early as the 1980s as Yugoslav socialism began to collapse, but after 1990 they came to predominate. In the works of the younger authors born in the 1960s and 1970s, the great topics of public, social, and political life retreated into the background as the creative focus narrowed to the domains of the personal and private, the individual, the particular and the everyday, or even the accidental and the exceptional. Parallel to these shifts, a decentralization of literature was taking place, as authors' imaginations shifted from politically and socially universal thematic domains to the regional and marginal. Slovene literature of the post-Communist period is dominated by a distinct pluralism of subjects, ideas, orientations, and styles without any unifying system of values.

Against this backdrop, a number of authors who are particularly representative of the new literary order stand out, and it is an undeniable fact that these most recent generations of authors have achieved an exceptional level of aesthetic refinement characterized by linguistic and stylistic invention and solid technique often executed on a grand scale. With such a range of talents the authors' distinctive strengths stand out all the more.

These are especially apparent in poetry, which remains Slovenia's literary genre of choice. Amongst the eldest of these latest practitioners, Ervin Fritz (b. 1940) has produced collections of ebullient, socially critical and satirical poems. A strain of intimately erotic, sensual, and spiritually ritualistic poetry inspired by Asian models has been pursued by Ivo Svetina (b. 1948). Milan Jesih (b. 1950) emerged as a leading poet with his persistent

pursuit of strict sonnet form, informed with apparently simple, everyday, ironic, and parodic life wisdom. His polar opposite is Tone Kuntner (b. 1943) with the naive simplicity of his verse form and style in praise of rustic simplicity. Milan Dekleva (b. 1946) has used poetry to explore, among other things, the philosophy of Anaximander and Heidegger, a preoccupation shared by Gorazd Kocijančič (b. 1965) in his collection of philosophical meditations *Od Talesa do tebe: apokrifna zgodovina evropske filozofije* (From Thales to you: An apocryphal history of European philosophy, 2019). Contrast with theirs the poetry of Boris A. Novak (b. 1953), who has set images of erotic intimacy in classical verse form, most recently using epic forms in his trilogy *Vrata nepovrata* (The doors of no return, 2014–17) to explore the history of the partisan movement from a personal and family perspective. Among the many women poets of this generation, Maja Vidmar (b. 1961) has stood out with her predominantly erotic articulation of a distinctly feminine world. By contrast, Uroš Zupan (b. 1963) has combined everyday, concrete reality with melancholy and occasionally ironic meditations about the passage of time and its recapture through memory. Brane Senegačnik (b. 1966) has distanced himself from the mundanity of life with a shift toward an aesthetic and spiritual sense of transcendence. This pluralism of contemporary Slovene lyric poetry has been further enriched by the arrival of numerous poets of an even younger generation, among them Aleš Šteger and Miklavž Komelj (both b. 1973). As they did from poetry, so too did spiritual, moral, and historical themes disappear from prose narrative after 1990 as its content shifted to distinctly private and particular subjects, whether idiosyncratic or bound to a specific time and place. Here, as in poetry, contemporary Slovene prose is marked by a great variety of genres and styles, witness to which are the works of the authors who have been distinguished with literary awards for best novel of the year, such as Marjan Tomšič (b. 1939) with his books about the world of the Istrian countryside with their admixture of magical realism, Berta Bojetu Boeta (1946–97) with her poetical prose about the situation of women in the modern world, Vlado Žabot (b. 1958) with the mythical and magical motifs he has introduced to the novel, Feri Lainšček (b. 1959) with his novels set in the world of Prekmurje's Pannonian plain and Roma motifs verging on magical realism, Andrej Blatnik (b. 1963) with his stories and novels exploring the intimate lives of intellectuals, Katarina Marinčič (b. 1968), who has revived and elevated the genre of the middle class family novel using intricate narrative technique that has struck some critics as postmodern, the Triestine novelist Marko Sosič (1958–2021) with his sensitive modernist prose focused on memory, or Andrej Skubic (b. 1967) with novels that have returned Slovene narrative prose to sketches of everyday life in a revival of neorealism. And there are many more noteworthy authors.

Genre literature as advanced by a number of successful authors has claimed a large and perhaps even a majority share of the narrative prose

published since 1990. While it was an important part of Slovene literature even in the nineteenth century, in recent decades, especially thanks to the democratization of all spheres of public life since Slovene independence, it has virtually exploded. In addition to the traditional genres, such as the village novel and instructional tales for young people common in the nineteenth century, new genres have won over a wide readership, not just through numerous translations, but above all in the form of original works by authors who have adapted European and American mass market models by incorporating typical traits of the Slovene literary tradition. All of the popular, bestselling genres are present on the Slovene book market now—adventure, science fiction, political and social criticism, mystery and detective fiction, romance, historical, travel, children's and young people's, biographical, memoir, and autobiographical, with specialized versions for women and men, children and teenagers, or hybrid versions of multiple genres. Generally, these books fulfill the standard formulas of genre literature, but often at a high professional level that includes literary qualities that are often recognized by reviewers and critics and then affirmed by enthusiastic readers. Many of these authors have advanced from genre writing to the more original forms of creative literature. Some of the most popular representatives in this category are Evald Flisar, Tadej Golob, Polona Glavan, Zoran Hočevar, Igor Karlovšek, Mojca Kumerdej, Miha Mazzini, Franjo Frančič, Vinko Möderndorfer, Maja Novak, Ivan Sivec, Brina Švigelj Merat, Suzana Tratnik, Jani Virk, Goran Vojnovič, Janja Vidmar, and others. Among them, the most prominent are those who favor the genre of political and social criticism, of the topical and socially "relevant" novel, more particularly focused on topics such as the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Balkan wars that followed and the refugees and émigrés who fled from them, as well as the fate of immigrants to independent Slovenia from other parts of the world, the fate of various minorities, both ethnic and sexual, along with the problems of racism, xenophobia, climate change, and consumerism. Works of this kind have made genre literature the most popular sector of Slovenian literature.

Slovene drama has been a thing apart during this most recent period. It reached its post-war peak in the 1960s and '70s, when the stage was ruled by the likes of the poet Milan Jesih with his ironically absurdist plays poking fun at the society's mainstream mentality, Tone Partljič (b. 1940) taking on socialist bureacracy in his popular comedies, and Dimitrij Rupel tackling acute social and political issues at a time when democracy and independence were still in embryo. Since 1990, such dramatic genres have vanished, as though theaters in independent Slovenia had no need of them anymore. In part this is a result of the turn in the theater from classical drama to so-called post-dramatic theater that no longer sees its mission in the performance of polished literary texts, preferring to assert its socio-political relevance in direct "engagements" involving the director, actors, and the audience. As a

result, playwrighting has narrowed to a small group of writers, most of them poets, who draw inspiration for their dramatic texts from poetry. It is therefore no accident that they've often mined their plots and motifs from classical mythology, which as early as 1960 was the source for Smole's *Antigone*. But in independent Slovenia these motifs were now shorn of their broader historical, philosophical, and socio-political dimensions, acquiring—like all other domains of literature—a strictly personal, intimate, and internalized resonance. The authors of these plays have been prominent, well-established poets: Veno Taufer, who with Dane Zajc and Gregor Strniša had been one of the founders of Slovene modernist poetry, drew inspiration from Homer for his play *Odisej & sin ali Svet in dom* (Odysseus and son, or, At home in the world 1990), and the poet Boris A. Novak, who used Aeschylus as a source for his play *Cassandra* (2001). In both, the subject matter was shifted from the mythical public sphere to the intimate private domain. The poet Ivo Svetina drew on Persian sources for his play *Scheherezade* (1989) on the subjects of love and death. Among young playwrights, Matjaž Zupančič has been the author of plays that use the former theater of the absurd as a point of departure for new writing in the spirit of sociopolitical neorealism. Perhaps this will prove to be a productive new vein for Slovene literature in the future.

Translated from Slovene by Michael Biggins