

PREŠEREN'S EROTIC POETRY

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Erotic love is one of the grand themes of poetry. Eroticism (along with patriotism and religious fervor) transcends all considerations of genre, period, language, and even what passes for good taste in any one generation. In poetry eroticism appeals immediately to the universe of readers. The successful poetic exploration of the human struggle with sexuality cannot, almost by definition, leave anyone apathetic.

As the *Princeton Encyclopædia of Poetry and Poetics*¹ points out, erotic poetry is to be located somewhere between the extremes of pornography, which is the explicit representation of sexual matters for their own sake, and the kind of love poetry which eschews all references to physical love. For poetry to be erotic, therefore, it must deal with the details of sexuality--contact, longing, fantasies, griefs, and frustrations--yet at the same time yield a principally aesthetic, and not merely erotic pleasure to the reader. Since for many readers, however, this distinction between erotic and aesthetic pleasures is frequently too subtle to grasp, traditionally erotic poetry, when it has been successful, has been identified with the pornographic, to the dismay of many an honest poet and the horror of his or her sophisticated readers.

Certainly for many of the contemporaries of Francè Prešeren (1800-1849), Slovenia's premier poet and the greatest of her romantics, his lyrics and ballads, ghasels and sonnets were unprecedented examples of pornography in a literature that before his time boasted of little more than religious writings and agricultural tracts.² Guided by a rigid morality, a faction of the Roman Catholic clergy of Slovenia condemned Prešeren's verse with such vigor that the poet himself felt called upon to make amends (which he did by writing "for the clergy" his epic *Krst pri Savici* [The Baptism on the Savica]).³ Not until a generation

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after the poet's death, but continuing on until the present day, was the discernment made that Prešeren's poems are not pornographic and therefore worthy of blame, but erotic and praiseworthy. In fact, were I to make a personal judgment about Prešeren's verse, I would venture to say that the erotic elements in it have come to weigh quite heavily in our appreciation of his poetry, that of all his principal themes--love, poetry, patriotism and life⁴--love, with its attendant erotic elements, often seems the freshest to us today.

Before we examine the specific works in which Prešeren's poetic eroticism manifests itself, we ought perhaps to look at the poet's own erotic life. Although he transformed his own experiences substantially in making his poetry, nonetheless certain major characteristics of his personal erotic life are reflected clearly in his poetry, and it is these in particular we seek to identify here. First, Prešeren's erotic interests seem to have been without exception heterosexual. We have evidence that from his early twenties, when the unwed but pregnant daughter of his Viennese housekeeper tried to seduce him, until his mid-forties, when he allegedly sired his last illegitimate child (he never admitted the child was his), he had about a dozen or so emotional involvements with women.⁵ They ran the gamut from Ljubljana barmaids to a wealthy German lady from Graz. Most of them were extremely young, sometimes as young as thirteen. Indeed Ana Jelovšek, the only woman he is known to have physically consorted with, was only fourteen when he first grew interested in her, and fifteen and a half when she became pregnant with their first illegitimate child. The poet never married, though once he was engaged. His excuse for not marrying Ana was that he could not support her on his poor salary as a legal clerk. Yet his double household undoubtedly cost him as much as one larger one would have. Ana never reconciled herself to Prešeren's aversion to marriage. By attempting to force the issue later in the 1840's, she caused their relationship to dissolve. Prešeren died a bachelor.

Though attracted to women, and ever ready to talk and joke with them sometimes in a vaguely obscene or

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suggestive way,⁶ Prešeren, according to one investigator,⁷ may actually have first entered into a physical relationship with one--and that one was Ana--only in his late thirties. Such a fact would obviously be impossible to prove, even if we possessed much more detailed information than we indeed have about Prešeren's life.⁸ But some circumstantial evidence does hint at the validity of such a thesis. For one, the theme of Prešeren's earliest writings is one of unremitting frustration at the hands of unyielding women. For another, we have no record of other children belonging to the poet. For a third, the poet's affectional intimacy with Ana was unique among all his female relationships. Finally, he never wrote any poetry for Ana (or at best only one lyric, and that an unflattering one called *Nezakonska mati* [The unwed mother]), while to the others, even the most casual flirtations, he devoted many of his poems; and with Maria Khlun, the wealthy Graz woman, he engaged in a lengthy correspondence (which unfortunately has not survived). Ana, therefore, is a singular phenomenon in the poet's erotic life. If we cannot prove that she provided him his first conjugal experiences, and those very late in his life, then we may at least conclude she represented for him the longest and most public relationship he was to enjoy with any of his women; she may have been the first to provide him a measure of some erotic peace.

In speaking of Prešeren's erotic life, researchers never fail to mention a profound occurrence that befell the poet when he was a ten-year-old in attendance at the Ribnica school.⁹ He was living at the time with one of his teachers--a normal arrangement of the institution--when something happened to young Francè which moved him so that he recalled it even on his deathbed forty years later. One of the finest of modern Prešernologists, Francè Kidrič, hypothesizes that Prešeren at that time was either introduced to alcohol (the more likely possibility according to Kidrič), or initiated sexually (less likely). If the latter were the case, however, if the poet's initial sexual experience had been fraught with emotional trauma, it might account for the almost neurotic quality of his later erotic encounters, explaining perhaps his fondness for

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the very young and the very inaccessible (Julija Primic, the greatest Platonic passion of his life, could never realistically have been his, yet he pursued her for at least five years). Not one researcher, as far as I know, has ever suggested that Prešeren's Ribnica experience may have been homosexual in nature, despite the fairly widespread incidence of such practices in European boys' boarding schools. Nothing else in what we know of Prešeren's adult life seems to suggest an early homoerotic experience. But--and I offer this hypothesis very cautiously--were we to ascribe to the poet a certain latency or perhaps fear of homosexual feeling along with his patent heterosexual expressions, we might better understand some of the tensions that wracked his erotic life in the 1830s.

What we are left with from this summary of the available information and speculation about Prešeren's erotic life (a summary, by the way, I have never seen made in a Slovene text, perhaps out of reverence for the national poet),¹⁰ is the impression of a poet with a strong but frustrated erotic drive, a man whose unrealizable fantasies about erotic satisfaction (with Julija Primic) stood in the way of his ever achieving more than a modicum of psychic and emotional release (with Ana Jelovšek). In his mode of life, which included frequenting bars, attempted seductions, a public scandal, and two or three illegitimate children,¹¹ Prešeren certainly affronted the official Jansenist morality of his society, which was Victorian before Victoria. In his own mind as well, he seems to have been tormented by his erotic dissatisfactions, which in turn he translated into the stuff of his erotic poetry.

While love poetry comprises the greatest part of Prešeren's poetic corpus, the specifically erotic portion of that part is relatively small, perhaps no more than five or ten percent. In the first place, none of Prešeren's German poems, with the exception of a couple of translations from his own Slovene originals, contains erotic materials. And even the translations which do (*Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], *Der verlor'ne Glaube* [Lost Belief]) seem rather tepid

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in comparison to the Slovene versions. But Prešeren's¹² German poetic diction, as Robert Auty has pointed out, is very formal and classical in its restraint. It does not lend itself as readily to erotic expression as Prešeren's pithier, less formal, more popular Slovene does.

Even within his Slovene poetry, however, Prešeren seems to have been cautious in allowing erotic motifs to enter his verse. The two genres most likely to contain erotic verse, sonnets and ghasels, in Prešeren's corpus are love genres, but completely anerotic. Once again, their formal properties, in terms of structure, language, and tradition (especially the Petrarchan model for the sonnet), seem to have made them inhospitable to Prešeren's kind of eroticism. Prešeren's short poems as well (*Zabavljivi napisi* [Humorous Writings] and the miscellany collected in volume two of his complete works), deal not with love but with politics, culture, and literature. Erotic material is avoided in all of them.

The genres which are left--the lyric songs, ballads and romances, Prešeren's one epic poem, the *Krst pri Savici*, and his adaptations of folk songs, plus the poems in the anthology of 1847 entitled *Različne poezije* (Various Poems)--are the site of Prešeren's erotic verse. They are structurally the less demanding genres, having no specific requirements as to length, rhyme scheme, meter, or arrangement of subject matter. Some of the genres, especially the lyrics and the folk tale reworkings, seem simple to the point of naïveté: these were, after all, the poems Prešeren wrote for "peasant boys."¹³ As a rule, then, Prešeren's erotic expressions occur in a context that is less studied than that of the sonnets or ghasels.

At first glance this statement may seem to be contradicted by the fact that some erotic verse occurs in the *Krst pri Savici* as well, which can scarcely be termed structurally less rigorous than Prešeren's most complex poetry. But upon closer examination, this exception helps prove the rule. The verses in question occur in the eighth through twelfth stanzas of the *Krst*

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proper, where Prešeren depicts the first meeting between Bogomila and Črtomir, and the year of unwed bliss that followed from it. While he sets the stage for their erotic encounter, when it comes to the moment of describing it, the poet says: "Naj pevec drug vam srečo popisuje,/ki celo leto je cvetlâ obema." In other words, he actually sidesteps the specifically erotic details of their love. The poet himself claims, a few lines later, that he practices such discretion because he, to whom such joy is alien, cannot convey that joy in his verse (we encounter a similar conceit throughout the *Sonetni venec*). But the fact of the matter may be that the context for erotic verse here was wrong, that the poet felt too encumbered by the high seriousness of his theme to descend to the erotic. He reserves his eroticism for his more frivolous, less poetically complex works.

The bulk of Prešeren's erotic verse is to be found in his lyric poems (or as he called them, *Pesmi*). For the most part they are the discrete calls--discrete because Prešeren's eroticism is rarely explicit, but usually just simply suggestive--of some lover who wants his or her love relationship consummated in some physical way. Occasionally there is witty dialogue--*Od železne ceste* (About the Railroad) is a good example of that. But more often the lonely lover (usually the male) addresses his beloved in absentia. He remembers happier times, when there had been more contact, more mutual affection between himself and his "girl." In some poems, like *Dekletam* (To the Girls), Prešeren's first published work, he warns the beloved that her physical virtues are very transient, so that she should capitalize on them while she can. In other poems the erotic tie is ruptured when the narrator--male or female--realizes that the erotic partner has been unfaithful, or at least is planning to be (*Zgubljenâ vera, Zapušena* [Lost Faith, The Abandoned One]). Underlying almost every poem in the lyric section is a tension between male and female. This tension, unlike the ethereal, Platonic relationships recorded in Prešeren's sonnets, is first and foremost erotic: its physicality outweighs any emotional quality it might have. And, as if to stress the physical nature of it, the antonym

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to the kind of love Prešeren sings in the lyric section of his anthology is not lovelessness, creative sterility, or chastity, as in the sonnets or the *Krst*, but death, the termination of the physical state.

In the ballads and romances, both those collected for the anthology of 1847 and those not included therein, we find perhaps the most erotic of all Prešeren's poems. Among them are two translations, of Bürger's *Lenore* and Byron's *Parisina*, the adaptation of Thomas Moore's ballad about St. Senanus and the lady, Prešeren's own *Romanca od Strmega grada* (The Romance of Castle Steep), *Povodni mož* (The Water Sprite, a legend Prešeren reworked from Slovene history), *Ribič* (The Fisherman), and several others. More often than not, these ballads deal with the consequences of erotic thoughts and actions. Without exception they list those consequences as negative--usually death, or at very best cessation from all future erotic activities (as in *Ženska zvestoba* [Woman's Faithfulness]). Prešeren's eroticism here is quite joyless. Its frustrations seem to be those of a man who has had numerous bitter experiences in love and finally comes to the decision that the price of erotic satisfaction exceeds the worth. Yet if we compare the dates of composition of many of these ballads, we find that Prešeren wrote them early in his career, before the genuine frustrations caused by Julija Primic became a factor in his own life. Unless he based these ballads then on experiences we know nothing about, it is reasonable to conclude, from what has been said about Prešeren's own erotic biography above, that the erotic frustrations of these poems derive largely from the poet's own frustrated fantasies, not his activities.

It might also be possible to describe the feelings depicted in these poems as a pose, that is, as Prešeren's imitation of traditional, especially Petrarchan, love lyrics.¹⁴ Without doubt in his sonnets Prešeren is particularly beholden to the Italian master in both details--the physical descriptions of the beloved, his own "inarticulateness" in her presence, the tormenting appearance of her image in his fantasies--and in his fundamental techniques--love depicted as war, oxymoron, antithesis, and hyperbole as principal devices to

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describe love, renunciation as the only escape from love. Prešeren was clever enough and well enough read in Petrarch and the Petrarchans to manipulate the conventions of the genre without adding any significant biographical material of his own in any way. Yet, while we must at least recognize the possibility that Prešeren's love poetry may be no more than a pose, a ploy to introduce into Slovene the poetic conventions of a literature--Italian--which he and his mentor Matija Čop respected more than any other, nonetheless we may in Prešeren's selection and stressing of certain elements of the Petrarchan system still come to some conclusions about Prešeren's view of love and eroticism. The poet's amorous and erotic vocabulary may have been borrowed in its entirety from Petrarch or some other source, but Prešeren's poetic syntax--the way he chose to arrange and repeat that vocabulary--remains uniquely his own, and reveals something of his own perceptions of love and desire.

How did Prešeren depict erotic contact? From the poems, erotic love seems to have two outstanding characteristics: excess and murderousness. (We might note in passing as well that Prešeren's folk adaptations, which are not discussed here because they belong only partially to the poet, also display both these characteristics.) There is no gentle eroticism in the ballads, no happy mutual delight, no long and tender love-making. Rather the lovers are feverish, burning with desire (Prešeren's favorite metaphor for erotic yearning). And their inability to bridle their lusts leads them inevitably to death.

Two ballads in particular exemplify Prešeren's erotic imagination, *Povodni mož*, in which the victim is a girl, and *Ribič*, in which he is a man. Uršika, the heroine of *Povodni mož*, was the most beautiful and flirtatious of all the girls of Ljubljana. Her goal was to ensnare the most interesting men; this she did by dazzling them, or tricking them, or flattering them until she got from them whatever she wanted. One day at a dance attended by all the beauties of Ljubljana, Uršika was making trouble by not choosing a partner for herself from among all those men who offered:

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"Jih dôkaj jo prosi, al' vsakmu odreče,/prešerna se brani in ples odlašuje." Then a devilishly handsome young man offers her his hand. Smitten by his appearance, she accepts. They begin to dance, and soon they are turning so fast they rise from the ground. The musicians are startled by the spectacle and stop playing, but the young man commands the heavens to provide the accompaniment and presently thunder is keeping the beat. Uršika herself asks for a moment to rest, but her partner refuses, saying they must go to "white Turkey, where the swift Sava flows into the Danube." At that they start to turn even faster, until they land on the bank of the Ljubljanica River. They rush into the water, and all the spectators see of Uršika again is the whirlpool left in the stream where they go down.

Uršika's dance suggests, of course, an erotic encounter of a most violent and deadly sort. Her blatant eroticism--in seducing, we are never told to what extent, however, all the available men of Ljubljana--leads her to the fateful party and the meeting with the devil. Moreover it drives her into his arms and gives her the ability to dance so wildly with him. All the spectators are horrified at Uršika's excesses with the devil, so much so that when she is drowned at the end, she seems to be reaping her just reward. The "moral" of the ballad, if we care to deduce one, would appear to be clearly antierotic: promiscuity leads to death and damnation.

The other ballad which represents another high-point of Prešeren's erotic verse is *Ribič*. A young fisherman, who has always trusted in his guiding star (*zvezda* in Slovene, hence "she") to lead him over the sea, is suddenly accosted, while fishing, by several mermaids who are half naked. They pose him a number of provocative questions: Why does he wait for his star and avoid any contact with them? Why does his star stand so close to the constellation of the hunter in the heavens? Others, they say, would tolerate neither such a distance between lovers nor the proximity of such a competitor. Recognizing the brutal truth in their words, the young fisherman begins to row violently, this time without the help of his guiding

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star. Is he rowing after the mermaids, the poet asks, or perhaps running away from himself? In any event, Prešeren concludes that the poor boy has probably drowned and that his example should serve as a warning to others who love without hope.

How are we to understand the fisherman's plight? *Ribič* is the tale of seduction, in fact, from pure love (the adjective *čist* is used twice at the beginning of the poem) to erotic, impure love, as exemplified by the semi-naked mermaids. Once again, excess--there are at least three mermaids luring him off, for the plural number is used to describe them, not the dual--and death--for the fisherman drowns in the end--characterize eroticism. The possible erotic infidelity of his guiding star drives the poor fisherman, who has been so faithful for so long, to his desperate chase after the mermaids. Hopelessness opens the door to lust, which in turn leads to death. Unlike Uršika, who seems to have deserved her fate, the poor fisherman is genuinely victimized, both by his star, who has betrayed him with the hunter, and by the mermaids, who open his eyes to the betrayal and to their own sensuousness. (In the vast majority of Prešeren's poems, the male is victimized by the female, although the poet was not insensitive to the opposite situation, as in *Nezakonska mati*, for example.)

Interestingly enough, Prešeren strikes a very personal note in both these poems. In *Povodni mož*, he calls Uršika *prešerna*. Although this word is a common adjective in Slovene meaning "proud" or "haughty," in Prešeren's poetry it is used sparingly. In one other case, a distich of his entitled *Pričujoče poezije* (The Poems at Hand), he made a pun on it, clearly equating it with himself: "Smé nekaj nas, kèr smo Prešernove, biti prešernih;/ pésem kaže dovòlj, kak je naš oče kroták." Perhaps we may conclude that the appearance of the adjective *prešerna* in *Povodni mož* too is less than completely coincidental. In the other poem as well, Prešeren manages to identify himself with the hero: as Boris Paternu¹⁵ has pointed out, while his clan name was Prešeren, the poet's family name in his town of Vrba was Ribič. Given also the great

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similarity between the suffering of the fisherman and Prešeren at the infidelity of their "stars" (in Prešeren's case, Julija Primic's marriage to Jožef von Scheuchenstuel), we may assume an autobiographical note in *Ribič* too.

In the final analysis we are left, therefore, with Prešeren's two most erotic poems making at least an oblique reference to the poet himself. We are faced at least with the possibility that Prešeren's poetic elaboration of the excess and deadliness of erotic love was also a feature of Prešeren's personal fantasy about eroticism. Perhaps it is unwise to venture any farther into an examination of the poet's own eroticism from the point of view of his poetic expression of it. But we may conclude at least the following. Prešeren was for the most part a desperately unhappy man, whose chief sorrow lay in his lack of success in the love relationships of his life. This much we can learn from the available facts of his biography. His poetry, on the other hand, may furnish us a somewhat deeper understanding of his unhappiness. In all his erotic verse, and especially in *Povodni mož* and *Ribič*, he described a fear of erotic contact, as well as a desire to avoid it. His lack of success in love may therefore be attributable not only to his bad luck, falling in love with women who did not love him, but to his own indisposition, for whatever reason, to overly intimate contact with anyone at all. If this is indeed the case, that Prešeren feared and subconsciously avoided erotic contact, then we advance a bit farther in comprehending the enormity of the pressures that afflicted him in the 1820s and 1830s. Perhaps, too, we understand why his health and mental stability deteriorated so rapidly toward the end of the 1830s. And, as one further insight we glean, maybe we gain one more reason for assuming that that mysterious misfortune which overtook him at ten and stayed with him for the rest of his life was not alcoholic but indeed sexual in nature. Prešeren's erotic poetry may in fact shed a bit of light on one of the most obscure facets of the poet's personality.

Lest we finish by attributing too much importance

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to Prešeren's erotic poetry and what it can tell about his life, however, I would conclude by repeating that eroticism in Prešeren's poetry is always muted, never explicit, and that therefore we are entitled in the end to read very little into it. Too much weight put upon such delicate expression can only serve in the long run to distort it. And analyzing the erotic in any poetry is, I add by way of a general *caveat* here, a subjective exercise. This Prešeren himself realized, as he faced those critics of his own time who found his verse pornographic. No doubt at them, and perhaps at us today, he directed two lines in the last of his ghasels to point out the unreliability of our own impressions about erotic verse: "Razujzdanim bodo moje pesmi prenedolžne;/ al' tercjalko porekó, de jih je vdihnili zlódi." (To the debauched my poems will seem much too innocent, while pious women will claim that the devil himself inspired them.)

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NOTES

¹Alex Preminger, ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 250-1.

²Cf. Joseph Burger, as cited in Avgust Žigon, *Prešernova čitanka*, Vol. II (Prevalje: Tiskovna Družba sv. Mohorja, 1922), p. 23, where he says that Prešeren's poetry is "Sittlichkeit anstössiges Gedicht."

³See the letter to F. L. Čelakovský, 22 August 1836 in Francè Prešeren, *Zbrano delo* (J. Kos, ed.), Vol. II (Ljubljana: DZS, 1966), p. 190.

⁴Boris Paternu, *France Prešeren in njegovo pesniško delo*, Vol. I (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1976), p. 107.

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⁵See Francè Kidrič, "Prešernove Lavre," *Ljubljanski zvon* 54 (1934), pp. 547-53, 612-20, 675-86; and his "Poslednja Prešernova Lavra," *Ljubljanski zvon* 55 (1935), pp. 305-16; and his *Prešeren, 1800-1838*, Vol. II, *Bibliografija, 1800-1838* (Ljubljana: Tiskovna zadruga, 1938).

⁶I. Prijatelj, "Duševni profili slovenskih preporoditeljev," in *Izbrani eseji in razprave* (A. Slodnjak, ed.), Vol. I (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1952), p. 253.

⁷Kidrič, "Prešernove Lavre," p. 549.

⁸The poet himself claimed to have learned "the facts of life" at age sixteen, but what exactly this means we do not know (Kidrič, *ibid.*).

⁹Kidrič, *ibid.*; A. Slodnjak, *Prešernovo življenje* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 1968), p. 10.

¹⁰Kidrič comes perhaps the closest in his articles.

¹¹Of course, despite the morality spoken of at the time, Ljubljana was anything but virtuous. According to Kidrič, *Biografija*, pp. 96 and 108, Ljubljana's 12,000 person population in 1828 supported about 160 taverns and sired 199 illegitimate children (out of a total of 525 born that year).

¹²R. Auty, "Prešern's German Poems," *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, 6 (1973), pp. 5 and 9.

¹³Letter to Stanko Vraz, 12 Dec. 1843, *ZD* II, 206.

¹⁴For excellent analyses of Petrarchan love lyrics and "Petrarchism" as a system often copied by other poets writing on erotic themes, see Hans Pyritz, *Paul Flemings deutsche Liebeslyrik* (Leipzig: Mayer & Müller, 1932), 19-134; Leonard Forster, *The Icy Fire: Five*

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Studies in European Petrarchism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and Robert M. Durling, trans. and ed., *Petrarch's Love Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1976).

For works dealing specifically with Prešeren and Petrarch, see the following: Pavel Grošelj, "Prešeren in Petrarka," *Zbornik Slovenske Matice v Ljubljani* 4 (1902), 23-61; Avgust Žigon, "Letnica 1833 v Prešernovih Poezijah," *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje* 3 (1906), 113-213; Anton Slodnjak, "Prispevki k poznavanju Prešerna in njegove dobe: III. Problem Gazel," *Slavistična revija* 4 (1951), 10-22; Bartolomeo Calvi, *Fonti italiane e latine nel Prešeren maggiore* (Torino: 1958); Janko Kos, *Prešeren in evropska romantika* (Ljubljana: 1970); Boris Paternu, *France Prešeren in njegovo pesniško delo*, Vol. I (Ljubljana: 1976); Jože Pogačnik, "Slovenski romantizam i Petrarca," pp. 425-44; and Anton Slodnjak, "Petrarca in Prešeren," pp. 469-74, in *Petrarca i petrarkizam u slavenskim zemljama* (Frano Čale, ed.) (Zagreb-Dubrovnik, 1978). In this last article Professor Slodnjak actually stresses Prešeren's "anti-Petrarchism."

¹⁵ Paternu, *France Prešeren in njegovo pesniško delo*, Vol. II (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1977), p. 64.