

ON THE OPTIONS OF THE POETRY OF A SMALL NATION*

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I begin my presentation with the unorthodox strategy of explaining what the title of my paper does not mean. In associating the poet and poetry with options of any kind, it may appear that I misunderstand the concept and character of poetry and poetic inspiration. Not at all. What I have in mind is not a set of options which are extrinsically suggested to poets or to poetry. Vis-à-vis beauty, poetry is a totally autonomous domain and the poet in it an absolutely free creator; with Jacques Maritain I relate poetry to the free life of the intellect and the free creativity of the spirit.¹ Thus the "options" of my title require an explanatory clause which would specify the topic somewhat as follows: "On the options of the poetry of a small nation--if it wants to invite attention beyond its own linguistic boundaries."

This topic is based on my interest in the relation between language and poetry. Two aspects of this relation, one inherent in the nature of poetry, the other inferential, are central in my discussion. Since they seem to be fundamental, I give them here axiomatically: (1) poetry exists by virtue of its matrix, its language; (2) language barriers tend to circumscribe poetry to its natural habitat. It is from this latter proposition that one may further imply that language barriers may sometimes act to the disadvantage of good poetry. This is what takes place in the poetic heritage of small, little known languages. Our problem is anchored precisely here. I formulate it as the question: What makes a world audience interested in the poetry of an unknown idiom? Or stated differently: What does a world audience expect to discover in a small literature?

It is obvious, of course, that if there is anything like a poetry appeal in the literature of a nation--and by appeal

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I wish to understand something more than a transient fad; rather an interest or attraction transcending the dimension of time--then it is to be sought in two areas: in the quality of the poetry, normally measured by formal perfection and by the value of the message or poetic experience which it conveys; and secondarily, in the specificity of the poetry, normally dictated by two things: by its matrix (its language), and by its origin and evolution. It is between these two points--quality and specificity--that I will try to search for an answer to my question.

It is also obvious, of course, that the magic passkey to discovering either the quality or the specificity of a poetry is the language of that poetry. A sensitive reader, as Eliot put it, may still impressionistically "sense" poetry even through an unintelligible language structure.² Yet the world of poetic experience, of the poet's feeling, emotion and thought, is essentially contingent on the intelligibility of the poetic message. This intimate link between poetry and language seems to be universal, though one becomes painfully aware of it in particular in discussing the literatures of small, less known languages.³

Now, the smallness and familiarity of languages are two entirely relative properties. In relation to the major world languages, such as Mandarin, English, Hindu or Spanish, or even in relation to some less major, relatively "minor" world languages, such as Russian, Japanese, Arabic, or German, the so-called "major Slavic languages"--Polish, Czech and Serbocroatian--appear to be small and relatively little known. On this scale they are in the same boat with Bulgarian, Slovak, Macedonian or Slovene.⁴

In focusing on a truly small member of the Slavic language family--Slovene--I can reduce the problem to its smallest dimension, while still offering solutions that can be applied to larger, but perhaps not much better known literatures than Slovene.

The very existence of Slovenes in Central Europe is still regarded as "something of an historical paradox and miracle in one".⁵ Slovenes are one of the tiniest national units in Europe; their total number does not reach even the two million mark. Yet they have withstood all the calamities of history and today possess a literature quite out of

proportion to their size, a literature whose works have drawn the attention of the world, been translated into a number of languages. It seems that in a country so small as to be unable to afford commercialization on a wide scale, even literary production is compelled to concentrate on quality instead of quantity; and Slovene poetry is renowned for its quality. Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that Slovene poetry is of comparatively recent date, it is remarkable that it possesses a distinct lyrical physiognomy which allows us to speak of its specificity.

Among several parameters within which the appeal of poetry may be measured, one involves a paradox implied by the nature of poetry as such. This paradox is the following: bound by its medium, which is language, a poetic work must belong to the province of a poet's language; expected to reach beyond the province of a poet's language, a poetic work should never remain provincial.

As marble or bronze or clay to a sculptor, language is the medium of the literary artist. A great poet must primarily be the genius of his own language. It is by this quality that his poetry assumes a social function for the whole of the people of his language. It is in proportion to the excellence and vigor of his poetic language that his poetry affects the speech and sensibility of the whole nation; that it preserves the quality of its language, the quality of its culture, and precludes the absorption of its culture in a stronger one. Thus no art is more stubbornly local, national than poetry. It ceases to be only local, provincial when it prevails over provincialism (F. de Saussure would say: l'esprit de clocher). And what this means is, when it becomes human. Nothing that is human is provincial, even if it should happen to have originated in our own village.⁶ Everything that is profoundly human transcends the merely national. It is by this quality that poetry acquires a broader appeal whose ultimate boundary is universality.

There are, of course, different aspects of provincialism in a culture, a literature, or even in a poetry. In one of its oldest and mildest forms provincialism exists as an unpretentious, unobtrusive regionalism. Literary regionalism, as it is known, may even promote an interest in small literature. On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, is the provincialism, usually reared behind the palisade, based on

conceit and self-worship, completely out of touch with the world and consequently totally self-defeating. The kind we are interested in in our discussion here, is somewhere between the two extremes, a kind of spiritual provincialism, usually identified with utilitarianism, confinement, narrowness, self-centrism and idiosyncrasies. Essentially confining and restrictive, such a spiritual provincialism may as a curiosity still be of some interest to a broader audience; ultimately, however, it cannot but undermine the appeal of a literature beyond its linguistic boundaries.

It is remarkable that one such kind of spiritual provincialism was defeated, discredited and stigmatized in the Slovene poetic tradition at the very beginning of its evolution. The victory of Matija Čop and Francè Prešeren's concept of European poetry over Jernej Kopitar's typically provincial model created a new literary language, a high poetic language, a formally crystallized poetry, a profoundly human and humane poetry, and linked it with the greatest traditions of the time. It is for the intertwining of a poet's own intimate world of emotions and feelings with the hopes and aspirations for the future of his ethnos, and for the intensity of both experiences, personal and collective, that Francè Prešeren's poetry may be called great and appealing beyond the linguistic boundaries of the Slovene language.

A somewhat different variety of local and utilitarian poetry appeared in Slovene literature some decades later. This time the provincial signified the patriotic, and patriotic stood for early nationalistic poetry. The phenomenon was common to all East European literatures, it was shared by all Balkan Slavic literatures, and one has to agree with Albert B. Lord that one cannot and should not brand this type of literary product as per se inferior.⁷ The poetry of purpose may have a transient vogue when it is badly written, but real poetry always survives. The poetic value of the patriotic and nationalistic poetry ultimately rests not with its emotional charge but with its aesthetic quality. An outsider may occasionally be attracted by the former, but it is the latter which arouses more lasting appeal.

In Slovene literature the poets of the fifties, sixties and seventies of the last century produced a great deal of patriotic poetry: Jovan Vesel Koseski (1798-1884), Simon Jenko (1835-1869), Josip Stritar (1836-1923), Simon Gregorčič

(1844-1906). Their patriotic odes, lyrics and songs, however, are not bad verse and have indeed attracted interest abroad. Jenko's Naprej, the Marseillaise of the Slovene national movement, written in 1860, was perhaps the first Slovene lyrics translated into English (it appeared in 1885),⁸ and may serve as a perfect example of how even a narrowly patriotic lyric, in this case probably because of its tune, can find an audience beyond its native habitat.

A different kind of provincialism appeared in Slovene poetry again immediately after World War Two. "Stifled by the doctrine of socialist realism and the catchwords of the day,"⁹ this poetry of "official optimism," in Slovene literary history now known as graditeljski utilitarizem (constructivist utilitarianism), served well the theme of socialist reconstruction after the revolution,¹⁰ but remained ideologically confined and self-centered, thematically narrow, spiritually and conceptually provincial. For a decade "constructivist utilitarianism" engaged most of the creative poets in Slovenia, from their doyen Oton Župančič (1878-1949), to the youngest of the young among his contemporaries: Peter Levček (born 1923), Ivan Minatti (born 1924), Lojze Krakar (born 1926). By 1953 "constructivist utilitarianism" exhausted its drive and inspiration. It is obvious that it never found its way out of the linguistic boundaries of the Slovene language. Real "poetry appeal" is not to be sought in the engaged and programmed poetry of this kind.

Now it is common knowledge that literatures live by a constant give and take, and that it is normal that from time to time they are revived by external stimuli. It is known to what an important extent European Romanticism shaped Francè Prešeren, and how much the Slovene Moderna depended on the French and German fin de siècle, how much, for instance, Oton Župančič's Duma owes to Emil Verhaeren; or even further, how much Anton Podbevšek and some texts of Srečko Kosovel depended on Italian futurist patterns. Where then, does the boundary between the original and its replica lie, where are the limits of poetic authenticity and imitation?

A partial answer to our question may lie in T. S. Eliot's concept of "genuine poetry" to be arrived at through his catalytic dialectics: "Has a poet something to say, a little different from what anyone has said before, and has he found, not only a different way of saying it, but the different way of

saying it which expresses the difference in what he is saying?"¹¹ It would not make much sense to scrutinize such great poets as Prešeren and Župančič for the authenticity of their poetry; it is different with Podbevšek's Človek z bombami, 'The man with the Bombs,' or Kosovel's Integrali 'Integrals.' A broader nontransient poetry appeal, in my view, therefore calls for something more than quality and originality; we would be inclined to define this "something more" as non-imitativeness. From this point of view the appeal of Srečko Kosovel's Integrali, recently translated and published in several languages,¹²--poetry which translates rather easily--is incomparably lower than would be the appeal of his personal and social lyrics.

By the same token, so-called experimental poetry of any kind, in particular when reared in less-known languages, very often, original as it may be, cannot count on a sustained appeal beyond its linguistic boundaries. The first phase of the so-called "second post-war generation of Slovene lyrics" of Gregor Strniša (born 1930), Dane Zajc (born 1929), Venko Taufer (born 1933), Tomaž Šalamun (born 1941), of the decade between 1958 and 1968, is a perfect example of this kind of limitation. The incipient wave of this phase, cryptic and esoteric even to the contemporary native critics who characterized it euphemistically, first as "a vanguard, cerebral but eccentric poetry,"¹³ then as "a total desecration of poetry,"¹⁴ or as "alienated unpoetic, hermetic anti-poetry of the day,"¹⁵ or even "poetic charlatanism,"¹⁶ was not poetry at its best. One cannot but agree with T. S. Eliot's sympathetic thought about experimental poetry at this point: Good poetry presupposes a synthesis of an exceptional sensibility with an exceptional power over words. Poets who are merely eccentric or mad, may and do have feelings which perhaps are unique but which cannot be shared, and if they cannot be shared, they remain uninteresting.¹⁷

But then something unexpected happened to the generation of Strniša, Zajc, Taufer, Šalamun: the negated objective world as such, the dismantled humanistic poetic experience, the poetic order of the intelligible word, emerged as values once again. In the latest poetry of these same young poets we are witnessing a familiar process. The most recent poetry of this seemingly anarchic generation is growing into the values of yesterday, of the rejected and lost tradition which now remains to be rediscovered and reconquered once again.

And here we come to the central point of our discussion.

To show what "poetry appeal" does not consist in, I have tried so far to set apart those types of poetry--the utilitarian, local, provincial, the patriotic, the ideologically engaged and programmed, the imitative, experimental and hermetic poetry--which may in general be less interesting to an outsider. The crucial question posed at the outset of our discussion, however, remains to be answered: what an audience outside the linguistic boundaries of a small, little known language expects to discover in the poetry of a small nation.

If languages really stand for the sediments of life experience of their speakers (the way people think, feel and behave), then--in quite general terms--by virtue of poetic language, the poetry in languages represents the crystallization of those sediments. Hence the role and importance of poetry in languages, hence the function of poetry--as T. S. Eliot would say--in groping for the balance between diversity and unity in our world.¹⁸ And conversely: if we recognize a linkage between the poetry and its language, we cannot deny the existence of the linkage between the variables inside the poetry of a language per se, i.e., between the works of art of individual poets of a language. If these variables are related through the medium and its content as they are, their relations speak of an order; symbolic logic interprets such constructs as systems.

I have just tried to apply to poetry what linguists do to language. Language is more than an inventory of sounds, forms, words and syntactic patterns. Each level of language exists in something more than an aggregate of its elements. Language is a system of systems of mutually interrelated and interdependent elements. Similarly, poetry is more than an aggregate of poets and their creations in that language. The poetry of a language is a system of interdependencies and interrelations between poets of the same language, a commonality, a system--"où tout se tient", as Antoine Meillet put it for language structures.¹⁹ Or as T. S. Eliot interpreted: No poet stands alone in time and space; no poet has his full significance by himself. He must be judged in relation to a historical order of poetry, national or European. Every poet of this order stands in a subtle relation to the entire body of poetry which coexists with him as well as precedes him. Furthermore, he can be fully understood and appreciated

only when he is set within the body of poetry of one language. Thus, poetry of a language exists as an "organic" whole, with individual works and poets finding their significance only in their relation to the system of which they are part.²⁰

On the two dimensions of this system, the horizontal and the vertical, the latter opens up the relation of past and present of a poetry. The relation extends in both directions: in poetry the past is related to the present, and the present is directed by the past. The present and the past are linked by what we normally call TRADITION, the poetic tradition of a literature.

Our preference for the variable, the individual, personal and subjective, which is essentially still a legacy of Romanticism, prevents us from seeing the constants of tradition in literatures. When we praise a poet, we tend to insist upon those aspects or parts of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. We pretend to find in him what is individual. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors and contemporaries. We endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. "Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice"--and these are T. S. Eliot's words again--"we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously . . ." ²¹ No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.

In revolutionary times, when we seldom speak with reverence of the past, the reference to tradition is not popular. Thus the term "typology" has been often used instead,²² although it is perfectly clear that the typology of poetry does not and cannot mean the same thing as the tradition of poetry. The gap becomes still wider if we adopt T. S. Eliot's understanding of poetic tradition, which seems to me the only valid interpretation of a poetic heritage. "The tradition . . . must be conceived as a living principle, capable of diverse historical realizations. The tradition is to be understood not as a fixed and immovable standard, but as a current which discards what is dead and integrates what is alive . . ." ²³

Thus, the poetic tradition of a literature assumes a physiognomy, a profile which, in spite of its continual evolution or better, exactly because of its continual selection process, may be conceived as a constant, constituting the

distinctive specificity of poetry. It is in this poetic tradition that one may look for the ultimate appeal of the poetry of any nation, let alone of the poetry of a small, little-known language.

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Footnotes

¹Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry (New York, 1953), 75-108.

²Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry." In: Poetry and Poets (New York, 1943), 14.

³Harry Levin, Grounds for Comparison (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 80-84.

⁴Cf., Rado L. Lencek, "The Case of 'Minor' Slavic Literatures." In: Papers in Slovene Studies: 1976 (New York, 1977), 9-12. William E. Harkins, "Minor Slavic Literatures: The Case of Slovene." Ibid., 1-8.

⁵Janko Lavrin, "Introduction." The Parnassus of a Small Nation: An Anthology of Slovene Lyrics (London, 1957), 9-28.

⁶Eliot, "Social Function" ibid., 12-13.

⁷Albert B. Lord, "Nationalism and the Muses in Balkan Slavic Literatures in the Modern Period." In: The Balkans in Transition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), 258-296.

⁸Cf., Naprej zastava Slave! (With Slava's banner, forwards!) The Slovenian National March, or Patriotic Chant of the Slovenes, the South Slavonic people of the provinces of Carniola, Carinthia, Styria, and Istria & in the Austrian Empire. The music by the Slovene composer Davorin Jenko. Rearranged as a solo for the pianoforte, with interlinear English version by Andrej Jurtela and Alfred L. Hardy (London, 1885). S. Jenko's Naprej was translated again and frequently published; see, F. Dobrovoljc, "Bibliographie. Traductions des belles-lettres slovènes." Le livre slovène, IX (Ljubljana, 1971) (Special issue), 6-119.

⁹Filip Kalan, "Some Notes on Contemporary Slovene Poetry." In: Slovene Poets of Today (Ljubljana, 1965), 3-15.

¹⁰Boris Paternù, "Sodobna slovenska lirika" (1964). Quoted from his Pogledi na slovensko književnost, 2 (Ljubljana, 1974), 249-280.

¹¹T. S. Eliot, "What is Minor Poetry?" In: On Poetry and Poets (New York, 1943), 48.

¹²Cf., Srečko Kosovel, Integrale. Ausgewaehlt, eingeleitet, uebersetzt von W. Heliger (Munich, 1976). Srečko Kosovel, Poesie di velluto e Integrali. Traduzione di J. Milič (Trieste, no date).

¹³Taras Kermauner, Izročilo in razkroj ali samorazdejanje humanizma v povojni slovenski poeziji (Ljubljana, 1970). Idem, Dileme sodobnega slovenskega pesništva (Ljubljana, 1971).

¹⁴B. Paternù, *ibid.*, 249-280.

¹⁵B. Paternù, *ibid.*, 272-273.

¹⁶Anton Slodnjak, "Občečloveško in narodno. Kaj ima v slovenskem slovstvu občečloveški in kaj samo narodni pomen?" Prostor in čas, 6 (Ljubljana, 1974), 1-16.

¹⁷T. S. Eliot, "Social Function," *ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸T. S. Eliot, Notes towards the Definition of Culture (New York, 1949), 43.

¹⁹Antoine Meillet, Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européenes (Paris, 1912), 36.

²⁰T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In: The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism (London, 1920), 49-50.

²¹T. S. Eliot, "Tradition," *ibid.*, 48.

²²B. Paternù, "Razvoj in tipologija slovenske književnosti" (1966). Quoted from his Pogledi na slovensko književnost, 1 (Ljubljana, 1974), 5-21. Cf. also B. Paternù, "Slovenska poezija" (1972); *ibid.*, 47-75.

²³T. S. Eliot, "Tradition," *ibid.*, 52.