

A POET IN SEARCH OF HER ROOTS: ROSE MARY PROSEN'S *APPLES*

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Rose Mary Prosen (*1931), the Slovene-American poet, author, and professor of English, has so far published four collections of poetry, starting in 1971 with *Poems*, to be followed by *O The Ravages* in 1976, *Apples* in 1980 and *Thank You Michelangelo*, also in 1980. Apart from her numerous articles and book reviews she also wrote a short memoir entitled "Looking Back: Newburgh" for the 1976 Growing Up Slavic in America Competition (and won the first prize), and her short story "Maria" appeared in Slovene translation both in *Slovenski koledar* in 1981 and the anthology *Naši na tujih tleh* (1982).

The trauma of not knowing what she was or where she belonged had, for many years, been part of Prosen's life. In her memoir "Looking Back" she writes:

"Rebellious, confused, I left my home, my church, my neighborhood, and ventured forth into the world, into Cleveland, into America, into Europe, wondering where it was I belonged. I flowed into the main-stream, but sometimes the currents were too strong for me; the questions unanswerable. I drowned, and drowned."¹

She remembers with remorse how, as a child, she refused to speak Slovene. "What was a Slovenian? A hunkie. A greenhorn. A dumb Slav. 'You sound like you just got off the boat,' another boy had said to me once."²

Like so many second-generation Slovene-Americans Prosen did her best to become Americanized, an American proper. Yet, as she grew up, she began to feel, deep down in her soul, that she was not just an American but a Slovene-American. With this recognition came the awareness that so many things had gone by without her being aware of them. The old ways of life, so typically Slovenian, were gone and the worst of all was that so much of the

¹ "Looking back: Newburgh" in G.E. Gobetz and A. Donchenko, eds., *Anthology of Slovenian American Literature, with Sixty Reproductions of Slovenian Ethnic Art* (Willoughby Hills OH: Slovenian Research Center of America, 1977) 27.

² "Looking back," 28.

old immigrant life had gone by without being understood. From her adult perspective, in 1976, Prosen writes:

“I am beginning to feel there is gold in the dust that I sift as I write these words; a pagan spirit, beyond any language, that is my heritage, tempered by thrift and work.”³

In 1965 the poet visited her unknown Slovene grandmother’s grave for the first time. In the tiny village in Dolenjsko she felt at home — and suddenly understood the plight not only of her parents but of all those thousands of immigrants who “felt displaced their whole life long, never learning English, never leaving the neighborhood, hugging their own blood, their own plot of land, living still as workers on the landlord’s great estate. They knew their boundaries — the lines their children crossed and crossed.”⁴

As a poet, Prosen paid tribute to her “lost youth,” to all the things she could only understand as a mature woman but had not understood before, in her collection *Apples*.

Her dedication of this, her third collection of poems, was “Once more, for Life.” The booklet consists of an untitled introductory piece followed by nine poetic “chapters” either untitled (I and IV) or introduced by a poetic quotation from William Blake (III), Li Ch’ing-Chao (V), William Butler Yeats (VIII) or the Bible (IX). Some poems are briefly dedicated to one of the poet’s loved ones — her father (II), her friend Bruno (VI), or her unknown paternal grandfather (VII).

The opening lines of her collection set the tone as well as introduce her major theme:

“I am forever tasting apples, tasting
Fruit. Teach me to see. Teach me to open
Terrible eyes. Under the apple tree.”

Apples, the keyword of the collection (together with synonyms and metaphors) stands, in the first place, as the source of both the poet’s personal as well as generally human experience. An apple tree is the tree of knowledge both in its positive and negative connotations. The forbidden fruit equally symbolizes human fall and knowledge, in Prosen’s case the fall from innocence (hence the quotation from Blake’s poem “Spring”)⁵ — the time when she began to suspect that “mine

³ “Looking back,” 32.

⁴ “Looking back,” 35.

⁵ One of his *Songs of Innocence* .

was a peasant's heritage tied to the land and the fruit thereof."⁶ It took Prosen a long time before she could understand the old folks' ways of life, for example:

“What child could understand then that terrible struggle to pay the mortgage before anything; that fierce desire to own the land and a house thereon; to owe no one; to be free and clear? I certainly did not.”⁷

The collection opens with memories of innocent youth when the world still seemed perfect and untouchable: “No danger crushing the fruit that fell / where we could not walk /. So it seemed. So it was” (Poem I, p. 9). Memories of her father ripening apples serve as a metaphor of ripening age. Just as green apples stand for immaturity, i.e. literally an early stage in the process of fruit gaining its final form and taste, so do they symbolize a person's young age and “greenness” — meaning both their inexperience in life as well as their immigrant status, mocking their “I thought I'd never grow old” (Poem II, p. 10). In Poem III Prosen first quotes two lines from Blake's poem *Songs of Innocence* “Spring” in order to further underline the idea of her poem: reminiscing about the McIntosh apple tree sprouting and blossoming one early spring — the spring of the poet's first love experience — Prosen once more brings out the apple tree as the source of corruption of innocence: the tender blossoms of love falling prey to serpentine temptation. Following spring there inevitably arrived autumn, bringing with it “the first loss” (i.e., experience). Yet, luckily, the poet's “eyes / are a photograph” enabling those bitter-sweet memories to be stored. “Thus we stocked our cupboards / ready to pay for sweet” (Poem IV, p. 13).

The grown-up poet is made aware that she has missed so much in her life for not having been able to appreciate her immigrant experience when she was young. There are so many things not remembered at all, because they went understood at the time when they took place. Once more apple imagery is being used by the poet to express her idea: “Worm, remind me. / What have I missed?” and “Reddest apples, / Straight from the tree. / No polishing, / I took what fell” (Poem IV, p. 14).

Linden trees, blossoms, farmers, harvest in addition to apples stand for plentitude, the richness of life, happiness as well as tradition:

⁶ “Looking back,” 31.

⁷ “Looking back,” 31.

“Our house will know something
of harvest,
its shelves not break,
Bushels and baskets to stack,
jars and jugs to fill -
an apple year!” (Poem VI, p.18)

Prosen’s poetry moves in two opposite directions: abstraction on the one hand and naked, active reality, mostly perceived as images from nature which, however, are used connotatively.

Poem VII certainly is one of the more “realistic” ones — telling the story of old-time jars that once preserved and helped persevere but are now empty — except for fond memories of the past and the daydreaming of the future-past that will never be.

The shadows of the past are coming and going, ghost-like, images of Paradise-like idyll are momentarily replaced by merciless reality, by a “purgatorio.” For the poet there is no other place to search for her memories but her heart, “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” as the introductory quotation from W.B.Yeats to Poem VIII says.

Prosen’s final poem in the collection is set in Greece but its theme — as indicated in the quotation from “Song of Solomon” — is “being sick of love.” Red apples embroidered on a tapestry stand for passion (“red is what is lasting”). The poet, however, has come full circle in her search for knowledge which she now accepts in silence:

“To know is always silence” (Poem IX, p. 25).

Whereas Prosen’s early poetry, especially the collection *O The Ravages*, is purely associative and very much abstract, frequently disappearing into magic states, her manner of expression turning into strings of unusual fantasy combinations, *Apples* reveals the poet’s attempt to develop new possibilities of expression in terms of metaphor, semantics and word combinations as well as the music of language whereby her imagery remains familiar and known, even though often still combined in an unusual way. If her early poetry was open to a whole range of extreme human dilemmas and dissonances *Apples* has narrowed down to one major trauma: that of searching for one’s roots. Although the picture of the world as presented in *Apples* is far from being objectively realistic, there are fewer apparently irrational reactions of the poet to the world than in her early poetry. It may just as well be that Prosen’s poetic rejection

of objective reality in her early poetry results from her subconscious rejection of her “spiritual Diaspora.” It was not until years later that the poet suddenly sensed a deep bond with nature, a secret force that helped her solve her inner conflict — or, if not solve it, at least make it possible for her to see “the ghosts /.../ come and gone” (Poem VIII, p. 23).

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POVZETEK

PESNICA, KI IŠČE KORENINE: APPLES ROSE MARY PROSEN

Pesniška zbirka Apples (1990) je predzadnja v seriji štirih: poleg nje so izšle še O The Ravages (1976 in 1977), Thank You Michelangelo (1980) ter, kot prva, Poems (1971). Tematsko je zbirka v celotnem opusu nekaj posebnega, saj povezuje problematiko splošnočloveške bivanjske stiske z osebno stisko Američanke slovenskega porekla, ki se šele v odrasli dobi zave dragocene vrednosti svojih korenin in pa neizpodbitnega dejstva, da je v mladosti zaradi svoje brezbržnosti do slovenstva mnogo dragocenega za vedno odšlo, ker pač ni bilo opaženo. Tako kot v ostalih treh zbirkah je pesniški izraz Rose Mary Prosen abstrakten, dasiravno je zaradi pesniških podob, vzetih iz narave, dovolj jasen in razpoznaven. Pesnica kot vodilno nit devetih daljših pesmi in krajše uvodne uporabi arhetipsko metaforo jabolka kot sadu (prepoznega) spoznanja, postopnega zorenja in razvoja. Različne stopnje vegetacije ponazarjajo različna obdobja v njenem življenju, osnovno tematiko svojih pesmi pa Prosenova uspešno podkrepi s posrečeno izbiro citatov iz poezije in Svetega pisma, ki ji služijo namesto naslova. Nekaj pesmi je neposredno posvečenih njenim najbližjim. Drobna zbirka Apples predstavlja tematsko zaokrožen ciklus. V poslednji, deveti pesmi, se krog sklene; pesničino iskanje spoznanja je zaključeno in sprejema ga vdano, molče.