

## Slovene Literature: A Brief Survey

The first attempt to communicate European cultural values in Slovene may have occurred over one thousand years ago, when Frankish missionaries, bringing Christianity to the Slavic settlers of the Eastern Alps (the ancestors of today's Slovenes), translated some essential Christian formulae into a dialect with recognizably Slovene features. These texts were later (ca. 1000 AD) recorded and preserved as the *Brižinski spomeniki* ("The Freising Monuments"). Often regarded as the oldest Slavic written documents, they stand as the unique examples of Slovene (or proto-Slovene) literature for over half a millennium.

A sustained literary effort among the Slovenes began only when Protestant impulses emanating from Central Europe stirred the burghers in the towns of Carniola, Carinthia, Styria and the Trieste region to demand teaching and preaching, liturgy and scripture in their native tongue. Primož Trubar (1508–86), traditionally the "father of Slovene literature," composed and published the first Slovene books in 1550/51, a Lutheran catechism and a spelling primer, which led quickly to a small but flourishing book culture in the Slovene lands. The greatest achievements of the Protestant moment in Slovene history are two translations of the Bible, one of the New Testament based on Greek and Latin sources by Trubar, and the other of the entire Bible translated directly from Luther's German version by Trubar's younger associate, Jurij Dalmatin (ca. 1547–89). The "Dalmatin Bible," as it is usually called, was published in 1584. Thanks at least in part to its avoidance of egregious Germanisms (a flaw of Trubar's translations) and the general sophistication of its Slovene, it managed to survive the Catholic Counter-Reformation, which swept the Austrian empire in the early seventeenth century. It has had an enduring impact on Slovene literature ever since. Also arising from this biblicistic activity was the first attempt at compiling a grammar of Slovene, by Adam Bohorič (ca. 1520–after 1598). His *Arcticae horulae* (1584, "Little Winter Hours") was a well-meant but misguided attempt to adapt Slovene to Latin grammatical categories. His data, however, are still of interest to modern linguists, and the spelling system he devised to record Slovene words survived into the nineteenth century. Of the other writers of the period—there was only a handful—little need be said: where their works survive (and the fires of the

Jesuits were quite thorough in cleansing the Slovene lands of “heretical” texts), they seem by and large to have been derivative (often mere translators or adapters of German or Swiss Protestant models). A few poems (“prayers” or “hymns”) are, however, worthy of note.

From the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, nothing of significance was produced in the Slovene language, although a history of Carniola with ramifications for Slovene cultural consciousness was written in German in 1689 by Janez Vajkard Valvasor (1641–93), *Die Ehre des Hertzogthums Crain* (“The Honor of the Duchy of Carniola”), which did contain a few Slovene-language texts, among them a poem by one Jozef Sisentschelli (dates unknown), considered to be the first Slovene secular text. Only in the reigns of the enlightened Austrian monarchs Maria Theresa (1740–80) and her son Joseph II (1780–90) were Slovene letters encouraged again, albeit in the service of the Austrian state and the Roman Catholic Church.

More or less continuous literary production in the Slovene lands is to be dated from this period. The poet Janez Damascen Dev (1732–86) and the grammarian Marko Pohlin (1735–1801) together produced the first anthology of Slovene literary texts, *Pisanice od lepeh umetnost* (“Easter Eggs from the Fine Arts,” in three published volumes, with a fourth manuscript volume, 1779–81). The priest Jurij Japelj and the scholar Blaž Kumerdej issued a retranslation of the Bible (with a Catholic orientation, but still based in large part on Dalmatin), beginning in 1784. The first plays in Slovene were composed by Anton Tomaž Linhart (1756–95), who was also an important historian (especially his *Versuch einer Geschichte von Krain und den übrigen Ländern der südlichen Slaven Österreichs* [1788–1791], “An Attempt at a History of Carniola and the other Lands of the Southern Slavs of Austria,” whose very title betrays Linhart’s Austro-Slavic bent). Linhart’s most enduring work, still produced on the Slovene stage, is *Ta veseli dan ali Matiček se ženi* (1790, “This Happy Day, or Matty Gets Married”), a clever and occasionally even original adaptation of Beaumarchais’ *Marriage of Figaro*. The best poet of this earliest period of modern Slovene literature is Valentin Vodnik (1758–1819), who was also the editor of the first Slovene newspaper, *Lublanske novice* (1797–1800, “The Ljubljana News”). It was Vodnik who published the first individual collection of Slovene verse, *Pesmi za pokušino* (1806, “Poems for Sampling”), and Vodnik who greeted (in his epic *Ilirija oživljena* [1811, “Illyria Revived”]) Napoleon’s conquest of Slovenia and the formation of the “Illyrian Provinces” as a distinct Slavic entity independent of defeated Austria and capable of national cultural expression. After the reimposition of Austrian authority Vodnik was retired from his teaching position; he

wrote a few poems which remained in manuscript, including *Moj spominik* ("My Monument"), which many consider his best work.

Two figures of this period who themselves were not literati nonetheless contributed significantly to the development of Slovene literature. The industrialist and naturalist Baron Žiga Zois (1747-1819) was the maecenas of almost the entire first generation of Slovene writers. Among others he supported the young village boy Jernej Kopitar (1780-1844), who in 1808 published the *Grammatik der slawischen Sprache in Krain, Kärnten und Steiermark* ("Grammar of the Slavic Language of Carniola, Carinthia and Styria"), the first scientific grammar of Slovene, a capital work that set the standards for the development of the modern Slovene literary language. Kopitar went on to become Censor of Slavic Books in the Austrian Empire and Librarian of the Court Library in Vienna, as well as the chief supporter of the Serbian enlightener Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the "father of modern Serbian culture" in his own right. Kopitar also tried to promote the unification (under the Austrian scepter) of all the Slavs through alphabet reform (actually a blending of roman and cyrillic letters, to facilitate mutual comprehensibility of at least written Slavic), and he opposed vigorously the romantic trends in European culture which eventually would blossom despite him even in the Slovene lands. Nevertheless his contributions were an essential step in the development of Slovene letters, and led directly to the efflorescence of Slovene literature in the 1830s, under the pen of the greatest Slovene poet of all, Francč Prešeren (1800–49).

Prešeren was a promethean romantic spirit, trapped in a time and place that could not appreciate his talents, and, like so many other romantic poets, assailed by temptations that contributed to his premature death. Guided by his close friend and mentor, a literary scholar of unusual breadth and sensitivity, Matija Čop (1797-1835), who died tragically while swimming in the Sava River, Prešeren introduced to Slovene poetry several new genres (the ghasal, ballad, sonnet wreath, carmen figuratum, to name a few), and raised others, particularly the sonnet, to levels which many believe have never been surpassed in Slovene literature. He first appeared to the Slovene reading public (a small, heavily Germanized group) on the pages of the *Kranjska čbelica* (1830–33, "The Carniolan Bee"), a literary journal which Čop edited, with major works like *Ljubeznjeni sonetje* ("Sonnets of Love"), *Slovo od mladosti* ("Farewell to Youth"), *Sonetje nesreče* ("Sonnets of Grief"), among others. In 1834 he issued the scandalous *Sonetni venec* ("A Wreath of Sonnets"), an artistic and technical tour-de-force which took Ljubljana by storm because Prešeren dared name his beloved acrostically in it. He thus compromised forever his hopes of marital bliss and domestic tranquility. In 1836 he published his longest

work, *Krst pri Savici* (“The Baptism on the Savica”), which marked not only the passing of his friend, Čop, but the high point of Prešeren’s sustained poetic effort and the beginning of the end of his poetic career. Though he produced several fine pieces in the decade and a half remaining to him (not the least of which is *Zdravljica* [1844, “The Toast”], which is now officially the Slovene national anthem), and he did manage to issue in 1847 a collection of his best Slovene work (he wrote in German as well), *Poezije dr. Franceta Prešernè* (“The Poetry of Dr. Francč Prešeren”), his deteriorating health, precarious career (he was an attorney but not permitted by the Austrian authorities to practice until almost the end of his life), and his unhappy relationship with Ana Jelovšek, the mother of his illegitimate children, undermined his poetic creativity. He died destitute and alone on 8 February 1849, a day still marked each year in Slovenia with literary and other commemorative activities.

The first Slovene novel was also written at this time, by Janez Cigler (1792–1867), *Sreča v nesreči* (1836, “Luck in Misfortune”), but it started no immediate trend toward prose. The orthographic questions concerning Slovene first raised by Kopitar and then hotly discussed by Čop, Prešeren and others were finally resolved in the 1840s by the adoption of Croatian diacritics (the “hachek” over c, s and z), themselves derived from the alphabet reform of the Czech religious reformer Jan Hus in the early fifteenth century. This system is in use in Croatia and Slovenia (as well as Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia and Lusatia) to the present day. At the same time, however, pressure to amalgamate with the Croats linguistically and culturally was resisted (though one Slovene writer, the “renegade” [as Prešeren called him], Stanko Vraz, did also write poetry in Croatian). Thanks to the overwhelming quality of Prešeren’s poetry, a variation of Prešeren’s central Slovene dialect became the embodiment of literary standard Slovene, leading to the marginalization of regional Slovene literary languages. And as a result of the nobility of Prešeren’s patriotism, his belief that Slovenia’s future lay with other Slavs, not with the Austrians (as Kopitar and some lesser poetic lights had proposed), carried the day among Slovene intellectuals.

By the decade of the 1860s Slovenes began to see themselves as separate but equal members of the Slavic “family.” Some at least began to chafe under Austrian rule, dreaming of a Slavic (or South Slavic) state of their own. Others worked quietly but persistently to build Slovene ethnic awareness and develop Slovene economic power, and one of the most effective means they had at their disposal in the latter half of the nineteenth century was literature, particularly prose. Though many fine poets grace the pages of Slovene literary journals from 1860 to 1895 or so—Simon Jenko (1835–

1869), Josip Stritar (1836–1923), Simon Gregorčič (1844–1906), and Anton Aškerc (1856–1912)—this period is more justly famed for the beginnings and significant development of Slovene prose. Most notable are Fran Levstik, Josip Jurčič, and Ivan Tavčar. Levstik (1831–1887) was a poet, playwright, and the first real critic of Slovene literature, but he remains most regarded for his short story “Martin Krpan” (1858), a moral tale of the Slovene (and by extension Slavic) giant Martin’s experiences and battles at the Habsburg court in Vienna. Jurčič (1844–81) was famed as an editor as well as playwright, humorist and prose writer, especially of historical fiction (*Hči mestnega sodnika* [1866], “Daughter of the Local Judge”, *Deseti brat* [1866, “The Tenth Brother”, the first successful Slovene novel, reminiscent of Sir Walter Scott). His principal subject was the Slovene peasant, whom he depicted quasi-realistically. Tavčar (1851–1923), a lawyer and liberal politician opposed to Slovene clericalism on the one hand and socialism on the other, based his prose on Slovene history with, however, many allusions to the contemporary situation. He is most noted for *Visoška kronika* (1919, *The Chronicle of Visoko*), which though published in the twentieth century and concerned with the eighteenth century is of a piece thematically and technically with Slovene nineteenth-century romantic and realistic prose.

The two decades from 1899 to 1918 (the year in which the Slovene lands abjured their millennial association with Germanic rulers to join the “Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes,” later renamed Yugoslavia [domain of the South Slavs]) were among the richest in Slovene literary history. Dubbed the “Moderna” (after Central European models), the period boasts four writers whose influence extends into the present: Dragotin Kette (1876–99), Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), Oton Župančič (1878–1949), and Josip Murn-Aleksandrov (1879–1901). Kette and Murn-Aleksandrov died tragically young of the same disease, in the same flophouse (indeed in the same room) in Ljubljana only a year and a half apart. Each left a very circumscribed corpus behind, Kette in *Poezije* (“Poems”), edited by Anton Aškerc and issued in 1900, and Murn-Aleksandrov in *Pesmi in romance* (“Songs and Romances”), prepared by the poet but published by Ivan Prijatelj in 1903. Kette is renowned above all for his erotic poetry, intimate, suggestive and subjective. Murn’s verse is intensely musical, of an impressionist bent, with however a simplicity of expression that continues to be attractive. Their early deaths were a great loss to Slovene letters. Ivan Cankar started his literary career as an erotic poet, but ended as Slovenia’s premier prose writer and playwright. He is the most translated of Slovene authors, perhaps in part because his works touch on universal concerns of the pre-World War I period (alienation, deracination, economic justice,

war and peace). His was the dark and difficult world of the city (Vienna, where he lived much of his life) and the suffering peasantry. Notable among his works are *Hiša Marije Pomočnice* (1904, *The House of Mary Our Helper*), a novel, *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* (1907, *The Bailiff Jernej and His Rights*), a novella, and *Lepa Vida* (1912, “Lovely Vida”), a play.

Though Oton Župančič lived longer than any of the other Slovene modernists, he too was most active in the period preceding the first World War. His poetic collections *Čaša opojnosti* (1899, *The Cup of Intoxication*), *Čez plan* (1904, *Across the Plain*), and *Samogovori* (1908, *Monologues*), contain by far his best work and set a high standard for twentieth-century Slovene poetry. Župančič was also successful as a writer for children (an important genre in Slovene), translator (especially of Shakespeare), dramatist and social commentator (especially in his support of the Slovene-American writer Louis Adamic in the famous essay “Adamič in slovenstvo” [1932, “Adamič and ‘Sloveneness’”]). Though age and ill health prevented him from taking an active part in the Slovene resistance during the Nazi occupation in World War II, he did contribute poems to the cause (anthologized later in *Zimzelen pod snegom* [1945, *Evergreen under the Snow*]), and he briefly held the post of Slovene minister of culture in the postwar communist government. Equally long-lived but less socially involved was Župančič’s contemporary Alojz Gradnik (1882–1967). Known as the poet of love and death (especially in his earlier collections like *De profundis* [1926]), he was above all a lyricist (many consider him the finest Slovene lyricist of the twentieth century): particularly worthy in this regard is his later collection *Eros—Tanatos* (1962).

As elsewhere in Europe, World War I had a profound impact on Slovene writers. The euphoria resulting from independence soon yielded to pessimism in view of Slovene losses during the war, the division of Slovene lands (with significant territories ceded to Italy or remaining in Austria), and, over the two decades between the first and second World Wars, the ever growing dissatisfaction with life in unitarist Yugoslavia. Literary expressionism, widely practiced in Central and Eastern Europe, also found a home in Slovenia as well, particularly in the work of Srečko Kosovel (1904–26), the most successful Slovene expressionist poet, whose own brief literary career epitomized the move from pre-war lyricism to post-war experimentation and dissonance. In prose Ivan Pregelj (1883–1960), whose ill health compelled him to live apart from society, developed an expressionist style with a distinctly Catholic orientation, culminating in the novel *Thabiti kumi* (1933). Other earlier works of his, such as *Tolminci* (1927) and *Plebanus Joannes* (1920), were also well received. Much along the same lines is the work of the very prolific Francè Bevk (1890–1970),

who among other things chronicled in a realistic and moving way the life of Slovenes living under Italian rule. His novel *Kaplan Martin Čedermac* (1938, *Fr. Martin Čedermac*) is one of the best works of the interwar period.

The imposition of Socialist Realism as the only acceptable style for Soviet writers in the 1930s had its repercussions in Slovenia too, though Slovene leftist writers were able to avoid successfully the dogmatism of their Soviet counterparts and follow non-Soviet realists, such as the Pole Reymont and the Scandinavian Hamsun. A kind of “social realism” became the vogue in the works of Prežihov Voranc (the pseudonym of Lovro Kuhar [1893–1950]), a frank and on occasion brutal chronicler of the sorry state of Slovenes in Austrian Carinthia. Miško Kranjec (1908–83), a Communist, did the same for the Slovenes living under Hungarian occupation (in Prekmurje), as did Ciril Kosmač (1910–80) for the Slovenes in Italy. These two also depicted the national liberation struggle against the Italian and German occupiers of Slovenia during World War II: Kosmač’s novels *Pomladni dan* (1953, *A Day in Spring*) and *Balada o trobenti in oblaku* (1968, *Ballad of the Trumpet and the Cloud*) are among the best literary products to result from the war. As for poetry in the 1930s to the end of the war, the most notable names are Božo Vodušek (1905–78), especially his collection *Odčarani svet* (1939, *The World Charmed Away*), on Slovene intellectual life; Matej Bor (the pseudonym of Vladimir Pavšič, 1913– ), the Slovene partisan poet par excellence, whose collection *Previharimo viharje* (1942, “Let’s Overcome the Tempests”) was published illegally in Slovenia at the height of the occupation; Karel Destovnik-Kajuh (1922–44), another partisan who published notable lyrics illegally; and France Balantič (1921–43), a “White Guardist” opponent of the partisans and accomplished sonnet writer whose few poems could be published posthumously only outside Slovenia until relatively recently.

The immediate postwar period was of course characterized in both political and literary spheres by rampant Stalinism until Tito’s epochal break with the Soviet Union in 1948 (ending Yugoslavia’s political subservience to the bloc) and the Congress of Yugoslav Writers, held in Ljubljana in 1952, which ended direct state control of writers. Of the literary production of the period till 1952, the less said the better, with perhaps the sole exception of Edvard Kocbek (1904–81), whose superb collection of prose tales *Strah in pogum* (1951, *Fear and Courage*) signaled the beginning of existentialism in Slovene literature while marking an end to the writer’s career, for he dared to criticize the partisans’ activities both during and after the war (Kocbek himself had been a partisan and a highly regarded pre-war poet, but as a non-Communist and Catholic he had always been suspect). Immediately following the liberalization of the Yugoslav cultural scene,

however, Slovene writers began to experiment rather boldly with themes and forms then in style in Western Europe, though within certain limits (at least on themes) imposed by the regime. The poetry collection *Pesmi stirih* (1953, *Poems of the Four*), containing works by Ciril Zlobec (1925–), Tone Pavček (1928–), Janez Menart (1929–), and Kajetan Kovič (1931–), rejected social concerns and objectivity for lyricism and intimate expression in traditional genres. Lojze Kovačič initiated his literary career with *Ljubljanske razglednice* (1954, *Ljubljana Postcards*), a somewhat realist work, but moved quickly toward the absurd and “stream of consciousness” techniques in his prose. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is *Sporočila v spanju* (1972, *Messages in Dreams*). Kovačič’s recent trilogy, *Prišleki* (1984–85, *Newcomers*) ranks among the very finest new Slovene novels.

Very soon the discord between ideals and everyday realities became the primary focus of Slovene writers; the absurdity of modern life and a scrambling for the means accurately to express that absurdity preoccupied them. Traditional means of expression (especially structure and genre) were rejected while word-play taken often to extremes became the norm. The 1960s, 1970s and especially the 1980s, with the death of taboo themes, are marked most conspicuously by this free-wheeling rush toward innovation and exploration in Slovene poetry, prose and theater. At the forefront of innovation in poetry are the poets Gregor Strniša (1930–87), with his metaphysical, symbolist but carefully structured work beginning with the collection *Mozaiki* (1959, *Mosaics*); Tomaž Šalamun (1941–), in many ways the “enfant terrible” of modern Slovene literature who upset numerous poetic conventions in his first collection, *Poker* (1966), and is still raising eyebrows; and Franci Zagoričnik (1933–), who in his 1967 work *Opus nič* (*Opus Null*) sought to test the very limits of poetic structure and expression. Free verse and a kind of neo-expressionism of a very grotesque and depressive sort characterize the verse of Dane Zajc (1929–); likewise his contemporary Venko Taufer (1933–) belongs to the avantgarde that in the 1960s began to predominate in Slovene poetry. Taufer is an experimenter who poses the “larger questions” of life. Among the youngest of Slovene poets is Aleš Debeljak (1961–), a recent recipient of the prestigious Prešeren Prize in Literature. His collection *Imena smrti* (1985, *The Names of Death*) immediately established his reputation as a Slovene postmodernist; he also writes provocative literary criticism. Many other names could also be added to this list: modern Slovene poetry is perhaps the most lively literary activity in the country today, with new collections appearing daily for a reading public that apparently never grows sated. It should also be noted that locally produced poetry is helping to raise the consciousness of Carinthian Slovenes in Austria: Milka Hartman (1902–



97), Valentin Polanšek (1928–85), Andrej Kokot (1936–), and Gustav Januš (1939–) have been particularly active in both writing and translating.

Structurally Slovene prose has followed the lead of modern French novelists with varying degrees of success. Rudi Šeligo (1935–) is the foremost practitioner of the “anti-novel” with its focus on states of mind rather than on the narration of events or actions. His *Triptih Agate Schwarzkobler* (1968, *The Triptych of Agatha Schwarzkobler*) reworks Tavčar’s traditionalist novel-chronicle. Alojz Rebula (1924–), on the other hand, writing from his base in Trieste and steeped in the traditions of littoral Slovenes, takes a more classical and Catholic approach, as for example in *V Sibilinem vetru* (1968, *In the Sybilline Wind*) or *Snegovi Edena* (1977, *The Snows of Eden*). Of a somewhat more topical bent are several writers who find inspiration in the distortions and injustices of modern Slovene society: Vitomil Zupan (1914–87), for example, who in *Menuet za kitaro* (1978, *Minuet for the Guitar*) and *Levitan* (1982, *Levitan*), reexamined the war and its consequences, including Tito’s prisons and the treatment of so-called “Cominformists”; Vladimir Kavčič (1932–), who also tries to take a fresh look at the war; Pavle Zidar (1932–), a very prolific writer who on occasion focuses on peasant life; and most recently Drago Jančar (1948–), who in *Galjot* (1978, “The Galley Slave”) and *Smrt pri Mariji Snežni* (1985, “Death at Mary-of-the-Snows”), dissects totalitarianism and its social consequences.

While World War II and its aftermath, including the distortion of the war-time record by the government, continue to interest Slovene prose writers, attention is gradually shifting from this historical event of capital but diminishing importance to the record of present times, especially the realities, injustices and absurdities of life in Titoist Yugoslavia, and now to the possibilities which lie in an independent national existence. Many poets and prosateurs also write for the theater: Zajc, Strniša (especially his *Ljudožerci* [1972, “Cannibals”]), Šeligo, and Jančar (*Veliki briljantni valček* [1985, “The Great Diamond Waltz”]) have all enjoyed success on the stage equal to that in their novelistic or poetic careers. By and large modern Slovene drama is avantgarde, absurdist, and very poetic. Among the earliest practitioners of such drama was Jože Javoršek (1920–90), also an accomplished poet and writer, whose first works were staged in the late 1950s. Particularly accomplished is Dominik Smole (1929–), whose reworking of the classical play *Antigone* (as “Antigona” [1961]) touched on contemporary issues, as did his staging of Prešeren’s epic poem *Krst pri Savici* (1961, “The Baptism on the Savica”), which followed up on the original in order to address modern problems. Primož Kozak (1929–81) is much indebted to modern existentialist dramatic presentation with a heavy orientation to-

ward revolutionary themes, as for instance in his *Legenda o sv. Che* (1969, "The Legend of St. Che") or his exploration of Stalinist show-trials, *Dialogi* (1969, "Dialogues"). The Belgrade-born, Ljubljana-educated Dušan Jovanović (1939–) has had enduring success at home and abroad with his reflective work on World War II, *Osvoboditev Skopja* (1977, "The Liberation of Skopje"), *Karamazovi* (1980, "The Karamazovs"), on post-war life, and in numerous other satirical pieces. Many of these playwrights also write for the cinema, radio and television, which are lively modern extensions of the Slovene literary tradition.

In its nearly thousand-year, discontinuous tradition, Slovene literature has been a net importer of styles, techniques, and themes, largely from the literatures of Western and Central Europe, occasionally from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, and most recently from North and South America. To call Slovene literature receptive is not, however, to label it imitative or derivative, for from its earliest practitioners it has striven—successfully, by and large—to shape its products to the realities and absurdities of life as lived in a relatively compact, all-too-often victimized, picturesque land on the southern side of the Alps east of Italy. Slovene literature contains much that is original about the human condition. It is expressive. But its originality and expressiveness are borne in a vehicle that both defines and delimits it, the Slovene language. As if the demands on any writer—to be both *dulce* and *utile*—were not great enough already, Slovene poets, novelists and playwrights have had to struggle as well over the centuries with the size of their audience, the short reach of their words. It is a tribute to them that they have accomplished so much.

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