



Ales Steger

Literary perspectives: Slovenia

A hollowed-out generation

Slovenian novelists are finding highly original ways to record the experience of transitional society, writes poet and critic Ales Steger. While male novelists take a hyper-realist, socially critical approach, their equally successful female counterparts are creating fictions only loosely connected to contemporary time and space. And while poetry and drama are lagging behind, there are still some notable exceptions. But first, an excursus into the Slovenian booktrade's current fad: the self-help manual...

The street is still named Marshall Tito. It is not any street but the main street of the capital, perforating the torso of a broken city that is only slowly growing back together again. It is also the witness to an unusual event in Sarajevo — a crowd at a bookshop. Even from outside, it can be seen that something is wrong. In the bookshops of the countries that emerged on the territory of the now departed Yugoslavia, writing supplies, reams of paper for copy machines, souvenirs, and even toys have proliferated like termites, invading the display windows and almost entirely pushing out the product advertised in the signs — *Knjigarna, Knjizara*: namely, books. They've been on the defensive since 1992. Since the Dayton peace agreement was signed, I have come every year or two to this bookshop, and this is the first time that there has been anyone else in the place besides me and the salesgirl. I had anticipated that, like always, I would see her seated in her solitary corner, her gaze penetrating the emptiness, gray fingers, a long-ashed cigarette between them, hovering over an ashtray that rests on a stack of dusty classics. And now this crowd all of a sudden; the salesgirl unrecognizably busy. Right now, she is serving a lady whose faced is covered by a *feredza*. I steal a glance at what kind of a book the woman holds with her left hand as she counts out convertible marks with her right. Would you think I was exaggerating if I wrote that the book she is holding is the same book that is lying on the nightstand of my hotel room? It would be a mistake if you didn't. Because the lady with the veil is purchasing a Bosnian cookbook that is not at this moment lying on the nightstand of my hotel room. As she does not have enough convertible marks, she puts down the cookbook on top of another book stacked on the sales counter among the other best sellers. And, behold, this time it *is* the same book that is lying on the nightstand in my hotel room and is now covered by a book about the art of Bosnian cuisine in the same way that we might cover ourselves with a blanket in an ice-cold bedroom.

What do Bosnia and Sarajevo, the bookstore on Marshall Tito Street, the Hotel Saraj and the nightstand in my room have to do with new Slovenian literature? Let us say that the author of this essay enjoyed in a somewhat Balkan manner several weeks of procrastination. This procrastination finally led to a situation in which I was driven by one of those horrific lines that weave the web of our time, the dreaded deadline. Two hours before the departure of my plane, I

rushed to the main Ljubljana library and tried to borrow the last copy of a book I wanted to write about. I looked nervously into the library computer. Fifteen copies: all out on loan. In that instant, I recalled stories about the author of this much sought after book: how he had signed books for two hours without rest at the last Interliber Book Fair in Zagreb, the countless reprints of the pocket Slovenian edition. These are stories that are perhaps standard in large literary markets but not in Slovenia. What now? The library computer had spit out two more items at the bottom of the column marked *on loan*: the first was the German translation of the author's most recent Slovenian success; the second was its shortened Slovenian adaptation. I ran up to the second floor of the library, hurried to the shelf marked with *Spirituality*. Like a madman, I rummaged through the books about kundali, chakras, masters of meditation, spiritual awakenings and pyramids, about Atlantis and the cosmos, before I finally found, shelved in the wrong place, the sought-after book. I lunged down the stairs and into my car and — you won't believe this (or will you?) — caught my flight to Sarajevo.

When I gaze through my hotel window, I look directly into a vertical wall that is covered by afternoon shadow and rises, like some kind of grim stone curtain, more than ten metres above my hotel window. Actually I should be satisfied with this view. If, like most other guests, I had a window on the other side, I would have a view onto young graves scattered across the hillside in the evening light. Everywhere you look: young graves and young trees, the old ones having been cut down for firewood during the war. So it's better if I stare into a steep bare wall when I look through the window. And better yet if I just don't look through any window at all and finally get down to writing.

The author whose book I was looking for is, at this moment, perhaps the most prominent promoter of the vegan food movement in the world and one of the few people living on this planet who has managed to be the president of two different countries in his lifetime. The bestselling author of spiritual books, Janez Drnovsek, carries the same passport as I do and speaks the same language that I write in. He is an economist from Posavje, one of the most polluted regions in Slovenia that has produced, in addition to tons of industrial waste, smoke, and non-biodegradable poisons, a number of positive things in recent years: the rock group Laibach, for example, and the choreographer Iztok Kovac. Drnovsek was the president of the disintegrating Yugoslavia, then for many years the Slovenian prime minister, and most recently the president of Slovenia, the post in which he currently serves. For twenty years, he was involved at the highest levels of Balkan politics and simply avoiding being despised in such circumstances is an indisputable achievement. And yet this early story is significant, particularly now that the Slovenian president has suddenly published a series of books that record the radical changes in his lifestyle and politics.

My president is the author of several books the titles of which speak for themselves — *Bistvo sveta* [The essence of the world], *Misli o zivljenju in zavedanju* [Thoughts about life and consciousness] and a collection of thoughts called *Zlate misli o zivljenju in zavedanju* [Golden thoughts about life and consciousness], the book that I have on my nightstand. World religions are full of prophets that come from royal families, experience enlightenment, and step onto the activist path of spiritual life. The key moment in the transformations of these people, the moment that legitimizes their teaching and actions, is the voluntary descent from authority, the denunciation of privilege and a worldly life that is based on the accumulation of power. That my president is also aware of this is illustrated by the series of golden thoughts that blind the reader

who opens the volume, *Zlate misli o zivljenju in zavedanju*, the book itself richly decorated with golden edges, golden ellipses, and golden words at the centre. The alphabet of Drnovsek's philosophy is on the one hand composed of the usual summons to moderation, the awakening of cosmic consciousness, the heeding of the inner voice, positive energy and spirituality, appropriate nourishment, even bread baking, a balanced, though not excessive, physical regime, and of course contact with nature. On the other hand, it is also coloured by the impending end of the world, ecological and atomic self-destruction. It culminates with the following thoughts:

Politicians say what they think people want to hear from them. They do not speak the language of higher consciousness. If they do, they are usually not convincing. It is easier to speak the language of hatred, selfishness, and fear of the other. What is important is position, prestige, fame. What is important is one's self.

For a person who wishes to do good, to bring light to darkness in the political sphere, the only thing that is missing is the activist example. And this is something that Drnovsek, following the change in his worldview, does to a certain degree: for example in his recently established organisation, the Movement for Justice and Development¹ of which he is the founder, and in his role as the president of Slovenia. But precisely because of his many official positions, Drnovsek has not acquired a saintly halo and will not until he denounces his power and all the trappings of authority. Lacking such a commitment, the thinker of these golden thoughts will remain in the collective consciousness as a pragmatic and moderate politician who did more good than bad. He will be remembered for his withered smile, the misanthropic performance of his duties, and the cynical tone of his commentaries. Yet we should not complain, since Drnovsek's attitude functions as entertainment in the otherwise dull and predictable landscape of the Slovenian public space. Who else can boast of a president who is passionate about healthy nutrition and who recommends that his mostly Christian compatriots avoid ham on Easter and make do with eggs?

Zlate misli is a good example of the type of exhausted self-help books and esoteric literature that increasingly dominate the shelves of Slovenian bookstores and those of the other republics of the former Yugoslavia. The exhaustion takes place on the level of articulation which has evolved into a compendium of generalizations. The key to this type of writing is maintaining the extreme simplicity of the message and ensuring that the writing reveals no mark of individual style (everyone can easily agree on abstract goodwill and summonses to do good). At minimum, such writing anticipates the receptive limitations of the wider reading public, and the commercial success of such books has strengthened the conviction of authors and publishers alike that the future of the literary market rests precisely with this type of literature. This has created a closed circle in which the crucial element is the phantom readership at which this type of literature is aimed, a readership that almost doesn't exist, and is nothing other than a phantom. Drnovsek is typical for a tendency of transitional (and not only transitional) societies, where the sense of lost values, social and religious structures is acute. This is especially true of societies that stumbled into such a situation after the fall of communism.

It is in this fractured, post-communist world that Andrej E. Skubic's novel *Popkorn* belongs. In 2006, Mladinska knjiga, the largest publishing house in Slovenia and the majority owner of more than 70% of the country's bookshops,

launched a new contest for the best novel about contemporary life. The prize was EUR 12 000 — about triple the standard honorarium for a novel in Slovenia. The response to the promised prize was commensurate to the amount and the winning name was no surprise. Skubic, a PhD in sociolinguistics and already well-known and rewarded for his previous novels *Grenki med* in 1999 [Bitter honey] and *Fuzinski bluz* in 2001 [Fuzine blues], builds his literary style on three identifiable premises: first, stories from urban Ljubljana; second, multi-perspective narration in which he often makes use of differing dialects; and, third, a cast of characters made up of self-deprecating losers whose thoughts, fantasies, and fears bounce around inside their heads. *Popkorn* (2006) is another one of Skubic's vehicles for Ljubljana dialects. The language that comes out of the minds and mouths of its characters is sufficiently specific and charming that it burrows into the reader's ear and is difficult to get out once the book is finished. The principal anti-hero of *Popkorn*, a cynical and reckless tour guide named Valter Koren living the scattered and unfulfilled existence of his late thirties, walks through wild turbo-capitalist Ljubljana to meet his fate. His scepticism toward any kind of sincere human relationship, his financial shenanigans and dreams about starting a Ljubljana torture museum, his sexual fantasies, and finally the cruelty of the demystified emptiness that dogs his every step, all create a fresco of a hollowed-out generation that has no foundation but indifference, the service of their fantasies, and simply staying alive.

Skubic's male characters fall into the Pleiades of contemporary losers that have haunted young Slovenian prose since 1991. Authors such as Dusan Cater, Jurij Hudolin, Andrej Morovic, Jani Virk, Mohor Hudej, Milan Klec have created a collective portrait of a man on the edge of the abyss, a man who has lost his bearings, a socially defeated and spiritually shattered man who drowns his impotence — how could it be otherwise! — in alcohol (usually some schnapps-like brew of socialist provenance such as *pelinkovec*), drugs, and the occasional, somewhat or terribly unsuccessful, erotic adventure.

Ales Car also falls into this general category of authors united, if not by style, then by subject matter. After three books — two novels, *Igra angelov in notopirjev* in 1997 [A game of angels and bats], *Pasji tango* in 1999 [Dog's tango], and a collection of short stories *V okvari* in 2003 [Out of order] — a new collection of fifty short stories, or almost vignettes, entitled *Made in Slovenia* came out in 2006. Like Skubic, Car undertakes a cold analytical study of the social and spiritual failings of contemporary Slovenian society. Each of the fifty stories is introduced by a short, pithy, and bizarre quote taken from articles in the daily newspaper. The stories that follow have a variety of relationships to the quote, from fictionalized excerpts — for example, a story about an automobile accident or the influence of internet chat rooms in perverting reality — to fleeting reference, as in the newspaper quote for story no. 5: "There is much talk of the collective guilt of men and that a voluntary tax should be levied on their violent nature." This quote is followed by a microanalysis of a tyrannical relationship between a woman and her pliable man — a reversal of the Balkan stereotype. Like many of these minutely drawn stories, a surprising turn comes in the final sentences. Emerging before us is a hive of human relationships in ceaseless transformation. In these extraordinarily economic narrative sketches, it takes two or three sentences for a character to change from a worker bee to a drone to the beekeeper who decides to burn down the whole hive. The sketches are the best in those instances when they delineate a territory of anticipation in which everything is clear yet nothing is said.

What emerges in the works of Skubic, Car, and many of the aforementioned authors, is an analysis of the dysfunctional intercultural relationships among the members of individual social groups after the fall of their collective Yugoslav state. These literary works offer a number of case studies about the inadaptability and the inability to live together of the various Yugoslav ethnicities. The stereotypical images of southern Mafiosi, children of mixed marriages, Yugo-nostalgic pensioners, former Yugoslav Army soldiers, Montenegrin loan sharks, southern beauties, and the predominantly Bosnian-Serbian working-class neighbourhoods in Ljubljana all receive convincing literary treatment by these authors.

In addition to themes related to the deterioration of the collective state and its micro-climatic consequences, a preoccupation with women's writing has defined the Slovenian literary space in the last decade. It is nothing less than a historical and biological about-face. For the first time in the history of Slovenian literature, we are at a juncture when a new generation of writers has entered the scene and the proportion of male to female writers is not only balanced, but even slightly tilted in favour of women.

This new circumstance became obvious in December 2006 when, among the ten finalists for the best literary debut, seven were women. In contrast to the male authors mentioned above, the female writers tend to deal with the problematic relationship between the sexes and current social issues. The drastic and explicit emphasis on the social dimension in a radical realist style, the exploration of miniature psychological changes, the erosion of stereotypes about the literary sublime, and shocking narrative reversals, though frequent in the works of young male authors, is rarely present in those of their female counterparts. The debut work rewarded with the aforementioned prize was a travel journal entitled *Ime mi tvoje zvezde je Bilhadi* [The name of your star is Bilhadi] (2006) by Magda Reja. It is a literary travelogue that takes the reader through the deserts of Mali. Besides the long, musically-composed meditative passages, which describe submersion into shapelessness and the caravan voyage of the nomadic Tuaregs to Bilhadi and back again, virtually nothing happens. Nevertheless, the author succeeds in maintaining the tenuous floating quality of a text that remains fresh throughout. Similarly idiosyncratic styles of writing can be encountered in the works of other young female authors such as Suzana Tratnik, Mojca Kumerdej, Irena Svetek, Nina Kokelj and Katarina Marincic.

The Slovenian literary space — in contrast to those in the other former republics of Yugoslavia — has succeeded in preserving the high social visibility of literature. In part this is due to the medialization of literary events and an emphasis on the social, performative, and discursive aspects of literary life. As a result of these trends, we see an increased number of literary presentations, festivals, readings, round tables, and more jostling for prime time television spots, mentions in the daily newspapers, and reviews in one of the approximately ten literary magazines published in Slovenia.

To a certain degree, these trends are also apparent in the genres that are generally viewed as less amenable to the passage from writer to reader — poetry and dramatic texts. Thus, in the last several years, we have seen a number of popular collaborations between musicians and poets, not to mention poets who establish their own bands as a way of encouraging the return of poetry to its oral tradition. We see this in the work of Matjaz Pikalo, Primoz Cucnik, Gregor Podlogar and others. As regards the work itself, the Slovenian poetic landscape has become extremely heterogeneous and much less

interactive. One cannot escape the feeling that each poet is increasingly engaged in a monologue that is more about the self and less about the work of others. There has been one Slovenian poet, however, who during past decades has opposed this trend and who has worked as a mediator of different poetics: namely, Niko Grafenauer, in his role as chief editor of *Nova revija*, Slovenia's principle literary publications. Grafenauer is also an exceptional essayist and his eighth poetry collection, *Nocitve* [Overnight stays], appeared in 2006. He was one of the key personalities in the Slovenian political movements of the 1980s and in his new collection achieves a magical balance between the extraordinary density of his own aesthetics, spinning a dense web of references and images, and a melancholy reconciliation of language with itself. Rarely is the power of poetry as balanced as it is in the poems found in this collection. They are an expression of negative life, unfurling through the presence of death in our everyday existence as well as a manifestation of times, changes and departures. In five thematically-connected cycles, the world of offices and bureaucracy is constructed before the readers' eyes, along with instances of erotic love and farewells to dead friends. Reading the verses in this quiet book, a whirlpool pulls us into a trans-rational space that cannot be described in any other way but by the poem that annuls the laws that construct it. Time outside the text stands still. We gaze at the poem and see in it a world that is constantly departing:

Nowhere is there a solid frame. a terrible throng arises from the
shards of life, crunching under our feet, the white fragments of
passing faces hang in the air.

In marked contrast, Slovenian playwrights have written hardly anything in the last decade that is worthy of mention. The extraordinarily fertile 1960s and 1970s were characterized by an unusual symbiosis of social revolt, aesthetic accomplishment, and new experimental possibilities. This was followed by the politically engaged plays of Dusan Javonovic and Drago Jancar during the 1980s. Yet the 1990s experienced a decline of original dramatic production and the gradual retreat of drama from the wider perception of readers. The sole vehicle of the dramatic text became the performance itself. Evidence of this trend can be found in the number of publications of Slovenian plays and dramatic texts, a number that can be counted on the toes of one foot.

It is for this reason that the posthumous publication in 2007 of a dramatic text by Dane Zajc, the late giant of Slovenian and world poetry and drama, is such a significant event. *Jagababa* was written during the two years before Zajc's death and it will become, as much for its radical aesthetics as for the space it examines, one of the most important Slovenian dramatic works. *Jagababa* is poetry in the form of drama. The work not only transgresses the borders of genre but is a border itself, opening the space between life and death, between event and phantasm, between the vision and the reality of the poetic word. The main character of *Jagababa* is death in the form of *Dekelca*, who enters a dim and maze-like world of guilt and must settle accounts with a group of eleven traditional foresters who produce charcoal high in the hills of Tolmin. Death is an account that is balanced by words, memories, and the ravings of the woodsman Gregor, another in Zajc's series of imaginative poetic figures. *Jagababa* is a work about transition into a space where the seemingly solid rules of the here-and-now no longer apply. If the eternal ideal of literature is to capture what cannot be captured, then Zajc's poetic testament succeeds in reopening the Beckettian space where words usually cannot go, the space that is the dark side of our existence, the space that — if I pull aside the curtain — reveals a rectangular reflection of light from a hotel window that gives onto the

dusk of a sunken wall and young graves and young trees on the other side.

¹ See: www.gibanje.org

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