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## CONTEMPORARY SLOVENE POETRY IN LITERARY STUDIES

This survey does not pretend to exhaustiveness but presents the genres of scholarly writing for different audiences and purposes. In addition to strictly scholarly texts, it encompasses essayistic, interpretive, and scholarly treatises. Books, articles, and commentaries evidence the range of directions in this expansive, scarcely manageable sector of literary creativity. Poetry's status among literary genres is in inverse relation to its quantitative and developmental measures; it has slipped from its one-time central position to unprecedented peripherality and the domain of a select few. They are the professional cognoscenti at universities and institutes who are competent in literary discourse and employ it in specialized descriptions of select fields, as well as amateurs, including most poets, who frequently assume the role of interpreters, editors, and purveyors.

**Key words:** contemporary Slovene poetry, collections, anthologies, interpretations

### 1 Literary history

Changes in epistemological paradigms and the deconstruction of historiography have led to intensive reflection on the "great genre" and the methods of construing literary history. This began in Slovenia with the conference contributions to *Kako pisati literarno zgodovino danes?* (Writing literary history today 2003), which manifested the shortcomings and dissatisfaction with the contemporary condition of literary history. The last synthetic literary history to encompass the entire system of production, reception, and criticism was the 2001 *Slovenska književnost III* (Slovene literature III). This collective project involved the most active university faculty members and academic researchers in an overview of lyric poetry, narrative prose, drama, children's literature, literary journals and programs, literary studies and criticism, and literature in translation.

Jože Pogačnik and Denis Poniž wrote the first chapter, on lyric poetry. Pogačnik's share, which deals with Slovene poetry from the end of WW II to the mid-1960s, is an abbreviated version of the text in his earlier *Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva VIII* (The history of Slovene literature VIII, 1972). There he divided the heterogenous post-war period into existentialism, marked by alienation and the absurd, and structuralism with its neo-avant garde experimentalism and play. Poniž's part considers authors and works from 1966 to the end of the twentieth century. A quantitative imbalance of presentation results: Pogačnik had fifty pages for a twenty-year period and descriptions of twenty-five authors' works, while Poniž had forty pages for thirty-five years and thirty-one poets with large bodies of works. Therefore he was forced to use relatively concise characterizations and abstract speech, having less space for detailed analysis and illustrative quotations.



The concept of “evolution” is mechanical—a linear chain of events without internal dynamic, breaks, concentrations, modulation, and dialog propelling the development of individual poetics. Intimate poetry in the 1950s was influenced after 1960 by Zajc, Strniša, and Taufer’s poetics of existential alienation. In the 1970s, new trends were in turn reflected in the poetry of these three. Thus it would also have been necessary to trace the reverse influence of younger poets (e.g., Debeljak and Zupan on Šalamun) on their seniors, and point out that, after the 1970s, diverse currents, tendencies, and poetics complicated the model of literary history. The inclusion of Pogačnik’s older text resulted in intimate and existential poets’ voices being muffled: their post-1970 collections were cited as bibliographic items, without thematic, stylistic, or formal analysis; evaluations like “the pinnacle of his creativity” are inappropriate or have limited worth. The conceptual basis of the whole is also disturbing: important Slovene minority and émigré poets were not included, remaining almost unknown in Slovenia and understood as a parallel, devalued, and dated phenomenon devoid of ontological, ethical, linguistic, and spatial features—all of which Marija Pirjevec, Miran Košuta, and Silvija Borovnik had previously identified in the poets’ works. Pogačnik’s chapter on “Književnost v zamejstvu in zdomstvu” (Literature of Slovene minorities and émigrés) does not reflect actual conditions—for instance, how young Carinthian poets on the Austrian periphery broke upon the Slovene center in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

A result of the dual authorship is conceptual diffusion. Pogačnik’s governing concept of existentialism and structuralism obscures the currents of post-symbolism and post-expressionism that shaped the critical, alienated, dark phase of high modernism (e.g., Božo Vodušek, Jože Udovič, Edvard Kocbek). Poniž introduces the concept of concrete, visual poetry for the radical phase of modernism, which Pogačnik calls structuralism, and then applies shoddily defined terms to the last quarter of the twentieth century, such as linguism, new formalism, the sixty-something generation, and postmodernism as project and projection. These partially cover currents, phases, and generations. Some authors are arbitrarily placed: Majda Kne is assigned to new formalism—along with Boris Novak, Milan Kleč, Milan Vincetič, and Jure Potokar—despite her cinematically framed fragments, metonymic substitutions, states of wonder, and undefined and diffuse lyrical subject. Jurij Kovič, “who displays thoroughgoing attributes of formalist poetics” (POGAČNIK 2001: 138), is grouped with the generation born in the early 1960s. The hierarchical and relational connections of these conceptual classifications with so-called *ludism* (Lat. *ludus*) remain unexplained, even though unfettered play links the visual and semantic experimentation of concrete poetry with more aestheticized formalism.

Even more unfinished is post-modernism’s theoretical foundation, from which the chapter “Lyric Poetry” traces quite varied realizations and an indeterminate temporal span. In Šalamun’s poetry after 1985, it means splintered images and fragmented and unstructured stories, but without substituting love for freedom, a deep adherence to poetic transcendence, imbibing foreign poetry, and encyclopedism—all of which make it a phenomenon of universal interest. In Grafenauer (*Odtisi* 1999), Poniž calls “postmodern” what he perceives as the circling about an inexpressible gravitational

<sup>1</sup> Janko Ferk, Jani Oswald, Maja Haderlap, Fabjan Hafner in the journal *Mladje*.



center, the search for a path, retreat, and juggling concepts, but not palimpsest-like texture and labyrinthine structure. The postmodern sense of groundlessness, of a person being drawn into nothingness is in Ivo Svetina (*Glasovi snega*, 1993) not an allusion to Buddhism, but rather anti-dualism, or ethical self-examination in light of mortality. In Milan Jesih's *Soneti* (Sonnets 1989), "the postmodern subject, in his ponderings, becomes the sovereign of all he can name" (POGAČNIK 2001: 124), although the greatest innovations were the hybridization of the exalted and banal, referentiality, and simulated sentiments. The poetics of Alojz Ihan and Aleš Debeljak were supposed to have been clearly postmodern. In Ihan, it was the fragmentary in place of a grand narrative, and a diffuse image of the world in place of collective consciousness. However, Poniž does not notice his deconstruction of stereotypes, undermining of power relations, ironizing precise thinking, or parabolic paradoxical points in prose speech. With Debeljak, postmodernism is the experience of subjective being and the world, which is empty, unresponsive, and labyrinthine; it involves referential aesthetics and fragmentariness; fluid consciousness and a fragmented world. The thematization of the media, speech, and codes is, perhaps, also postmodern, as are visual simulacra of classical forms, and the subject's nostalgic and melancholy bearing as it remains an unobservable synechocic presence or simply the sum of conventional lyrical utterances.

If in the part by Pogačnik, we question the validity of closed interpretations of polyvalent symbolic texts,<sup>2</sup> Poniž's section evidences fear of interpretation, lack of profundity when approaching existential, erotic, mnemonic, cognitive, linguistic, cultural, artistic, and communications problems. Contemporary poetry has discernable, if difficult to apprehend moods, feelings, perceptions, experiences, and perspectives of the lyrical subject, whatever the degree of depersonalization, fissure, ontological uncertainty, and identity multiplication. Thus Poniž states that Šalamun has staked himself to the destruction of ideologies, to parody and combinatory gaming, while there is no attention to conjecture and the poet-medium's divinations, the believer in an immortal soul, or derisiveness towards humility. Likewise missing is how he exploits the poetry of chaos, malleability, surprising multilingualism, and the magic of poetry to liberate from reality's oppression. Pogačnik's evaluation and analysis are sometimes distilled from less than representative texts, while significant semantic and stylistic variations are overlooked (e.g., Udovič's magically fantastic images; elegiac nature; light's mortal struggle with death, nothingness, oblivion, suffering, and senselessness). A few examples will suffice to show how Poniž's section is also replete with omissions. In Jesih's sonnets, Poniž neglects the masterful composition, rich, colloquial rhymes, refreshing word formations, and innovations in the rhythm of the iambic pentameter. He does not identify regional identity, humor, irony, burlesque, kitsch, and banal scenes in Vincetič's poetry. In Aleš Šteger's poetry, there is no attention to the key dark images, wounds, torn inner world, detachment; yearning for cohesion, harmony, peace; and the repetition of imaginary images.

In view of these things, using the chapter "Lyric Poetry" in *Slovenski književnosti III* for teaching and learning is problematic. No criterion of systematization, interpretation, or developmental value is realized in full or in detail. The presentation takes

<sup>2</sup> See the interpretation of Strmiša's poem "Inferno" on p. 93.



in all generations and poets, but without a model of reception that would explain what works may have been of interest when, which were shocking or generated controversial interpretations, and which yet today are spiritually and experientially close to a highly educated reader or even one with an informed acquaintance.

Denis Poniž's impressive, almost contemporaneous project *Slovenska lirika 1950–2000* (Slovene lyric poetry 1950–2000, 2001), which presents seventy poets on 327 pages, begins with those born at the outset of the twentieth century and extends to young poets born after 1965. In comparison with *Slovenska književnost III*, there are eighteen new poets, while five are omitted. The relative advantages of the work are that Slovene poets of all regions, countries, and continents receive equivalent attention, and it dispenses with previous ideological exclusions—that is, political emigres' (e.g., Tine Debeljak, France Papež, Karel Vladimir Truhlar, Vladimir Kos) achievements.

The large group of heterogeneous poetics and enormous opuses is chronologically divided into seven units: 1. "Povojna lirika med revolucionarnim zanosom in osebno stisko (1950–1953)" (Post-WW II lyric poetry, from revolutionary excess to personal anxiety, distress [1950–53]) covers sixteen poets (including Truhlar's first collection of 1958); 2. "V navzkrižju pomenskih struktur (1953–1960)" (At the crossroads of semantic structures" [1953–60]) treats twelve poets (including Makarovič's first collection of 1964); 3. In "Polifonija estetskih in idejnih pesniških izrazov in oblik (1960–1966)" (A polyphony of aesthetic and intellectual poetic expression and forms [1960–66]), three of the fourteen poets' first collections came out in 1968–69 (Vogel, Kravos, and Kokot), and one each in 1974 (Pregarč) and 1978 (Januš); 4. "Vprašanje lingvizma, ludizma, karnizma (1966–75)" (The problem of linguism, ludism, and carnalism [1966–75]) focuses on six poets; 5. "Sedemdeseta leta (1970–1977)" (The 1970s [1970–77]) considers two poets' (Ivan Volarič-Feo and Matjaž Hanžek) concrete poetry, and seven others as relates to "the end of modernism or the beginning of postmodernism"; 6. "Leta 1977–1980" (The years 1977–80]) treats nine poets as "new formalism and the advent of postmodernism," although Vincetič, Oswald, Jurij Kovič, Ihan, Vidmar, and Haderlap published their first collections only in the mid-1980s; 7. "Postmodernizem se uveljavi (1985–)" (The prevalence of postmodernism [1985–]) contains four of the youngest poets, although early on Šteger and Hudolin sharpen the images of dark modernism.

Aside from the table of contents, because of the temporal divisions and criteria, the aesthetic differences between Pibernik on the one hand and Geister and Zagoričnik on the other give one pause. The only thing that links these three is when their first collections were published. The attributions are even more questionable because the presentations of their works follow the poets' long individual evolutions, during which they parted with their initial stances. This is moreover true when we read that due to his influence on younger poets, "the 1970s can easily be called the 'Šalamun era'" (PONIŽ 2001: 160).

The greatest critical shift as regards previous evaluations of the shift to modernism is apparent with poets who substituted "sentimental humanism" for the dictates of collectivism and activism in the years immediately after WW II. After all, it was the older Kocbek, Udovič, Vipotnik, and (even earlier) Vodušek who drove the aes-



thetic move to the void subject. Even as relates to pre-war aesthetic norms, the collection *Pesmi štirih* (Poems by four 1953) does not signal a retreat from or resistance to the established canon, a critical stance, destructiveness, and cosmopolitanism. True to an autonomous stance and skepticism about national projects and political utopias, the Poniž prefers to expose political taboos (in Snoj, Zajc, Strniša, and Grafenauer; Udovič is an exception), even when they are coded in hermeneutic and polyvalent images. Poniž cannot restrain himself from taking a position, though, not even as relates to rejection of anthropocentrism in poetry. Due to the expansiveness and panoramic survey of all the poets' collections, the literary characterizations are general and abstract. Besides standard theoretical terms, which are occasionally used imprecisely (e.g., *zau*m for irrationality), the lyrical subjects' conditions are described in terms from psychology (e.g., despair, doubt, resignation, oppression, fear, terror), philosophy (e.g., existence, nihilistic rejection, metaphysics, transcendence, absurd, being, truth, logos, ideal, ideology, anthropocentrism, the essence of things), ethics (e.g., evil, falsehood, freedom, morals), religion (e.g., salvation, eschatology), and sociology (e.g., activism, collectivism, totalitarianism). Perhaps this results from the fact that Poniž had at first, earlier in his career, judged poets from the perspective of a proponent of modernism and excellent interpreter of visual and concrete poetry. Poets that had formed the modernist canon are tautologically<sup>3</sup> turned into content and stylistic shorthand for other poets.<sup>4</sup> Sloppy essayistic or critical characterizations substitute for accurate ones in several places.<sup>5</sup> Poniž interprets sometimes illusive content with illustrations from (numerous) excerpted quotations and short texts in which one can recognize more clear-cut or even different meanings than those adduced,<sup>6</sup> and often the suggestive titles of texts and sections of books, erroneously called cycles, substitute for close reading. The descriptions of techniques and forms are more reliable. Essential innovations were the relaxing of classic verse patterns and stanza forms, violation of orthographical rules, word divisions, texts' visual layout, new phonetic-semantic correspondences, unique verse rhythms, adaptations of forms, reworking and parody of traditional forms and genres, prose poems, and strict structuring of cycles and books. Poniž shows how formal models diverge from tradition and are intentionally redeployed. It is unfortunate that exact observations on polyvalent images and play with syntactic logic are generally missing.

Poniž's personal approach is important in this book: he devotes little attention to previous literary historical systematization. He defines four tendencies in the

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<sup>3</sup> Strniša's *Škarje* (Scissors) are "composed of pure Strniša images" (PONIŽ 2001: 115); "Jesih's collection *Usta* (Lips) has 'Jesih's' humorous, biting, and sparkling puns; a 'Jesih-like leap' from seriousness to jest" (ibid.: 259).

<sup>4</sup> For example: "Kocbekova pesem" ("A Kocbekian poem" is said about Branko Hofman and Ervin Fritz), "zajčevski in šalamunovski svet reči" (a Zajcian and Šalamunian world of *things*)—on Miroslav Košuta), and "zajčevska jalova setev" (a Zajcian *infertile sowing*,"—about Pibernik).

<sup>5</sup> "A poem is only an impression of something that cannot enter the poem itself, and remains the shared consciousness of author and reader" (PONIŽ 2001: 143); "For Januš, writing poetry is showing, revealing, and divulging, like continuous play between the truth concealed in poetry and its revelation" (ibid.: 201).

<sup>6</sup> Šalamun's very concrete, autobiographical, and emotionally dynamic collection *Balada za Metko Kraševac* is described as containing "poems that are like a series of free associations affixed to 'semantic emptiness' and linguistic autonomy" (ibid.: 171).



central “flow” of contemporary Slovene lyrical poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s, ones that do not overlap with literary currents: 1. One tendency has humans overcoming their entrapment in mortality and ephemerality, discounting and rejecting them. The world becomes a correlate of language in its naked, empty, disconnected, and “unminted truth” (e.g., in Zajc, Taufer, Makarovič, and certain younger poets; a fresh impulse in the postmodern lyrics of Debeljak, Zupan, Šteger). 2. A second tendency stems from the realization that the world and humans are empty, and therefore poetic language can only indicate the vacancies, contours, shadows, and hollow resonances of nothingness and engage in liberated play (Šalamun’s direction, which in the 1970s becomes guiding and inspirational for many younger poets). 3. The third tendency attempts to discover and poeticize anew the magic of the word, seeking forgotten and hidden meanings, removal from the world as it is into a world that could be (e.g., Svetina, Jesih, Novak and younger poets). 4. The fourth unveils a poetic discourse to complement philosophy and aestheticizes the discourse (e.g., Andrej Medved, Vladimir Gajšek, Jure Detela, and Vladimir Memon) (PONIŽ 2001: 101). Generalizations like these, which partially replace the concept of “influence,” are justifiable if accompanied by careful reading of and abiding in the texts, and if we ignore the broader artistic context, disposing of existential background, programmatic self-interpretations and reflections, and integration of translated poetry and active acquisition of foreign poetics, while simultaneously rejecting parallels in literature, the visual arts, and music. In place of a governing web of contexts, discourses, and literary practices, virtually random configurations interact in an apparently isolated sphere. The greatest constraint on the unfettered realization of poetic being is the primarily (political) ideology, which is without a clearly defined place in the literary system. If lyrics are its antipode and alternative, a note is missing as to which poets it was possible to call forth to aid emancipation and regime change, and which poets’ creative careers helped form the bases for Slovene independence.

## 2 Collections of articles and monographs

A substitute for synthetic literary historical compendiums are collections of articles and studies first published as commentaries or conference proceedings. Irena Novak Popov’s *Sprehodi po slovenski poeziji* (Strolls through Slovene poetry 2003) contains eighteen articles in three chronologically arranged groups: the first analyzes thematic, semantic, and formal aspects of individual opuses (including of the contemporaries Kocbek and Kovič) or only key collections and poems (e.g., Štrniša’s *Želod*). On the micro-levels of metaphor, paradox, genre and sub-genre choices, the studies rise to aesthetic, philosophic, and spiritual considerations. In the second part, there are case studies that contain synthetic and typological overviews of overlooked and undervalued women poets, analyses of textual space and lyrical time, the evolution of visual imagination, questions of masking and identity, poetic responses to wars in the region, and the key topic of modernism: language poetically thematized. The last part presents the most stable genre, the sonnet, and its importance as the modern-



ists' (often reconfigured) form of choice, organization, and metaphoric innovation. The structural and semiotic analyses embark on a comprehensive text analysis and Geistesgeschichte approach which reveals narratives of continuity and metamorphosis in individual poets.

Boris A. Novak's *Zven in pomen* (Sound and meaning 2005) is a collection of articles on Slovene verse, rhythm, stanza forms, and phonetic features, which also addresses profound poetological, genre, and aesthetic questions (e.g., the relationship between language and reality, formal semantics). It begins with a fundamental model, Prešeren's wreath of sonnets and Romantic poetry, and then considers the watershed between formal verse and free verse (in Pregelj, Kosovel, and Kocbek); however, the largest part is devoted to contemporary poets, from Kovič and Zajc to Debeljak and Vidmar. The analyses of less studied poets (e.g., Andrej Brvar, Ivo Svetina, Berta Bojetu, and Josip Osti) are valuable. They offer comparative models, descriptions of forms and genres, and each poet's place on an imaginary continuum of modernism's rise and decline.

Matevž Kos's *Fragmenti o celoti* (Fragments of a whole 2007) is decidedly not about the history of poetry. Such a whole is no longer achievable, and what remains is a series of parts, the subjective literary critic's de-contextualized, self-substantiating, and unreliable position. Aware of the incompleteness of any exegesis, which can be replaced with equally legitimate alternatives, the author declines to supply definitive, informed readings. He sees the post-structuralist situation as skeptical of definitive formulations that drain poetic content of life. The same is true of period indicators, "terminological approximations" (e.g., avant-garde, modernism, postmodern literature, new intimism), of limited appeal. The story of the twentieth century stretches from Podbevšek and Kosovel in the 1920s, with an epilogue and reception through the present. Taufer, then Dekleva and Jesih, appear in the middle, and Zupan and a pleiad of young poets from the anthology *Mi se vrnemo zvečer* (We'll return in the evening) at the end of the century. The latter cannot be assigned a collective name because of their diverse poetics. Kos's open and innovative readings are accompanied by reconstructions of expansive parts of key social and literary contexts, enhancing the heuristic value of the findings. The readings' philosophic bases are more than maxims from the works of key thinkers (Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger); erudition is employed as a precise explicative means for understanding the Romantic, modern, and postmodern subject.

Literary history, with new theoretical underpinnings, survives in fragments in rarely published dissertations and M.A. theses. Darja Pavlič's *Funkcije podobja v poeziji K. Koviča, D. Zajca in G. Strniše* (The functions of imagery in the poetry of K. Kovič, D. Zajc, and G. Strniša 2003) is an example. Pavlič developed a model for considering metaphors in poetry on the basis of conceptual tools first applied to German poetry. Semantic innovation supplies a complex isotope that recreates a sphere that otherwise cannot be textualized. For the reader to apprehend it, he or she must draw on the work itself, other works by the author, contemporaneous and prior aesthetic and intellectual formulations, including from poetry in translation, and the iconographic codes of the cultural tradition. The images that are highlighted in the title are not only the dominant metaphors and metaphoric links,



but also symbols, related subordinate figures, and the literal context. Extended, absolute metaphor and referential anomaly with unusual expressive effects are characteristic of modern poetry. Pavlič inventively and effectively examined three key modernist poets according to essential imaging functions, such as textual (title metaphors, integrative metaphors and chains of metaphors), thematic (indicative, deep, and encoded content), and style (pathos, décor, description, fantasy, and reflectiveness).

Vita Žerjal Pavlin researched the poetic cycle as a qualitatively different, supra-poetic structure in the monograph *Lirski cikel v slovenski poeziji 19. in 20. stoletja* (The lyric cycle in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Slovene poetry 2008). The structure extends the borders of the textual domain, intertextually enriches poems' autonomous senses, and generates new semantic potential for the whole. She applied the criteria of textual cohesion, coherence, and verse and stanza forms to the cycle, as well as to "border cases," like multi-part poems and wreaths of sonnets. She analyzed older poets' representative examples and contemporaries who are attracted to cyclical forms: Zlobec, Pavček, Cundrič, and Novak to wreaths and cycles of sonnets, and Taufer in Strniša to the multi-part poem. Kovič, Makarovič, and Mokrin Pauer wrote short cycles, and Saša Vegri the most strictly structured book, a collection of a totality of arranged fragments entitled *Konstelacije* (Constellations). The cycle's thematic content is realized in paradigmatic (parallels, variations, mosaics) or syntagmatic (causal, dynamic, progressive, resume) links between units in the cycle. Paradigmatic structure is more characteristic of modernist cyclic compositions (Taufer, Zajc, Šalamun) because "it transfers the principle of montage onto a cyclic level" (ŽERJAL PAVLIN 2003: 185), conveying the multiplicity of meanings, diverging perspectives, non-hierarchic nature, and the lyrical subject's fluidity. Žerjal Pavlin sees the return to syntagmatically composed sonnet cycles and wreaths of sonnets in the mid-1980s as a sign of retreat from radical modernism.

Metka Lokar's monograph *Podobe neizrekljivega* (Images of the inexpressible 2010) is a history survey of visual poetry. Among the Slovene examples, she notes artists' (i.e., members of the OHO group, Zagoričnik, Aleš Kermauner, Hanžek, Geister, and Vojin Kovač-Chubby) acquaintance with European and world events, avid reception of foreign influences, and their adaptation to individual preferences and features of Slovene. The illustrations show the historical development of mixed multi-media forms that challenge traditional understandings of poetry, verse, the verbal sign, and language. Visual poetry is part of the profound spiritual and aesthetic shifts in the twentieth century. Its techniques foreground language's essence as a semiotic medium and increase the semantic role of space (i.e., the page or book), and tend to the abstract and intermedia, and to multi-media art. Poetry's changed nature alters the manner of presentation (in multi-author collections, journals, books, and exhibit space), as well as means of interpretation and evaluation. Relations between the arts are also changing, as is the relationship between traditional poetry and innovative, avant-garde art (that is non-mimetic, conceptual, exploratory, experimental, intellectual, concrete and objective, and supranational).



### 3 Interpretations

Slovene literary studies no longer number such well-rounded, genius historians who might manage the explosion of poetry publishing;<sup>7</sup> therefore, collective, thematic projects on a shared topic seem to be the optimal framework. The journal and publishing house Nova revija organized an influential, quality project with the series Interpretacije, which is devoted to selected artists. Project editor Niko Grafenauer categorized the goal as “literary criticism and theory that deals with thought and poetry,” “maximally comprehensive presentation of an opus,” and “qualitative judgments, which are unavoidable for forming a critical awareness of contemporary Slovene literature and essay writing” (from the dust cover). The series Interpretacije has treated the following poets: *Gregor Strniša* (1993), *Dane Zajc* (1995), *Jože Udovič* (1997), and *Kajetan Kovič* (2001). In Edvard Kocbek’s case, because of the heterogeneous materials, his social roles and situations, and his personal fate, the concept was broadened. The collection about him, entitled *Krogi navznoter, krogi navzven* (2004), was written by scholars from other humanities disciplines, with only six articles of thirty-three dedicated to his poetry, and most of them to the pre-WW II collection *Zemlja* (Earth).

A virtue of the series Interpretacije is its theoretical and methodological pluralism, and the way it elucidates a variety of writing, from memoir and biographic to verse forms. In addition to poetry, it includes children’s and young adult literature, poets’ drama and prose, and translations. The series helps explain the grotesque and mythic; imagery, metaphors, and paradox; nature, erotica, and the search for the absolute. The editors have published previously unknown biographic data, letters, and interviews that facilitate apprehension of poetic texts with multiple meanings. As Zajc wrote, “I see a very freighted connection between the poet’s poems and life” (ZAJC 1995: 15). As befits the concept in the title, there are few articles that situate works in a “narrative” on the basis of aesthetic tendencies and phenomena; there can be a focus on just a single poem by Strniša or Zajc, or a cycle or collection. There are relatively more observations on the temporal, developmental dimension in the interpretation of Udovič in Kovič.

Among the writers for the series are people who graduated from the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Ljubljana, the students and followers of Dušana Pirjevec’s thought. As critics, essayists and poets, many participate in Nova revija (Denis Poniž, Milan Dekleva, Ivo Svetina, Niko Grafenauer, Iztok Osojnik) or are professors and researchers (Marjana Kobe, Marjan Dolgan, Boris A. Novak, Vid Snoj, Vanesa Matajč, Tone Smolej, Darja Pavlič). There are also Slavists and people in Slovene studies (Drago Bajt, Marko Juvan, Marko Stabej, Milena Blažič, Igor Saksida, Irena Novak Popov, France Pibernik), poet coevals (Pavček, Taufer, Snoj), philosophers (Taras Kermauner, Tine Hribar, Vladimir Truhlar, Aleš Debeljak), dramatists and theater scholars (Malina Schmidt Snoj, Vinko Möderndorfer, Tomaž Toporišič), and translators (Janez Gradišnik, Janko Moder, Štefan Vevar). On occasion, foreign scholars have added a cosmopolitan di-

<sup>7</sup> In the last decade, more than a hundred collections of poems were published each year.



mension.<sup>8</sup> The collections have educational importance because of their structured bibliographies (e.g., by Martin Grum, Matjaž Hočevár, and Borut Osojnik), but because they lack references to scholarly literature and synopses, they are closer to (a philosophical) dialog with poetry.

#### 4 Selected and collected poems

Anthologies devoted to a single author and equipped with studies in the series *Kondor*, and reprints in the series *Klasiki Kondorja* have a very different mission, import, and implicit addressee. They mark a phase in the process of canonization: the selection of the most important of the acknowledged and confirmation of representative texts. At one time, they broadened pre-college students' horizons; today, university students of Slovene literature use them. Among contemporary poets, those who have been honored with a selection of works are Kovič (1992), Zlobec (2003), Menart (2009), Zajc (1984), Strniša (1989), Taufer (1994), Makarovič (1998), Šalamun (1993), Grafenauer (1996), Ervin Fritz (1999), Jesih (2001), Dekleva (2007), and Novak (2006). Reviewers (Aleksander Zorn, Peter Kolšek, Tea Štoka, Alenka Jovanovski), poets (Josip Osti), and literary historians (Matjaž Kmecl, Boris A. Novak, Matevž Kos, Vid Snoj) have written commentaries. They have discussed poets' works in terms of development, themes, formal features, and style, even when these are yet in motion and transformation. As a rule, they also draw on the socio-cultural context, and take into account essential existential facts and meta-poetic (reflexive) statements by poets. These comprehensive presentations integrate reception without explicitly evaluating the poets. Evaluations are unobtrusively present in personal affinities and connections (e.g., between Novak and Zajc), belonging to a generation (e.g., Kmecl and Menart, Kolšek, and Jesih), scholarly concerns (Štoka's as regards Grafenauer), admiration (e.g., Osti for Makarovič's ruthless confrontation with death and Zlobec's erotic metamorphoses), or a conviction about exceptional evolutionary significance (e.g., Kolšek on Strniša's, Kos on Taufer's and Dekleva's). The commentaries have great informational and explanatory reserves that can immediately be tested by reading the poetry oneself. The fact that the chapters on literary history in formation are important can be seen by the number of times they are cited in specialized articles and the attention they garner in later interpretations. The *Kondor* selections also indicate when any contemporary poet has been elevated to the Slovene Parnassus.

Since contemporary poets will not soon be published in the most elite editions of the classics, *Zbrana dela slovenskih pesnikov in pisateljev* (The collected works of Slovene poets and prose writers)—Truhlar, Kocbek, and Udovič have been exceptions—and since the earliest collections haven't been for sale for a long time, the enterprising publishing house *Študentska založba* undertook the collected poems of the classics of modernism. They began with those without whom contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Jackson, *O naših mitih proti strahu: Poezija Daneta Zajca*; Henry R. Cooper Jr. z bibliografskim geslom Kajetan Kovič iz Dictionary of Literary Biography, 181, *South Slavic Writers since World War II*, ed. Vasa D. Mihailovich, Detroit, 1997



poetry as it is would be inconceivable: Strniša (*Zbrane pesmi*, 2007), Zajc (*V belo*, 2008), Kovič (*Vse poti so*, 2009), Šalamun (*Kdaj*, 2010), Grafenauer (*Diham, da ne zaide zrak*, 2010), and Jesih (*Zbrane zbirke*, 2012). The poet and essayist Aleš Šteger does the lion's share of editorial work and writing commentaries. He provided a sophisticated colloquy on Strniša (convincingly establishing the meaning of the poet's cosmology, which departs in universal consciousness from anthropocentric rationalism), Zajc (whom he read from the standpoint of a negative theology, a horizon of the absolute, Derridaean polyphonic utterances, the shining of mystical light in darkness, and a shamanic calling), and the Sphinx-like, reticent, and serious Grafenauer (from the perspective of Rilke, Mallarmé, Celan, and the poet's autopoetic essays on inexpressible being, the ineffability of the absolute, his palimpsest and labyrinthine texture). In portraying Kovič, B. A. Novak underlined the symbolic techniques and loyalty to traditional verse and stanza forms in his poetic language, which functions naturally and in harmony with a general return to the tradition of pronounced skepticism towards apologies for free verse. A virtue of the commentaries are the ways they summarize and advance knowledge, reveal unnoticed dimensions by introducing new comparisons, and reset evaluative emphases. The largest book is on Šalamun. The selection is taken from forty collections, early texts not included in the first collection, and recent poems. A unique feature is the six (re-issued) recordings of Šalamun's poetry, three by Slovene and three by foreign speakers. Ivo Svetlina recollects the atmosphere surrounding the appearance of the poems in the periodical *Naši razgledi* and notes the subversive effect of the collection *Poker*, employing Pirjevec's maxim of the end of the 'Prešeren structure': "Šalamun... jolted the sleepy and rigid Slovene poesis, which transformed all the non-occurring and non-existent into occurring and existing" (SVETINA 2010: 912). Taras Kermauner questions the poet's faith (metaphysics with a Logos), nihilism (a non-essential code of substitutable signs), and personal identity as regards the paradoxes in the *Maske* collection. In the view of Šalamun's coeval, the art historian Tomaž Brejc, in the second edition of *Poker* (1989), the poet features elegantly dresses the shocking, employs mobility, speed, erudition, word purification, and metonymy; conveys the immediacy of life and speech; and juxtaposes imaginary and real freedom, which is a model for contemporary human survival. The external views are especially interesting—the testimony of translators, critics, and poets. The American poet Joshua Beckman, with no knowledge of Slovene, felt fortunate to enter the other's place and then, instead of witnessing history experienced the art of presence, "and presence is, in and of itself, the greatest affirmation of life" (BECKMAN 2010: 1970). The Macedonian poet Katica Kjulavkova summarizes the poetic features with the formulation: "evinced a strong will and power of presence in the poet's world/picture of the world here and now" (KJULAVKOVA 2010: 978). She explains mobility as the drive to creative difference, which can easily be situated in international systems of poetic values and function in them as recognizable identity with a strong individual stamp. The American critic Kevin Hart expresses a view different from the Slovenes'. In the poems of *Praznik* (Feast) and *Balada za Metko Kraševac* he sees variety, childlike enjoyment, poetic expansion of experience, a journey of discovery and expectation of the unforeseen, and a quest for discoveries that disorient our experiences.



## 5 Literary reviews

The current literary pulse registers in magazine and newspaper reviews, which cover the appearance of new poets and exciting collections from old friends, even as periodicals are dispensing with or cutting reviews. Reliable reviewers are frequently members of the same circle (magazine, publishing house) and generation as the authors of works under review. The most perspicacious and ambitious of them attempt the move from the current moment to the longer term by publishing series of reviews in book form, resisting the marginalization to which literary criticism is subjected as well. Those who have recently gathered their writings on poetry collections in book form are Tea Štoka, *Prevara ogledala* (The mirror's illusion 1994); Matevž Kos, *Kritike in refleksije* (Reviews and reflections 2000; Peter Košek, *Lepa točajka* (The pretty barmaid 2003); Urban Vovk, *V teku časa* (As time passes 2002), *Kruh zgodnjih let* (The bread of my early years 2006; and Brane Senegačnik, *Paralipomena poetica* (2004). Aside from *Prevara ogledala*, which came out with one of the first private publishing houses, and by its title emphatically signaled a shift to the postmodern, all of these were published by the Literary and artistic organization Literatura, whose series *Novi pristopi* specializes in literary essays and theory. The collections of reviews aid in surveying the luxurious landscape a literary historian cannot observe from a reflective distance and, given the distinctive voices, organize into a consistent system. Young critics review younger, unestablished authors who are part of a society in transition and art of the postmodern period. They are at home in the context of the altered sociological, economic, and technological factors at work in the literary system. Thus the reviewers employ not only philosophical, but also sociological discourse suited to “sense destroyed” in contemporary poetry. An observer of the 1990s, the critic Urban Vovk displays a realistic and elegiac intonation, in the end even a hymnic emotional openness, returning to direct life experiences and the reality of the world; revisiting content; dialogism and referentiality; a narrative tendency and literary polemical bent. The fact that reviewers cover more ground than literary history and representative anthologies is evident by the list of poets.<sup>9</sup> Poniž's seemingly thorough monograph included only six of them. The last decade would expand the list by another twenty authors who publish in magazines, have had at least two collections published with prestigious houses, have been nominated for or even received prizes, and have been included in recent (Slovene and translated) anthologies.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ciril Bergles, Matjaž Kocbek, Iztok Osojnik, Tone Škrjanec, Rade Krstić, Robert Titan, Brane Mozetič, Peter Semolič, Jure Potokar, Esad Babačić, Primož Repar, Vida Mokrin Pauer, Maja Vidmar, Alojz Ihan, Barbara Korun, Cvetka Lipuš, Brane Senegačnik, Marjan Strojman, Uroš Zupan, Primož Čučnik, Lucija Stupica, Gregor Podlogar, Miklavž Komelj.

<sup>10</sup> Vid Snoj, Matjaž Pikalo, Tomislav Vrečar, Peter Svetina, Gorazd Kocijančič, Cvetka Bevc, Ivan Dobnik, Marcello Potocco, Stanka Hrastelj, Gašper Malej, Jana Puterle, Alja Adam, Kristina Hočevar, Jure Jakob, Katja Plut, Andraž Polič, Barbara Pogačnik, Andrej Hočevar, Ana Pepelnik.



## 6 Anthologies

Anthologies supplement reviews and publicity of less and less socially relevant poetry.<sup>11</sup> They expand the canon and their commentaries offer important glimpses of the whole, even though they are not published by central, national houses. The most extensive is the anthology of twentieth-century poetry entitled *Nevihla sladkih rož* (A storm of sweet roses 2006). It has 103 poets and 371 texts, which the editor Peter Kolšek has set in two mega-categories: national and socially influenced poetry in the Prešeren tradition, and a second one, dominant today, of autonomous, subjective, existential, metaphysical and linguistically open structure in Josip Murn's style. Matevž Kos edited an anthology of young Slovene poetry from 1990 to 2003 entitled *Mi se vrnemo zvečer* (2004). It contains information and commentaries on nineteen authors. The anthology *Antologija slovenskih pesnic*, edited by Irena Novak Popov, is devoted to the most neglected and forgotten women poets, who remain on the periphery of literary history. In the second (1941–80) and third (1981–2000) volumes, she includes the representative achievements of 100 contemporary poets. The anthology of Slovene émigré poetry *Beseda čez ocean* (Words across the ocean 2002) fills the void caused by ideological censorship. France Pibernik selected, edited, and supplied information on twenty-five authors, furnishing substantive judgments of poets' fates abroad and their creative careers. A special topics anthology, of Slovene erotic poetry, is Alojzija Zupan Sosič's *V tebi se razraščam* (I flourish in you 2008). It is anchored in the present: "there was a real blossoming... after 1996," and "in the past two decades has become the axis of contemporary Slovene poetry" (ZUPAN SOSIČ 2008: 169). The theoretical model in the commentary furnishes a distinction between pornography and eroticized or erotic poetry. The determining factor is the manner of textualization: the kinds of lyrical situations, the set of erotic expressions, the structuring of anticipation and waning, and the intensity that tends to sensuality. An anthology of contemporary Slovene poets in Italy, *Rod Lepe Vide* (The tribe of Lepa Vida 2009) adds to an integrated picture of poetry today. David Bandelj made the selections, edited them, and wrote a commentary. The authors here are often excluded from the literary system because "very few scholars comprehensively deal with this... corpus of poetry" (BANDELJ 2009: 373). On the basis of Marija Pirjevec's typology, as fleshed out by Miran Košuta, Bandelj sees the works of the forty-two poets in tension between a native and universal orientation. They are existentially defined by space and border. Some of them are attached to the folk and literary tradition, while others' inventions of their own worlds help overcome painful branding by the past.

## 7 Portraits

Since the last dictionary of Slovene literature (*Slovenska književnost*) dates to 1995, the popular and scholarly survey *Sto slovenskih pesnikov* (One hundred

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<sup>11</sup> The social relevance of the discipline and its subject are also illustrated by the fact that only five of the fifty-nine presentations at the Ljubljana international symposium *Obdobja, on Contemporary Slovene Literature (1980–2010)*, were devoted to poetry.



Slovene poets 2004) is a welcome source for recent developments. Franc Zadavec and Igor Grdina present the poets in concise literary historical sketches. Vladimira Rejc's collection of portraits of Slovene writers (twenty of the forty-nine are poets), *Čarovnija pisanja* (Magical writings 2005) is another educational source. The portraits are derived from answers to ten questions put to the poets about creativity and their attitudes towards language; however, the original interview format is eliminated. Updated bibliographic and biographical data frame the portraits.

## 8 Textbooks

Pre-college and university faculty members in Slovene literature have expended a great deal of energy on compiling high-school textbooks for upper-class academic programs and four-year high schools. According to their academic plans, they study contemporary Slovene literary texts. Janko Kos and Matevž Kos present lyric poetry in the *Svet književnosti 4* (The world of literature 4, 2003) textbook. There are sixteen required and ten optional authors and a total of thirty-three of their poems. Jana Kvas and Irena Novak Popov included thirty-nine poets and 104 poems in *Branja 4* (Readings 4, 2003). In the second edition, the numbers had to be reduced to thirty-three poets and sixty-six texts. Darja Pavlič presented contemporary poetry with seventeen authors and twenty-seven texts in *Berilo 4 Umetnost besede* (Reader 4, Art of the word, 2010). In view of the dated, conservative, and unbalanced academic plan, which emphasizes poetry in Slovenia proper before 1970, the inclusion of Slovene minority and younger poets, as well as new poems by older authors, was a great achievement. The new textbooks and readers' virtue is not in their attested literary historical accounts, but as innovative pedagogical tools. Questions and recommendations for discussion, reflection, writing, and research facilitate students' active contact with poetry and enjoyment of careful reading. The quantity of required texts in all three (competing) readers is but a drop in the ocean of actual literary production.

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