

Marko Juvan

Ljubljana

MODERNIST AESTHETICS OF EMOTIONS AND LYRICAL DISCOURSE

The title of my presentation could strike one as pretentious because it promises to discuss issues that belong to what Paul van Tieghem once termed *littérature générale*. However, this topic will actually be tackled from the singular perspective of Slovenian literature, which is but one of the “small” literary fields in the world cultural system and located in the “in-between peripherality” of East-Central Europe (cf. Tötösy de Zepetnek 2002). Nevertheless, I am convinced that such an approach is legitimate, not only with regard to current methods of comparative literature, free from imperialist perspectives and nationalist resentment, but also if seen in the context of recent notions about modernism itself. I fully agree with the position represented, among others, by Susan Stanford Friedman (2007), who attempts to show modernism from a transnational and postcolonial point of view, from which its structure proves to be essentially different from notions about modernism that used to be canonized by its leading critics and theorists. Modernism is no longer regarded as an international phenomenon (an “international style”) whose dissemination could be explained according to the model of waves of innovation emanating from some Western metropolis (Paris, London, New York, Berlin, etc.) to peripheral zones, where they are subject to a belated imitation and appropriation. On the contrary, the transnational range of modernist poetics is grasped as a result of the paratactic operation of multiple centers, including the peripheral and border zones. These peripheral and border zones develop specific and singular literary discourses that are informed by metropolitan influences and respond to the global and local issues of modernity in their own, often syncretic way, through cultural transfer and hybridization of imports with local repertoires, literary tradition, potentialities of past artistic codes, and the specific constellation of domestic social discourse.

I am going to speak about Slovenian lyrical poetry of the 1970s and 1980s; specifically, about its particular current, which in Slovenian literary criticism was often connected to a

transition from high modernism to postmodernism. This vein of poetry differs from poetic idioms that have been present in this cultural space since World War Two. Compared to communist regimes in other parts of East-Central Europe, the modernization of the cultural sphere, in the sense of westernization, was tolerated in Slovenia (as a former republic within the “socialist” Yugoslav federation) after Tito’s 1948 split with Stalin, but only to certain limits, within which the ruling party could still retain control over the artistic and intellectual elites. As soon as the monopoly of the ruling party appeared to be threatened, various repressive measures were taken and political violence was demonstrated (e.g., a ban on literary journals and alternative theaters, legal persecution of dissidents, media campaigns against modernist trends, etc.). In the historical and political circumstances briefly outlined above, the poetic current I am speaking about distanced itself not only from a widely practiced recycling of post-romantic tradition (with its confessions, sentimentality, the imaginary of nature, social compassion, and retreat into intimacy), but also from literary trends that challenged this kind of traditionalism from the mid-1960s onwards. The first such trend, termed “dark modernism,” was largely existentialist poetry, which deconstructed traditional systems of legitimization such as Catholicism or nineteenth-century nationalism and at the same time subverted the collectivist imaginary of the postwar communism. It allegorically indicated dissident perspectives on society and exposed the poetic self to the unconscious and the dread of nothingness. The poetics of dark modernism took various shapes, from grotesque phantasmagorias expressed in a mythopoetic, post-expressionist, or surrealist manner, to an imagist montage of reality fragments or quotations from diverse cultural traditions, often backed by a pronounced irony and intellectual self-criticism. Around 1968, when even communist Slovenia, together with the other Yugoslav republics during the “liberal” interlude, was overwhelmed by transnational student movements, accompanied by alternative social, theoretical, and artistic practices (the radical left, “French theory,” hippies, the sexual revolution, rock and the underground, and experimental and intermedial avant-gardes), new poetic currents emerged in the writing of the postwar generation, such as neo-avant-garde concrete poetry, conceptualism, and a specific Slovenian modernist trend termed “ludism.” This movement was inspired by French theoretical notions of text as a free play of signifiers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the emancipatory processes taking hold in art and theory posed a serious threat to the official ideology and the communist regime, especially considering the fact that hedonism and

westernized consumerism also held sway in everyday life. Taken together, cultural radicalism and petty-bourgeois individualism were a far cry from communist principles and began to weaken the very foundations of its political power. The ruling party and its leader, Josip Broz Tito, thus reacted to this threat in a repressive manner; from 1972 onwards, literature was again subjected to severe control and restrictions in order to protect the political system from any kind of influential dissenting transgression. The period that followed the “liberal” interlude of the late 1960s and its ecstatic liberation of radical individualism and non-conformist emotionality was afterwards termed the “leaden seventies” in Yugoslavia. However, the Yugoslav communists did not completely suppress all modernism during this period; the decorative stamp of “socialist modernism,” emptied of its provocative, scandalous subtext, was even used to foster the image of pseudo-cosmopolitan progressiveness (in comparison with the Soviet bloc), whereas other modernist trends were tolerated if they were not seen as conveying some kind of a coded political critique or undesired emotions, values, and attitudes (cf. Šuvaković 2001).

The modernist poetic trend of interest here emerged from the conditions of the “leaden seventies.” Similar to neo-avant-garde ludism of the late 1960s, this poetry was formed through intensive interdiscursivity with the (post)structuralist theory of text and writing as proposed by Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, or Sollers. It also regarded the text as an open, inconclusive, and intertextual structure, in which meaning is disseminated across chains of signifiers. Poetic signs were also meant to be ordered by the immanent linguistic logic of tropes and anagrams. However, in contrast to ludism’s political use of the signifying play as a means of carnivalizing dominant social discourses and transgression of ideological order, textual referentiality was turned inwards here, its self-reflective gaze directed toward textuality, literariness, writing, and the “essence” of lyrical discourse itself. Irony, destruction, carnavalization, provocative grotesquery, moral transgression, desperate rage, ugly feelings, and other manifestations of repressed drives, which only a few years earlier could have been set free in the semiotic ecstasy of writing, almost disappeared from these texts. The most telling examples of the poetics I am speaking about are *Štukature* (Stucco Work, 1975) by Niko Grafenauer (b. 1940) and *Stihožitje* (A Still Life with Verses, 1977) by Boris A. Novak (b. 1953). Both authors continued to write in this style until the mid-1980s and influenced some younger authors such as Aleš Debeljak (b. 1961) with his 1985 *Imena*

smrti (The Names of Death). In their collections of poems, they produced a specific, singular, and hybridized style, which exemplifies one of the characteristic “irregularities” within literary processes in the peripheral, “small” literatures. Such literatures do not engage in extensive cultural production, reflection, and transfers, and so certain genre or stylistic matrices, after having been introduced, are not played out and their potentials or dead ends not thoroughly tested. Thus, on the one hand, Grafenauer and Novak undoubtedly wrote against the background of the (then) topical notions of open textuality and writing as linguistic, ludistic engendering of autonomous, non-mimetic poetic sequence. On the other hand, they hybridized this contemporary matrix with the reactivation of much older models, especially those of Mallarmé’s symbolism and the “dehumanized” vein of modernism, such as that of Gottfried Benn. In addition, Grafenauer and Novak put this compound poetics into the perspective of the Heideggerian understanding of language as the house of being and poetry as the privileged site where, in the decadent context of modernity, being still discloses itself (note: Heideggerian discourse deeply influenced Slovenian literature and criticism of the 1970s and 1980s).

It is now time, at last, to address the modernist aesthetics of emotions in lyrical discourse as represented by Grafenauer and Novak. In her comprehensive 2003 monograph *Kodierte Gefühle* (Coded Emotions), Simone Winko emphasizes that emotions retained an important role in German lyrical poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century, in spite of the widely accepted “modernist thesis” according to which modern, “dehumanized” poetry was supposed to reject “traditional” poetry by renouncing subjective confession, as well as representation, expression, and evoking of emotions. In the German and Central European *Moderne* (which should not be confused with the Anglo-American notion of modernism; cf. Mozejko 2007), the language of emotions was still regarded as a distinctive feature of lyrical discourse. However, what had really changed was the cultural and discursive coding of emotions and the codes for their poetic presentation, expression, and evocation. Winko mentions several ways of modernizing the lyrical representation of emotions in poetry by Dehmel, Hofmannstahl, George, Rilke, and others. I will mention only some of them: speaking about emotions, formerly held to be ugly (see also Ngai 2005), banal, and pathological (e.g. disgust, homoerotic love, necrophilia, envy); disrupting conventional links between the emotions and their experiential triggers (aesthetic pleasure at the dead body of

a beloved person); ambivalence and mixing disparate emotions (a love-hate relationship); exceeding or downgrading usual measures for appropriate expression of emotions (unbridled joy or understated sorrow); inventing new linguistic and stylistic means for textual encoding of emotions (supplanting the metaphorical code of nature and the four seasons with the imaginary of the big city); and deconstructing rhetorical conventions that linked each trope, figure, or verse form with a distinct emotional effect upon the readership. Winko does not pursue her meticulous explorations of emotional encoding further and does not consider dadaism, expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and other modernist currents. Although this prevents application of her explanations directly to my examples from the 1970s, it is evident that the poetic encoding of emotions in Grafenauer and Novak has something to do with symbolist and post-symbolist poetry discussed by Winko: in their poetry, too, emotions are presented diffusely, as from a distance; they are intertwined with memory and are artfully arranged in evocations of abstract beauty, seemingly cut off from live experience. The fact that both poets re-activated symbolist tradition and grafted its resources into the matrix of radical modernist, Tel-Quelian text theory (after all, *Tel Quel* itself was a reference to Valéry) could partly be explained as a result of a double translational transfer. Grafenauer and Novak, who were translators like many other prominent Slovenian postwar inventors of new poetic idioms, not only expanded the domestic literary repertoire with their translations of Trakl, Benn, Mallarmé, and Valéry, but also absorbed and transfigured the imported styles in their own creativity; thus the selection and reworking of the literary import helped Slovenian lyrical discourse find new resources and new expressive potentialities in imagery, composition, forms, thematics, or modality.

As already stated, in Slovenian lyrical poetry by Grafenauer, Novak, and Debeljak a particular feature of a hybridized modernist-symbolist poetics becomes prominent – direct pronouncements or declarations of emotions are, so to say, “censored.” Once adopted, every literary form, genre, and style enforces its own censorship; that is, conceptual filters that restrict and control the author’s handling of linguistic resources and potentials. Paradoxically, these very restrictions – the verse itself being the first of them – figure as sources of poeticity because they inflect writing upon itself, forcing it to work intensively on discourse in order to explore the available semiotic repositories. In this case as well – in which the presence of the lyrical self is erased due to the strictures mentioned above, and

the subjective “inwardness” is emptied out – the writing process has to be creative: cognitive, emotive, and modal traces of the lyrical ego are projected onto and dispersed across the linguistic surface through newly invented registers, tropes, and connotations. Grafenauer’s *Stucco Work* and Novak’s *A Still Life with Verses* thus evoke the existential structure and medium of writing. In Grafenauer’s and Novak’s texts, the fictional poetic self – which, with its confessional discourse, used to constitute the lyrical genre in the nineteenth century and persevered in many modernist currents through various modifications – mutates into a “zerological subject” (Kristeva 1969: 212; Kristeva’s Slovenian translations were published almost at the same time as Grafenauer and Novak wrote their sonnets). This kind of a-subjectivity seems to be constituted merely by discursive codes, pure and abstract gestures of speaking. Consequently, the “traditional,” post-Enlightenment literary language of emotions appears to be superseded by an abstract, pure beauty of tropes and textual surfaces, which testify to a significant cultural conversion of lyrical discourse: it no longer performs expressive and representational cultural functions, but, following the programmatic turn from *mimesis* to *poiesis* (at that time a prominent issue of Slovenian aesthetic theory), devotes its energy to a genuinely poetic, self-referential “aesthetic” realm. Through this move, the lyrical code of emotions becomes “aestheticized” precisely in the sense of Jakobsonian poetic function: the emotions presented serve neither the expression of the speaker nor the representation of the context, but are stylistically employed as a modal orchestration that helps focus attention on the working of the poetic speech itself, thus enabling both the author and reader to reflect on poetic world-making. This kind of “depersonalization” and aesthetization of modernist poetry, however, reintroduces emotionality through the back door – in the form of *Stimmung*, inscribed in the generic memory of lyrical poetry and evoking a feeling of loss.

This feeling could be explained by categories, through which Hugo Friedrich, in his *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (Structure of Modern Poetry), once interpreted existential uncertainty, destabilization of subject, and loss of transcendence in the conditions of socially differentiated, fragmented, urbanized, industrialized, and mercantiled modernity of Western capitalism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Friedrich’s notions of “dehumanization” or “empty transcendence” are pertinent to a possible interpretation of Grafenauer’s and Novak’s poems and their aesthetization of

emotions. This is all the more so, considering that Friedrich's monograph was published in Slovenian in 1972 and was the prime reference in discussing poetic modernism at the time when *Stucco Work* and *A Still Life with Verses* were written. Strange loops between literary theory and practice often also manifested themselves in other cases (e.g., the influence of poststructuralism on literary ludism). However, metaphysical interpretation, imported from Friedrich, would fall short of explaining the feeling of loss, the detached mood in which emotions lose their dynamic aspect (*movere*) to become an aesthetic arrangement of an abstract state of affairs or minute and diffuse shifts of memory. This very feeling has its correlate in factual experience, although literary emotions in these poems – either represented, expressed, or rhetorically performed – are apparently cut off from the contingencies of the living world and libidinal or social economies. The loss that is poetically evoked may be seen as a symptom of a frustration that writers had to cope with in the “leaden seventies,” when they were exposed to stronger political pressures, just after modernist literary discourse had succeeded in unleashing individualism and social criticism. The feeling of loss and retreat in aestheticism were, so to say, a farewell to the period when culture in the former Yugoslavia was for the last time so broadly open to Western cosmopolitanism and progressive thinking.

Works cited

- Alphen, Ernst van. “Modernism and Distraction.” *Modernism*. Vol. 1. Ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. 339–346.
- Benthien, Claudia, Anne Fleig, and Ingrid Kasten, eds. *Emotionalität: Zur Geschichte der Gefühle*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2000.
- Debeljak, Aleš. *Imena smrti* [The Names of Death]. Ljubljana: MK, 1985.
- Friedrich, Hugo. *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*. Revised and expanded edition. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968.
- Grafenauer, Niko. *Štukature* [Stucco Work]. Ljubljana: DZS, 1975.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Sémeiotiké*. Paris: Seuil, 1969.
- Možejko, Edward. “Tracing the Modernist Paradigm: Terminologies of Modernism.” *Modernism*. Vol. 1. Ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. 11–33.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005.
- Novak, Boris A. *Stihožitje* [A Still Life with Verses]. Ljubljana: DZS, 1977.
- Stanford Friedman, Susan. “Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading.” *Modernism*. Vol. 1. Ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. 34–52.
- Šuvaković, Miško. *Anatomija angelov: razprave o umetnosti in teoriji v Sloveniji po letu 1960*. [The Anatomy of Angels: Studies in Art and Theory in Slovenia after 1960]. Ljubljana: ZPS, 2001.

- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 2002. 1–32.
- Winko, Simone. *Kodierte Gefühle: Zu einer Poetik der Emotionen in lyrischen und poetologischen Texten um 1900*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2003.