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Jože Žohar: a Forgotten Slovenian Migrant Poetic Voice from 'Down Under'

Igor Maver

Abstract

The article discusses the verse written by Jože Žohar, the recently deceased and forgotten Slovenian poet migrant poet from Australia. The poet despite his not enormous poetic output shows a prodigious gift for poetic experimentation and tries to reconcile in himself the affiliation with the two "Homes", Slovenia and Australia, neither of which paradoxically seems to in his poetry qualify as such any more in his poetry.

Keywords: Slovenian migrant literature, Australia, Jože Žohar, diaspora

In memory of Jože Žohar (1945–2018)

In the late fall of 1994 I arrived at Sydney Central Station by train from Brisbane in Queensland, where I was doing research at the time. In the station I was supposed to meet Jože, who had an afternoon shift that day. I thus waited in the big lounge for Jože whom I had previously only met once before in Ljubljana and who promised to act as my *cicerone* during my stay and fellowship in Sydney. Of course, we were planning to discuss his poems and cultural life in the Sydney area as well. He was very late and I almost gave up, but the meeting and his kindness that evening en route to a hotel and the days afterwards made up for the wait. Through him I got to know many prominent Slovenians in Australia (among them the tireless cultural activist, editor, poet and consequently a good friend Pavla Gruden, 1921–2014) and this stay was the beginning of a long friendship, which also resulted in my writing several introductory studies to his poetry collections and the public reading and presentation with him of one of his collections at the Slovene Writers' Association in Ljubljana in 1995.

Born in 1945, Jože Žohar has been living in Australia since 1968, where he came as a very young man to try his luck as an economic migrant in search of a better life. He died in 2018 in a small town of Lithgow in the Blue Mountains, almost at the far outskirts of Sydney. He loved the Blue Mountains and found a new emotional and artistic home there after the Panonian Prekmurje plains of his childhood and adolescence he had left behind many decades before. As a contemporary Slovenian migrant poet (Maver 2010), Žohar experiments with the potential of the Slovenian language and constantly tries to expand the borders of his world and language by transcending traditional poetic aesthetics and through linguistic self-awareness. Žohar's verse written in Slovenian is characterized by linguistic experimentation using palindromes, alliterations, vocal colouring, puns, homonyms and ornamental adjectives, as well as lexical and syntactic play.

Contemporary Slovenian literary creativity is, despite the slow disappearance of the older generation of Slovenian migrants to this country under the Southern Cross, still much alive (Maver 2002). In fact, there has recently emerged fiction written in English by Draga Gelt (who published only very recently two books of poetry and fiction, *Utrinki/Starburst* and *Dreams of Love/Sanje o ljubezni* (Gelt 2018; 2016), Cilka Žagar (unpublished fiction manuscript *Lovers and Ratters*) and her new verse collection *Od tu do tja, nikjer doma/From Here to There, Nowhere at Home* (Žagar), poetry by Krissy Kneen in her collection *Eating my Grandmother: a Grief Cycle*, whose grandmother was Slovenian and who has herself become an awarded prominent mainstream Australian writer and who is trying to rediscover her Slovenian roots: she is going to be dealt with in the next issue of this journal (Kneen 2015). The truth is, however, that many new

migrants, mostly professionals and highly qualified people from Slovenia are currently trying to establish their homes there. Hopefully, they will at some stage of their translocation also find the time to reflect their new experience in words, literature or literary blogs that are today more trendy.

Jože Žohar could be described as a migrant poet from the Prekmurje region, for *genius loci* is of great importance in his verse: the Prekmurje region on the one hand (the plain and the hills of the Goričko region in Slovenia bordering with Hungary and Austria), and Australia (the arid bush) on the other. In all three collections of his poetry, an element which is present strongly is the specific geographical environment, which appears in a dual relation: on the one side the poet's native Prekmurje and Goričko, and on the other the Australian landscape. Jože Žohar published quite a few of his poems in the Slovenian press as well as the migrant press in Australia. But it was only in 1990 that his first collection of poems in the Slovenian language, *Aurora Australis*, appeared in Slovenia, which became an independent European country only in 1991 after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. In an interview Žohar made it clear that he did not approve of the division into a physical and a spiritual migration, for "a physically displaced Slovenian is at the same time also a spiritually displaced Slovenian." He chose exile primarily for social-economic and not for political reasons, unlike many of the Slovenian migrants who left immediately after the Second World War to go to Argentina, Canada, and also Australia.

Žohar's collection of verse *Aurora Australis* features the poetic cycle entitled "Apple Poems," written during a sleepless night in a motel in Orange in April of 1987. They transcend the typical migrant nostalgia and again reflect the poet's erotic relationship with his homeland, tinged with thoughts on death. The external flight is replaced, and thus balanced, by the withdrawal into an "inner exile" that remains laden with existential anguish: "We are drowning, drowning, oppressed and twisted, deafened by the howl inside [. . .]" (*Aurora Australis* 25). These poems feature unusual tropes, paradoxical comparisons and very private symbolism. An apple as the symbol of "Slovenianness" has turned into mere apple-skins, Australia having squeezed out all its juices of life. Elsewhere, only sour, sulphured wine remains, as in the poem "We Are Apple-Skins." Žohar's stream-of-consciousness technique enables him to make ample use of private hermetic symbols which are difficult to decode. "Apple Poems" also point to the multiple alienation of the speaker of the poems (geographical, personal, social.). The "black sister" which appears in some of the poems metaphorically stands for the night, death or a prostitute, with an Eros-Thanatos relationship firmly in place. The poet contends that there is no easy or relaxed erotic connection between man and woman, but rather a constant mutual self-denial and fear, a

search for something else, a fear of spiritual chaos and hallucinations caused by separation. Frequent sound effects and typography, not devoid of semantic significance, show the poet's postmodern *penchant*.

It all betrayed me.
Even the sun and the sky.
Through a blind pane the black sister
Stares black into my Eye....

APPLE-TREES MIGRATE with overripe faces
Into my dreams that are for me by the town of Orange.

THE APPLE WIND from the apple ships
Is breaking through the cracks of the tired windows.
The galleon oars are rowing into darkness.
Oh, Man, why are we so alien to each other,
Why is there no Sybilla, no words among us? [. . .]

WE ARE APPLE-SKINS and nothing can save us.
The black sister squeezes us black
Among the apples in the green press. (*Aurora Australis* 26)

The Eros-Thanatos relationship is clearly recognizable in the final stanzas of the twelve-poem cycle "Apple poems," where night, death, the poet's mistress, and by extension his homeland, all metaphorically merge into one:

SATISFY ME, oh Night! Make me
A statue, a beam, something
That knows no nightmares and peaceful dreams.
But you are growing pale, retreating from the room!
Far behind the mountains you take off your clothes,
The black robe, and you are white. You are hope.
You are faith. (*Aurora Australis* 27)

The second part of *Aurora Australis* in particular shows the poet's predilection for linguistic experimentation in the fields of Slovenian lexicon and syntax, which is difficult to render in English translation. He is, for example, fond of homonyms, synonyms, phonetic intensifications; he deftly uses onomatopoeia, occasionally adds alliterations, internal rhymes, assonance, interlocking and end-rhymes. The poetic cycle "Mourning Poems," is still tinged by the hue of sometimes pathetic migrant nostalgia. The speaker of these poems longs for a spiritual and physical *néant* and laments the fact that he shall forever try in vain to return home:

Only you shall never sleep
In these beds between the furrows,
Your own with your people.
You are too far. A disconnected joint.
In vain searching for the way back. (*Aurora Australis* 66)

As a migrant poet in Australia Jože Žohar finds himself in a double exile; as an emigrant from his native country and as an artist, thus by definition an outsider in society at large. His verse has nevertheless managed, metaphorically, to span two continents, Europe and Australia. He has found a striking balance between his memories of the old country, Slovenia, and the experiences in the new country, Australia, with an emphasis on the characteristic Australian landscape, this paramount Australian literary trope. In contrast to many other migrant poets, there is no place for pathetic, maudlin melancholy in *Aurora Australis*. The two elements causing schizoid displacement in his verse are geographical distance and the poet's past. Hence his constant departures and returns create an impression of the transitoriness of life:

Every time I come back, there are fewer warm hands,
Ready to be shaken.
And there are more and more of those
Who cannot recall me.
At least I know how I fade into nothingness [. . .]
And southerly wind blows
Over white bones. (*Aurora Australis* 40)

In his very first collection of poems, *Aurora Australis*, Jože Žohar states that he does not acknowledge the division between a "physical" and "spiritual" migration, since the two appear to him complementary, never appearing separately. He feels „dis-placed“ and never „trans-placed“, remaining a cultural hybrid, half Slovenian and half Australian, which in his case represents a sort of homelessness (see Maver 1992).

Žohar's second collection is called *Veku Bukev* (1995; *To the Crying of Beeches*), which can mean a chronological definition of his youth spent among the beeches but also crying after it; that is, an ode to a Proustian "time lost," time spent among the reeds, poplars and beeches. Geographical locale is again of prime importance in the book and it appears in the typical dichotomic relationship: the Prekmurje and the Australian bush country are constantly contrasted and juxtaposed. This second collection of the poet's verse represents his attempt to identify Australia as his new home; yet Žohar remains caught "in between" and sings to the Australian "harem of camels in the desert, tombstones under the eucalypt trees, the

waves broken on the shore, kangaroos, run away from bush fires" (*Veku Bukev* 29; my translation). Žohar revives alliterative verse, amply uses paronyms (words that are identical but have a different meaning in a changed context) and palindromes (that can be read forwards and backwards and may have the same or a different meaning), amasses numerous homonyms, synonyms and uses onomatopoeia. As in his first collection *Aurora Australis*, Žohar still remains set asunder in the pain between Eros and Thanatos, between the erotic experience of the homeland, Slovenia, and a wish for a physical and spiritual nothingness in the vicinity of death that can only bring "salvation." This dichotomy also accounts for the poet's ambivalent attitude towards his homeland, which on the one hand urges him to become erotically involved with it and also makes him suffer, triggering off a wish for death for abandoning it.

An element that is very apparent in Žohar's collection is a specific geographic environment, which again appears in a typically dichotomous relationship: on the one hand there is the poet's native Prekmurje and Goričko, the river Mura, and on the other the Australian desert landscape. They are being constantly juxtaposed in his verse. In his melancholy, the poet is constantly returning home and at the same time bidding farewell to it: he wants to be "one in the two, to be there and to be here," which he finds a special privilege that excites him (*Veku Bukev* 9). However, it is not that he thus finds himself in a sort of schizophrenic divided position, he who describes himself as "an excited galley-slave between Scyla and Charybdis"? (*Veku Bukev* 29). Žohar's displacement and geographic schizophrenia never become a self-centred, pathetic tearful lamentation and weeping. The poetic account of Žohar's migrant experience is clearly enough set into the Slovenian-Australian context, although it could represent any migrant or exilic experience.

The collection structurally consists of four cycles, each of which comprises several sections or units, which could only conditionally be called stanzas, for the poems are written in free verse, with occasional embracing and internal rhymes. Not only does he experiment with typography (for example, in the verse sections "a mar rama" and "mure erum"), sound colouring and ballad characteristics, but also tries to revive the old Germanic alliterative verse, which is an important novelty in contemporary Slovenian poetry. Žohar uses sophisticated paronyms (cognate words) and palindromes (see Eckler). His experimentation with words, the changing of individual letters in them, which completely changes the meaning, the poetic description of his stream-of-consciousness represent a significant development in contemporary Slovenian poetic expression. The surprising introduction of alliteration into contemporary Slovenian poetry is perhaps the result of Žohar's knowledge and attachment to the Anglo-Saxon, Germanic accentual-syllabic metrical system. The palindromic arrangement of letters and the search for new or similar meanings, lexical and syntactical experimentation, synonyms

and onomatopoeic sound colouring, places him among successful Slovenian verse experimenters.

In the first poetic cycle of the collection *Veku bukev* titled "Emigrants" Žohar asks himself about the motives of Slovenian migrants to go and live in Australia "by the muddy rivers," "in the snowy Mountains" or on the sugar cane plantations of Northern Queensland (*Veku Bukov* 6). In Žohar's descriptions Nature is completely indifferent to the fate and life of an individual, a migrant—"the beeches in the Panonian marshes do not care" (*Veku Bukov* 6). The poet is "an erring figure," the Prodigal Son who has to write his poems, odes to "the time of beeches that is no more," which turn out to be elegies (*Veku Bukov*). The last part of this artistically effective cycle is partly surrealistic and full of painful awareness of the approaching old age. The second cycle of the collection, "To the Time of Beeches," establishes Žohar's life paradox: "To grow there. To grow up here."

"I Am in Between, I Am in Between," the third cycle of the collection, is the longest one. The speaker suffers because he is split between the two countries, Slovenia and Australia, he is "in between," "a mixture, a conglomerate of both, the blood of the blood of generations, departed beyond their boundaries" (*Veku Bukov* 35). He is aware of his flight that has found expression in "crying" from "the time of beeches," which opens itself as a spiral and at the same time it closes and collapses within. The attitude of the poet towards his homeland is very telling: in his first collection the erotic relationship man-woman comes to the fore, while in *Veku bukev* it is complemented with the relationship ("old") baby-("ancient") mother.

The collection ends by the fourth cycle, "The Dry Shadow-time," which is not set in the Australian setting by coincidence. This is the environment where the poet now lives, "the kind second home, surrounded by the power of oceans" (*Veku Bukov* 44). The cycle is actually dedicated to Australia, which in his eyes is a dry, deserted and empty "stolen continent" (*Veku Bukov* 45). There is a biblical allusion to the saviour—"him who shun the grave" (*Veku Bukov* 45), who is to return "from the sky". But according to the poet, the saviour is not going to arrive there, "there will be no sky with clouds above the poor consumed by fire." The ironic label "Lucky country" refers to the description of a kind of hell, where the Australian Aborigines live. They are identified with the land, which represents for them "a bowl of memory" and is no hell to them (*Veku Bukov* 47). Žohar envies them, for in contrast to him, the migrant, they are on their own piece of land and they feel at one with it, with "the land into which they are cursed" (*Veku Bukov* 47). How to win over time and transience in the dead, dried-out country? This question, too, is posed by the poet himself and he answers it by describing a metaphysical search in a love act between two people, who "pant into the sky and the earth, who hold back, prolong the moment" (*Veku Bukov* 48), with which they would at least for a

moment experience this illusion. Just as the black Aborigine blows the memory of ancient times into his *didgeridoo*, the poet at the end of the poetic cycle cries out for darkness and water for the dried-out land. It should drink till it is drunk, which he himself also desires: to forget.

Žohar's most recent verse collection *Obiranje Limon* (2004; Lemon-picking) shows that he has remained true to his bold linguistic experimentation. As a migrant he constantly tests the borders of Slovenian poetic expression, and in this book for the first time he uses rhythmical prose, representing the dark inventory of the poet's life via the metaphors of lemon-picking in Australia. This rhythmical prose or poems in prose also represent some sort of reconciliation with the anguish of a migrant abroad and the significance of "homeland," reflected in "Wanderings" for an emigrant as "one of us, displaced, with home away from home. Jernej. Domen. The tenth child. And much more" (*Obiranje Limon* 49; my translation). Žohar intimately yet only partly accepts Australia as his new homeland, because as a migrant he remains constantly displaced (Maver 2004). He sees his life as an endless process of saying good-bye and himself as the prodigal son, who tries to find his peace but also finds poetic inspiration. In "Complaints, Conciliations" he writes:

Where you are now, there is June, when lemons and oranges become ripe, time when you leave all behind and everybody leaves you behind, because you want it like this for a change. For you know full well that among lemon-trees sensually rich poems happen too. Find yourself shelter among them. (*Obiranje Limon* 29; my translation)

The poet's collection of poems *Obiranje Limon* contains seven cycles or thematic clusters: "At Home! At Home! At Home! (The Two of Us)," "Symposion," "From Apple-tree Orchards," "Indian Fragments," "Lemon-picking," "Nameless," and "Word Anguishes."

"Lemon-picking" consists of lengthy poems in prose, and the cycle "Nameless" features puns and linguistic experimentation. Žohar's poems in rhythmical prose are a new form for him, where he shows his essential dividedness between the two "Homes" (the Australian one is in the Blue Mountains, Lithgow N.S.W., where he lived later in his life) in the collection "Lemon-picking":

From the Blue Mountains, when they dwell cold in silence or when they speak out in fire.
From the house which is the home of Home. From eucalypts,
magnolia. From fences and walls between wordless neighbours.
From new roots. Yes: from new roots. You feel: there is no more of you with
each new coming back. You bite into a ripe lemon,

Suck out its juice. The tongue pricks you. The tongue that is called [. . .].
You feel like crying. (*Obiranje Limon* 35; my translation)

The cycle titled “Indian Fragments” represents an important novelty in Žohar’s poetic opus, although certain references to Buddhism (or Hinduism in his most recent collection) can already be found in the collection *Veku Bukev*. In “Pilgrim-ages,” Man’s anguish at the realization of his own transience suddenly strikes the poet—a Man, a migrant, as Everyman and as a pilgrim through life—as less dense and pressing during his visits to India, for he seems to be able to find a way out of it in an after-life voyage and search for a new life after death:

Scented flames,
O, bright flames of cremation,
Anoint the body that through you
Offers itself to the gods.
There is the time of search and migration.
All the destinations and terminals are also the returns. (*Obiranje Limon* 18; my translation)

It is interesting that the speaker’s experience and thinking about life (abroad) ends with a certain projection into the future, into what is for him a more “neutral” locale and culture, India—not Slovenia and not Australia. India represents for him, physically and symbolically, “something in-between,” the phrase he uses to describe himself in a previous collection, a Slovenian migrant to Australia (“Pilgrim-ages,” “For Indira,” and “Vishnu”). Jože Žohar’s *Obiranje Limon* connects descriptions of Man’s existential anguish with questions of migration.

Contemporary theory of diasporic/migrant literature perceives Home as several locales, non-spatial transnational concept of location, i.e. being here and there at the same time, which is at the same time deeply embedded in the cultural memory of a migrant and their own specific personal biography (for more Goyal). Jože Žohar’s poetic heritage, after his untimely death in 2018, amply shows this transnational turn in an aesthetic(ized) manner. It is unfortunate that despite the richness of his language, unusual experimentation which shows his linguistic freedom and playfulness, his work has unfortunately remained practically unknown in mainstream Slovenian poetry to date. His literary opus, as well as that of other important migrant Slovenian authors, however, does feature on university syllabi in the English department of the University of Ljubljana and some other Slovenian literature university courses in Slovenia. Migrant literature was, is and will continue to be part of the national literary creativity tradition and collective consciousness and historical experience and should be taught on all the various levels of education, especially on the tertiary one. However, in contemporary

mainstream Australian literature ethnic subjects are increasingly not depicted as traditional immigrant characters constructing their diasporic identities, but as modern transnational subjects seeing especially urban space as both the alternative space and as a space defining the marginality of their cultural identity. This transnational identity within the context of Bill Ashcroft's concept of Australian transnation is an identity expressing the specificity of the plethora of cultural and ethnic identities of the contemporary generations in Australia.

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Igor Maver
University of Ljubljana
igor.maver@guest.arnes.si



Jože Žohar: pozabljen slovenski izseljenski pesniški glas od 'tam spodaj'

Članek obravnava poezijo Jožeta Žoharja, nedavno preminulega izseljenskega pesnika iz Avstralije. Pesnik kljub svoji ne ravno veliki pesniški produkciji kaže neverjeten talent za eksperimentiranje in skuša v svojem delu in v sebi samem pomiriti povezanost z obema 'domoma', Slovenijo in Avstralijo.

Ključne besede: slovenska izseljenska književnost, Avstralija, Jože Žohar, diaspora

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