

SELECTED AMERICAN AND SLOVENE CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE WORK OF EMILY DICKINSON

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson, deemed one of the greatest and most prolific American woman poets, published only a handful of poems during her lifetime. Since its posthumous discovery, however, her opus has aroused innumerable critical debates, which mainly fall into the following three categories: psycho-biographical, strictly analytical and feminist. On the contrary, Slovenes have still not yet fully discovered all Dickinson has to offer. In addition to providing a short overview of American criticism on Emily Dickinson, the author of this article attempts to suggest some potential reasons as to why this is so, largely by drawing a comparison with the Slovene woman poet Svetlana Makarovič, who bears a striking resemblance to Dickinson.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts. She studied at Amherst College and Amherst Academy, both of which affected the intellectual tone of the town, and at 16 she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where young women made active use of the years before entering into a marriage. Dickinson, however, opted not to walk down the aisle, although her relationships with men have never ceased to pique people's interest. What is more, her close affective ties with Susan Huntington Gilbert, her sister-in-law, have repeatedly been brought to attention by scholars and biographers. For a number of possible reasons – either because the then public was still reluctant to appreciate her unconventional poetry, or because she was discouraged by her would-be mentor, Thomas W. Higginson, who praised her “wholly original and profound insight into nature and life” (Higginson 417) but criticized her ‘ungrammatical’ forms – Dickinson never craved public recognition. After 1860, she gradually withdrew from the world, devoting all her time to poetry and her rose garden. She died in 1886.

While her relatives were for the most part aware she wrote poems, everyone was confounded by their quantity (1775); some of the poems were soon published by Mabel Loomis Todd and Th. W. Higginson (*Poems by Emily Dickinson*, 1890; *Poems: Second Series*, 1891; *Poems: Third Series*, 1896, Todd and Higginson), but it was not until 1955 that Thomas H. Johnson edited and published all of them (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Johnson 1955). In 1958, her rich private correspondence, the other aspect of her self-expression, was published (*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, eds.

Johnson and Ward 1958). In the past, correspondence was obviously essential for communication, but for Dickinson, who does not appear to have kept any other form of a personal record, this was also a way of developing skills to put her own sensibility into practice, thus blurring the line between a personal letter and a poem (Salska 8-9). Although her first letter to Higginson demonstrates excessive self-control and shrewdness (15), it is also incredibly personal and marks a start of their professional as well as amicable relationship. To put it differently, because she believed a poem is an intimate message, she concluded that her friendship with the critic would aptly replace professional acknowledgement.

Nineteenth-century Amherst was changing rapidly; with the Calvinistic belief in predestination inevitably leading to religious apathy and the Church failing to keep its influence, the Transcendental concept of self-reliance became more acceptable. Emily, the only Dickinson who did not join the Congregational Church, regularly attended sermons and was well-acquainted with the Bible. Despite her Puritan mentality (preoccupation with death, the belief in self-denial), she could also identify with Transcendental views on authority, self-reliance, individuality and intuition, and the absoluteness of the Soul. The rapid increase in the country's wealth after 1848 (the high tide of the Romantic Movement in Germany and France) was conducive to the production of literature; New England had a long literary tradition since institutions, like the church, the school and the local newspaper, were well-established there. The cultivation of poetry was an inevitable by-product of early 18th century literary education; nonetheless, a woman was not supposed to turn her literary engagements into a career – they were supposed to merely serve as a diversion.

Since Dickinson, who read several literary magazines of the period (e.g. *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Springfield Republican*), disagreed with the contemporary American literature of ideology and was unable to relate to it or the current social circumstances, she greatly admired the Romantic, Victorian and Metaphysical poets; she also found pleasure in works by Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Browne (*Religio Medici*, 1643). It was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), however, who applied two important aspects of European Romanticism (the cult of nature, the revival of the past) to American poetry, which developed its own distinctive style after the Civil War from 1865 to 1890. Some of the major American literary works published in the 1850s are: Emerson's essay "Representative Men" (1850), Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Whitman's seminal collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

1. American Critical Responses to Emily Dickinson's Poetry

At first, it was mostly the idiosyncratic Dickinson's style (e.g. punctuation, ambiguity, unusual syntactic structures) that stirred up severe criticism (e.g. *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, 1947). Having lost sight of the relationship between literature and life, a great number of the Southern critics (e.g. R. P. Blackmur and others) doggedly persisted in detailed research of her poetic technique (esp. language and imagery). After 1931, however, the attitude changed considerably and it

now seems that the analysis of Emily Dickinson's work is crucial to understand the late-19th- and the-early-20th-century American culture and literature. Gay Wilson Allen, for instance, regards her technique as a link between Emerson and the modern free verse movement; he claims her rhythm is "surprisingly original for the epigrammatic diction and thought" (Allen 179-80) and cautions against laying too much stress on 'the irregularities', sustaining that printed versions seldom correspond to Dickinson's drafts¹. Therefore, it hardly comes as a surprise that in some subsequent surveys (e.g. *American Literature: A Complete Survey*, 1962) Dickinson is treated as one of the major American authors of the late 19th-century literature:

She wrote a verse that, in its spirit and technique, belongs more to the 20th than to the 19th century [...] Emily Dickinson was a poetess, far in advance of her times. She contributed to American literature a verse that was unbounded by time or by fashion, a verse that was totally 'free', before the new generations of poets were to declare themselves in revolt against poetic standards of the past. (Smith 109-10)

In *The (Macmillan) Literature of the United States of America* (1988), she is regarded as a forerunner of Modernist poetry:

If by 'modern' is meant a historical period lasting from about 1910 to 1940, Emily Dickinson's withdrawal and her highly individual use of imagery, off-rhyme and unconventional syntax give a foretaste of modernist emphases on impersonality and language. (Walker 116)

Regardless of what has been said thus far, the true value of Dickinson's poems is still not estimated as can be proven by *The Literature of the United States* (1991): while she is recognized as "America's greatest woman poet" (Cunliffe 297), a forerunner of Modernism, Marcus Cunliffe frowns upon her "erratic prosody", "conflicting images" and "abnormal use of the verb"; for this reason, she is "[t]echnically a poor poet, [but] [...] does effective violence to vocabulary" (300).

It is safe to say that in Dickinson's case critics were, for many years (and sometimes still are), far more curious about her life than her work; as she has always been considered a private poet, it was thought that her poems could not be properly interpreted without taking her life into account. It is a common Romantic belief that literature is an expression of the author's individuality and personality, and a critic has to respond to it emotionally; this resulted in a great number of the so-called critical biographies in the early 20th century. To enumerate but two:

- In *Ancestor's Brocades* (1945), Millicent Todd Bingham claims that "[t]he objective factual account of the literary debut of Emily Dickinson is inseparable from the characters and interrelationships of the persons who were closest to it [...]" (Bingham xviii).

- In *This Was a Poet* (1938), George F. Whicher maintains that the analysis of Dickinson's private life would lead to the apprehension of her poetry because the bulk

¹ It is common knowledge that the editors have generally tried to 'correct the irregularities' of her verse and that her handwriting was not particularly legible.

of it was directed at a man she could not marry; the profound grief she suffered over that resulted in fragmentary, ambiguous and incoherent poems (Whicher 1957).

It is certain that particular elements in a work of art can be explained through the author's biography, personal perspective, social status, and name, which evoke certain expectations from the reader; nevertheless, when it comes to identifying the *poet* with the *speaker* of a poem it is essential to be cautious:

Personality is a legitimate interest because it is an incurable interest, but legitimate as a personal only; it will never give up the key to anyone's verse. [...] The effect, which is her poetry, would imply the whole complex of anterior fact, which was the social and religious structure of New England. (Tate 157)

[...]

The poet may hate his age; he may be an outcast [...]; but this world is always there as the background to what he has to say. It is the lens through which he brings nature to focus and control – the clarifying medium that concentrates his personal feeling. (165)

The 1960s brought about a shift in Emily Dickinson criticism. Charles R. Anderson published what is still considered to be one of the most noteworthy studies, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: A Stairway of Surprise* (1960); the part examining her conception of poetry is particularly intriguing:

Within each group the interrelations of her poems are such that they illuminate one another, the language forming a rich spectrum, the images and ideas radiating out from a central vision.

(Anderson xiii)

Anderson identifies the following distinctive features: (1) *wit* enabled her to achieve the modern artist's alienation from society (11); (2) *language* originated from the Bible (juxtaposition), Shakespeare, and the Metaphysical poets (the reader has to be actively involved in the aesthetic experience by studying the origins of key words), the language of Amherst (regional expressions are contrasted with scientific terminology in the same way modern doubts challenge the tradition and religion of Dickinson's ancestors)²; (3) *Circumference* denotes unlimited radiation from the *Center*, which is

² In *Recycling Language: Emily Dickinson's Religious Wordplay* (1992), Linda Munk draws attention to the manifold connotations of the few symbols we use:

Words are revived by a new relation between words – metaphor, displacement, paradox, wordplay, juxtaposition. [...] Dickinson turned her Calvinist vocabulary back on itself like a uroboros, the snake with its tail in its mouth. This study explores the nature of that transformation.

(Munk 83)

By discovering its etymological roots, the poetic significance of the word may be restored; the language of religion can be made secular again by giving it its pre-Christian meaning. According to Martin Bickman (qtd. in Munk 90), by enhancing Christian symbols with their powerful archetypal meanings Dickinson is able to convey her personal etymology of the Christian myth (e.g. # 1068). On the other hand, she repeatedly makes use of religious puns to question religious decorum; thus in "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" (# 324) bird songs overpower the pretentious tone of a sermon, which demonstrates that clergymen are uncalled for if one can hear the voice of God without mediators.

an inquiring spirit whose task is to explore the infinite universe; (4) *perception* discloses the external reality of the object but deprives one of its mental equivalent (Locke's philosophy of sensation: the primary qualities of an object are absolute, existing regardless of our perception, and determine its secondary qualities); Dickinson's attitude is modern: she can only know what she perceives, which suggests that the absoluteness of the object is nonexistent (80-92); (5) a keen interest in potential *cosmic anomalies*.

With the emergence of the New Criticism in the early 20th century (T. E. Hulme; T. S. Eliot: "Tradition and the Individual Talent", 1917), psychobiography was reduced to one of its methods. The so-called close reading, aimed at interpreting texts on the basis of the hermeneutic circle and words' connotations and denotations, does not call for any external information. Due to its unconventionality, Dickinson's poetry was once again exposed to severe criticism. The New Criticism paved the way for Jacques Derrida's philosophical theory of Deconstruction, which was also adopted by Paul de Man and partly Harold Bloom in the USA. A variety of subsequent interpretative models has attempted to discover the gist of literary works through their inner contradictions, which originate in antagonisms between the logic of the work and its rhetoric. In Dickinson's case this is perhaps best represented by Clark Griffith's *The Long Shadow* (Griffith 1964) and Alfred Gelpi's *The Mind of the Poet* (Gelpi 1965).

For the most part, *The Long Shadow* is a study of the poet's inner life while basic biographical data only account for certain aspects of her behaviour. The author's concern is more with the milieu (specifically the decline of Transcendentalism); he also insists that isolation was vital in order to liberate Dickinson's talent (Griffith 15). According to Griffith, Dickinson uses "an ironical aesthetic" (57): typically, she introduces a well-thought-out ambiguous image (its vagueness is reinforced by the dash), negates the initial interpretation, arouses mistrust and thus forces the reader to participate. These seemingly naïve child poems (e.g. # 520) are in fact 'unromantic': namely, the Ocean, which constantly seduces and harasses the innocent girl, leads one to believe that Nature is unpredictable, sly, and destructive of anything sacred to man; what at first seems to be innocence is just a disguise for the poet's disdain.

As to the problem of time and transition in Dickinson's work, Griffith's approach is somewhat more philosophical:

For the real problem of the momentous transition lies, precisely, in the metaphysical uncertainties which time and change are constantly occasioning. (87)

It seems as if the aim of change is to prevent the poet from understanding the world and finding stability in it (90). This is clearly related to her attitude to death, which is twofold (e.g. # 712): it can either cause aversion (when she empathizes with the living) or yearning (when she sees through the eyes of the dying).

On the subject of love poems, Griffith (182-83) is under impression that they do not mark Dickinson's literary peak, partly also because she eliminated any direct sexual experience by her self-imposed seclusion. In contrast, Alfred Gelpi (*Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*, 1965) believes that by becoming a voluntary recluse, she accomplished emotional and spiritual objectivity and independence (Gelpi 110):

So from within the tightening circle – the circle tightening around herself by choice and despite choice [...] – she negotiated with man, God, nature, and language to carry on the business of circumference. (175)

Emily Dickinson devoted more attention to the communication of feelings (Griffith 244-45); to avoid abstraction and sterility, the language she used needed to be concise and, above all, precise, which was later typical of the Symbolist poetry (245). In “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (# 280), for example, the funeral takes place exclusively in the poet’s mind and thus represents the decay of man’s inner world. Griffith compares the poem to Charles Baudelaire’s *Spleen*, Yeats’s “On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac” and Eliot’s “Gerontion”.

To sum up, according to Griffith and Gelpi, biography has two notable functions from the critic’s point of view: it may either clarify the artist’s motives to write (Dickinson’s themes suggest poetry helped her to ease the load of her personal anxieties) or enable one to distinguish between the artist’s private distress and the way it is manifested.

With the 1960s coming to an end, various schools of literary criticism emerged, feminist studies being one of them. In the 1970s some of the most prominent (American) feminists (e.g. Gilbert and Gubar) started dealing with Emily Dickinson and the question of the so-called ‘female aesthetics’ (the term ‘gynocritics’ also applies). Their premise is that any kind of writing is determined by the author’s gender; they examine every aspect of female creativity (history, styles, themes, genres, structures, and psychodynamics), which supposedly differs from the male creativity in four modes: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. The representative studies are by Sandra Gubar and Susan Gilbert, Paula Bennett, Camille Paglia, and Betsy Erkkila.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer in the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 1979) take Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter’s view when they claim that the 19th-century woman writers and poets (e.g. Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath) had both their own literature and culture (Gilbert and Gubar 16-17). Moreover, they defend a well-known Bloom’s standpoint that the so-called ‘strong poets’ (including Dickinson) define the originality of their work against the achievements of their poetic precursors; they rebel against being spoken to by dead men (Lodge 247):

[...] the dynamics of literary history arise from the artist’s ‘anxiety of influence’, his fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings. (Gilbert and Gubar 46)

In Dickinson’s case (and woman poetry in general) this is even more transparent since *she* can never become her *male* precursor; it was not only that she felt the “anxiety of authorship”, it was indeed a mental and physical torment she was enduring, a kind of anorexic state. The latter was associated with agoraphobia, the fear of being over-exposed in the literary market (578), which the then patriarchal authority had established control of. In contrast to her fellow woman writers, however, Dickinson

swore her unquestionable loyalty to poetry, which was predominantly a 'male' genre; yet the fact that her poetry was greatly influenced by women's fiction should not be ignored. Next, Gubar and Gilbert recognize the ambiguity concerning the relationship between the female 'I' and the male 'Other' (who can either be an adorable Apollo or a ruthless tyrant) as Dickinson's central enigma. The white she wore almost all her life itself represents several paradoxes as well: the energy of Romantic creativity on one hand and the loneliness it leads to on the other; the divine innocence and glory and the Victorian adoration of a woman's chastity contrasted with the frost of death, the weariness of winter and the infernal terror; by way of white election the poet chose to become an 'unconsecrated' nun, buried alive in her own society.

In her far-reaching study, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990), Camille Paglia is concerned with the role of gender and eroticism in nature as well as culture, on the subject of which she challenges some of the most extreme feminist theories (Paglia 1-3). With regards to Dickinson, Paglia argues that she wrote "dark, sexual songs of experience" (623), which are characteristic of late-phase Romanticism. The poet has two representational modes: the Sadean ("is the female Sade, and her poems are the prison dreams of a self-incarnated, sadomasochistic imaginalist") and Wordsworthian (usually known as sentimental), both of which are complementary and need to be recognized as such by critics (624). In her opinion, Dickinson's lurid metaphors belong to late-phase Renaissance and her lurid concretization is late-phase Romantic (629): "In her poetry, things become persons and persons things, and all press physically on each other in nature's brutal absolutism." (637) Paglia strongly believes Dickinson has always been underrated and she "still waits for her readers to know her" (673).

In the study *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (1990), Paula Bennett strives for the same aim, that is to say, to make the poet better known with her readership: firstly, Bennett is of an opinion that the boundaries Dickinson had set for herself won her freedom, and the erotic commitment to her sister-in-law was her key life experience since it is only in relationships with women she did not feel inferior (Bennett 154-60): "the struggle for sexual equality was not a battle Dickinson could win" (162). Secondly, she believes that the grammatical 'flaws' are actually a protest against traditional forms and that the multiple variants of individual poems are an essential part of the poetic process (to publish them one alternative would have to be decided upon, which would substantially impoverish their many-levelled meaning³). Betsy Erkkila (*The Wicked Sisters*, Erkkila 1992), however, assumes Dickinson refused to publish because she did not wish to comply with public taste or with the editors; she was convinced her poems were too exceptional to be ruined by the conventions of the period.

In conclusion, as elusive of criticism as Emily Dickinson is, the majority of American studies about her work are actually psychobiographies, and only during the last twenty years has the feminist approach prevailed.

³ In *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (1987) Christanne Miller says that in Dickinson's case the reader has to constantly put an effort in choosing an appropriate word to stabilize the poem, not to mention the fact that the choice has to be continually validated within the context of the poem (qtd. in Bennett 28).

2. Slovene Critical Responses to Emily Dickinson

Whereas an abundance of critical material on Dickinson exists in the USA and Britain, the Slovene situation is quite the reverse: it was not until the mid-1960s that her name began to gain serious attention, and only in the 1980s was a more thorough study conducted by Mart Ogen (a translator, essayist and poet). It is to his credit that at least a few of her poems were published in Slovene (*Emily Dickinson*, Ogen 1988). Even so, with the exception of Slovene literary experts, specialists in (American) poetry, and higher-level grammar-school students, who are familiar with at least one of her poems (# 1510), Dickinson's work remains yet to be discovered. But the case with Slovene woman poets has curiously stayed much the same, and the reasons could likely be of socio-political nature. Namely, in Slovenia and former Yugoslavia, these circumstances have never been favourable to a woman writer (as during Dickinson's lifetime), because the role as a mother and a housewife has been understood as inconsistent with that of an intellectual. Among Slovene woman poets, Svetlana Makarovič bears some striking similarities with Emily Dickinson in her attitude to the literary market and the reader. They also share unique and provocative poetics, which will be discussed later in the article.

Dickinson was virtually unknown in Slovenia prior to 1961 when she was briefly mentioned in the article by Alberto Moravia on contemporary American literature in the fortnightly *Naši razgledi*⁴; in 1966, a notice of Alfred Gelpi's *The Mind of the Poet* was given in the same periodical⁵; in 1968, Jolka Milić mentioned Emily Dickinson in connection to Pavle Zidar's prose work *Marija Magdalena*, the content of which is similar to the lifelong Dickinson's project of fighting "the average woman's life and marriage" (Milić 324).

I have previously noted that in Slovenia Emily Dickinson was not thoroughly studied until the 1980s⁶. In 1988, Mart Ogen published a collection of 96 poems in Slovene, together with a brief analysis and chronology of Dickinson's life and work. Ogen's attitude to this "samonikli, ostri in nadarjeni duh" ('original, penetrating and gifted mind'; Ogen 1987: 90), which helped to revolutionise poetic expression (rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, syntax), is not exactly ground-breaking. He maintains that her vocabulary is no more bizarre than that of Keats or Emerson; what is new, however, is her approach to language in a broader sense (Ogen 1988: 118). In view of this, he interprets words whose meanings have been revived and examines several other idiosyncrasies of individual poems: (1) Circumference (a borderline between life and death); (2) the archaic subjunctive and half-rhymes (which establish and stabilize the relationship between formal and informal language); (3) the dash (denotes a union of

⁴ Moravia, Alberto. "Nič pa amen." *Naši razgledi* 10. 14 (1961): 342.

⁵ "Mala kulturna panorama: Novitete o Emily Dickinson." *Naši razgledi* 15. 24 (1966): 512.

⁶ Interestingly enough, already in 1979 Vatroslav Grill, a Slovene emigrant to the USA, published a translation of six of his favourite poems by Dickinson (# 258, # 288, # 441, # 449, # 1322, # 1409,) in his memoirs *Med dvema svetovoma* (Ljubljana: MK, 1979. 512-17).

⁷ In the same year (1986) an article by Igor Maver was published: "Pesem (Emily Dickinson), ki se je zazrla vase." *Delo, Književni listi*: 10. 7. 1986: 9.

the idea and the individual experience and, at the same time, stands for her artistic effort to find a suitable expression); (4) hymn measure and religious poems (119-20); (5) analogies (always functional); and (6) death, her 'royal subject matter' (127).

After almost a decade, in *Orfejev spev* (Grafenauer 1998; *Orpheus Song*), the anthology of world poetry as selected by several Slovene poets, the Slovene readership was given another, perhaps crucial, opportunity to discover Emily Dickinson. Aleš Debeljak's choice (# 915) is based on those poets who bear witness to the universal core of an individual experience, and he justifies his decision by saying:

Namesto celotnega tradicionalnega kolektiva se nedoseženi sublimnosti torej lahko približa le pesniški vizionar, ki ceno za intimno modrost plačuje s socialno izolacijo, o kateri je – živeč vse svoje življenje stare device v puritanski družinski hiši v še bolj puritanskem Bostonu – Emily Dickinson srhljivo zgledno pričala na ravni danes bržkone že povsem nepredstavljivega biografskega izkustva. Ne bi bilo pretirano trditi, da je prisila zunanje askeze za Emily Dickinson pomenila prvi, četudi ne zadostni pogoj za graditev brezbrežnega mostu do intuitivno upesnjene absolutne vsenavzočnosti, 'ki veže to, kar vidimo / s Prizorom, ki ga ne —'.⁸

(Debeljak in *Orfejev spev* 535-36)

Ivo Svetina (# 290) expects a poet of the world to display not *mimesis* (imitation, reproduction), but outstanding poetic creativity, whilst the meaning of the 'world' has to be met in the sense of time and place. Moreover, such poetry inevitably addresses the question of 'the supreme Being' (Svetina in *Orfejev spev* 355). Dickinson, he concludes, definitely is such a poet:

[...] mrtva sestra hroščev, ki še vedno romajo na njen visoki grič, 'otok sredi trave oskrunjene', njen grob; je tisti glas, ki sredi maše mrtvega boga zakliče: "What once was 'Heaven' is 'Zenith' now!" in takó poezijo zasidra v 'Nadglavišču' in ji s tem podeli mesto samega Nébesa, kjer nikakršen malik ne prebiva, le Duh biva, ki kliče k sebi, vabi, zahteva!⁹

(359)

As for Komelj, he chooses Emily Dickinson (# 67) because she has the power to follow the dying 'into the place across the borderline between life and death' ("v prostor čez mejo med življenjem in smrtjo"); she does not, however, interfere with what only

⁸ The traditional collective subject is thus replaced by an individual poetic visionary, who is the only one to be able to come near the unattained sublime, yet who has to compensate for the intimate wisdom by enduring social isolation. On the level of a personal experience this was eerily exemplified by Emily Dickinson, a spinster who spent her entire life in the Puritan family house in even more Puritan Boston, which is quite inconceivable to modern man. It would not at all be an exaggeration to say that it was the compulsion of the external asceticism which initially (although not exclusively) led Emily Dickinson to build a pierless bridge to the absolute and intuitively portrayed omnipresence, who is 'Supporting what We see / Unto the Scene that We do not —'.

⁹ [...] the dead sister of beetles, which still make pilgrimage up her high hill, 'An Island in dishonored Grass —, her grave; by calling out in the middle of the dead god's mass: "What once was 'Heaven' is 'Zenith' now!" she anchors poetry in the 'Zenith' and entrusts it with the position of Heaven itself, where no deity resides, only the Spirit, who calls to him, invites, demands!

they can say but merely wants to be able to listen to them (Komelj in *Orfejev spev* 633). The anthology ends with short portrayals of the selected poets. The poet Uroš Zupan makes the following attempt to define the literary period Dickinson belongs in:

Za njeno poezijo bi bila verjetno ustrezna oznaka, da gre za globoko občutene intimne pesmi, ki so v veliki meri nagnjene k mistiki. Pisane so v zelo zgoščenih podobah, njihova pomenskost pa je večplastna. Emily Dickinson je predhodnica pesnikov 20. stoletja.¹⁰

(Zupan in *Orfejev spev* 679)

Putting aside the rather unimpressive Slovene contribution to Emily Dickinson criticism, it is nonetheless interesting to look at the points of resemblance between the great American poet and Svetlana Makarovič, a contemporary Slovene woman poet and writer. (i) They both keep away from the public eye, but at the same time occupy a pivotal position in their national literatures. (ii) In his introduction to Makarovič's collection of poems *Pelin žena*, the poet Niko Grafenauer (whose choice of terms – 'tragic', 'ironic', 'grotesque' – again reminds one of Dickinson) draws attention to the ambiguity of meanings in her poetry:

Gre torej za takšen tip poezije, ki je od vsega začetka usmerjen v izrazit lirizem, za katerega pa je značilno, da se ne more nikoli prevesiti v romanticistično samozadostnost, saj je vseskozi opredeljen s spletom tragičnih in ironičnih sestavin, ki pri priči razveljavijo vsakršno tovrstno težnjo, namesto tega pa vnašajo v besedila svojo groteskno razsežnost.¹¹

(iii) Svetlana Makarovič, too, is a 'brave writer'

[...], ki si je upala kljubovati monopolnim državnim institucijam, kakršne so bile npr. državne založbe (in v ta namen skupaj še z nekaterimi avtorji razglasila kulturni molk, ki se ga je nato edina dolga leta tudi dosledno držala) [...]¹² (Borovnik 83)

Perhaps her poetic stance is similar to Dickinson's, especially because in Slovenia, as during Dickinson's lifetime, poetry has always been within the male domain. Therefore, it is not unexpected that Makarovič feels her status to be far from equal to that of male fellow poets, although the quality of her work may not be any poorer:

V poplavi babje poezije skoraj izključno moških pesnikov, ki je preplavljala slovenski kulturni prostor takrat in ga še zdaj, je moja poezija izpadla nekako moško. Do takrat se je ženska poezija obravnavala v smislu

¹⁰ It would probably be best to depict her poetry as deeply felt, personal and much influenced by mysticism. Her poems are brimming with dense imagery and manifold meanings. Emily Dickinson is a precursor to twentieth-century poets.

¹¹ Makarovič, Svetlana. *Pelin žena*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1974.

It is the type of poetry unfailingly pointed into the direction of undisguised lyricism, which as a rule never results in the Romantic self-sufficiency owing to its tragic and ironic elements; the latter would instantly negate any such tendency by substituting it with their grotesque dimension.

¹² [...], who dared defy the monopolistic state institutions such as state-supported publishing houses (for this reason she and a few fellow-authors sparked off a protest against cultural politics, but she was the only one among them to stand her ground for many years to come) [...]

nežnejših pesnic, ki pišejo izpovedno poezijo o svojih erotičnih doživetjih, o svojih družinskih odnosih, spominih na mladost in tako naprej. Jaz sem to pač presegla in kot prva dama sem morala nositi tudi posledice. Nosim jih še danes, samo da sem zdaj na to že navajena.¹³

(Makarovič qtd. in Borovnik 88)

Let us briefly examine the position which Slovene woman writers have held in the society for generations. In *Pišejo ženske drugače?* (1995), Silvija Borovnik deals with the so-called 'women's literature' (i.e. literature written by women). In Slovenia such literature emerged as late as the 19th century (e.g. Josipina Turnograjska) and it was not until 1897 that the women's monthly literary paper *Slovenka* was published, stressing the need for equality between the sexes, better education for women and solidarity among them. In the coming years, the socio-political situation was extremely limiting for woman writers: for instance, when in 1947 Mila Kačič tried to publish her first collection of poems, she found that it was neither time or place for personal or confessional poetry¹⁴ (the same occurred to Ada Škerlj); even now, despite the many studies of her work, Kačič is not included in any Slovene anthology. What is thought-provoking, though, that at roughly the same time the collection of deeply personal poetry by four prominent male poets (*Pesmi štirih*, 1953) was published with tremendous commercial and critical success (of course, one may always argue that neither Kačič's nor Škerlj's poetry is of the same quality as that of their male contemporaries – nor of Makarovič's for that matter). (iv) Makarovič also mirrors Dickinson in that she does not want to renounce her poetic style for the sake of public acknowledgement; to take any other decision would mean commercialization. During the period 1983-1993, for example, she decided to publish privately for political reasons and

[i]z prepričanja, da njene individualistične ideje niso sprejemljive za 'široke ljudske množice' in da mora umetnik živeti sam kot najbolj skrajna manjšina, je izstopila tudi iz Društva slovenskih pisateljev.¹⁵ (84)

Not to mention the fact that she forbade her poems to be included in anthologies and textbooks:

Umetnino je treba zavarovati pred tem, da bi jo lahko vsak prijel v roke, da bi vsakdo vtaknil noter svoj nos in kar odločal o tem, ali je cena primerna ali ne, in celo o tem, ali jo bo kupil.¹⁶ (85)

¹³ In comparison to womanish poetry, which was (and still is) flooding the Slovene cultural scene at that time, and was written almost exclusively by men, my poetry struck one as somewhat masculine. Until then, female poets had been regarded as delicate women who wrote confessional poems on their erotic experiences, their family relationships, their childhood recollections, and so on. I went beyond that and, as the first lady to do so, I had to accept the consequences. I am still suffering, but then again, I have now grown to it.

¹⁴ This is also discussed in the author's graduation thesis *Osebnizpovedna lirika kot literarna kategorija* (Ljubljana: FF, Oddelek za primerjalno književnost in literarno teorijo, 2000).

¹⁵ [...] has resigned from Slovene Writers' Society because she does not find her individualistic ideas to be acceptable to 'the masses', and because she believes an artist, as the most extreme example of a minority, has to live alone.

¹⁶ A work of art should be protected from the possibility that anybody might hold it, stuck their nose in it, and comment about the in/appropriacy of its price, and even whether they will buy it or not.

In 2002 Makarovič published a very limited number of the collection *Samost* ('Solitude') at an exorbitant price, which she thought would guarantee that only the most devoted admirers of (her) poetry would buy it. Svetlana Makarovič is considered to be the leading Slovene writer, original, blunt, unorthodox and provocative, who refuses to comply with the popular literary style. (v) While Dickinson took delight in puzzling the reader with her etymological discoveries, Makarovič achieves the same effect by filling the pattern of the earlier folk poetry with modern existentialism and surrealistic imagination (87). (vi) Although Makarovič finds the division between 'male' and 'female' literature highly questionable, the fact remains that in her poetry she accentuates femininity (89) much the same as Dickinson, who spares no effort to propose female creativity as a legitimate alternative to the male's, as gender should not be of significance when acquiring spiritual experience is at issue. (vii) The first two Makarovič's poetry collections (*Somrak*, 1964, *Kresna noč*, 1968) exhibit Dickinsonian 'affection for the extraordinary' ("nagnjenje do drugačnega") or even 'love for the ugly and the forsaken' ("ljubezen do grdega in zavrženega") and fondness for those non-conforming female characters in Slovene mythology (e.g. 'desetnica', the tenth daughter, who has to leave home; the cuckoo) who win personal freedom by becoming social outcasts (90). (viii) Both Dickinson and Makarovič disprove of the doctrine of the established Church. They believe God is devious (e.g. Makarovič in "Preštevnanje", "Romanje"; Dickinson in # 476) and stand up to any system of dividing people in a society because they find the role of the woman in it unacceptable (100).

Ženska v poeziji Svetlane Makarovič pa ne premore le svojstvenega intelektualnega odnosa do sveta, v katerem živi, temveč je *nekonvencionalna tudi na erotičnem področju*. Le-ta zanjo ni nikakršen prostor vdanega in ponižnega pričakovanja, temveč pravica, ki ji pripada z enako samoumevno svobodo kot moškim.¹⁷ (99)

(ix) In addition, both poets opt for seclusion to secure the freedom of their mind. (x) Some further similarities can be observed in the personification of nature (e.g. Makarovič's "Gora" and Dickinson's # 258); in their views on time (e.g. Makarovič's "Ura" and Dickinson's # 322); the motifs (the snake, the grave, the rope); the way they title their poems with one nominal word (when considering the few poems Dickinson actually titled herself, e.g. "Snow Flakes," and Makarovič's "Sončnice"); the way they both use regional expressions, archaisms, obsolete words, neologisms and the language of science. The following example is taken from "Pot" (cf. Dickinson's # 916 or # 602):

[...] vi zviti, vi *presukani*
in za denar *prefukani*,
prefukani odspred, odzad,
naduto, *volhka* služinčad
[...]

(my emphasis, Makarovič 8)

¹⁷ *The woman in Svetlana Makarovič's poetry does not only have a unique intellectual view of the world she lives in, but is also unconventional in the area of eroticism, which she refuses to regard as obliging and humble anticipation; on the contrary, it is a right women can naturally and freely enjoy in the same way men do.*

One cannot but conclude that in the case of Slovene woman poets there is considerable imbalance about their wifely functions on one hand and their intellectual pursuits on the other, that is to say: "A woman who tried to reach higher [...] was sure to get cut down." (Bennett 152)

In sum, the superficial knowledge about the great American poet and the lack of interest Slovenes hold for her work must primarily be a result of the general atmosphere of repressing and undermining women's poetry; the fate which all world-class Slovene woman poets (e.g. Lili Novy, Neža Maurer, Mila Kačič etc.) have to degree met originates in the socio-political situation, which has only recently started to change. Svetlana Makarovič, painfully honest and straightforward, has indisputably made a valuable contribution towards the changed circumstances in which Slovene readers will be able to appreciate the work of Slovene as well as foreign woman poets.

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- The author's translations from Slovene in the footnotes are in italics for the sake of clarity.