

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY IN SLOVENIAN CRITICISM AND TRANSLATION: 1945 - 2005

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Abstract

The article presents the Slovenian reception of five major groups in American post-war poetry - the Formalists, the Confessionals, the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, and the New York School poets - as well as the reception of those prominent authors who cannot be classified in any of these groups. The analysis reveals which groups have attracted most interest of the Slovenian critics and translators, when was the peak of their reception, which methods of interpretation have been used by the Slovenian critics, and to what extent has their judgement about certain contemporary American authors gradually changed.

INTRODUCTION

This survey of the Slovenian reception of American poetry written after World War II takes into consideration all the relevant articles and publications about contemporary American poetry published in Slovenia between May 9th, 1945 and the end of June, 2005. In these six decades a great deal of Slovenian critical attention was devoted to different periods and genres of American literature, and a great number of American authors were translated into Slovenian. In the second half of the 20th century and the first years of the new millennium no other national literature attracted so much interest of both Slovenian scholars and readers, and probably no other literature has had so much influence on the contemporary Slovenian authors. The topic of this article, however, is limited only to the reception of those contemporary American poets whose work is not always familiar to the wider Slovenian public, but who nevertheless created a great deal of excitement, provoked vigorous debates, and proved very influential in Slovenian literary circles. The survey does not include those American poets who belonged to the main literary movements in the period between the two world wars and who continued to publish after 1945. Instead, it focuses only on the Slovenian response to the representatives of the major post-war movements and groups in American poetry - the Formalists, the Confessionals, the Beats, the New York School, and the Black Mountain poets, as well as to those poets who cannot be classified in any of these groups, but are nevertheless considered central figures in the development of American poetry in this period.

The survey will try to establish which American poetic movements and poets attracted the greatest interest of Slovenian critics and translators in this period, and when interest in a certain poetic movement reached its peak. Another point of interest will be the methods of interpretation used by Slovenian critics and the conclusions that they reached, which will enable a critical observation of how their judgement changed. In this respect it is important to know to what extent Slovenian interpreters considered the specific historical and cultural circumstances in American society after World War II, and how well they were acquainted with contemporaneous American cultural trends and aesthetic movements, as well as how much their judgement was influenced by the socio-historical and cultural circumstances in Slovenia. And finally, the survey will enable us to answer which chapters in post-war American poetry have still not been represented thoroughly enough in Slovenia, and which American poets from this period still have to be translated into Slovenian.

THE SLOVENIAN RECEPTION OF AMERICAN AUTONOMOUS POST-WAR POETRY: THE FORMALISTS AND THE CONFESSIONALS

Although the United States and Yugoslavia were allies during WWII, from which they both emerged as winners, the two countries took different political paths after the end of the war in May, 1945. Relations between the United States and Yugoslavia - and thus also Slovenia - in the first fifteen years after the war were mainly characterised by huge differences in their political, social and economic systems, which resulted in very poor communication in the cultural field. For the United States this was the beginning of a new era, in which it became a global economic and military superpower. To the rest of the world it presented itself as an economic miracle and the promoter of the ideals of the American style of capitalism, individualism and the free market. However, at the same time it also perceived a new threat in the spread of international socialism, and soon engaged in a struggle for global supremacy, or the Cold War, with the Soviet Union and its allies. On the other hand, Yugoslavia, under the leadership of President Tito and the Communist Party, at first followed the Soviet model of collectivism and a planned economy. Although Tito's alliance with Stalin ended in 1948 after a resolution of the ComInform, and Yugoslavia later developed its own model of socialism based on self-management, it was the United States with its apparent ideal of a free-market economy that was perceived as the major threat and the biggest enemy of the Yugoslav socialist model in the first fifteen years after the war.

The first Slovenian reports of contemporary American poetry and literature in general after the war reflected these political tensions. On March 3rd, 1949, the main Slovenian daily *Slovenski poročevalec* published an article "Književnost v ZDA" ('Literature in the USA'), which was marked by a hostile propagandistic tone and was, characteristically, unsigned. Most probably that meant that the author was aware of the controversial nature of its content. He did not refer to any specific group of American poets or writers, but alluded to them as a whole, accusing them of servitude

to reactionary capitalist ideals. "American authors would like to present themselves as independent servants of pure art. But in reality their books are put at the direct service of the interests of reactionaries and imperialists." (*Slovenski poročevalec*, 1949, 3) From his point of view, the only exceptions to this reactionary doctrine were Howard Fast, Albert Maltz, Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis.

Although in the following years such an extreme propagandistic tone was avoided in articles about contemporary American literature, caution and reserve due to unfavourable political circumstances were still noticeable. In his article "Nekaj misli o sodobni ameriški književnosti" ('Some Thoughts on Contemporary American Literature'), published on September 9th, 1951, in the newspaper *Primorski dnevnik*, Vlado Habjan stressed the importance of younger American authors who wrote so-called proletarian literature. Regrettably, he mentioned only a few writers, and did not refer to American poets at all. Peter Kosem, Jože Dolenc and N. Smith, on the other hand, preferred to focus on the financial success of American authors. In the articles "Pregled ameriškega knjižnega trga v letu 1952" ('A Survey of the American Book Market in 1953') and "Kaj bero Američani?" ('What Do Americans Read?'), published in *Novi svet* in 1953, Kosem presented some literary bestsellers of the previous year; Dolenc did the same in his article "Z ameriškega knjižnega trga" ('From the American Book-Market'), which was published a year later in the magazine *Knjiga*. As can be deduced from the title "Poplava cenenih broširanih knjig na časopisnem papirju" ('A Flood of Cheap Paperback Editions'), N. Smith presented the new economic medium through which literature could become more accessible to the broader public in his report published in *Primorski dnevnik* in 1954.

The only exception who tried to present American literature, including poetry, in more objective terms in that period was Janez Gradišnik. Between 1950 and 1955 he published a few articles in the magazines *Novi svet* and *Nova obzorja* (Gradišnik, 1950-1955), which represented an isolated attempt to evaluate the contemporary American writers, dramatists and poets purely on the basis of aesthetic criteria, without any political judgement. His view of American poetry of the time was slightly conservative, however, since he claimed that the most important publications of the period were reprints of authors who had won recognition before WWII, such as Wallace Stevens, Carl Sandburg, W. C. Williams, John Crow Ransom, and e. e. cummings. He also complained that the American literary public had become apathetic and did not understand contemporary poetry.

In the 1960s and 1970s the political climate changed and Yugoslavia, including Slovenia, although still under socialist rule, opened itself up to the West. Suddenly it became possible to write more freely about the new western cultural and artistic movements, and consequently the number of articles about contemporary American literature, including poetry, significantly increased. This was the period when the magazines *Perspektive*, *Sodobnost*, *Tribuna* and others reported extensively on the poetry of the Beats, the Black Mountain Poets and the New York School, and published a number of Slovenian translations of their poems. However, for a long time nothing was written about the representatives of the two major movements of American poetry in the first two decades after the war: the Formalists and the Confessionals.

It was only in the mid-1980s that Slovenians received the first information about their work.

Both the Formalists and the Confessionals regarded poetry principally as an autonomous object whose value was purely aesthetic, rather than understanding it as a means of communication. In this respect they can be categorised as subgroups of the larger modernist movement, which entered into its darker phase after the experience of World War II and the beginning of the atomic era. The Formalists tried to create a new version of American myths, and employed various technical devices and strategies for this purpose: from laconic, realistic description to parody and parabolic fantasy. Elizabeth Bishop, for example, was renowned for the dreamlike surrealist atmosphere of her poems, which she created through the description of seemingly banal everyday details; while Richard Wilbur believed that the purpose of poetry was to present and connect the discrepancies of the modern world, while rearranging them in an accomplished poetic form. Other important names of the Formalist movement were Louis Simpson, Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, W. S. Merwin, Stanley Kunitz, Howard Nemerov, Reed Whittemore, Weldon Kees, Donald Justice, Edgar Bowers, X. J. Kennedy and Anthony Hecht.

Slovenians first became acquainted with American Formalist poetry in 1984 and 1985, when Veno Taufer published his translations of eight poems by Stanley Kunitz in the progressive cultural magazine *Nova revija* and the newspaper *Dnevnik* (Kunitz, 1984, 1985). A more thorough presentation of Formalist poetry followed in 1986 with the publication of *Antologija ameriške poezije 20. stoletja* ('Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry'). The editor, Miha Avanzo, included seven Formalist poets in it: Stanley Kunitz, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, Howard Nemerov, Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice and W. S. Merwin. The translations of their poems were provided by different authors, and each poet was presented with a brief biographical note. Unfortunately, the inclusion of these authors in Avanzo's anthology did not arouse much interest in American Formalist poetry in Slovenia. The only other occasion when we could read of their achievements was in 1992, when Jure Potokar included one poem by W. S. Merwin and one by Richard Wilbur in a selection published under the heading "Sodobna ameriška poezija in narava" ('Contemporary American Poetry and Nature') in the 126th-127th issue of *Nova revija*.

However, the Slovenian reception of the Confessional poets, who in the 1950s and 1960s shifted the interest of the American literary public from social themes to personal and even pre-personal mythology, was more intense. The most important names of this movement were Theodore Roethke, who found the main subject of his poetry in his own history, pre-history and the archetypal subconscious, Robert Lowell, who obsessively tried to transform the story of his life into art, and Sylvia Plath, who rewrote her neurotic personal experience into a larger myth, with psychological and historical allusions. The movement included such authors as John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Robert Kelly, Galway Kinnel, James Wright, and to some extent Richard Hugo, John Logan, and W. D. Snodgrass.

The first translator to draw the attention of the Slovenian public to the Confessionals was Veno Taufer. In 1984 he published his translations of Sylvia Plath's dramatic poem *Tri ženske* ('Three Women') in the magazine *Dialogi* (Plath, 1984), and

seven of Theodore Roethke's poems in the magazine *Problemi* (Roethke, 1984). Two years later, several poems by Sylvia Plath, translated by Ifigenija Zagoričnik, Miha Avanzo and Alenka Zor-Simoniti, were published in *Nova revija* and in the rather conservative magazine *Sodobnost* (Plath, 1986). In the same year, Avanzo's 'Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry' came out, which included seven Confessional poets: Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Robert Bly, James Wright, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Among these, the editor gave most space to Plath and Lowell, which reveals that he regarded them as the most important authors of the group, although each of the seven poets was duly presented in biographical notes.

The most important event in the Slovenian reception of American Confessional poetry occurred in 1992, when a translation of Sylvia Plath's selected poems was published in *Lirika*, the prestigious edition of *Mladinska knjiga* publishing house. (Plath, 1992) The translator was again Miha Avanzo, who also contributed a brief informative essay about the poet's work and a few notes about her life. He used the poet's life story as a framework for his essay "Ariel ali božja levinja - Sylvia Plath kot pesnica roba" ('Ariel or God's Lioness - Sylvia Plath as a Poet of the Edge'); however, his method of research was not strictly positivistic and biographical. Instead, he focused on the issue of the poet's repressed eroticism, and explained her poetic development through its liberation. He also considered the historical and aesthetic context of the Confessional movement, and interpreted its achievements as an attempt "to reject the Eliot-like assessment and evaluation of the world as objective, and to put the author again at the centre of his or her creative focus." (Avanzo, 1992, 93)

Another contribution to the Slovenian reception of American Confessional poetry was provided by Veno Taufer, who in 1998 presented the poet John Berryman in the 83rd-84th issue of one of the main Slovenian cultural magazines of the time *Literatura* with translations of several of his *Dream Songs*. More important for our literary criticism, however, was the essay "Robert Lowell, pesnik okrutne izpovednosti" ('Robert Lowell, the Poet of Merciless Confession'), published by Boris A. Novak in the first issue of the student magazine *Preplet* in 1999. Novak saw the origins of the Confessional movement in the traumatic experience of World War II and in the reaction to the false, *petit bourgeois* values of American society. According to him, the main characteristic of this movement was "the tendency of a number of American poets in the 1940s and 1950s to write about their unique personal existential experience." (Novak, 1999, 13) Within this historical framework, he then focused on the more specific formal and thematic content of several of Lowell's poems, which he combined with an analysis of the most important events in poet's life.

A survey of the Slovenian reception of American autonomous post-war poetry reveals that, although relatively late, our literary critics and translators nevertheless demonstrated some interest in Formalist and Confessional poetry. If it is understandable that, due to political reasons and lack of information, it was not possible to write about it at the time when it won recognition in the USA, it comes as a surprise that it did not attract more attention at the peak of Slovenian modernism in the 1960s and 1970s, when poets like Dane Zajc and Gregor Strniša became popular. At first sight it seems that American Formalists and Confessionals and Slovenian modernists had many common characteristics, since they all wrote autonomous poetry, full of archetypal

and mythological references. Yet it has to be presumed that the aesthetic differences between them were too great. First of all, the American Confessionals liked to use the first person voice, which the Slovenian modernists programmatically avoided, considering it a sentimental remnant of Romanticism. And second, Slovenian modernism was much darker and desperate in its content, while the American poets, even though only implicitly, often preserved some features of their zealous Protestant tradition. However, with the spread of Slovenian post-modernism in the 1980s and 1990s, which propagated openness to different traditions and aesthetics, the right conditions for the reception of American Formalist and Confessional poets were finally met. Their achievements were presented largely due to the enthusiasm of a few individuals like Miha Avanzo, Veno Taufer, and Boris A. Novak, and therefore many important American poets from the first two decades after the war have still not received a Slovenian edition of their poems. Among them are such names as Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, and Theodore Roethke.

THE SLOVENIAN RECEPTION OF AMERICAN POST-WAR POETRY OF OPEN FORM: THE BEATS, THE BLACK MOUNTAIN POETS, THE NEW YORK SCHOOL

The 1960s and 1970s was a much more turbulent period in American society than the first fifteen years after the war. At the beginning, with the election of the young John F. Kennedy as president and the rapid spread of the Civil Rights movement, it seemed that a new era, full of optimism and imminent social change, was beginning. However, with the assassination of Kennedy in 1963, and Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, it soon turned out that social reality was much harsher. The Vietnam War against the alleged communist threat became the central political issue of the period, and as a response to all the political and social injustices, a vigorous counter-culture developed. The late 1960s and the early 1970s witnessed the formation of many new political and social groups and movements, and some of them, e.g. the ecological and the feminist movements, which were alternative at first, were later institutionalised and became important elements of American civil society.

The major poetic groups of the early 1960s, the Beats, the Black Mountain poets and the New York School, propagated a new kind of poetry, which reflected the dynamic changes in contemporary society. They rejected the autonomous poetics of the Formalists and the Confessionals, and sought new means of expression in the poetics of open form, which focused on communication and tried to incorporate different linguistic levels and idioms of post-industrial culture: the hustle and bustle of the urban environment, colloquial language and slang, and also the language of politics, philosophy, religion, movies, and pop-cultural phenomena. Even though these poets rebelled against the work of their immediate predecessors, they still kept in touch with tradition, drawing inspiration for their creations from the poetic techniques used by the European avant-garde poets of the early 20th century and to a large extent also from the poetry of Walt Whitman.

The first group to attract wider public attention both in the States and internationally were the Beats. Allen Ginsberg wrote poetry in the tone of a prophet of modern America, and organised the rhythm of his long visionary lines according to his breath, similarly to the way a jazz musician blows a musical phrase. Another characteristic of his poetry, which strongly influenced other Beat poets, was composition through a strategy of association and juxtaposition. Lawrence Ferlinghetti also tried to liberate poetry from academic constrictions by creating and performing so-called street poetry. Similar strategies were employed by Gregory Corso, who tried to present the fluidity of the real world in his poems, and Gary Snyder, who was strongly influenced by Zen Buddhism. The broader Beat circle included William Everson, Jack Spicer, Philip Lamantia, Philip Whalen, Michael McClure, and Charles Bukowski.

In the Slovenian reception of Beat poetry, two intensive phases can be detected. The first was in the 1960s, when the climate of liberalisation, social change and student revolt also emerged in Slovenia. Many young Slovenian protesters found expression for their discontent in the lines of Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and other Beat poets; moreover their work also proved to be very influential in the formation of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde movement led by Tomaž Šalamun and Franci Zagoričnik. The first reports of the Beats, however, came from two literary critics: Darka Kos and Ljudmila Šemrl. Already in 1960, in the first issue of the new magazine *Perspektive*, Darka Kos published an article "Ameriška beat-generation" ('The American Beat Generation'), in which she presented the main Beat authors and their nonconformist poetics. Only a year later, a similar presentation of the Beats was published by Ljudmila Šemrl in *Naša sodobnost* under the title "Beat-generation - moralni anarhisti" ('The Beat Generation - Moral Anarchists'). Although these two articles were important, since they presented the achievements of a new generation of American poets to Slovenians for the first time, they were mainly informative, and marred by prejudices. Kos and Šemrl did not base their judgements of the Beat authors on aesthetic criteria, but proceeded from rather conservative ethical principles, accusing them of being moral anarchists and destroyers of American tradition and mythology.

Due to two poets, critics and translators, Miro Boštjančič, better known under the pseudonym Mart Ogen, and Niko Grafenauer, the first half of the 1960s was the most prolific period in the Slovenian reception of Beat poetry. As young poetry enthusiasts, they both wanted to expand Slovenian knowledge of contemporary poetic movements, but they proceeded from differing aesthetic standpoints. As a believer in an autonomous and hermetic modernist tradition, Niko Grafenauer showed some restraint in his reflections on the Beats, which were published along with his translations of Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti in a student newspaper *Tribuna*, the magazine *Perspektive* and the fortnightly review for intellectuals *Naši razgledi* (Ginsberg, 1962, 1964, Ferlinghetti, 1962, 1963), denoting them as nihilists who rejected religion and law. Mart Ogen, on the other hand, was a zealous supporter of the Beat movement, and defended the Beats as fighters against the corruption and decadence of modern society. In *Perspektive* and *Sodobnost* he published a number of translations of Jack Kerouac, Stuart Z. Perkoff, and Allen Ginsberg (Kerouac, 1961/62, 1963/64, Perkoff 1961/62, Ginsberg, 1964, 1965). In 1965 he also published an essay "Beat generacija in njeno mesto v ameriški sednajstosti in literaturi" ('The Beat

Generation and Its Role in American Culture and Literature'), in which he presented the main characteristics, development and influence of Beat poetry in American society, and complained about the inadequate reception of the Beats and the lack of understanding of their poetry in Slovenia. He was especially reproachful towards Niko Grafenauer, who he said had unjustly diminished the value of Ginsberg's poetry and made numerous errors in his translations.

With the spread of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde movement, experimental poetry became more familiar to Slovenian readers, and the critical response to Beat poetry became more impartial and less prejudiced. In the 1970 *Mohorjeva založba Calendar*, Peter Komac published an essay "Slepa ulica ali o poeziji beat" ('The Dead End Street of Beat Poetry') in which he presented the Beats as typical American products, who differed from the European literary movements in their lack of political engagement. An even more objective presentation of the role and influence of the Beat movement was delivered in the same year by Mirko Jurak in his essay "Beat v ameriški književnosti" ('Beats in American Literature'), published in an independent literary magazine *Prostor in čas*. Apart from determining the socio-historical and aesthetic origins of Beat literature, Jurak also provided the first semantic analysis of the word 'Beat' in Slovenian criticism, which included the different meanings that it had acquired through time. According to Jurak, the word, which at the beginning had only denoted the condition of being beaten down, and also beat out (as in a rhythm), had gradually acquired such connotations that it became synonymous with "the urgent need for revolutionary change in the American way of life and a belief in the prospect of human beatitude". (Jurak 1970, 265)

In the 1970s and 1980s, Slovenian interest in Beat poetry gradually diminished, partly because of changed social circumstances and partly because new aesthetic tendencies prevailed. The student movements lost their initial impetus, and since this was a period of relative social and economic stability and freedom, the poetry of revolt lost its revolutionary appeal for the broader reading public. As in other world literatures, post-modernism, with its fascination with mythology, reflexivity, and meta-textuality, became the predominant aesthetic doctrine in Slovenia. Nevertheless, in that period Beat poetry and Beat literature in general acquired the status of a classic movement, which any scholar researching contemporary American literature had to consider. Two events attested to this: first was the publication of Majda Stanovnik's book *Angloameriške smeri v 20. stoletju* ('Anglo-American Literary Movements in the 20th Century') in 1980, and secondly, the inclusion of five Beat authors in Miha Avanzo's 'Anthology of the 20th Century American Poetry' in 1986. In her extensive research of contemporary Anglo-American literary movements, Majda Stanovnik devoted a large chapter to Beat literature, in which she systematically presented the meaning of the term "Beat", the historical development of Beat literature and its origins, its main characteristics and its influence in Slovenia. Her survey of the main stages in the development of the Beat movement was exhaustive and she proved to be well acquainted with the theoretical background of Beat poetics. According to Stanovnik, the basis for the creative technique of both Beat writers and poets was Jack Kerouac's principle of "spontaneous prose", based on improvisation and the rhythm of breathing, in which she recognised "a simplified variation of the surrealist princi-

ple of automatic writing". (Stanovnik, 1980, 66) As far as the Slovenian reception of Beat literature was concerned, Stanovnik determined that it had begun relatively early, and that the Beats had aroused considerable interest, but nonetheless their writing had also been accepted with some reserve, since it had "summoned ideas and techniques which had been known in European literary circles already in the first decades of the 20th century". (Stanovnik, 1980, 75)

In 1986, when Miha Avanzo included Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Charles Bukowski, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Gary Snyder in his 'Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry', and presented Ginsberg as the guru of the Beat movement in the 1950s and 1960s in the accompanying notes, it seemed that the Beats had become subjects of academic discussion and scholarly research, but no longer held any real interest for translators and critics. Literary and cultural magazines began to publish articles about other, more recent groups and movements which were closer to the poetry written by the leading Slovenian poets of that time. Nevertheless, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, in the last years of the previous century, another intensive phase in the Slovenian reception of Beat poetry began. One reason for the renewed appeal of the Beats may be found in the social and economic changes which took place in Slovenia in the 1990s. With the introduction of a 'free market' economy and capitalist system many artistic endeavours became marginalized from the public sphere, and as a response a kind of counter-culture developed, especially in youth centres like Metelkova in Ljubljana, which in many respects resembled the alternative movements of the 1960s. Another reason may be that towards the end of the millennium, post-modernist aesthetics, which had characterised the previous two decades, had become exhausted, and at least some poets of the young generation began to search for inspiration in the tradition of the neo-avant-garde.

In 1990 Tone Škrjanec and Janez Saksida published the selected poems of Charles Bukowski in Slovenian translation under the simple title *Pesmi* ('Poems'), and due to great interest the book was reprinted in a slightly expanded and revised edition in 1997, this time under the title *Angeli so na dnu mojega kozarca* ('There Are Angels at the Bottom of My Glass'). While the popularity of Bukowski's poems could still be explained with the success of his prose works, it became obvious that interest in Beat poetry was increasing when Primož Kuštrin published his translations of Allen Ginsberg's poems - at first only a few of them in the fortnightly magazine *Razgledi* on May 27th, 1994, and finally a selection from his entire output in book form under the title *Blebetanje neskončnosti* ('The Babble of Infinity') in 1997. This publication was especially important, since it included an extensive essay on Ginsberg's writing "Spreminjajoče se oko-ki vse-spreminja" ('The Altering Eye Alters All'), subtitled "Vizija in poezija Allena Ginsberga in beatniške generacije" ('The Vision and Poetry of Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation') by Uroš Mozetič.

Being aware that the main characteristics of Ginsberg's work and the Beat movement had already been presented to the Slovenian public in Majda Stanovnik's study, Mozetič concentrated on those aspects of Ginsberg's creativity which had hitherto been relatively unknown. His analysis of the history of the American critical reception of Ginsberg's poetry revealed that, even though critics had initially rejected his work, their opinion had gradually become more favourable. Mozetič also provided an

informative insight into Ginsberg's biography, which showed how certain fundamental experiences in his youth had shaped his life. From the critical perspective, however, the most revealing part was Mozetič's detailed analysis of the development and formation of Ginsberg's style through the influence of William Blake, W. C. Williams, and Walt Whitman. Mozetič successfully combined the positivist method of research with an analysis of the form and content of his poems, to which he also added his own original interpretation, describing him as a poet "who had always striven to reach the very end of creative imagination, but unlike many other poets, had never seen it as a new beginning. Above all, for him the end meant merely the end." (Mozetič, 1997, 22)

The introduction of Beat poetry to the Slovenian public continued into the first years of the new millennium. In 2001, in the 48th-50th issue of the cultural magazine *Apokalipsa*, Tone Škrjanec published a number of translations of Gary Snyder's poems, to which he added a brief presentation of the author's life and work. Two years later, a selection of Snyder's poems in Škrjanec's translation were published in book form. The publication *Pesmi z želvjega otoka* ('Poems from Turtle Island') included the translator's after-word, in which he explained that "each poem and the entire opus of Gary Snyder has been strongly influenced by the Eastern-Asian perception of life and the world." (Škrjanec, 2003, 80)

Much less Slovenian attention was devoted to another group of poets who significantly shaped American culture in the first decades after World War II: the Black Mountain poets. The group, which gathered around Charles Olson in the period between 1951-1956, when he taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and published their work in the magazines *Origin* and *Black Mountain*, included Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Robert Duncan, and strongly influenced such poets as Jonathan Williams, Paul Blackburn, and John Wieners. The basis of their poetics were the principles which Charles Olson presented in his essay 'Projective Verse', demanding that open poetry and composition by field should replace traditional closed verse.

The first to introduce the work of the Black Mountain poets to Slovenia was Mart Ogen. In the first part of the 1960s he translated and published some poems by John Wiener (Wieners, 1961/62) and Charles Olson, along with an extract from 'Projective Verse', in the magazine *Perspektive* (Olson, 1964). Ogen's translation of the whole of Olson's essay was published in 1973 in the 1st-2nd issue of the magazine *Prostor in čas*, along with some newly translated poems. Unfortunately, no study, or at least a brief informative note about the importance and influence of Olson's poetic principles in contemporary American writing, was added to it.

In the 1980s, translations of Black Mountain poets were published on three occasions. Veno Taufer published his translations of Denise Levertov in the fortnightly *Naši razgledi* (Levertov, 1980), and Rade Krstić presented some translated poems of Robert Creeley in *Problemi* (Creeley, 1985). The most comprehensive presentation of Black Mountain creativity came with the publication of Avanzo's 'Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry', which included the work of four poets from this group: Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley. Since Creeley was presented with the most poems, such a decision could be understood as

the editor's assessment that he was the most relevant. Charles Olson, on the other hand, was awarded the most extensive accompanying note, in which he was described as the ideological leader of the movement. Thereafter, Black Mountain poetry was translated into Slovenian only one more time, in 2003, when Veronika Ditinjana published her translations of a considerable number of Denise Levertov's poems in *Apokalipsa* and also briefly presented the author. (Levertov, 2003)

While the reason for such poor response to the work of the Black Mountain poets in comparison to the prolific reception of the Beatniks may be traced to the perhaps overly intellectual and socially disengaged attitude of the former, it was another group that managed to attract almost as much attention as the Beats, with experimental poetics which cleverly and wittily combined highbrow aspirations with the banal trivia of everyday urban existence. The New York School poets, who wrote their best poems in the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, were inspired by the main American visual artists and composers. They all favoured the aesthetics of immediacy and presence over the traditional aesthetics of transcendence, and tried to capture the excitement of living in New York City, which to them represented a model of urban simultaneity, in their work. Frank O'Hara, one of the main authors of the group, designed the outlines of such poetics in his half-jocular manifesto 'Personism', in which he stressed the communicative value of poetry, demanding that a poem should primarily exist between two persons and not between two pages. John Ashbery, another celebrated New York poet, was particularly interested in the way experience filtered through his perception, claiming that his poems were not about the experience, but about the experience of experience. Ashbery and O'Hara influenced other New York poets: Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Ted Berrigan, Barbara Guest and, to some extent, James Merrill.

Although the first information about the New York School had already reached Slovenians in 1964, when Mart Ogen published a translation of one O'Hara's poem and an extract from Schuyler's theoretical writings on contemporary American painting in the 36th-37th issue of *Perspektive*, and then again in 1986, when Miha Avanzo presented Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery with a few translations and notes in his 'Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry', the period of intensive reception of New York School poetry began in the mid-1990s, reaching its peak in the first years of the new millennium. The number of articles about the New York poets and translations of their poems can be compared to that of the Beats, while it has to be observed that in contrast to some negative reactions to the work of the Beats, Slovenian critical opinion was always in favour of the achievements of the New York School.

In 1995 Aleš Debeljak published his translations of John Ashbery - first a few poems in the 13th issue of the fortnightly *Razgledi*, and later that year a collection of Ashbery's selected poems (Ashbery, 1995). This edition included comprehensive bibliographic information and an extensive essay on Ashbery's work, entitled "Hlapljiva identiteta jaza v pesništvu Johna Ashberyja" ('The Volatile Identity of the Speaker in John Ashbery's Poetry'). For Debeljak, Ashbery was primarily a poet of critical scepticism, "who did not possess that basic certainty which had previously enabled the metaphysical unity of author, namely the certainty in continuity of language and external reality." (Debeljak, 1995, 94) In his interpretation of Ashbery's work, Debeljak

combined different methods: the positivistic framework served for him only as a basis for a subject and form analysis of certain of Ashbery's poems, upon which he expanded in broader reflections on the aesthetic and social premises of post-modern society. In Debeljak's opinion, the crucial categories in approaching Ashbery's poetics were "the responsibility of style" and "the ethics of indeterminacy", which he substantiated with interpretations of the most relevant American critics. Only a year later, Uroš Zupan decided to approach the complicated subject of Ashbery's poetics in a more relaxed and informal manner. In his essay "Svetloba znotraj pomaranče" ('Light Inside an Orange'), published in the magazine *Literatura*, he avoided any scholarly methods of interpretation, and instead simply described and analysed his own experience of reading Ashbery's poems "Pohajkovanje" ('Just Walking Around') and "Približevanje dežja" ('Expecting Rain'). Through these two poems, Ashbery's poetic world, which he had found alien and strange before, suddenly opened up to him. In Zupan's interpretation, the poem "Pohajkovanje" was "a poem about a process, a poem about dreams, and perhaps also about illusions and mistakes." (Zupan, 1996, 85) Zupan compared Ashbery's method of using words to the method with which an abstract painter uses colours, and explained that the reader had to break through different abstract layers before creating their own experience of a specific poem. But in the end, Zupan asserted, the reader was rewarded for the effort, since they could finally understand that behind the complex surface one could still find a love poem.

Frank O'Hara was thoroughly presented a few years later, in 2001, when Tone Škrjanec published quite a few translations of his poems in the 118th issue of *Literatura*, to which he added a translation of O'Hara's manifesto 'Personism' and an informative portrait of the author. A year later, in 2002, a selection of O'Hara's poems was published under the title *Srce v žepu* ('Heart in My Pocket'). Apart from the poems translated by Tone Škrjanec, Primož Čučnik and Miha Avanzo, the publication included translations of two of O'Hara's essays and a critical study of his work by Primož Čučnik, and could be set as a model of a good and comprehensive presentation of an American author to the Slovenian public. In the study "Tvoja posameznost" ('Your Singularity') Primož Čučnik gathered observations of various American critics on the New York poets, and managed to depict a vivid image of the creative fervour pervading various artistic spheres in New York in the 1950s and 1960s. In Čučnik's opinion the essence of O'Hara's poetic process was in the use of techniques familiar to most avant-garde painters of the period. O'Hara tried to vivify the surface of a poem by "swift changes of perspective, leaps in time and space, and unexpected changes of voice, combining technical effects with the principle of coincidence." (Čučnik, 2002, 101) Another aspect of O'Hara's poetry which Čučnik stressed was its communicative nature, its striving to establish contact with the reader.

The new millennium also provided some new translations of John Ashbery's poems. In 2003 Veno Taufer's translation of Ashbery's long poem "Avtoportret v konveksnem ogledalu" ('Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror') was published in the 139th-140th issue of *Literatura*; more Ashbery translations were contributed a year later for the 155th-156th issue of the same magazine by Uroš Zupan. In 2004, when *Avtoportret v konveksnem ogledalu* was published, John Ashbery became the first post-war American poet with two collections of poetry in Slovenian. Apart from

'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' the publication included translations of several other poems, by Veno Taufer, Uroš Zupan and Primož Čučnik. Regrettably, no essay or study of Ashbery's work was added to them this time.

Although the Beats and poets of the New York School both wrote poetry with open forms, and did their best work at about the same time, their reception in Slovenia was very different. While the first information about the Beat movement came to Slovenia relatively early, the New York poets became familiar after more than three decades of delay; and while the former were accepted with scepticism, prejudice and misunderstandings, the critics who wrote about the latter in the 1990s and in the first years of the new millennium revealed a great deal of expertise, and welcomed them as one of the most interesting artistic movements of the second half of the 20th century. It seems that in the 1960s and 1970s Slovenian literary taste was still not ready for the avant-garde experiments of the New York School, and it took some time for the post-modernist doctrine of openness towards different aesthetic approaches to become pervasive and the right conditions for understanding such poetry to be met. This happened with the development of post-industrial society and the spread of the market economy, which introduced to Slovenian urban areas many new phenomena similar to those described by the New York poets three decades earlier. A great deal of credit for their intensive reception goes to the young generation of Slovenian poets like Uroš Zupan, Primož Čučnik and Tone Škrjanec, who have found a source of inspiration for their own work in the achievements of the New York School and have been denoted by some critics as Slovenian urban poets.

In conclusion, despite the increasing number of translations and Slovenian publications of American poets of open form, there are quite a few important names from this group who have not been properly and thoroughly presented to Slovenians. Among the Beats, Lawrence Ferlinghetti is still awaiting his first Slovenian collection; the most important Black Mountain poets, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov, are all relatively unknown in Slovenia, and among the New York poets at least Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler deserve more popular recognition.

OTHER POST-WAR AMERICAN POETS IN SLOVENIAN CRITICISM AND TRANSLATION

Many other poets who cannot be classified in the foregoing groups and movements were very influential in the development of post-war American poetics, and some of them are today regarded as contemporary classics. Among the most prominent names in the second half of the 20th century are Adrienne Rich, who focused on her personal experience as a Jew and a lesbian; Louise Glück, who managed to achieve a dreamlike ritual effect in her poems through a seemingly distanced and uncomplicated style; Imamu Amiri Baraka with his socially engaged and uncompromisingly provocative poetry; Audre Lorde, celebrating the identity of Black people in Africa and the United States; Rita Dove, exploring the history of African-Americans; Mark Strand, whose poems have been compared to the paintings of Magritte because of their eerie, mysterious atmosphere; and Charles Simic, who developed an original

surrealist style of writing, in which the sublime merges with the profane, and tragic elements with comic. In his essay "American Poetry in Slovene Translations" delivered in 1977 at the Seminar on Contemporary American Poetry and Criticism in Ohrid, Macedonia, Mirko Jurak observed that "the development of American literature, poetry included, had been more or less closely followed and evaluated during the past three decades by a number of Slovene critics, translators, and essay writers." (Jurak, 1977, 75) That was the case also in the following decades. From 1979 on, when Mirko Jurak published a few translations of Mark Strand's poems in *Naši Razgledi* (Strand, 1979) and presented him as a poet of individual experience whose work was replete with melancholy and irony, the Slovenian reception of those American poets who cannot be classified in any of the major groups continued regularly and even considerably increased after the year 2000. Eighteen such authors were presented in Avanzo's 'Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry' in 1986, namely Delmore Schwartz, Gwendolyne Brooks, James Dickey, A. R. Ammons, Adrienne Rich, Mark Strand, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Michael Benedict, Marvin Bell, Charles Simic, Tom Clark, Robert Hass, Ron Padget, Erica Jong, Louise Glück, James Tate, Ai, and Susan Feldman. The volume included brief biographical and bibliographic notes, but unfortunately, no critical comments on their poetics. Nevertheless, this publication still serves as a relevant starting point for any researcher of contemporary American poetry.

Only three years later Aleš Debeljak prepared a presentation of nine more American poets for the magazine *Literatura* under the title "Sodobna ameriška poezija" ('Contemporary American Poetry'). His survey included David Halpern, Richard Jackson, Edward Hirsch, Stephen Dobyns, Jorie Graham, Richard Katrovas, Phillis Levin, Lary Lewis, and David St. John. In the accompanying essay, he explained that he had selected only such authors who had not already been presented in Avanzo's anthology and who had been born after 1940. In his characteristic style, combining an analysis of various poetics with broader social and historical implications, Debeljak tried to define the essential characteristics of the new generation of American poets. He found it in their lack of social involvement, since "all of them proceeded from the experience of defeat which the counter-cultural America suffered at the end of the 1960s." (Debeljak, 1989, 42) Therefore, he opines, their creation of individual mythologies and imaginary worlds was a reaction to the extrovert social protests of the neo-avant-garde literary scene in the 1960s.

In the second half of the 1990s Ciril Bergles and Uroš Zupan published their translations of contemporary American poetry in various literary magazines. Bergles prepared a presentation of Adrienne Rich for *Razgledi* (Rich, 1996) and *Apokalipsa* (Rich, 1999), while Zupan presented Mark Strand in *Nova revija* (Strand, 1997) and Charles Simic in *Literatura* (Simic, 1998). A year later, Iztok Osojnik translated a few poems of Richard Jackson, known also as an enthusiastic promoter of Slovenian poetry in the United States, for *Literatura* (Jackson, 1999). With the year 2000 a period of publications of individual poetry collections of authors from this group began. First the *Mondena Publishing House* brought out Janko Lozar's translation of Brian Henry's collection *Astronavt* ('Astronaut') with an after-word by Tomaž Šalamun, in which he described the author as "probably the most published poet, essayist and

critic of his generation in the USA" (Šalamun, 2000, 69). And in 2001 the first Slovenian collection of Richard Jackson, entitled *Svetovi narazen* ('Worlds Apart') was published; the translations were contributed by Jure Potokar, Iztok Osojnik and Uroš Zupan.

More important, however, was the publication of selected poems of one of the most acclaimed post-war American poets, Charles Simic, in the same year. The collection *Razgaljanje tišine* ('Dismantling the Silence'), which apart from Simic's poems included some of his essays, translated by Tomaž Šalamun, and at the end a detailed and comprehensive critical study "Anonimne usode med bogovi in hudiči: pesništvo Charlesa Simica" ('Anonymous Fates Amidst Gods and Devils: the Poetry of Charles Simic') by Aleš Debeljak was added to it. Through the analysis of Simic's poetic technique, Debeljak managed to create a very persuasive interpretation of the existential position of the individual in the modern world. Debeljak recognised the main premises of Simic's poetics in the feeling of displacement, which derived from his experience of being an immigrant, and in the need to reinvent his own identity. A special quality, which distinguished Debeljak's analyses from the studies of numerous American interpreters, lies in his ability to recognise political undertones in Simic's fantastic and grotesque imagery. Debeljak understands Simic as a socially and politically engaged author, and for him, even humour as one of the most recognisable features of Simic's work "was in the service of the author's broader cosmic vision, which revealed his existential engagement in present-day reality." (Debeljak, 2001, 227)

Another central figure on the contemporary American poetic scene received a Slovenian edition of selected poems in 2002. This was Adrienne Rich, whose publication *Raziskovanje razvalin* ('Exploring the Ruins') was prepared and translated by Ciril Bergles, who also wrote an extensive accompanying essay "Iskanje izgubljene identitete" ('The Search for Lost Identity') about her work. Bergles approached Rich's poetry with a positivistic method, focusing primarily on her life and experience as a lesbian and a Jew, which seems an appropriate choice, since Rich has often included autobiographical elements and reflections upon current political events in her poems. Bergles combined this method with an analysis of the gradual change in Rich's poetics from fairly traditional themes and styles to an engaged female writing which strives to reinvent language and make a revision of history through a critical reflection upon the role of archetypes created by men. But for Bergles, the greatest value of her poetry is not in its feminist implications, but simply in the fact that "for her, love between women, physical and ethical, has served as an open possibility of imagining a new America, a new social order, a different language." (Bergles, 2002, 135)

In the same year, Uroš Zupan's translations of a few of Charles Wright's poems were published in the 237th-238th issue of *Nova Revija*, along with Ana Jelenc's translation of Wright's essay "Improvizacije" ('Improvisations'). Yet another author from the youngest generation of American poets was published in Slovenian in 2003: Joshua Beckman, whose *Zapusti New York* ('Leave New York') was translated by Janko Lozar and Primož Čučnik; however, no comprehensive critical presentation of the author was included in this edition. In 2004 a broad selection of Louise Glück's poems in Ciril Bergles's translation was presented in *Nova Revija* (Glück, 2004), to

which the translator added a brief introduction of the poet, entitled “Divja perunika Louise Glück” (‘The Wild Iris of Louise Glück’), in which he described her poetry as “a riddle, whose mental and aesthetic essence has to be unravelled by the reader through their own interpretation”. (Bergles, 2004, 177) And finally, in 2005, at the end of the period presented in this survey, a small paperback volume of James Tate’s poetry was published under the title *Izgubljeni pilot* (‘The Lost Pilot’). The translation was by Tomaž Šalamun, and the author was presented in a few informative lines.

All these publications show that the Slovenian reception of those American authors who cannot be classified into any of the leading movements reached its peak after the year 2000, and towards the end of the period in question Slovenian interest in American poetry in general was increasing, and even more publications of contemporary American poets and critical studies of their work can be expected in the future. It seems that with the establishment of democratic society and global post-industrial culture, with all its positive and negative connotations, and after familiarisation with the post-modernist doctrine of openness towards different aesthetic approaches and new urban trends among our writers and poets, Slovenian readers and critics have considerably fewer problems accepting contemporary American poetry than forty years ago, when the first publications of the Beats provoked vigorous polemics about the moral aspects of their aesthetics. Contemporary Slovenian critics reveal a good deal of expertise regarding recent trends in American poetry, and even those Slovenian readers who are not well acquainted with literary theory can understand contemporary American poetry as the artistic expression of people living in an environment which is not radically different from their own. While it is true that some essential authors from this group, like Audre Lorde, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Louise Glück and Rita Dove, still do not have a Slovenian edition of their poems, a new trend of publishing works of very young authors has been observed in recent years - such are the cases of Brian Henry and Joshua Beckman - which raises the hope that in the next few years the most interesting new American poets will be received more regularly and without too much delay.

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