

SLOVENIA AS A LOCALE IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN VERSE

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Despite the fact that the writer Patrick White had worked on his novels for a short while also at Lake Bled in Slovenia at Hotel "Toplice", just like Agatha Christie did at Lake Bohinj, Slovenia has only recently come to feature in mainstream Australian literature, more precisely in contemporary Australian poetry. It should be stressed that Slovenia is thus no longer present only in Slovene migrant poetry written in Australia as has so far been the case: it entered the major contemporary Australian anthologies. This testifies to the fact that Slovenia no longer belongs to the uncharted part of Central Europe on the geographical and consequently also on the Australian literary map. Rather than that Slovenia increasingly makes part of an average Australian 'Grand Tour' travel itinerary in Europe; it has thus become present in the Australian cultural consciousness. In this light two recent Australian poems with Slovenia as a literary locale are discussed, Andrew Taylor's "Morning in Ljubljana"¹ and Susan Hampton's poem "Yugoslav Story".²

"Morning in Ljubljana"

Austro-Hungarian! Houses yellow
and confident. The streets crawl
parallel to the river. Always the Sava.
Visible, to the north,
the Alps. At night
frost slides quietly over the fields
and seizes the city. It takes
the air, filling it with mist
and particles of utter cold. Later
the sun, winnowing, willowy, warms us.
This is almost the end
of autumn, but the brown edges

¹ Andrew Taylor, "Morning in Ljubljana", Geoff Page (ed.), *On the Move: Australian Poets in Europe*. Springwood, N.S.W.: Butterfly Books, 1992, p. 68; also published in Andrew Taylor, *Selected Poems 1960-1985*. St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1988, pp. 175-6. See the article by Igor Maver, "Krajina v avstralski literaturi in pesem o Ljubljani" ("Landscape in Australian Literature and a Poem about Ljubljana"), *Ljubljana, Delo*, Književni listi, 25 November, 1993, pp. 16-7.

² Susan Hampton, "Yugoslav Story", Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1986. The poem had previously also been published in the prestigious Australian literary magazine *Meanjin*, No. 4, 1980.

of the plane tree leaves
 store memories of the sun.
 In the trees' upstretched arms
 I can hear winter approaching
 as once someone in a ballgown
 leaning against a decorated chest
 might have heard the beginning of silence
 after every third beat of the waltz
 and the faintest rumble
 of a Baroque square
 filling with tanks - somewhere
 somewhere, somewhere in the future ...

Andrew Taylor

The Australian poet and critic Andrew Taylor (born 1940) wrote this poem upon his visit and reading in the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana in 1985. He taught in the Department of English at Adelaide University in South Australia and now teaches at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Along with his professional career as an academic, teacher and critic, he is the author of several books of poetry. For *Travelling* (1986) he won the British Airways Poetry Prize, which shows his bent for travel, this "voluntary temporary expatriation".

Taylor's poetic vision in the poem "Morning in Ljubljana", which was published in the anthology *On the Move: Australian Poets in Europe* (1992), is an Impressionistic one; it is a meditation on the situation and mood in autumnal Ljubljana in the late 1980s, the years preceding the Slovene state independence achieved in 1991. In the poem Taylor prophetically announces great historical events that are to take place in Ljubljana "somewhere, somewhere in the future". He describes a Baroque square that will be "filled with tanks", which indeed happened during the independence war in 1991. The rendering of the locale is superb, in the descriptions of the Alps to the North of Ljubljana and the still present Austro-Hungarian tradition in architecture and manners. Taylor convincingly juxtaposes the waltzing in the Viennese manner in the Ljubljana past, which might be replaced by the rumble of tanks in the future. He is aware of the uneasiness and tension lingering in the air; the chill and fog of autumn serves him as a very fitting objective correlative standing for the ominous situation and the pending Damocleian sword of war above the city of Ljubljana.

Susan Hampton is a well-known contemporary Australian woman poet and fiction writer,³ who published the poem titled "Yugoslav Story" in *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* (1986), where Yugoslav really refers only to Slovene experience. The poem namely recounts her own life story, her marriage with a Slovene whom she had met back in 1968. His name was Jože and he was a Slovene migrant from Loški potok, who probably did not know much English upon his arrival to Australia, which is why she reproduced many Slovene words and expressions in the poem. The spelling of Slovene words is surprisingly correct, even of such difficult ones as *palačinka* or *pražena jetra*.

The poem is essentially a straightforward poetic narrative; however, it is a sincere poetic and unsentimental way describes her experience of what was it like being

³ See for example Susan Hampton, *Costumes: Poems and Prose*, Chippendale, 1981; *White Dog Sonnets*, Surrey Hills, 1987; *Surly Girls*, Sydney, 1989.

married to a Slovene migrant. The speaker of the poem tries to be objective, presenting the life and cultural background of her Slovene husband Jože chiefly without comment, a great deal of Australian broad humour and a fine sense of minute observation. Susan Hampton compares the background of an Australian woman ("my father was a builder in bush towns") with that of a Slovene man ("His father was a policeman under King Peter"). However, the events described pertain to a regular boy-meets-girl story written with a great deal of cheeky humour, namely the Slovene-Australian migrant experience from the other end, which is rather unusual and new, from an Australian-Australian point of view.

"Yugoslav Story"

Jože was born in the village of Loški Potok,
in a high cheek-boned family. I remarked
that he had no freckles, he liked to play cards,
and the women he knew were called Maria, Malčka, Mimi;
and because he was a 'handsome stranger'
I took him for a ride on my Yamaha
along the Great Western Highway
and we ate apples; I had never met someone
who ate apples by the case, whose father
had been shot at by Partisans in World War II,
who'd eaten frogs and turnips in the night,
and knew how to make pastry so thin
it covered the table like a soft cloth.
He knew how to kill and cut up a pig,
and how to foxtrot and polka. He lifted me up in the air.

He taught me to say *Jaz te ljubim, ugasni luč*
('I love you, turn off the light')
and how to cook *filana paprika, palačinka,*
and *pražena jetra*. One night in winter
Jože and two friends ate 53 of these *palačinke*
(pancakes) and went straight to the factory
from the last rummy game. Then he was my husband,
he called me '*moja žena*' and sang a dirty song
about Terezinka, a girl who sat on the chimney
waiting for her lover, and got a black bum.
He had four brothers and four sisters,
I had five sisters.
His father was a policeman under King Peter,
my father was a builder in bush towns.
Jože grew vegetables and he smoked Marlboros
and he loved me. This was in 1968.

Susan Hampton

Australians have a reputation of being long-distance travellers and Andrew Taylor's poem shows that travel currently exists very much as writing or 'text', as well as part of the real experience. Australian self-definition, closely linked to the migrant experience is the subject-matter of Susan Hampton's poem "Yugoslav Story". Both poems show that foreign, non-Australian models can and do provide a new and better understanding of the composite Australian culture and identity. The fact that Slovenia has become part of this process shaping the Australian mind is not unimportant.