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RATTLING THE ESTABLISHMENT: A DECOLONIAL READING OF KATJA PERAT'S POETRY

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Prispevek razume poezijo slovenske pesnice Katje Perat kot način preučevanja eksistencialne možnosti v okoliščinah njenega nastanka in onstran njih. V ta namen se opira na dekolonialni teoretski okvir, ki kritizira evropocentričnost epistemologije racionalnosti/modernosti. Ta okvir je primeren za poezijo Katje Perat, ki na podoben način preizprašuje meje evropocentrične epistemologije. Analitični okvir tako pomaga osvetliti osvobodilno etiko poezije Katje Perat, ki spretno in drzno išče boljše eksistencialne možnosti in s tem pravičnost za svoje bralce.

Slovenija, poezija, dekolonialnost, pravičnost

This essay reads the poetry of the Slovenian poet Katja Perat as a means to examine existential possibility within and beyond the conditions of its creation. To that end, the essay invokes a decolonial theoretical framework that critiques the Eurocentricity of the epistemology of rationality/modernity. That framework suits Perat's poetry, which similarly interrogates the limits of that Eurocentric epistemology. Thus, the analytical framework helps to illuminate the liberatory ethic of Perat's poetry, which artfully and defiantly seeks greater existential possibility and therefore justice for her readers.

Slovenia, poetry, decoloniality, justice

1 Introduction

The British sociologist Martin Savransky (2017: 1) suggests that »in order for sociology to become exposed to the deeply transformative potential of non-Eurocentric thinking, it needs to cultivate a decolonial imagination that may enable it to move beyond epistemology, and to recognise that there is no social and cognitive justice without existential justice, no politics of knowledge without a politics of reality«. As a Latin Americanist and poet, I wish to suggest much the same of poetry. More precisely, I wish to propose how the poetry of the Slovenian poet Katja Perat (born 1988) might cultivate decolonial imagination by questioning Eurocentric epistemology and ontology in ways that encourage greater existential justice and augment the politics of reality.

To develop the theoretical framework for such a reading of Perat's verse, we might return to the roots of Latin American decolonial theory. There, in a foundational essay from 1992, the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano writes of the need »to liberate the production of knowledge, of reflection and communication, from the traps of

European rationality/modernity« (Quijano 1992: 19).¹ By this Quijano means to exhort his readers to identify and question the limits of the Eurocentric epistemological matrix structuring modernity and postmodernity, and oppressing human potentiality to this day around the globe. Through and against that Eurocentric matrix, Perat writes her iconoclastic verse. In other words, we could read her poetry quite generatively through Quijano's challenge, examining how she poetically reveals and transcends some of the »traps« of European rationality/modernity.

Specifically, Perat explores the ontological consequences of those epistemological traps. She does this by artfully exposing and questioning the ontological constraints imposed by the Eurocentric epistemological matrix of rationality/modernity. In this manner, her verse unveils an instantiation of what Quijano (1992: 12) terms the »colonization of the imaginary of the dominated«. That is in fact the liberatory ethic of her poetry. It strives to create the conditions for greater existential justice through an expansion of ontological possibility. Hence she defiantly interrogates the colonization of the imaginary by the Eurocentric epistemological matrix, and the resulting poetry both traces and transcends the European politics of reality that are the entrapping conditions of its inception.

2 Parsing Perat: A Decolonial Poetics of Ontological Difference

As aforementioned, Perat's poetry emerges from within a European framework of rationality/modernity to transcend it. She does not do this by using the tools of rationality/modernity against itself. That would not be transformational of the paradigm, but rather merely rebellious within it. To quote the US scholar Audre Lorde (2007: 113), »the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change«. Following Lorde, genuine change emerges instead from plurality. It emerges from recognitions of the strength and hope in *difference*. That orientation can be developed through the decolonial imagination in Perat's poetry. That is in fact what this section of the essay aspires to illuminate. It will reveal how Perat's poetry convokes a plurality of ontological paradigms that include and exceed European models.

More than a mere eschewal of the traps of European ontology, Perat's poetry offers alternatives to them. This is the power of their decolonial imagination. It is also the source of their existential hope. Her poetry conjures more diverse ways of being in the world, beyond the limits and traps of modern, European ontology. And this is driven by her intractability. She refuses to abide the limits of the cultural preconditions of her birth. Perhaps this is why the Slovenian literary critic Mojca Pišek calls Perat »the biggest name of literary system *disobedience*« (Versopolis, emphasis added). Similarly, her Nottingham translators praise her intractability by writing that »Perat's poems are not lyrics to caress the ear and the soul; sharp, ironic, cynical and to the point, they *dissect the cultural and literary establishment and the backstage of*

1 Translations of Quijano are by the author.

the everyday» (Perat 2014: 5, emphasis added). And what are such plaudits if not celebrations of Perat's fundamental intractability, of her refusal to be subordinated to and diminished by the constraints of preformulated ontologies? In other words, such praise for her disobedience is as accurate as it is deserved. Perat is a poet *sui generis*, brilliantly defying Eurocentric ontological norms to great effect in her best poetry.

A good example of this comes in her poem, *And I Make Art* (Perat 2014: 7-9). It exemplifies her affirmative, augmentative decolonial poetics of reality. She artfully enacts it via her juxtaposition of multiple, archetypal ontological possibilities across the poem's seven stanzas of free verse. Most of those ontological archetypes are European, though not all of them are, and in their simultaneity, Perat stakes her decolonial claim. That is, the poem's comparative ontological reflection introduces ontological possibilities beyond European paradigms, thereby carrying the reader beyond the limits of European modes of reflection and communication. In this manner, she cultivates decolonial imagination in a decidedly European poetry.

And what exquisitely artful poetry it is. For example, she summons all of this decolonial possibility in a mere fifty-three lines of free verse, demonstrating her expert control and precision as poet. For within that relatively limited discursive space, she introduces and juxtaposes a diversity of ontological possibilities. Each comes figuratively, in the form of an archetypal person, who is identified in relation to her conceptions of mortality. The ensuing parade of archetypes therefore includes, for example, »[s]ad people [who] surrender themselves [to death] / just like medieval towns are surrendered / After long sieges«, »beautiful people who can afford themselves / arrogance and rage [against dying] without / losing anything,« and »truth-loving people who are capable of clarity [about death] / without constantly reminding themselves / that nothing imaginary has been beautiful« (Perat 2014: 7). It even includes the first-person speaker, who coheres with none of those existential paradigms. Instead, she must create new modes of reflecting and communicating such that she exists beyond the paradigmatically European reactionaries (i.e. medieval towns), arbiters of beauty, or arbiters of truth. In other words, decolonial imagination is summoned in the poem via its evocation of ontological alternatives beyond European ontological possibilities and their limits.

Moreover, that speaker in herself represents decolonial imagination. She is paradoxically a singular multiplicity of ontological possibilities that exist within and beyond European paradigms. Accordingly, she describes herself variously across the poem as »abandoned« by others (Perat 2014: 7), »separated« from others (Perat 2014: 9), and inextricably interconnected with others. She is of and apart from the European conditions of her birth, and this is signalled by that internal antinomy of ontological possibilities. Its breadth implies supra-European existential possibility, thereby adding to the poem's cultivation of decolonial imagination. Importantly, her embodiment of decolonial imagination does not stem from the evocation of plurality in itself. Such an evocation might reasonably be theorized as a mere iteration of European postmodern literary theory, whereby the supposed unity of the speaker,

of the cohesive I, is deconstructed into a paradoxical plurality, for example. Instead, the speaker conjures decolonial imagination by striving to go beyond the plurality of European ontological paradigms.

This supra-European striving is evoked quite powerfully in the final stanza of the poem, for example. There she writes »Art doesn't need anything. / In that way I would like to be similar« (Perat 2014: 9). In other words, here one sees the speaker, who is an artist, lamenting the limits of her situated needs. They constrain her and diminish her ontological potentiality. More precisely, as the poem argues, she, unlike art, is ontologically limited by culturally situated conceptions of mortality, from which she longs to be liberated. She wishes to be freed from the strictures of the European colonization of her imagination. And therein arises the poem's decolonial imagination. Existentially intractable, she writes a poetry striving to transcend its grounding in European ontology. A decolonial artist, she strives to create new modes of poetic reflection and communication that exceed the Eurocentric paradigms that entrap and diminish her existentially. In short, she seeks greater existential possibility.

3 Perat's Decolonial Epistemology: An Escape from Psychoanalysis

Perat's critique of the traps of European modernity in *And I Make Art* also emerges from her exposure of the limits of European epistemology. That is, just as Perat conjures decolonial imagination in Slovenian poetry through her artful evocation of supra-European ontological possibility, so, too, does she conjure decolonial imagination through her artful evocation of supra-European epistemology. This is most evident in the poem in its explicit re-examination of a bedrock epistemological element of European modernity: psychoanalysis. More precisely, through the poem, Perat reveals psychoanalysis to be both a vector and a metonym for Eurocentric epistemology, against and beyond which she seeks alternative epistemological paradigms.

Perat makes this clear from the very opening of her poem. By juxtaposing the title of the poem with its first stanza, one immediately sees that she is making art within and against the modern European imagination as instantiated in theorizations of the Freudian death drive. Here is that first stanza in full:

It is said that people are quietly
aiming for death as everything organic
strives to become inorganic again
and every movement strives
not to move anymore.
Things decompose because they long
to be left alone.
(Perat 2014: 7)

Quite pointedly, that stanza echoes Freud's own words in 1920 on the death drive: »everything living dies from causes within itself, and returns to the inorganic, we can only say '*The goal of all life is death*'« (Freud 1922: 30). And that watershed moment in modern European thought – meaning Freud's introduction of the death drive and the pleasure principle as foundational concepts to a psychoanalytic framework soon

to grow and gird modern European epistemology – reverberates not only in Perat’s opening stanza, but also across the poem.

Perat’s critique is in fact intricately structured, demonstrating her masterful artistry as poet. It begins in the scepticism invoked tonally in line one with »[i]t is said.« That tonal defiance of received norms also marks her intractability. That tone is enhanced by Perat’s control of narrative as she interrogates the epistemology of European modernity across the poem via an irreverent re-examination of the death drive. That intellectual challenge to Freud’s canonical concept structures the poem’s counter-narrative to European modernity. It reveals its inadequacy, implying a surfeit of epistemological possibilities beyond its limiting confines. To build upon Savransky, there exists beyond the European epistemology of modernity the deeply transformative potential of non-Eurocentric thinking.

Perat builds this liberating, decolonial argument paratactically. Her invocation of the Freudian death drive in stanza one becomes the founding referent for a mosaic of subject positions relative to mortality, as aforementioned in ontological terms. Those ontological archetypes people the poem, conjuring and critiquing not only various instantiations of European ontology, but also European epistemology. That is, these personifications are vectors and metaphors for the epistemology of European modernity, of which psychoanalysis is a founding element. And Perat explores the limits and inadequacies of each, meaning the inadequacies of modern, European epistemology. Such is the layered evocation of decolonial imagination in this special poem. It moves swiftly and trenchantly in its pursuit of being and knowing beyond Eurocentric modes of reflecting and communicating modernity. It seeks the deeply transformative potential of non-Eurocentric thinking beyond European epistemology.

Of note, the decolonial impulse in the poem is to critique European epistemology by exposing the pitfalls of its Eurocentricity. More deeply, the poem is interested in exposing the partiality of European epistemology relative to the possibility of thinking and knowing *in toto*. This is evident metonymically in the poem’s critique of the inadequacy of the Freudian death drive to reckon human desire. For example, Perat writes »psychoanalysts say that / he who relinquishes desire has already died,« and then she impugns their logic. She shows its false limits. She demonstrates that to be beholden to that Freudian logic of desire is to be constrained. It diminishes epistemological possibility. Hence she seeks liberation from its traps. But Eurocentricity is a formidable foe, meaning the speaker recognizes its traps but cannot avoid becoming mired in them. And mired as she is, she intimates with frustrated resignation that »all I can do / is to wait« (Perat 2014: 9).

There is hope, though, in the poem. Her restless waiting is not an interminable monotony. It is interrupted by irreverent bursts of art. Art injects intractability into the colonizing epistemology aiming to homogenize and marshal imagination. This is why Perat writes that »[t]here is a certain grace in saving yourself / in art« (Perat 2014: 9). It can help one in her struggle to extricate herself from the existential mire of Eurocentric epistemology. In other words, art is transformational. It introduces

non-Eurocentric ways of thinking, thereby expanding the possibilities for being and knowing, for reflecting and communicating. In short, as Perat explains, art is »[t]he grace, where you speak / released from the constraint of one single view« (Perat 2014: 9). It is an opening of existential possibility, a portal to escape from being held existentially hostage within culturally specific epistemological structures. Such is the decolonial hope of the poem.

4 Conclusion

Where the poem evokes decolonial hope, it finally reveals its existential limits, too. That is, true to her spirit of relentless intractability, Perat concludes the poem with an existential claim about the inevitable limits of human thinking and being. There are traps to Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric imagination alike, and »you can never truly avoid [them]« (Perat 2014: 9). They are intrinsic to the human condition because the human mind is »unprepared to survive the exposure« (Perat 2014: 9) to the totality of existential possibility due to its incapacity to reckon it fully.

Consequently, towards the end of the final stanza, Perat concedes that »poems are unimportant« (Perat 2014: 9). They are inadequate to the totality of »exposure.« Yet even that admission is deepened and complicated in meaningful ways by decolonial imagination. More precisely, *And I Make Art* finally becomes an *ars poetica*, pivoting on a decolonial politics of reality. It showcases the potential for poetry to create the conditions for new ways of knowing and being beyond the constraining, Eurocentric ontological and epistemological conditions from which it emerges, even if the poem finally must concede its incapacity to enact the existential transformations it seeks due to the inadequacy of human mind to total exposure. Nevertheless, the poem leaves the reader with a newfound sense of hope. It is the hope in the poet's intractability, her relentless existential striving. Foreknowing her failure, she nevertheless writes to expand human ways of knowing and being in the world. And therein lies the profundity and the pleasure of decolonial readings of Perat's poetry.

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