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HOW FIVE SLOVENIAN WOMEN POETS TEAR APART FRAMES TO FIND THEIR SPEECH

Barbara Siegel Carlson

FLS International, Boston
bsiegelcarlson@gmail.com

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Cenzura se v slovenski poeziji še vedno pojavlja na različne načine in v različnih oblikah. Prispevek obravnava dela petih kritičnih ženskih glasov v slovenski poeziji: Maje Vidmar, Mete Kušar, Miriam Drev, Barbare Korun in Alenke Jovanovski, pri čemer se osredini na način, kako razdirajo okvire, da bi videle, kaj je v srcu – kot pravi Alenka Jovanovski v pesmi *Razdreti okvire* –, ko ponujajo svoja razkritja kot obliko duhovnega odpora proti resničnosti, ki bi jih sicer lahko utišala.

slovenska poezija, sodobne slovenske pesnice, cenzura, feministična literatura, politična poezija

Censorship continues to exist in many ways and forms in Slovenian poetry. This paper will look at some of the work of five critical female voices in Slovenian poetry: Maja Vidmar, Meta Kušar, Miriam Drev, Barbara Korun, and Alenka Jovanovski, focusing on the way they, in Jovanovski's words »tear apart frames [...] to behold [the] heart« offering their revelations as a form of spiritual resistance against the realities which might otherwise silence them.

Slovenian poetry, contemporary Slovenian women poets, censorship, feminist literature, political poetry

1 Introduction

Censorship affects consciousness in a variety of ways, most notably by limiting awareness to a view or narrative of reality shaped by a framework of established power and generally accepted and adhered to by the society at large. That view is shaped by language. And that view is a force. How do we counter this force? In *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words* from *The Necessary Angel*, Wallace Stevens (1951: 36) writes that the mind »is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the nature of reality«. The imagination embodied in literature helps us see the reality of our lives in our time and place through the language we use; its images, rhythms, tones and forms often reveal hidden layers of history, politics and circumstance to bring us to a more complex and enriched understanding of being. This paper will look at some of the work of five

critical female voices in Slovenian poetry:¹ Maja Vidmar, Meta Kušar, Miriam Drev, Barbara Korun and Alenka Jovanovski, focusing on the way they, in Jovanovski's words, »tear apart frames [...] to behold [the] heart« (*To Tear Apart Frames*, Carlson et al. 2017: 248), offering their revelations as a form of spiritual resistance against the realities which might otherwise silence them.

2

For Maja Vidmar (born 1963), who has felt the pressures and anxieties of living in a patriarchal, socialist society, poetry is no needlepoint, but pierces to the truth. In *Poet* she addresses society's view of beauty as a kind of censorship, ending on the Keatsian: »Beauty is truth; truth beauty« (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats 1967: 1186), even when that truth causes »mute horror«.

My beautiful young mother
 sold me each morning.
 It was hard for her to resist
 my little arms.
 My beautiful auburn-haired mother
 bought me each afternoon.
 Each evening
 a beautiful black-haired woman
 stood beside my bed
 and taught me how,
 in mute horror, to find a scream.
 (*Poet*, Carlson et al. 2017: 26)

In repeating the word *beautiful* three times to describe the mother/woman who sells, buys and stands by the speaker each day, Vidmar enforces how beauty creates power leading to outrage against the acceptance of using it as a commodity. The language here is deceptively simple, but ironic. The repetition and rhythm of both the syntax and imagery suggest a mechanical inheritance with a nursery rhyme charm, only to break that pattern in the last line. The adjectives *beautiful*, *little* and *mute* characterize an aspect of femininity. This stands in sharp contrast to the end. Who is the black-haired beautiful woman but the undefined self? The paradox here is how she sees past her role to give birth to a new self whose first utterance is a scream.

Anxiety features prominently in much of Vidmar's work, along with tension and irony, due to the conflict between stability and freedom. In *The House* the speaker drinks her father's milk that provides »the solid architecture / of the house« only that she »covered up [her] head« (Carlson et al. 2017: 135). She goes on to fear »those who are not« as »they would have devoured me« (ibid.). Such images tense with struggle against a patriarchal culture recall Emily Dickinson, in a letter to T.W. Higginson, describing her father who »buys me many Books—but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the mind« (Johnson 1996: 173). In *The House* Vidmar

1 This analysis draws on examples of poetry found largely in the anthology *A Bridge of Voices* and does not take into account collections of poems in their entirety.

plays her role as daughter while craving otherness, as she sits »at the back door / crying out for them, those who are not« (Carlson et al. 2017: 135).

Poems, no matter what the subject, are portraits of a multitudinous self. Vidmar explores aspects of a self she must destroy. Her poem *Isaac* becomes a metaphor depicting her struggle between obedience to the status quo which might demand that she cut off a live part of herself: »How do I take a knife / as though/ I didn't care, / take a naked, grey knife– / how do I cut him off / so alive.« Her conflict with her identity is further dramatized in *The Bed* with its animal force that »holds the leading / role in this room« as the couple »let it / run away across the carpet.« (ibid.: 137) Just as there are iron remains of weapons from World War I in her hometown (ibid.: 139) there is iron in these poems that give them gravitas and power for what they unleash.

3

For Meta Kušar, transcendence to a higher realm is attained through language. It is a place where »People would take the book / and with one line from it dress their wounds« (Carlson et al. 2017: 68). Kušar has embodied Wallace Stevens's view of poetry as »a revelation in words by means of the words« (1951: 33). We see this in *Zen* where »[o]n new lines I catch new spirits« (Carlson et al. 2017: 70). The revelation comes from »eating« raw materials, daring to make a vow with language and trusting what burns.

From his small kennel I feel and see and hear. I work in it.
See ships that don't sail. Only trust gets all hands onto the rope.
Alone with yourself you burn the language. Even great Dante shivered
from hardship. He trembled for his native city.
I quiver.
(ibid.: 70)

Censorship has long been a practice in the history of Slovenes. During the Counter-Reformation, Catholic clerics closed Protestant schools, burned their books, blew up their churches, even dug up some of their corpses, throwing them in the river that winds through Ljubljana (ibid.: 75). Kušar, who was born in 1952 and grew up in Yugoslavia in an environment of censorship, found poetry to be her refuge and language her freedom (ibid.: 73).² Tomaž Šalamun became a role model for the audaciousness in his work. For he believes, like Czesław Miłosz and Harold Bloom, that poetry saves civilizations from both moral and spiritual collapse, for »in critical moments, according to [C.G. Jung], the collective unconscious of a nation yields a poet who is a torch-bearer or rather a consciousness forged by poetry« (ibid.: 76). Kušar's poetry is highly symbolic, addressing the issue of censorship in a more refined way, questioning relationships of unequal power between different individuals/groups (men/women, the powerful/the marginalized) in a small nation, while admitting that

2 The censorship in ex-Yugoslavia is a complex issue. While Kušar was not subjected to an external, overt censorship, she nonetheless felt a keen sense of what was deemed acceptable, and poetry was a refuge for her due to many other aspects as well.

»My language, myself and my nation have never had it so good as today« (ibid.: 77).³ In poem 30 from *Ljubljana*, the image of men searching for a language that only the slaughtered understand is a haunting reminder of the heart's longing to express that which may only come from loss of life.

Men rush to Babylon to find words
understood by a hundred million slaughtered animals.
I know the smallness
that a poem falls into when
no one bothers to see your fingers.
Or look you in the face!
because they don't know why words exist.
(Kušar 2010: 61)

But her lamentation is never at a standstill. She uses the very power she knows and will not be stifled in her soul for »What's the use of yearning, if it doesn't incite growth?« (ibid.: 61) Kušar has sought an independent path with echoes of Dante, Dickinson, Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva as much as by the writings of Jung and Heraclitus to animate and spiritualize language to open borders, where in poem 31 also from *Ljubljana* »Courage blushes the porcelain and monograms, / and falls on warm mahogany. / When it embraces language and fate, / gravel in the driveway is churned and sent flying« (ibid.).

4

In his view of the imagination as a noble force of the mind, Wallace Stevens goes on to say that the »nobility which is our spiritual height and depth« is insoluble and fluid. However, it »resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes« (1951: 36), which can become »our self-preservation [,] and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives« (ibid. 36). Miriam Drev draws from this noble force by crafting poems that locate and keep the soul alive. In a recent interview she says that she has often felt curtailed by the tradition's restrictive voices. She has received many messages about »how far a woman should or could reach,« causing her to become immobile at times, »in a kind of chrysalis« (Carlson et al. 2017: 116). Her method of »tearing apart frames« is to stretch them into space-time, exploring that emotional locus where history, culture, cosmos and imagination collide. In *Fragments* she senses her ancestors »scattered into dry leaves« that also reside in her. The boundaries blur.

At twilight I take the form of one who is lame,
dragging her leg behind me.
Everyone in the alley hears me hobbling,
my voice strangled from words
stuck in her throat.

I press my face against barbed wire
where, like broken birds,

3 This interview was conducted in 2014.

souls were left dangling.
 Some unable to fly and some
 who simply didn't. I become one
 who restrained himself
 from taking revenge
 against the killers.
 (ibid.: 110)

The under-voice is as haunting as it is powerful. She's drawn to Louise Gluck and could be characterizing her own work when she speaks of Gluck's »paradoxes, keenness and half-disclosed emotions« (Carlson et al. 2017: 121). In the following poem *In Chorus* from her collection *Births*, Drev recounts the legacy of growing up as a woman whose views of love and life were shaped by reading literature that makes sacrificing the heart a morally superior act.

Too much waiting,
 too dependent
 on the lexicon of foreign words,
 on plans whispered in our ears:
 how, where, with whom
 from the mouths of rigid gods.

We gratefully return
 to the owners
 their epiphanies.

(Trans. by author and B. S. Carlson)

In this minimalist ending, she must come to her own vision, recalling the often-subtle workings of repression, reminiscent of Adrienne Rich's ending to her seminal poem *Diving into the Wreck*, Drev values the understated and intuitive as a source of spiritual resistance. As Jay Parini (2008: xii) says of the usefulness of poetry in *Why Poetry Matters*, she »allows consciousness to emerge within the grid of the poem«. She often writes about the individual who finds meaning in the cracks and crevices of life. In her poem *Sooty Heads* about hunting for mushrooms, the old woman »Bent low [...] digs beneath masses of leaves / between the fallen trunks / as if she's unearthing meaning itself.« (Drev 2021)

Women born in the mid-twentieth century have inherited an obedience toward a particular traditional lifestyle that, when it no longer »fits«, catches one off-guard and alone, as she writes in *Existence* like »a speck in the maze.« She recalls a life of constraint, »Inwardly composed, aware / you keep moving down the corridors, / [...] immune to the toxins the pressures, the chill.« She uses the word *vanish* to describe what she can do. »Or else just sit on the fence for a time.« Her language and images are unadorned: »Baking a pastry isn't enough.« The teachings she was given and have adopted have become a shell, pastry layers a metaphor for the layers of protection she must cut and shape »[s]aving / until the crust crumbles.« She hungers for love to fill the layers. »I stay attentive, open, / softly kneading fresh hopes« (ibid.). In English

(her word) *kneading/needling* takes on the double meaning of shaping her own dreams and realizing how crucial and life-affirming they remain.

5

Afaa M. Weaver (2010: 311) suggests in his essay *This is So Esso* that one might »develop as a poet away from the trends of the day. This isolation feels at times like alienation, and the struggle for such poets is to find intimacy in the art itself, as if poetry is a living being«. For Barbara Korun, poetry involves tapping deep from within our feral and primal selves. The voice rises in fierce and passionate lyricism, which becomes a kind of joyful rush breaking out of the dictates of society. In *Every Breath You Take* (translated by Theo Dorgan), she begins: »And then the voice says: Shut down your reason, spread your / wings and soar across the sky. Animals rise in the blood out / of molten rock, a sea of burning floods me, I ride on an / unknown animal, furred and warm. It licks my cheek« (Miller, Pruffer 2008: 151). This animal force, eroticized through the language and imagery, acts ironically to spiritually empower and enrich, thus as resistance against outside forces. Korun's early formal education contained hardly any women poets, as there were few in the Slovenian intellectual canon. Her early poetics was strongly influenced by Zajc and a few other men poets. Only later did she discover Tsvetaeva, Plath, Woolf, Gertrude Stein, June Jordan, Rich, Bachman and Claribel Alegria (Carlson et al. 2017: 151). There's a compulsion in her work to give voice to those that had or have had their voices stifled.

In *Woman without a Name, Noah's Wife* the speaker assumes the inner life of the swarms of the creatures on board. The poem is an embodiment of the human trapped in the dark amid the animals where she has hidden with them »out of pity.« Is it pity for herself then? For her sense of feeling less than a man, or like an animal. She must stay quiet to become part of this underworld, to survive. Just as »I trembled at the darkness and noise, / and of the incomprehensible swarming of creatures unseen / [...] I became one with them, feeling/our total being—warm, damp and stifling.« This is also about surviving by withdrawing to keep safe amid the chaos. During the time of the flood she is with the animals, feeling their grief and hunger, though this is a Godless place. In Korun's version of the story Noah's a stranger »the bearded face of / someone fulfilling God's commands.« When she finally hears him releasing the animals, she feels the light she has forgotten, as her husband has forgotten her. But the light hasn't left; it has been transfigured into a majestic fantastical creature made of the sentient creatures:

When my husband who has forgotten me, opens the door,
 into his chest filled with wind and sun
 a herd of animals will rush—
 a multi-tailed body with thousands of glittering eyes
 moving through every instinct. First—me.
 (Carlson et al. 2017: 145)

The poem enacts the journey from powerlessness, humility and estrangement to empowerment through darkness of the hold to light that is both historical and mythical. The feeling of entrapment that precedes this resurgence is total. Noah's wife becomes one with the animals and emerges as semi-divine. In this way, Korun has created a correlative to God in this woman animate with all the world's most humble and wild.

6

A society controls its narrative through the language it uses. When it wants to cast a particular image that keeps certain groups in power, then words become ideological tools. If we do not understand the weaponization of language, we can become maimed by it. Alenka Jovanovski opens this frame by addressing language itself as it constructs an alternate reality. She writes in *Rehearsals for a Feast at Salo* of a society where »Words mean the inverse of what they mean: / 'transparency' – an alarm for criminal organizations in fog, / 'mother' – a mask of fascism / [...] Everything [is] swapped for *in-between*« (Carlson et al. 2017: 246). This in-between place of subtexts, contradictions, ironies and ambiguities is where »The language of nazis, / spineless as molten rubber, / shall eat us one day« (ibid.).

In another poem *Secrets of the Wise Ones* silence becomes her skin, which then morphs into a fire she kneads: »And this is Discipline. Clarity / rises only after centuries« (Carlson et al. 2017: 247). Jovanovski admits to being afraid to write for a time because she believed that poetry could only be written in a certain way. The Slovenian literary establishment dismissed voices that went outside their view. In addition, those who have questioned or exposed the matrices do not get published or lose the ability to work in cultural institutions (ibid.: 254).

Her stance that »Poetry is just a form of free speech [that] deals with the unconscious in the way that it catches, observes, analyzes and transforms discourses or matrices that enable [...] functioning (neoliberal) societies« (ibid.: 254) is brought to the fore in the poem *To Take Apart Frames*. The syntagm »To take apart frames,« which appears at the beginning of each stanza (except one), is used to explore various kinds of enclosures, constructions, containers and casings that have enabled and previously defined the speaker as a member of society but ultimately serve as constraints, often maintained out of fear of the unknown within those structures. Such ambiguity threatens stability and order. At the beginning, the speaker bids goodbye to the suitcase and »foreign objects that have grown into flesh, / while an organism grew around them and embraced them / in its enormous solitude.« Here is the self, uncertain and fearful of its opened borders, where broken antennas shiver madly, though exhausted in the knowledge received from parents' allegiance and compliance to the system. In the third stanza we encounter the heart in its power, fragility and inscrutability.

To tear apart frames is to behold one's heart,
 this supple lump placed wrongly, this medical miracle
 his exiled heart that pushes its fist through ribs
 stripped of citizenship, papers, residence,
 barely capable of friction and fire

one single drop is fatal
to see one's heart and put it in its place –

The irony is that this lump of flesh can register all our emotions. Its force makes it something threatening that must be subdued. This is not just about raising the fist or »tak[ing] the credit of one's justice« or »wearing white clothes.« Tearing apart frames »is something completely different, unknown, terrifying, / when I say goodbye to the motley surrogates in my body / and at the same time touch them in terror, / now I can say 'this is who I am'« (Carlson et al. 2017: 249). In order to transform the discourse, one must remove all the scaffolding of fixed thought.

In *Nine Gates*, poet and translator Jane Hirshfield (1997: 203) describes the ninth-century Japanese poet Ono no Komachi as a figure in a liminal state who has left her identity to dwell in ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. Komachi in a fourteenth-century *Noh* play chooses immersion and oneness over escape and separation to live through every part of her life. Jovanovski understands she too must step out of the framework of her identity and place in society to find what is left after everything else burns away: this truth. »I tear apart frames and leave, but not to escape / I go as a pine after a fire / holding everything that remains:« (Carlson et al. 2017: 249). She does this not only for the individual self but on behalf of others. It is worth noting too that the poem ends with a colon perhaps to signify further opening into indeterminacy.

7 Conclusion

Each of the poets featured here has taken her own poetic stance to open frames that the society has imposed. Maja Vidmar uses language that is spare and bold in ways that subvert our expectations to feel the spaciousness and import of her vision. Meta Kušar draws her strength and verve from an array of sources in order to energize and deepen the reserves of meaning beyond the here and now. Miriam Drev intuits her way by focusing on the hidden, empowering by drawing out of this space new life. Barbara Korun shares what is sensual, erotic and feral, entering into a kind of liminal language-less place at the source where body and spirit conjoin, and humility is crowned. Jovanovski addresses how language can manipulate us unless we define its parameters for ourselves. »Taking apart frames« honors what slips through our fingers. These voices have with discreet and persistent spirit expanded the range of the possible, creating within the crucible of history, politics, psychology and religion, a space and a vision through language that is wholly their own and radiant.

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