

JOŽE ŽOHAR, A SLOVENE MIGRANT POET FROM AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Jože Žohar migrated »down under« to Australia in 1968 and struggles to pacify inside him the two homelands, Slovenia and Australia. In his three published collections of verse in the Slovene language (1990, 1995, 2004) the poet remains torn between the two countries, between Eros and Thanatos, between a unique erotic experiencing of the homeland and the wish for physical and spiritual ending and closeness of death, which brings deliverance. The article tries to contextualize his recently published book of verse *Obiranje limon* (2004) within recent theories of diasporic writing.

If home(land) is also and especially one's mother tongue, then this is certainly true of Jože Žohar, the Slovene migrant poet who has been living in Australia since 1968. His verse, however, proves that the limitations of his language are not also the borders of his world. Bert Pribac and Pavla Gruden are the other two best known migrant poets from Australia that have published both in Australia and especially in Slovenia (Maver 2002). As a contemporary Slovene migrant poet Žohar experiments, researches the Slovene language potentials and thus constantly tries to expand the borders of his world and language by transcending traditional poetic aesthetics and original linguistic self-awareness. Characteristic for Žohar's poems written in Slovene is linguistic experimentation: palindromes, alliterations, vocal colouring, puns, homonyms and ornamental adjectives, as well as lexical and syntactic play. Experimentation is central to contemporary Slovene poetology and to Žohar it signifies even more: his personal freedom.

He could also be described as a migrant poet from the Prekmurje region, for *genius loci* is of great importance in his verse: on the one hand of the Prekmurje region (the plain and the hills of the Goričko region in Slovenia bordering with Hungary and Austria) and Australia (the arid bush) on the other. Žohar constantly moves between the two locales and identifies with each of them increasingly in his poems. The fact that the poet writes about his Prekmurje experience is significant, because this experience is like the region itself, close to the archetypal, elementary folk tradition, the typical melancholy, mostly flat Prekmurje landscape as the landscape of the mind. In all three collections a strongly present element is the specific geographical environment, which appears in a dual relation: on the one side the poet's native Prekmurje and Goričko, and on the other the Australian desert landscape, which he

co-positions throughout: he wishes to be at the same time »one in two, be there and be here« simultaneously, something he considers a special yet agitating privilege.

In his very first collection of poems *Aurora australis* (Žohar 1990), Jože Žohar states that he does not acknowledge the division between a »physical« and »spiritual« migration, since the two appear to him complementary never appearing separately. In his almost erotic link with all of Slovenia, not only his native Prekmurje, which is to remain in him as »the eternal serpentine«, he feels that the key question is how to reconcile within himself two countries: he became dis-placed and never finally trans-placed, remaining a cultural »hybrid«, half Slovene and half Australian, which in his case represents a sort of homelessness (Maver 1992; cf. also Jurak 1983, 1997). It should be stressed that in the different thematic clusters of this first collection he already reveals a gift for linguistic experimentation, which suggests an allied formal significance, reflecting his dividedness between the »old« and the »new« homeland (cf. Suša 1999). The initial homely sentimentality is replaced by the existential anguish of a migrant and a person *per se*.

Žohar's second collection, *Veku bukev* (To the Crying of Beeches, Žohar 1995), which can mean a chronological definition of his youth spent among the beeches but also crying after it, i.e. an ode to a Proustian »time lost«, time spent among the reeds, poplars and beeches (Maver 1995, 2003). Geographical locale is again of prime importance in the book and it appears in the typical dichotomic relationship: the Prekmurje vs. the Australian bush country are constantly being contrasted and juxtaposed. This second collection of the poet's verse represents his attempt to identify Australia as his new home; yet Žohar remains caught »in between« and sings to the Australian »harem of camels in the desert, tombstones under the eucalypt trees, the waves broken on the shore, kangaroos, run away from bush fires«. Žohar revives alliterative verse, amply uses paronyms (words that are identical but have a different meaning in a changed context) and palindromes (that can be read forwards and backwards and may have the same or a different meaning), amasses numerous homonyms, synonyms and uses onomatopoeia.

Žohar's new verse collection *Obiranje limon* (Lemon-picking, Žohar 2004) shows he has remained true to his bold linguistic experimentation. As a migrant he constantly tests the borders of the Slovene poetic expression, and in this book for the first time he uses rhythmical prose, representing the dark inventory of the poet's life via the metaphors of lemon-picking in Australia. This rhythmical prose or poems in prose (»sketches of things that refused to be a poem«) also represent some sort of reconciliation with the anguishes of a migrant abroad and the significance of »home-land« for an emigrant as »one of us, displaced, with home away from home. Jernej. Domen. The tenth child. And much more« (»Wanderings« VII, 49). Žohar intimately yet only partly accepts Australia as his new homeland, because as a migrant he remains constantly displaced and not fully transplanted (Maver 2004). He sees his life as an endless process of saying good-bye here and there and writes that he is diminished each time he goes away, in Slovenia as well as in Australia, where as the prodigal son he tries to find his peace but where he also finds poetic inspiration: »Where you are now, there is June, when lemons and oranges become ripe, time when you leave all behind and everybody leaves you behind, because you want it like this for a change. For you know full well that among lemon-trees sensually rich poems happen too. Find yourself shelter among them« (»Complaints, Conciliations« II, 29).

The poet's new collection of poems *Obiranje limon* contains seven cycles or thematic clusters: »At Home! At Home! At Home! (The Two of Us)«, »Symposion«, »From Apple-tree Orchards«, »Indian Fragments«, »Lemon-picking«, »Nameless«, and »Word Anguishes«. The first cycle represents the poet's most explicit wording of his migrant experience and the overpowering sense of homelessness.

»Lemon-picking« consists of lengthy poems in prose, and the cycle »Nameless« features puns and linguistic experimentation. Žohar's poems in rhythmical prose are a new form for him (and most other migrant poets from down under), where he shows his essential dividedness between the two »Homes«:

You feel: there is less of you with each new coming back. Anywhere you go, you are merely saying good-bye. From everything and everybody. From bays and beaches.

From the Blue Mountains, when they dwell cold in silence or when they speak out in fire.

From the house which is the home of Home. From eucalypts, magnolia. From fences and walls between wordless neighbours.

From new roots. Yes: from new roots. You feel: there is no more of you with each new coming back. You bite into a ripe lemon,

Suck out its juice. The tongue pricks you. The tongue that is called ...

You feel like crying.

(»Lemon-picking« VIII, 35)

In »Word Anguishes« there are poems consistently written in rhymed stanzas, which once again, as in his earlier work, establishes an erotic relationship with his homeland personified as a woman: (»Who is this coming back / down the muddy road? An old man / to see his bride.«). The cycle »Symposion«, for example, reestablishes the image of a dark »aurora australis« (Australian dawn), the themes and the used allusions and elements taken from Greek mythology are, however, quite new for Žohar. The third cycle »From Apple-Tree Orchards« inspires the poet with melancholy nostalgia, and not only one for home left behind (characterized by apple-trees) but also one for one's own lost youth at the realization of Man's fragility and transience, which drives him to an Australian pub where he does not find solace nor does he feel at home.

The cycle titled »Indian Fragments« represents an important novelty in Žohar's poetic opus, although certain references to Buddhism (or Hinduism in his most recent collection) can already be found in the collection *Veku bukev*. Man's anguish at the realization of his own transience suddenly strikes the poet, a Man, a migrant, as Everyman as a pilgrim through life during his visits to India less dense and pressing, for he seems to be able to find a way out of it in an after-life voyage and search for a new life after death.

Scented flames,

O, bright flames of cremation,

Anoint the body that through you

Offers itself to the gods.

There is the time of search and migration.

All the destinations and terminals are also the returns.

(»Pilgrimages«, 18)

It is interesting that the speaker's experience and thinking about life (abroad) ends with a certain projection into the future, into for him a more »neutral« locale and culture, India, not Slovenia and not Australia. India represents for him, physically and symbolically, »something in-between«, the phrase he uses to describe himself in a previous collection, a Slovene migrant to Australia. The new collection of verse by Jože Žohar *Obiranje limon* connects descriptions of Man's existential anguish with questions of migration.

In the current processes of globalization and trans-nationalization, migrant literature appears particularly important, and this is of course true also of Slovene migrant literature in Australia (where the term migrant has been fittingly used for some time, unlike in some other traditional receptive countries, in order to efface the emitive/receptive country and to stress the inclusive value of migrant transcultural/transnational contribution). Despite the »tyranny of distance« between the two countries, migrant literature should not be ghettoized, in Australia or in Slovenia, and is, in fact, increasingly represented in the main anthologies, published by major publishers, and receives major literary prizes, etc. Slovene migrant writers perceive reality and their own personal experience in two different systems, which is why their work can be regarded an enrichment of both cultures, the source and the target one. Increasingly they are seen as transcultural authors in the best sense of the word, figuring both in the unified Slovene cross-border cultural space worldwide and the Australian multicultural society. These two, as Žohar's most recent collection of verse *Obiranje limon* amply proves, are becoming more and more interchangeable.

Is the future culture/literature of the newly settled migrant countries such as the United States of America, Canada, and Australia going to be part of the melting pot, ethnic mosaic, some transnational hybrid or a new fusion of various ethnic identities? Recently introduced new concepts, in addition to the already well established multiculturalism, are polyvocality and hybridity. Homi Bhabha argues that the concept of hybridity as a form of cultural difference, while sometimes regarded as manipulative, allows the voices of the Other/migrant, the marginalised and the dominated to exist within the language of the dominant group whose voice is never fully in control (Bhabha 1994). In recent theoretical debates diaspora and its writing has been frequently connected with the constructed and transnational nature of identity formation, since the concept refers to both voluntary and involuntary migrations and movements. In the future migrant/diasporic writing should be examined for how it represents »otherness« in a text and how it brings otherness to bear on the actual experience of reading. Contemporary theory of diasporic literature perceives Home as several locales, liberated of the spatial concept of location, which is at the same time deeply embedded in the cultural memory of a migrant and her/his own personal biography.

In Jože Žohar's poetry dis-placement and trans-placement and the fluid diasporic identity, as well as the changing position of the subject in the globalized world show his contemporary »dynamic« global view. The sense of movement in his verse underscores his themes. The two remain in his poetic opus the source of an original and assured artistic inspiration.

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