

Slovene Migrant Poetry In Australia Written In English

Many Slovene migrants in Australia, especially those belonging to the younger generation, have come to accept Australia as a new, second homeland, a lucky and in many ways promised country. (Of course, those authors born to Slovene parents regard themselves as Australians, but they are interested in their “roots”.) Like so many other migrants from various countries of the world, their parents have gone through the process of adaptation and assimilation, which is why they experience a certain linguistic “schizophrenia” that is to be taken as a new positive value. Consequently, they use in their writing, along with Slovene, also English. Although written in English, their work is thus partly the fruit of Slovene poetic sensibility as well as the new Australian experience. For these poets the traditional “migrant” themes are (in most cases) no longer true, such as for example the exaggerated sentimental nostalgia for home or the difficulties to assert oneself in a new environment. Rather, their poems transcend this and deal with general existential and ontological questions, impressions from the Australian landscape and cityscape, coloured, however, by the typical Slovene melancholy. The artistic level of poetry and its literary articulation written by Slovene migrants in Australia has, since the major inflow of migrants right after the Second World War, at the beginning of the fifties, consistently risen. Some bilingualism can be noticed also in the work of the major Slovene migrant poets writing in the Slovene language, such as for example Bert Pribac, Pavla Gruden, and Jože Žohar, but this chapter will focus on three (women) poets writing in English, Michelle Leber,

Irena Birsa, and Danijela Hliš, who is the most important of the three and has had the most extensive verse output (cf. Maver 1998).

Michelle Leber does not link her poems with the Slovene community living in Australia, although she was born to Slovene parents in Melbourne. Her verse is along with a few publications in various anthologies and journals (*Lipa šumi med evkalipti*, A Lime-tree Rustles among the Eucalypts) published in the collection *Fistful of Fever* (Leber 1986). Themes range from eroticism as challenging the time dimension ("Running for Flesh"), "Kiss Me Free"), the Australian Aborigines that are seen as outcasts in a social and spiritual sense trying to find consolation in drinking ("Outcast"), to the theme of urban restlessness and alienation, which may lead to empathy ("Mr E for Empathy"). Urban anxiety, noise and the blunted senses are the reflection of the poet's life and traumas she experiences daily in the dehumanised environment of the city of Melbourne, which she sees as a concrete jungle ("Jungle Jive"). Leber's poems reveal a sincere and subtle poetic sensibility and are written in free verse with occasional alliterations and sound colouring ("A to Z").

If Michelle Leber does not address the theme of the migrant community, then this is not true of Irena Birsa, who was born to Slovene parents in a migrant camp where her parents were placed upon their arrival to Australia. She studied towards an M.A. degree and researched the history of Slovenes in Victoria. The result of her work is the book *Slovenians in Australia* (Birsa 1994), which was published posthumously, after Birsa's death in 1991, and brings a selection of her articles and essays on the social and cultural history of Slovene migrants in Australia. She was posthumously awarded the M.Ed. degree from La Trobe University in Melbourne for the book which is a valuable source of information and a selection of field material on the Slovene press, ethnic radio, religious institutions, process of migration and cultural activity of Slovenes living in Australia.

Between Europe and Australia

Birsa also wrote poems in English which, with a few exceptions, were not published and exist in a manuscript form. They are highly Impressionistic with images taken from nature and some of them also deal with migrant themes. In the latter ones she juxtaposes the calmness in nature, reminding her of “home”, the home of her parents, Slovenia, and, on the other hand, “Little Slovenia” in Melbourne where her home is and the adopted home of her parents. The poem “Our Little Suburban Plot of Land” (Birsa 1991) contains numerous alliterations and the tiny canary is an effective metaphor for a migrant, who sings only now and then, “Communicating with the local birds/ On something /she/ will never understand”. In her view even the noise of the modern Melbourne cannot “defeat” the “Little Slovenia”, for the national feelings of its people are strong. The poems “Summer’s First peach” and “The Budding Rose” are again full of alliterations and built on the impressions from nature. The peach turns out to be a metaphor representing life, ended suddenly in resignation, while the tyranny of time slowly eats up her youth, “my tiny rose”. Birsa’s poems are fine lyrical impressionistic poems in a poetic way expressing her feelings about the passage of life and existential anguish.

Poetry written by Danijela Hliš expresses the complexity of human relations and the fate of a migrant in a new environment. Mirko Jurak writes that “she can more easily accept the social, cultural and physical differences which exist between her native Slovenia and Australia. Although she is happy about the important political and social changes and the independence of Slovenia (1990-1991) she feels at home in Australia, accepting its positive and its negative sides” (Jurak 64). As shown in her verse, she is clearly open to new experiences and already accepts Australia as a second (home)land.

Apart from some poems and a considerable amount of fiction written in the Slovene language, Danijela Hliš writes most frequently in English. This bilingualism is typical of the “younger”

generation of Slovene migrants of the first generation in Australia. In 1991 she published her first collection of poems, a bilingual one, *Whisper - Šepetanje*, which was reported in the Australian press (Simmonds, 3), while her recent collection *Hideaway Serenade* (1996) is written exclusively in English. She has published poetry and fiction in the magazine for multicultural literature and culture *Australian Multicultural Book Review*, published in Melbourne, and in *Today I Write... Rainbow Rising: An Anthology of Victorian Association of Multicultural Writers*. In volume 1 of the latter magazine she along with fiction in English published the poem in immaculate French "Des mots, des pensées, les désirs..." (12-13), which has an almost identical beginning with the poem having the same title "Words, Thoughts, Desires..." (8) published in *Hideaway Serenade*, which is, however, much shorter than the one in French.

In the same volume there is also her poem "Spring Buds", which she, prolonged by a stanza, published also in *Hideaway Serenade* (31). In the added stanza she describes the sunset in the Australian bush, which "swims/ in a sublime beautitude", which she her acceptance of the new land. "Whisper - Šepetanje" in her first collection of poetry can thus signify a woman, hope, a migrant, pain, ecstasy or rainbows, as run the subtitles of individual thematic clusters in the collection. The most frequent themes she uses in her verse are the migrant's trauma and (at least initial) isolation in the new environment, problems connected with the growing up process, love and eroticism as part of our everyday lives. Similarly to two other Slovene migrant poets in Australia, Jože Žohar and Bert Pribac, she fully accepts Australia as a new homeland and feels emotionally at one with the new land.

Danijela Hliš is probably the sole Slovene author living in Australia, who was just very recently requested for permission to have her poem "A Job for my Daddy" reprinted from her collection *Whisper*, and included in the secondary school text-book *Australian Mosaic: An Anthology of Multicultural Writing*, to be

published by the prestigious publishing house Heinemann (Heinemann). The fact that Australian secondary-school pupils are going to read and learn about her poem testifies to her “canonization”, i.e. the acceptance into the Australian mainstream literature, even if within the multicultural sphere of writing, which can be regarded as quite an achievement.

In 1996 appeared a new collection *Hideaway Serenade*, written by Danijela Hliš who lives at Bicheno in Tasmania. Its launch attracted a keen interest of the local media. The collection consists of five thematic parts and is visually complemented by photographs contributed by the author, her husband and various friends. Some of the poems had previously been printed in various journals and magazines in Slovenia and Australia alike, such as, for example, *Rodna gruda*, *Prints*, *Women in Harmony*, *Australian Multicultural Book Review*, *Today I Write*, *Marie Claire*, which points to the active literary aspirations and career of the author.

The first thematic section “If Only We Had Wings” contains most of Hliš’s thoughts on her emigrant fate and life “down under” and it definitely does not come first gratuitously. The wording of this emigrant experience is, however, ambivalent, for it describes Slovenia not merely in a nostalgic way but also with some bitterness as in her previous collection *Whisper*. In the poem “Words, Thoughts, Desires...” the speaker of the poem sees the Australian bush as “a blessed state”, which makes her perfume the body “with the exotic scents of freedom” (8). She concludes tellingly by saying that she is no longer merely a searching and unstable emigrant stranded in Australia:

I am no longer a bird of passage,
I am a powerful force, an agitation,
a stem for you to lean upon. (8)

The poem "May It Never Be Too Late" echoes the poet's sorrow for leaving behind, in Slovenia, her family. She hopes that it may never be too late to go back, to be able to leave "the door ajar" (9). But can one, indeed, recapture the past, the fleeting moment which is never to return? As if the poet were aware that this wish is to no avail, since she ends the poem by using a rhetorical question and calling it a (bad?) dream:

In my dream I hear your voice,
on the platform in Ljubljana,
twenty years ago, parting
yet again:
"Daughter dear, you are never here,
what is the use of living,
with you so far away?" (9)

In "My Son" Danijela Hliš speaks about mother and son fighting. Although she has no children of her own, it is the prerogative of an artist to see things from different angles and points of view. As the poet said at the launch of her book: "Sometimes I write as myself and sometimes I write as another person, not from my own experiences but from observations,..." (Simmonds). A very intimate and subtle expression of her nostalgia for Slovenia is the poem "The Old Country" in which she does not explicitly say she is nostalgic about the native land, the past, about youth that is no more. Rather, by using a series of metaphors standing for trees, she describes the fading of her memory of "the old country", metaphorically by the leaves that "keep falling./ Silently, gracefully." She has employed this technique in her verse before by contrasting the Slovene oak and the Australian eucalypt tree. The feeling she has about the old country is very ambiguous

and complex and can hardly be described: she calls it love, fear and peace.

There's a strange feeling inside me,
something like love,
or fear,
something like peace,
wanting to burst,
for the trees and the people. (12)

The second cycle "Poems for My Husband", as indicated by the title, is dedicated to the poet's husband, Helmut Rademacher, and is therefore intensely personal. However, there are at least two common features to be found in all of these poems. First, there is the omnipresent and dominating presence of the ocean with which the poet constantly offsets her feelings of sexuality and love alike. Make no mistake, the ocean is in actuality the Hideaway at Bicheno on the Tasmanian East coast, a complex of tourist chalets that the poet runs with her husband, which is the setting that permeates the collection. The ocean as "the ocean of marriage" (23) is thus not merely the background but a real personage of the poems, for example in "Raindrops" (18) and "Sweet Longing" (19). The second recurrent feature, of which maybe even the poet may not be fully rationally but definitely not emotionally aware, is a kind of inexplicable existential aloneness, which for Hliš can only be alleviated in love, the ultimate freedom ("In love we are free." 19). The descriptions of sexual and emotional harmony between the two lovers is of an almost metaphysical stature (cf. John Donne's best known love poems), where the sun is superfluous ("I am waiting for the sun to hide..." 18) and where the lovers in perfect harmony want to remain in bed and not get up ("Love, we must get up!" 22). The word alone is the key word here, e.g. "so horribly alone" in the poem "Raindrops" (18), and in the poem "I Am not Alone" (21) the

title of which speaks for itself, “yet never alone”, “but never alone” in “You and Me”:

We're old,
happy and calm,
content and aware
that our love is still here.
We touch and talk,
talk and giggle,
dance and wriggle,
write and scribble, we listen to the love songs
and we pray,
 thanking God,
 for this life and love,
 for being together.
Old, so old, my love,
but never alone... (20)

In the cycle “The Weeping Tree” the speaker’s voice is decidedly more pessimistic, full of regrets and dark thoughts, partings and death, about the dark sides of human nature from which no one (“Winter and War”, 26; “They Roam My Mind”, 26) and no place (“Murder”, 27) is exempt. The poem “The Baby” (29) echoes the war in the former Yugoslavia, while the poet’s adolescence is referred to in “Growing Up” (29). The next cycle titled “Like a Fish on the Beach” contains some fine confessional poems dedicated to her mother and as a Cankarian (as in Ivan Cankar, a Slovene writer) image, as we know it from Slovene literature. In “Mother” (36) Danijela Hliš celebrates her beauty, patience, hope for the future, optimism. The event described is when the poet is about to board the plane to leave, probably to fly away from home again, far beyond the horizon that lures her, to Australia perhaps. Only on such an occasion she is actually able to

utter the magic and “difficult” words for any child to say, namely that the poet loves her mother:

She swallows her sorrows as
if they were chocolates.
In the distance,
she imagines better days,
greater loves,
happier people.

My mother rests her head
on my shoulder,
her eyes closed, she can
see the paradise.
Deep shadows will return
as I board the plane.
Shyly I tell her I love her. (36)

In the poem “My Mother” (38) she again feels sorry for having caused pain to her beloved mother by leaving home and wonders whether the mother is aware of what is going on in her mind, the suffering she experiences:

Will she ever comprehend how
the sirens scream
in my head
when I see her so old,
so lonely and so afraid?
We could cry together, then.

The final cycle of Danijela Hliš’s collection *Hideaway Serenade*, titled “After the Storm”, consists mostly of fine and delicate nature Impressionistic poems (colours, sounds, scents), which point to the poet’s Romantic bent. She is fascinated by the beauty of images from nature in which she sees reflections of her

own self, her moods and feelings (e.g. "The Scent of Evening", "The Storm", 42; Wordsworthian "Rainbows", 43; Shelleyian "The Full Moon", 44). Often she finds herself in perfect harmony with nature, with the omnipresent ocean always in the background ("The Moon, Me, and the Tree,/ what blissful harmony." 44).

Danijela Hliš belongs to the younger generation of Slovene poets of the first generation living and writing in Australia, both in Slovene and recently more frequently in English. She is bilingual in her poetry and masters English as the medium of artistic and intimate personal expression. In some of the (multicultural) poems the migrant's fate is still present, in some completely absent, which shows that she is evolving as a poet in her own right, although she originally started off as a migrant poet. Some of these fine latter poems mentioned here, especially those dedicated to her mother and the nature poems, transcend the migrant readership. She is probably the first Slovene migrant poet in Australia to be included in a major secondary-school textbook, which brings her to the Australian literary limelight. A case to follow for other Slovene poets in diaspora.

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