

Criticism in the Closet

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the attitudes of Slovenian literary reviewing towards LGBT literature. The quantitative part of my research shows that there is no obvious discrimination at work when it comes to the critical consideration of LGBT works; the mapping of the critical coverage of selected books compared with the coverage of works by non-LGBT authors does not indicate any deviations. Also there is no important difference in the critical coverage of LGBT books within different types of media (web portals, print, radio). But since writing a review of an LGBT work does not automatically mean “inclusive” critical practices, I also did a qualitative analysis of texts. Most reviewers provide a thorough overview of the main topics of the selected works, they understand their socially engaged potential, they listen actively when homophobia is in focus, etc. It turns out literary reviewing is not ignorant and exclusionary, it is striving for a greater visibility of LGBT works. But in doing so, it is also regrettably superficial.

Keywords: LGBT literature, literary reviews, discrimination, inclusiveness

In order to investigate the relationship between the current critical production and LGBT literature I have taken into consideration some of the latest Slovenian LGBT works: the novel *Piknik* (2015) by Nataša Sukič, the poetry book *Ostani* (2014) by Nataša Velikonja, the novel *Objemi norosti* (2015) by Brane Mozetič, the book of poetry *Tišima* (2015) by Uroš Prah, the book of poems *Poletni volkovi* (2015) by Petra Hrovatin, Milan Šelj's poetry book *Gradim gradove* (2015), Vesna Lemaič's novel *Kokoška in ptiči* (2014), poems by Ciril Bergles, collected in *Cuerpo plural* (2014), and the anthology of European lesbian poetry *Brez besed ji sledim* (2015). With the exception of the poetry book by Prah all these books were published by the Škuc publishing house, which specialises in LGBT literature.

Through a quantitative analysis of the reviews of the selected works I searched for an answer to how actively the reviewers dealt with these books and in what types of

publications their reviews were published, so that the results could be compared with the coverage of other comparable Slovenian books. My analysis covered some of the more popular publications – the newspapers *Delo* and *Dnevnik*, the weekly *Mladina*, the literary journals *Literatura*, *Dialogi*, *Sodobnost*, the radio stations *Radio Slovenija*, *Radio Študent*, and the web portals *literatura.si*, *Airbeletrina* and *Koridor*.

Table 1

	Delo	Dnevnik	Mladina	Literatura	Sodobnost	Dialogi	R SLO	RŠ	literatura.si	Airbeletrina	Koridor	SUM
Piknik	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
Ostani	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	5
Objemi norosti	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	6
Tišima	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	4
Poletni volkovi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Gradim gradove	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Kokoška in ptiči	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	8
Cuerpo plural	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brez besed ji sledim	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SUM	4	1	2	3	1	1	5	4	3	1	3	28

In the sample of 28 reviews, Table 1 shows above all that there is no crucial difference between the critical coverage of LGBT literary production among various media types. The possible assumption that lesbian and gay books, in contrast to more traditional printed media, would be more often covered in newer electronic portals, where reviews would be published by a younger and more liberal generation of reviewers, is wrong.

In the case of printed media, specialized literary journals could have done better. *Delo* is undoubtedly more active in covering selected books than *Dnevnik* or *Mladina*, but this is also due to the fact that the latter two rarely or never publish poetry reviews. In addition, these journals tend to cover LGBT topics in different ways – e.g. through interviews.

Radio has proven to be the most prominent. The slightly more traditional *Radio Slovenija* as well as the more alternative *Radio Študent* have aired more reviews in this period (9) than any other media: daily newspapers and weekly magazines (7), literary journals (5), electronic portals (7).

The Comparison

The second part of the quantitative analysis encompasses a mapping of the selected books with comparable books that do not belong to the category of LGBT. The purpose of such

a strategy is motivated by the question of whether books written by lesbians and gays are truly overlooked in comparison with the majority production. This kind of comparison is of course a risky one with such a small sample, as my choices are also marked by a subjective assessment, however, I attempted to achieve as much representability as possible. Due to lack of space, I will only present some of the examined cases below.

Table 2

	C. Lipuš: <i>Kaj smo, ko smo</i>	N. Velikonja: <i>Ostani</i>	B. Korun: <i>Čečica, motnjena od ljubezni</i>
Nr. of reviews	3	5	0

Velikonja received the highest recognition of the City of Ljubljana for her *Ostani* poetry book; furthermore, her book was one of the focal points of the Pranger festival. With the bilingual poetry book *Čečica, motnjena od ljubezni* (KUD Ivan Trinko, 2014) Korun was selected the same year for the Pranger festival. She – despite being a recipient of the Veronika prize (*Pridem takej*, 2011) – did not receive any reviews for *Čečica*. I compare them with Lipuš, who received the Prešeren Fund award in 2016 for her book of poems *Kaj smo, ko smo* (Beletrina, 2015), but Velikonja ranks higher for the number of reviews as well, even though both books were nominated for the Veronika prize at the same time.

Table 3

	M. Dekleva: <i>Telo iz črk</i>	B. Mozetič: <i>Objemi norosti</i>	P. Čučnik: <i>Otročjost</i>
Nr. of reviews	7	6	2

In Table 3 I compare three established poets from different generations who have recently published a novel alongside their rich and award-winning poetry oeuvre (all three winners of the Jenko prize, Dekleva and Čučnik also recipients of the Veronika prize). The fewest responses were received by Čučnik's *Otročjost* (LUD Literatura, 2013), regardless of the fact that he is the most social media savvy of the three, while Mozetič received a comparable number of reviews to Dekleva for the novel *Telo iz črk* (Beletrina, 2015), and despite the fact that Dekleva was nominated for the Kresnik prize in the same year.

Table 4

	Ciril Bergles: <i>Cuerpo plural</i>	Ciril Bergles: <i>Lazar se odpravlja domov</i>
Nr. of reviews	0	1

It only made sense to compare recently (2013) deceased Bergles to himself; in the year after his death two of his poetry books were published – *Cuerpo plural* and the much less gay-marked *Lazar se odpravlja domov* (Mladinska knjiga, 2014). Even though the latter was also chosen for the Pranger festival assessment it only received one critical response, while *Cuerpo plural* received none.

I can conclude that we cannot talk about LGBT works being overlooked or discriminated regarding their critical treatment, at least not during the observed period. However, a critic's decision to write reviews of a lesbian or gay book does not automatically imply "inclusive" critical practices.

Reviews under Scrutiny

In the continuation of the paper I carefully examine all the 28 reviews in order to analyse the critical discourse. My question was whether the critical apparatus of an individual reviewer is influenced by the very subject of the literary work and the reviewer's own intimate and our common cultural context. I examined closely the critic's argumentation.

Impeccable, Superfluous, Outdated?

"The latest poetry book by Šelj, *Gradim gradove*, was given to me with a label that this is one of the most intimate books of gay poetry. I felt somewhat like someone presented me with a book written by a female poet and saying that it represents beautiful female poetry. Would somebody offer me a book of a Slovene poet and say – this is one of the most extraordinary works of male poetry? No, they would not. And after reading all the sensual (homo)erotic poems, the aforementioned label finally got a positive connotation," is what is written in the introduction to Pregl Kobe's review of the aforementioned poetry book, which I find – despite the good intention of the reviewer – alarming. It reveals either the homophobia of whoever presented the reviewer with the book, or an unusual social sensitivity of the reviewer. After years of experience in the Slovenian literary scene I would nevertheless hope to claim that the term *gay poetry* is not marked in value. Pregl Kobe continues that "the remark that Šelj is a gay poet is nevertheless partly important, as it is important that he has lived in London for many years and occasionally in Karst ...", which shows a certain embarrassment, to say the least. This note is more than just partially relevant to Šelj's book; when the review reports on "bridges to understand otherness" and "brave confessions of difference", it probably does not speak of those who are brave because they live in London rather than Maribor.

While one reviewer writes almost in fear of naming what could allegedly cause harm, another suffers from a similar kind of concern for the LGBT community – it seems obvious to her to be explicitly supportive. A critic who assessed *Poletni volkovi*,

for example, sympathizes with the anger of the lesbian subject, which is “quite justified, especially after the disappointment that was caused in December by the intolerance of Slovenian society [probably thinking of the unsuccessful referendum on LGBT rights]” (Šoster a). However, this kind of criticism can often result in righteousness rather than criticism.

On the other hand, some of the reviewers do not concern themselves with naming names at all. Two of the four critics reviewing Prah’s *Tišima* do not state that this is gay poetics (no mention of homosexuality), although it is obvious from the added quotations that this fact was not overlooked. A similar issue emerges in one of the reviews of Mozetič’s novel, which is interesting also because of its diametric interpretations, as one reviewer reads it as a “story about a writer’s everyday life” (Bogataj a), while another one as a “story of gay sex” (Vrščaj).

Does it therefore mean that some reviewers believe that the label LGBT literature is irrelevant, superfluous, outdated? Such ‘normalization’ would probably have been well accepted in different social circumstances, but for the establishment and continuity of lesbian and gay literary tradition that have been in the shadows for too long, “naming names” is one of the priorities, as Bonnie Zimmerman emphasised almost thirty years ago (461).

The Meaning of Difference, the Difference in Meaning

That criticism should still be taking care of the practices of inclusion I also gather from Velikonja’s writing, which, among others, relies heavily on Martha Nell Smith. She divides the history of lesbian poetry into what the “invisible” lesbian poets wrote before the 1960s and the highly politicized lesbian poetry of the past decades, which “changes the history of poetry and thus the culture itself, since it introduces the necessary cognitive correction into it: it introduces a *difference* in the so far (hetero)sexually monolithic literary canon, namely the (homo)sexual *difference*” (216).

I cite the quote as it is relevant to a kind of universalization of love or de-centralization of homosexuality in certain reviews. Such an example is already the title of one of *Piknik*’s reviews: “It’s not about lesbianism, it’s about love” (Babnik a). And in the words of Babnik in connection with the same novel: “Most attention is paid to describing the ups and downs in a homoerotic relationship, but this is not a matter of exposure to lesbianism, but to show how fragile and breakable love can be ...”. The review of the *Ostani* also insists that it is a poetry book “which calls for identification, to hell with lesbianism (after all, everything is in class and race, is it not?)” (Babnik b) and continues to be read as a manifest of love (and not lesbianism). Similarly, one of the reviewers of *Poletni volkovi* emphasizes that the poetry book “serves as a recorded monument of love, no matter which kind” (Šoster a).

Not Friends, but Lovers

Among the problematic points in some of the reviews are also inaccuracies in marking relations between literary persons, who are more than once labelled as “friends” or “spiritual comrades” instead of “lovers”.

Because of the ignorance of the cultural history of the LGBT movement some of the reviews miss important references, which can be classified as poor reading. If one reviewer finds that Prah obviously likes to play with words, which even “announces the title of the poetry book, this strange *tišima*, which cannot be explained through the poems, but rather made even more complicated. Other poems are also strangely titled, so that one wonders, if the words are not in fact typing mistakes ...” (Šoster b), another reviewer has no issues with decoding. She finds the verb ‘to silence’ in the sense of reconciling, filling, sealing, as well as the Styrian dual form in the unusual suffix of the verb. But at the same time noting that “the title easily alludes to the controversial Japanese writer and director Mishima, who ultimately professed his homosexuality in literature ...” (Pungeršič a).

Lastly, I would like to emphasize the still insufficient critical insight into the linguistic and stylistic procedures of LGBT authors. If I come back to the case of Prah’s poetry – many reviewers correctly detect the breakdown of verses and linguistic neologisms, but they cannot find an explanation for such literary manoeuvres. Perhaps they are the kind offered by a very precise reviewer of *Tišima*, that the poet’s language “is dissolved so that a new, more precise, more appropriate, yet unladen markers could be created from its remains. The desire to define an altered social reality and the individual in it with a new vocabulary is, of course, an old, but obviously, always provocative intention” (Pungeršič a).

Good-Natured or Exclusionary?

Before anyone gets the wrong impression of Slovenian literary reviewers, let me make it clear that I have mentioned only individual, but sufficiently elaborate critical practices. However, the purpose of this text is not to point fingers, but above all to point out that sometimes the most self-evident and benevolent critical decisions can be – exclusionary.

Most of the reviewers thoroughly analyse the basic themes of the selected LGBT works, for example the love between people of the same sex, both through emotional proximity and sexual relations, and do not disregard the importance of desire, fear, pain. They describe the social position of the characters, devote themselves to the meaning of the body, which is “on the edge of discomfort” (Bešter) and wants to be set free, which also gives meaning to illustrative descriptions of sexuality, etc.

They understand that these are politically critical, sometimes autobiographical works for the “underground” (Sinanović), as they use intimacy to allow the readers “an

insight into something wider and larger – at least the state of margin, if not the relationship of Slovene society to homosexuality” (Putrle Srđić). Accordingly, reviewers pay attention to the “interplay between the private and the public” (Babnik b), they also take an active stance in cases of authorial censorship of homophobia and social repression, they notice “the fragile and endangered but fundamental identity which has been built by the subjects in decades of their lesbianism” (Putrle Srđić). They also notice the significance of the spatial placement, “physical or spiritual space” (Pungeršič b) is encountered, since the works are placed in the setting of the pride parade, the lesbian scene, the lesbian club Monokel, etc.

They notice “how practice and theory should and are able to mix” (Babnik b) in these books, for example, they find connections with Foucault. They are attentive to a wider cultural and artistic context, including for example Patti Smith, Virginia Woolf, Suzana Tratnik, the *Lesbo Magazine*, the film *Clouds over Sils Maria*. In several places they point out that the strategy of the persistence of literary characters and perhaps also the authors is artistic creation, also as a rebellion against established social norms. “Discourse on second-class citizenship and otherness” (Babnik c) is not perceived by reviewers only in the relationship between the capitalist present and members of the LGBT community, but ultimately, among others: refugees, mental patients and other representatives of overlooked communities or groups.

A Dangerous Critical Adventure

So when I ask myself what is the relationship between literary reviewing and existing social problems in Slovenia, I can conclude we do not have a problem with criticism, but at the same time we do have one. Criticism is not ignorant and exclusionary as a rule, LGBT literature is no longer perceived as merely intended for lesbian and gay readers. Slovenian reviewers actively strive for a greater visibility of the oppressed, but are overly cautious and undecided, rarely discriminatory, often ‘only’ superficial. I doubt that more or less so than when dealing with other literature. The only fact is that the negative consequences in LGBT area are due to, as Velikonja calls it, historical amnesia, which still limits gays and lesbians in the (re)construction of their artistic tradition, and due to the social climate shaped by the new rise of fascism, more socially and politically binding. To change the love relationship between the characters in Velikonja’s poem into a friendly one is just so much more problematic than if a reviewer does the same with a love relationship in the poems of a straight author. And it seems that criticism is aware of that.

Zimmerman noted that the work of a lesbian critic often involves “twisting into darkened corners, reading between the lines, understanding what has not been said or what is difficult to imagine. It is a dangerous critical adventure that may yield results

that violate the norms of traditional criticism, but may at the same time transform our understanding of the possibilities offered by literature" (458). And although Zimmerman speaks of lesbian criticism, I wonder – is not this the task of any criticism? If criticism engages in promoting social change, then its only option is to violate, to go beyond its own norms. It has to come out of the closet in order to avoid ending up in the closet of history.

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