

Simpozij OBDOBJA 40

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**Poetry in an Expanded Field: Franci Zagoričnik and Nina Dragičević**

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objavljeno v:

Darja Pavlič (ur.): *Slovenska poezija. Obdobja 40*. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2021.

<https://centerslo.si/simpozij-obdobja/zborniki/obdobja-40/>

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Obdobja (e-ISSN 2784-7152)

Univerza v Ljubljani  
Filozofska fakulteta



## POETRY IN AN EXPANDED FIELD: FRANCI ZAGORIČNIK AND NINA DRAGIČEVIĆ

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DOI:10.4312/Obdobja.40.23-29

V prispevku obravnavam preobrazbe poezije, ki so se zgodile v dveh različnih zgodovinskih trenutkih: med hladno vojno v Evropi in v obdobju globalizacije. Kot primera sta prikazana vizualna poezija Francija Zagoričnika in ukvarjanje z besedami, zvoki in glasbo Nine Dragičević. V svoji vizualni poeziji (v poznih šestdesetih in sedemdesetih letih) v času socialistične Jugoslavije je Zagoričnik uporabljal mednarodni jezik poezije, da bi presegel meje nacionalne kulture, kar pa je bilo tedaj razumljeno kot transgresivna praksa. Na drugi strani pa lahko v času globalizacije v samostojni Sloveniji poezijo Nine Dragičević razumemo kot del globalnega performativnega preobrata. Kot skladateljica, zvočna umetnica in literatka se ukvarja z ritmom verzov in njihovo govorno interpretacijo. O njenem delu razpravljam kot o simptomatičnem za slovensko pesniško sceno, pa tudi v povezavi z globalnimi tokovi in poeziji.

performativni preobrat, vizualna poezija, socializem, globalizacija, Franci Zagoričnik, Nina Dragičević

In this paper, I will explore the transformations of poetry that took place during two different historical moments: Cold War Europe and the age of globalisation. Franci Zagoričnik's visual poetry and Nina Dragičević's work with words, sounds and music will be discussed as examples. In his visual poetry (late 60s and 70s) during the time of socialist Yugoslavia, Zagoričnik used international poetry language in order to transcend the boundaries of national culture, which was considered a transgressive practice at that time. On the other hand, during the age of globalisation in independent Slovenia, Dragičević's poetry can be understood as part of a global performative turn. As a composer, sound artist and writer, she works with the rhythm of lines and with their oral interpretation. Their work will be discussed as symptomatic of the Slovene poetry scene, as well as in relation to global trends in poetry.

performative turn, visual poetry, socialism, globalisation, Franci Zagoričnik, Nina Dragičević

### 1 Introduction

In American experimental poetry we can find two similar terms. *Poetry in an open field*, related to Charles Olson's manifesto *Projective verse*. Projective verse is open verse leading to a »new poetics and to new concepts« (Olson 1973: 148). Olson established *visual poetics* (Drucker 1996: 47), rejecting rhyme, metre, sound

repetitions and the standard layout of the poem, which are all subordinated to the self-expressing lyrical I. *Poetry in an expanded field* is deduced from the work of John Cage, who intended to broaden the field of music and the meaning of media (Đurić 2017: 1). Analogously, the definition of poetry is broadened to include its performance in various media on and off the page. The practice of *visual poetics* ranges from Mallarmé via the avant-gardes, the neo-avant-gardes (Drucker 1996) to the contemporary moment in which poets act within a wide field of literary production. Experimental poetry is self-reflective, and, as Dušan Pirjavec wrote in the 1960s, it »turns to itself« (Pirjavec 1983: 133). *Turning to itself* is not separated from society, because poetry is social practice.

Through a short analysis of Franci Zagoričnik's concrete poetry (1933-1997) and Nina Dragičević's (1984) book of poetry, I will point out how contextual changes impact the production of poetry. Zagoričnik's and Dragičević's poetry performs within the concept of *poetry in an expanded field*, but in different historical moments. Zagoričnik's poetry was created within the culture of socialist Yugoslav Slovene poetry, and Dragičević's is produced within the culture of late post-socialist Slovene poetry, drawing on globalised art practices. Zagoričnik belonged to the male-centred (even macho) formation of the Slovene neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, which rarely if ever included female authors. Thanks to the globalisation of feminism during the 1990s, female poets joined the poetry scene, and this is the context in which Dragičević is acting. The Slovene neo-avant-garde was constituted as multimedial and international, questioning the constraints of self-managed socialist culture. Dragičević acts in the age of neoliberal globalisation in which the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde are historicised, so that multimediality and multidisciplinary are in accordance with the neoliberal imperative for creativity in production and consumption, as well as in art production.

## 2 Franci Zagoričnik and concrete poetry

Franci Zagoričnik's concrete poetry is defined as ultra-modernist, avant-garde, i.e. neo-avant-garde (Poniž 2001: 189-190). It is avant-garde because it belongs to experimental poetry practices. As a neo-avant-garde formation, it appeared after WWII and, within the new historical, technological, geopolitical and geocultural environments, it radicalised concepts of the historical avant-garde. Denis Poniž (2001: 190) defined the avant-garde as the »multiple destruction of the traditional language of poetry, and along with it, implicitly, its ideological patterns, which in the decade after WWII established such poetic language as an aesthetic canon and aesthetic norm of contemporary Slovene poetry«.

In socialism, poetry had a role in shaping the everyday routine of working people. At the same time, modernist poetry appeared with a symbolic role in shaping socialist modernist national identity. In the realisation of this paradigm, Western mainstream poetry models were used (i.e. T. S. Eliot), which were nationalised and hybridised when mixed with local traditions. During the 1960s, in the culture of socialist Slovene Yugoslav poetry, the radical poets Matjaž Hanžek, Tomaž Šalamun, Iztok Geister

Plamen, along with a distinguished role by Zagoričnik, broke the boundaries of socialist culture. Their work was produced under conflicting forces. The Cold War and its »iron curtain« separated the socialist East from the capitalist West (the forces of divergence, separating these political-economic cultural fields). At the same time, the forces of convergence were active, ranging from the welfare state to the new media, and the consumerist and popular culture (Duda 2005). All these phenomena spread internationally thanks to new technologies, changing life in the West and in the East, especially in Yugoslavia with its medial position between the two blocs. Another phenomenon should be mentioned: the appearance of the counterculture, with its critique of dominant social paradigms and ideologies.

After WWII, the tradition of the historical avant-garde in socialism came to an end, but under the influence of transnational currents these practices were »rediscovered«. In 1967, Kosovel's *Integrali* was published, which was connected to this new poetry practice. Concrete poetry internationalised the Slovene Yugoslav poetry culture. Apart from the negative reactions by the political and cultural public, during the 1970s Slovene neo-avant-garde poetry was canonised (Hribar 1984; Poniž 1989). Poets rejected the lyrical I and insisted on a »collectivist spirit« (Poniž 2011: 8). That is why I am dealing with Zagoričnik and focusing on the principles which he followed in his work.

By giving up on dealing with the ideals of socialist society and with the national identity of its poetry, the concrete poets, with this radical gesture, made a deep cut into the tissue of Slovene poetry. The usual communicative function of poetic language was abandoned in favour of a new poetry which would be able to communicate without the mediation of translation. For this reason, poets like Zagoričnik used graphic and visual signs. Concrete poetry posits itself between poetry and visual art practice. According to Johanne Drucker (1996: 44), »poetic meaning [is] isomorphic with its visual structure, with its representational form, and its appearance on the page«. This minimalism is the mark of ultramodernism. Concrete poetry works through its procedures to desemanticise (empty of meaning) and resemanticise (attach meaning to new content). The visual aesthetics appears by using repetitive techniques and by spatial design of words and other signs on the page. Although linguistic signs always retain their referential potential, through these procedures it is destabilised and opened up to the play of signifiers with signifiers in which their material aspect (visual and implicitly acoustic) is foregrounded.

Tine Hribar emphasised that the range of Zagoričnik's poetry encompasses classical approaches to writing, working with signifiers (the phonemic and graphemic level of letters and words), demonstrating the productive and non-representative (mimetic) power of language in generating meaning. Hribar concluded that through his work, Zagoričnik had the most important role in the process which led to the autonomous differentiation and modernisation of Slovene poetry in the mid-1960s in relation to the »homogenous proto-modernist poetry of the earlier period« (Slo: »homogeno protomodernistično poezijo iz prejšnjega obdobja«) (Hribar 1984: 206).

I will consider one segment from Zagoričnik's poem *Dajla* as an example of how minimalism functions in semantic concrete poetry:

b) na poti za dajlo

kakšen kakšna kakšno

čemu  
iščem te  
hočem te  
neznano te  
...

kaj si  
kdo si  
da bodi  
dan bodi  
dana bodi  
danaida bodi<sup>1</sup>

(in: Hribar 1984: 71)

A *pattern* is made of words on the page, pointing out how, by adding to or taking away phonemes from a word's root, a new meaning is generated. The poem demonstrates how language as a signifying mechanism functions, and at the same time, self-reflectively shows us that this is exactly the function of this poem.

### 3 Nina Dragičević and hybrid poetry

Nina Dragičević came to the artistic and theoretical scene during the period of late globalisation, in independent Slovenia, in which, as Matevž Kos (2006: 158) wrote, poetry and the whole culture became peripheral. In the 1990s, during transition, feminism was globalised, and this enabled the establishment of feminist and gender studies and the appearance of feminist and lesbian activist organizations. Eventually, after 2000, Slovene poetry and critical production was feminised (Balžalorsky Antić 2020: 35). As a result, the field of art was structurally changed thanks to the increasing presence of female authors, especially poets. Anglo-American gynocriticism provided the conceptual framework for dealing with female authorship and a female poetic tradition (Novak Popov 2003: 250-285 in: Balžalorsky Antić 2020). At the same time, LGBT+ literary production became visible, with the publishing house ŠKUC and with the Lambda collection as an institutional framework for publishing contemporary gay and lesbian literature. This is the context of Nina Dragičević's work.

Works of experimental poets in Slovenia were canonised during the 1970s. With the postmodernism of the 1980s, Slovene poets dealt with styles of different historical epochs, so that radical poetry became part of a past which had nothing to do with contemporaneity. Eclecticism and searching for national and local themes and motifs shaped in the European tradition, and the usage of traditional models like the sonnet,

1 Approximate translation: »b) on the way to daila / who are you / what are you / what kind he /she / it / to what / i am looking for you / i want you / unknown you / be / be day / be given / be danaida«.

helped establish a totalising space with no room for different approaches to poetry. Yet, in the early 1990s, Slovene poetry was *globalised*, returning to modernist models of poetry production under the influence of global trends. Poetry was *globalised* under the strong transnational influence of American poetry. In the early 1990s, American mainstream poetry underwent a transformation thanks to the historicisation of American experimental poetry from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, ranging from Fluxus to New American Poetry (with the dominant position of the Beat and New York school) and language poetry. Performing poetry became inseparable from its production, as an effect of secondary (media) orality. Slam and open mike started in the USA at this time and spread around the world (Đurić 2002: 152-153).

In experimental poetry, self-reflexivity from the 1960s became important. It became part of literary production, incorporated in poems and in the form of writing poetics. During the 1970s and 1980s, poets could become theoreticians. The hegemony of theoretical textual production by French theoreticians such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray were influential in this process. This production blurred the borders between the theoretical and literary text, which would become important in language poetry production and in feminist experimental poetry (Đurić 2020: 302-310).

In the Slovene poetry culture, especially on the female poetry scene, the status of Nina Dračičević is unique: she acts as the theoretician and composer who performs her poetry. Varja Balžalorsky Antić (2020: 48) claims that Nina Dragičević's work is not typical of female poetry production in Slovenia, because she questions gender relations in the language, »as is the case in French female writing or in the texts written by some authors of the Awin school<sup>2</sup> in Serbia«.

Irena Novak Popov (2021) defines the book *Ljubav reče greva* (Love Says Let's Go), generically as a »rhythmically organised long poem«. I will use two terms from American poetry criticism which designate works such as Pound's *Cantos*, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* and Olson's *Maximus Poems*. The first is the *modernist epic*, which, according to Pound, is a long poem which includes history and can absorb the discourse of different origins. *Ljubav reče greva* can therefore be understood in relation to modernist epic transformations, especially those at the peripheries of the world's cultural system, in which micro-configurations (here the domination of more narrative poetry models) give contextual frames which make possible the appearance of a hybrid genre. The second term under which I would describe *Ljubav reče greva* is a *hybrid poem*, which in American poetry culture was canonised as a genre around 2009 (Đurić 2014: 255; Pavlič 2019: 157-162). Although the *hybrid poem* as a genre is defined by mixing the conventions of the lyrical poem with the conventions of experimental poetry, especially by language poets, the term points to the general tendency of *hybridisation* in contemporary American poetry and beyond.

In this sense, Dragičević, who writes prose and theory as well, in this long poem (a modernist epic), works with transformations of several genres. She uses the

2 A Belgrade poetry school of experimental poetry from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, which I inaugurated.

conventions of the lyrical poem as an introspective genre which was for a long period connected with male poetry production. Then theoretical discourses are presented fragmentarily in comments related to the social system and the construction of subjectivity – the heritage of post-structuralism. The narrative flow by which we relate these discursive fragments we construct while reading the book. Novak Popov emphasises the extremely rhythmical organisation of the poetic material. I will relate this aspect of her work to the fact that Nina Dragičević is a composer and scholar dealing with sound. Poetry in the age of the global *performative turn*, which forcefully embraced poetry, related this to the oral public performance. And so Dragičević composes her text, simultaneously working with narrative flows, or as Balžalorsky Antić (2020: 47) explains, she combines outer dialogue with inner dialogue. The stories branch in different fragmentary narrative directions, and the initiator of this is the work at the sound level of the language, pointing to how sound and sense coincide. In some parts, the lines consist of only one word, while on the other hand, some parts are organised in paragraphs, as in prose. Dragičević carefully works with the relationships between *narrative continuity* and *narrative discontinuity* in two ways, first through a repetition of certain words and phrases, as in this example: »kažem šta ću kaže šta šta ćeš kažem pišem, a šta ću kaže a šta / ćeš kažem ništa, kaže idemo.«<sup>3</sup> Secondly, she works with signifiers and with words which function as synonyms but are either opposed at the level of sound pattern as not similar or successively positioned as similar or with identical sound composition: »še kar / tolčejo in *mlatijo* in *udarjajo* in *udrihajo* in *udrihajo* in / zasopli so votli komaj dihajo« (Dragičević 2019a: 10). Words are repeated, varied, or the poet works with the word's root, prefixes, suffixes and infixes, words that are usually graphically marked – written in italics. These compositional principles Novak Popov (2021) describes as »developing by the repetition of sounds, sentences, onomatopoeia (vrə, bm, ššššš, he, hm, ou, ə) and syntactic parallelisms«. All these elements enable a performing of poetry in which the articulation of the voice is a medium in itself, because the rhythms of repetitions and words enable the voice to act not as a vehicle for transmitting a specific meaning subordinated to it in declamation, for example, but as a specific articulatory sound energy.

#### 4 Conclusion

The concrete poetry of Franci Zagoričnik and the hybrid poetry of Nina Dragičević took shape in the broader poetical context of the historical period in which they worked. This means that the conditions of their work are different. In Zagoričnik's case, the context was socialist Yugoslavia and the Cold War, during which poets wanted their work to belong to the international language of concrete poetry, penetrating the barriers of socialist culture. In the case of Dragičević, there are no longer any political and

3 I used Ivan Antić's translation of one fragment from Nina Dragičević book into Serbian and published in the magazine *Koraci* (<https://koraci.net/2019/12/нина-драгичевићљубав-каже-идемо/>). Approximate translation: »I say *what I can do* She says *what can you do* I say *I am writing*, *what I else i can do* she says *what esle you can / do* I say *nothing*, she says *let's go*.«

poetical barriers, so we have the impression that all poetry practices are transformed under the influence of global trends, which spread rapidly through neoliberal world cultures. Although they worked and work in different historical, political and poetical configurations of the national field of poetry, connecting these authors and segments of their work points to the discontinuities of specific (experimental) poetry practices, as well as the continuities that we construct.

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