

# IN THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

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*In this brief essay the author contemplates his poetics: his ideas, principles, intentions and the real process of creation; his use of language and its registers, verse and rhythm, the choice of topic and vocabulary; and especially the relationship between the biographical and poetic ego that is concealed in the first person singular of lyrical discourse. The author explains his poetic creation as an ornament.*

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The topic of this contemplation is supposed to be the balance between intentional poetics and the real working process of an author that has published several collections of poems. I will produce myself in the first person singular, and so these thoughts are inevitably individual and thus partial views of the undersigned – of the majestic first person – and it is neither possible nor justified or sensible to generalize them.

What prior knowledge do I have then, apart from everything I do not know, about the rules that guide my writing? Quite a number of them have accumulated spontaneously through the years; some have sprung from my decisions, sometimes after consideration, yet mainly more-or-less *via facti*.

However, first comes the big question, which – I will admit straight away – I cannot answer: namely, the big *why*. I could, I think, explain quite coherently why humanity is producing poetry, but I cannot say why I personally need to write. If I understand the boy that, decades ago, wished to prove himself in the field he valued and chose for himself, I am less certain why the present me. Is it simply inertia? Suppressed vanity? Little lust for adventure? Would I like to – probably in the narrower sphere of interpersonal relations rather than really in the area of the social – present another particular view on the world in general? Or at least – on poetry? Possibly, because I believe poetry is born out of marveling. So much about

the question why or to what end: I do not know. Just in case we stumble upon it later on.

The real first person singular reaches up to this point and barely beyond. When the process of word construction begins, I assume the dynamic dual (or is it split?) role of someone writing a poem. I am both the versifier and his supervisor. I am thus telling you about this double non-ego in the first person.

Poems usually start with one verse or less, which arises when I am completely relaxed – thinking neither of poetry nor of anything else; walking, driving – as if accidentally, as if I snatched this rhythmic string of words out of the ether. To continue means walking down the eternally divergent paths: so many words must be abandoned in order to choose one. Selecting words from which poems are built is, after all, writing poetry.

A propos – Hugo Fridrich in *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* cites the anecdote in which Mallarmé tells Degas that poems are not made of ideas but of words. The same thought about poetry, as the viewpoint of the novel's character, appears in Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*: "And then he told me my mistake is to start from the idea instead of letting myself simply be led by words." Or, as Winnie the Pooh composes a song in Eeyore's honor, he declares: "So there it is, ... It's come different from what I thought it would, but it's come."

A poem as a string of words – such a definition is somewhat tautological, as if we said David was made of stone. On the other hand, it expresses the anguish of the attempt to define my own pursuit as a stable ontological category. After all, the engine driver needn't know Ludolf's number down to the last decimal place in order to drive the train. Let me add another statement here: the readers are the least of my concern when writing. A concert, too, is meant for the orchestra: it is *not a concert for the audience*.

Naturally, combining words does not imply arbitrary combinations. Here, I feel a trace of the mystical: somehow I think (or do I believe?) that some beginnings naturally demand continuation, so that they round off with the end, as if they were strings in some chaotic knot that want to come into the light and existence. *We Look for Poems Where They Are* was the translation of the title of Matjaž Hanžek's book in the early seventies.

Before we address the topic of taste, I should mention that in terms of social ideology – if the term is not too rough – within my work, I set myself virtually no boundaries, except appeals to evil, such as glorifying war, killing, and repression. The reason behind this is mostly hygienic, less the belief that a poem directly influences the world and changes it. Or is it superstition?

I am nonetheless, willingly or not, committed to a wider network of ideologies in the area of the strictly poetical, which I perceive in terms of some thematic and numerous formal limitations.

It would perhaps suit me best to proclaim my poetic intention with a metaphor: I dance you an ornament. An ornamentalist can use a stencil, why not? I prefer to think that I draw the contours freehand, and above all I wish to play with colors within my ornamental canvas.

In terms of themes, it tends to start with a rather empty, regular statement that is frequently dangerously close to the weather or the time of day or the season. In some way, the beginning creates its own sphere, which I rarely break dramatically. I like small turns and stable shifts. The motifs are old, tried and tested through centuries. I could not, though, sincerely praise patriotic themes, except in the parodic vein, which is a completely different story.

As regards form, for over two decades I have been a slave more than a devotee of a regular verse form: namely, iambs. In this period I have been able to train myself in numerous rhetorical and verse approaches: from balancing the verse on a more daring enjambment – which I can, for instance, perform with a phrase or with an accent on the non-ictic position – or in various other ways. These could be illustrated, if I prepared examples, with a five-hour-long lecture. I would also like to be regarded, by myself, as a good rhymester: I cannot imagine rhyming *my* and *thy*; only exceptionally do I rhyme words of the same part of speech; I take damn good care not to use empty filler words.

Lexically: as with the thematic and the formal dimension, the lexical does not demand any special attention. Quite the opposite, such consideration would block the work that seems to be operating by itself. If, *relata refero*, I am known for my successful jumps from low into high language – from affected foreign words into street slang – it is not a matter of a deliberate plan, but deliberate acceptance. It is a consequence of the non-hierarchical anarchy inside my head, where there is also enough space for some very common prejudices; I refuse to use about three dozen words.

How does such poetics work? I think it doesn't differ considerably from the majority of "creative" activities: in the upper right corner it releases the imagination that, more or less hastily, keeps throwing at one's feet all kinds of ideas and nonsense, at times rejects, at times prefabricated expressions, at times elegant, already achieved solutions: and one is employed there as a censor, as a filter, as a selector. Selection: choice. It always seems somewhat horrendous: how many words I reject each time I choose one.

Overall, I would find it easier to tell you about what I don't than about what I do; the territories of the unacceptable are considerably larger and it is always the chaos of everything versus the chosen singular.

This work is a constant struggle with the first person singular. I repeat: it was never me that wrote poems; I was writing a poem that somebody somewhere was writing. Although I lend my privacy into unlimited use to the first person of the poem, the "lyrical subject," I never feel that I speak about myself. As already stated, the ornamentalist's colors bring with them a fair amount of the personal, but this is only the material: my experience is thus merely enclosed in the basement; having read or heard a story, it is likewise stored there. The same applies to yet unheard words – and I cannot see any reason why I should limit the stock of the available material in advance.

However, there is a limit between the material and the private. In no circumstances would I wish my poems to become my dear diary.

Once, when already I was a mature man, a poem occurred to me, featuring my mother, with her actual Christian name. The poem wouldn't sound right without her name; other, fake names made it fall apart and the poem was dear to me, maybe even dearer due to the real name, and it still is, but, but. I placed it into the collection *Sonnets* and I am not sure, up to the present day, whether I did the right thing.

I know very well that it is this tangible experience of the individual – the author – that provokes poems, far better than mine, poems of pain and joy, poems that overwhelm and move, but I have chosen another path. (I also know that this choice is the result of the deepest first person, even if it renounces it; if we are given any choice at all). This is what poetics is all about: the author demonstrates his notion about what a poem is.

Ultimately, aren't we all incessantly – in poems and in any discourse and when quiet – talking in first person singular, be this person a technical element of our *métier* or the civil I or maybe eventually one, inseparable entity, as is the world we inhabit – a single one, no matter how diverse?

Translated by Barbara Zorman