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An Attempt to Percept the Searching of God in Unknown Work and Poetry of Zdenka Serajnik

*Poskus vpogleda v neznano delo Zdenke
Serajnik in njeno iskanje Boga v poeziji*

Abstract: Of all the created beings in the world, a human is the most mysterious one. A human is the only being who is aware of his uniqueness, distinctiveness, and irreplaceability. A human is the only being who is self-aware but at the same time remains a secret to himself, a secret which he can never get to the bottom of. In the search for the truth about oneself, one encounters both: the abyss within oneself and the awareness of greatness and beauty that reflects external beauty, eternal beauty, the Beauty of the One who gives life, the beauty of God who supplicates the life and draws his Divine essence into that life. The more the human is aware of the limitations of his mind, the more challenging revealing the truth about the Transcendent is. Still, it is possible as long as humans feel the »sharing« of one's mind in God's mind, which enables revealing the truth in the first place. The tool that helps people to do this is language which also has its boundaries and limitations.

Both philosophy and poetry come from the same origin, that is, the wonder of being. They both use the same tool, that is, the language. However, they diverge, which is clearly expressed in the thoughts of Heidegger, the German philosopher of the modern age, who shows that philosophy can no longer perform its task correctly, but poetry can help it to uncover and express reality. In discovering and endeavouring truth, philosophers and poets face the same challenge, the same demanding task, which they each »solve« in their specific way. The way of approaching this assignment, both for a philosopher and a poet, is influenced by the time in which they live, the socio-political situation, the broader social context, personal circumstances, and a personal life story. Knowing the intimate life story of a philosopher or poet enables more accessible insight into the understanding of creative poetic activity or the development of philosophical thought.

This article introduces a brief insight into the rich creative life of Zdenka Serajnik, a Slovenian poet, writer, and pedagogue. Due to the extent of her hitherto unknown and little researched literary legacy, the article only presents some of her attempts to find answers to life's questions and the deepest longings, which Zdenka Serajnik masterfully outlines in the literary strokes of her rich creative work. The article analyses unknown manuscripts of Zdenka Serajnik, especially her sonnets, and shows how she reveals a longing search for answers to the most profound existential questions, questions that are also inherent in philosophy.

Keywords: Zdenka Serajnik, pedagogue, poetry, sonnets, language, symbol, God, longing, the meaning of life

Izvleček: *Med vsemi ustvarjenimi bitji na svetu je človek najbolj skrivnostno bitje. Samega sebe se zaveda in hkrati samemu sebi ostaja skrivnost, ki ji ne more nikoli priti do dna. Ob iskanju resnice o sebi se srečuje tako z breznom v sebi kot z veličino in lepoto, ki je odsev zunanje Lepote, večne Lepote, lepote Tistega, ki bivanje daje. Lepote Tistega, ki človeka prikliče v bivanje in zariše v njegovo podobo poteze svoje Božanske biti. Odstiranje resnice o Presežnem je toliko bolj zahtevno, kolikor bolj se človek zaveda omejenosti svojega uma, a je možno, če človek čuti »deleženje« svojega uma na Božjem umu, ki odstiranje resnice sploh omogoča. Orodje, ki človeku pri tem pomaga, je jezik, ki pa ima svoje meje in omejitve. Filozofija in poezija izhajata iz istega izvora, to je čudenje nad bitjo, obe uporabljata isto orodje, to je beseda oz. jezik, pa vendar se razhajata, kar se jasno izraža v misli nemškega filozofa moderne dobe Heideggerja, ki pokaže, da filozofija svoje naloge ne more več ustrezno opravljati, na pomoč pri odstiranju in izrekanju resničnosti pa ji lahko priskoči poezija.*

V odstiranju in poskusu izrekanja resničnosti so tako filozofi kot pesniki pred enakim izzivom, enako zahtevno nalogo, ki pa jo »rešujejo« vsak na svoj specifični način. Na način pristopa izvrševanja poslanstva tako filozofa kot pesnika vplivajo čas, družbenopolitična situacija oz. širši družbeni kontekst in tudi osebne okoliščine, osebna življenjska zgodba. Poznavanje osebne življenjske zgodbe filozofa ali pesnika omogoča lažji vpogled v razumevanje ustvarjalne pesniške dejavnosti ali razvoja filozofske misli.

*V prvem delu razprave orišemo nekatere zanimivosti iz bogatega ustvarjalnega življenja Zdenke Serajnik, predusem v vlogi prevajalke in pedagoginje. V drugem delu prispevka predstavimo tematiko nekaterih njenih sonetov in pokažemo, kako v njih razkriva svoja hrepeneca iskanja in išče odgovore na eksistencialna vprašanja. Odstiranje resnice o smislu in lepoti bivanja vodi Serajnikovo do odstiranja večne lepote, lepote, ki presega vso tukajšnjost in jo osmišlja, do presežne Lepote, ki jo Serajnikova najde v odnosu s Presežnim, v odnosu z Bogom. To je tudi njen *raison d'être*, to je temelj in izvor njenega iskanja in pesniškega ustvarjanja, delovanja in življenja.*

Ključne besede: Zdenka Serajnik, pedagoginja, poezija, soneti, govorica, simbol, Bog, hrepenenje, smisel življenja

Introduction

In Slovenia, the literary work of Zdenka Serajnik (1911–2003), a Slovene poet, writer, translator and pedagogue, professor of Slovene language and literature, is still relatively unknown and little researched. In the first part of this article, we outline some interesting facts from her lavish creative life, especially as a translator and pedagogue. In the second part, we present the themes of some of her sonnets and show how she reveals her longing searches and seeks answers to existential questions that the language of philosophy cannot sufficiently express and where the language of poetry can help and succeed. A human being is a being who transcends the present, whereas in the power of spirit and language constantly seeks and tries to speak the truth about himself, his being, and the meaning of his being. Revealing the truth about the purpose and beauty leads Zdenka



Serajnik to discover the eternal beauty, the Beauty that transcends and makes sense of everything here, to the surplus of beauty that Serajnik finds in the relationship with the Creator, in the relationship with God. It is the foundation and source of her search and poetic creation, action, and life.

1 Rich creative opus of Zdenka Serajnik

1.1 Zdenka Serajnik as a poet

Zdenka Serajnik was by nature modest and introverted. She did not like to talk much about her work and creation. She was not interested in material goods and reputation. We mention her character trait to substantiate the phrase about Zdenka Serajnik's unknown silent language and understand the concept of »blooming silent flowers« (Mrzdovnik 2017, 270) which began to open and bloom only after her death. Due to her humble nature and part of her introversion, it became apparent only after her death by researching her legacy that she was a dedicated and excellent pedagogue and a literary creator and prolific poet (Serajnik Sraka 2017, 28–29).

The rich written legacy of her creative work, collected in twelve volumes, is owned by the municipality of Slovenske Konjice and is currently located in the village of Prihova, where Zdenka Serajnik was born. Poems, primarily sonnets, represent the most significant part of her legacy. Zdenka Serajnik wrote more than 2,200 poems, mostly of religious content, relating to the themes from the Bible (a considerable quantity of the opus refers to the Psalms), the liturgical year, church holidays, and the feasts of saints. A large proportion of the poems are Marian (in honour of the heavenly Mother Mary). Three hundred sixty-five are selected and collected from the entire poetic legacy in a book entitled *Ne bojim se tebi, Mati, hvalnic peti*.¹

1 Poems by Zdenka Serajnik in honor of Mary, mother of Jesus, were selected and edited by Slavko Krajnc, Professor at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology, and pastor at the Prihova parish. Krajnc systematically and in-depth deals with the literary legacy of Zdenka Serajnik. In 2017, in cooperation with the Municipality of Oplotnica and the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology, he organized an international scientific symposium on Zdenka Serajnik and her work. In the same year, he edited a scientific monography entitled *Svetloba drami našega duha*, which was published in anthology *Znanstvena knjižnica*, at University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology. Along with the monograph, the hymnal *Izliva duša se mi v hvalospev* was also published. Some of Zdenka Serajnik's songs are set to music, they were performed at a concert at the end of the international symposium in the parish church in Oplotnica.



Interestingly, the number of songs selected coincides with the number of days in a calendar year. It could be symbolically understood as a daily meditation that directs a person to Mary, Mother of Jesus, not only as the Mother of God but the Mother who accompanies us on the path of life and faith and does not reject anyone. (Krajnc 2020, 5) Zdenka Serajnik published some poems during her lifetime in Catholic magazines (often under a pseudonym). Some poems were published soon after the poet's death in *Dihanje večnosti* (2003). Her legacy (poems, dramatic texts, translations, articles, and many critical texts) has still not been thoroughly researched. Typescripts and manuscripts are being processed under the guidance of Slavko Krajnc and are waiting to be analysed and to undergo detailed expert examination, public announcement, and presentation.

1.2 Zdenka Serajnik as a translator

Zdenka Serajnik was considered a great intellectual in the town of Slovenske Konjice, where she lived. Her knowledge of classical languages and ancient literature could be compared to the highly academically educated intellectuals of her time. She translated from German, Latin, French and Russian languages. In her legacy, you can find translations of excerpts from the literary works of Alma M. Karlin, an exceptional and unusual person for those times, world traveller and writer from Celje (1889–1950), who probably aroused particular interest in Zdenka Serajnik through acquaintance and friendship with the painter of German descent Thea Schreiber Gamelin, a secretary, proofreader and companion of Alma M. Karlin.

Thea Schreiber Gamelin told Zdenka Serajnik about the exciting life of Alma M. Karlin, her destiny, travels, literary works, and life together with her, thus encouraging and inspiring her to start translating her texts, which were written in the German language and mostly untranslated. Since Schreiber Gamelin still had at her disposal the entire literary legacy of Alma Karlin (she handed it over to Ljubljana's NUK² after 1974), Zdenka Serajnik had the privilege of inspecting all the unpublished works of Alma M. Karlin. That is evidenced by individual short translations of completed narratives and summaries of some novels preserved in the legacy

2 NUK - Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica (National and University Library).



of Zdenka Serajnik and publications in the magazine *Nova mladika* in 1973 and 1974. In the legacy we find e.g. a concise summary of the entire book and a translated introduction from Alma's autobiography *Ein Mensch wird* (1931) by Zdenka entitled *Zmorem, kar hočem*, a short story *Pod košatim očesom* (Alma's work *Unter dem Augenbrauenberg und andere Erzählungen* was published in Leipzig in 1938, as well as other translations). (Pušavec 2017, 264–266)

1.3 Zdenka Serajnik as a pedagogue

Zdenka Serajnik has dedicated her life caring for the education and upbringing of young people. She conducted her mission as a professor of Slovene language (sometimes Russian as well) and literature with all dedication, commitment, and care. Nada Serajnik Sraka³ writes that Zdenka Serajnik was imbued with love for the teaching profession (Serajnik Sraka 2017, 42). Her character attributes, such as modesty, self-criticism (Pušavec 2017, 265), and simultaneous determination, were good predictors on her diverse pedagogical path. From 1939 to April 1941, she taught Slovene language at the state-run Grammar school in Celje and ran a student library. After the liberation in 1945, she taught at the primary school in Slovenske Konjice. In July 1945, she taught History, Slovene and Russian language at the state-run Grammar school in Konjice. She also taught at the Grammar school in Ptuj (from September 1947). She returned to Konjice in February 1948 and taught at the Grammar school until its abolition (school reform in 1957), when an eight-year primary school was established. From 1968 until her retirement (September 1, 1971), she taught at the Dušan Jereb Elementary School. (Boldin 2017, 17–19) She was strict but fair, concise, and systematic. This is witnessed by her students, as well as evident in her notes found in her estate. In the material legacy for teaching the Slovene language (from 1977), it is possible to see, among other things, exam questions from the Slovene language class for the Secondary school »School Centre for Commerce, Celje«, where she was a lecturer until her retirement (at the unit in Slovenske Konjice).⁴

3 Nada Serajnik Sraka is the daughter of Zdenka's cousin, Ben Serajnik (1911–1998). After the death of Zdenka Serajnik's second aunt, Nada collected and kept Zdenka's legacy, and in 2009 handed it over to the Municipality of Slovenske Konjice.

4 The lectures were held under the auspices of the Labour University.



Here are some examples of questions (knowledge testing) that consisted of three parts. The first question was from the world literature, and the second question was about Slovenian literature. The last, third question, was usually to recognise a well-known work by a domestic or foreign author. Sometimes, in her notes, we can find the answer – the name of the author. Here are some examples with the listed author:

Paul Sartre and work

Which works by Slovenian writers are filmed?

Now the Autumn night has come, my sleep is through and gone,
despair dwells ever in my head, but no one cares for that.

/Josip Murn/

Dostoevsky and work

Kersnik's / petty / bourgeois

Let's swim, let's sail, what do I care, where the shore is!

/J. Kersnik/

Example of questions without author:

Ibsen's view of society

Slovenian lyric folk song

Less fearful the long night of life's denial. Then living 'neath the
sun in subjugation!

Sophocles' persons

Prešeren's Wreath of Sonnets

They send rays of soap out of your eyes, and they will drive the
new flower more happily.⁵

As a professor of the Slovene language, she was also responsible for the content of school celebrations. She was fond of the theatre and organised several plays for the stage and directed them. She was a regular speaker at school celebrations for various cultural events and festivities. In her

5 The questions for knowledge testing can be found in the unpublished material (from 1977) collected by Slavko Krajnc (2015a).



speeches, she did not miss the opportunity to awaken national consciousness. She expressed her deep respect for Slovenian literary authors and other great names in culture. She encouraged her colleagues to fulfil their pedagogical profession with commitment, conscientiousness, and dedication. That can be seen in the speech to the workers in the cultural sector at the 1st primary school in Slovenske Konjice during the Christmas and New Year celebrations in 1991:

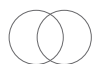
We need genuine and pure love: for the subject to which we are devoted to. To our poor, little »merry-go-round« that we stand before daily. To our originality, which cannot and must not be just an appendage of this or that foreign imperative, but must grow as a branch on a bushy, deeply rooted and boldly rising tree for centuries and generations, as given to us by Prešeren, Župančič, Cankar, Kajuh and Plečnik; as well as Gallus and Betet, Stane Sever and others. (Serajnik 1991)

Zdenka Serajnik nurtured and awakened a healthy national consciousness during her active (professional) years and after her retirement. Thus, at the 40th anniversary meeting of the students of the Konjice primary school, she wrote a song as a tribute to all, not forgetting to emphasise the importance of being rooted in the native soil:

It's been forty years,
when we, primary school students, separated
full of courage on all sides:
an open and friendly world welcomed us.

Thee plunged into the study, learning,
you have amassed the treasures from the spirit,
while others roamed the world,
and conquered manners high.

Thee created a family on his own:
and became grey-haired grandfather, already loving -
while other harrows single through the life
respected; the whole homeland loves him.



Rooted in the fertile soil
 as proud sons of Slovenia,
 we want its future to be bright,
 and let the sunshine upon her from the sky!⁶

As an intellectual, Zdenka Serajnik was nationally conscious and open to social issues. She followed especially events in culture and cultural heritage. As a religious woman, she followed events within the Catholic Church.⁷ She was often very critical but continually argumentative and constructive. For example, in the essay *Vloga žene v Cerkvi* (*The Role of Women in the Church*) she uses historical and other sources⁸ to think about the emancipation of women in the Church, family and society in general, in the spirit of democratisation and elimination of social prejudices that were largely socially and historically conditioned (Boldin 2017, 25).

The material in Zdenka Serajnik's legacy is quite extensive, so in the second part of the article, we will narrow our discussion down to few aspects of her poetic creation, in which she reveals her deepest longings, fulfilled in a deep personal relationship with the Superior, with Creator.

2 The language of poetry as transcending the language of philosophy

A human is a being who can never be discovered or revealed in full. He is a seeker and weaver of his identity, which originates from personal roots and is formed concerning others. The latter is (may also be) the

6 The song entitled *Minilo je že štirideset let* was written by Zdenka Serajnik on October 28, 2000 in Slovenske Konjice. It is a typescript that belongs to the still unprocessed and as yet unpublished material, which is kept at the parish church in Prihova.

7 She regularly responded to events in the Church with her articles, suggestions, and criticisms, often in the religious press (*Srečanja, Cerkve v sedanjem svetu, Oznanjenje, Družina, Znamenje, Božji vrelci, V Materini šoli*, etc.). She was benevolently critical of priests, monks and nuns as well as the congregation. It is interesting to note that she signed her contributions in very different ways: with her full name and surname, with the abbreviations Z. S., ZS, S. Z., zs, sz, and once even with a male name and surname (as Silvo Zorec), regarding an article that talks about a common release and can be found in archival material in the form of a typescript. The reason for the different ways of signing may be the fear that the articles would encounter too much resistance due to female authorship, as they touched on delicate theological pastoral-liturgical topics. (Šegula 2017, 231–233)

8 Regarding historical and other sources – the Bible – of the role of the women in the Church, see Večko 2021, 175–202.



Other – with a capital letter. Thus, Zdenka Serajnik's poems are permeated by this very search for the Other, who for her is the eternal and merciful You, God, who is the »King, Lord of all the world«, as she often calls Him in her poems. Her identity is formed primarily in this relationship. It grows out of this relationship, which she perceives as the most genuine of all and in which all of the human's deepest longings can be realised.⁹ This is beautifully expressed in the sonnet *Secuti Sumus Te*¹⁰ when in the first stanza she confesses the inadequacy of humans and the transience of worldly life:

We have followed You, God, in every way –
we have come to know worldly transience,
honour is given by people, falsity –
only in Your eyes, the grace we seek!

And then there is consolation in the fulfilment given by God (3rd stanza) and the joy brought by trust in the Lord (4th stanza):

God has given us the fullness of his blessings,
comforted the longing of our hearts,
placed a family on us.

We fondly anticipate the gifts,
the share received from eternal heaven,
where we faithfully celebrate our King.

As a profoundly faithful woman, Zdenka Serajnik was devoted to God with all her heart and with all her being. From this personal relationship with Him, she drew strength and inspiration for her rich and creative life. This devotion to the Creator breathes from all her poems.

9 In fact, in Bible, humans deepest desire (longing) is depicted as »need« for God (Skrlovnik 2019, 919–920).

10 The poem of Zdenka Serajnik *Secuti Sumus Te* can be found in Krajnc 2015b, 68.



2.1 Symbolic language as a possibility of expressing reality

A human, as a subject, as a free and rational being, is aware of himself; he is aware of his existence, of his otherness and difference (from others). He is aware of his abilities and limitations, and in the power of his spirit, he can rise above these givens and »establish« them anew. This awareness can be articulated and communicated to others through language as a universal symbol through which man understands the world (Juhant 2009, 46). Thus, language is an expression of culture, nation tradition, the characteristics of experiencing the world and a human in it. But speech also has its limitations. All these feelings and experiences are difficult to express appropriately with language and speech, difficult to embrace, so language uses symbols. Symbols indicate the deeper content of what they represent. They surpass clichés and express what we intuitively feel, experience and cannot correctly express in logical linguistic structures. Language expresses an idea and reveals the meaning of a phenomenon, reality, but we cannot definitively explain and arrange the world logically with language. (Pevc Rozman 2017, 47–48)

The task of explaining and regulating the world and its phenomena (including a human and human's relation to himself, toward other and Other) is performed by philosophy as the activity that seeks and tries to express reality. Philosophy aims to explain and regulate the world and life in it, but it must also answer how to live and prosper in this world to be happy. Philosophy tries to justify human's experience in the world, and at this point, it encounters poetry. The pursuit of poetry is:

to weave oneself into the experience of reality, into this world and the world beyond. To weave oneself into reality up to the point of leaving it and going beyond it. Both philosophy and poetry strive to be in a pure relationship with the essence of things. Their first and most decisive common element is language, language to convey philosophical thought and poetic mystery. (Pevc Rozman 2017, 49)

Poetry tries to eliminate the traces of life, embrace them in its symbolic language and at the same time let the trace not be discovered until the end and remain unexpressed in its expressive form. The poet and philosopher



need the tool that allows the expression of a vague reality. The tool they have in common is language. Language, as understood by the philosopher Heidegger, is that what brings to light something hidden to reveal it, and this task of language is most easily shown in poetry. (50) Therefore, for Heidegger, poetry (*dichten*) is closer to the truth than philosophical thought (*denken*) (Klun 2014, 170). If the language of philosophy proves to be insufficient or insufficiently relevant, the most profound realities that touch the foundations of human existence can be more appropriately expressed by poetry with its expressive figures, metaphors and, last but not least: with complete freedom of expression and wording of the mysteries of life.

2.2 Poetic language of Zdenka Serajnik

At first glance, we could say that Zdenka Serajnik's poetic expression is simple, sometimes folk-oriented. Still, with her sonnets, she expresses a precise knowledge of the structure of this poetic genre (lyric), often modestly resembling the style of France Prešeren, the great Slovenian poet from 19th century. In her poems, she mainly covers personal confessional, religious and sometimes meditative themes. The structure of her sonnets is usually precise and follows the rule: the first two stanzas are tetrameters (four lines), the other two are trimeters (three lines), the verse is iambic pentameter. The style of the poem is often narrative, enriched by examples and metaphors, and is distinguished by the frequent use of dialogues and rhetorical questions, the concentration of meaning with the help of literary figures, classical rhythm and repetition. (Kmetec 2017, 80)

Her sonnets are a praise to God the Creator. They speak of the repentance of sinfulness and are a plea for forgiveness and mercy (following the example of the Psalms). The liberation is in God, as is beautifully expressed in the first two stanzas of *Xi Regis*:¹¹

11 The sonnet can be found in Slavko Krajnc 2015b, 73.



Wounded and separated by sin
 families of nations suffer, sobbing –
 from the governance of dark their heart desires
 to be liberated by the Light.

To be united with Him, unified,
 who the King of heaven and earth is,
 to exist in Him, to live
 and have sins forgiven in Him.

Sin is the one that wounds a human and causes suffering, pushing him from the light into darkness. Sinfulness is a human's withdrawal from God, from his love. But the eternally faithful God does not abandon the sinner. He forgives his sins and his delusions and unobtrusively invites him into his safe embrace of connectivity. He grants him forgiveness and peace, as the theme continues in the 3rd and 4th stanzas of the same poem:

With limbs connect with God – the Head
 we listen, we accept the truth,
 the truth he testified by coming into this world.

We honour and praise Him, glorify,
 we relish love, peace, justice.
 A trace to the God's kingdom we create.

A common theme of Zdenka Serajnik's poems is the chanting of Mary, Mother of God, and the already mentioned longing. Longing for happiness, for the fulfilment in life, peace and love. The poem's purpose is prayer and contemplation, intended for itself and the potential reader; narration or confession is only a secondary goal (Kmetec 2017, 80).



Conclusion

In the present article, we can't in any way satisfactorily present the richness of Zdenka Serajnik's literary opus, but we can summarise that her works reflect a sincere attitude towards a fellow human being, based on the relationship with the Transcendent; with Christian God, the One who is the source of eternal Beauty and also reveals himself to humanity through the Beauty of poetry and artistic creation. Zdenka Serajnik addresses contemporary human being who gets lost in the whirlpool of nihilistic everyday life because he has distanced himself from his source, which he convincingly professes in God. She is critical towards (her) modern time, the loss of values (also critical towards apathetic Christian), and the vanity of modern man, which leads to destruction. The true hope is in the search for a real treasure that can fulfil human's deepest longings, that is, in God.

Although modern literary critics have not yet assessed Zdenka Serajnik's literary legacy and might even accuse her of simplicity and popularity, it must be acknowledged that she mastered the poetic language, poetic figures and rhythm. Her poems lead humans to the origin and deliver inner peace that humans attain by reconciling their will with the will of God. This is also the greatest happiness, fulfilment and meaning of human life, as Zdenka Serajnik asserts in her poems.

Finally, knowing the life and work of more or less anonymous Slovenian poetry creators can help us recognise through their eyes the pulse of a particular time and space and the cultural circumstances that characterized the people of that time.



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