

Among the works of Taras Kermauner, probably the biggest expert on Slovenian drama and its first theoretician, one can also find a single dramatic experiment: a courtroom debate on the value of avant-garde poetry, based on the case of the accusation against the poet Tomaž Šalamun. While Kermauner develops the genre of judicial disputation in a theatrically fitting and interesting way, he undermines the disputation with an anticlimactic, anti-dramatic conclusion that postpones the decision on the matter to another space-time. A closer examination of the text reveals several conceptual inconsistencies that can be better understood as paradoxes. Thus, the five points that might be defined as paradoxical could be traced in the text itself concerning substantive categories such as the essence of art, the meaning of a nation for art, art and Marxism, and life as the supreme aesthetic category, while the last paradox is a more formal one, since the courtroom debate, with its conclusion, does not reach any point whatsoever. Regardless of the sufficiently clear and pointed presentation of the positions of the two protagonists, the Prosecutor and the Defender, Kermauner decides, rather than escalating the conflict to a (theatrical) climax, to dilute the disputation based on the inclusion of the audience and the conclusion that the latter, in its role as jury, cannot decide for either side. The (dis)solution of the dilemma of the (national, artistic) quality of avant-garde poetry is thus left – despite the fireworks of Kermauner's theatrical courtroom debate – to the future and literary theory.

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**Krištof Jacek Kozak** studied philosophy and comparative literature at the University of Ljubljana and received his PhD in comparative literature from the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, in 2003. He is employed at the Department of Slovene Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska. He has published two monographs (the second one appeared in Serbian, Slovak and English translations) and several scholarly and professional articles. He has also worked as a theatre critic, translator and dramaturg. He has been a guest lecturer at various foreign universities.

kjkozak@fhs.upr.si

# Disputation on the Five Paradoxes of “Toilet Poetry” with a Prologue and an Epilogue

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Krištof Jacek Kozak

Department of Slovene Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska

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## Prologue

Taras Kermauner wrote his only original dramatic text in 1972.<sup>1</sup> The short play entitled *Avantgardistični pesnik pred sodiščem* (*The Avant-Garde Poet in Court*), in which he uses the classical theatrical procedure of a trial in court and stages a verbal confrontation on stage, the theme of which is, of course, an attack on and – as is to be expected – the defence of the poetry of the neo-avant-garde poet Tomaž Šalamun. Unlike other important European dissidents – for example, Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, Andrej D. Sinjavski and Julij M. Daniel – Šalamun did not face a trial. Thus Kermauner’s literary experiment is a work of fiction. However, eight years earlier, in 1964, when Šalamun attempted to publish his poem “Duma 1964” in an issue of the journal *Perspektive*, the authorities imprisoned him for a few days after confiscating the magazine.

Based on the 1960s’ “leaden” decade, the ideological positions of the drama’s central characters appear to be very clear: to think freely, young artists strive to expand the narrow ideological views that oppress them and resist the pressure of the regime. Kermauner’s position on this matter in 1972 would appear obvious, both regarding the values represented by his generation and based on his personal ties, since many artists shared his views and were his friends, or at least acquaintances. Thus, given Šalamun’s fate, a vigorous political defence of youthful rebellion against political reality was expected. However, Kermauner’s dramatic courtroom debate, which is much more cerebral than emotional and – in a judicial manner – theoretically dense and wordy, is, above all, not political. At the time, one would have expected that the

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<sup>1</sup> As Blaž Lukan points out in footnote 2 of his introductory study in the publication *Generator:: za proizvodnjo poljubnega števila dramskih kompleksov* (*The Generator:: for Manufacturing Any Number of Drama Complexes*), Kermauner wrote his other play, *Črtomirke*, immediately following the first one, i.e., the very next year. This second text, however, was not entirely original, as it was assembled from excerpts from texts by Mira Puc-Mihelič, Vitomil Zupan, Igor Torkar, Ivan Mrak, Dominik Smole, Primož Kozak, Andrej Hieng and Dušan Jovanović (cf. [www.sigledal.org](http://www.sigledal.org)). Aleš Berger wrote a critique of its production in the experimental theatre Glej.

prosecutor's main weapon for accusing Šalamun of inappropriate class, social or political views would have been loaded primarily with sociopolitical bullets. However, political accusations no longer seemed relevant to Kermauner. Perhaps this was because merely a month after the confiscation of the journal *Perspektive*, the journal's publishing house DZS published Šalamun's entire confiscated poem in the journal *Naši razgledi* as "evidence" to justify their decision to cancel the journal *Perspektive*, as Kermauner reports (cf. 10; the page numbers with no reference cited here and henceforth refer to Kermauner's dramatic text). Perhaps this was also because Kermauner was writing in 1972, which was the time of economic liberalisation and political "thawing" during the presidency of Stane Kavčič. At this time, it appeared that the people had finally "come of age" and that the Communist Party was planning to slowly step down from power to usher in a better economic reality.

However, since the text was bereft of any political discussion, one would have at least expected Kermauner to defend the aesthetic approach of neo-avant-garde literature and make this the value paradigm of the play, but even this is largely absent. The central argument of Kermauner's text does not focus on aesthetic values at all, but rather – an even more surprising decision in the case of neo-avant-garde poetry – on the functional values of poetry. While Šalamun's poetry is the culprit and bone of contention for the judgement of values and serves as a lightning rod for the two protagonists, the Prosecutor and the Defender, the central object of the accusation is not only Šalamun's poetry but rather the whole of neo-avant-garde poetry and its function in the context of national literature.

The starting points of the two protagonists – the Prosecutor attacks with the points of view articulated by Ivan Vidmar, while the Defender argues from a Marxist point of view – raise several questions. The problem is that Kermauner does not give any clear answers in a theatrically distinct way – we are left without a definitive ideological resolution, which makes the ambiguity even more complex. As a result, his courtroom debate appears not as a dramatically effective but as a paradoxical text. And there are five paradoxes that we were able to discern in his playlet.

## The First Paradox

The first paradox boils down to a key assumption about art, namely the question of the essence and function of literature. Although Šalamun's "Duma 1964" was confiscated primarily for political reasons (the authorities judged the poem to be socially inappropriate), Kermauner does not question the functionalist understanding of art but rather formulates his interpretation of art precisely based on its social role.

According to the Prosecutor's theory – which, tellingly, the Defender never actually contradicts – true art, true poetry, “professes faith in humanity” (19) and “ennobles us, elevates us and makes us more and more human” (6). Therefore, in Ivan Cankar's terms, art is that human activity that makes a man a Man. Its deontological aim is to make a man a better (social) being and raise them to a higher moral and ethical level. This task of art, however, can only come to fruition when it “consolidates [man's] meaning of life and the meaning of life as such” (19). This definition means that the essence of art is primarily didactic. The natural corollary of this assumption is that the modernist, art for art's sake quality or self-sufficiency of art is relegated to the background. At the same time, its functional properties influence the transformation of each individual into an adequately adapted and ideally functioning cog in the mechanism of society. And since this is so, art is judged by its social results. On this basis, Kermauner subjects avant-garde poetry to critique primarily from an applied point of view, starting precisely from a materialist understanding of art, exactly as, for example, articulated by the Marxist aesthetician György Lukács: Art is not merely a Kantian agnostic adventure, but a medically useful specificity that helps to care for – and therefore enhances – “social, historical and personal health” (14).

Kermauner adds a unique twist to this point of view by using the example of Valentin Vodnik's 1781 poem “Zadovoljni Kranjec” (“The Satisfied Carniolan”). Namely, Vodnik's hero is “obedient, he is happy if he can fulfil the command – the order – of his homeland, to go to battle [...], to learn diligently, conscientiously” (8). The conclusion is self-evident: only a diligent Carniolan is a good Carniolan, and only a good Carniolan will survive! Only a socially exemplary person is a proper individual. Therefore, a true man is not one who (only) engages with literature but uses literature for pedagogical purposes. All of the above reminds us of the giants of Slovenian literature, whom literary history has raised to the pedestal of “the fathers of the nation”, as Kermauner himself confirms: true, real poets cannot be anything other than patriots.

This is the direction that Kermauner indicates with the Prosecutor's question: “Should we give into the hands of our youth the poem which we are about to hear (Šalamun's poem “Zatonil je čas usranih poetov” (“The Time of Shitty Poets Has Set”)?” (cf. “Pesmi Tomaža Šalamuna”). Are we to teach them that this is art?” (24). This also confirms his observation that “it was the poets themselves who, with their fighting spirit, encouraged the popular masses to work and build a better life” and “gave them self-confidence” (17). His emphasis here is crucial: art is not merely a leisure activity of conceited artists but an existentially important medicine. The struggle to attain it is vital for the community and the individual.

Therefore, art's task is not to be artistically unrestrained, creatively original and thought-provoking but – for the good of the individual and, by extension, the nation

– to be restrictive, disciplining and sedative. Therefore, the Prosecutor need not fear for the survival of the people (the nation) since it will always know – if properly conditioned and educated – how to cope with such nihilistic poets since “our [...] people [...] will spit them out” (6). This position automatically opens up the next paradox: the *telos* of national literature.

## The Second Paradox

In addition to the didactic notion of poetry, two other views of art overlap in Kermauner’s courtroom argumentation: the political view, although Kermauner mentions it only once, and even then (again, paradoxically) he puts it in the mouth of the Defender, and the national view, which forms the central axis of the Prosecutor’s attack: allegedly, that true poetry should contain “the programme of the whole nation” (9). Both views share a teleological understanding of art: art should always be stimulating, celebratory and admiring. It must be (like Župančič’s “Duma”, which the Prosecutor quotes) “an ode to work, [...], to beauty, to earth, to Slovenia, to nature, to the family” (10). The Prosecutor searches for (and finds) the role and meaning of literature on the basis that is most typical of the Slovenian literary tradition: in its relationship to the formation of our national identity.

The Prosecutor’s arguments focus on the Slovenian nation, or rather, the role and function of art/literature in its formation, in which he does not treat avant-garde poetry as it would probably consider it most fitting, i.e., independently of any social systems and applications. Instead, he neatly puts it into a line with (and thus on par with) all previous nation-building works of art provided by the true giants of literature: Valentin Vodnik, Ference Prešeren, Oton Župančič and others.

In his first barrage, the Prosecutor takes a crucial, nationalist tone juxtaposing the avant-gardists with the nation. He sees the contradiction of avant-garde art in that it does not care about the nation, which for Kermauner’s Prosecutor, is by definition “beautiful, healthy, intelligent, warm, attractive, useful and conscious” (6). Moreover, since only true art addresses it as such, since only such art can lead to the creation of “invigorating and enlightening culture – a true homeland” (6), avant-garde art is worthless. The literary example quoted by the Prosecutor is Šalamun’s poem “Utrudil sem se podobe svojega plemena” (“I Got Tired of the Image of My Tribe”), which is allegedly a persiflage that deconstructs and tramples these very ideals into the mire of ridicule. The Prosecutor dubs Šalamun, rather emphatically, to be “an avant-gardist poacher” (10) and accuses him of indulging in “sully[ing] everything that is noble, [...] and above all an attack on the nation, on Slovenity” (25), whereby he desires to “erase all Slovenian tradition and our undying ideals” (10), which is supposed to mean “a complete destruction and desolation

of Slovenity and of our society" (17). The aim of Slovenian avant-garde poetry, in the Prosecutor's view, is no less than the utter destruction of our nation, which, however, has been the sacred aim of all previous literature since Primož Trubar. What particularly troubles the Prosecutor is Šalamun's national unawareness and the scorn with which he demonstrates it, or rather, his "cynical hooligan attack on everything (from the constitution and politics of the SFRY to the Slovenian nation)" (13). Nothing appears to be sacred to Šalamun, and with him to all avant-garde poetry, for it represents "terrible relativisation, an abolition of any and all values" (20), and even of God himself, who, to the Prosecutor (despite being an atheist), still represents "a symbol for all things fundamental, beautiful, just, for ideals, for examples, for meaning" (24).

This destruction of the national ideal, well known from the introductory lessons on the history of Slovenian culture, is supposed all the more painful because avant-garde poetry offers nothing in its place, or rather, propagates a "lowlife, vulturelike society" (8), "a world upside down, [...] a world in a swamp", a world that means "the disintegration of the world" (20), i.e., "nihilism" (6, 20). Let us mention that, above all, nihilism threatened national(ist) impulses since it contrasted the social ideal merely with its lack, i.e., little or nothing. From this point of view, it is thus not hard to understand the Prosecutor's two rhetorical questions: Is "national awareness today already a disgrace?" (16) and "Could Slovenians have survived their history if they had only such poets and poems?" (13).

For Kermauner's Prosecutor, the avant-gardists are, therefore, nothing more than "anti-national elements without morals, defeatists, desperate people" (6), essentially "internal emigrants" (6), i.e., advocates of "most extreme individualism and privatism" (26), who embody "the world of sloths, bohemians, hippies, hobos who live at the expense of working people" (8) and "escape into the abstract worlds of cosmopolitanism and non-national sentimentality" (6). They are characterised by "deep ennui, weariness, despair" (13) and by "escapism", "individual impotence" and "infantilism" (22). This is why avant-garde poetry can only produce "blasphemous, dirty, divisive" (24) poems, "street songs" (23) and, even more, "poetry of the toilet and of the dissolution of all human values" (9).

Šalamun's poetry is what it is not because it is created by a critical but by an authentic man. Šalamun cannot rise to the level of national worship expected of him because he himself is human excrement, so to speak, a freak incapable of higher forms of sensibility. He and his kind – the only other avant-garde work, apart from Šalamun's poetry, mentioned by the Prosecutor in the same critical vein is Dušan Jovanović's play *Norci* (The Madmen) (19) – are incapable of constructive (national) action, since such entities are incapable of creation, they can merely make fun of everything and "parody words" (17), which equals "refusing to engage, all social action, it means capitulation" (25). "Šalamun conceives of every struggle, every action, every activity

as negative, stupid and ridiculous” (17). Thus, the aim of Kermauner’s Prosecutor is clear and precise: “Such scribbling must be banned” (24).

Kermauner puts much effort into developing this theoretical starting point, which means that the defence has no energy left and does not give any answer to the attack. Moreover, it seems contradictory that – despite the apparent disparity of views between the unrelenting and sharp Prosecutor and the Defender, who supposedly stands on the other side of the artistic ideal – they only appear to stand on opposite shores since the idealistic approach is crucial for both of them, which makes them ideologically more akin than one might think. The defence bases its arguments on two assumptions. The first one is the Defender’s sleight of hand, as he does not object to the Prosecutor’s ultra-patriotic position outright but instead attempts to disarm and devalue it differently. The Defender denounces and mocks the Prosecutor’s blind faith into patriotic art. Here, the logic of the argument is reversed and, therefore, quite effective: if pious, patriotic poetry is the best there is, then it would follow that also Jovan Vesel Koseski, with his zealous patriotic creations, must be a better poet than France Prešeren. Moreover, since it is evident that Koseski no longer belongs to the canon of Slovenian poetry, this devalues the weight of the Prosecutor’s argument about “patriotic love” (15) in the context of nation-building poetry.

The Defender’s second assumption is that dissatisfaction with reality is a special characteristic typical of poetry in general, as he tries to prove with the example of early poems by France Prešeren, “Soneti nesreče” (“Sonnets of Misfortune”), and Oton Župančič, “Pesem mladine” (“Poem of Youth”), “Ob uri brezupa” (“At the Hour of Hopelessness”), in which one can undoubtedly sense the “horrible complaint against today’s world and society” (11), as well as the disintegration of the “wonderful national and humanist programme” (12). Such criticism is allegedly particularly typical of young people, who think that nothing is sacred and, above all, they want “a freer, more playful world with less darkness” (11) and “refuse the deadly seriousness of everything” (11). If they are not just young but also poets, “they have the right to exacerbate [things]” (11). This youthful dissatisfaction with the state of society at the time is an opinion that we can present as a third paradox.

## The Third Paradox

The accusations above appear to follow the central ideological foundation of the time when Kermauner wrote his playlet. For Marxism, nihilism was the umbrella term for all reactionary, bourgeois, individualist, Western and other deviations, as it pitted this “progressive social ideology” against completely different and, indeed, forbidden views of art. Since the Defender embarks to defend avant-garde poetry from an

ideological point of view, we are dealing with a third paradox, focused on the political use of poetry within the framework of Marxist ideology.

According to the Defender, Šalamun's poetry is completely "in line" with party politics, i.e., it is beyond reproach not only regarding national awareness but also political integrity. The Defender asserts that Šalamun's poetry is "perfectly in accordance with the rule or rather demand that Marxism itself raised as its flagship proposition: that a ruthless critique of everything that exists is necessary" (11), while Šalamun as a poet is supposed to have no regrets about anything other than "the former revolutionary spirit of the masses" (11, *sic!*), even though the ideological horizon in the country darkened again only later, towards the end of 1972, which makes Kermauner's invocation to the political "gods" for ideological protection appear, to be frank, quite anachronistic. Indeed, by that time, orthodox Marxist aesthetics had already been proven wrong so often that it would be difficult to perceive it as value-consistent, ideologically concise and theoretically credible.

After a period of enthusiastic support for proletarian art (according to later socialist-realist critics, its main weaknesses, which were nurtured already by RAPP, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, were psychologism and its "unmasking" in literature since they were both close to "decadentism", cf. Mozejko 20), with speeches by A. Zhdanov, M. Gorky and also N. Bukharin at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, the political winds changed towards the direction of socialist realism, which was, of course especially encouraged by Stalin. The theoretical foundations of socialist realism, according to Mozejko, were Marx's Thesis Eleven on Feuerbach and Lenin's theory of mirroring/reflection, which was to lead literature to become "an objective picture of external reality" (cf. 34–35). The Stalinist era saw several twists and turns (and, consequently, victims). It was only after Stalin's death that criticism of socialist realism was allowed and indeed became possible precisely due to its political nature, its idealessness, lack of any conflict, its naive and obvious message, and, essentially, its unnaturalness, i.e., its essentially unrealistic character. The latter criticism was made particularly clear by Lukács, who proposed the phrase "critical realism" to replace socialist realism. This term was to be based on 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism but could be enriched by all major literary innovations of the modern age (cf. Lukács 139 ff.). Regardless of the surprising reference to Marxism, this ideology is significant in Kermauner's argument since it automatically reveals the fourth paradox.

## The Fourth Paradox

For all its orthodox stiffness and ideological rigidity, Marxism, across its many versions, has placed another category on a pedestal, to which Kermauner, firmly rooted in

realism, attributes absolute importance for evaluating literature and anachronistically establishes as the central category of art: life, which brings us to the fourth paradox.

From Marxism – or rather its aesthetic foundation, critical realism – we can derive the Prosecutor’s key condition: the demand for “life” in art. Art and, consequently, writers were required to “depict life above all” (Mozejko 16) precisely in the most radical phase of Marxism, which was utterly ruthless with art – under Stalin’s rule. (True) writers were – apocryphally – supposed to be “engineers of human souls” (cf. Mozejko 16; apocryphally because Stalin is said to have taken this technician, almost modernist definition from Yury K. Olesha at a meeting in Maxim Gorky’s home). Along this line, “life” also entered Slovenian pre-war liberal and post-war Marxist aesthetics. The post-war Marxist cultural ideologist Boris Zihel<sup>2</sup> also advocated the value of “living reality” (14). However, unlike the hardline ideological socialist realism, he was already familiar with Lukács’s post-Stalinist critique and, above all, with the Russian theoreticians of realism from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (he wrote several introductory texts to the publications of their translations into Slovenian, particularly for works by Nikolay G. Chernyshevsky and Vissarion G. Belinsky. Cf. “Visarion Grigorjevič Belinski, njegova doba in delo” and “O realizmu v književnosti”).

However, the concept of “life”, whatever we understand by that, had already played a special role in Slovenian pre-war literary criticism. Many key works of art had been praised and (much more often) rejected in its name, despite being completely harmless in most cases. In the often devastating critiques written by Josip Vidmar, the supreme *arbiter elegantiarum* of Slovenian art, if not culture in general, life appeared as a fundamental concept, a kind of “master key”, so to speak, for the exegesis of literature. Thus it can be both surprising – or not – that Kermauner’s Prosecutor at some point instructs: “Read the scriptures of the greatest living Slovenian [...], Josip Vidmar, who has written so many important pages on these matters” (19–20). Such a recommendation could also be perceived as ironic. Kermauner, however, refers to Vidmar’s well-known stance on art, with which he held Slovenian pre- and especially post-war literary production in an iron grip. According to Vidmar, only true, ideal, absolute art can reach its goal and thus further substantiate the above-mentioned first paradox, namely the reflection of “true” life, which in literary works manifests itself in the form of Liveliness. Vidmar was not concerned with any philosophical (moral, ethical or aesthetic) criteria. On the contrary: art should be cleansed of all such ballast since the sophisticated life of man “knows neither necessity nor profit. Instead, it is free ... And all his creation – art – is born of love and joyful freedom” (*Trije labodje* 1). The Prosecutor takes the following words out of Vidmar’s mouth, so

<sup>2</sup> It was Zihel who is said to have played a special role in the incrimination of Šalamun’s “Duma 1964” as well, as embodied in the verse “on the logic of myopic vegetarians minus fifteen” (cf. Repe 68), while the second verse, “the land of the Cimpermans and their pimply admirers”, is said to target Matija Maček, who used to be a carpenter in his youth (cf. Kermauner, “Poker ni poker”, 78).

to speak: “Art is an effort, it is a high mission, not a cheap and one-day fad” (20). To quote Josip Vidmar again, only art with no ideological additives is “that most precious of all human pursuits” (1). And this is why, to the Prosecutor, “Šalamun’s writing [...] represents a bare mockery of all that is great, important, sacred” (20), “a parody of previous metaphysics and religion” (21).

In my 1998 book *Estetski in idejni vplivi na predvojno dramsko in gledališko kritiko Josipa Vidmarja (Aesthetic and Ideological Influences on Josip Vidmar’s Prewar Drama and Theatre Criticism)*, I had assumed that Vidmar’s measure of aesthetic life was primarily influenced by Goethe’s romanticism. Now it seems it would be much more plausible to assume – despite Vidmar’s 1959 translation of J. P. Eckermann’s *Conversations with Goethe* – that during his time as a prisoner of war in World War I, Vidmar was instead a “student” of the aforementioned Russian critics. The common source of the realist, utilitarian view of art both for Zihlerl and Vidmar can be traced back to Russian aesthetic theory of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: to Belinsky, who preached the primacy of society over the individual and influenced Chernyshevsky, who in turn advocated a utilitarian theory of literature, whereby, according to him, life is in a privileged position, since art is only its pale reflection. Thus, the epicentre of Chernyshevsky’s aesthetic theory lies in the truism that “beauty [...] is life” (cf. Mozejko 57). This almost self-evident assumption by Chernyshevsky later influenced a range of theorists (for example, Nikolai A. Dobrolyubov and Vladimir I. Uljanov). It is in Chernyshevsky’s idea that “for the peasant, the notion of ‘life’ always encompasses also the notion of work” (11) that we have to look for the Prosecutor’s references to Vodnik’s “The Satisfied Carniolan” and “Dramilo” (“Reveille”), Prešeren’s “Zdravljica” (“A Toast”) and Župančič’s “Duma”. These are examples of true, relevant poems since they – for example, Vodnik’s poems – speak of the principles of “the healthy working man, who ploughs, sews, produces tirelessly [...], who wears nice clothes, not just rags, his cheek is fresh, red, gorgeous, toned” (8). Thus, “abstract thoughts [...] should not belong to the sphere of life” (Chernyshevsky 17). The origin of Kermauner’s claim that “the reproduction of life [...] is a characteristic feature of art in general and constitutes its essence” (Chernyshevsky 117) can thus also be traced back to Marxism (and Josip Vidmar).

Literary history has not yet tested or proven neo-avant-gardist poetry regarding nation-building. Since the post-war period equated the very essence of the Slovenian nation with revolution, avant-garde movements that did not care about social influence necessarily appeared to be anti-state or even anti-national, while Kermauner aimed to present the reasons for its recognition and achieve its rehabilitation, to ensure that instead of aspiring towards an artistic Olympus, it was safely anchored in the canon of national literature, thus giving it value and place in the Slovenian pantheon. This position, however, opens up the fifth – and final –, paradox.

## The Fifth Paradox

Our review of the substantive paradoxes finally brings us to the fifth, formal one. Even in terms of their understanding of form, the two courtroom protagonists do not differ as much as one might expect and conclude at first sight. The Prosecutor considers true art to be only that which traditionally represents an ideal fusion of content and form since it is clear that such art, if it is to be of quality and relevance (cf. 19), must strive to “contain noble content in a beautiful vessel” (19). The Defender, on the other hand, is not so much concerned with the new avant-garde form since the avant-garde form is supposed to be only a contemporary expression of eternal human questions, a reflection of its (critical) content of life. Contemporary art reacts to the problems of today’s world, and precisely due to it being so critical, that is to say, value-oriented and responsive, it cannot be beautiful since the world today is legitimately subject to such criticism. In the Defender’s view, this does not imply that avant-garde art is of any lower value, and even less that this calls for its cancellation.

But while the Defender does not care about form, this is far from being the case for Kermauner since, in his opinion, avant-garde poetry deserves only (lower-value) dramatic treatment. Kermauner thus claims that if avant-garde poetry were already part of the social canon, i.e., accepted among the works that are crucial to the identity of the Slovenian nation, or “universally recognised as having fundamental importance for the destiny of the Slovenian nation” (5), then it would also deserve a different literary form: perhaps even an epic! Although Kermauner’s statement could be seen as ironic, it is also true that avant-garde poetry has not yet been properly assessed in terms of value and does not yet hold a position in the canon of Slovenian (nation-building) literature. And as such, in Kermauner’s opinion, the dramatic form suits it best. The dramatic text, or even its most sophisticated form (a trial in court), is supposed to be best suited for the presentation of the “problems [...] and tribulations [...], as well as the work and entertainment” (5) of Slovenian avant-garde poetry, since it is the most open of forms, and above all, it supposedly does not prejudge the evaluation, whereas other literary sub-genres do.

In his own words, Kermauner chose the form of a court trial<sup>3</sup> because it “fits our subject best” (5). None of the genres – whether epic, lyric or literary historiography – are suitable for the chosen subject, each for their own distinct reasons. The status of avant-garde poetry today is “far too alive, uncertain, thrilling” (26) to be dealt with by any form other than a direct classical (courtroom) confrontation. But even this position results in a paradox since the playlet presents merely an exposition of conflicting

<sup>3</sup> The dramatic presentation of a trial has been a specific theatre genre ever since antiquity. To name but a few of the most striking examples of the genre: from Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and Aristophanes’ *The Knights* to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*, Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, Miller’s *The Crucible*, and von Schirach’s *Terror*.

opinions. At the same time, it does not culminate in a conclusive decision about who is right. The decision itself is thus passed over to the spectator. Besides the two central protagonists, Kermauner introduces two other characters: the Declaimer, who reads out the individual poems as evidence presented by a “bailiff”, and the Commentator – could this character represent Kermauner himself? – who does just what his name implies: in addition to the opening and closing commentary, he occasionally directs the action itself, and above all, he interacts with another, tacit character, namely the audience itself (to which he attributes the functions of a neighbour, a good craftsman, an educated teacher, a smart politician and a wise cultural worker, cf. 5), to whom he assigns the usual role of the jury in court. As usual, in such cases, the audience has their work cut out due to the nature of the subject of the hearing. As Kermauner himself notes: “It is difficult for an uninvolved listener to immediately reach a decision” (26). But the author goes even one step further: according to the Commentator, avant-garde poetry is far from easy to understand and even more difficult to discuss: “Avant-garde poetry is a devilishly complicated, obscure, two- or three-layered affair” (5). Moreover, it is also “not a thing to be loved: it is neither beautiful nor wise” (6). In short, it is complicated and unattractive, hindering the audience from the start. And even in this situation, the Commentator, just like some conservative court bailiff, leaves them little manoeuvring space. He even prevents them from deciding about avant-garde poetry at the end, leaving the avant-garde poet in an indeterminate, undecided limbo. As the climax of his playlet, Kermauner proposes the following implausible suggestion: “The debate [...] goes on, of course, and it is even becoming more and more passionate, but let this be enough for this evening. So let us put a stop to it. [...] The debate will resume later, which will be announced in the daily newspaper. The audience is asked to disperse peacefully” (26).

## Epilogue

Contrary to the form of the dramatic structure, Kermauner does not reach a final verdict. Instead, he leaves it to the audience and snatches it away from under their noses. He interrupts the debate with his suggestion that “for now, the polemic between the two opinions, between attack and defence, should be temporarily suspended; we could say it is undecided for the moment” (26), which makes absolutely no sense in the context of a dramatic conflict.

Kermauner’s Commentator thus interrupts the debate at its very climax and deprives the audience in the role of the jury, even the possibility of reaching a decision. There is another problem here, however: Kermauner’s most self-destructive move in the playlet appears to be the fact that a final verdict was never possible at all since the Prosecutor and the Defender basically speak the same language: the language of

idealistic, patriotic, political, nation-building, realist-art values – the premise from which they discuss avant-garde poetry. Regardless of their, by definition, opposing functions, Kermauner's two protagonists are presented as holding the same set of values, which would make a verdict – in any form, be it aesthetic, social, or political – meaningless. And if they were to reach one, it would undoubtedly be to the detriment of avant-garde poetry.

Kermauner leaves the decision to the uncertain future: the arguments and, of course, the fate of avant-garde poetry [...] [should] only be definitively decided later" (26), and only when "must ferment into wine [...] we will see the long and the short of it" (5).

But even this will not be allowed to the same (theatrical) assembly before which the poet now finds himself, i.e., the court (and the jury). The momentarily inflamed passions are, in Kermauner's opinion, not very useful, and the audience is left with no answer to the question about the avant-garde poet's "guilt". Moreover, the future verdict will not be reached in public space, embodied by the courtroom. Instead, it will be accessible exclusively to "literary historiography", which "will only be allowed to do its duty at the moment when the debate [author's note: which, *nota bene*, was interrupted by the author himself] will be settled, once the immediate public and social, i.e., even non-artistic role of such poetry is clear. In accordance with Hegel's owl Minerva, it will only be allowed to pass judgment on avant-garde poetry *ex post*. Kermauner's instruction to the audience to disperse peacefully also points in this direction. Here, however, the "mother of all paradoxes" is revealed, namely the realisation that, despite adopting the dramatic form of argument, Kermauner renounces the possibility of theatre or the court. He even renounces the possibility that "the audience might still be interested" (26).

Based on the paradoxes identified and the extremely anaemic conclusion, the audience/jury is left with more questions than answers. First of all, it is not clear what Kermauner's position was: in the play, he devotes much more space to discussing the general values of art/poetry than the characteristics of its avant-garde version. There is a sense of tension between the expected positions of the two protagonists, the Prosecutor, who is an ideologically rigid "representative of society, its order, perspectives, and firmness" (8), and the Defender, who is supposed to be an artistically relaxed advocate of creative freedom, but essentially is not.

Kermauner's text is a poor attempt at a simultaneous, not-too-one-sided exculpation of neo-avant-garde poetry in the case of Tomáš Šalamun. The verdict is unremarkable, vague and – contrary to the initial belief about the only possible form of (dramatic) presentation of this avant-garde enigma – left to the uncertain future and (dispassionate) literary history. Why did Kermauner choose such an anticlimactic conclusion? Was he of the opinion that in the eight years (i.e., since 1964), avant-

garde poetry had already established itself artistically and therefore did not need any special defence? Did Kermauner himself struggle with both arguments? Was the nation-building argument with its canonical examples too strong even for Kermauner to give it up, and the self-referential artistic argument too unconvincing for him to rely on it?

However, it is encouraging for art in general and avant-garde poetry in particular that Kermauner left the courtroom door slightly ajar and allowed for the possibility of continuing the hearing “with new arguments and new examples, perhaps even examples of other avant-garde authors” (26), even though this would appear to be no longer necessary. Kermauner failed to embark on a retrial, probably not because in contemporary criminal justice practice, cases frequently fall under the statute of limitation, but rather because Šalamun’s vast opus had spoken for itself and there was nobody left to defend it against. And there is no point in fixing something that is not broken.

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