

IN MEMORIAM: MIRKO JURAK (1935-2014)

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I.

BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Mirko Jurak graduated in English and Russian Literature from the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts. In 1963 he departed for England to commence graduate studies at the University of Sussex, under the mentorship of the well-known literary historian David Daiches. In 1967 he received his doctorate for his work on English poetic political drama between 1930 and 1960. For the academic year 1970/71 he was a guest professor at Drake University in Iowa. He also held lectures at the University of Maribor.

Before his retirement in 2005, he was a full professor at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, where he introduced courses in Shakespearean drama as well as in Australian and Canadian literature to the Department of English. Between 1979 and 1981 he was Associate Dean, and between 1981 and 1983 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts. From 1984 to 1988 he headed the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, and from 1991 to 1993 he was Vice-Rector of the University of Ljubljana. He was co-founder and Vice President of the European Association for Australian Studies (EASA). Professor Jurak organized two high-profile international conferences in Bled: one on Australian Literature in 1982, and, in 1988, one on intercultural studies in the United States, Canada and Europe.

From 1990 to 1995 Professor Jurak was president of the Slovenian Emigrant Association, as well as the Vice President of the Republic of Slovenia's Office for Slovenians Abroad. For many years he was also a member of the boards for the "Drama" and "MGL" theatres in Ljubljana. Further, he was president of the Slovenian Association for Foreign Languages and Literatures and editor of their newsletter. He was involved in the journals on emigrant issues *Rodna gruda*, *Slovenija* and *Dve domovini*. In 2000 he became Editor-in-chief of the Faculty of Arts' journal *Acta neophilologica*. He received the Faculty of Arts' Award of Merit in 1989, and the University of Ljubljana's Award of Merit in 1990.

Professor Jurak's main research and teaching areas were: Elizabethan drama (with a particular emphasis on Shakespeare), 20th-century English and American drama, and Slovenian emigrant literature in English. His bibliography consists over 300 entries, including the monograph *Dileme parabolične umetnosti* (1975), which is a discussion

of the role and importance of sources for Shakespeare's plays. He also published the important first survey of Slovenian emigrant literature in Canada, as well as several forewords to Slovenian translations of English and American writers for the "100 novels" and "Nobel Laureates" series.

II.

Mirko was a long-time professor of English and American Literature and mentor to a great many Slovenian undergraduate and graduate students, but also to American, Australian, and Italian students, since he lectured abroad in addition to working at the University of Ljubljana. As a young man, he had wanted to become an actor, though for various reasons this was not to be. And so he dedicated his entire professional life to researching and teaching English and American drama, indeed to all English-language literature. His bibliography is extensive and wide-ranging, and he wrote a series of monographs and textbooks for students at the Universities of Ljubljana and Maribor.

In his illustrious academic career, he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Vice-Rector of the University of Ljubljana, as well as co-founder or executive member of such leading European associations for literature and culture as the European Association for Australian Studies and the European Association for American Studies. Mirko was also responsible for bringing leading thinkers to the Faculty of Arts, and to the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, among them, the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, the literary historian David Daiches, the British writer David Lodge, narratologist Karl Franz Stanzel, as well as many other literary critics – but also writers – from the English-speaking world. For me, however, Mirko was first and foremost my professor, my mentor for my Master's and PhD degrees, and a dear colleague at the department of literature.

We all learned a great deal from Mirko, and he was always trying to instil in students a love of English-language literature and for literature in general. Beyond Slovenia, he was very well-regarded as a scholar and, always and everywhere, he endeavoured to make known the fruits of Slovenian academia.

In 2000, after having been for many years executive editor of the Faculty of Arts' *Acta neophilologica* (founded by Professor Janez Stanonik), Mirko became the Editor-in-chief of the scholarly journal. The journal published a series of studies of Slovenian emigration (as manifested in emigrant media and literature) written by Slovenian and foreign literary historians, many of whom were of Slovenian descent and living abroad. This research was pioneering for the areas of Slovenian emigrant literature, especially in the United States, Canada and Australia, a trio of lands for which Mirko had a particular affinity. I especially remember participating in the seminal 1988 international conference in Bled which focussed on intercultural literary studies in the United States, Canada and Europe and which was organized in conjunction with the Slovenian, American and Canadian embassies. Many attendees noted at the conference reception that they had never before, on a single occasion, shaken the hands of two ambassadors of large countries, namely, of the United States and Canada. Because this occurred just a few years before Slovenia became independent, this coming-together was by no means a given, and the Bled conference was thus of great political significance for the country. In addition, the

conference was of pivotal importance for Slovenian intellectuals and professors of Slovenian descent who, for the most part from American and Canadian universities, lived in the diaspora and were previously mostly unpublished and little-known in Slovenian academia. The rest is history. Mirko clearly contributed significantly to knowledge and research of Slovenian emigrant literature, a field that has, increasingly, been included into the Slovenian literary canon.

Mirko was always innovative. In the 1980s he was the first to start teaching the postcolonial literatures of English-speaking countries, which in the European context was a novel undertaking; this tradition of thematic and critical decentralization and pluralisation of Anglo-American literary studies or literature in English continues at the Faculty of Arts' Department of English. For his efforts in propagating Australian literature and Australian studies in the European scholarly space, Mirko received an award from the Australian Government. As well, Mirko was the initiator of the interdisciplinary postgraduate (now doctoral) programme of American Studies at the Faculty of Arts. His decisive role in initiating and shaping the programme for English and German studies at the University of Maribor cannot be overlooked.

Mirko always looked at life from the sunny side and with optimism. Anyone who knew him knows that he was, in addition to being a conscientious and serious academic, also a *bon vivant* who loved company. This is the Mirko many of his colleagues from abroad knew – while appreciating his scholarly side, they also appreciated his purely human side. In addition to being a lover of the theatre, Mirko was a great lover of classical music, and for many years he was on the boards of Ljubljana's "Drama" and "MGL" theatres. As a theatre lover, he had very fond memories of his visits to London, and he wrote of London theatrical performances for Slovenian newspapers – in particular of his visit to Shakespeare's reconstructed Globe theatre. This roofless, semi-circular theatre, built as it was back in Shakespeare's time, seemed to Mirko to faithfully reflect the lively atmosphere and of the Elizabethan theatre of yore.

Right up until his last days Mirko continued to write about English drama, especially as it connected with and influenced Slovenian creativity for the stage. Over the past few years he published, in *Acta neophilologica* and in Slovenian newspapers, a number of extensive studies on Shakespeare and his influence on Slovenian playwrights – ranging from Anton Tomaž Linhart, Fran Levstik, Ivan Cankar, to Oton Župančič, Ivan Mrak, Bratko Kreft, and to contemporary Slovenian artists for the stage. With great dedication and as far as his health would allow it, he was also writing a book about these theatre links. The members of the editorial board of *Acta neophilologica* and generations of students of English will forever preserve beautiful and grateful memories of Mirko.

Let me conclude with a quote from Mirko's beloved Shakespeare and his play *Hamlet*, where Hamlet's friend Horatio accompanies Hamlet's demise with the following words:

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince:
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

(*Hamlet*, V.2)

III.

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