

A Permanent Non-reconciliation With Violence

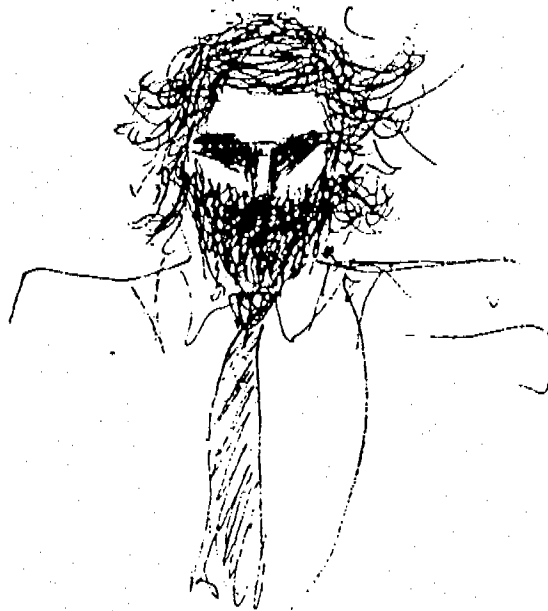
Tonko Maroević
interviewed by

Andriana Škunca

Tonko Maroević (born 1941) is known as a poet, art and literary critic, essayist, translator and anthropologist. He has published numerous papers on modern art and edited several monographs, a collection of art reviews *Polje mogućeg* (Field of the Possible) in 1969, wrote literary criticism, adapted Marulić in *Dike ter hvaljenja* (Pride and Praises) in 1986, essays on Croatian-Italian literary dialogue *Zrcalo adrijsko* (Adriatic Mirror) in 1989 and collections of poems: *Primjeri* (Examples) in 1965, *Slijepo oko*, 1969 (The Blind Eye) *Motiv Genoveve* (The Motif of Genieveve) 1986, *Trag roga ne bez vraga* (The Mark of a Horn, Possibly the Devil's Work) 1987, for which he was awarded the Tin Ujević Award, *Četveroručno* (Four-handed) 1992, and *Sonetna struka* (The Sonnet Profession) in 1992.

He edited the anthology of modern Catalan poetry *Bikova koža* (Bull's Skin) in 1987. He works at the Institute of Art History as an associate researcher.

He is an expert on old Croatian literature. Maroević builds his opus on, as he says, »dualities and discrepancies« and »the examination of all the intermediate forms«. He examines self-ironically his dethroned ego and, by making fragments to dove-tail, medi-



Vera Fischer

ates between the word and the image, between the discontinuity of silence and echo.

Q How do you think the power of words can eliminate dilemmas and strengthen decisions at the present moment, since you wrote in *Trag roga ne bez vraga*: »Oh, my words are not only being re-heated/ on a fuzzy and external fire but also drying/ and flaking off under the weight of doubt?«

A I am pained by this helplessness. I am one of the people who do not believe that their words activate anybody, or that they ought to. I am not a representative of my world exclusively, as for example, musicians and painters are; I primarily testify on behalf of others. It is discouraging to live and not be able to relieve the pain with words, to justify one's life, one's existence. Culture as a whole has this function, rather than individual words.

Present day news creates panic and a feeling of temporariness, which exacerbates hundred-fold. We have to find an antidote for our resignation, such words that will be impossible to ill-use, words that will side with the underdog, in need of particular attention. On the other hand, there has never re-

ally existed any Arcadia in these parts; it has only been anticipated, projected and defended »against the Turks«. Marulić's prayer and appeal for help from Europe is perhaps as relevant today as it was at the time it was written.

Q Who are the Turks now?

A I would by no means wish to write a prayer »Against the Serbs«, but I would immediately sign a prayer against the so called Yugoslav People's Army which is, in the long run, not acting in the interest of any particular ethnic group, not even the one with hegemonic aspirations, but in its own petty and panicky defence of privileges and its obsolete function. Another thing is that Milošević's bloated policy still contains a fair deal of Turkish mores and that widens the gap between his people and both Europe and their future. Not to mention the ethnic Serbs in Croatia, with whom I would really like to share love for our common homeland, in which the Serbs would not be deprived of anything in their own particular patriotism.

Q Tolerance and unselfish coexistence with other nations have always in a way repressed aggressive feelings among Croats. How to resist violence?

A Croatian consciousness contains, I think, an idea of a weak, small and constantly endangered nation and it should not essentially be aggressive. The love for the hometown, region or homeland is not restrictive. Love of peace and the teachings of Ghandi and Radić can seem naive, but, in the long run, they are the only justified ideals for a small, civilized, European nation. I don't consider such naivety to be something negative. But, it does not mean that we should turn the other cheek to Adžić and the likes of him.

Q From the reverse face of history, is it possible to see the obverse of the present time, the insecurity, the constant threat to the Croatian people of war and of being stripped of their centuries old rights to freedom, peace and independence?

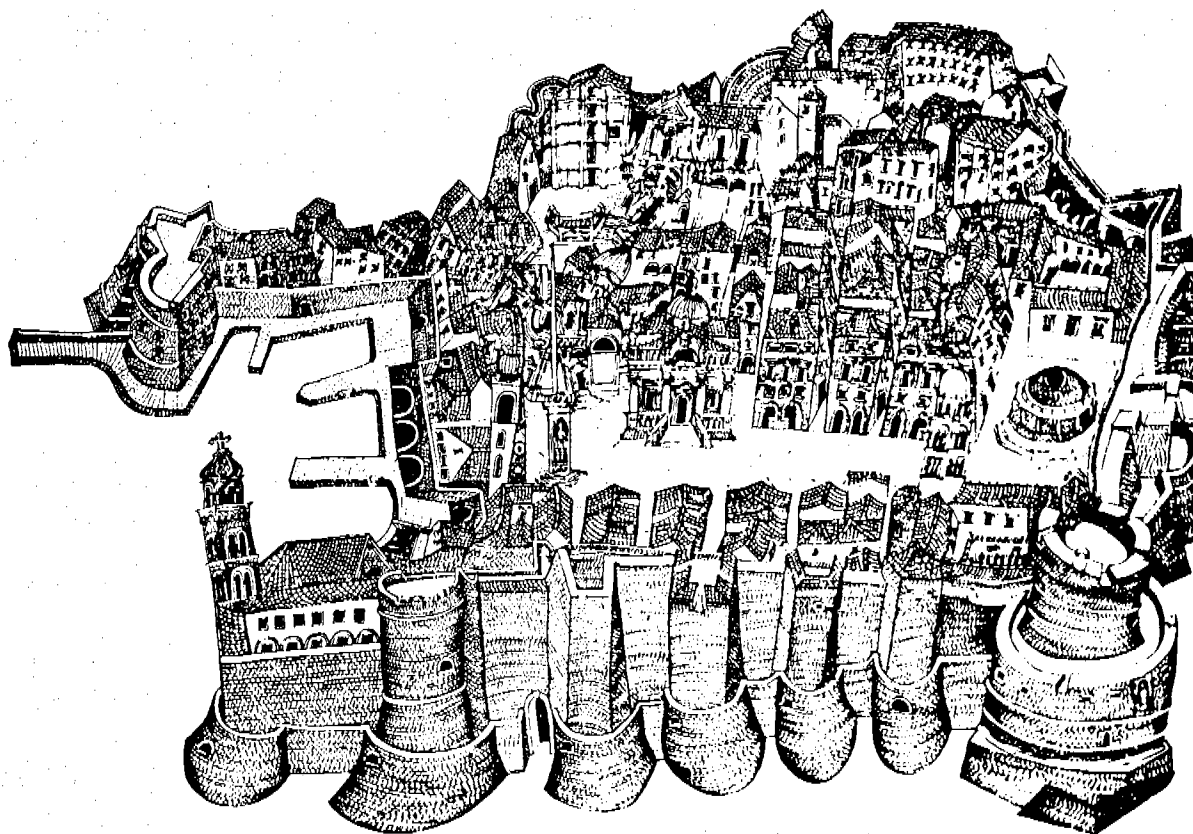
A It is a fact that our literature is also a kind of struggle for survival,

but we must not agree to be manipulated and succumb to sheer pragmatism.

To be open within our language and embrace universal values is certainly a compelling heritage. A word showing its historic layers has its own power. The depth of tradition and the heritage, adopted and verified through words, are rare means left to a small and weak nation. Unfortunately, I do not believe in applied literature, not even in letters to powerful and distinguished people. I would only try to reserve a possibility for the meeting of intellectuals coming from nations that are, sadly, already at war, in order to meet, face and finally understand one another. I think that similar and in a way cathartic understanding has been achieved by the mothers of soldiers from all parts of the country and from all ethnic groups.

Q In what kind of opposition do you believe?

A If I were to fall prey to intellectual conceit, I would quote this sophism: »To make the weaker thing



stronger. « I know that the sophists didn't change the world, but the only thing left to us in terms of morals is to make a small step toward understanding and by doing so, strengthen the weaker side. I remember Tonči Petrasov Marović and his poem *Suprotiva* (Against) where Marulić's spirit of resistance and endurance speaks in December of 1971, not only as an invective against contemporary political aggression but also as a defence of the right to permanent non-conciliation with violence. This is what words can do. The example of this poem, the poem provoked by instinct, is still valid and also acts according to its intellectual and ethical substrate.

Q You have studied writers of old Croatian literature: Hanibal Lucić, Petar Hektorović, Marin Gazarović and, especially, Marko Marulić. What directed you to these writers?

A Ten years ago, when I was adapting Marulić's *Judita*, I was in a position to write that, fortunately, we were not motivated by desire to bring up-to date the theme of war and siege, heroism and liberation. Unfortunately, I could not say the same thing nowadays, quite the contrary, but I could affirm all that originally led me to those original texts of Croatian literature, such as their reality, their stratified structure, richness of sound and the direction to the primordial and a level of expression that is eminently European and hence equal to world standards.

The encounter with writers of old Croatian literature is a cure for vanity, pretentiousness and lack of roots. Perhaps in my case there has occurred a fortunate coincidence, for I could associate the field of old Croatian literature with the geographic area I was born in. The objects and phenomena around me gained an aura of dignity of something that has been described, celebrated and conceptualised in verse. Naturally one could occasionally mock and thumb his nose at tradition, but the words had their weight, roots and range.

Maybe the most beautiful synthesis of modern Croatian literature can be found in the works of Slobodan

Novak. His works have been created on the same soil and with the same feeling of approach to and departure from tradition at the same time.

Q You have written numerous outstanding poems in the spirit, manner and language of old Croatian literature.

A I was adding verses to Marko Marulić's *Judita* and *Davidiada* in the spirit of *Judita*. Then, every season, I was adding a prologue or epilogue. Many of my poems have been written according to some classic model, repaying a debt of sorts to Lucić, Hektorović, Menčetić, Ujević or Prešern. I was toying with their motifs. However, these poems represented simultaneously an affirmation of love and interest, they indicated that I can wave to these poets from a distance, with longing, but also with a realisation that one can't step twice into the same river.

Literary originals are like boxes that can now be offered in a different way. They corroborate their authority as much as we are capable of twisting them, using them, turning them inside out like gloves. This process is certainly a beautifying mirror. To try one's skill at a closed, perfect form means to borrow some of its prestige, depth and radiance, along with all its aspects of craft and metier. At the same time we admit that while the old poets knew how to do it and meet the highest standards, we can do it only as a game, half seriously. We can at least adopt their technique when we are not allowed to absorb their strength.

Tin Ujević's *Oproštaj* (Farewell) is a magnificent effort, at the beginning of the century, to establish a direct bond with tradition. My variation on a theme *Otpozdrav* (A Greeting Returned) is just a personal gesture of recognizing the context. By encompassing the past, Tin became a rebel, the founder of a heresy. At the end of the century, I show the awareness that I am but a humble epigone, a neo-mannerist.

Q What is the reason for your need to try different aspects of writing, blend with other writers' voices

and examine a possible transformation?

A When I was translating Queneau's *Exercises in Style* and adapting Gazarović's *Ciprijan i Justina*, I experienced that the same thing can be said in different ways and that I am particularly attracted to the possibility of transformation, the transposition of transformation and putting on a mask, a kind of *persona*. All my work in translation, criticism, adaptation and interpretation stems from the wish to examine different perspectives, to listen to the position of someone other and different, besides my histrionic interventions. What I am interested in, in any mode of writing, is a certain reverse side, a dimension which makes any excessive individualism seem relative.

I find individualism which is not self-questioning entirely insufficient. Without such curiosity I certainly could not read so much, let alone write, about others.

Q You are also known as a translator from several languages.

A I consider reading and translating a great privilege and it was not labour but my free choice. It is nice when you can serve somebody who is better than you and simultaneously test your own instruments. Although I am not a linguist or an expert, I have translated from Latin, Italian, French, English, Spanish, Catalan and Slovene. I have usually chosen by affinity. Translating Borges saved me from writing a series of lesser variations. My translation of Catalan writers is a result of my interest in the mode of function and autonomy of a small Mediterranean literature of a great historic tradition and a destiny similar to Croatia's (both had to struggle for survival encircled by stronger neighbours, both possess a strong spiritual intensity, the parallelism of popular lyrical poetry and European erudite tendencies, etc).

Q Selected works of Borges in six books (1985) represents the largest segment of your work as a translator. What is your relation to Borges today?



WRITERS WITH WRITERS: INTERVIEW



A I used to haul his books along on my journeys until I liberated myself from him through translation. I certainly find Jorge Luis Borges more boring than Thomas Stearns Eliot and Paul Valéry, even than Luigi Pirandello and André Gide, but he managed to mark authentically a characteristic moment in literature. I perceived that he combined the most demanding possibilities of writing and thinking and it was only proper that I should kind of pay him back. He in turn had something to offer even where I thought he was repeating himself and running in circles. He convinced me empirically that variants carry that substantial small difference which is most important. Having translated him I lost the feeling that his works were esoteric and too exclusive for me. They rather showed me the exceptional possibilities of the direct testimonies, journal entries, observations and contemplations of a man who is growing old and entering his own darkness.

Borges is a writer using intellectual consolation through the creation of a parallel universe, where rationalism is reduced *ad absurdum* and precise geometrisation *ad infinitum*. It is a different matter altogether that, for our existence, we need stronger emotional spices and, I dare say, a metaphysical projection.

Q Where and how do written and visual art meet?

A Visual art gave me a challenge of looking at another medium, searching for an answer to a manner of expression which certainly changes quicker than any other language. I will not say that visual art is inherently driven by fashion, but fluctuation of trends is more obvious than in music or writing. I think it is not a coincidence that many Croatian writers, particularly middle-generation poets, switched to writing about painting and sculpture in order to experience universally adopted innovations and tendencies. Interest in visual art was maybe an inadvertent way of escaping from excessive engagement and explicitness. Let us not forget that visual arts organically lived, flour-

ished and ripened even in times when the written word was suppressed. This is true, of course of the period immediately after 1971, but also of the mid- and late 1950s. The path to liberation was easier to build through physical signs than through verbal expression.

Painting is, for example, a model of creation of a personal world, according to personal rules and codes which do not necessarily have to be an imitation and persillage, and thus metaphorically painting convinces us that words do not have to be servants of ideas and that they have their own spirit and radiation. The experience of abstract and informal painting has opened essentially new perspectives to the possibility for both complex verbal combinations and syntactic elasticity.

If turning to the world of forms represented a kind of an escape from reality it was well compensated with a largely enhanced understanding of the scope and extent of the sign. Some say that in the beginning there was the word, some that there was the image. My experience confirmed that there were moments when only physical forms could have offered me a real discovery, as there were moments when only highly articulated expression could give me satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment. It is surely a privilege to be able to change registers. The question is: are there other modes of paying the debt, besides gratitude? Well, writing about artists I gained something which I paradoxically call a debtor's capital.

Q You write inspired literary reviews and essays using your sensitive ear for different kinds of poetic forms.

A I have read poetry all my life, and it seemed to me that I should write some kind of a diary. Interesting indeed is that it seems that reflex and reflections suffice in this field and that I don't have to apply the same kind of technique and terminology as in art criticism. It is maybe not a coincidence that an art critic must also necessarily be an art historian, while a literary critic does not have to be a literary historian.

Indeed, I observe works of visual arts from the distance of somebody who is not a painter or sculptor himself and my perception of them is diachronic, whereas my perception of literature is always synchronic, regardless of what period the text dates from. Naturally, somebody else can have a completely reversed perspective.

Q How much can authentic literary criticism contribute to the recognition of really valuable works?

A I can give you an example from my youth. The result of my first reading of Franz Kafka's »The Trial« was a total confusion, but later on, when I read Günther Anders's book »Kafka, Pro and Con«, several other doors were opened for me at once. Günther Anders was, hence, more transparent, beneficial and necessary than Kafka. But, we should not reduce the role of criticism to propaedeutic crutches, because interpretations written by Bachelard, Blanchot, Wölflin, Steiner, Sedlmayer and Starobinsky are really no less creative than the most demanding »artists and models«. (To say nothing about Beckett's reading of Proust.)

Q Your books of poetry in prose *Primjeri* and *Slijepo oko* express an awareness of the problem of writing, of the automatization which favours the structural over the thematic meaning and awareness of the concretization and materialization of poetic language. Was poetry in prose a personal choice or a choice of your generation?

A I thought it was personal, but now it is apparent that it was also a choice of the generation. It was at least a mimicry considering the usual, banal forms of poetry; the choice of freedom of image and rhythm, free from mechanisms or reliance on the ecstaticness of speech. Poetry in prose is an amphibian genre which enables you to walk on the edge of description and then plunge into the most intimate profundities and then again come out to the clearing of conventional signs.

The internal rhythm which is not supported by drums of straight lines



or trumpets of rhymes permits, or at least seems to permit, greater immediacy, purity and unpretentiousness. If all forms have been stamped and verified by history, we had a feeling that we could smuggle into this form an image, thought or pulse compromised by frequent use.

Q Why have you given up poetry in prose in the past years?

A I have not given it up. I am simply not always concentrated enough and worthy of writing it. A part of my experience continues to find its most appropriate way into this seemingly formless form, but the fact is that a large part of playful, erudite reactions or references need a different structure. After all, if I try out other voices and *personae* in me, I can use the sonnet form or hexameter, but everything that I thought out, I hope it does not sound too proud, in the first person singular, finds its most natural ex-

pression in poetry in prose or — in prose instead of poetry.

Q Where does your need to write sonnets come from?

A Extremes are contiguous. The sonnet is for reader's hygiene, for the possibility of a quick, mainly intellectual and analytic reaction. The sonnet resembles an epigram — in social terms aimed at somebody else and even in its embryonic form almost a work of somebody else. One can't write a sonnet without being aware that there are millions or possibly billions of similar sonnets already written.

Q In times of crisis, such as ours, when questions of national survival and freedom directly intertwine with the question of personal existence, how can we resist fear and anxiety, the feeling of being truly powerless faced with militant onslaughts?

A Inclination to relativism is accompanied by the danger of defeatism and an utter futility of individual work. Indeed, what could these patches do, our modest texts, at a time when the most concentrated and consistent feats of the human mind can not offer usable and directly applicable solutions? But, to remain in our domain does not always need a rational verification. Giving up would mean to give up identity and humaneness. To create war conditions in one's mind would mean to gratify those people from the outside who want to create them. Unfortunately, defiance and decisions are not enough. Solidarity with those who suffer now and those who suffered before in a similar way is permanent and still a just humanistic decision. After all, if we can't directly help, we must not hinder.

