

# A Group Portrait with a Chasm

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1.

Our post-war literary practice has often been to consider literary creations of a certain period as team work. Singular individuals have agreed, in their mimicry, to divide among themselves achievements and merits, only leaving some of them to stand out of the collective arrangement like a rod of lightning.

This is, of course, the consequence of the combined effort to reach their own, personal voice, and then of a struggle to maintain that voice in unfavourable circumstances, even in a choir. The view of literature as the endeavour of a generation of writers or poets is more the reflection of troubles than of the success in emphasizing one's own view of literature — without regard to later violence against those who do not fit in this generation scheme. However, if this trouble is taken on as a sign of success or of "newfound time", it can only give birth to further troubles. The biggest of them, the least painful for those who have recourse to it, is the simplification by which a generation as a biological condition becomes the key which reduces the differences between the individualities in order to establish a mean value, their ideological or conceptional identity. When this is done, they approach the main reason for manipulation: mutual comparison and the opposing of one generation to another. Each one is marked by its emblematic "problem", mostly gathered from the fragments of founded analyses. Simplification of the generation approach is the main inspirer of that criticism preoccupied

with summary classification for everyday purposes. Without doubt, the trouble of placing literary works within the time and space of problems imposes a mnemotechny in which the names of periodicals — in our case "Krugovi" (Circles), "Razlog" (Reason), "Pitanja" (Questions), "Off" — become unavoidable points of support. Practice has shown that the phenomenon and the development of generation-inspired concepts can be placed within the time of one decade. It seems to us that such a segmentation can earmark more precisely the diachrony of changes. The problem is that the speech is not only of chasms among generations, but the chasms inside generations themselves. What prevents us from accepting an unique concept is the realization that such a concept functions on the basis, and beginning with one chasm in itself, and that such a concept is at the least ambiguous.

In the case of the generation of the fifties, gathered around the periodical "Krugovi", a certain "discovery of the individual", its first given condition which is not founded by anything but the actual act of writing, imposes itself as the basic thematic and poetic innovation. This discovery stands in the air of negativity to the extent that it is defined by a break with the context. Thus, the awakened individual in Mihalić's poem "Metamorphosis" is defined by emptiness, the space which does not define the individual but corrodes, deprives and evacuates him. Each move of Šoljan's thrower of the stone takes something from himself: he is a thrower at the price of being transubstantiated somewhere else as

his own loss:

"Because I have flown away with stones long ago. . ."

In an analogical way, Vlado Gotovac defines the law of "dangerous space" by which the poem wins at the price of loss of life. Ivan Slamnig's poetry is nothing else but the adjoining of transformations and the disguising of the subject of his poems. It consists of the flight of every permanent fixation and determination equal to the death and whiteness in brackets that follows after the year of birth. Speech is, then, about negative definition again, about the place of the subject which is constantly vacant and which place is more real than him himself.

One *more positive* way is opposed to this unanimous characteristic way of *negative* marking. In this case, a unique "I" is only the pretext for identification with some multiple chorus "I" which is not the same any more but neither is it different:

When I was my three brothers and I  
when I was  
four of us.

The introductory parallelism of Pupačić's best known poem is more than explicit in the move of adjoining, and overpassing other related beings. This is a specific sensitive communion (it is spoken about in the continuation of the same poem) which negates the discontinuity of the subject's (self-)reliance with the world. It is not a question of a world evacuated by a poetic act, but of a fulfilled, complete world.

In a final sense, this is a unanimous "fraternity of beings", the chain of beings who outlive the finality of the individual, prolonging the sequence of kinsfolk backwards and forwards. In the poetry of Nikola Miličević ("Elegy for my Dead") the major part of that sequence consists of dead persons: they authorize the greatest part of what the subject is and what it longs for. The individual is only the last link in the chain of the traditional message. This patriarchal and ancestral world and its speech are defined in advance, given, with a small possibility of individual deviation. We find the same attachment to kinsfolk in Miroslav Slavko Mader, wellknown for identifying with his dead brother Slavko. His programmatic verses

One should recognize himself in others  
one should open one's eyes in others...

are experientially and poetically in direct contrast with the views of the poets of deracination which cannot imagine any repetition and recognizability. Identification with others, however, is not less existentially determined, as we can see in Vesna Krmpotić. Her poetic speech is decisively incited by its essential ordering party. That is that famous You which assumes, by turns, various roles depending on how they are dramatized by the existential agreement and its surpassing. The subject becomes consciously dependent on that You which invites it into speech and which creates it in the essential sense as the being of speech — without regard as to whether You is a lover, son or a higher consciousness, God. If we open wider the chasm between two opposite ways of marking the subject, we shall see that they cover two varying practices of language. In the first case, the language is the rest of the negation procedure, it is mostly singly defined as deduction/being. This singleness is especially evident in Slamnjig who tries to word each poem in its own "constructive concetto" or witticism. In the second case, language is summed up as the transparency of

the intersubjective, collective experience and it transforms the melancholy grandeur of togetherness. In an experience of the first type, language, in its tendency toward the single and the individual, is materialized in the perception of its materiality, but also in the imagination of the material. Thus, Branimir Zeljković writes in the middle of the fifties his "Dinosaurs", the project of the integration of the spiritual and the material. Dubravko Horvatić appears somewhat later with his poems to be fascinated by the material. (Let us remind ourselves, at the end of the fifties "Informel" replaces abstraction in painting). In its experience of the intersubjective type, language tends towards transparency liberated by all material afterthoughts, as is the case with Pupačić, or towards the suggestiveness of poetry as the medium of mystic fusion in the poetry of Vesna Krmpotić.

**2.**

The chasm leads us thus from an existential modality closer to the operative field. The difference may be expressed by the transfer of emphasis from the question "Who speaks?" to "Why does one write?" and "How does one write?". When we speak about the poetry of the poets of the sixties, we have to take into consideration the fact that their activity, although incomparably less exposed to normative pressures, is characterized by other not much lesser temptations. This is the era of the emergence of philosophical, psychoanalytic discourse in the interpretation and theoretical foundation of poetry, but also of the examples of modern poetry. Poetry did not get through these challenges easily, but it also gave a great number of varying answers to the above questions.

A superficial observer saw these dilemmas as a divorce between "philosophical", "intellectual" "unintelligible" and "intelligible", "original", "hippy" poetry. This is much more complex when considered from inside. On the one hand, the continuity of the poetic flow

depicts the direction of the dignity of the poetic word. Poets like Mate Ganza, Nikica Petrak, Ante Stamač and Željko Sabol stick to the value of the basic words of survival as the pathos traits of poetry. Poetry does not have any other prospects but to address the original words and it calls for their power. This poetry sees its task in sequence — in the continuation of the "ancient poem" (Petrak), in the first place of the immediate predecessors. The experience of existence in these poets is received in a way as the experience of poetry. On the other hand, all good reasons for the faith in the word would prove faithless, already in 1962, in the "Book of Water" by Tonči Petrasov Marović, by a diluvial eruption of asemantic materiality. He wanted to clean poetry of its unbearable purity, whether its reasons are esthetic or existential, and to make language debase itself in order to begin functioning. Tonko Maroević, in the opposite/similar way, feels "shame" for the language polluted by poetry. His "Examples" (1965) are a decisive intervention in the neutral speech adapted to a subtle geometry of textual shifts. Josip Sever in his "Dictator" (1969) opposes an explicit oral concept of the poem to the scriptural orientation of his fellow-travellers in linguistic formalism. The delight in the manipulative materiality of speech produces the stuff of the poem by a specific phonemic automatism of an explicitly unconscious transmission. Sever sacrifices historical-cultural coordinates of meaning to the delight of phonic actualization. This is especially evident in typical noun-term metaphors. Thus, in the phrase "cottoned paris", for example, the known meaning is subordinated to the unknown and a sound stain replaces information. The ridge of nonsense is avoided by an elegant pirouette. Finally, Josip Stošić, after concrete poetry from the beginning of the fifties, comes, in 1961 already, to the position of the text which keeps only auxiliary words as vehicles of (potential but unwritten) words. By this, he is completely in the field of conceptual poetry which will

come to the focus of attention fifteen-odd years later.

As we can see, the chasm in the generation portrait of the poets of the fifties, deepened in the sixties to the proportions of rupture which contains in its variants the announcement of almost all that will happen in Croatian poetry up to the present time. A shock has occurred which has endangered the fundamentally positive determination of poetic activity. While it is possible to neglect Ivšić and Stošić in the fifties, the poetry of the sixties denounces language as indisputably a meaningful useful instrument. The language becomes simply a field of activity open at all its levels, without offering any guarantees for the significance of the poetic job.

Aside from this controversy, Dragojević's phenomenological moralization does not call for the continuity of poetic authorization or for the gestures of rupture. The historical message which is interwoven in his speech from the book "Bad Weather and Other" (1968) onwards concentrates him to the congruent reading of material and immaterial worlds. Dragojević's insistence "on the thing" contains one of the most flexible and constructive proposals for the language of contemporary Croatian poetry just at the moment when its readiness for testing its powers begins to lose footholds.

**3.**

In Croatian poetry the seventies and eighties are announced by a novelty. If the chasm in the unique generation-view of the world could be covered in the sixties, now it appears in the foreground. Moreover, the existence of the chasm, and the discussion about it, become more important than what they divide. To be precise, the divide is no more one, but there are many and they are not cut at a right angle. Fixing the boundaries, inventing terms, giving qualifications, before a very rare phenomenon, has become the question of the day. (The parallel rise of critical consciousness could not be found, judging from the ever narrower circle

of critics' references).

One rule may be deduced from the consideration of the two previously decade layers: the influence of "heretic" tendency always prevails. Thus, the poets of "the language experience" ensured for themselves a stronger influence in the seventies than those who continued with the existentialist concept. And what does "the language experience" mean in the seventies? Poetry as part of a broader project for the future, where the tendencies of poetry towards a "universal language" (A. Rimbaud) would be materialized, remains the programme of several groups of poets who dispute among themselves about the avant-garde qualifications. They are connected by the esthetics of planetary folklore, which means the use of diachronically rooted cultural notions as the material for synchronic metaphors. The futuristic innovation of noun-term metaphor, popularized by Josip Sever, has become the most favoured vehicle of the young poetry-maker because it annuls the historic and semantic dimension of proper names and terms transforming them into a dim, coloured impression. Names and notions have been pulled from the weakening embrace of Knowledge and given over to the pure play of unburdened present time. The style which was created under the charismatic impulses of Josip Sever and Tomaž Šalamun, and which was practiced by the poets Branko Maleš, Anka Žagar, Milko Valent, Sead Begović, Branko Čegec and others, has been baptized "semantic concretism" by Maleš himself. The term semantic concretism, without regard to the fact that it refers to the periodization of T. Kopferman, is paradoxical to say the least when it is known that the said style practices the asemantic connections of words, and that it does not aspire to any suggestion or notion of objects, outside the materiality of the language itself. (The term asemantic abstractionism would better serve that purpose.) The divide of the controversy between the term as semantic concretism and the practice it covers — indeed the division typical for the

seventies and early eighties — confronts us with a new fact: through poetry, either by its theoretical pilotage, ideological window-dressing or open politicizing — one wishes to obtain something which until recently has not entered the scope of poetry. An attentive observer will not overlook the phenomena of engaging poetry for premeditated political aims. The disengaging aspiration towards "the dethroning of sense" (B. Maleš) is only congruent with it and not opposite! Taking into consideration that all extra-verbal extensions of poetic activity are foreign to "semantic concretism", the mentioned tendency may be designated as verbal-centric which sees the prospect of poetic activity in the classical publishing of books. There is also a militant anti-verbal-centric tendency of the conceptualists, who are indeed aligned at the edges of painting, but the fact that they continue the work of Josip Stošić gives us the right to consider them as the part of poetic field. The artist-poets such as Vlado Martek, who deals with the problems of "pre-poetry", then Mladen Stilinović, the author and publisher of unique hand-made books such as "Written in Blood" (the title should be understood literally), and others, write verbal messages, create conceptual projects and practice other non-verbal kinds of writings. This tendency has managed to preserve its stand of opposition against literary conformism, so that it may deserve, to some extent, to be designated as avant-garde. On the other hand, it is possible to conclude, as the lyric tendency has done being opposed to the planetary-folklore one, that the future that modern art has dreamt about is already there, and that innovative possibilities have been practically exhausted. The poets such as Zoran Kravar, Drago Štambuk, Krešimir Kosić, Neven Jurica, Hamdija Demirović, Mile Stojić, Tomislav Matijević, and others, prove that there is a place for the antithesis and that the quality of retrospection in lyricism can be confronted with the transcendency of the future. Has the lyric current managed to obtain a po-

sition in the turn of the avant-garde perspective or surpass it, which would result — to borrow the expression from painting — into “trans-avant-garde”? This attitude is evident in the “new simplicity” of Zoran Kravar and the way in which he relaxes the clamps of modernist neuroses by his hexameters enabling the language to flow regularly through the metric scheme:

But leaves also move and know  
airy freedom and dwell in it differently,  
hastily  
tremble in it, overturn in it booming,  
they  
believe in it differently: that is to say,  
without resistance,  
ecstatically, completely

(“Tree”)

It is evident that generation-critics do not see the already established direction of poetic phenomenology among the tendencies which compete for the designation of contemporaneity. While the humorous-concrete poetry of Dražen Mazur, Pero Kvesić and Ranko Igrić, by its cynical verbal directness, represents the most communicative aspect of young poetry making, phenomenological poetry sees in banal speech the obstacle to approaching the essence of the phenomenal. Poets such as Neda Miranda Blažević, Boris Vrga, Đurđa Miklaužić, Dražen Katunarić and Hrvoje Pejaković, confirm the ability of words to return “to the thing” producing new concrete poems by the contemplation of the phenomenal.

The poetry of the seventies and early eighties is obsessed by the Orpheus

complex: whether one should turn back or not. Whether it is possible to go further without turning back or is only possible to turn back or, as Rilke would put it, to take leave? This rather simple approach to dividing lines of the poetry of the seventies generation wishes only to refer to the tectonics of the problems in comparison with a similar breaking of lines found in the poetry in the fifties and sixties. As we have seen, the motivation of breaking changes constantly according to the elementary methods of creating poetry. Without regard to controversies within generations or among them, the divides are necessary signs of temporal and problematic differentiation. They can only keep opening, so it is hopeless to try to prove their superfluity through the need of a monolithic soil.

*Translated by Graham McMaster*



Slavko Kopač: A trio, 1965