

Introduction to reading through Slavko Mihalić

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The poetical work of a poet — just like the biography of a man — often seems in retrospective to consist only of exceptional moments in which, in the glare of inspiration, there seems to have been a crystallisation of his experience and art. We are abetted in this idea of ours by both selective memory — if we have followed the poet's work as contemporaries — and our later limited investigation of the texts. But the poetic work of a genuine poet is much more than this: it is really the spiritual biography of the person, and the manifest ontogenesis of his talent. Although the poet should always be valued only by his greatest successes (the rest, as Pound said, being journeyman stuff), interrogation of the works always constitutes a precious testimony about how and at what price these marvelous ultimate syntheses were actually arrived at: in review it reveals his sources, the case history of his waverings and diversions, it is, to put it picturesquely, a series of testimonies in the most difficult of all schools, but the only one for the poet, the school of selfhood.

If there is but one contemporary poet whom the widest circle of readers should constantly keep an eye on, and investigate, it is Slavko Mihalić. This is not because *all* of his poems are successful, nor because he has such a great number of anthology pieces (although this is true of Mihalić to such an extent that someone once remarked that he was "going to be a problem to future compilers of anthologies") — rather, above all, because his work, from poem to poem, from collection to collection, shows the concentration, discipline and persistence of a talent



that has from the beginning worked on itself, persistently and unsparingly, with the system of a gold miner. Mihalić is a seeker, but not a seeker after happiness, not an adventurer hungry for newer and different paths and incidental sensations (of the kind our hungry era teems with), rather a geographer, in a constant clearing, drawing in and definition of his route.

In his poetry there really are not many adventures in form ("the greatest adventure is a flower in a glass of water"), nor are there many byroads, it is as if there were, on a road mapped out in advance, just harder or lighter obstacles that have to be overcome, shorter or longer breathing spaces before a step further is taken. But the obstacles themselves, the tiredness of the traveller and despondent questions about the purpose of the journey, and all the byroads, looked at retrospectively, seem to have been built into the advance towards the target. We can say quite confidently that here it really is

a matter of *advancing*, that there is a clear ripening going on before our eyes and that, which can be said of few poets, the writer's most recent poems are also his best.

The second special reason for constantly checking out Mihalić's poems lies in the very nature of his talent. His poems, perhaps precisely because they are chapters of a personal spiritual biography, are in a particular and very close way tied to our times, and just as they tell us about the poet, unmasking him, so do they describe and unmask the times, of which he is actually the most paradigmatic poet. Mihalić's poetry is far from modernist cocoons of solipsism, and equally far from the sentimental outpourings or ideological didacticism of the extrovert; in it there is always a complete man, a man with his own everyday, actual, temporal dimension. If poetry is something like "total experience" then Mihalić's poetry, in its composed connectedness (and Mihalić is a composed poet), is the most approximate illustration of this. This poetry is so much linked with the times that if it were decoded we could call it a chronicle — something like the private writings of those chroniclers who are later more essential for the understanding of a given period than any historical reconstruction.

Anyone who later wants to find out the real truth about this time or to write, for whatever reason, its real history, will not be able to find a more accurate testimony than in poetry. This is nothing new; in history, truth has many a time gone to ground in poetry. Two characteristics of the present times make this maxim particularly relevant.

Recent experience of totalitarian pressures on the sphere of public life, which reach to ever deeper points in the private sphere, is built into the foundations of contemporaneity. The mass media, becoming ever more mass-oriented, are being turned into tools of authoritarianism and conformity, and resistance to reality has to withdraw into ever more confined discipline reserves. Poetry is reduced to an elitist discipline; while it is in its reserve, it is allowed a certain freedom. Poetry is thus one of the last hiding places of freedom or, to put it a bit more optimistically, temporary refuges of truth. Another characteristic of our time is that human speech is going off into ever greater abstraction: we handle fewer and fewer things, more and more symbols and systems — a hypertrophy of the Cartesian scheme of things has led us to total loss of connection with the concrete world. Drawn thus into the network of abstract structures, into the oakum of meta-language, into the endless regressions of the new logics, we have ultimately to be reminded by one scientist that “every cognitive act has in the end to be based on natural language, because only in this way can we be sure that we are touching reality”. Poetry has today become the only last remaining authentic field of natural human speech, the only free medium for total, more complex, human truth.

The criterion of this kind of truthfulness is the ultimate testing point of a poetry — the only one that guarantees it worth. We ourselves are the only judges of this truthfulness; our identification with its speech is the only possible confirmation. In my eyes Mihalić’s poetry passes this truth test as if the exam questions had actually been designed for it. While I read it, it seems to me that I can see my own story in it, as if from the hands of the same Designer. And this is how I have always read it, not as an observer from the side, but as if it were about me. Just as I measure it by myself, so I have always used it to measure myself. Its worth and validity are not for me a question of a simple aesthetic judgement, but a question that is both personal and essential. I am thus inclined

to believe that without this kind of reading, the poetry can not be properly understood. And when, from my own standpoint in the time, I compare Mihalić’s poetry with the poetry of earlier times, I cannot help saying: in the period of my modest life, Mihalić’s verses are the point at which Croatian poetry comes closest to greatness.

All this in no way means that Mihalić’s poetry can or may be reduced to mere historical commentary — if it were only this, of course, it would not be even this. But it has to be insisted on that it should be read in its right context, because it itself specifically requires this kind of reading. It really participates, ardently and vitally, in this context; without it, it might seem to someone to be a merely discretionary kind of game with modernist commonplaces — with existential pessimism or the philosophy of the absurd, as it was sometimes too facetly understood by its earliest critics.

The genealogy of Mihalić’s poetry is, on the world stage, the genealogy of romanticism. In order to indicate his place on this genealogical tree, one has to avoid all kinds of aestheticism, mandarinism or flight into abstraction, and start from Matthew Arnold’s formulation about Wordsworth, whose poetry is at base a “criticism of life”. Mihalić’s poetry is a marked example of a frustrated poetic polemics with reality that begins with Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislators of the world”. Mihalić found this context of ideas, enhanced with personal and collective post-war experience, mainly through the intermediary of Croatian poetry of the inter-war period with which, after the interval of the war, he sought a natural continuity.

Mihalić’s connection with the context of actuality is so strong and so crucial that he is perhaps one of those poets whose biography always has to be kept in mind, notes about the occasion behind individual poems not being superfluous. There are confirmations of this in many places in his oeuvre — although he is not a *poeta doctus*, Mihalić is also no wild talent — this is a poet who is pronouncedly aware and articulated where the history of his life and poetry is concerned. From the very

beginning of his work he has been aware of the “forcefulness of the day” and asked himself rhetorically whether to accept it, with full awareness that there is actually no choice. He awaits actuality with all the weight of his romantic disillusionment, ready for the inevitable defeat: “like this I wait for when it broken stops”. But in spite of this, he surrenders to the day for the sake of the ideal of participation and is prepared to serve it: “It does not break this terror full of inspiration, for it is now...”

In several places Mihalić has completely openly declared his aware and programmatic connection to his own actuality:

I am placed whole in the oven of the present
almost by my own will.

This almost shows the complexity of the umbilical connection of his poetry writing with actuality. He does not only accept his insertion, emplacement in his translation, he also, though it must be said with unease, submits to it. In part he feels violently inserted, partly he does it of his own free will, with, I would almost say, a certain “nervous enthusiasm”. Other critics who of course have not missed the specific relation between his poetry and his life story have observed that Mihalić’s verses “are realised from the experience of direct historical reality” and have called this love-hate relationship with reality “a capricious friendship with the most unfriendly situations”.

We can find confirmation of the historical dimension of his poetry writing not only everywhere in his verses, but also in the poet’s direct statements. In a conversation in the paper *Telegram* of almost twenty years ago, talking about his apprenticeship to “beauty and wisdom”, Mihalić said: “until one day, when I was composed enough, I asked about our fate that imposed ever more ruthless demands, and took less and less care about me” — defining this composed day as the beginning of his poetry writing. He discovered poetry as a “form of opposition”. “It is ridiculous when we recall how ordi-

...this sounds today," Mihalić went on recalling the trials of poetry in the more difficult periods and the breathless spaces in its dialogue with reality, "not seeing, however, any permanent home, but: "Isn't this just a reliable sign that new, mysterious trials are awaiting us. Nor would I want them to pass me by..."

Our history, recreated and reified in Mihalić's poetry, does not of course have to coincide with the temporal either in sequence or in detail — it is a poetry that is like a kaleidoscope of our biographies, in which the ripening and falling of our own fates are jangled. Our history is, we might say, anachronically present in Mihalić's work. It is up to us, as readers, and not to the order of his poems or collections, to co-date it.

It would not perhaps be possible to find a better or more accurate motto for this than Mihalić's poem *Još malo nuka smo*. We quote it in its entirety:

We dug up the graves, all silted up
With centuries of vilest self-conceit
We didn't leave a stone on stone
(Of walls that should have kept us out

So now we tread the scattered world
In fragments, with no sense of wholeness
Unless for this can serve a cry
That bursts out for an instant

Fear, more of ourselves than of others
We feel there's someone larger rising in us
Impossible for us to bear his eyes
that brook no obstacles

We dug graves up, now we should
build houses
Just a little longer, don't hurry, let the
dance

 play itself out
Just a little longer, let us be bird, snake
and

 flower (on some far distant
field)
Just a little longer an ingenuous dream

History begins in the undermined and dissipated world, which we ourselves, or someone greater in us, have created, in front of which we stand in the quasi-

divine dilemma of creators of our own future. It is significant, this collectivist *we*: it doesn't allow either poet or man to be extracted from historical happenings or historical responsibility. This, it seems to us, is a key place for Mihalić: he lives and falls with the people of his age — any distancing of himself towards "others" is foreign to him — knowing that there is no other age but his own.

Of course, in this poetry we will be able to find acceptance and welcoming of revolution, belief in the possibility of an *Umwertung*, even enthusiasm, here only slightly tempered by warning, there tinged with an anxiety that is to become ever stronger with time. Mihalić's poetry shares this fervid faith with the whole messianic mainstream of European art of the recent period. This utopian faith does not divide the social and the artistic meaning of rebellion, seeing them rather built into the revolution — a hope that the revolution will be a completely human and an integrally artistic deed. It will open up spaces in which the humanist ideal will at last be able to live and breathe. The poem quoted could well be a hymn to the ongoing revolution if in the second part we did not clearly hear the voice of warning and fear. This is fear of the incompleteness of the rebellion, of its being too rapidly ossified, before it manages to give birth to the new out of the chaos. Fear that it will all be over before we grow to the magnitude of what we have started off — that is, we can say, fear of self.

In the last lines we can clearly sense that the poet does not believe in the permanence of the revolt which he had wished for and by which he is now caught up like a straw, like all the other straws, but from the very beginning actually predicts the loss of that "undirected dream" — of some kind of absolutely open freedom of creation. We get "conducted", which should be understood in two ways: both informed (made aware) and directed into the inevitable unhappy rut. Everyone around the poet is hurrying into the rut, and the inevitability, and the sense of frustration, are contained in the very act. Although the poet asks us to be

"flower" for a little longer, it is clear to us that we are already not that. The fruit are already delineated in the bud. The black apples will soon be ripe.

Is this kind of writing implicit in the last lines or has the reading of the poet's oeuvre retroactively given us a clear insight into its meaning? This would be a difficult act of distinction, nor is it necessary with a poet as integrated and consistent as this. We will find confirmation of this in his poems. "Fear of self" still implicitly contains a belief in the efficacy of revolt: it is seen clearly, for example, in the poem *Spring without intention*, where the poet fears "for those who will" but he does not advise them to return to the "demolished shrines" and expresses hope in the abilities of what is unintentional and vital in this "revolutionary spring", in the vital snowdrops which "might grow tall".

From this collective enthusiasm and declared optimism, however tinged with a restrained anxiety, Mihalić has gone a long road, together with reality. This is the road that we too, his faithful readers, have also gone, or are going. Mihalić is our knowledge of the nature of the road. After many phases, the black history book stops at the last "shore... beyond which there is nothing any more" without us having lived out our time: "it is nothing but noon". The poem *On the accursed shore* was written in 1969. We will quote its end.

Still it's scarce noon.
For anyone who's reached this shore
of shame, madness, deformity, repulsion,
the longer road to evening lies ahead.
Shall we go back and gather
scattered shells in which a fragment of
sweet
kernel was overlooked, or believing in
no kernel, yielding to fate's absolute
evil
stay here on the accursed shore?

The question of whether the prophetic dimension of Mihalić's sensibility has been confirmed in reality, or whether reality with its "classical answers" has provoked such a sensibility, is merely scholastic. While the prognoses of this sensibility are becoming real, the ques-

tion of "how to take part" is turned into the question of "how most honourably to give up". The gathering of the scattered shells in which there has remained a fragment of the sweet kernel — which represents, among other things, the remains of the old faith — is only rhetorical. There is no longer any of the "lovely cheat" of reality as the poet called it at the beginning, not even the "service of delusion" as he calls it at the end.

These two points are landmarks of Mihalić's poetic path in relation to reality. Mihalić's existential questions are structured between them. For this reason his moods are always in a state of a kind of duality: between a hunger for delusion and a contempt for all delusions, between praise and hatred, between visionary promises and total defeatism, between visions of shootings and greasy ropes on the one hand and magic and miracles on the other, between the exile of even the generous, and gifts, mainly poisoned. The complex of these doubts will perhaps seem to the superficial historian nothing more than the commonplaces of a modern sensibility — but their experienced truthfulness gives them the power of a convincing personal and poetic document.

We have already said that Mihalić does not show any great range or development of versification, that he deepens more than he experiments. In a technical sense, the evolution of his expression is minimal. For this reason, his maturation in the comprehension of his own world is the more obvious; this is a world that is for him always as much there and as intimate as his own room. As if from the very beginning he had sensed it as his only task:

each of us before his birth
had a perfect picture of the world
The revolutionary spirit of the epoch
or the practical education in which he
grew up drove him sometimes into the
embrace of a faith that this inborn
image could be changed or at least
some contribution could be made to-
wards its being changed. Starting off
from devotion to this belief, the jour-
ney through his poetry shows an obvi-
ous advance: need it be said, via many

bitter stairways, downwards. On the way the poet has resorted to many charming deceits: from the wine of resigned self-irony to "unworthy loves", but at each one of these moments he was too good a poet to be able to surrender to the Circe of saving delusions. Does this development of Mihalić's simply prove that, as he himself is quick to say, heaven is always the same? That he has found out the "indisputed unity of eternity"? This kind of question would, of course, lead us away from actuality, and Mihalić's poetry, however deep and rich its metaphysical inferences, will not allow this. Mihalić's thoughts about poetry and poetry writing should also be looked at in the light of the relationship with reality. Mihalić frequently and happily writes about his craft and the "fate of the poet miracle-worker" but almost always this is the fate of a poet and the craft in a given actuality. An eye brought up on a naive romanticism or perhaps on an extremely metaphysical and solipsistic reading matter can easily decode the commonplaces in Mihalić's frequent excursions about poetry and fall into the error of ascribing to him a self-deceiving dream about the vatic demiurge. However, Mihalić's thinking about poetry has gone over the same path as the poetry itself: at the beginning it is genuinely a naive belief in the dream, and the ability of the magician of words. The dream was then for Mihalić a "wild vegetation that made fun of the laws" and his private birth pangs served "for the beauty of one thing beyond it". With this search, in a world without a god, for an outlet in the creative, it is as if Mihalić is recapitulating one phase of Romantic phylogeny. But hoping that he can be "a satisfied creator", a happy ruler "in another kingdom", at the same time he sings of the tragedy of this division, of the tragedy of giving up on reality. And holding the face of his poetry constantly up to the mirror of reality, he will not allow it to fog it with its own breath, and quickly comes to the conclusion that this was

the time of poets
who with tears in their eyes
darn the old socks

of poetry

and
the time
when even poetry is injustice

and the poet can only mourn that he

has let the world colonise you
and browse on you with relish.

For Mihalić poetry is something like a total metaphor for man's existence in reality. If God is dead, perhaps there is not much else that could serve us as a total metaphor. The fate of the poet in the world is for Mihalić quite simply the fate of mankind. That is perhaps nothing particularly new. What is new is that Mihalić identifies precisely *our* historical fate with the fate of poetry in time. He wants to bear witness to a specific variant of it in the context of our reality. In this he is not so much a disappointed artist as helpless moralist. This is a frustrated and disillusioned Messianism, a recapitulation of the general journey in the private sphere. In Mihalić's attitude towards poetry there is one constant thematic thread that shows the practical, realistic foundation of the attitude. This is the theme of human unusedness. It has its roots in the devastated belief in total revolution and in the loss of illusions about the ability of an integrated participation in the world.

And to be a petty spring, no one will
oppose
Since we're here anyway, why not have
a go

Ever since Romanticism hope in an organic participation in the legislation of the world has been exposed incessantly to the same frustrations. This ambition, in essence democratic, has appeared to be the belief of an elite, a caste, and the so-called post-industrial society has completely rejected and discouraged it, just as the World Revolution did as well. Mihalić expresses this very clearly when he feels that he is an alien in a fortress

I built with my own fingers

DOSSIER: SLAVKO MIHALIĆ

His countless variations on the theme of exile simply confirm this. He can sometimes return from exile (apparently, on the cloud of the imagination) as ruler "in the land that had once exiled him" but in reality it was possible to return only as in the poem *I had to go back*, as a man defeated by everyday life, return to food, a woman, the offered water-bottle of human society. Both the poet-miracle-worker and the man who had hoped for flight from this world arrive only at exile (which is not particularly "generous") from which they can return only as "a prisoner goes in a circle".

The theme of unusedness perhaps is most clearly articulated in one line of the poem *Not one would hesitate*:

It is a pity you didn't make better use
of us
You, furious winds, that still secretly
suffer from your ancient fame
Our hard hearts could have won many
more
victories

Understand once for all: our hands are
insufficiently employed.

This is no lamentation, simply a diagnosis of the state of affairs. The poet simply talks of the necessity for everything in him, all the creative, the human, the poetic, to be used in the construction of reality. "Our hands were

clearly stretched out" he says in another poem: in spite of all doubts and anxieties, the poet was ready for service. But of course it turned out that "we do everything wrong". The winds that constantly blow through Mihalić's verses, symbol of the blind violence of reality, seem to be convinced "that the leaves go voluntarily" and identify the fate of the poet with that of a leaf.

The theme of under-utilisation comes up in one of the most touching and painful messages to the younger generation (*Unavoidable heritage*) left by our time:

You, who come with marvellous lack
of seriousness

If it were not late, I would with you
tear down all

that has weighed too much
Without point without justice without
love

While all around unemployed beauty
came into leaf.

In the theme of the under-utilisation of the poet's faith and his willingness to serve in the construction of an organic reality is contained a small human protest against the improvidence of fate and, in his final inference, a protest against the greatest wastrel — death. Why death, when we might be so useful? Not in one verse of his later poems does Mihalić lose sight of this

final inference, but his protest is directed primarily against the direct and unnecessary wastefulness of reality. One has to die, but what might be useful to other people, to society, to a simple practical life, to beauty and wisdom, does not have to be wasted. Mihalić joined the person who said that "that age which knows how to employ all its talented people" is great in denying greatness to this century. Here lies the deep humanity of Mihalić's singing of the defeats of poetry in the confrontation with reality, and the defeat of reality in the confrontation with poetry.

Starting four decades away with the modernist, revolutionary premises of the epoch, Mihalić's poetry has gone through a deep and gradual metamorphosis. The hymnody to reality was turned into a dialogue, in which it could only of course be defeated, but in which it waited defeat with human dignity and poetic greatness — it did not allow the polemics with the gods to be reduced to a polemic with the local servants of reality.

The polemical character of this uneven dialogue can be seen in the formal characteristics: the often direct address to interlocutors, in the second person plural, is a marked stylistic figure of Mihalić's retorts. Whether it was a matter of winds, orders for shooting, the captains of our reality or the whole world, this is always a direct polemic with a "meagre time". The voice of these concrete interlocutors can clearly be made out through Mihalić's answers. To proclaim this voice only a divine evil would also be to impoverish this poetry, as if we were to reduce it only to a historical reading.

In the paradoxical reversal of this deep metamorphosis, this poetry, in its latest phase, has come back to reality. Now it is not a hymn to a potential future (which has, after all, "outwitted all agreements") but a hymn to the miracle of substantial life, ever further away from allegorical and fabular illustrations — and is now a participation in a deeper human reality, in all of its complexity and mystery, in a fate that is actually by reason of its commonness closer to the basic metaphysical questions. In this way his poetry



Slavko Mihalić, Helena Buljan, Ivan Kušan, Slobodan Novak, Sonja Bašić, Antun Šoljan,

too as a total metaphor for human existence has become at the same time equally more tangible and more irrational and deeper, and thus closer to the genuine classical poetic ideal.

Although its roots are retrospectively visible in the earlier poetry of Mihalić, this phase bloomed to its full power only in his collection *Trap for Memory*. Its correlation with our time is again so deep that we can consider Mihalić an answer to a history and a destiny such as ours. Its inspiration is so everyday and so democratic that we might almost consider him a satirical poet, if the ultimate achievements of this inspiration did not delve so deeply into the sphere of metaphysics. The referential points of the poetry (bread on the table, fried potatoes, the streets of Zagreb) are clear to almost every contemporary reader to such an extent that it might be their own story singing on Mihalić's lips.

And the readers responded with the gratitude: in spite of the subtlety and complexity of the way he expresses things, in spite of the darkness and depth of his topics, of his strikingly modern way of expressing himself, Mihalić has become one of the rarest of creatures in the recent literary scene — the genuinely popular poet. This is not a passing, fashionable popularity, nor is it the result of flattery of the public, but a deep and permanent popularity, achieved only by the cherishing of his own audience, which lives the same fate and develops together with the poet, and understands his language as if it were their own. This is the kind of popularity that we could compare only with the greatest of our recent poets, Kranjčević and Ujević, of whom he is, after all, the legitimate spiritual and poetic descendant.

Translated by Graham McMaster



Slavko Kopač: Leapfrog, 1959