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THE RETURN TO THE CLASSICAL MYTH  
IN MODERN SLOVENIAN POETRY

No-one knows exactly when the myth originated. It came into Greek literature from prehistoric times, transmitting itself through oral tradition.

A later distinction reminds us that *mýthos* is a narrating, or, more precisely, a story narrating speech in verse, the speech of poets from time immemorial, in opposition to which *lógos*, a written speech in prose, came to establish itself in antiquity, particularly in its discursive, argumentative form assumed in the writings of philosophers.

Therefore, the classical myth is, paradoxically, a myth *ante litteram* that existed even before antiquity came into being as an era of the historical existence of Greeks and Romans. It is a speech, a story of gods and men from prehistory that stood at the beginning of Greek literature and — this we do know — became its core. This story permeated Greek epic, lyric and tragic poetry, and in this poetry attained its classical form. Since then, the stories of Odysseus, Prometheus, Oedipus, Antigone, and so on, have been circulating and are being interpreted in European literature.

And so on — at this point, I shall take the liberty of skipping the classical forms of myth and their destiny in European

literature, by which we usually understand (and, under its name, deal with) the literatures of big European nations, and jump into a relatively late period and, particularly, into a less known landscape of this literature. This will by all means be a jump, but on the track of the classical myth: my thesis is that, precisely through this myth, modernity was introduced or, better, reintroduced, and thus definitely affirmed, in Slovenian lyric poetry after the Second World War. How was this possible? How was it possible for something as old as the classical myth to become a harbinger of modernity?

Let me first attend to some historical and literary-historical circumstances that are more or less known and accepted in the Slovenian consciousness.

*Inter arma silent Musae.* During the war, the silence of the Muse prevailed in Slovenian poetry. This did not mean, however, that all of verse-making had been brought to silence, but there was only a lack of poetically relevant poetry. With the exception of a few poems, which were not published in that time and could only be registered by literary historiography in a later period, Slovenian poetry returned to its old function of national defense. This phenomenon is, of course, also well-known in other literatures, namely, when arms begin to sign, poetry becomes a defense weapon. But in Slovenian literature — a literature of a small nation which, given its hard and uneasy historical existence, needed poetry for self-preservation — national defense is an old hypothecation. At the beginning of the war, the elderly Oton Župančič, the most respected Slovenian poet at the time, addressed to himself and to his fellow-poets the following words in the form of a question, which simultaneously have the sense and power of an imperative: «“Do you know, oh poet, your debt?” — and

called for the “song for present-day use”.<sup>1</sup> Under his aegis, poets returned to the most elementary poetical tradition — a confession of patriotism in rhythmical and sonorous form. The exhortation of a nation in danger was voiced in each and every plainly intoned verse, so to speak, even in the lamentation over the dead.

The Second World War was also a time of the communist revolution in Slovenia. The scenario is well-known: after the victory of the revolution, poetry was put in the service of building socialism. A mobilizing optimism was demanded, and thus, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the so-called «builder» or «pickaxeman poetry» (more known as *proizvodstvoennaiia poeziia* in Russia) was produced.

Changes appeared rather quickly after the Yugoslav communist party’s break with the Informbiro in 1948 and the beginning of «socialist democratization» around 1950, when the brutal dictates of the communist party — that is, Stalinism — in the field of culture and art came to an end, and more indirect and refined forms of directing and controlling them were introduced. In an atmosphere of allowing whatever did not directly endanger the communist party’s monopoly over power to develop in culture, a generation of poets appeared on the scene in Slovenia, together with some older, pre-war poets, who turned away from socially engaged writing. This turning away became declarative in their collective book of poems entitled *Poems of the Four* (1953), in which each of the four young poets (began his section of poems with a statement of principles about poetry. This was a novelty in the cultural-political sense at most, but their turning away from the social *engage-*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the poems *Veš, poet, svoj dolg?* (*Do You Know, Oh Poet, Your Debt?*) in *Pojte za menoj* (*Sing after Me*), both of which were published on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1941 in the newspaper *Slovenski poročevalec*.

ment to «intimism» and «primary lyrism,» as this was labelled by literary critics and historiographers, brought nothing new in the poetical sense: a return to the elementary confession, restoration of the quasi-romantic split between the beautiful soul and ugly reality ... It had nothing to do with modernity.

What is, in fact, the situation with respect to modernity? How does it appear?

Modernity affirms itself, and is perhaps characterized by a special manner of affirmation — *the imposition*. When Paul Valéry speaks of the appearance of modernity in Baudelaire, whom Hugo Friedrich in his still referential book *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (1956) enthroned as the first modern poet, he uses a verb that is meaningful in this respect, the verb *imposer*.<sup>2</sup> Modernity *s'impose*, says Valéry, it imposes itself with force, if I may deduce further — but it is not necessary, though perhaps expected in poetry, for modernity to impose itself in such linguistic experimentation, where we cannot help but see force being exerted on language. We are reminded that modernity is not necessarily a deconstructive or destructive experiment with language in Baudelaire's traditional binding of the poetical word, the preserved strophic form and the alexandrine, in which all innovations are made. Modernity imposes itself — and in a more relevant way — still elsewhere. The imposition of modernity particularly implies a certain positioning, a certain positing, which is certainly not without force. Modernity *posits itself*, yet it does so in the double *in*: in breaking with what was before and simultaneously in its own self-affirmation. What was just now a groping private intuition, establishes itself as a new universal truth.

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<sup>2</sup> Valéry P. Situation de Baudelaire // Oeuvres. Vol. 1 / ed. by J. Hytier. Paris: Gallimard, 1957. P. 598.

But how does modernity impose itself in Slovenian poetry? Let me answer this question by detour.

In the eighties of the previous century, two anthologies were published in Slovenia, one after the other: in 1983 *Slovene Lyric Poetry 1950–1980*, and a year later *Contemporary Slovene Poetry*. The first was compiled by Janko Kos, the most distinguished living Slovene comparatist, also author of the important *Comparative History of Slovene Literature* (1987), and the second by Tine Hribar, the most outstanding Slovene philosopher of the phenomenological direction. Both anthologies open with the poems of Božo Vodušek (1905–1978). Or, to put it differently: in both of them Vodušek appears as the beginner of modern poetry in Slovenia after the Second World War, though he published only eight poems that passed by unnoticed at the time of their publication. The reason for placing Vodušek at the beginning in order to amend the former neglect is fittingly rendered in particular by Hribar's reference to Vodušek's pre-war poem, *Izpoved* (*Confession*), from 1931. In this poem, as Hribar says in his commentary to the selection, the horizon of Vodušek's pre-war poetry is most evidently spread as «the horizon of the world without God»,<sup>3</sup> thereby preparing his post-war poetry.

The poem *Confession*<sup>4</sup> presents itself as a distinctively modern lyric confession. It gives an account of the spiritual experience of God's absence, which, for example, is no longer a psalmist's experience of the veiling of God's face, nor a mystic's experience of a «dark night», but, in the modern

<sup>3</sup> Hribar T. *Sodobna slovenska poezija* [Contemporary Slovenian Poetry] / ed. T. Hribar. Maribor: Obzorja, 1984. P. 175.

<sup>4</sup> Vodušek B. *Pesmi* [Poems] / ed. by J. Kos. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1980. P. 103.

inversion of traditional spirituality, becomes nothing less than a universal, world-wide fact. The bearer of the confession is not «I»; the confession is universalized through a «collective subject» — «we». The words «to reach the impossible» are repeated four times in the poem, expressing the passion of this «we», our passion, as an attempt to reach God or as an assault on Him. This is followed, in the closing strophe of two verses, by the words:

– *Suddenly ceased to shine  
the sun and the stars and all the lights of the world.*

Here, we must pay attention to the dash. The fine syntax of this punctuation mark ties the absence of God to the sudden darkening of the whole world and, at the same time, abruptly breaks with the topography of traditional spirituality: the modern inversion transforms, through the introduction of the collective «we», the feeling of the temporal individual loss into the universal loss of God within the world.

The darkening of the world in this poem eloquently announces the collection of poems entitled *Odčarani svet* (*The Disenchanted World*) from 1939, in which Vodušek, a translator and principal promoter of Baudelaire in pre-war Slovenian poetry, develops, in different figures, the persistent and tormenting Baudelarian examination of the heart in a world without God. In a handful of his post-war poems, however, the classical myth appears — and, along with it, modernity once again.

But how can modernity possibly impose itself through the classical myth? Let us remember: in his famous writing *Vom neueren Gebrauch der Mythologie*, Herder calls attention to the fact that Greek mythology, which knew not the theological rigour and dogmatic authority of Christianity, was already at the disposal of ancient poets for being used by them freely, and recommends precisely such a use — the use that incor-

porates contemporary subjects in myth — also to the poets of his time.<sup>5</sup> Friedrich, on the other hand, in the previously mentioned book does not speak of mythology, but of that poetical disposition, that bearing of modernity, into which, if we think well, the classical myth can nevertheless fit nicely, too — of depersonalization. He says: «It is with Baudelaire that depersonalization of modern lyric begins, at least in the sense in which the lyric word no longer derives from the unity of poetry and the empirical person».<sup>6</sup> The intentional impersonality gives origin to the different figures, in which the traditional covenant between the «empirical person» of the poet and the speaker of the poem breaks up, that is, the continuity that establishes the lyric speech as an immediate confession of the poet himself. Such a figure may be an invented character from contemporaneity, for example Prufrock or Sweeney in Eliot, perhaps the most loud-voiced advocate of depersonalization in poetry, or it can also come *from the classical myth*, as numerous examples have shown since Baudelaire. Modernity only incises *the caesura* in the mythic figure through which this figure becomes a cipher of modern existence.

The modern mythopoesis thus appropriates the figures of classical myth by making them *per-sonae*, «masks», through which manifold voices of the searched-for new identity pass. Precisely this can also be found in Vodušek's reintroduction of modernity in Slovenian poetry through the classical myth, and that is why he is, with his Odysseus and Prometheus, my first choice.

<sup>5</sup> Herder J. G. Vom neueren Gebrauch der Mythologie // Herder J. G. Sämtliche Werke. Vol. 1 / ed. by B. Suphan. Hildesheim: Olms, 1967. P. 426–449.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich H. Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956. P. 26.

My second choice is Gregor Strniša (1930–1987), a reader of Vodušek's pre-war as well as post-war poems, when these still were without an echo in literary critique and literary historiography. This choice, however, is again not merely a «subjective» one: Janko Kos, for example, regards the figure of Minotaur in Strniša's poetry, which, like Vodušek's, measures the «horizon of the world without God», as «the most consistent poetization of metaphysical nihilism in Slovenian poetry».<sup>7</sup>

Besides their modern use of classical myth, Vodušek and Strniša, who started to publish his poems in the fifties of the previous century and belongs to the second generation of Slovenian post-war poets, share an abstinence from ruthless experimenting with language: from the abolition of a strophe, the loosening of verse, the dissolution of syntax, the emancipation of a word. Vodušek wrote all but one of his post-war poems in four-verse strophes with rhyme, while Strniša developed a peculiar cyclical poem composed of five songs, each having three four-verse strophes with assonance, already in *Odysseus*, his second collection of poems.

On the other hand, both poets were linked, in literary critique as well as in literary historiography, with existentialism. Time and again their poetry was labeled «existential» or, even more determinately, «existentialist». But I myself would not like to get involved in the discussion about what existentialism is in literature, when it appeared in Slovenian literature and when in poetry — if, as opposed to narration and drama, existentialism exists in poetry at all. Perhaps in literature it is nothing but a sort of «ideology», a set of themes that is not

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<sup>7</sup> Kos J. Recepcija antičnih mitov v slovenski literaturi [The Reception of Classical Myths in Slovenian Literature] // Poligrafi. 2003. N 31–32. P. 163.

neutral, and this not only because it is based on choice (and presupposes an «interested consciousness»), but because it implicates an angle of inclination from which the chosen themes are observed.

It therefore seems by all means more proper to speak of modernity than of existentialism with respect to Vodušek's and Strniša's poetry. Let me now cite from their poetry a few examples concerning the imposition of modernity through the classical myth, and accompany them with brief remarks.

Vodušek published the poem *Odisejski motiv* (*An Odyssean Motive*) as the last of his eight post-war poems.<sup>8</sup> Its title already points to a certain distance. In literary and art criticism, the term «motive» signifies a constant in terms of content that repeats itself in a set of works, and also refers to a repetition in the title of Vodušek's poem, namely, the repetition of Odysseus' voyage. Yet a difference is already inscribed in this repetition, a deviation suggested by the word «Odyssean», for «Odyssean» does not simply mean «of Odysseus», but «such as of Odysseus», «Odysseus-like».

Vodušek's Odyssean voyager is not like Homer's Odysseus at all. Vodušek does not present him as someone returning home, to Ithaca, but as someone going into the unknown. In fact, Vodušek thus remains on the track of Dante, who, as W. B. Stanford says, radically converted the figure of home-seeking Odysseus in European literature, having given him to sail past Heracles' pillars beyond the borders of the known world: «In place of this [Homer's] centripetal, homeward-bound figure Dante substituted a personification of centrifu-

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<sup>8</sup> *Vodušek B. Pesmi* [Poems]. P. 134–135. For the first publication, see *Nova sodobnost* (1956). N 4. P. 299–300.

gal force».<sup>9</sup> Vodušek's newcomer is also a centrifugal figure, a fugitive indeed: his voyage is a flight, a «Robinsonian flight» (v. 3) away from *oikumené*, an «inhabited world», into the refuge of a wild, lonely island. Vodušek, however, adds to the Danteian tradition of Odysseus a relevant trait of modernity, that modernity which has nothing to do with the projections of the absolute novelty fostered by artistic avant-gardes and social revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The newcomer to the uninhabited island is not the new man establishing a new world — the one who should have been born from the death of the old man and whom avantgardists and revolutionaries dreamt in their dreams of immortality — but is, if I contextualize this reading with other poems by Vodušek, *a present-day, yet hardened man*, who, after going through the fire of passion in a world without God, salutes the «new earth» (v. 16), the new «brave world» (v. 33). The penultimate strophe speaks to this world, and at the same time describes the position of the newcomer within it, as follows:

*Through your bravery set free  
from doubts and questionings,  
he will praise the mystery of life  
and without expectations wait.*

A year before *An Odyssean Motive*, Vodušek published the poem *Ko smo Prometeji neugnani* (*When we mischievous Prometheus*).<sup>10</sup> Let us remember: according to Hesiod, Prometheus stole fire from the gods for man; according to Aeschylus, Prometheus taught man different arts through which

<sup>9</sup> Stanford W. B. *The Ulysses Theme. A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*. Dallas (Texas): Spring Publications, 1992 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1954). P. 181.

<sup>10</sup> Vodušek B. *Pesmi* [Poems]. P. 129–130. For the first publication, see *Nova Sodobnost* (1955). N 10. P. 880–881.

he, in his animal-like existence, was humanized; according to Ovidius, Prometheus even created man from soil and water after the divine image — and in the tradition of the modern age, in Shaftesbury and Goethe, he became a «second creator» after the Creator. In Vodušek, however, the mythic figure already multiplies in the title: we are all Prometheuses. The poem begins as follows:

*When we mischievous Prometheuses  
stole for ourselves the red fire from heaven,  
now we are ourselves from it ignited,  
flames burn in us blazing.*

I am reading contextually again: we all, all modern people, are Prometheuses *in the horizon of a godless world*. The stealing of fire from heaven that we all have committed goes hand in hand with the loss of God within the world.

Here I would like to point out that, in this poem, the «fire» appears as a poetical word which cannot be interpreted unambiguously, or translated into discursive language with only a single word. By all means, it is no cold means of cultivation, but that which, on one side, ignites us in our innermost inwardness — passion, our innermost passion, our lust for life. On the other side, it is that which «enlightens» us, that in which we are looking outwards, as is paradoxically evident from the following two lines:

*From the ground up to the starry vault  
the whole world glitters to us in the conflagration...*

There is fire everywhere, even «in greenery lava decants itself» (v. 11), yet the fire that we see around us is the same fire in which we are looking outwards from ourselves: «one fire, one sole / lust untamed» (v. 19–20). The worldwide conflagration comes out of us. The world of our lust for life that

was God's property is a world set on fire, our Promethean creation. And in this fire, as the final lines of the poem suggest, we are self-consummated.

I shall now pass to my second choice, Strniša, first to his cyclic poem of five songs entitled *Odysseus*, which was written a few years after Vodušek's last published poem, *An Odyssean Motive*, and concludes Strniša's second collection of poems with the same title, *Odysseus*.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to Vodušek's Odyssean voyager, Strniša's Odysseus has already come, he is already on the island. Strniša introduces his poem with a citation from Homer, which, in a translation by Anton Sovrè, the first integral translation of *Odyssey* into Slovene dating from 1951 and the only one made until now, sounds like this: «just once more I would like to see the smoke over my native Ithaca». In Homer's epic, Odysseus endures his days sitting on the shore of the island of the nymph Calypso, and his yearning for home can neither be overcome by enjoyment of the nymph's divine love, nor by her promise of immortality. In Strniša's poem, on the contrary, he is sitting on the shore of a completely lonely, uninhabited island.

So far so good. I would like, however, to point out a hardly noticeable *interruption* in the complicated intertextuality of the old and the new poem transmitted through the translation. In his translation of Homer cited by Strniša, Sovrè actually adds «over my native Ithaca» to Homer's «smoke ascending» (*kapnós apothrónskon*).<sup>12</sup> This is certainly a suitable translational *Zudichtung*, but becomes completely lost in Strniša's poemit-

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<sup>11</sup> Strniša G. *Odisej* [Odysseus]. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1963. P. 81–87. For the first publication, see *Perspektive* (1962/63). N 25. P. 494–495.

<sup>12</sup> *Odysee* // greek-german ed.; transl. by A. Weiher. München; Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1990. *Od.* 1. P. 58.

self, in its text. This is because Ithaca is not mentioned even once in this poem, nor is there a single word about Odysseus' yearning for it.

The citation placed at the beginning of a work often strikes the basic tone by which the text is then imbued, but in Strniša's poem, the yearning tone of the introductory citation is somehow suspended before entering the text. Instead of going, in his yearning, towards that which is (perhaps) going to come, Strniša's Odysseus looks towards the past and death. In the second song, he remembers his voyage to the dwelling place of the dead, and in the third, the island of the Sirens as well; the sole path that he undertakes, without actually being able to go anywhere, is the path of remembrance. Sitting on the beach, he is captured, with the earthly weight of his being, «between the land of shells and the land of birds» (the fifth song, v. 6). The earth on which he is, is compressed between water and air, between the water of mute shells and the air of singing birds, so that the «up» and the «down», the height of the air and the depth of the sea, become a «behind» and a «front» in the symbolical configuration of the poem (v. 2–4):

*Behind him there are restless flocks of motley birds,  
and in the waves in front of him a black rock lies  
covered from heavy shells of fold-like shapes.*

In this configuration, it is the sea and time that move, in contrast to the sitting Odysseus, compressed, so to say, from all sides. In the first song, particularly the movement of the sea is stressed by repetition in slight variations («the sea rises and falls»), and so is the movement of time in the fifth song («spring comes and goes»). Each time, the pair of verbs speeds up the movement of the sea and time in the poem compared to their movement in nature, yet this movement is never moving

on anywhere, but coming back again and again. Surrounded by such a movement, the oppressive static of Odysseus' figure can only sink.

Allow me to finish with Strniša's earlier poem, *Inferno*, which is composed of two cycles of five songs and placed in the middle of the *Odysseus* collection of poems.<sup>13</sup> This two-cyclic poem is a poem about death. The title of the first cycle is *Pustinja (The Wilderness)*, and the title of the second *Gora (The Mountain)*, and they both speak of the journey of an unnamed someone traveling days and days across the wilderness to the mountain and still further into it.

In archaic cultures, the mountain is the ultimate place of earth where, in the eyes of a mythical man, earth touches heaven: a dwelling place of gods, a place of cult, and, as a bond between earth and heaven, a place of ascent into heaven. In Strniša's modern mythopoesis it is also the ultimate earthly place, but one which does open for descent into the earthly depths rather than for ascent into celestial heights: «with peaks that are as curved as the horns of a bull» (the fifth song, v. 6), it has the outward look of a «bull's skull» (the sixth poem, v. 11) and, at the same time, the internal structure of a labyrinth which, with its descending pits, is reminiscent of Dante's hell, and has Minotaur at its deepest centre.

At the entrance into the mountain, the unnamed someone begins to be designated by the pronoun «who». The unnamed multiplies, but this time the multitude is few in number; hardly anyone who managed to make the tiresome journey across the wilderness and enter the mountain belongs to it. But only he who does not go astray in the blind corridors of

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<sup>13</sup> Strniša G. *Odisej [Odysseus]*. P. 44–55. For the first publication, see *Perspektive* (1961/62). N 17. P. 769–772.

the mountain and does not «become lost in hallucinations» (the eighth poem, v. 7), only he who «comes to the hollow heart of the labyrinth» (the ninth poem, v. 6) and goes further, still further into the cave of this heart, still further through it — only he will then truly hear something, in the distance he will hear something like the grinding of a horn. But when he is supposed to see something, *he does not see anything*. The only thing that looks and sees is the eye of Minotaur: «the eye that catches sight of you, and you do not see it» (the tenth poem, v. 8). The last strophe says:

*Hardly anyone comes to these places.  
But nobody returned out of the mountain yet.  
Some die in the labyrinth of thirst and hunger,  
with horns Minotaur impales the others.*

Not only the majority of men who, living from day to day, are unknowingly falling victim to death, but even the few who are fighting, even he who fights it out and is about to confront death, ultimately does not see it. In the metaphor of Minotaur's eye that sees without being seen, Strniša presents the impossibility of confronting death and, there being no duel without confrontation, without staring from eye to eye, *the impossibility of overcoming death*.

Modernity does not dazzle itself with its novelty: a man does not have an eye for confronting death.

Precisely for this reason, Strniša's modern appropriation of the myth of Minotaur is perhaps, to repeat the previously cited judgement, «the most consistent poetization of meta-physical nihilism in Slovenian poetry».