

#1

Slavko Mihalić: Orchard of Black Apples

(1972)

THE TIME, THE TIME HAS COME

Perhaps the time has come
 for love to be kept secret.
 To be concealed
 in the cellar of some abandoned
 house.
 To cut it from the flesh,
 dress it in beggar's rags.
 To close its lips,
 seal up its eyes.
 To throw it down a cliff,
 burn it and cast
 its ashes to all four
 winds.

The time, the time has come
 when even poetry is injustice.

(1972)

ORCHARD OF BLACK APPLES

All things were bathed
 in some more ancient light
 of which truth, caught by the neck
 is silent.
 Books of the dead and the living
 emerge from their willing prisons.
 And words
 grown numb
 in this world of divided sense
 flare up impassioned and senseless
 after which the fall
 is at least
 understood.

And things have changed places.
 Right by the wall
 spreads an orchard of black apples.
 In place of the stove — a cave
 opens
 its neat little hell.
 I mingle, laughing
 amongst kettles, chains.



Slavko Kopač: Boy, 1966

All armies charge
 over the table —
 a ploughed field
 soaked in blood and wine.
 Good evening, calls the ruler
 in jester's cap and bells.

Good evening, unknown land
 that hides its tracks so well.
 Each one of your dwellers —
 a glad destroyer.
 Now I know,
 you summon him yourself.

(1972)

EVERYONE WANTS TO SEE THE SEA

The sailor, clutching a knife,
 at the tavern door.
 On such a night boats crawl along the seabed
 and the shore's full of desperate men.
Everyone wants to see the sea.

You tremble behind closed doors.
 The gold at your neck goes on repeating
 its old, old song of treachery.
 One is dead, the other kills.
Everyone wants to see the sea.

(1972)

THE SMILING TRAVELLER.

For Ivan Kušan

No matter where you travel
 you carry with you (like a hurdy-gurdy)
 that whole small world
 tuned to a droll perfection.

Towns and people can't touch you.
 Whatever you see
 you open up that battered box of yours
 where you've
 so often spent good times.

Other creatures, waters, plants can't touch you.
 There is but one measure
 in your eyes.

You travel with the smile
 of a beggar in disguise
 who is his own whole kingdom.

(1972)



Kušan, Novak, Mihalić, Šoljan

LAST VOYAGE OF AN UNGRATEFUL SAILOR

The sea's no bigger than a rotten lemon.
And just as round:
We always had to think up islands.
Where can I find, I ask you,
so many of their names.
Harbour taverns — empty matchboxes.
With swarms of headless flies inside.
At last you see that after drinking
nothing is left. Nor after love. Nor
after your own self.
Truly I'm no way sad to leave
this overflowing chamber pot.
The waves — a bat's wings. And the moon,
a sperm whale's bloodshot eye.
I go ashore
renewed for death.

(1972) *Translated by Bernard Johnson*



Slavko Kopač: *Nude on a couch*, 1984

CRITICAL READING

Veselko Tenžera: The Chamber Scene of Poetry

Slavko Mihalić: "The Garden of Black Apples", book collection "Razlog", Zagreb, 1972

Here is one of the rare contemporary poets whose poems we can give as a gift to those who do not like poetry. These are ballads about a traumatized existence, created by extracting strong images, selected emotions and impressive paradoxes. Mihalić has impressed readers for two decades by that poetic "traumaturgy", collected prizes and increased the host of followers. We could say that this poet achieves the effects of traditional poetry and the traditional position of a poet through his modern procedure. He has escaped the dead ends of an experiment, the jungles of linguistic exhibitions and seductive gravitations of the giants of modern poetry. His verse dwells in the region of his own spirituality, subjugated syntactically to his own choleric temperament and open to the reach of his own reality.

I called Mihalić's poetry some time ago an intimate entertainment show and today, after his most recent book, I consider this definition essential. The subject of his poem is a great actor on the chamber stage of the repressed and anxious existence of contemporary man. I do not use words "stage" and "actor" because of picturesqueness but as original characteristics of a view of the world, a type of expressiveness and a basically dramatic inspiration. The

chamber stage of the world (Mihalić's first book is called *Chamber Music*) is made to the measure of a scream translated into a seductive whisper and to the measure of existence oppressed by an aggressive objectivism. The performance of the verse continues in a spasmodic need for each next image to disappear in the vertical of a counter-point or some surprising, sometimes shocking turn. Nouns are tied to an unexpected adjective, each statement has its "but" which puts it in an expressive contrariety. The actor plays beautifully, and, as in jazz, he dissolves the "sound mass" of anxiety by his syncopations. He is a "serene destroyer" who transforms destruction into a luxurious work.

The Garden of Black Apples is mostly a book of love lyrics: the poet borders the closed and ancient world of love with dark visions filled by the pulsating of strong images and paradoxes. The attempt to leave the chamber stage of existence (the poem "The People of Simple Things") leads Mihalić to a scene too great for his type of imagination. He has enough irony for such an outlet but not breath: he is too much tied to the pronoun "I" to be able to express that Fichtean "non-I" of the world.

The whole space of this book is Mihalić's "room" known from earlier on, to which he admits the world and translates it into "the garden of black apples" in which

"Tonight, you shall dive again into the terrible poverty of your body in order to pluck up with big pliers the only remaining pearl."

That room, or that chamber stage is the place where deceptions are added up and in which the world and things become contents of silence, strange embroideries of sense and an always awakening request that the empire of words be the admission of defeat in the prison-houses of life, beautiful to the measure of inspiration and true to the measure of despair.

At the same time, the poet condenses even more the real space of existence, sharpening the tension of living to some elementary forms. Love is the last pane through which one observes the film of the downfall of the possible, desired and promised in times past. The world in which "merchants have paved every inch of dreams" and in which "wine tastes of mouldy corpses" reveals itself to the subject of the poem as the last blows of reality against a fine sensibility, against a great actor of verse (nothing negative in this definition) who will last as long as he is able to encompass anxiety. Mihalić's acting opens with this book new possibilities for its duration.

Translated by Živan Filipi

Ivan Golub: Slavko Mihalić: The Garden of Black Apples (1972)

Slavko Mihalić establishes himself, with this new book, as the poet of simple things. The word "thing" comes very often from his pen while the naming of a series of things, mostly everyday and plain (somebody may say common) streams through his poems. The last poem "In the White Sunset" seems to collect things scattered throughout the book. The poem and the collection end by enumerating things in or-

der:

"and yet a thousand lonelines in the white

sunset
cupboard window lamp radio
do not wish to find their place any more
entrance ticket, comb lighter
pencil letter
key."

"The Garden of Black Apples" offers a few pregnant verses on "ars poetica" itself. "The Small Disobedient Poem" gives some chiselled, let us say, definitions of a poem:

"The poem cannot give you more than you have."

"It catches you like an unjust punishment."

“The poem is the quest for yourself.”
 “The poem is the place of what did not happen.”
 “The poem is also revenge.”

In the poem “The Genesis of a Poem”, we can feel the echo of Aristotle’s evaluation of history and poetry: history that speaks about what was and poetry that speaks of what might be. The poem derives beyond the reach of reality and directed actuality:

“two unworthy powers already scramble for the poet’s body: what was and what would wish to be. But when they are late Two awful monsters! The poem bursts into flame by a mature delight in the yielding body of the poet.”

Mihalić denotes by an excellent image the relationship of creating, experiencing and writing a poem:

“Then a little more the poet lasts and just a little more the ash of the poem on paper.”

Generally, Mihalić’s comparison is original and brave; his observation common to uncommonness. Let us mention something from the poem “Everything Was There and There Was Nothing More”:



Golub, Tadijanović, Mihalić

“The world died yesterday on our hands.

Not a single tram stops. Passing to nothingness, newsboys cried out even louder headings of the words from the last pages.” ...

“uttering their rude greetings, like bullets, trains hit stations.”

And one verse from the poem “The Flood”:

“woods chatter in their underwear.”

The power of the word and the work on the word, although not comparable, reach extraordinary ranges of witicism, the melodiousness of the harmony of sounds and the rarity of inspiration; we can mention only “Waterwoman” and “Slaughter”.

Mihalić’s poem is not an ancillary. His poetry does not escape to false idylls but it is all in reality, in the materialized life of the consumer, deeply rooted.

“Marulić”, No. 4, Zagreb, 1974

Translated by Živan Filippi



Slavko Kopač: Sunset in the land of the elephants – unbound booklet, 1951 (detail)