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The Poem that Kills Itself in Itself

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(For the right face of pessimism in the poetry of Slavko Mihalić in the collection *Generous Exile*, Lykos, 1960)

There is method in his madness
Hamlet

Loyal to a cause lost in advance
James Joyce

In a real poet the feeling of poetry is total. It only gets another name every time. Mihalić's poetic being appears in the sign of Return, and manifests itself multi-facetedly: as an approach to poetry, mainly unintentionally, as an approach to life, to man and the act of the poem.

Sartre explains the feeling and aspiration of the creative artist for entirety by the contradiction that exists between one's own choice of existence and being. Every poet attempts in his own way to achieve the synthesis of existence and being, which we have known as impossibility. There is no lack of persistence. From the sea of contingency the object is separated out, and meaning is attributed to it so that it may point over its own shoulder to another object, to the general situation, to heaven or hell. The symbolism of the poem bears the Sisyphean persistence of the creator to attain, in an artificial manner of contemplation, a state in which being and existence are finally united.

Heidegger found poetry in an essential sense an original authentic manifestation of being, which by its occurrence made possible the poetry of the word, the poetry of the image, the poetry of music. The word is a neces-

sary evil. Images or music might occur, and in some places they might occur together. By chance it happened that Mihalić, apart from poetry, was also involved somewhat in music and painting. But the poet did not lose steam under the weight of his all-roundness. On the contrary, it gave him an understanding about limits. To give music and painting their own, and cleanse poetry to the maximum of pictorial loading, metaphorical simulations and decorative music. That is why Mihalić's verse is a really an art of speech, and his words are squeezed to the bare bones of the communication of the essential. The essential is still not the same as the conceptual. There is also the essential subject of the event. Reading the pages of Mihalić's slim volumes of poetry we cannot resist the impression that what we have before us is an elevated and correct journalism, somehow miraculously shifted to the grotesque and the tragic, and the audience, used to decorative post-war poetry, will take a step backwards in amazement: why, is just this poetry?

However paradoxical it might sound, Mihalić is at the same time a total poet and brilliantly superficial. Without doubt this last has emboldened him to embark on an assignment which has been condemned from the beginning as an impossibility. And perhaps his suicidal elan comes precisely from this, that poetry never interested him as a problem for discussion about art, but simply as creation, as work, which compels by an inner need, a traumatic need, for it aspires to the solution of personal complexes. The "fate of the poet miracle-worker" concerns him

only insofar as it enters into his repertoire of marvels. By extreme self-consciousness devoted to personal reservoirs, which is a gift of the exceptionally talented, he has for eight years been quoting and making excerpts from just himself, where poetry in general is concerned, and poetry from the beginning. In his verses we will find the motivation for this eccentric platform as well. After the equation *I equals poetry* is established follows a second that goes *Now equals always*. Reality has only one face for the poet: the present. The present is not as innocent as it seems, and it does not seem according to itself, but according to the past, which it has included, and the future, which it has assumed. It does not actually exist as duration, but more as a connection and a unification. The future is not non-existent. It participates in its undiscovered way. The far off stars are still just waiting for their names. To express their existence by the moment of the present, poets wish to retain the really vanished and draw the phantom of the not yet achieved real. "There is without doubt a unity of eternity" says Mihalić, some absurdist involuntary vitality, in which existing consequences and possible predictions are vertiginously intertwined.

Sails the ship with clear prints of the future

One has to say: The sea is ever bluer
Both wood and stone are love
We live in all times that can happen

Every movement of ours resounds without conclusion —

We can hear the voices of those we

cause

It's just a pity that they cannot help us
To do anything at all unforeseen.

When we say that Mihalić is constitutionally a markedly lyric poet, we have said it all, but nothing in particular. He is the poet of situation and psychosis. He does not make an impression with reasons, but with the suggestion of his lyrical dogma. His experiences are of a lyric nature, the experience of a resigned emotional person, who has apparently ascended into contemplation. But at a certain limit he will take care that by sudden turns into jokes or exaltation, by bold paradoxes and relativist illumination of the situation, he will explode the thought, so that it should not develop to the end, into a system. It is essential for the lyricist to conjure up the original source of excitement, the return to the authentic situation. The poem is not a reflection, not an echo. It is the very deed of the truth, not a commentary on it; it is the original event, the first time, evident to all. Mihalić the lyricist wants to crystallise in words as directly as possible the fluid state of being overwhelmed, of permeation. What confuses us in the act is the ultimately distinctive, almost banal elements that he manages to stage into a completely new spirituality. The framework of the poem retains the trembling of exalted incompleteness, but in it everything is common:

Let my word be my dream, of a free
Waking; I, here, set it free
Come, children, into this game with
your hoops, which
remember — serve you voluntarily
While the game lasts; for they are hungry
of themselves; a thousand
of themselves; what is on

Spring has come ashore — here the
stone greens
The land waves roll; the sea flattens
for ploughing
One cloud takes the shape of a city;
much sky
is on the earth
Let's try out, comrade, flying.

(Etude)

To be able to get as essentially as possible into this lyric it is necessary to delimit it in relation to the contemporary that exists. Let us suppose that, to make the opposite explicit, the key points in the most recent well-received Croatian poetry are Vlado Gotovac, Slavko Mihalić, Vesna Parun. Their specificity is revealed best in their common ambition, to create the return of unity, which we have previously formulated as the synthesis of existence and being, condemned in advance as an impossibility. Let us call this return to the totality of nature and spirit the cosmically reconciled man. Vesna Parun endeavours to establish the upset totality, by an a priori recognition of some pantheistic physis. According to this, man is naturally restricted, directed from the beginning and from outside by a biological imperative. Vlado Gotovac, totally opposite to her, and a poet of a pronouncedly reflexive inspiration, establishes an appearance of unity in a way that is completely intellectual, like the privileging of ideas outside poetry. Incurably intelligent, provoked most often to the act of poetry by philosophical reasons, Gotovac represents the type of poet who from "metaphysics comes to poetry", eternally bothered about where poetry begins and where it ends. Mihalić lies somewhere in the middle of the road. His return to man, cosmically reconciled, endeavours to equalise the viewpoints, to abolish the dualism. In the returned simultaneity it is completely a matter of indifference whether we look into ourselves or the sky to see stars. The return of man to the natural sources in the poetry of Vesna Parun appears in the sign of Pan, mythically triumphantly. The return of Mihalić's lyrical hero is posterior and thus full of anxieties, tinged with defeat, since there has been a tragic fracture in the willed existence and the understanding that consciousness helps not at all.

The position of Mihalić is the position of the true modern lyric. Mihalić is a first hand creator (to avoid the compromised concept of directness). He does not want to alienate ready made truths by subsequently breaking them up into an image. The meaning of a

world grows in front of our eyes even if this is not wanted. And the poet is so arrogantly convinced in the infallibility of himself as explorer that he does not disguise the raw materials of his structures, which are often markedly anti-poetic and journalistic. The question whether this is poetry or not does not arise where only the act of making the poem is important. Mihalić's poetry grows from itself and kills itself in itself. Its truth does live, but only in its own frontiers. What is translated out of these frontiers, whether as a subjectivised programme or as philosophy, can be questioned and doubted.

But now all those who have been accustomed to looking for a programme in Mihalić, those ominous doubters who also do not believe in pure *l'art pour l'art*, being the refuge of the narcissist: is not the untranslatability of poetry actually an impoverishment of the message? What is the innovative advantage of the poetic metaphor if it cannot be used cognitively?

Mihalić satisfies the conditions of pure poetry. He does not insist, preach, declaratively demand anything. He simply makes free of his own fate. Far reaching poetic discoveries are not within his competence. I am thinking of that great moment of poetry when there is an identification between creation, beauty and truth, when the fate of the poet, in spite of his will, stops being a private matter, a moment when the power of poetic suggestion nobly puts a stop to the lyrically egocentric. "Predetermined to know myself — to give up on myself when I am transformed" says Slavko Mihalić.

When we talk from the present of the poetic being in the sign of return, the idea of flight irresistibly occurs to us. At the very beginning, Mihalić renounces it. The region does not exist to which it would be possible to flee without obligation. Not even childhood, what is more. Childhood — a few white margins, a few pure stations which because of their sanctity cannot be touched, and therefore do not help at all. However paradoxical it sounds, Mihalić returns to the present. Defeat preceded this, the defeat of hopes and sentimental expectations. Is there a

poet at all who is not in some way a hurt romantic?

On this occasion one should be able, and we are encouraged in this aim by Mihalić's latest collection *Generous Exile*, to arrive at the real meaning of defeat, around which a mass of misunderstandings are entwined, calling the poet a propagator of defeatism, of the superfluousness of making any intervention, the poet of fatalism and despair. The basic error here lies in taking defeat as final. But in Mihalić defeat is only a premise for the happening of the poetry. It is experience for the creation of a completely modern attitude towards life, man and the act of writing poetry. It is necessary to stuff oneself full of despair, to overturn as many holy places as possible, to be able to see what in fact is left to us. And where there is the strength to exist in the vacuum. Hope, the hope of expectation outside the self, of some life in the abstract, has to be killed to be able to make from the beginning that terrible hope of hopeless action which is perhaps called the poem. From this point of view Mihalić's feeling of defeat is a beginning, the awakening of poetry, and not a conscious finality, an intoned philosophy of the absurd, defeatism:

In this is the greatness of defeat — to free

 a man completely
So he need fear no more, no more
 huddle,

And if you are as open as a ruin door
All roads will lead through you

(Restrained ballad)

Mihalić's poetic maxim can be formulated as return to life with gritted teeth. For those marvellous superficialities in the poet, which capture life totally, but only from the self, the poet owes nothing to the existentialists. Possible coincidences derive from his genuine urbane sensibility, which has managed with a universally valid image of spirituality to equalise man on all the meridians. The poems *Discovery of Space* or *Return against the self* can without fear be written in all the languages along the roofs of all the big cities on all the five continents. There will be

no want of tacit agreement. Irrespective of Mihalić's liking to joke with the audience, making it follow him in the most vertiginous paradoxes and cynicisms on the theme of "I" and the theme of man, irrespective of an innate journalist's nonchalance and a willed appearance of disorder, all three of Mihalić's collections (*Journey to Non-existence*, *The Beginning of Oblivion*, *Generous Exile*), in particular the last one, reveal a careful effort of composition. This modern poet knows how to put a collection together in the manner of the old Baroque masters, who have with a marvellous patience made concerts in their compositions since time out of mind. There is a somewhat smaller framework, that of the cycle of birth — youth — age — death, and a smaller still, that of the four seasons. Every collection by Mihalić is a little history of psychic states, from the creative desire (spring) to dark knowledge (winter). At the beginning of this dense verbal composition there is commonly some kind of prelude with the theme: who am I? and I — a narcissus projected in the mirror of the water, very much isolated:

I look at you amazed
What kind of space vegetation springs
from your

 little disharmony
A whole great ocean in this rib cage
This timid throat dives deeper than any
 thunderbolt.

After this there usually comes an etude, the elaboration of artistic tasks, without banners and pedagogy, lyrically untendentious, only tinged with all the spiritual darkneses that follow. There is a powerful thrust of the erotic, the most vertical rise in the graph of moods. Then a fall. A paroxysm of the feeling of emptiness, a gathering of strength for the last blow. At the end, the danse macabre, Requiem, Last Night, a serious incursion of hopeless power having it out with itself. The darkest Mihalić reaches the culmination, that marvellous male potency of poetry, the poem at the end killing itself in itself from its own power, its powerful self-aware despair. Here Mihalić is without parallel, the most

potent darkness of Croatian modern poetry (*Ancient sign of our race*, *Only one way*, *Requiem*, *Exiled Ballad...*). But let us go back to the beginning. Mihalić's return was not just a relaxation, not just in obedience to an involuntary continuity, but a return in spite of life, in spite of emptiness. For the courage to be total, and in no way mere oblivion, rather the ultimate of recollection, a waking recollection like a mine of creative material:

I reject some few shades, that would
 be joined
I retort: what is being imposed? In this
desert
 it's a waste to leaf
I do not despair, but memorise to en-
ervation
And lose my balance.

(Impromptu)

Mihalić defends in himself the wounded romantic in a very masculine way. The paroxysm of pain has to be buried with paradoxes. Cynicism is the peak of the sentimentally disappointed. For defence, biting surprises have to be prepared for enemies and murderers. Here are a few typically Mihalićian reversals: going to visit the wolves, who are on the rampage, bristling to the maximum. Oppose the Samaritans not with cruelty, but with mildness, for which they are not prepared, to spite them. An opposer of conventional beauty, the poet is apt to uncover it where it is least expected.

Don't hope to be spared my friend
There are enough hunters on your trail
for you
 to be hit at last
You'll squeal so nicely, that the forests
will bloom

(Don't hope)

It's nice to be mad — that comes at
the end
As if you are stoned — in fact you're
finally
 limber
You can start up a thousand of your
lives
Or take them off the stage — as in the
puppet

theatre

(*Great Nocturne*)

The person of emotion in Mihalić decides only for deadly exhibitionist affects, to prove his endurance. The weak in spirit seek sympathy, are powerful masochists by choice:

One hill lies slipped a full three days
and no one

has the strength to approach
it

I alone with slender fingers
will dig over its

wounds to fall sick
and to destroy this damned wish that
wants

to be admired.

(*Journey to Non-existence*)

To be your own hangman, to provoke suffering for being awake and sharp of sight. At the highest degree masochism overcomes both emotion and temperament and makes it possible for the poet, a little coldly, enjoying things in himself, to observe himself. The suddenly masochistic Narcissus becomes ideally critical.

Each one of Mihalić's three collections has one obligatory erotic cycle. "Love simply can't be left out." Love is the moment of descent, for the rise to happen. It is a valley, a pause for breath, a lyric intermezzo something a bit like joy. But not even in it can the maturity of the anxiety of the initial etudes be forgotten, nor the danse macabre that follows. It is just the middle, the complete fastening within the tragic spirituality. That is why, like signs of damp, the colours of the former and the latter creep in. One colour is present "in the old way" and it is called despair, as in the poem in honour of a picture of Picasso: *Femme assise au bord de la mer*.

Eros, dreams, nature are three states to which the poet submits as far as he can. People are in the habit of taking the darkest fatalism as the banner of Mihalić's excellent lines:

This is a spring without intent
The snowdrops have grown, and no
one has

made an effort

Nor have they themselves — it just
happened

They could grow high.

This is a spring without intent

This is only partially accurate. Fatalism is a helpless reconciliation, the total negation of conscious choice. Mihalić's relaxation lasts as a symbol of superior mockery of life, and of superior sarcastic negligence: life and I do not care and we have each other in our damnation. And what is there to talk about. Life is simply present. There is no need to decide, or to be obliged. But the poet continues to persuade us: from here only do the chances for the "poet miracle worker" begin. Much more has to be completed. Nothing around us is over, that is everything is here, but waiting for the man who will formulate nature to the end. Here the circle is closed. Here the totality is confirmed, without anything having been done by force. No one saved anyone, and yet the miracles are guaranteed in the region of creativity. Not even the most deeply rooted adherents of the absurd will confute this. "Man has chosen to exist when he does not give in to death, and in so doing accepts the value, at least the relative value, of life. What does the literature of despair mean after all? Despair is dumb. Even being silence, after all, does have some sense, if the eyes speak. Real despair is an agony, the grave, the abyss. If it speaks, if it judges, particularly if it writes, at once a brother stretches out a hand to us, the tree has found its justification, love is born. The literature of despair is a contradiction in terms." (Camus)

THE APPROACH TO MAN

Mihalić is too much of an explorer, too cagey that is, to deal with the enhancement of unperturbed beauties. A harmonious man seems not to interest him at all, and he will attempt to break him down with the truth wherever possible. Emphasising dramatic spiritualities, he wants to bring us as shattering a document of the psychic state as possible. In a way that is not planned, accidental, instead of the aesthetics of the study, the forced unities of artifi-

cial beauty.

Yes: all crumbled; yes: pointless: yes,
having oneself

on the palm of the hand
And not seek oneself, but having too
much

To be with oneself on all different sides
Deposed into purity, which does not
demand

(*Great Nocturne*)

One should not miss this typically Mihalićian reversal: an ethic that does not insist. This is Baudelaire's upper limit of the ice. Since we have given up systematically morally seeking from ourselves and those close to us, our inner limits between purity and vice, good and evil have shifted. It is enough to cross the degree zero in the scale of values, and we will find ourselves in one or the other of two humanities: humanity plus or purity and humanity minus or vice. In both cases humanity has moved its course, and in each one of both leads to infinity. "Purity, which does not demand" is finally a boundless freedom of conscience, not directed from without, but the more burdened with a feeling of guilt. Man becomes his own real master, the master of all his movements, his god, and his hangman. Mihalić expresses this with another characteristic paradox: *The Slave of Freedom*.

So free my hands — they may
take flight

I've already sought my eyes — but they
came

themselves

And that is the real revenge — I can
leave

you

For all the good I have done

I heard some bird — I said an apparition

I saw the waves — I moved aside; they
compel

I have taken out my heart myself

With an equally developed analytical consciousness the poet delves into vices and virtues wishing to attain a paradoxical state of unity: vicious unto virtue. Psychically inverted states and



Slavko Kopač: Abraham's sacrifice, 1945-46

paradoxical chapters in man are irresistibly interesting to Mihalić. Yes, paradoxes, they provide him with both unease and an eternal progress in knowledge. They are a reliable sign of vitality, the destruction of settled, and the beginning of new, still uninvented truths. When as a lyric poet Mihalić decides on reflection, he attempts to undermine it with humour and jokes. The one genuine line of his poetry is nihilist at the aesthetic level and relativist at the moral level. In order to realise this, he proceeds in the manner of the dramatist, giving one of his personae to every contradiction. For this reason each of his collections represents a series of small dramas, attractively fabularised, from which smiles a sense for faults and that absurd mildness worthy of Dostoyevsky, stroking its little pastoral devils, while they run madly between heaven and earth. "They are free of the earth, and of the sky" but are unable to decide. In the dramatised piece of grotesquerie *The last night*, the hangman is as full of tetchy desires as a pregnant woman, the jailer writes poems and demands the strictest discretion of the condemned man, so that his ridiculous request should not be heard, the condemned man in his cell is tenderly concerned about whether his sweetheart will be late to school, and the most anxious of all is the novice hangman who is going to do his first hanging in the morning. Once undertaking the region of psychic realism, the poem remains always within the limits of poetry, in a state of incurable givenness, and it is absurd to raise the question of guilt. This state springs from his own experiential consequences, and it would be simply an abuse to ascribe it a programmatic or ideological point, which, because of the pronounced cynicism, is very often ascribed to the poems *A few of us, Just one way*. To condemn the poet to a given point of view on the basis of one poem means to impoverish him of all those fertile paradoxical situations without which poetry cannot be imagined. Alongside those so-called venomously defeatist banners of Mihalić's, "fragments of hope" lie, of sleep, "of some savage vegetation, which laughs at the law"

and the painful belief in action to preserve mobility, faith in the act, because of the beauty of the act, for the sake of the poem. And if we are so spoiled that we cannot move in poetry without a programme, as it is called, let us try to find it on the other side, perhaps in the verses of *Conversation with a swallow*:

And where do you put your thought
 happy blue thing
 For yourself there's no time
 I found work for her
 in my wings.

Life buds densely on the pages of this poetry, paradoxes blossom endlessly. Heroes wave their hands in hesitation, executioners lament over their stupid profession, cruel little houses cover the rotten lands, for cities to be able to pose for pretty postcards. Anything can happen to the poet who has decided not to demand but to take. On the other side of hope a real battlefield for courage is revealed. In the poem *To return against the self*, Mihalić has brought us a unique modern poetry, the pure urban sensibility of a Camus, just five degrees more barbarian and stronger and more poetic, because it has no intention of recruiting, it is able to turn itself into pure dry thirst and dramatise itself ad infinitum in emptiness. For as great as possible a freedom of the imagination of events in emptiness, Mihalić has rearranged the eternal myths. His Orpheus is unbelievably current, he has got over both hell and Eurydice and found out "for example to go above my himself", or that glorious Villonish devilry underneath the rope (*Ancient sign of our race*), that hunger in spite of the waste and that hopeless irritability, "while the earth trembles barrenly beneath the feet". And it is just this marvellous hopeless hunger that ensures to this poetry, undermined by paradoxes that are too audacious, a unity of tragic catharsis and a higher morality, if you like, the same that redeemed Faust from infernal resignation.

APPROACH TO THE ACT OF POETRY

The act, as a final redemption. The

dark potency of despair is exceeded. The work converts the absurd to the optimism of action. Mihalić has written his most spirited verses about the greatness of creation. The strangely optimistic *Inscription for a stechak* is written in its honour.

They weren't in vain, my steps
 Earth, now you have your rivers,
 mountains

What is to be said of the methods of the modern poem, when you hear on all sides: Don't touch, because you have no authority in this world of dreams? One thing at least has to be said. For a poem to be, you have to get a thorough hold on your dreams. In the poem the dream becomes work. In the unruly game of the imagination, more or less conscious rules are sought, a certain method of the image. Mihalić's approach to metaphor actually aspires towards the abolition of any image that is a reflection, projection or illustration of a state. A maximum synchronisation is aimed at. The image-symbol retains its duality alluding to the suppressed thought. Symbol is a mediator. Mihalić renounces symbol in order to embody the situation in the image the more completely. His image is simultaneously a revelation and an event, which does not wish to be surpassed. So it is necessary to abolish the borders. So that there should not be external things and internal things, object and spirit, organic and inorganic; so that conceptual abstractions should move within reach of pure sensibility. This image is not a metaphor in the classical sense, which means transfer, but totally an object. It is the only and irreplaceable witness of the poetic event. From this point of view the poem *Sinful, grey and green* is characteristic as procedure.

Sinful, grey and green, in shallow waters
 My knees the scream of weeds
 As I fall constantly down my chest
 I employed all the little organs with
 my wailing.

Mihalić's image suggestively depicts both the nature and the totality of it

