

DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN

It's a question I've heard many times not only from the lips of youngsters but also from oldsters with academic titles, and I must admit that at times I asked it myself. In our society success has (through the centuries) been a very relative thing, and Antun Šoljan's success is not materially palpable, he has not even nearly adequately been rewarded with so-called public acknowledgements. Šoljan couldn't care less about this, but it is sad for a society when it misses the rare opportunity to, unpunished (?), acclaim the right people. Instead of that they have rewarded Šoljan with their fear, they were afraid of him. He was always independent, solitary (because that is what victory is like). How to punish a man who is not even in the service of the state, on a monthly subsistence wage?

Yes, hirelings of all kinds must find the secret of his success the Croatian cultural puzzle of the century. Can we at least try to explain it to ourselves? (When I say we, I mean I: I doubt that Šoljan would have expressed himself in such an enigmatic way.)

When I say *solitary*, then, of course, I mean the kind of solitude that is one's personal ivory tower of independence that only some of us manage to climb and find seclusion in.

Never a hireling (even less on a list) for a secure \$110 a month, Antun Šoljan nurtured a quality that we cannot claim for (all) Croatian intellectuals: *courage*. The passing decades have not only been depressing, they were poltronic, necks were bent and reputations smeared, cultural officials dealt out crap à la carte. The wrong word in the wrong place, spoken and written utterances or statements which, at the best ended in several months or several years of enforced silence, at worst to being sentenced to Gradiška. This was the fate of at least two or three generations. Few made a sound from that morass of fear, and if they did they had their heads bent waiting for the blow to fall and assiduously gathering ashes to scatter over themselves. Šoljan always kept his head above the morass. They pushed him in, pushed him under, slapped him, but he always surfaced cleaner and newer.

The Sailor's Cheerful Testament

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Antun Šoljan, Prigovori («Objections»), Edicija Durieux, Zagreb, 1993

The new, and unfortunately, last collection of Antun Šoljan's poems published during his life, is entitled «Objections». This very resounding, simple and easily memorable title leads us in more than one way into the field of this book's meanings. To object obviously means to retain a critical, sceptical attitude towards reality, it means not to trade the right to one's own opinion for the ostensible (and frequently very tangible) advantages resulting from compliance to the spirit of the herd. But, on the other hand, objections both in life and in literature are made by those who care about the issue at hand, even when it is clear to everybody that some grouch's unrelenting objections are self-serving, he himself believes (and it perhaps should not be presumed that he is wrong) that by introducing discord into the reinforced affirmativeness of predetermined harmonies he is advancing the common good. Of course, Šoljan has nothing to do with such a position, however, his writing very much depends on an interest in reality in its diverse dimensions. He is, in short, somebody who has not succumbed to easy indifference, he is somebody who is, his scepticism notwithstanding, very much carried away by the facts of existence, so that nobody could deny him the right to object. Literary associations certainly make a connection with the title of Hektorović's fa-



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mous work (where «prigovaranje» means «conversation») — «prigovori» is something which ensues from, in Hektorović's case, relaxed «prigovaranje», separated from the daily routine but interesting and vivid. If we were to make a pun, we could say that objects — «prigovara» in Croatian — he who willingly accepts being aside — «pri» — from speech — «govor», and not in its dangerous, tempestuous core, but we could also say that objections — «prigovori» — are at the same time close to speech — «govori», words uttered by somebody who does not put into question his place in the language.

In Šoljan's «Objections» something out of each of these possible meanings of the title is manifest. It is a book characterised, like Šoljan's po-

m DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN o



etry in general, by a clear, reliable discourse perspective, and by an analogous precision and crystal transparency of utterance, the utterance of a poet who in his essays and reviews often stresses the importance of a standard as a hypothetical central flow of the poetic speech in a certain period, in relation to which flow there can be bigger or smaller deviations. Naturally, such a concept of a poetic standard is subject to serious reconsideration, but it is of interest to us here in the context of Šoljan's writings, so that we could state that the idea of the standard in effect unifies both democracy and elitism. For, standard is something general, a certain measure of reason accessible to all *per se*, but at the same time it is something select, extraordinary, something that is not prone to the superficial whims of fashion. The position of speech, manifest in Šoljan's poetry, and therefore, in this book, is determined in a similar way. It is a poetry uttered by one among the many, a member of a generation or a nation, or, simply, of some brotherhood of all people of goodwill. However, Šoljan's poetry is at the same time uttered from a pedestal of sorts, and, despite all its irony, all the incomplete rhymes and nervous urban diction, it preserves numerous traces of confidence in the dignity of a poet's task, confidence in the fact that a poet can tell the others something essential about the common fate. Even when this insight mediated by the poem might seem entirely sceptical, when it points out the deceptiveness of man's dreams and the futility of his efforts, the poem's very intonation suggests quite the opposite, the speech is in his poems always robed in a certain consciousness of its own distinctiveness; it communicates, but also bequeaths at the same time (remember the title of an earlier, well-known Šoljan poem, *Testament*).

The thirty-three poems in the collection are divided into three parts, »Seafaring«, »Stations« and »Objections«. Seafaring as a metaphor for human life is a frequent figure in Western literature. For Šoljan it is important as a matter of personal experience, about which innumerable

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m DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN o

pages of essays and stories have been written, as well as a possibility of direct entrance into the world of traditionally affirmed images where one's own writings are recognised as a piece in a much more universal, supra-individual mosaic. Šoljan's sailors are shaded in a slightly existentialist manner, they sail towards a point in the middle of the ocean where they are supposed to face the ultimate choice, towards »the point of no return«, where they would be »alone, in darkness, amidst nothing«. But they are also intimate with the more real, female wisdom which sees in the obsession with the sea just another kind of coastal slavery. Here is present also that vitalistic perspective which Šoljan, as the critics have pointed out, turns into its exact opposite, and understands life as a continuous drain of strength. For a sailor this would mean that the invisible ropes that kept him above the murky abyss had snapped, threatening to submerge him, or else that he must retreat onto the land, there benevolently to pity the self-ignorant children who will have

to set off »on this dark and restless sea, / to repeat my wretched life«.

The two other cycles of the collection offer the reader a similar perspective, but in their most interesting parts it is presented in a more complex, original way than in the »sailors'« poems. This is especially valid for the three beautiful poems dedicated to female characters; the actress, the »siren« and the anaesthesiologist. These three poems show at its best the noble pathos of Šoljan's poetry which I tried to stress above: his poems assume the responsibility to summarise and relate a whole human fate. These fates are as a rule permeated with a feeling of inevitable loss — the loss of the actress who gives herself away unsparingly in her roles, the loss of an ordinary girl from a sea town convicted by her life to grow numb into a woman whom the poet's voice is still able to reach and identify with even across the wintry seas of time, the loss of the anaesthesiologist who meets her most attractive lovers on their exit from life, on the brink of the darkness into which she leads

them with her mundane, technical sorcery. The man with a hole, from the poem of the same title, is the paradigmatic incarnation of that, since the legendary »Stone Hurler«, probably crucial Šoljan theme: the ebbing away of the very substance of one's existence, that is non-substantiality, which, nonetheless, can be perceived as a form of luxury, »Through me have passed myriads/ of the wise and the mad alike/ so I am both wiser and madder / than the impervious ones«. And finally, the concluding poem of the collection elevates the interlacing of divestments and onsets, of the depletion and renewal of strength to a higher plane, beyond the boundaries of individual lives, and, therefore, I think it should be included here in its entirety: »When I die I don't want to become/ a star or a stone, some thing eternal, /but rather something which joyfully is wasted, / like muscles and veins, loins and shoulders. // And once again when never comes, / and again somewhere in the nowhere land, / shall I know of nothing else than to consume the air, / than to live and rejoice.«

