



To cite this Article:

ZDRAVKA GUGLETA. "Milan Orlić: Postmodernist Longing for Sense", The AALITRA Review Volume 4, 2012, 5-10.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

Milan Orlić: Postmodernist Longing for Sense

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Milan Orlić is a distinguished contemporary Serbian poet. The recipient of many literary awards, he is known both in critical circles and the wider reading public in Serbia, as well as in central and eastern Europe where his poetry has appeared in a number of anthologies and literary magazines. As for English translations, only a small number of Orlić's poems have been translated and published to date: in 2001 *International Poetry Review* featured six poems from his first collection *From the Polar Night*, while in 1999 *World Literature Today* published a review of Orlić's second volume of poetry *The Hum of Millenia*. The present translations aim to reintroduce this important poet, whose poetics situate him on a par with two south Slavic poets already known to the English-speaking reader: the Serbian poet Jovan Hristić and the Slovenian poet Aleš Debeljak.

From the start, Orlić's lyrical poetry has attracted critical attention with its display of an erudite, essayistic style, sophisticated classical sensibility and conscientious devotion to developing a palimpsest or synthetic poetics. Orlić entered the Serbian literary scene with the publication of a "storynovel" (*pričoroman*) *About the Un/real* (1987) (*O ne/stvarnom*), which for the first time in Serbian (or Former Yugoslavian) literature introduced pastiche as an integral part of its poetics. Then came a multi-genre trilogy, the first and up till now the only trilogy of the kind in Serbian literature: a little poetic novel *Momo in the Polar Night: A Fairytale for Grown Ups* or *Momo u polarnoj noći: bajka za odrasle* (1992), a book of poetry *From the Polar Night* or *Iz polarne noći* (1995), and a book of essays *Notes from the Polar Night* or *Zapis iz polarne noći* (1997). In each of these three texts, Orlić develops a unique symbolism of the polar night, which is transformed into the mythopoeic space of the polar City in the next volume of poetry, *The Hum of Millenia* (1998) (*Bruij milenija*). The City figures as an ever-expanding totality of civilization, with past and present coexisting in a chaos which the Poet transforms into sense. Such a metaphor of the City is explored in Orlić's two volumes of poetry, *The City, Before I Fall Asleep* (*Grad, pre nego što usnim*) published in 2006, and the latest, *Longing for Wholeness* (*Žudnja za celinom*), published in 2009.

Critics have already situated Orlić within the "vertical tradition" of Serbian poetry which includes, retrospectively, the eminent Serbian poets: Jovan Dučić, Momčilo Nastasijević, Vasko Popa and Miodrag Pavlović. As in these Modernist and postmodernist authors, the poetic opus of Milan Orlić represents an open, ever-growing structure, within which poems are carefully placed in a sequence, and the sequences into *books*. Orlić's poetry, however, further radicalizes the poetic composition by having it grounded in citation and self-citation, allusions and reminiscences, effecting multilayered and ramified intertextuality. The motifs and themes move from one context into another, a word or a syntagm, a motif and whole poems shift from one book into another, acquiring a fresh, unexpected meaning. Moreover, Orlić's poetry relates to the poetic or literary heritage as a whole: his text enters into a dialogue both with Serbian poetry and literature (especially Crnjanski, Miljković, Pavlović), as well as with the world literary "canon" (ancient writers, Borges, Yeats). And not only poetry and literature but other discourses are assimilated in this poetry: philosophical, religious, and even popular culture discourse. Orlić's succinct and highly stylized poetic idiom also includes an idiosyncratic aligning of the text on the right and the innovative use of parataxis *à la* Crnjanski.

Aware of the responsibility of the act of writing, the trace of the written word, and its place in the literary tradition, Orlić remains indifferent to a hackneyed poetics which manifests a simplistic interpretation of Pound's motto "Make it new!" His poetry puts into relief the

iterability of the trace or sign (Derrida). Taking out of the original context and recontextualizing the poetic motifs, citing and re-citing them, detaches these from the superimposed meaning, historical or aesthetic relevance. This process of composition points to the non-origin of sense or the non-essence of the trace and the possibility of its being repeated again and again, attesting to the transformative force of language. Orlić's poetry dramatizes the fact that there is no originality or unmediated meaning. Meaning is not grounded but is prone to repetition and perpetual recontextualisation.

Below are two poems from Orlić's latest volume, *Longing for Wholeness* (an allusion to Plato), taken out of the context of the sequences within which they acquire a richer meaning. The first, "A Birthday Poem: The Shadows of Absent Guests", is a part of the aesthetically rounded first sequence "Birthday Poems" ("Rođendanske pesme") in which, as it progresses, the lyrical persona ages, speaking first as an eleven-year-old child, then as a youth of twenty-two "who can do anything", then as a man in the middle of the Road (thirty-three), and so on, following an eleven-year interval pattern up to the moment of his death, and beyond. In the translated poem, the lyrical persona reflects on his forty-fourth birthday. In a characteristically melancholy voice, typically punctuated by idiosyncratic pauses, often tinged with good-natured humour, a now mature man meditates in the solitude of a drawing-room. The last lines are particularly evocative, juxtaposing the beautiful image of the falling snow from a *Huston movie* and the gesture of *mildly* stroking, not *faraway hills and icy mounts* like in Crnjanski's well-known poem "Sumatra", but *faraway cities* – and of holding *an arrow pulling the bowstring tight* – another allusion to Crnjanski's motif. Crnjanski's expressionist metaphysical longing for distant and snowy landscapes is widened in Orlić into the longing for the urbane, and by taking into account a mediated, aestheticised version of the wintry scenery.

The second poem, "Sitting in Front of the Castle, Waiting (a contribution to palimpsest poetry)", is the fifth poem of the sequence "Eternity and A Day" ("Večnost i jedan dan"). The land surveyor-poet is writing an addendum to "palimpsest poetry", an ironic reference to the syntagma with which Orlić's poetry has been qualified by critics. The poem thematises the "real" and "fictional" within this *unfinished manuscript* of the poem: Godo is evoked as an actor and motifs from Kafka's novel, as well as Kafka as the author. The "author" abruptly and emphatically ends his little narrative, parodying the "genre" of "an unfinished manuscript". Not surprisingly, perhaps, this author, in line with the play of interchanging the "real" and "fictional", anticipates his own death and conceives the idea of critics, exegetes (translators?) and editors further improvising and *contributing* to, or better, *constructing* the manuscript of the poem. This seemingly parodic gesture in the end offers an affirmative view of or *contribution* to poetry as an open-ended palimpsest structure of meaning.

In fact, the very next poem in the sequence "Eternity and A Day", "A Letter to an Unknown Female-Reader", thematizes the active role of the reader. The poem is characteristically "transferred" from Orlić's previous book, *The City, Before I Fall Asleep*, where it appears juxtaposed to other poems – letters to various poets, writers, and fictional characters, comprising the sequence "A Letter to Friends" ("Pismo prijateljima"). The poet-persona apostrophizes the female reader. The poet realizes the idiomatic "love for poetry", as he looks with *a lover's eyes* on his verse, as well as on the *tenderness* of the *beautiful reader's* gaze as she reads his lines, or on the *softness* of her fingers, *her slender fingers* that embrace *the poem's body*. The text seduces this imagined female reader into an eroticized love for reading, an encounter with the text that induces search for the nuanced richness of meaning in *the secret chambers* of poetry.

RODENDANSKA PESMA:

SENKE ODSUTNIH GOSTIJA

Četrdeset četvrti mi je, eto, sedim u toploj

beržeri, čitam.

Žaračem, povremeno, razgorevam vatru

A BIRTHDAY POEM:

THE SHADOWS OF ABSENT GUESTS

There, I am forty-four, sitting in a warm bergère

chair, reading.

I poke, at times, and kindle the wood in the fireplace.

u kaminu. Čitam
svoju omiljenu knjigu, u crvenom safijanu.
Kroz prozore,
gledam, žmirka zvezdano nebo. Kao božanski
Gang, Grad izvire
na nebu ali, ipak, postoji samo da bi živeo
u pesmi. Nekada
rog izobilja, mirisao je na retku petolisnu
ružu. Sada ga
nastanjuju požuda Večite Eve: Crne Madone:
carice tame
i tajne milosti. Još večeras, sedeo sam u
Reform-klubu i
iz klupske čaša ispijao porto, pomešan sa
cimetovom korom.
Koliko juče, bio sam dečak, samosvesni očev
princ. I kad bolje
razmislim – od četvrte do četrdeset četvrte –
svaki dan mi je
praznični poklon. Između prvog poletanja na
Mesec i prvih
naseljavanja, stao je sav moj život. Ovako
živahan, kao da
dolazim iz muzeja Madam Tiso, mogao bih
sanjariti bar još
hiljadu godina. A da nikada ne ostarim.
Pomešan sa senkama
odsutnih gostiju, iz malog salona, širi
se miris muskatnih
oraščića. Božjom milošću, večeras nisam
jedini anahoret u
gradskoj pustinji. Velike oči mojih prozora,
bistre kao sveta
jezera Himalaja, izgleda da podstiču jednu od
poslednjih zabava:
Istraživanje ontološkog dokaza za postojanje
Pesnika. Ako bi,
na primer, konji, volovi ili lavovi imali
pesnike, da li bi ih
zamišljali po svom obličju? Ali do jutra,
utihnuće i ta
zabava. Zvezdane mirise neba, rastaraće gnev

I am reading
my favorite book, covered in red saffian.
Through windows,
I see, the starry sky is winking. Like the godly
Ganges, the City
springs in the sky but, still, exists only to dwell
in a poem. Once
the horn of plenty, smelled of the rare five-leaved
rose. Now
it harbors the lust of Eve Eternal: the Black Madonna:
the empress
of the night and secret grace. Only tonight, I sat in
the Reform-club
sipping red port from the club glasses, mixed with
cinnamon peel.
Only yesterday, I was a boy, a conscientious father's
prince. And when I
think about it – from my fourth to forty-fourth –
each day
has been a festive gift. Between the first flight
to the Moon
and the first colonies, my whole life fitted. So
vivacious, as if
coming from Madame Tussauds' museum, I could
daydream for at least
another thousand years. Yet never grow old. Mixed
with the shadows
of absent guests, from the little parlour, spreads
the scent of fragrant
nutmegs. With God's grace, this evening I am not
the sole anchorite
in the City's desert. The big eyes of my windows,
clear like the holy
lakes of the Himalayas, seem to invite one of
the last pastimes:
The search for the ontological proof of the Poet's
existence. If,
for example, horses, oxen or lions had poets, would they
imagine them
in their own image? But by morning, this pastime
will cease too.
Starry scents of the sky, the wrathful storm will

oluje što besni
kao da u Gradu ionako nema dovoljno gneva.
Kada se gnev
stiša i teške kiše uminu, dugo će jahati
peskovitom obalom.
Udisaču morske šumove, krotiti talase i
radovati se kao
da mi je prvi put. Kao da se prvi put po mom
licu razvejava sneg
iz jednog Hjustonovog filma. I da daleke
gradove blago
milujem, rukom. Dok u drugoj držim strelu
sa zapetim lukom.

dispel, raging
as if the City hasn't had its fill of wrath.
When the rage
subsides and heavy rains abate, long will I ride along
the sandy shore.
Bathe in the marine sounds, tame the waves and
feel joy as if
for the first time. As if for the first time in my face
snow scatters
from a Huston movie. As if faraway cities I caress
gently, with my hand.
While in the second I hold an arrow pulling the bow-
string tight.

SEDIM PRED ZAMKOM I ČEKAM
(prilog palimpsestnoj poeziji)

Čekam godinama i decenijama, čekam da se
konačno dogodi
nešto važno. Čekam onako kako se nekada
čekao Godo
koji je, oduševljen mogućnostima interneta
ostao kod kuće
i, bez predumišljaja, zaboravio da stigne na
pozorišnu predstavu
čiji je glavni junak. Čekam u nekakvoj večitoj
sadašnjosti, evo sada,
na putovanju do Zamka u koji, ni sa mapom
puta, najboljom,
kartografskom veštinom i ličnom Kafkinom
rukom izrađenom
– ne uspevam da doprem. Sedim, ovde i sada,
u stalnoj vezi sa
stalnim sekretarima za vezu, geodetski óbučen:
ali bez posla i
zemlje koju bih merio u ovom sve globalnjem
Gradu. Gledam
kroz kapiju Zamka kao što sobar, znatiželjno,
viri kroz ključaonicu
gospodara, ljubazno se pozdravljam u velikom
tudem prostoru,
sa još većim i još više tudim ljudima, veoma

SITTING IN FRONT OF THE CASTLE, WAITING
(a contribution to palimpsest poetry)

I've been waiting for years and decades, waiting for
something special
finally to happen. I'm waiting the way they
waited for Godot
who, excited by the possibilities of the Internet
had stayed at home
and, without premeditation, forgot all about
the show in which
he was the hero. I'm waiting in some kind of
eternal present, just now,
on my journey to the Castle that, even with the map
of the road, the best,
drawn with cartographic skill and in Kafka's
own hand
– I'm unable to reach. I'm sitting, here and now, in
permanent connection
with permanent secretaries for the connection, versed
in geodesy: with
no job and land to survey in this ever more globalised
City. I look
through the Castle's gate the way a valet peers,
inquisitively, through
his master's peephole, and kindly exchange
a greeting in
the big strange place, with still bigger and stranger

raspoložen
da primim bilo kakvu, makar i neizvršivu
obavezu, ali eto,
rukopis pesme se na ovom mestu prekida,
što nesumnjivo
ostavlja prostor svakoj vrsti kritičara,
tumača i
priredivača kritičkih posthumnih izdanja.

people, very
well-disposed to take on any kind, even impossible
responsibility, but alas,
the manuscript of the poem breaks off at this point,
undoubtedly leaving
space for all kind of critic, exegete and editor of critical
posthumous editions.

PISMO NEPOZNATOJ ČITATELJKI

O tome je reč: da u pesmi, pored lepote ima
mesta i za zamišljenost.
Čak i malo staromodne melanolije, pobeđe
tzv. ljudskosti nad
podsmehom subbine. Krasna čitateljko. I stoga
na stihove
gledam očima ljubavnika, kao i na nežnost
Tvog pogleda
dok čitaš ove redove. Ili na blagost prstiju
kojima listas
knjigu. A na sebe – kao na psihijatrijski
slučaj, nepopravivi:
u gradu širokih travnjaka i uskogrudih
pogleda, u trenucima
dok troši poslednju nadu, radost životnu
i trezvenost – još uvek
izgubio nisam. Kao slučajni prolaznik,
u večitom neznanju
zatečen, polja Umbrije posmatram, u odrazu
Paundovih očiju.
Udubljenih u beskrajnu daljinu, daleko iza
zlatnog kaveza.
Priznajem da je ljubav prema prozi sasvim
prirodna, ali
voleti poeziju – otmeno je. Najvažniji je lični
primer. To je jedino
što, nedužno, možemo učiniti za bilo čiju
besmrtnost. Ili
spasenje. Na probi je svačiji smisao za humor

A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN FEMALE-READER

It's about this: that a poem has, beside beauty, room
for thoughtfulness.
Even a bit of old-fashioned melancholy, the victory of
so-called benevolence
over fate's mockery. Beautiful reader. And therefore
I regard verse
with a lover's eyes, as I do the tenderness of Your
gaze while
You read these lines. Or the softness of Your fingers
browsing the book.
And myself – as a psychiatric case, incurable: in a city
of open lawns
and narrow views, in moments of wasting its last
hope, the joy
of life and soberness – are my forte still. Like a random
passer-by, with eternal
ignorance caught, I contemplate Umbria' meadows, in the
reflection of Pound's
eyes. Engrossed in an endless distance, far beyond
the golden cage.
I admit, a love of prose is natural indeed, but
loving poetry –
is noble. Most important is the personal example. Only
that can we,
innocently, do for anyone's immortality. Or
salvation.
Everyone's sense of humor is on probation and, like
all things of value,
is unevenly and unfairly bestowed. Your reading,

koji je, kao i sve
važno, neravnomerno i nepravedno raspoređen.
Tvoje čitanje,
vitki prsti što grle telo pesme, na stihovima
smireni pogled
što odmara, naslućivanje je velikog blaga u
tajnim odajama
knjige. U trenutku prvog saznanja. Sve ozbiljno
u pesmi, počiva
u Tvom posvećenom čitanju. I zamišljanju
tog blagostanja.
Jedina možda još Ti znaš put do Prosperovog
ostrva i biblioteke.

the slender
fingers embracing the poem's body, the calm gaze
on the lines
that relaxes – a premonition of unbound riches in secret
book's chambers.
In the moment of the first intuition. Everything significant
in a poem
rests in Your dedicated reading. And imagining
that fortune.
Perhaps only You know the way to Prospero's
Island and library.