
The Poetry of Milan Dekleva

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In the beginning there was not the word; there was silence. And immediately afterwards: the word about silence. The following is the first poem in Milan Dekleva's first book, *Mushi mushi* (1971), a collection of haiku poetry.

No traces.
Dry, glassy sand.
What silence!

Dekleva was the first Slovenian wordsmith to make use of haiku, a Japanese three-verse poetic form. Haiku is a form of few words, of semantic miniature, an ascetic vocabulary that becomes the condensed articulation of the poet's unique experience of the world's totality. The sound of this particular experience is also - if not primarily - silence; the space of the poetic event is emptiness. "The poem is controlled silence", wrote Dekleva in his 1990s collection *Preseženi človek* [Out-lived man]. This poetic paradox, that existed from the very beginning of Dekleva's writings and persisted through the three and a half decades of his experimentation in various genres and linguistic situations (including not only fourteen books of poetry but prose, plays and essays) and indeed remains today, did not emerge from nothing.

In the end, Dekleva's story is also the story of poetic modernity as it lurks within the metamorphosis of world and Slovenian literature. Dekleva's dialog with modernity remains a creative conflict with his ancestors, the battle of the poet for self-recognition, for the word that will articulate the uniqueness of his world. What is central to Dekleva's texts - and this can only be said with the benefit of hindsight - also corresponds with the spatial-temporal coordinates of their emergence: with the conceptual-aesthetic, and perhaps even with the ideological-political, conditions of the decades following

the Second World War, which is to say through the filter of the poet's individual reason, gaze, and desire. The transition from the 1960s to the 1970s was not only a period that marked the beginning of Dekleva's poetic formation, but also a period of turbulent social happenings, dramatic debates and actions. In connection with Dekleva and with many other Slovenians of that generation, one can speak of two early points of identification: the first was 1968, and the second was Dušan Pirjevec (1921-1977). Pirjevec was a charismatic professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at Ljubljana University's School of Humanities (where Dekleva studied), a revolutionary and Partisan fighter during the war, and one of the most important figures in post-war Slovenian culture.

In Slovenia, the year of student protest came after a delay of several years. Its main peculiarity, if we compare it to the events in western European cities, was that Yugoslav (and Slovenian) students did not question the nature of the system itself - the Yugoslav system of socialist self-management and the deeper legitimacy of the socialist revolution which had taken place, concurrently with the resistance against German and Italian occupiers, during the years from 1942 to 1945. Student demonstrations all over Europe, and especially in Paris, were of a pointedly leftist-revolutionary and anti-capitalist nature, which is to say a direct attack on the institutions of bourgeois society. The legendary graffiti on the Sorbonne in Paris - "Let's be realists and demand the impossible!" - was precisely that: a challenge to destroy the ruling system.

The scene in Slovenia and in other parts of then Yugoslavia was fundamentally different, precisely because, similar to the West, it was in essence left-wing and often revolutionary. The Slovenian communists who held in their hands the levers of power in what was then a one-party state at least nominally shared the ideas of the student movement. But the Slovenian students hardly questioned these powers, let alone viewed them as totalitarian - and that is because the dilemma of totalitarianism versus democracy is, from the leftist perspective, an artificial and superfluous dilemma. (It is no coincidence that the word totalitarianism within this value system is even today mostly reserved for Fascism and, now and again, Stalinism.)

This is one of the several reasons that in those days the only revolution for which poets were willing to sign up was

the so-called “revolution of the spirit”. Which is to say: aesthetic and spiritual transformation, a change in attitudes and relationships, but not direct action or the concrete struggle for radical change of the status quo, least of all an anti-party, liberal democratic, bourgeois struggle for a multiparty system, private enterprise, etc. Among other things, this meant that aesthetic revolution was practically the only revolution that was possible within the world of socialist totalitarianism and its clearly delineated borders. These borders represented the real levers of domination, the distribution of political power, and the regulation of political antagonisms.

The fact that Dekleva’s *Musbi musbi* is a haiku collection is a reflection of the interest of the then post-Beat generation in Eastern thought. The gaze toward the East was an attempt to gain perspective into a different life practice that could function as an alternative to the Western world, to the logic of Capital and petit-bourgeois consumerism to which the ideological *East* of Europe (and especially Slovenia, the most western part of the socialist East) was not immune. This *gaze away* was an effort to step out of Eurocentrism, logocentrism, subjectivism, man as the centre and measure of all existence – and it was this tendency that achieved its peak twenty years later in Dekleva’s poetry, at the beginning of the 1990s.

As mentioned before, Dušan Pirjevec was the other early point of identification for Dekleva’s generation. The story of Pirjevec – and also of his intellectual legacy today – is, generally speaking, much more complex than the story about the generation of 1968. Pirjevec’s ideas were certainly one of the impulses that spurred the Slovenian “revolution of the spirit”. It was Pirjevec who coined the two well-known slogans “the end of the action” and “the tolerance of being” based on his studies of Martin Heidegger. From the second half of the 1960s onward, Pirjevec contributed considerably to the vitality of Slovenian intellectual life. His participation in the Heideggerian turn, together with his active role in the Partisan resistance, revolution, and historical action, belonged among the main impetuses for the general consideration of the questions and dilemmas of the modern era and, above all, for the denunciation of subjectivism, revolution, and the will to power.

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In the early 1970s, Dekleva and other members of his literary generation stood before the poetic door to high modernism. If the dilemma between modern versus traditional poetry still held on a theoretical level, in practice it assumed a different quality depending on the individual artist: how to find a unique voice within the context of modernist poetics, increasingly perceived as the dominant literary style? How to be more than a mere imitator of one's great, penetrating, and still living poetic predecessors? The 1960s were a great decade for Slovenian poetry. It was a decade founded on the debuts of the poetic upstarts of the late 1950s - Dane Zajc (1929-2005), Gregor Strniša (1930-1987), and Veno Taufer (1933-). These were the key Slovenian authors of so-called "dark modernism". If we care to make a selection, the most important books of Slovenian poetry from this period were written by Zajc (*Jezik iz zemlje*, 1961; *Ubijavci kač*, 1968), Strniša (*Odisej*, 1963; *Zvezde*, 1964), Edvard Kocbek (*Groza*, 1963), Taufer (*Jetnik prostosti*, 1963), Niko Grafenauer (*Stiska jezika*, 1965), and Tomaž Šalamun (*Poker*, 1966; *Namen pelerine*, 1968). By 1960, the playwright Dominik Smole had staged and printed his *Antigone*, a dramatic and no less poetic text that become the significant overture to the 1960s and at the same the uncompromising analysis of the spiritual and ethical condition of contemporary Slovenian identity.

Two key words of Slovenian modernist poetics are *molk* (quiet) and *tišina* (silence). These two words are - both symbolically and actually - important to the above-mentioned authors (who cannot be nonchalantly tossed into the same historical-literary registrar) and characterized the poetry of Taufer and Grafenauer in particular. It could be stated that even the title of Grafenauer's collection, *Stiska jezika* [The anxiety of language], semantically reflects the condition of modern poetry: being fated to walk on the edge of silence, where silence is no longer merely a challenge or an inspiration, but the ultimate aim of a poem. In one of his later collections, Grafenauer called this condition "condensed silence". At the other extreme is Tomaž Šalamun, a poet whose oppositional response to silence as the destiny of modern poetry was poetic hyperproduction. We could even claim that he struggled against the danger of "the end of poetry" by conceiving of poetry as an ongoing process, as an activity that never comes

to an end. *Poker* put forward a poetic language that deconstructs meaning as an *a priori* value. This is one of the reasons that in the image of world Šalamun paints, there is no longer a split between man and world, and likewise there is no so-called “humanist dilemmas” or oppositions (between man and an unfriendly world, the ideal and reality, etc.). The unmistakable feature of Šalamun’s early poetry is, not least, the ironic destruction of the national-literary tradition, its eschatology and fatalism. The radicalization in Šalamun’s poetry came early on: not only the destruction of meaning as it is proclaimed by one or another Idea to which literature lends an emotional and graphic image, but the very process of attributing meaning is called into question on the primary linguistic level. One of the intentions of Šalamun’s poetry is therefore disillusionment: poetic texts should only speak of poetry as a production of language formation, not something in service to one or another Idea (with a capital I), whether it is historical, national or even literary in the sense of fidelity to the ideals of a literary tradition. In this context, a particular feature of Šalamun’s poetry is humour. In Slovenian poetry, this is more the exception than the rule. There is no doubt that some of this humorous agility and experimentation in different linguistic registers finds its way into Dekleva’s later poetry.

Widely varying literary-historical terms have been used to describe Šalamun’s poetry: in addition to the all-encompassing term modernism, we hear, for example, surrealism, Dadaism, constructivism. Critics have also used terms such as pop art and experimental poetry. The general notion of experimentation brings us to a different set of Slovenian authors: Franci Zagoričnik, Iztok Geister Plamen, Matjaž Hanžek. The avant-garde art group OHO (1966-1971) and the authors that gathered around *Katalog* (1967-1970) would also belong in this category. It is no coincidence that the work that represented the summit of ultramodernist poetic practice was a “book” by Franci Zagoričnik entitled *Opus nič* [Opus zero] published within a 1967 OHO book series. It was comprised of seven blank white pages. At this point, it became evident that it would be impossible to move forward within this particular poetic praxis. All that remained was silence, or expressed in less poetic words, the transition into other trans-linguistic artistic media.

Already in the second half of the 1970s, Taras Kermauner, one of the most penetrating interpreters of then contemporary

poetry, stated that modernism had been “sung out”, that it had become a “convention”, that a change was needed. Kermauner’s words were directed at hypermodernist literary practice in which he had detected that subversion had begun to run out of steam; in other words, that subversion had become convention.

Silence is otherwise one of the most frequent concepts in Stephane Mallarmé’s poetic reflections. Mallarmé, the classic poetic modernist, said that poetry was “silence as the idealized path of abstraction”, that the poetic text was therefore fading. What’s more, Mallarmé also spoke of the ideal poem as, to paraphrase his words, a silent poem made of only whiteness. That characterization perfectly describes Zagoričnik’s collection *Opus nič*, which is actually a poetic self-annulment enacted on empty pages. Zagoričnik’s poetic artefact also emerged from traditional poetry insofar as it belonged in the category of so-called visual/concrete poetry. One can only say of this phenomenon that these are trans-textual artefacts that are beyond words. Perhaps, it would be more appropriate to discuss it within the discourse of art history. Certainly one could arrive at the conclusion that visual/concrete poetry is the inevitable response to “compressed language” or “the magnetism of silence”. Perhaps it is no accident that Dekleva’s debut collection *Mushi mushi*, published in the era of high modernism and probably not immune to this particular dilemma, is not only a collection of haiku, poems with extremely few words, but also that it has the sense of being beyond-words, almost a product of visual media.

If we remain on the level of textuality (that is, on the level of the sound and meaning of Dekleva’s early poetry), it would not be exaggerated to note that the title of the first section of Dekleva’s first collection is *Glasba* [Music]. Dekleva’s preoccupation with music is not merely a hobby or passing enthusiasm. In his student years, Dekleva was a member of the Salamander Group and he vacillated for a long while between the musical and poetic media. Later in his career, he would try his hand as a composer and a writer of lyrics. In Dekleva’s work, it is necessary to understand music in a subtle manner, in the way sounds (and silence *à la* John Cage) enter the body of the poem. When that body is lively, it can be measured by the unpredictable impulses of jazz and the transcendence of borders thrown up by content and form. In this regard, one might

also look to a later pair of collections from 1996 – *Ježikava rapsodija / Improvizacije na neznano temo* [Impudent rhapsody / Improvisations on an unknown theme]. The titles alone indicate Dekleva’s musical leanings.

Seven years after the publication of *Mushi mushi*, Dekleva’s second collection *Dopisovanje* [Correspondences] came out in 1978. This was immediately followed by *Nagovarjanja* [Promptings]. The title of both books places an emphasis on dialog – and in comparison with haiku, relative volubility – which characterizes Dekleva’s poetry from the late 1970s on. Rather than of “condensed silence” – which reached its peak in the era of high modernism with the 1975 publication of Grafenauer’s *Štukature* [Stucco] – in Dekleva’s case we must begin to speak of the eroticism of the body. Dekleva presents a dialectic between the ecstatic openness of the body and (in the background as always) the conscious awareness of the silence of language and the ongoing disharmony between words and things. This disharmony, both an internal border and a challenge for the future of poetic expression, is meaningfully named the “anagram of all things” in *Nagovarjanja*. In one of the poems in *Dopisovanje*, the experience of “nomadic correspondence” is graphically described. It is an experience that lacks (the right) words for things:

Our nomadic correspondence was like the cancellation of camping. I don’t have the last word, but the next to the last was glittering like Father Christmas and could not hold the warmth of its own flame: it was a flight that left even itself behind, and the last word lost the prop for sound, and what shall I do with the seed of language that is too strong for the fruit? The tallest was the young girl though she didn’t blossom in the burning tobacco of woman. Under my cloth is the wavering solidity of the table, above it the fingers that can count with ease, no remainder.

The response to the experience of absence, to the lack of (the right) words for the naming of things, is a fullness in which a pre-Babylonian language rings: this is both paradoxical and logical. It is “the praise of all things”, the almost programmatic title of the second cycle of Dekleva’s fourth collection of poetry. And it is the praise of all things made possible, en-

couraged, and facilitated by the language of the body. It is in this context that we must also understand the title of Dekleva's 1984 collection: *Narečje telesa* [Dialect of the body]. The "things" are phenomena of the world's totality: we encounter, for example, a praise of wheat, rain, hatred, Mexico, style, winter, etc. Poetic praise is a praise of the world that it *is* at all. And yet the fact that it *is* does not release it from the enigmatic process - on the level of naming or the dialect of poems, of putting these elusive things into words. Indeed, it is precisely the physicality of things that allows us to experience them because of their sensuous immediacy and pre-linguistic eroticism - "love is / the economy of the earth", as Dekleva wrote in *Pesmi v dvojini* ([Poems in dual]. This physicality is the closest possible experience not only of the *other*, but of oneself as well: the other in the self and the self in the other. The first three verses of one of the poems in *Narečje telesa* are: "Suddenly all was mastered. / What was near, was near. / What hurt, hurt." ("Someone would say"). The plan for *Narečje telesa*, if it can be expressed in a single sentence, was thus: to bring things into the texture of the poem, to bring them into the embrace of the world's totality, so that they will all sound at the same time.

* * *

*Entries in the book of the world outlive us.
Wonder outlives us, leaves, warmth,
smells, distance. They don't grow old like us.
And yet what death demands of us
is pure concentration.
Then all things will sound at the same time:
too loud, beyond the reach of human
bearing.*

The above poem - in many ways one of Dekleva's more programmatic poems - appears without title, in a graphically designed font, and concludes the collection *Narečje telesa*. A poem about entries into the book of the world embodies Dekleva's poetic foundations in the mature period of his creative life. The key words in the poem are *outlive*, *wonder*, *death*, *concentration* and, of course, *things*. They are crucial not because they are relatively frequent in Dekleva's poetry, but because of their semantic density, their specific weight, their

poetic universality. The last poem in *Narečje telesa* is also a sort of declaration of Dekleva's poetry at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In this five-year period, he wrote the four collections of poetry: *Zapriseženi prah* in 1987 [Sworn dust], *Odjedanje božjega* in 1988 [Nibbling on the divine], *Panični človek* in 1990 [Panicked man], and *Preseženi človek* in 1992.

In order to make the unique quality of Dekleva's writing clearer, we will once again make use of a short comparison, and once again with Niko Grafenauer whose collections of poetry stand as an articulation of the crossroads of Slovenian modernist poetry. *Štukature* in the 1970s and *Palimpsesti* [Palimpsests] in the 1980s were, to borrow Grafenauer's own poetic vocabulary, books of transition from "ideology" to "morphology", from "the language of ideas" to "the games of language". Such poetic games prevent an *a priori* reading that would discover unambiguous meaning or dramaturgy in the message or narrative about the condition of the open human heart. Grafenauer's 1989 collection, *Izbrisi* [Erasures]- which came out during the period relevant to our discussion - reports, among other things, that the elevated solitude of the poetic "inner-language" is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. In the final analysis, the poet's view onto the world is the view from his own room. It is a view of limitless freedom, though nevertheless through the "bars of ...language" (Paul Celan).

This situation is keenly expressed in a well-known verse from *Palimpsesti* "erasures writing silence into the palimpsest" (from a cycle of poems dedicated to Dušan Pirjevec). In *Izbrisi*, the strict form of the sonnet, a form which prevents the play of language being left to uncontrolled word-making, is replaced by the longer elegy, which is inhabited by kind of historical allusion and intertextual reference. Eroticism and the awareness of responsibility, for the *other* are also present. All of this takes place within the wider context of Hölderlin-inspired poets in "an impoverished era", within the context of Heidegger's thinking about being and ontological difference, and Pirjevec's reflections on "modern subjectivism". These stations on Grafenauer's poetic journey are mentioned because they are, in the most general way, also stations on Dekleva's journey through his poetic dilemmas. Only Dekleva's responses are different. A certain philosophical reflection frequently crops up in his poetry and gradually becomes more and more present. And yet in comparison to Grafenauer's,

Dekleva's poems (and this is more than merely a technical-formal question) are not impersonal. Dekleva's first person poetic self is the medium through which things arrive at words and, even more importantly, consciousness of *being-in-the-world*. The following is the first and last stanza of one of Dekleva's poems in *Zapriseženi prab*:

Everything that we weave with our pain and striving
exists on the doormat to silence.

* * *

How blind is our hypocrisy,
although *simplicity* is given to us as the inspiration for
eternity
and eternity is given to us as the return of the *same*,
all in the direct speech of experience!

Dekleva's first-person is either singular or, more often than not, plural: "we" is implied in order to arrive at a word that emphasizes the universal, a condition that goes beyond the individual/personal/private dimension of experience. The poem, parts of which are cited above, is one of the best examples of a certain kind of reflexive poetry that is made possible by the simultaneity (weaving) of pain and striving, blindness and insight, the speech of experience and the experience of speech, words in the context of silence. Or more precisely: the poem exists on the "doormat of silence". Particularly in *Odjedanje božjega* and subsequent collections, this high pathos of silence - even "night silence" ("The blind spot of time") - is juxtaposed in Dekleva's work by a lower, musically jazzed-up language. The affairs of the world examined in his poetry are no less fateful, but they are nonetheless loosened up, moved closer to the human sphere where nothing human is entirely alien. Dekleva's work is solemn and philosophical but also filled with pleasure and play. At issue are not only the ontology of nothingness and the awareness of the porousness of language, but also the relaxation of dogmatism about the world's night that in its timelessness knows no dawn. This is the source of Dekleva's complex intermingling of various aspects of speech, mental conditions, and thought forms all of which enter into dialog with each other.

And yet sooner or later, one must return to the beginning. Dekleva made such a return - in order to more clearly light the path forward - in his collection *Panični človek*. This return to the past - perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it, in the postmodern binary method, "back to the future/forward to the past" - must be understood on two levels: the first is in terms of *civilisation* in the sense of searching for the beginnings of the West and, in light of these beginnings, reflecting on its "end" as contemporary thinker pessimistically conceive of it; and the second is in terms of *literature*, and in this particular case Dekleva's dialog with the Ionic natural scientist, Anaximander, which allows him to discover new possibilities for the articulation of his own poetic world. Given that only a fragment of Anaximander's writings about nature was preserved, it is not difficult to understand Dekleva's poetic conversation with the pre-Socratic thinker more as a dramaturgical starting point than as an effort to reconstruct the substance of Anaximander's thoughts. *Panični človek* is a collection that returns to the source; but it is a return in which we understand the figure of Anaximander (we encounter him in the titles of all the poems from the first, "Anaximander senses", to the last, "Anaximander counts down") as a (post)modern hero who, though he finds himself in the world of Ancient Greece, must orient himself toward the new in order not to lose his own modernity. In short: it is the search for innocence as conducted by a man who is no longer innocent, but suddenly finds himself in an innocent (pre-modern) world: "A strange fright, because the world is here. Present. / Light is here, things glow." ("Anaximander senses"). Or in another poem: "I would like to persevere like offspring, in this moving confusion. / That is the plan. To revive the wind, the stone, the ether. / To revive death!" ("Anaximander's plan"). If we remain within the contours of Dekleva's poetry, the story of Anaximander as it is narrated in *Panični človek*, in a period of civilizational maturity, is still - and will always be - essentially paradoxical: "Everything is planned destiny, / it fulfils the paradox within me." ("Anaximander's paradox").

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"Entries in the book of the world outlive us" was written at the end of *Narečje telesa*. Entries in the book of the world *outlive*. Man becomes *outlived man* - which is the title Dekleva

gave to his 1992 collection, a book of lapidary poetic-philosophical sayings. How is man *outlived*? What perspective allows us to say that man is *outlived*? The first thing that comes to mind is the response provided by the great ideologies and eschatological projects of the twentieth century. Man must be outlived or transcended: the man of the “old” world replaced by the man of the “new” world. Man must outlive himself: in the sense that new man is the outlived man. The method by which he outlives himself is the will to power, or in the final analysis, the will to will.

But the outlived condition that Dekleva is speaking about must be understood in a different way. One of the sayings in *Preseženi človek* goes: “We are not at home on earth; we are only visiting.” (No. 41). Dekleva wants to emphasise in a clever poetic way that man is not Protagorean *homo mensura*. “No. We are not the measure, / but the unease of all things,” as he wrote at the end of “Copernican revolution” in the collection *Zapriseženi prah* which followed *Narečje telesa*. Man is neither the *mensura* nor the Cartesian “modern subject” that takes everything he encounters as an object, in accordance with Heidegger’s explanations of the key stations of “European nihilism”. Man, as understood by Dekleva’s po-ethics, is also not the subject of the will to power as Nietzsche understands it in the philosophical context of his Superman, ecstatically named “the master of the Universe”. Dekleva’s subject is not the master of anything; after all, he is only visiting the earth. To visit this earth means to be condemned to “homelessness” and to the “unknowable path”. The path is unknowable because it has no destination and it has no destination because man, following his experience of arbitrary subjectivism and various totalitarian projects of redemption, can no longer define the destination. He is no longer the absolute lawmaker who in his privileged position can judge and master the totality of being. Insofar as metaphysics are thoughts about the totality of being, it becomes possible to speak of its “end” in this context: that is, in the context of the crisis of the Subject and its Truth that is based on the self-certainty of man as Subject, giving him a justification and a measure for the formation of the world in his image.

When it turns out, to put it sentimentally, that “There is no Truth” – neither in Immanence or Transcendence – the art

of the poet acquires an essentially new dimension. Only now what Dekleva calls the “perfecting of language” can occur. But this is not a language that strives for the greatest self-referentiality and aestheticist self-sufficiency. This is precisely what brought modernism to the crisis that Dekleva also experienced in the body of his own poetry in the 1970s. It is a language that is in constant dialog with silence. Dekleva speak of “pure concentration”. Only on the horizon of silence, at which point language itself becomes excessive, does the word acquire its true weight - just as human life acquires its true authenticity only on the horizon of its own death (mortality). It is in this direction that we must search for the answer to why Dekleva wrote *Preseženi človek* as a collection of short sayings and also why the most frequent form of his sayings is paradox.

What does this mean for poetry? Within the context of Dekleva’s poetry-making, it means above all that putting the world into words means the annulment of Truth and the author’s rights to it. It means to persist in paradox, and - to once again borrow Dekleva’s formulation in *Zapriseženi prah* - on “the doormat to truth”. Paradox is one of the few conceptual figures of thought that, because of its cunning structure, does not fear the grandeur of what it wants to say. And yet this doesn’t mean that it is a more redemptive engagement with - again using Dekleva’s words - “the pathology of expression.” Namely:

*It is worthy of admiration and laughter:
that we still try to perfect this Poem.*

The form of “the perfected poem” is the sonnet. Does this mean that modern sonnet-writing is something “worthy of admiration and laughter”? Yes and no, would be the answer given by Dekleva’s paradox. If we stay within the context of the paradox, it is no surprise that Dekleva’s 1995 book of sonnets would have the title *Šepavi soneti* [Limping Sonnets].¹ The title *Šepavi soneti* is, of course, ironic. The sonnet, from its very beginnings, is the most demanding and precise poetic form, and *limping* is hardly the quality that would be required by the strict science of sonnetology.

¹ Dekleva published another collection between *Preseženi človek* and *Šepavi soneti* which was called *Kvantaški stibi* [Filthy Verses], a collection of soft eroticism in which the light, voluble and, shall we say, licentious spirit of the poetic nature was given free rein.

Contrary to what we might be implied by the two words in the title, Dekleva's poetry is not about the avant-garde and modernist destruction of the sonnet. It is not even a parody of the sonnet: which is to say, it is not a settling of accounts with classical tradition, with literary or national ideology, the beautiful and sublime as the privileged theme of sonneteers. To the contrary: the poet's relationship to tradition is respectful. Nevertheless, he cannot avoid its problematization with or, more precisely, the revision of poetic canon. And yet there is a basic difference between destruction and revision (the latter lovingly done in Dekleva's poetry).

The basis of destruction – the act of destruction itself and the establishment of the subject that is the destroyer – can be *novum* (for example, within literature, the avant-garde project of the liberated word, the salvation of traditional semantics, linguistic conventions, motif-thematic stereotypes etc.), and many times the destructive action is guided by blind negative passion without a positive program, the pure pleasure of destruction, the imaginary absolute freedom of the absolute subject. The poetics of destruction has performed an important function within literature and art, in general. Without it, there would have been no literary modernism, no revolution of the poetic self, no breaks with tradition. The difficulties begin when there are no objects of negation or they begin to repeat themselves. With contemporary Slovenian poetry, the most obvious example of that sort of stubborn revival of the *already seen* can be found in authors who are unable to reflect on their own (ultra)modernist praxis. The absence of self-reflection results in poetic dogmatism and stubborn persistence to the end. Such liberty is no longer liberating but belongs in the historical genre of lost illusions.

The story of Dekleva's poetic persistence and sonnetistic revisionism is an entirely different one.

The core formulations and aphorisms in *Preseženi človek* sounded like the articulation of mature poetic-philosophical wisdom, practice, and strength acquired during long years of dealing with language and its traps. Dekleva's *Preseženi človek* meant the unified synthesis of philosophical thought and poetic imagination, but at the same time his sayings, having come to the very edge of poetic text, beg the question – on both the practical and theoretical level – of *where* to go now and *how* to get there.

The move to *Šepavi soneti* is above all a return to poetry in a more voluble form. The existential-philosophical dimension that was outlined in *Preseženi človek* remains more or less unchanged - that which has been outlived will not be outlived again. In short, what Dekleva expressed on the poetic-philosophical level in his terse sayings is reprised in the *Šepavi soneti* with more sensuous, graphic, and linguistic opulence. The only caveat is that they came at a time when the artistic criteria for the Slovenian sonnet were considerably heightened. Here I am thinking in particular of Milan Jesih, one of Dekleva's generational cohorts, and his 1989 *Soneti* [Sonnets] and 1993 *Soneti drugi* [Other sonnets], which represented one of the most important chapters in recent Slovenian poetry.

Jesih's poems, consistently written in the sonnet form, most often tell the story of a melancholy man who nostalgically, and often cheerfully, looks through the evening window and gives himself over to memories, imagination, and meditative travels in near and far countries and times. In the forefront of Jesih's sonnets is the living world of the first-person Self, his hopes, fears, obsessions and longings that only rarely reach beyond the private sphere. Dekleva's *Šepavi soneti*, on the other hand, are driven by the dramaturgy of the depersonalized or pluralist lyric voice (almost never the first person singular). The book attempts to put into words a more universal experience that transcends the otherwise dramatic, yet nonetheless coherent, world of the first-person heart.

In Jesih, as in Dekleva, the subject is not some hard and immutable substance. Jesih's sonnets know a whole pallet of different narrating selves that assume various existential attitudes, and yet this plurality is facilitated by the poetic self as the most credible instance of an anthropomorphic and anthropocentric world. In contrast, Dekleva's poetry avoids precisely that sort of conception. Indeed, he problematizes it. In *Šepavi soneti*, the self - either as the lyrical self or as an empirical person - only rarely reveals itself as pure (self)presence. What remains is only a metaphor covered by a web of diverse languages:

Masters know when they honour things
and remain silent. But if the things dismiss them,
they obtain their voice and metaphor:
the self.

This element of Dekleva's poetry, which is foreign to the (otherwise masterly) work of Jesih's modern "intimism", is expressed in one of the sayings in *Preseženi človek*: "The battle for metaphysics is over, the battle for the metaphysical has begun." (No. 51). Dekleva's story about how the sonnets became limping is above all a story about the lost centre and thus the decenteredness of man. The battle *for* metaphysics takes place *within* metaphysics; it is the battle of one metaphysics against another metaphysics. It is the *gigantomahia* of great narratives, announced by postmodern prophets, as their "end" has run its course. (These voices were especially loud in the 1980s and 1990s.) This doesn't mean that the "old" metaphysical questions no longer exist or that they have been resolved. Indeed, the "end of grand narratives", which is constantly being predicted may sooner or later transform into one grand Narrative. The key significance is the changing context - from the battle for metaphysics to the battle for the metaphysical. Dekleva's context, especially if we consider his poetic opus as a whole, is quite clear. It is a poetic dialog with philosophy and the "anti-metaphysical" or at least the "post-metaphysical" ideas of Martin Heidegger - we encounter them, for example, in a poem in *Zapriseženi prah* entitled "Parable on the Journey of Martin Heidegger" - and an effort to unite these ideas with traditional "old" eastern philosophies, above all Daoism. On the poetic level, it is a question about the transition of the battle for metaphysics to the battle for the metaphysical, which is primarily a question about the poetic articulation of this transition. Namely: what will a poem about the metaphysical be like if it doesn't want to be a poem about metaphysics? Or put another way: what is the poetic correlation for the transition from metaphysics to the metaphysical? Is a poem about metaphysics - about its contemporary destiny and truth as an attempt to reflect post-metaphysical thought - a poem about the metaphysical?

One of the most famous Daoist sayings written by Lao Zi goes like this: "The Dao that is voiced / is no longer that of eternal Dao./ The name that has been written / is no longer that of the eternal name." This concise four-line statement about paradox is also a matter for poetry. If we say that the Dao (in European traditions it might also be called the Absolute) cannot be voiced, that it cannot be named, that speech

itself questions what it utters, then it follows that there is certain knowledge about which we are supposed to know nothing. In this case, there is no error in logic. When we refute the truth of our own speech, we graphically illustrate both the impossibility and the transcendent power of language: to articulate something that escapes articulation in language. Dekleva's poetic persistence is therefore the persistence of paradox - of structural openness, of uttering the unutterable, of the irreducible tension between *yes* and *no*, between the arsenal of poetic armaments and the remoteness of the land that must be conquered, between the paucity of language and the evasive grandeur of what needs to be said. This sort of intention - "that we still try to perfect this Poem" or to paraphrase Mallarmé's *Book to end all books* "to utter the Word" - is filled with solemn and fateful pathos, and poetic (auto)mythology. Dekleva is, like all serious poets, the heir to this tradition, except that his own *a priori* orientation toward the Word is strengthened by humorous alienating effects that, far from diminishing the credibility and commitment, prevents its fetishization and consequently its unreflective, self-satisfied, and solipsistic poetic stance. Poetry will always have to do with "perfecting the poem", except that when the effort takes place in our time, adds Dekleva, it is worthy of both admiration and laughter. It is no longer the self-evident assumption of each poetic enterprise.

Dekleva is the poet of the "disenchanted world" and is thus linked to "the twilight of the idols" in which not even the Word of the poet, understood in the old metaphysical way, has been spared. And yet Dekleva's "battle for metaphysics" refers to that dimension of the poetic project that is not subject to historicity: which is to say that it does not participate in the history of metaphysics and its attack on vulgar temporality, but is instead part of a different primordial time. But as Dekleva writes in *Šepavi soneti*, "that which we are, we once were". Man's sameness within different exposures of historical time resides above all in the space between birth and death, in the persistence of the eternal *here*. To the extent that poetry is one of the most exposed kinds of speech, it bears witness to the radical exposure of human existence: not in the sense of "to be or not to be", but to be, how much to be, always in the circle of not-being. "What is will be forever measured by what is not." (*Šepavi soneti*, II).

The most notable characteristic of *Šepavi soneti* is the interweaving of various linguistic strategies and levels along with the use of humorous and often slightly ironic asides and insertions. This practice is true of Dekleva's poetry in general and the insertions perform a somewhat alienating function, entering the work at the least expected moment. Usually they followed a philosophical-reflexive passage, and grand and weighty words dripping with the patina of fatefulness. Likewise, the solemnity of Dekleva's meditation is often interrupted by linguistic-melodic games and often by the invasion of the trivial. This kind of synthesis has two results: first, the nearly musical atmosphere of rhythmical silences, jumps and retreats; and on the other side, what I have already called sonnetistic revisionism. This is not an issue of only adopting the sonnet form and its formal (verse) standards of poetry writing. *Šepavi soneti* poetically embodies above all the fundamental ambivalence of the situation of literature in a desacralized world - in the sense of Pirjevec's ideas about the ambiguity of poetry that "touches everything and commits to nothing".

During ancient times, poetry had the magical power to create worlds through the naming of things, a power that was revitalized by the project of romantic poetry as "progressive universal poetry" or "new mythology" (to cite the well-known program of the German romantics). Though this power has been lost today, that does not render poetry inconsequential. The actual position of poetry, as it is recorded in *Šepavi soneti*, is mixed: on the one hand, it is already inscribed with the awareness of its own "end", its exhaustion, and its declining world-making power ("We have reached the zenith"); and on the other hand, the nearness to the "end" introduces the possibility of something new, of a different beginning.

Of course, Dekleva's poetry does not want - and cannot - offer some sort of redemptive model or answer. But that he persists in his ambivalent position, committed to his "concern for the immense" as he puts it in *Panični človek*, contributes to the preservation of the world as an open structure. It prevents the circle from being closed. It opens up the world and with it, poetic speech, as a *possibility*. "The world is unbearably perfect, / like the imperfect verb to be." (*Šepavi soneti*, III).

Perhaps Dekleva's insistence on limping, his trump card so to speak, allows him to resist the seductive temptations of

the light-footed Prophets and their pathos-filled, unreflected, prophetic passion. Despite this - or perhaps precisely because of it - *Šepavi soneti* only limps in the title.

* * *

A year after *Šepavi soneti*, a new paired book came out: *Jezičava rapsodija / Improvizacije na neznano temo* (1996). The work contains two stand-alone poetic collections that are externally similar to each other. In each collection, there are fourteen cantos united by their linguistic agility and their effort to detect an image of the (post)modern world outside the context of subjectivism and anthropocentrism. The cantos are written from a perspective that is made possible by the figure of Dekleva's "outlived man". *Twentieth Century*, the outstanding 1976 film made by Bernardo Bertolucci, attempted to capture the splendour and squalor of the twentieth century using an idiom of flickering images. Dekleva's book, with a little bit of cross-genre audacity, functions as a sort of poetic twin to Bertolucci's magnificent cinematic fresco. The difference is that Dekleva - according to the inner logic of the poetic genre - replaces the expansiveness of the film frames with the reflexive intensity of his "impudent rhapsody" and his "improvisations on an unknown theme". The result, written in two great flourishes, is an unusual poetic chronicle of the twentieth century.

"The century began with passion and illusion," he writes at the beginning of the eleventh canto. Somewhat later in the same canto, he writes "human freedom was covered over by arbitrary will". The freedom of arbitrary will, of which Dekleva speaks, is the freedom of man as subject. To be captured in the logos of history (history as a branch of subjectivism if we remain in this conceptual context) does not mean actual freedom but a condition of disposability: disposable people, disposable things, disposable Earth, and in a larger perspective, disposable universe. "For what purpose, these rhapsodists in a decentered world?" Dekleva wonders in the essay that corresponds with the poetics of *Jezičava rapsodija*. When we ask - in connection with poetry or anything else - *for what purpose?* - the question is already a sort of answer. The question is born in an era, the signifier of which is not ecstasy but ripe world-weariness. Dekleva's poetic utterances in *Improvizacije na neznano temo*, for example "the twilight of man" or "the last

poem”, need not be understood in a loud apocalyptic manner which was the manner in which others awaited the then impending end of the millennium. To the contrary, the poetic synthesis of fateful solemnity, ironic undertones, emotional suggestiveness, “impudent top-of-the-line doubt” (fourth canto), and jazzy syncopation, all of which has come to be known as typically Deklevian, tells the story about “how long it takes man / to get used to the miraculous” (fifth canto). Dekleva’s other name for the miraculous is “the will to be”. At the end of the thirteenth canto, Dekleva adds in his lucid and paradoxical manner: “the will to be here forever and never again.”

Jezikava rapsodija / Improvizacije na neznano temo was followed by a long period of poetic silence (long only in relation to the otherwise intense rhythm of Dekleva’s publication of poetry collections after 1978). The question of whether this silence was the consequence of a poetic dilemma, the need to reflect on the path behind and look for answers to the future – where to go and how to get there – or whether it represented the poet’s temporary retreat into fiction (after 1997, Dekleva published three novels and three collections of short stories) and essay writing (*Gnezda in katedrala*, [Nests and cathedrals] in 1997; *O trnu in roži*, [About the Thorn and the Rose] in 2003) will remain an open one. Whatever the case may be, Dekleva published five poetry collections in the years from 1990 to 1996 and went through a number of poetic registers in these books: the philosophical-reflexive voice of *Panični človek*; the attempt to return to the beginning of western thought to the extent that it could be captured by the “fictitious” voice of Anaximander; the lapidary, aphoristic sayings of *Preseženi človek*, a condensation of poetic wisdom; and *Kvantaški stibi*, a lively afternoon snack, a pleasant rest on the way to *Šepavi soneti* in which we discover the synthesis of Dekleva’s various poetic faces. The collection *Jezikava rapsodija / Improvizacije na neznano temo* was a return to reflective thought, though this time not of the monastic-ascetic variety but of the rhapsodic-impudent variety which was perhaps demanded by civilization’s overbearing ripeness and, not least, the symbolic arrival of the turn of the millennium. The year 2000 was, even in the planetary context, a symbol of ending, rupture and (again) a new beginning. Like each new beginning, it was also the beginning of the unknown, and it is certainly no coincidence that the genre within which the word

about the unknown would seek its image would be precisely an improvisation (on an unknown theme).

As for Dekleva's poetry after the turn of the century (today we talk about it in fragments, in so-called "live" commentary), it seems that now that all the travel in diverse directions is behind him, he is once again giving privilege to the idiom of silence. His own experience of travelling to different worlds, both human and trans-human, is made intimate. "What matters is the emotion / that nearly cauterizes metaphysics," is, for example, clearly stated in the 2001 collection *Glej medicno cvetne čaše, kako se razpira* [Look at how the pelvis of the flower opens]. The quoted (programmatic?) lines are from the poem "A simple man went into the world"; this is a poem about "a simple man" who went into the world and is now returning home. Almost certainly, it is written from the perspective of Dekleva's own poetic journey. But the story, as Dekleva narrates it, is not entirely simple. The result is not the poetics of intimacy or even a return to the good old emotions of unmediated lyricism, but a reflection on the intimate as it is possible at the intersection of home and the world, at the intersection of the time of the future and the time of the past. In the quoted collections from 2001, all of the poems are in the second person. The second person introduces a distance between the lyrical voice and what the poem speaks about. In this case, however, it is the voice of the modern soliloquist: modern because the speaking self (the self as metaphor as it was said in *Šepavi soneti*) can speak of itself only in the manner of addressing the other within the self, and about this self (and other) as an open possibility, as a story about *you*, the most familiar stranger in the ceaseless domestication of your own home the uncertain certainty of your world, your people and the things that exist in it. Yet the tangibility of the present, the immediacy of dwelling here and now, between the indeterminate yesterday and the unknown tomorrow is above all "a form of the infinitive", knowing about (not) knowing. This is what the last stanza of the poem "Sky, dusty ecstasy" speaks about:

What a dusty ecstasy, to be the proprietor of an illusion
of what's behind,
a chimera of what's ahead,
and in between to be a form of the infinitive, the past
delivered to the present.

The collection *Sosledja* [Sequences], which came out the same year as *Glej medenico cvetne čaše, kako se razpira*, has a pre-history in Dekleva's prose. This collection was already referred to in the introductory pages of Dekleva's 1997 novel *Oko v zraku* [Eye in the Air], and specifically in the sentence uttered by the novel's main character, Professor Vladimir who explains why - "after the rise and fall of the student movement that unravelled like a black-wave film, a movement which, understandably, deeply touched my emotional and intellectual biography" - he began to write poetry. Professor Vladimir also mentions that he is writing a cycle or rather a "network" of poems with the working title *Sosledja*. And because he is a professor, he makes this explanation in poetological terms and at the same time that he explains his poetry - he is a professor after all - he speaks also of the inadequacy of explanation, interpretation, and the valuation of poetry at all. The novel is a work not only about Dekleva's "poetic paradox", but also a glimpse at the dilemma of any explanatory talk of poetry. The point of the poet/professor's words about poetry is that an explanation cannot touch poetry as poetry and "thus the artistic work is thrown into the growing chaos of the world". Only the poetic work itself can provide a proper response. Is it not necessary, asks Professor Vladimir, to respond to the chaos with "a creative game, a series of poems that speaks about touching things and will arrange the world anew? That will weave and unweave it into a network of poems with no borders?" After which in the novel, like a kind of introduction to the events, comes the "professor's" poem "Dead man". This poem, of course, is reprinted a few years later in Dekleva's collection of poetry, *Sosledja*. What is essential about this collection has already been said (in the manner of postmodernist-metafictional discourse) by its authors, Professor Vladimir and the poet Dekleva, so I only make the following observation: the poems are for the most part in the first person singular, but this first person is a consequence of things speaking for themselves, things such as stones, door-knobs, hands, eyes, evening, reason, bread, book, swamp, and, at the very end, the Grail.

Things speaking with their own voice?

Yes, though even this voice does not redeem the uncertainty of (self)naming, the gap between the things themselves

and the names for them, and lastly between the silence of things and their ability to speak when given voice by a poet. The first stanza of the poem entitled "Grail" (in the manner of the first-person of doubt and, not least, the doubting first person) speaks precisely of a possible meeting between words and things, speaks about it as if it were already a failed meeting. Thus it presents the possibility or, better yet the necessity, of a new search:

Perhaps I am a singularity.
 A perfect illusion. Perhaps.
 But I am, ecce homo!
 How will you find me?

The 2003 book, *V živi zob* [Into the living tooth], is Dekleva's most recently published collection of poetry. We first encounter the eponymous phrase in one of the poems where the first person - and now it is no longer a speaking *thing* but, if I may use the term, a traditional poetic self, a situation rarely found with Dekleva - speaks of the search "against the self, into the living tooth". It is immediately clear that this is a search for reconciliation that can never really end and because of this we find a relatively large number of reversals, oxymorons, expressions of lasting difference and non-identity, the unease that accompanies the traveller into the distance. "Unease, unease / is the distance of travellers," Dekleva says at the beginning of the poem "The Distance of Travellers". Travellers are "addicted to distance", and the question that opens before their addiction, is of course the question of the *right* way. Will their choice be right, or will their choice drive them toward the *distance*? As always, the answer in Dekleva's poems falls within the context of his poetic paradox and directions into the unknown. In other words, it is as clear as the black night: "That's not the right / way, the thought occurs to them, // but it is wandering, good fortune."

* * *

In the beginning there was not the word; there was silence. And immediately afterwards: the word about silence. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that one of Dekleva's newest, (for now) last, and as yet unpublished poem is as follows:

snow falls. the land fills with silence.
our attentiveness fills with silence.

a rabbit runs across the silence.
its tiny prints remain behind,
traces of God's paws.

In the end there will be no word; there will be silence. And before that: the word about silence. And tiny footprints across a winter landscape. A winter scene or a trace of the Unknown searching for the name of a future poem?

Milan Dekleva's bio-bibliography

Matevž Kos

Poet, fiction writer, and essayist, Milan Dekleva, was born on October 17, 1946 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He graduated from the University of Ljubljana in comparative literature and literary theory. He has taught music, worked as a journalist, and now serves as an editor at Slovene national TV. He was a member of the Salamander music group and has composed music for theatre. He writes poetry and prose for children, television scripts, and literary and musical journalism. He has received the most prestigious national awards for his poetry, fiction, and essays.

Poetry collections

Mushi mushi, 1971

Dopisovanja, 1978

Nagovarjanja, 1979

Pesmi za lačne sanjavce (for children), 1981

Narečje telesa, 1984

Zapriseženi prah, 1987

Odjedanje božjega, 1988

Panični človek, 1990

Preseženi človek, 1992

Kvantaški stihi, 1994

Šepavi soneti, 1995

Jezikava rapsodija / Improvizacije na neznano temo, 1996

Alica v računalniku, 2000

Glej medenico cvetne čaše, kako se razpira, 2001

Sosledja, 2001

V živi zob, 2003

Fiction

- Oko v zraku, 1997 (novel)
Pimlico, 1998 (novel)
Reševalec ptic, 1999 (short stories)
Zmagoslavje podgan, 2005 (novel)
Izkušnje z daljavo, 2006 (short stories)

Essays

- Gnezda in katedrale, 1997
O trnu in roži, 2003

Plays

- Zgodba o Ferdinandu, staged 1978
Sla boeme (musical comedy), staged 1981
Sanje o rdeči češnji (puppet play), staged 1982
Magnetni deček (also included Sanje o govoreči češnji, both are plays for children, staged 1982, Sanje o govoreči češnji was also a radio play 1985), 1985
Lenča flenča (also included Zveza diamantnega čuka, staged 1989), 1991
Igra o strašnem volku, staged 1991
Vonj po mrtvecih, staged 1991
Totalka odštekan dan (musical for children), 1992
Bučka na Broodwayu (musical for children), 1993
Igra na vrhu (political canaret), 1993
1821 (with Mojca Kranjc and Alja Predan), 1985, staged 1999
1928 (Izza kongresa), with Mojca Kranjc and Alja Predan, 1985, staged 1999/2000 at MGL
Od ena do nič, puppet play, 1999
Plitvina, 2003
Trije prašičji prašički, staged 2006

Children's literature

Ob devetnajstih zjutraj 1985
Totalka odštekan dan, 1992
Bučka na Broodwayu, 1993
A so kremšnite nevarne, 1997
Virus za smeh, 1997
Naprej v preteklost, 1997
Kako so nastale ZDA, 1998
Rahlo pegaste sanje, 2003

TV scripts

Peta hiša na levi, familiy comedy, 1999
Naj ostane med nami, 2000

Translations into foreign languages

English, Italian, German, Spanish, Russian, Czech, Slovakian,
Croatian, Serbian, and other languages.

Awards

Prešeren Fund Award 1989, Župančič Award from the City of
Ljubljana 1990, Jenko Poetry Award 1991, Rožanc Award for
Best Non-Fiction Book 1999, Babič Award 2000, Veronika
Poetry Award 2003, Kresnik Novel Award 2006, Prešeren
Award for Lifetime Achievement 2006.