

# The Mystery of the Subject

FOREWORD BY DAVID BANDELJ

## A brief history of verse

Traditional Slovenian literary criticism has always associated the name Milan Jesih with the phrase *poetic modernism*. Viewed strictly from the perspective of literary science, this claim is justified, for Jesih's first poetry collection, *Uranium in the Urine, Master! (Uran v urinu, gospodar!, 1972)* continues the *apparent* ludism of Tomaž Šalamun. "Apparent" because ludism was not the artistic *credo* of the so-called modernists but merely a formal basis enabling the mimicry of the subject, a feature which was to become highly personalized in Jesih's writing. The history of Jesih's verse in fact spans a remarkable evolution or, in the words of Matevž Kos,<sup>1</sup> a sequence of poetic metamorphoses.

Janko Kos<sup>2</sup> suggested that Jesih belonged to the same generation as, for example, Ivo Svetina, but to a different type of poetry. According to Kos, Jesih's starting point is "poetic playfulness," and his collections show a largely modernist orientation toward an alogical flow of surprising associations and phrases: a flow which at the same time draws on a parody of the poetic tradition.

Jesih's second collection, *Legends (Legende, 1974)*, already manifests an elaboration on modernist techniques and thus assumes a transitional role: the line gains in length and narrativity, thus paving the way for the twin summits of Jesih's

1 Matevž Kos: "Sonet kot forma prebolevanja vsakdanjosti." [The Sonnet as a Form of Recovering from Daily Routine.] *Fragmenti o celoti*. Ljubljana: LUD Literatura (Novi Pristopi Series), 2007. 153–169.

2 Janko Kos: *Pregled slovenskega slovstva*. [A Survey of Slovenian Literature.] Ljubljana: DZS, 1992. 377–378.

modernism, the collections *Cobalt* (*Kobalt*, 1976) and *Tungsten* (*Volfram*, 1980). With these, Jesih's energetic modernism peters out, and five years later his poetic composition is transformed in the collection *Lips* (*Usta*, 1985). If the subject of the first two collections invites identification with the author, the subject of *Lips* shakes off all subjective categories, searching for his place in pure poetry. In addition, the line of verse shortens: Matevž Kos<sup>3</sup> considers *Lips* a collection of poetic miniatures.

The peak of Jesih's writing, according to traditional literary criticism, occurs in the 1990s, which saw the publication of his *Sonnets* (*Soneti*, 1989) and *Sonnets the Second* (*Soneti drugi*, 1993). The regularity of their form and their connection to the France Prešeren tradition make Jesih a postmodernist who has successfully employed classic structures to exploit the range of possibilities inherent in the Slovenian language. The two sonnet books became popular and were widely read, perhaps partly due to the tradition of the Prešeren sonnet, which had been elegantly transplanted to the present in Jesih's approach. One of Jesih's distinctive features, according to Boris Paternu,<sup>4</sup> is that his poetry is not self-sufficient; rather, he is fully open to looking back, to the national poetic tradition, even to its best known and most brilliant classics. It is this tradition that he alludes to and blends into an innovative configuration. The same association continues in *Iambics* (*Jambi*, 2000), but this apparent structural rigidity in fact charges his language with even more meaning, which is why Jesih is considered a master of language in Slovenian poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Boris Paternu: "Jesih v klasiki." [Jesih among the Classics.] *Od ekspresionizma do postmoderne*. Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1999. 204–216.

Two subsequent anthologies, *Verses* (Verzi, 2002) and *Poems* (Pesmi, 2006), were followed in 2007 by the collection *So to Say* (*Tako rekoč*). *So to Say* inaugurates a type of composition which seeks, less gravely and with great harmony and elegance, a narrative mode—a mode which makes poetry a pure delight.

Continuing the trend of *So to Say*, the collection *Hundredtown* (*Mesto sto*, 2007), slightly more provocative but just as ironic, sets to verse the details of an imaginary town and its (petit) bourgeois life. And the latest collection, *Couldbe* (*Lahkoda*, 2013), is an elaboration of the poet's search for and omission of the subject in various tones, ranging from more to less serious. What preponderates is again a polished verse form.

This brief sketch is the history of Jesih's poetry as seen by mainstream Slovenian literary criticism. A minute examination of details, however, yields still another image of the poet and his work.

### **The subject: all or nothing**

For the attentive reader, the most striking feature of Milan Jesih's poetry is the gradual withdrawal of the subject. Rather than a diachronic development from one collection to another, this is a result of the author's intention ever since *Cobalt*. If the subject of his debut collection, *Uranium in the Urine, Master!*, is heavily involved in daring and subversive poetic utterances, which literally "hit" the reader with their apparent playfulness, the subject of *Legends* takes to hiding in visionary and oneiric images. At this point we may stop to examine the *ludism* label attached to Jesih's poems, which can hardly be read as a mere

toying with poetry. Certainly, Peter Kolšek's<sup>5</sup> afterword to Jesih's *Verses* remarks on the larger meaning of ludism: it is a daring, at times traumatic, counter-ideological campaign which breaks down both old ramparts and new barricades. This is certainly a more appropriate portrayal of the Slovenian ludism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet Jesih's ludist phase soon peters out, and the *novum* of the two subsequent collections, *Cobalt* and *Tungsten*, is that they embark on the annihilation of the subject—a futile task because the poet himself admits<sup>6</sup> that the subject is not so easily annihilated: “Of course it's fine with me that my poem is not told from my own viewpoint, but it's not enough, I want it to be told from nobody's viewpoint. If it could be done.”

The collections *Cobalt* and *Tungsten* bear eloquent titles: both refer to metals which are at once harder than iron and very brittle. Similar features mark the two collections. Both were printed in landscape orientation because the lines of verse became progressively longer. This extension brings, of course, an abundance of material which poses a challenge to the reader. On the other hand, the intrusion of “sentiment and melancholy”<sup>7</sup> speaks against a total adherence to modernist ideology which is eager to break from the past. In fact, Jesih's quest leans toward absorbing the past in his own poetry and recasting it with means of expression more suitable to this day and age.

*Cobalt* segues into a discourse on the art of poetry, on the

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kolšek: “Podobar in podoba.” [The Painter and the Painting.] Milan Jesih: *Verzi*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga (Knjižnica Kondor), 2001. 203–226.

<sup>6</sup> Tina Kozin: “Tri besede (Milan Jesih, intervju).” [Three Words (Milan Jesih: an interview).] *Literatura XXIV* / 247–248, January–February 2012. 88–102.

<sup>7</sup> Matevž Kos, op. cit.

creation of worlds through poetry, on the truth or fictionality of poetic utterances. The poet (or his subject) seems to have reached a phase when he is intensely questioning his activity. Poetry turns into a string of images embedded in the safety of the verse, but the latter has no authority because the poet is continually testing its endurance. The images which superficially smack of modernism subtly express the predicament of the poem which tries to become the pure reflection of its self.

The ruminating quest continues throughout the collection, and certain flashes suggest that not all that glitters is gold—or to paraphrase . . . not all that is brittle is cobalt. Jesih's quest for expression is firmly rooted in the past; he seeks to give these roots a contemporary appearance, to sever the poem from himself, but this venture is by no means a facile or simple one. Rather, it springs from carefully considered choices, from his creative *métier* and bold decisions. If his *Cobalt* of 1976 claims: "It's not true that I call things by false names" and thus avoids fictionality at all costs, a more recent interview states: "[. . .] the poem is always smarter than the writer. There may come along a fine opening line in the first person, and then it's up to you to struggle with it."<sup>8</sup>

Thus Jesih is revealed as an author who in *Cobalt* embarked on an earnest search for the truth about himself, the world, and the act of creation. Nearly forty years later he realized that poetry was essentially the result of carefully considered choices. But the road that led to this insight enabled him to renounce the subject (at least in principle): the subject who, in Slovenian poetry, by definition both suffers and enjoys the fruits of his suffering.

<sup>8</sup> Tina Kozin, op. cit.

The subject who is dead serious but converted by Jesih into an ironic *flâneur*, drifting through society. The subject who is capable of saying in the first phase of his quest: “What is said to you by the unknown in an unknown tongue is said to me by the known in a known tongue,” thus setting a boundary for his quest. The subject’s tongue turns and twists until another collection emerges, *Tungsten*. Here the subject’s gradual *alienation* progresses in harmony with the preceding collection. Jesih begins by writing: “I am not I, I am a knife, I am a whip, I am a cry, I am rice, the water of silence, thick, imperturbable, I am the way and the sweat of the way.” This entails renunciation of the poetic *persona* in the interest of the language and the images created in it. The effect becomes more varied and frequent in *Tungsten*. But among the lines we may find occasional orientation markers for the reader (and perhaps author), showing the path they are currently treading. Thus Jesih sometimes returns to the issue of selfhood in poetry:

*The chasm of sky, beneath it, above it, a man’s—  
my—thin silhouette; on my way to myself? Oh.*

[...]

*Halfway up the slope I stop, halting in midthought.  
Knowing? Seeking? On my way to myself? Oh.*

Such formulations make Jesih’s poetry a modern (or—according to literary criticism—modernist) reflection on his current activity. The “right way” of poetry and the (il)legitimacy of the subject in this approach are no longer an issue; what emerges is a natural progression of events which reflect the state of the

writing subject. An important issue is mastery over what has been written, a feature prominent in both—closely related—collections. The road to poetry's independence is a long one, and the author is aware of it. He jots down the images almost automatically, within the frames of a form which adapts itself to these images. These running notes are accompanied by occasional self-reflections which define poetry in *Cobalt* and *Tungsten* as a long meditation on poetics. A surprising kind of auto-poetics. A reflection on what has been created—or, better yet, awakened.

Jesih's two "metal" collections are thus simply a road leading to the future through the past: a past which the author strives to leave behind but which increasingly becomes entwined in his text. This is achieved not only through numerous references but, above all, through the atmosphere evoked by a string of images, which are sometimes tinged with expressionism and imbued with a sense of the tragic.

Yet *Cobalt* and *Tungsten* were not enough. The ocean of verse lines (the longest lines in the history of Slovenian poetry, according to Peter Kolšek)<sup>9</sup> is fragile for all its solidity; to achieve a subjectless utterance would require lips speaking on their own. This image comes in handy in the next collection with a telling title: *Lips*.

After the arduous quest of *Cobalt* and *Tungsten*, the poet reappears with a considerably shorter verse form, renounces the first-person subject, and definitively ends his phase of extreme linguistic exuberance by adopting simple, almost rudimentary language material.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Kolšek, op. cit.

Henceforth the poetry speaks for itself as Jesih retreats. The poet is only detected in the ingenuity of miniature flashes which are born of relativity, or in his masterful play with language. The withdrawal of the first-person subject is important not just because poetry thus meets irony, but also because the poet strips the long verse line, laden with meaning, of those elements which are related to the subject and therefore redundant. The meaning remains, as do certain reflections that touch on his timeless poetological theme. Some poems are thus subjectless but still clearly express their writer's intention:

*How do poets write  
when they turn blue:  
with needlelike letters  
they touch*

*the sky  
till blood comes*

In addition to the line shortening and the (at least apparent) absence of the subject, a distinctive feature of *Lips* is the enhanced polyphony of Jesih's idiom. *Lips* is an intermediary stop where the train of Jesih's creativity pulls up to reflect on its way forward. It is no coincidence that the book comes just before *Sonnets*, the collection which crystallizes Jesih's poetic idiom, for it is only by attaining his shortest possible verse form that he can move on, step onto the path of the defined iambic meter which finally establishes him as a full-fledged poet. *Lips* concludes with a well-founded doubt as to what may come next:

*A slip of a verse  
is crossing the field,  
leaving a still  
track in the grass.*

*Will anyone follow it here, so far,  
with what hope?*

This question is not addressed to the audience but to the poet himself. And the answer will only emerge four years later, in *Sonnets*, followed by *Sonnets the Second*.

With this, the subject disappears for good. Henceforth Jesih's poetry speaks for itself; the sonnet is chosen because of its link to the past—not merely the historical but the creative past. Here begins Jesih's language metamorphosis, which emerges out of tradition and returns to it, having sought on all previous forays the kind of poetic realization that would prove most suitable for our time. Instead of a *subject*, the floor is taken by a *speaker*.

### **Sonnets, a chapter unto itself**

Although they are an integral part of Jesih's process of withdrawal, his sonnets require a separate chapter because it is here that his idiom, form, and maturity of content become fully established. Both of his sonnet collections have been minutely examined by literary scholarship and given favorable reviews, reviews testifying to their role not only in the author's personal development as a poet but in the context of Slovenian poetry as

a whole. To cite some examples: Denis Poniž<sup>10</sup> concisely notes that Jesih's sonnets, which give voice to the poet's "journey" through real and imagined landscapes, contain an uncommon wealth of words, brightly colored contrasts, metaphorical turns, allusions to other poets, a postmodern blend of the most diverse impressions, perceptions, and visions. The phrase "the sonnet as a form of recovering from modernity" coined by Matevž Kos<sup>11</sup> clearly establishes that Jesih's sonnets approach the postmodernist experience of poetry and its tradition.

It was precisely characterizations such as these that led to the perception of Jesih's sonnets as postmodernist attempts to verbalize the world. True, in the late 1980s and early 1990s *Sonnets* certainly displayed an evident *zeitgeist* power, fusing with the postmodernist "model" which had emerged in Slovenian literary scholarship. But of equal importance is the autonomy of the author who has gathered in his sonnets the prestigious tradition of this verse form. The Slovenian sonnet blossomed with Prešeren and went on to be adopted by a number of Slovenian poets (even recent ones), who sought either to create their own versions of it or to adopt it as a classic form, a reference to the past, in their desire to establish artistic continuity and poetic excellence. Jesih's contribution to the sonnets centers on content rather than form. His form is impeccable, of course, but the real shift happens at the inner, subject-matter level: the confessions of the subject, who has been sought (or rather lost) in the previous collections, are transformed into the narrative

<sup>10</sup> Denis Poniž: "1990–2000." *Beseda se vzdiguje v dim. Stoletje slovenske lirike 1900–2000*. [The Word Rises Up in Smoke: A Century of Slovenian Lyric Poetry 1900–2000.] Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2002. 269–281.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit.

of a voice which creates and renews landscapes from the past. To this end Jesih employs quotations as well, but without an artificial or constrained effect; they result from his poetic practice, an ecstatic flood of words that takes a different shape for each poet. Of his alleged postmodernism and the use of quotations associated with it, Jesih says:

*[W]ords like to flock together: once I've ferreted out the first ones, the rest will come of their own accord; I fire a signal rocket to call together the more desirable ones, with the right hair colors and finer measurements and a scandalous past and all their wear and tear and all that defines them, and then they parade on the catwalk like models and body-builders while I choose or reject them [...]. At first I was a bit wary of quotations but adopted them all the same; when I read how typical they were of postmodernism, something I must have overlooked before, I began to reject them but then accepted them again, thinking There's no harm in that, if they want me to be a postmodernist I'll settle for it, what the hell, the poem won't be any better or worse for it.<sup>12</sup>*

Jesih's speaker is a narrator and painter. A narrator because the sonnets are largely characterized by discourse that is descriptive and unhurriedly rhythmical, presenting a landscape of words which coalesces into an image. But he is a visual artist as well (Kolšek<sup>13</sup> calls him a "painter" after one of his poems, "The painter and the painting") for the sonnets display a vivid visual

<sup>12</sup> Tina Kozin, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit.

element in their choice of metaphors. Far from being hermetic, these are clear and open, conjuring up an ambience which is interpreted by literary criticism as postmodernist. This quality, however, stems from the poet himself rather than from postmodernism. The setting, the chronotope to which the sonnets are attuned, is a fictional, remote, or not-so-remote past where the action, transplanted to the level of conceptions, slows down. Facts are no longer facts even if they appear as such. They are simply a way of expression which annuls the present and past, entering the *kairos* of poetry.

The imaginary landscape, and thus the imaginary *chronos*-turned-*kairos*, smoothly blends in Jesih's sonnets with the elements described by Boris Paternu<sup>14</sup> as the thematic circles of Jesih's poetry: existential, erotic, and poetological themes.

Despite the speaker in whom we encounter Jesih's "double," *Sonnets* is a brilliant opportunity for Jesih's personal voice to infiltrate his utterances, as it has done in *Lips*. This is performed with quiet elegance. The problems of employing the sonnet in this guise are introduced in the very opening line: "I'm not sure I can utter it at all." Later the subject's—yes, this time there is a subject!—difficulty in expressing himself is touched on in passing: "I haven't faced myself alone and nude." Or he may express his doubt in the *kairos*, which is spatial as well as temporal:

*the world is, I am not: I'm one who lives  
caught between yes and no, distant from it.*

Still other statements may be read as self-disciplining attempts to grasp the poetic materials—statements directing us to the “I” who is the true *subject*, the subject whom Jesih continually attempts to lose but can never fully shake off:

*let me be me: sit small inside the house  
surrounded just by bare necessities.*

Or elsewhere:

*I bloom and belch and shift into reverse;  
what is, is me; whatever lives, I live.*

Another defining feature of Jesih’s sonnets is their variety of language, a polyphonic style that mixes higher and lower registers, Petrarchan verses and slang expressions. The sonnet experiment succeeded (even apart from the fact that *Sonnets* had two reprints) because the poet was able to revolutionize tradition and include it in the contemporary perception of the world, creating a book or, rather, two books which define a major leap in Slovenian poetry from tradition to the present with great artistic sensibility. Therefore Jesih’s form is no superficial appearance or escape but a consistent choice which opens up the language in all directions. Even free verse, after all, can be perceived as a kind of formal choice. *Sonnets* evidently laid out for Jesih the setting of a poetic landscape which he was to continue in his iambs.

### Where do we go from here . . .

In its essence *Iambics* is a collection of modified sonnets, for the poet has given up tercets in order to form poems of four, five, or six quatrains at most (with an occasional sonnet still thrown in) and thus continue down the path taken by the preceding two collections, equipped with a formal feature which will accompany him throughout the years. The mood of the *kairos* from *Sonnets* grows more intimate in *Iambics*. The frequent sonnet metaphors suggesting involvement in public life are reduced, giving way to the theme of being, of existence, which is underlined in most poems. Surprisingly, *Iambics* is hardly embedded in town life at all: there is instead a lot of nature, conjuring up a background of silence which accompanies the observations of Jesih's speaker. These are essentially bitter, melancholy, at times even tragic. It is possible to associate the existential mood radiating from the iambics (or *Iambics*) with the creation of a poetic mood: a mood which might link the world of imaginary facts, such as is found in *Sonnets*, to the world of imaginary emotions. This mood establishes the conditions under which the fictional image of a poetic world, a world such as is articulated by Jesih's speaker, can exist. In *Iambics*, too, some poems are imbued with the poet's spirit, especially those enclosed in parentheses. Some of them explain why the author chooses to create the image of a world which exists only in his thoughts, ideas, dreams:

([. . .] *the sweetness of the blooming linden trees  
does not pass on because I keep it up,  
with choking breath and a suppressed heartbeat.*)

Yet this ethereal, fragile atmosphere is shattered in the next collection, *So to Say*, in its very first lines:

*What I have sharpened still keeps slipping, vague,  
away from me, and seeps into oblivion.*

We are back at the drawing board. Jesih's intentional loss of the subject must continue. The speaker may stay, but the subject must disappear. The parenthesis represented by *Iambics* in the poetic circle of Jesih's writing closes and the subject is sent back into his imposed exile. It is as if the poems sought to awaken a momentary nostalgia for the subject and to test whether the acknowledged and established speaker of *Sonnets* might not at least "impersonate" the latter. The collection *So to Say* again delights in the joy of narrating and the flood of images, which sometimes masterfully interweave with the author's erudition and (reading) experience:

*A second-hand bookshop: last night I leafed  
through reproductions of some painters' works:  
in an Impressionist paysage emerged  
a soldier—tiny, only just perceived . . .*

But hidden clues can be discerned to prove that the text has not been stranded—*so to say*—left without the author's signature. This becomes evident in the following poem:

*The poet's old, and weakness is a daze;  
his hold has loosened and he now assents*

*that things are alien to their names  
because the names have turned to things themselves;*

*no longer luscious beauties of the south,  
the poems are mere skeletons, mere frames,  
he stammers clichés, cries without a sound  
—he who could always sing to please the taste—*

*into a shifting glimpse of trembling lines,  
into a maze of interrogatives;  
what death has pre-elected is his mind  
—and yet the more his wisdom lives,*

*a wisdom that does not build verse, that's true,  
but still lights up the building work itself—  
No shape, no clay, a wire hacked to shreds,  
he hovers in the final customs booth.*

In addition to a pronounced (self) irony, the poem presents the author's reflection on his own work, a reflection ever wavering between despair and joy. In short, Jesih often portrays himself as a keen thinker on technopoetics.

The true twist in the collection, however, comes in its final section where Jesih's speaker confronts one of the themes most frequently addressed in poetry, death. Seemingly lighthearted, this confrontation actually deals with the fear which pervades all living creatures. Yet the poems are surprisingly bright even when they express finiteness, and especially once they have been stripped of the metaphysical nihilism which the poet (or

his speaker) has been skeptical of ever since *Sonnets*. A playful treatment of the death theme occurs, for example, in the following poem from *Sonnets*:

*And yet—again that “yet!”—if up should creep  
the Never-Asking White and ask of me  
if I was ready: “Coming, ball of grease?”*

*“The road is broad, the boss has sent a jeep,”  
I’d answer: “Not right now . . . And, a propos,  
you needn’t fetch me: I can walk alone.”*

The narrative encountered in these poems thus fuses with a major subject-matter of Jesih’s poetry, one which recurs in all of his collections. As passion and the tragedy of existence intertwine in many and varied forms, these two themes may be viewed as genuine companions of Jesih’s work. The doubt about any kind of existence and the quest related to this doubt define the poet as a great seeker of purpose (or Purpose), who is aware that such a search may well lead to tragic ends, such as the void of nothingness. However, Jesih’s doubt is not skeptical but Cartesian, the kind that may shed some light on existence.

These poetic voices, too, reveal the apparent absence of the subject, but the latter keeps intruding—at the very least through the author’s choice of themes.

Thus it comes as a surprise that the collection *Hundredtown* continues the journey without a first-person subject, and that its speaker is a pure narrator. Again it is the town, growing into a large metaphor, which is foregrounded as the chronotope of

action. Under a guise of irony, shallow routine and lack of sentimentality, this poetry cuts to the very core of man's purpose in the world.

The poetry again takes place in the *kairos*, renewing Wittgenstein's covenant to keep the essentials concealed. But in talking about marginal things, Jesih (or his speaker) in fact puts his finger on the primary goal of poetry—revelation:

*A stone in town, what does it do?  
Squats—in the middle of the square, legs crossed—  
alone, defiant, brazen, never moved,  
as if to say: I challenge all your lot.*

The stone metaphor is appropriately used in this context to outline the poet's position in the surrounding world. The collection *Hundredtown* thus reinforces Jesih's role as a builder of worlds and images which define the present in a quasi-realistic manner. Prešeren's eternal dilemma between fear and hope is addressed through a fluctuating poetry which skillfully swings from one existential extreme to the other.

A close encounter with the purpose and "hope" of existence as perceived by Jesih's speaker calls attention to the theme of love. While this theme reaches its apogee in *Sonnets*, it occurs in the earlier and later poems as well, although with slight differences. If the pre-sonnet poems talk about love only indirectly, the sonnets are deeply stamped with surrender to the overwhelming force of love's eternal flame, but this is done in a *hopeful and narrative* manner rather than a *romantic and confessional* one.

The doubt about existence, or the *fear* of it, is redeemed by the *hope* of amorous encounters which bring meaning to the speaker's — and perhaps the poet's — world:

*(if I should doze, o kindly God, then let  
a stranger in a blameless instant find  
that she has raced to meet me in her mind  
and let me dream of her with arms outspread)*

The aspect of time dissolves: the *kairos* of this poetry is the present, the *hic et nunc* moment of erotic ecstasy:

[. . .]  
*two making love in steaming undergrowth.  
A kiss that, being eaten, does not bite;  
a clasp that squeezes but does never choke;  
a night-time meal without a board or knife!*

*Above them lightly stirs a rustling leaf,  
the breeze comes licking sweaty, hot skin dry,  
the time is limpid, clear beyond belief,*

*it is Forever which is called Tonight,  
ubiquitous yet present only there:  
beside the tranquil lake, some time, somewhere.*

Time, a category which is considered everlasting in love, narrows in Jesih's poems to a single moment. A fleeting moment, to be sure, but poetry seems created precisely for the purpose

of arresting this moment, for dispelling any misgivings about the transience of love. In fact, time is love's strongest adversary:

*I still remember tears and rants, the schnapps  
that I—the bloody idiot—went and gulped  
in that hotel room; sickness and disgust,  
the parting note that “she’d be sorry once”—*

*and that is all; and all of it is veiled  
by fogs and vapors from the pulp I’ve read  
and half-baked films and fancies, dead as nails.  
No longer do those hours sear like death*

*—those stumbling hours of searching for the cheat—  
instead they seem benign, like tourist rides:  
museums, parks, the Old Town dear to me,*

*the fountain—how it gushed into the skies!  
How much of memory’s power can remain  
when the first thing to melt down is the pain?*

The flight of time and transience of love are so closely entwined that they may be recognized as the leitmotif of Jesih’s quest in erotic lyric poetry. Eroticism provides no real fulfilment: all that the theme seems to offer is the suggestion that the ecstasy of existence may yet be realized somewhere, but it is burdened with a gnawing doubt which hinders any optimistic view of the future. After *Sonnets*, the theme of love accordingly retreats into the background, resurfacing only at times as a bright,

invigorating reminiscence which nevertheless leaves a deep doubt in its wake. In grappling with the greatest existential dilemmas, Jesih does not turn to love for support: he prefers to reflect on his work, seeking the purpose of the artist's activity.

On the other hand, a close look at the poems clustered around the poetological theme reveals a subtle form of self-redemption. Through his work, Jesih—or the poet/subject/speaker—merges into the structure of the universe and becomes part of the primordial plan which we shall never understand: the plan commonly referred to as fate, god or the like. The immeasurability of Jesih's address to god (or God), which ranges from irony and even sarcasm to deadly earnestness, reflects his multi-faceted confrontation with the world and its illogical logic, a confrontation which is, after all, the arch-origin of all outstanding literature. Therefore the verses meditating on creation are in fact verses written by a *creator*. Seen in this light, they merge with the ancient dictum that says poets create not merely poetry but the universe or world itself. As a poet, Milan Jesih, too, engages in creation to keep fear at bay and to foster hope, a prerequisite for any creative act. This is aptly summarized in the concluding poem of his first sonnet collection, a statement of the poet's urge to articulate and create, which is both natural and inscribed in the universe:

*(I nibbled on my pen the livelong day  
and racked my brain for just one line of verse,  
as if I tried to chirrup down a bird  
to perch on my wide open palm and stay,*

*and nothing still—but when I closed an eye  
and nodded off, dejected, in my seat,  
my doze drew unknown lines from outer dreams  
—of Everything: of Beauty, Truth And Light—*

*they left me gawping, humbled, stricken low  
before a force that slips the waking grasp,  
for in the rose's name there grew a rose*

*and in the sound of “heart” there beat a heart . . .  
Awake, I now recall no theme or word.  
But such a sonnet is, somewhere on earth.)*

It is impossible to sum up an oeuvre that is still in the making. There is no telling how Jesih may surprise us in the future. What is certain is that a poet of his ilk not only possesses an artist's sensibility but also demonstrates the magic of language which comes, goes, and oscillates, while the poet / creator's role is merely to shape it. Sometimes he does it by himself, but sometimes it is the language that does the shaping, the poet being a mere tool in its hands. The dividing line between them is a mystery which remains unknown.

TRANSLATED BY NADA GROŠELJ