

Boris A. Novak

PEEPING THROUGH *THE DOORS OF NO RETURN*

(EPOS)

The Doors of No Return (Vrata nepovrata) are one of the rare epic texts in the world poetry today, and one of the longest ever written – 44.000 verses on 2.300 pages in the original edition of the Slovene publishing house Goga. The epos is divided into three books: the first one is entitled "*Maps of Nostalgia (Zemljevidi domotožja)*" and was published in 2014, the second book, "*The Times of Fathers – Čas očetov*", in 2015, and the third book, ("*Dwelling Places of Souls – Bivališča duš*"), in 2017. Strangely enough, all three books were already several times reprinted, and they have brought to the poet the highest Slovene national award for arts – Presheren's award. This "*poetic madness*" (as the author defined it) has aroused a lot of interest among translators and foreign publishers.

BOOK 3: DWELLING PLACES OF SOULS

Novak's epos *The Doors of No Return (Vrata nepovrata)* ends with the third book entitled *Dwelling places of Souls (Bivališča duš)*. Like the first two books also the third one can be read separately and independantly from the others, but at the same time it concludes the whole of the epos and transfers it to the higher, metaphysical, maybe even religious level. It is the most unusual, original and personal among all three books, although obviously modelled after Dante's *Divina Commedia*. It is the most poetical of all the three books: even the narrative lines are here deeply influenced by the free grace of poetry. It irradiates a universal message about the human destiny, about the destiny of artists and art, about love and death.

Dr. Janez Vrečko, a literary historian and a specialist for epics, tragedy and avant-guard, contributed a foreword entitled *Poetry as History and Revived Epics* in which he lucidly proved that according all the features of the ancient epics Novak's *opus magnum* can be qualified as an *epos* with all the justification.

The book has a firm composition structure necessary to hold a huge text of 20.000 verses on 1.100 pages. It is divided into 9 notebooks, each one of them containing 11 cantos, together therefore 99 cantos. The structural parallels with Dante's *Divina Commedia* are obvious, and the "small difference" as well: a canto less than 100 cantos of Dante's masterpiece serves – as Novak claims in a poetic form – as a humble homage to the greater master.

Even more important might be the parallels on the narrative and spiritual level.

The narrative framework of this book is the naval travelling to the North; the cargo of the ship turns out to be Memory, Souls, Stories ...

The Captain of the ship guides the poet deep into the underdeck where all the Memory is stored, starting with mythological stories about the creation of the universe, gods and the human world. Ancient myths are constantly transformed into their later historical repetitions: the flight of Aeneas from the burning city of Troy is transformed into destinies of exiles over the centuries, trains to Auschwitz and boats of today's refugees sinking to the bottom of the Mediterranean sea. Novak re-interpretes Dante's *Inferno* as – History, including recent tragedies like wars in the former Yugoslavia.

Let us illustrate the narrative procedures with the example of the siege of Sarajevo. Instead of using great and pathetic words the poet symbolically expresses all the horror of the war through the story of a simple soap. The soap given by Susan Sonntag to her translator Amela, and given by Amela as a sign of gratitude to the poet, the organizer of the humanitarian help for Sarajevo writers. Not having anything more to give to a silent lady, a self-sacrificing organizer of his stay in Sarajevo, the poet gives her the soap. After the war, years later, the silent lady comes to the poet's reading and thanks him for that nice smelling soap.

On eleven floors above the deck the poet has built spaces of arts and other privileged means of maintaining the Memory. The above mentioned story of the soap takes place in the fourth floor, in the duty free *Drugstore of the Nice Smelling Souls*. With the grace of the poetic imagination he gives a chance to the souls of his beloved ones to live in a way that they would like to live if there was no History to limit and tragically mark them. For example: in the seventh floor there is a concert hall *La musica mai perduta (Music never lost)* where a philharmonic orchestra performs

compositions created by Leo Novak, a composer tortured and executed by Gestapo in 1941 (his destiny is treated in the second book) whose notations were burnt in the bombing of Ljubljana in 1945. At this stage there are concerts with two singers – the poet's mother Anica whose musical carrier was broken because of the family obligations, and his aunt Bahrija Nuri Hadžić, an internationally acclaimed opera diva with no recordings of her beautiful voice.

The eleventh floor is the attic reserved for poetic souls. Here Novak entertains a dialog with the great epic poets from antiquity over medieval troubadours and Symbolist "fathers" to the Slovene poets, many of them personal friends, like Dane Zajc, Tomaž Šalamun and Aleš Debeljak.

The central notebooks, between the infernal mytho-historical underdeck and paradise-like upper floors reserved for arts, are dedicated to the poet's parents: the fourth notebook, entitled *The Soul of the First Woman*, to the mother, and the fifth, *The Soul of the First Story-teller*, to the father. They are followed by poetic reflections about the nature of souls gathered in the sixth notebook with the title *Soul is a Verb* and a subtitle *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Souls*.

At the end of the journey to the North the ship becomes a prey of the ecological catastrophe causing war conflicts and threatening our civilization with the apocalyptic end. In that context the ship remains the only carrier of the Memory and of all the dead souls, and a Noah's ark for the last remaining living creatures, humans and animals. Dangerous events are suggested by the surrealist language and dark images. The mystical Figure changing its face and identity all the time issues conflicting commands to the poet: the male personifications of the Figure (the Captain, Dante, Ante ...) appeal to him to save the Memory and the souls of the dead, while the female personifications (*nonna*, the poet's mother, his love Mo etc.) ask him to save the living. The disaster reaches its dramatic peak with the description of the poet's death – a theme very rarely treated in the history of the world poetry: the poet dances with his own soul detaching from the body; they long for each other, the dying body begging the soul to go on, and the soul mourning its beloved body and expressing sorrow for not being able to close his eyes – a task which can be performed only by the living ...

At this point the apocalyptic journey is interrupted, and the poet returns to the miraculous everyday life with his beloved Mo ...

The last verses of this book and of the entire epos reverse the meaning of the title *The Doors of No Return*: there are only Doors, the point of no return does not exist, everything turns and returns, as a carousel ...

The word *carousel* is the last word in all three books of Novak's epos, equally as *stars* are the last word in all three books of Dante's *Commedia*. So everything in history turns and returns

...

BORIS A. NOVAK – CV

Boris A. Novak (born in 1953) is a Slovene poet, playwright, translator, and essayist. He teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Ljubljana. Novak was active in the movement for the democratization of the Slovene and Yugoslav society. In the name of International PEN he organized humanitarian help for refugees from the former Yugoslavia and writers from Sarajevo during the war. In 2002 Novak was elected for the Vice-president of International PEN.

So far he has published 90 books, including the following volumes of poems: *Still-Life-in-Verses (Stihožitje)*, 1977; *Daughter of Memory (Hči spomina)*, 1981; *1001 Verses (1001 stih)*, 1983; *Coronation (Kronanje)*, 1984; *Cataclysm (Stihija)*, 1991; *The Master of Insomnia (Mojster nespečnosti)*, 1995; *Alba*, 1999; *Echo (Odmev)*, 2000; *Glowing (Žarenje)*, 2003, *Rites of Valediction (Obredi slovesa)* 2005, and *SPM: Small Personal Mythology (MOM: Mala Osebna Mitologija)*, 2007. He has also published handbooks of poetic forms *Forms of the World (Oblike sveta)*, 1991, *Forms of the Heart (Oblike srca)*, 1997, and *Forms of the Spirit*, 2016. Novak's *opus magnum* is the epos *The Doors of No Return (Vrata nepovrata)*, 44.000 verses on 2.300 pages in 3 books (*Maps of Nostalgia*, 2014, *The Time of Fathers*, 2015, and *Residencies of Souls*, 2017). Novak writes poetry, plays and stories for children.

Novak's poetry is translated into many languages. In 1990 a bilingual Slovene-English poetry book *Vrtnar tišine – The Gardener of Silence* was published, in 1996 *Poèmes chosis (Selected Poems)* in French, a multilingual edition *Absence* in 1999, and a bilingual English-French choice of poems *The Master of Insomnia – Le Maître de l'insomnie* in 2003. In 2012 *The Master of Insomnia: Selected Poems* were published by Dalkey Archive Press (Champaign, U. S. A. – London – Dublin). The first Croatian selection of poems *Sveta svjetlost (The Sacred Light)* appeared in 1996, followed by the translation of the poetry volume *The Master of Insomnia* in 1997 and *SMS: Small Personal Mythology* in 2011. The selected poems *Baštovan stiha (The Gardener of Silence)* were published in 2003 in Serbia, *Záhradník tícha (The Gardener of Silence)* in Slovakia (2005), *Krunisuvanje (The Coronation)* in Macedonia (2008), *Dlaneno platno (The Palm Linen)* in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2011), and *Zaostavština (The Heritage)* in Montenegro (2014). The tragedy in verses *Cassandra* was translated into Russian in

2013. Spanish translations are published in *El jardinero del silencio y otros poemas (The Gardener of Silence and Other Poems)* by Galaxia Gutenberg (Barcelona) in 2018.

Novak translates poetry and prose from French (S. Mallarmé, P. Valéry, P. Verlaine, E. Jabès), ancient Provençal (Troubadours), Dutch (Paul van Ostaijen, Monika van Paemel), as well as American, English and Irish poetry (S. Heaney) and literature written in South Slav languages (Josip Osti). In 2001 he has published a huge anthology *Modern French Poetry* (more than 800 pages), and in 2003 the first anthology of Provençal *troubadours* in Slovene.

Novak received several national and international awards, among them the highest Slovene one, the Presheren's award for his life oeuvre, and *Bosanski stečak (The Bosnian Tomb)*. He is a double knight of the French Republic (*Le Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques*, and *Le Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*), a corresponding member of the French poetry academy *Mallarmé* and an associate member of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts.

CONTACTS

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SAMPLE

Tidying up after the Dead

Even now, as I write this, the taste of ash
fills my mouth and it is hard to breathe. Because
tidying up after the dead is a horror. To pass

a whole life through a sieve, to choose among
the unfortunate things destined for the hell of oblivion,
and the more happy ones, for the paradise of memory.

To find in this legacy gold used for fillings
and for wedding rings, bracelets and pocket
watches with broken hands, the old detritus

of souvenirs and letters, visiting cards and
post cards, important documents and photographs,
a sewing kit, a box of buttons, a broken necklace

and rusted keys, fruit rotting in the refrigerator,
someone's first tooth, primary school textbooks,
a dozen glasses with different lenses and frames,

two dozen identification cards and passports,
paintings and prints, and shelves filled to overflowing
with dusty books, books, books, books...

A last glance at a life, amazement, what a beauty
my mother was when she was young, the scent
in her skirts, her rounded soul hovering in the pleats,

so lovely. – My memory of her will live until her scent
abandons the empty clothes. – Tidying up after the dead
is a bittersweet ritual that revives for the last time

everything that she once was and had, before the death
shroud erased all traces. It's a terrible dilemma,
what to keep and what to throw away. Discarded

memories roam in boxes closed forever.

Two evening dresses with matching silk scarves,
which pair should I save from oblivion? ...

The zeal of the living continues relentlessly, the force
of the present pushing aside the weight of the past.

All those closets filled with junk would suffocate us,

we must make room, cleanse our memory,
lest it collapse under the weight of the burning
cargo it carries...

It burns for so long,

that statuette from the Horn of Africa –
who brought it so far, to this Alpine land –
and a faded letter, a passionate appeal,

from my father to my mother, just before they
became father and mother, dated 1953, *April 9*,
that father wanted to destroy but mother saved

after his death for future eyes, and now

I also save because I, who my mother – so feminine,
so mild – carried then, am mentioned in it.

I am tormented by the question: what will be the fate
of this letter when my time comes – the next tidying-up
by the living of the traces left behind by the dead?

Will another face

lean over this letter and dream of lives lived
and lives ended? Will my parents' love be tossed
in the garbage bin
or in the box of memory?

Silence descends ...

translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak