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Selected poems of Milorad Pejić in Czech translation

Adin Ljuca

Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature has been translated to Czech more than to any other language. However, the poetry translations are so rare that each constitutes a special cultural moment. From 1911 - when the first Czech translation of selected poems was published - until today, an entire century has passed with a mere nine poetry translations.¹

This edition of Milorad Pejić's poems, impressive by both its volume and looks, titled *True Stories: Selected Poems*, and translated by Jaroslav Šulc, was published by Protimluc, the publishing house from Ostrava, in September 2020. The book and its author were presented to the Czech public in the following cities: Frýdek-Místek on September 3, Ostrava, Tábor and Prague on October 1, 3, and 6, respectively. The book also includes the afterword by Adin Ljuca, *The True Story of M.P.*, presented below in its entirety.

The True Story of M.P.

Long ago, in a country that is no more, there was a poet who wrote a book of poems and named it *The Vase for the Lily Plant* (Sarajevo, 1985). This fairy-tale introduction may make it easier for us to objectively comprehend the entire poetic body of work of Milorad Pejić. Do you know the old story about the sailors who, after a long journey returned home on the same ship they sailed off on? It was the same ship, yet not a single part of it was the same - each got damaged over time and had to be replaced. In the same sense, everything seems to be the same now as at the time when Milorad Pejić was writing his poems, in the early 1980s, and yet all is different. Years that ensued have gradually done away with entire countries, regimes, anthems and home addresses - but, to paraphrase the poet, verses, they remain weighty.

I read this poetry collection for the first time as a literature and library science major in Sarajevo in 1986 and have been fascinated by it ever since. In Sarajevo, it didn't take long for me to personally meet its most reputable poets or at least to have an opportunity to run into them in the street or at poetry readings - only Milorad Pejić was nowhere to be found. The same is true today - he is, in a sense, nowhere, and yet all true lovers of the poetry written "in my homeland's native tongue"² know of him. He was never a member of any writers' association, nor a guest at the prestigious Writers' Club, or part of any literary circles. Put simply, he has always been original

and distinctive. And thereby incomparable. And immeasurable.

In the summer of 1987, I became the owner of a copy of *The Vase for the Lily Plant*; it has accompanied me on my journeys across the world ever since. While thinking about the sounds of my homeland, I wrote this about the book in an intimate story entitled *The Field Trip*:

“All these native sounds, as if sliding down the gutter, were flowing into one single verse: ‘tiptoeing on its tiny dove fingers lunacy marches across the tin roof.’ This verse is from the poetry book that still has the seal of my hometown’s library pressed onto several pages. A college freshman at the time, a literature major, I was spending my break at home relaxing and trying to temporarily distance myself from the ancient and more recent classics. At the library, where I went to borrow a book by some of our more contemporary poets, the librarian pointed to a pile of books and said:

‘There are plenty of books by contemporary poets in that pile over there. They will all be thrown out, as we have no room for them. You may take as many as you wish.’

When I saw the yellow cover of *The Vase for the Lily Plant* in the pile, the book I was unsuccessfully looking for in the bookstores in Sarajevo for some time, I picked it up with delight and asked:

‘Can I really take it?’

‘Take it!’

And I have been carrying it with me ever since, and rereading it all these years. Every time I see the library seal while leafing through the book, I feel a sense of unease in my stomach, as if I had stolen it. More than once I thought of returning it, but knew they would likely only laugh at me.

The sound of leafing through the book, that I have forgotten though.”³

It may seem unimportant how I obtained the book, but to me the story shows that these poems were born to a world that had no place for them. This was the period of the pre-war brainwashing, with nationalist poets (emphasis on nationalist) spreading like epidemics. Aware of the situation he was in, some seven years before he will involuntarily leave the country, Pejić escaped, voluntarily, into a sort of exile - into his poetic world. Seven years later he will simply sneak out from his homeland “carrying with me / only my mother tongue, like a sailor cast away on / a desert island who wields but one useless skill” (*The Trip*).⁴

Pejić is one of those people who think that a preface about the author should only include a dates of birth and death. In absence of the latter, here are a few basic biographical facts: upon completing his studies at the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Economics, Pejić returned to his birthplace, Tuzla, and got a job with the Tito Coal Mine. In Tuzla, he ran into Nada Ostojić again (they had first met at the Youth Work Action constructing the railroad Šamac-Sarajevo in 1978), fathered his first daughter, and then the war started. They left Tuzla, and Bosnia, which was by then sinking into

darkness the same as Tuzla itself was sinking into its mine-gutted ground, and embarked on a journey that would take them to the very end of northern Sweden (*Kiruna*), “on the nose of the polar circle”. A couple of years later, in a town of Luleå, which in the winter can only be reached by an icebreaker, their second daughter was born. They stayed in Luleå, then Solefteå, until 2017. When the children completed their education and found jobs in the south of Sweden, Pejić and his spouse moved from “the nose of the polar circle” to Lund, a town in the south, not to be closer to civilization, but to be closer to the children.

Growing up in socialist Yugoslavia, witnessing the country’s long and bloody disintegration, and spending the second half of his life in exile, while watching our consumer civilization undergo major global changes – all this has set the stage for the world in which his poetry was being born.

One important detail in this biographical overview is his day job. Pejić has worked his entire adult life as an economist, thus being able to avoid the curse of supporting a family by writing –he has always kept these two things clearly separated.

As the countries born out of the dissolution of Yugoslavia were glorifying their nationally correct and nationalistic literature, Pejić, living in his northern solitude at “minus twenty-seven,” was creating a poetic world where patriotism was not a virtue but rather an ailment.

The Vase for the Lily Plant is woven from the best material – from the finest language – while at the same time systematically poking at open wounds. One crucial verse that could serve as a key for unlocking the secrets of Pejić’s poetry reads: “We look, look, look... / powerless to cast our eyes down and not to go crazy” (*Castle*). This sentiment that, irrespective of everything, things need to be seen as they are is characteristic of his poetry, from his very first poems until today.

A microscopic view of his poetry reveals that it is deeply anchored in the details, which can make the poems appear almost abstract. Still, take one or two steps back, and the details, like in a pointillism painting, start locking together into a whole. They are never a mere catalogue of suggestive images but are always given a deeper intention and meaning.

With the exception of one toponym (*Gradačac*) and two dedications (to Mujo Grbić and Nada), this first collection of poems doesn’t reveal anything specific – his past reality and the conditions of his heart are documented simply by playing with words and images situated in undetermined places that could be anywhere (*Castle, Monastery, Summer Home, Island, Swamp*). However, to those who manage to decipher the subtle code, his poems – airtight and abstract, with unorthodox (and disjointed) perception and syntax, become easily tangible.

This poetry collection, born out of author’s superhuman struggle with himself, has a unique and distinct expression. I know of no other poetry to compare it with, nor do I recognize in it any traces of influences by other poets. There is though one verse by Andrić that I think quite accurately describes the author’s state of mind at the time of

writing *The Vase for the Lily Plant*: “And everything I look at is poetry and everything I touch is pain.”⁵

This collection of poems is an extraordinary hymn to the author’s “timeless youth”: “My blood is approaching twilight. Only a breath of strength left in my wings” (*Waterlily*). His quite unorthodox cycle of love poems begins with: “Besides being sick, I am not doing much” (*The Letter*).

Only with the beginning of the war did Pejić step out of this personal poetic universe, one that was the basis for his first poetry collection, and enter the outer (“real”) world. The usual response to an attack is to close up: a hedgehog curls up into a prickly ball, a turtle retreats into its shell, a human takes a defensive guard – Pejić, on the other hand, opened up. As the war progressed, his poetic expression became more precise and specific. The patterns were the same, but it was like he turned his two-faced jacket inside out and started wearing a different color, not as camouflage but, on the contrary – to show his true self. Exiled from the unidentified depths of his soul and his “timeless youth,” he is now using real places, people’s names, giving his poetry a documentary character, a testimonial form, a true-story feel. Documentation, in fact, makes it possible to take an unequivocal stand. Just like Jíří Kolář wrote: “The stand you take in life determines the kind of poetry you will write.”

His first collection of poems was an honest reckoning with himself, with no outside enemy, until it was time to face the unimaginable. Never one to look away when fighting his own demons, he would certainly not look away now, but instead he observes the world around him “with eyes that / look straight at the horror as when you are threading / a needle” (*The Trip*).

It is obvious that Pejić writes with premeditation dissecting the reality with scientific meticulousness, but he never let the premeditation diminish his spontaneity. Namely, if we accept that a poet is not some barbarian genius who writes great verses only in a state of ecstasy or delirium, then we also have to accept that there is no great poetry without spark and spontaneity. Knowledge is not enough: if a competency in problem solving or a command of language were necessary for writing good poetry, then the greatest poets would be scientists and linguists.

A poem is a building, that, like a house, needs a sound foundation and strong walls and a roof that does not leak. Windows, too, to let the light in. And a door to enter it. Pejić confronts the war destruction by constructing and erecting the finest poetic structures – “poems for my friends,” as he calls them, and by sending them to several known addresses (Tuzla, Chicago, London, Cologne, Auckland, Prague) to his „scattered friends“ (*Friends in the Universe*) who await them eagerly. For a long time, the poems circulating through the virtual wilderness was their only proof of life.

The first poem in *The Eyes of Keyholes*, his second book of poems, marks Pejić’s introduction of factual precision and specificity to his poetry: *Fishing Village* is no longer an anonymous fishermen village but one situated on the island of Hvar; *Kalemegdan* is a well known actual toponym, *Pasuljanske livade* is a name of a military site in Serbia. *The Trip*, a title of one poem, is no longer something unidentified (like some titles from his first book – *Field Trip*, *Island* or *Homecoming*) because it is now

taking place “in a night-train compartment on the way to Boden, September 1992”. It is therefore no longer just any path, any road or traffic lane, it is a specific path, the one and only that you take when leaving home. And so it is in every poem in this book, and even today – most poems are titled after real people and toponyms.

Among the many toponyms in Pejić’s poetic opus, the central place belongs to a mythic one: *Hyperborea*, as the poet lovingly calls his “substitute homeland,” Sweden.

Hyperborea is also the title of his third collection of poems.⁶ The mythic qualities that the author ascribes to *Hyperborea* won’t prevent him from saying: “I gladly return home to *Hyperborea*, but I / would not die under its flag either” (*Hyperborea II*). It shouldn’t be viewed as a betrayal of an ideal of freedom but rather as his unwillingness to be manipulated in the name of any ideals.

Although he practically made *Hyperborea* a synonym for his poetic world, this, too, won’t prevent him from declaring in one of his late poems: “*Hyperborea* does not exist!” and “Where do we go now, sister, when *Hyperborea* is / no more?” (*Tuottar*). In his world “patriotism is sickness” and a national hymn is nothing more than “a closed railroad-crossing gate” in front of which you stand stiff “till the train passes.” It is not enough to call his poetry *anti-war*, as it is in equal measure *anti-patriotic*. “Patriotism is the worst malady. It is a benign tumor that always yearns to transcend into its natural, malignant state.”⁷

Still, one will rarely find words like war in his poems, and if they do, the context will always be different from what you would expect (“the Crusades,” “the picture from the cold war” or “war veterans” from some Swedish movie). More frequent though are the words like: *road, door, return, water, forest*.

His capacity to compress is extraordinary. A passage from a spring to a river mouth is crossed in only two verses: “Wash your face therefore in a handful / of the cataract from which, little by little, an ocean will hatch.” (*Padjelanta*).

The title of this newest collection of selected poems, *True Stories*, corresponds perfectly to Pejić’s poetic realism. To criticism that his poetry is dark, he once responded: “My poetry is full of darkness and pessimism because I try to grasp the world as it is, honestly and directly. Therefore, my poems are a reflection of the real state of the world today, which is exactly like this, dark and pessimistic, actually quite similar to what it was in the middle ages.”⁸

Within his poetic universe, Pejić is forced to face not only the insanity of war and the tragedy of exile, but also the general degradation and retardation caused by today’s insatiable consumerism. The threats from the outside are balanced by the threats from the inside: impudence and greed are the major themes in his poetry. The author is both a careful observer of the contemporary consumerism, greed and hoarding and its fierce critic. “Today we have a place to sleep and things to read, / but we are nowhere as happy as when, long ago, / we were unhappy, when we had nothing – neither *mine* / nor *yours*.” (*Mykena II*), writes Pejić. He reminds us of the danger of the charmed cycle of greed in which we drown as if it were quicksand. Greed is recognized as something eternal, transgenerational, because “the enthusiasm of those who rob

pharaohs' tombs never subsides, and the sound of their pickaxes is a historical constant." ⁹

The title of many of his poems suggests the poet's own stance (*The Crusades*, *Afghanistan*, *The Terrorist*, *West Side Story*, *East Side Story*). Deceit is the theme that serves as a leitmotif in his work: "Model citizens. They / also are innocent until the lie, like / overloaded electrical breakers, goes bust." (*The Crusades*). It is painful to come to the realization that we are all inclined to cheer for the "lies which bark the loudest" (*East Side Story*) and that we are "deaf to what we hear and blind to what we see" (*Afghanistan*).

From the robbers of pharaohs' tombs who dig "day and night for generations" (*The Pharaoh*), to the Crusades when the good men died good deaths "for our cause, / that on our bank accounts" (*The Crusades*), to the call to "protect our values" (*Gulliver's Trial II*), Pejić highlights all sides of this ancient story. It is like a cheap thief's trick: while two men tussle, the rest of the thieves rob the spectators' pockets. What frustrates Pejić the most is that lies and manipulations on the global scale are just as cheap: "I cannot understand how we know nothing of this?" (*East Side Story*).

It's long obvious to Pejić that "one thing is the Bible and its arks / and quite another real life at the bottom..." (*The Flood*), but it is important to repeat because people forget. Pejić references God more frequently the older he gets, though not to seek comfort or forgiveness, but rather to stand, with youthful irreverence and great wisdom, "barehanded against false gods" (*Saint Columbia*).

Pejić views God as a genius, "God is genius!", but sees through his tricks: "He invented himself / and forced himself onto the city..." (*Sarajevo, Meeting at Lolek's*). He likens belief in God to empty tomes, with luxurious covers and golden titles, which sit "like hollow volumes in the display windows of furniture stores" (*Transsiberian Railroad*). And in a poem about a legally sanctioned killing of a swan ("as ruled by the fathers of the city") he won't hesitate to say to his face: "You embarrass yourself, God!" (*Swan*).

Another poem speaks about Pejić's search for an isolated piece of land somewhere in the south of Sweden, to fix up with his wife to their liking, when they stumbled upon a squalid little church for sale. They liked it very much, but did not buy it:

"...We decided against it
 for similar reasons: you, out of fear that it
 would be difficult to evict all the bats, and
 I because it would take a long time for God
 to wear off."
 (*Church for Sale*)

Ideologies and religions deform, poetry shapes and creates. It renews the human ability to perceive and reflect on reality in a world where old dogmas are inherited not like genetic diseases, but like the color of one's skin.

While in *The Vase for the Lily Plant* his travels were “...just a lethargic step of a potted plant” (*The Letter I*), once in exile, Pejić moves “from continent to continent with ease / like green frogs from one lotus leaf to another” (*Moves*), from the beaches in New Zealand to Tarfale in Lapland, from New York, via Belgrade and Kalemegdan, to Prague.

Pejić isn't a “collector of photographs”, to use a phrase once said by Petr Hruška to diagnose the often unhappy union between poetry and tourism. One doesn't travel for the photo, the photo awaits. That's what the poem *Kebnekaise* is about (“despite...all those expeditions” ... “for the eighth year now I've been lying in wait for that view” ... “everything else is luck”). To travel isn't to search for photos, meanings, or new worlds. Pejić simply visits his “weary friends” (*Friends in the Universe*). In each city after which his poems are named, he has his people: “Today we are scattered out across countries / like crabs across fjords.” (*Geiranger II*).

The poem, *Island*, written in the early 80s, demonstrates how he predicted his life. The phrase, “I haven't arrived” signifies – as the author himself explained to his Czech translator – “that not only I haven't arrived back to my homeland but also that I haven't arrived anywhere (neither in time nor space) nor achieved anything. Like a version of the Odyssey, but with a flipped epilogue: Odysseus returned, but I haven't, because I have chosen to remain on the island of abundance and safety, i.e., I gave up on my return due to reasons of a ‘material’ nature. Seeing that poem now, I would gladly change the last sentence to: ‘All is lost.’ That is to say, ‘I've lost it all’ is a description of a personal drama, while ‘All is lost’ means that no one has a chance.”

Gradačac, the poem from *The Vase for the Lily Plant*, named after the northeastern town in Bosnia with a famous tower that used to be the headquarters of Captain Husein Gradaščević,¹⁰ could be considered a precursor to all the poems named after cities around the world: *Stockholm, Cologne, Prague, New York, Queenstown, Copenhagen, Chicago*, etc. There is an awareness of the pointlessness of travel in this first collection: “So much travel, so much impatience and yet we've already / been here” (*Summer Home*). It signifies a realisation that even then, in the early 80s, even before being anywhere, the end of the world, like the setting of the sun, can clearly be seen from Tuzla.

His trips/escapes to nature are special kind of travels. Especially powerful are the poems with Nordic names: *Kebnekaise, Kaitum, Padjelanta, Geiranger I, Geiranger II, Tarfala, Sarek*... Nature, that endless source of themes, occupies a special place in his poems, and the best nature is one untouched by people and God. The poem *Tarfala* begins with the verse: „I don't like intact nature when humans / have their hand in it“ and ends with: “I don't find joy in the wonders of nature that God's had his hand in.” Or as Adisa Bašić notes in her review of *Hyperborea*, “The presence of man in nature in Pejić's poems is primarily seen as violation of harmony; man is often an arrogant intruder, a source of destruction, a pragmatic consumer rather than a key element of nature.”¹¹

Even when it appears that Pejić is running from people and the world to the farthest, most untouched corners of nature, he still concerns himself with societal problems.

Perhaps it is the poems in which there are no people that say the most about man, in which the poet's subject is alone on the precipice, under the waterfall, in the depths of northern forests, fjords, in places where the power of nature has used people up: "The people in them / Geiranger has used up..." (*Geiranger I*). Where man is alone: on reindeer pastures, behind glaciers, at the end of the world, in places where Nordic names sound secretive and frightening...it is there that man cannot take anything else "but the knowledge - that you live in the wrong way and in the wrong place" (*Padjelanta*).

As if going to the end of the world doesn't provide him with enough distance, Pejić's poems go even farther. Only the view from Apollo 17, only when he sees the planet "Earth - in the sepulchral silence of darkness" will allow him to be far „enough / from myself to see clearly and for the / first time who I am. / And where I am. And where I am from..“ (*Apollo 17*).¹²

His lyrical being identifies with mother Earth and, assuming the position of the Planet, tells the mankind: „When I take off my shoes / and step into the darkness of space, all of you will be / at my funeral“ (*Planeta*). After all those travels one has to arrive at the Apocalypse: „In one and same apocalypse the world ends twice,“ and the future is the first to be eliminated. „The other calamity is more brutal but just, for it will / erase us from the past...“. The preachers in this poem, those who make us obedient, hiss at us „from oaken pulpits like over upright coffins“ (*Apocalypse*).

Pejić finds humanity and warmth where no one else cares to look: „But as far as the / eye can reach and thought can grasp, the closest / to me is that which has perished: the windows / of Vršani.“ The poem *Vršani* was written to accompany a collection of photographs titled *The Windows of Vršani* by Mujo Grbić. The poem's apocalyptic atmosphere is only abstract at first glance - it is, in true Pejić style, anchored in concrete details. Vršani is an abandoned village above Tuzla whose inhabitants left because of the worsening conditions caused by coal mining.

Return is another major theme in Pejić's poetic universe. He sees return and looking back on the past as a type of travel. That is the subject of a series of poems: *Balkans*, *Bosnia*, *Tuzla*, *Vršani*. Even if a person forgets, "blood remembers" (*Hyperborea I*).

The question of return in the context of exile holds a special weight. In a true story within a poem casually titled *Moving*, the poet, who is just one of millions made to leave his birthplace for good, tells of an unexpected type of fear: "we fear removing ourselves too much from / what we were escaping." On the way from his homeland to Hyperborea, which may not exist, he notices deformed trees, "that, bent over the Torne River /are taking root." While the theme of exodus is one of the most common in the history of art, it is still rare to find this feeling of a refugee's blind yearning for return as precisely described as in the poem *Salmon*. The fish would return to its "first water" had not some blind omniscient hand built a water-power plant in their way: "Oblivious is nature / for it has not taken away from God's fish of the Ångermanälven / the memory of home, so they keep on / striking the concrete and assailing the unknown."

As always, when it comes to the question of return, Pejić goes even farther. He puts aside the stories of exodus and concentration camps and turns to the horror of

everyday life. That is, the hardest type of return is the return to one's self: „Fortunate are those untouched by this, whose bodies always find their way back from every mirror.“ (*Discoveries*).

For the phenomenon which Petr Hruška calls “the collectors of photographs,” Pejić has a somewhat different description: “fueling up with suffering:”

ALL INCLUSIVE

Rarely, but whenever I happen to be in the capital,
I sit down to talk with the writers of the Kingdom.
They've exhausted their substance, they say, they
lack inspiration. Two hundred bloodless years they
carry like a curse. They simply envy me for being from
the regions of silver, where to this day transports
keep arriving at the places of execution.

Still, they doubt the true stories, the specter of
a freight truck dumping shoes with feet in them
in the schoolyard. They are most confused by
pussy-willow tendrils which, incited by the wind,
are slapping the prisoners with their white nails. . .
before a shot in the head!

I don't like when they are being fastidious, but
I understand the Kingdom's writers, who travel
all inclusive to soft dictatorships on the other
side of the globe so they can, in person and
on the spot, stock up on suffering for their spy
novels and fantastical poems.

The Vase for the Lily Plant demonstrates that to create great poetry it is enough to have the images of your motherland and a peaceful existence. Although the poems in this book come from a time long gone, they evoke a feeling of the present even more than the humming of the people that surround us. For an ordinary man his own personal despair will suffice. And his art. One does not have to fuel up with other people's pain.

These are verses that call for a constant wakefulness, not only for external dangers, but for the dangers that lurk within ourselves. They warn us to be wary of “deliberate suffering and calculated loves.” A double end awaits us all, one's own death and the end of civilization, the abolition of the future and the past, but a man is reminded that: „You are not lost even if you are infinitely unhappy / provided that you follow the scent of a moose.“ (*Sarek*).

I don't feel the need to analyze Pejić's poetic world any further or more deeply, the way the critics do. I'm afraid that would distance us from the essence of his work. I like to engage with his poetry in another way, the way I once replied to his manuscript

of *The Third Life* with a poem:

READING *THE THIRD LIFE* THROUGH AND THROUGH ¹³

Countless words, and still more stars and heavenly bodies,
are circling around us, and yet in my head emptiness gapes
from the word cosmos, like from a black hole.

To search for elusive verses is the same as to follow
the light of a star gone dark long ago: broken twigs,
trampled grass, a hoof print in the interplanetary dust . . .

Towards the end of *The Third Life*, it becomes clear what
will be, but not what was. Words emerge as if from ambush,
palpable like letters from a book for the blind. I can smell
them like the scent of a freshly snuffed candle.

Translated by Esmā Hadžiselimović

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