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On the art of memory

(On poems by Dragan Jovanović Danilov)



Abstract

This text is primarily concerned with woman's presence in some of the poetic texts written by the eminent Serbian author Dragan Jovanović Danilov. The very poems chosen here, we consider part of the heritage that proves that men can succeed in 'digesting' female nature. This text is profoundly grateful to the poet's words for not confining women to the figures of the virgin heroine, the mother, the wife, the prostitute, the mistress, the spinster or the redundant middle-aged mother.

Key words

poetry, women, music, language, touching.

THE HOUSE OF BACH'S MUSIC

If we have to describe the poetry of Dragan Danilov in a few words, we would probably do it as simply as possible and call it 'the state of being in the house of yourself'. It is not only a direct reference to his book 'The House of Bach's Music'² but also a glowing source of possible interpretations. Looking at somebody's poetic gesture as at a confined space has always been appealing to literary critics. In Danilov's case, the private space does prove its own value and stands behind the idea of reaching poetical meanings by entering it, not leaving it. Therefore, this is one of those poetic gestures which one can't endure, and with which defamiliarization is not a possible way.

Though Dragan Danilov's poetry comes together as a human body on the pages

¹ Dragan Jovanović Danilov (1960) is a Serbian author, a plastic arts critic and an essayist. He is amongst the most translated contemporary Serbian poets. He has published ten books of verses, two novels, and one book of essays. 'The House of the Bach's music' (Kuća Bahove muzike) is his third poetry book released in 1993.

² DANILOV, Dragan: *Kuća Bahove muzike*. Nolit, Belgrade, 1993.

of his texts does, that is being percolated only in order for his parts to be adored; we will look especially at one fragment of his poetic body. Because most of the talks about art and nature do take place in a closed space or at least within the walls of an imaginary world that indicates a certain place, we choose the book 'The House of Bach's Music'. The reason behind this choice is the feeling of being inside that one needs when reading. And as long as I am tracing one hypothesis which is connected to the variations of the reader's reception, I imply the subjective nature of the poetical work.

Entering 'The House of Bach's Music' is like penetrating art but not by losing interest in nature. Dragan Danilov's poetry says, as does Vivian in 'The Decay of Lying', that it is fortunate for us that a woman is so imperfect; otherwise, we should have had no art at all. His verses are his 'gallant attempt to teach the woman her proper place'. I am intentionally mentioning this dialogue written by Oscar Wilde, because when writing about poetry, we write primarily about the art of lying. And that's what Dragan Danilov's poetry teaches us. 'What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition'.³

³ WILDE, O.: *The Decay of Lying*. New York : Brentano, 1905. [online]. [21. 3. 2019]. Available at: <https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/steen/cogweb/Abstracts/Wilde_1889.html>.

ON THE ART OF TOUCHING

Danilov's poetic space is a place the reader can hardly escape or estrange themselves from when once trapped. The state of being in this house is like being enclosed by a high living wall made up of the fairly solid material of one's own thoughts, and every single effort to produce a movement leads to pain. This is because being in yourself, is like playing with your presence and your absence at the same time. The house of yours is nobody's place in which the only certainty is the acknowledgment that things may be if we think of them, as we read in the poem 'Thinking of those things'. Being in the inside space of these texts is like learning to love the total absence of yourself.



This absence is stated by a certain sensual deficiency. The poem 'The Life of the Monologue' is one of the many examples that represent the author's attempt to compose his own senses. His poetry is his own allegory of the five senses. Every sentence represents one of the sensory modalities. The lyrical subject thinks about 'the touchings

which are reaching out' for him. But his perception does not inherently include the perception of the Other. The Other's body naturally consists of interaction processes, but there's no body laying here, *She* lives only in the memory. Wondering about the woman who was, could have been or will be is like drinking ambrosia. 'My ambrosia is getting closer, getting closer' and then the lyrical subject desires to collect his words, as the woman is tying her hair into a bun. And as her hair was 'crying spread out on the bed', the poet's words are still desiring a form.

The absence of the Other's sense of touching that is the only answer to your own reception is the main punishment in Danilov's poetry. Only one hand at a time is doing the touching, while the other is sentenced to itself. In 'Dedication to the Ambergris' the punishment is officially pronounced, the lyrical subject is sentenced to wait for 'the goddess who has never created him'.



As long as all the feelings coming from the tactile experience are absorbed in the poet's hands, they are art themselves. Dragan Danilov is one of those artists who will give you the freedom to write your own variations of his biography. Most likely it is only after reading his po-

ems, you will go back again to his spoken words to begin searching for hidden meanings. The book is the curving arc that the sweet suffering of the words forms. The author touches you in such a way, that you want to go through the delightful pain of becoming known to him and to yourself. And it is simply an invitation to enter Danilov's house.

THIRSTY FOR YOURSELF

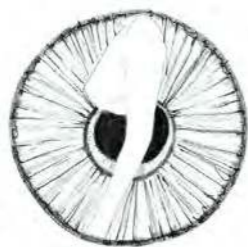
Dragan Danilov's poetry is an invitation to stay in his house of words. To stay and turn yourself into poetry. Because reading him evokes the desire to watch yourself embodying the verses. This is the reason for writing such a reflection on Dragan Danilov's poems. This text is deeply persuasive such that when written about this Serbian poet's verses, it must be first of all a talk with his texts, to find their meaning in the process of communication with them. This reflection shares one way of reading Dragan Danilov's poetry and asks you to share your own.



Creating the Iconostasis of Your Very Own in the Total Absence of horror alieni

Dragan Danilov's poetry is a language that is asking the grass, having a conversation with it, a language that is dying in the verse, and after his death 'maidens squeeze fragrances' (*The Life of the Mono-*

logue). The poet allows himself to come out of his own skin because the spirit is bodiless while the body is finite, thus the words touch his all and what he holds in the bed of the palms of his hands. His verses moisten and warm up in order that the hand touches after and to feel it warm and soft as in the embrace of a woman's lap. Then everything is more than it has ever been. Reading this poet is not only a pleasure, if you are a woman, because it makes you feel ashamed of your own aging. Ashamed of the moment when you lose your skillfully created limpid body and the embrace of your thighs. Ashamed of what is left to the man, which is only the soft bed of the palm of the hands. If you are a young opal, the words will flow from the poet's body which will be hung from your ear as if it was an earring; if not, he will put in your hand your own being from the past. But the poet is not trying to own you as a painting hung in the rooms of his texts, he just gives you the chance to feel yourself again rooted in the very origins of yourself.



If we have to choose one main characteristic of his poetry, it will probably be the desire of life to imitate art'.⁴ This is why we do not write about any traces of *horror alieni*, of the fear of the otherness, of the other. Because the creator is not afraid of the woman, he is rather afraid of her coming out of the dark with her real being. The woman is supposed to flawlessly stay in the shadow and never show off because the reality is not as beautiful, wild and endlessly rich in meanings as the products of the imagination. Because otherwise, the poet could possibly see the defects of her soul.⁵



She is not given a voice to speak her thoughts. She is not given anything else but the possibility to be a mem-

4 Wilde, O.: *The Decay of Lying*. New York : Brentano, 1905. [online]. [21. 3. 2019]. Available at: <https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/steen/cogweb/Abstracts/Wilde_1889.html>.

5 'Pope's poetry, people's characters eternally, and the defects of her own soul.' - Woolf, V.: *Mrs. Dalloway*. Great Britain : Penguin Books, 1996, p. 9.

ory. Only the past has the power to stay untouched, that's why *She* is the absence that is not supposed to fill the silence because *She* is herself the silence. In 'Tenderly, with a Hand', we read: 'She could have been is she hasn't said a word'. This statement speaks of the main theme of Danilov's poetry - *She* never speaks in the house of her music, because by speaking she can destroy the perfect memory in which she does exist. Dragan Danilov desires to last forever in the poetry written. He creates a house which stairs inside are a bridge to the eternal life of the words, and the poet himself stays forever in the text.

Ars Memoriae



En français? Non, je voudrais écrire en musique.
André Gide

Poetry is about finding yourself in the poem and falling in love with the way someone could have seen you under the condition that you have reached him before the act of writing. Or in other words, to find yourself in the poet's hands and to witness him composing you.



Music is one of the main elements in Dragan Danilov's poetry, and especially in *The House of Bach's Music*. The piano and the cello are playing the main role in describing the female existence. The female feet are crossing the surface of the musical instruments and together they tremble for the spontaneous touch between the moving body and the eternal one that produces music. The tremulous poet's hands are washing his own soul and the one of the beloved using the allurements of the vibrations transmitted through the air and through them.

In 'The House of Bach's Music' the musical instrument is in a temporary state of being touched. No matter if the bare feet are stepping on a harpsichord, or a hand is secretly touching it, it is always one of those Sofias who stands naked next to the piano. But at the same time, not a single sound is being produced. The music comes from the movements which come into life when *She* is awake. There is only one definition of musicality in the house created by the poet and it lies in 'the invention of memories'. The thing in the poetic world has not happened, they have been only thought. The poet is the medium connecting the happening and its memorized form.

Dragan Danilov not only uses the language but the language itself is somehow using him. That's why the language is a medium of such great importance in his poetry. Except for his mother tongue, that the texts are written in, we mean Serbian, Dragan Danilov retains a craving for the French language. His poetry follows Goethe and his belief that French

words originated not from written Latin words but from spoken ones.⁶

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