

Alfa's Progress

The Poetry of Mila Haugová

Slovak poetry has struggled to find visibility in the English-speaking world. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Penguin Modern European Poets series created the impression for the half-educated, such as myself, that literary culture in the former Czechoslovakia was monolingual with the publication of selections from Holan, Holub, Nezval and Seifert. Later publication by other major publishers in the 1980s of a younger generation of Czech poets only reinforced the misapprehension. Miroslav Holub became something of a father figure, or at least a foreign uncle figure, to a number of poets in the British Isles and Ireland especially those with a take on a combination of a narrative line and a stranger than fiction content. The concealment of Slovak poetry was never better illustrated than by Holub's discovery of our *Not Waiting for Miracles* (1993), the first anthology of contemporary Slovak poetry in English, in a bookshop in Dublin and his subsequent comment in a Czech journal that he had more in common with these Slovak poets than many of his Czech contemporaries.

Slovak poetry's appearance in English has other hindrances. First, one their best poets of the twentieth century or indeed any other century, Miroslav Válek, was Slovak Minister of Culture in the 1970s and 1980s and adherent of the "era of normalisation" presided over by Gustav Húsak. Slovak poetry therefore might have been regarded as following the party line whatever its merits and diversity. Second, Slovak poetry's strong religious element—perhaps best represented by Milan Rúfus—may have adversely affected its reception. In the 1930s and 1940s the Catholic Modernist movement produced a number of distinguished poets, the best of whom was Janko Silan (1914-1984), but Silan's work was suppressed after the Communist putsch of 1948

and unfairly yoked to the clerical-fascist Slovak republic of 1939 to 1945. Silan lived out his life as a Catholic priest in the High Tatras, reappearing briefly with a collection in 1969 before the return of repression, and publishing two more collections in 1980 and 1984 when conditions began to ease once more. The religious element in poetry also has implications in terms of a readership in the English-speaking world—not only for Slovak poets. On the one hand, direct address to the reader can often result in the simplistic dichotomies of the R.S. Thomas's *Mass for Hard Times* (1992); on the other, the strategy of including one's religious sensibility in an all-encompassing "sprawl", as Les Murray does, runs the risk of weakening the focus of religious observance so that a secular readership can pass it over as a particular poet's eccentricity rather than a belief in divine grace and all that entails.

The post-modernist poet, Mila Haugová, seems to have adopted this latter strategy, as opposed to the direct address favoured by the descendants of the Catholic modernists. Tactically this is understandable, as these versifiers, who might well be described as "Catholic anti-modernists", have written some extraordinarily bad poetry which still contrives to make its way into print. Haugová's work demonstrates the emergence of Slovakia's greatest woman poet in the period following 1989. Her work and life exemplify the tensions and forces which have energised Slovak poetry over the last twenty years.

Mila Haugová was born on 14 June 1942 in Budapest. Her mother is Hungarian although she has lived the best part of her life in the Slovak village of Zajacá dolina not far from Levice in Central Slovakia. In the immediate post-war years, in common with many other families in Central Europe, Haugová's family moved from place to place. Her earliest memories are of a nursery school in Nitra beneath the castle run by nuns and of a stud farm near Zlaté Moravce which began a life time love of horses. Yet another home had a garden, was beside a stream and close to a church instilling a desire to live outside the city, a desire which remains unfulfilled. From 1951 to 1953 Haugová's father was imprisoned after being found guilty of "economic sabotage". Mother and daughter were forced to move to very modest surroundings which they only left following her father's amnesty in the wake of the deaths of Stalin and the Czechoslovak leader, Klement Gottwald. In 1954 her family found a house in Zajacá Dolina with long arcades where her mother lives to this day.

Those who studied Slovak and German in Arts Faculties in Czechoslovakia at the time were expected to follow a “cadre” career path. Thus she studied in the Agricultural College in Nitra until 1964, and to this day Haugová prizes the fact that she was protected from “professional deformation” which at this time was characteristic of studies in the prestigious humanities. “The choice of literature, reading, every initiative I took by myself without any external pressure”. The Agricultural College was actually at this time a refuge for kindred spirits, people who had not been chosen by other colleges. The eventual fates of her fellow agricultural students who marched to manual labour—pulling turnips, mucking out pigs and milking cows—were film, opera direction, house design, literary journalism in Brno, Vienna, California and so on.

After college Haugová was employed in an agronomics organisation (“Completely delightful work with plants”), and later a position teaching in an agricultural technical school in Levice. In 1967 she married and after August 1968 she emigrated to Canada following a honeymoon in Yugoslavia. After a year she returned followed by her husband. “Everyone thought I was mad, but simply I couldn’t imagine a life without friends, without Zajacá Dolina, without the house, without all these strands—now I see that if I’d remained in emigration my life would certainly have turned out much differently... literary work is very difficult abroad, there are very few people who have succeeded”. She worked as a teacher in Levice and Ivanka pri Dunaji, and then Haugová moved to Bratislava in 1972 following the birth of her daughter. She worked in an elementary school and immersed herself in literary work until her first collection, *Hrdzavá blina* [Rusty Clay] (1980), which she published under a pseudonym, Mila Srnková. “I thought that in the environment in which I was, an elementary school, married... it would be better if no-one knew that I had published a book, outside those closest to me”.

An increasing commitment to literature resulted eventually in her leaving her school on a year’s unpaid leave, intensive translation from Hungarian and German, evening classes in English and lasting friendships with the novelist, Rudolf Sloboda, and the poets Štefán Štrážay, Jozef Mihalkovič, Ivan Štrpka and others. She published her second book, *Premenlivý povrch* [A Changeable Surface] under her own name in 1983. This publication, along with her next book, *Mo ná neba* [A Possible Tenderness] (1984),

resulted in the growth of her reputation, and the leading critic, Valér Mikula, observed: “We should prepare ourselves for the fact that from now on poetry will not be important for Haugová, but that Haugová will be important for poetry”.

From 1986 to 1996 Haugová was editor of the important literary journal, *Romboid*. This period coincided with a new phase in her work accompanied by translations of Shuntaro Tanikawa (*Midday of the Soul*, 1988) and Sylvia Plath (*The Moon and the Yew Tree*, 1989). She became dissatisfied with the anecdotal nature of her work and her fourth collection, *Čisté dni* [Pure Days], did not appear until 1990 signalling not only artistic, but personal changes in her life.

Although this collection, too, was well-received Haugová’s mature style is not fully evident until *Pralaska* [Ancient Love] in 1991 when she began to delve deep into the history and prehistory of humankind, resisting the obvious attractions of a newly available west. As well as penetrating the layers of history Haugová’s work strips away the layers of personality to reach towards a notion of spirit. There is also an exploration of feminine sensibility in archetypal human relationships mediated through the expression of erotic love:

... shore, a crumbled wall,
the emerald skin of a dead lizard, a jewel in the damp
sea sand... flower of no-one... a lap half-asleep...
slowly dropping anchor... with their lips girls un-
steadily touch death, old Roman glass... regularly
first blood darkens on their thighs...
they kiss the head of a twelve year old
Christ

(“Tight Mask”)

The concept of masks possibly derived from the actors in Greek drama is central to her work. It is as though Haugová’s rejection of the anecdotal nature of her earlier work has led to a desire to reach down through surfaces—an almost archæological strategy which also has a parallel in the work of her contemporary, Ivan Laučík.

Pralaska introduces the persona of “Alfa” whose presence dominates the collection and who recurs throughout subsequent collections until the present. The twelve part “Pradavna” [Ancient] opens with language of great simplicity and power:

I am Alfa.

In ancient sorrow

my body bathes,

wounded stars

depart,

sleep will caress

my face only

with the last digit of a finger...

Haugová would seem to be staking out a feminist space which includes an ambivalent relationship with God:

She does not pray. What she sees and knows

is too much for God. She has to bear it alone.

She holds on to loneliness, the world, morning...

(“To Withstand Evil”)

Other elements in this collection include poems derived from the classical world and biblical worlds: *Œdipus Rex*, *Pompeii*, *Salomé* and *Cassandra*—the last as the prophetess destined not to be believed and an important identity in Haugová's work.

In *Nostalgia* (1993), which many regard as containing her finest work, Haugová's technical resources have become more complex, and there is great variety in the textual forms that she employs. Classical reference now homes in on ancient technologies rather than ancient myths as in "Encaustics":

shadows

with which we awaken their

severity is not fixed for posterity

but in knowing the border on which

we layer recurring dreams, rainbows, predictions of routes...

There are a number of “Genotexts” scattered throughout the collection where the standard sentence is dispensed with and phrases are juxtaposed together:

....tot-ter-ing records.

lacework of dried blood;

net of waters with a thousand entrances.

(“Genotext I”)

The Genotexts demonstrate the notion of the poem as a fragment extracted from a larger context, perhaps history, collective consciousness, one's own inner colloquy with the world.

Nostalgia contains two tremendous religious poems "Žalmy" [Psalms] and "Requiem" for the artist Peter Ondreičko and there is the extraordinary title poem which explores the processes of memory:

Rejected even before utterance,
the light fever of childhood;
the persistence of memory? It marches up
the stairs it descends by.
A noble slenderness
of beloved bodies; islands
of first-fruitless pains;
an un-touching.
A tenderness which works
the silver of our hearts.

Haugová's subsequent collections, *Dáma s jednorožcom* [Lady with Unicorn] (1995), *Alfa centauri* (1997) and *Křídlatá žena* [Winged Woman] (1999), consolidate the gains made in *Pralaska* and *Nostalgia*. Syntactically, most of Haugová's work has moved away from the standard sentence towards the juxtaposition of fragmentary phrases becoming paratactic in utterance. Her poems, although carefully constructed, have something of the character of notebook entries, often dated or dedicated to an individual.

Double-mouth. Unvoiced speech. You wish to close
what should remain open. Unknown languages wander
through us.

Fitting tightly to the limits of escaping rays.

("Alfa Centauri")

A syntactic parallel might be with the work of Geoffrey Hill particularly in *Mercian Hymns* and *Canaan* although Haugová does not share Hill's animus against the contemporary world. This is not surprising from a poet whose early work appeared under the Communist regime and whose work of the last ten years might have been classified as hopelessly formalist and possibly tinged with reactionary tendencies (for instance, there are clear references to Yeats and Pound).

Haugová's forays into prehistory, the classical and Christian legacies are all of a piece with her radical approach to language. The "word" is frequently invoked as an antithesis to "body" or indeed in commerce with the body and frequently words are split apart especially at line endings to exploit the expressive and word-play opportunities in Slovak prefixes. Some of these are highly resistant to translation:

Childhood; are-there-games? Di-
vided into words: vivacious, important non-
sense, fleeing into darkness

("Nostalgia")

The device of accumulating phrases rather than balancing sentence against sentence has resulted in an individual punctuation. In the interview recorded at the end of the collection, *Alfa Centauri*, Haugová describes her preference for certain punctuation: "three dots ... , I love the semi-colon; I love the colon: commas, no, although I don't know exactly how it happened." In *Pralaska*, Haugová also began to use lower case rather than capital letters at the beginning of sentences. The effect of this is that sentence flows into sentence, the cæsura becomes a matter of continual negotiation and thus the meaning of the text also. Haugová is an experimental poet although this is something she might reject: "I do not think that I am an innovator in poetry. If there is anything new in my work it is the sense of theme not the sense of language. And the feminine voice is perhaps a little more expressive than is commonly found. But now it's as if something in me is played out".

Indeed there is now a sense that Haugová is beginning to repeat herself and her two most recent collections, *Atlas piesku* [A Map of Sand] (2001) and *Zavretá zábrada (reči)* [The Closed Garden (Colloquies)] (2001), pose formidable problems for readers who are unacquainted with her previous work. *Atlas piesku* draws from the poetry of Georg Trakl and Paul Celan, the technology of photography and extensive word play. A persona, Sebastiana, opens a gate into the closed garden of the self through the use of a translingual (at least with regard to the Trakl persona to which it relates) pun with the prefix "seba-" [self-]. Familiar Haugová motifs are deployed; gardens, bodies, wings, labyrinths, the W(w)ord, pre-history, angelic presences and

Haugová's punctuating procedures have become more idiosyncratic with the innovation, if it can be called that of reversed parentheses, “)(,” which might be intended to create the sense of the main body of her own texts as incomplete parentheses themselves into which)other realities(intrude. *Zavretá zábrada* gives more cause for concern about the increasingly self-referential nature of Haugová's work. Here untitled texts are infested with conventional parentheses almost on every page. It is like gazing down on lawn where the dandelions are in danger of taking over. Slovaks are inclined to think of a garden as a place to grow fruit and vegetables, and the well-kept lawn is regarded as an English eccentricity. However, the cultural difference can't be extended to poetry. It is difficult to keep faith with texts continuously disrupted by insertions often of a recondite nature. Alfa is reduced to a fugitive mention:

I am here again (Alfa) in the mould
of daily opaque somnambulism

It is probably too early to pass judgment on these latest collections especially on a poet whose work shows steady innovation from collection to collection and who works deliberately in a symbolist tradition where motifs must recur. Haugová remains by far Slovakia's most inventive poet.