The Bloody Sonnets of Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav

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Nad zemou v letku utkvel na krielach
posupný démon, v pravej hlaveň vojny,
z nejž, zmáchav ňou, plam šľahol dvojný, trojný…
a k zemi vzal sa splývať v pramenách,

iskriaci síru, meteorov prach —
Rod ľudský dlho spal už nepokojný:
i strhol sa! — ziv sudbinej vtom trojny
zrel, úžas v očiach, v údoch mrazný strach.

Kam dieť sa, Bože!? (zúpel). K spáse vrátka
kde? rokľa v bralách, zápač pralesa
či morská choboť, loďka čo jak vratká
za útočište?… Ale kryje sa
nadarmo v svete; všade ľudská jatka:
či tvŕď či oceán či nebesá!
(*Krvavé sonety*, 3)

A dreadful demon soared above the earth,
holding a warhead; resting on his wings,
he shook the weapon – two, three flames came forth…
then flew off downwards to corrupt the springs,

scattering sulphur sparks and meteor dust.
The race of men, who'd long had troubled dreams,
was torn awake! – they saw fate's jaws wide-thrust;
shock filled their eyes and terror gripped their limbs.

Where to take flight!? What exit, Lord? (they wailed).
What fissure in the rocks, or strip of shore,
or jungle shade, or ship (however frail)
for refuge? None! – no cover any more!
The human slaughterhouse is everywhere:
on earth, upon the ocean, in the air!
(*Bloody Sonnets*, No. 3)

In reply to the question I am often asked, why the Slovak poet Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav and his *Bloody Sonnets* are important, I can say in a nutshell: because in 1914 he had imagination enough to know that the world would go on fire.

The image comes from a dialogue set in Vienna in the year 1918, between a "well-adjusted citizen" and someone who might be the anti-war poet and journalist Karl Kraus:

THE OPTIMIST (trying to light a cigarette): Strange, none of the matches are working.
THE GRUMBLER: It's because of the ultimatum to Serbia.
THE OPTIMIST: I said, none of the matches are working!
THE GRUMBLER: I say, it's because we have set the world on fire!
THE OPTIMIST: There's a connection there as well?
THE GRUMBLER: Precisely! Nothing we touch has remained unchanged, either internally or externally, in value or in price. If in 1914 there had been a statesman who had had enough imagination to know that not a single match would light anymore in 1918, he would not have let this happen to the world! He would have foreseen the war he had to declare, as well as the peace in which the ever-mounting misery will only increase.

(Karl Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind,* tr. Patrick Healy, November Editions, Amsterdam, 2016. Act V, Scene 49, p. 508)

If the statesmen of 1914 could not see what was coming, the poets of 1914 were no better (a point Karl Kraus made often and eloquently). Hviezdoslav was different. He was not the only anti-war poet in those early months, but to the best of my knowledge he was by far the most impressive. I cannot find any other poet, from Ireland all the way east to Russia, who matches the height of awareness of the *Bloody Sonnets*.

Dank dem Schicksal, Volk in Waffen, / Deutschland gegen alle Welt! ("People in arms, give thanks to Fate: / Germany against all the world!"), cried the outstanding symbolist poet Richard Dehmel. *Now God be thanked, who has matched us with his hour, / And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,* said England's Rupert Brooke. These are representative responses from the opening months of the war. But for Hviezdoslav, such responses were a betrayal of the culture of Europe, both religious and secular. They made a mockery of Christianity and enlightenment alike.

Not in 1918, not in the 1920s or 30s, but right at the beginning, in August-September 1914, Hviezdoslav understood that the First World War was catastrophic for civilisation, ruinous for culture. He set out to describe what it meant, and to think how it could be, that *"nation hurled itself on nation, massed, / intending murder, rabid to destroy"* (Sonnet 4). In a sequence of 32 son-

nets he presents a many-sided argument and speculation. The sonnet form, with its concentrated energy and powerful focus on one or two themes, proves ideal for what he wants to do.

His work is ingeniously structured. One can think of it as two distinct movements, each of 16 sonnets. In the first part he builds up a picture of the war's destructive impact, firstly on human lives and material achievements, and secondly on religious and secular culture. Subsequently, from the seventeenth sonnet onwards, he explores the possibilities of hope, the prospects of a better future. Hviezdoslav hopes that even from this frightful war some just and soundly-based social and international order may emerge – though he also unflinchingly faces the possibility that the eventual peace may be little more than the war's continuation, a *Vae Victis* ("woe to the vanquished!") peace, which in time may prove equally to be "woe to the victors!" (Sonnet 18). This pursuit of hope in no way compromises the integrity of his protest against the war: indeed, for a representative of an oppressed nationality not to entertain such thoughts would scarcely be human.

Alternatively, one could argue that rather than two major themes there are actually four, roughly represented by four blocks of 8 sonnets each. The complete sequence, however, forms an integral unit. Each sonnet has its special place in the whole, and here I will concentrate on the first three, which launch the intense enquiry. The opening sonnet broaches the theme of *"a song of blood"*, but then keeps exclusively to blood in positive senses: a girl's blushes, the flushed face of a dreaming child, an inspired prophet's glowing brow; blood that is elaborately stored in the body *"like rare champagne"*, blood that powers all constructive work... Only the very last word in the final line (*mäsiari,* "butchers") makes a sudden discord and rouses ominous thoughts: *"Do such things ever cross the butchers' minds?"*

The second sonnet tells us immediately that beautiful or beneficial blood will not be the poet's theme. Nevertheless, reluctant to abandon it, he continues his positive train of thought for most of the poem. Dynamic blood is here associated with the key image of grain-growing (the imagery of sowing and reaping corn recurs throughout the sequence). Hviezdoslav's goes on to associate blood imaginatively with the sun. But reluctant though he is, he must come to his real theme, and in a few explosive lines at the end he reveals it: he will sing of blood spilled in rage, blood that flows like a furious torrent, literally as a natural disaster.

My principal concern here is Sonnet No. 3, an essential building block in the structure. To appreciate it we need to see the larger picture of the war poetry, which erupted in August 1914 "*like a storm and a Spring flood*", to quote the German anthologist Carl Busse.

Leading poets, all across Europe, succumbed to the war fever. Guillaume Apollinaire joined the army of France, though he was not a French

citizen and did not have to. Richard Dehmel joined the army of Germany, though at fifty-one he was over the age limit for conscription. Francis Ledwidge of Ireland, where conscription did not apply, voluntarily enlisted in the British Army and wrote a recruiting poem ("The Call to Ireland") where he presented the war as a necessary job of *ploughing*. Anton Wildgans of Austria, unable to serve because of a cardiovascular complaint, compensated with a blood-curdling war poem entitled *Vae Victis* (whose sentiments Hviezdoslav explicitly rejects in two of the Bloody Sonnets). Even Rainer Maria Rilke contributed to the fever with his *Fünf Gesänge (*"Five Songs"). The list of the gifted poets who fed the war enthusiasm is long, but their work represented just a tiny fraction of the truly stupendous mass of "war poetry", most of which was clichéd doggerel.

Never before or since has there been such an explosion of verse-making. One German anthologist reckoned that in August 1914 alone a million and a half poems had been composed in the German language. These multitudes of poets reaffirmed some traditional themes, and not least the theme of God. During the course of the nineteenth century most of the leading poets had distanced themselves from Christianity (this was true of England no less than Germany), but in the war poetry of 1914 the Christian God made a comeback. He was thanked for sending the war as a gift, as in the lines quoted earlier from Rupert Brooke: And above all, God was recruited or conscripted to lend his essential support to this or that country's war effort. I may quote an eloquent couplet from an early war poem by an English clergyman, Rev. R. Ross: *Defend the Right, Thou God of Might! Our "God of Battles" be! / O'erwhelm our foes, we humbly pray, in air, on land, on sea*.

Hviezdoslav, who despite some personal crises had remained a committed Christian, considered all this an abomination. In order to situate the war imaginatively he drew on the richest source of negative images in European culture: Hell. For him, the war was in no sense divinely inspired or aided. On the contrary, it was infernal.

In Sonnet 3 the machinator who gives the initial impulse for war is a frightful demon. He is an authentically military figure, participating in armed action. However, he fights not in support of any of the combatants but against all of them. Shooting at mankind from the air, he seeks to infect and destroy the most precious sources of human life.

And it is interesting that he is a flier, a kind of military pilot. Here, where the Bloody Sonnets effectively begin, the poet seems to look even beyond the current war to future wars, to a horror which comes down to our own times. Today, when we read the closing lines of Sonnet 3 (*The human slaughterhouse is everywhere: / In earth, upon the ocean, in the air*), we can hardly fail to think of what was then still in gestation. In fact, the aerial campaigns got underway only in 1915, though they had been in preparation for several years. Newspapers had carried articles on air force development. Hviezdo-

slav assuredly had read such reports, and his powerful imagination could project the information he found there.

World War I did indeed introduce the most frightful form of modern warfare, aerial bombardment. By 1916 its potential was already evident: in at least two instances the airmen killed nearly one hundred people in single missions. But only in World War II, and in subsequent wars in Korea and Vietnam/Cambodia, did it truly make "a human slaughterhouse". Within the few years before I write these lines we have seen the cruel bombardment of the city of Aleppo, which in our own politico-cultural sphere was widely condemned, and the still more cruel levelling of the city of Raqqa, which in our politico-cultural sphere was scarcely condemned by anyone (an ominous acceptance). – Hviezdoslav, then, begins his portrayal of the war with an image of genius, an image that transcends even the great catastrophe which provoked his poetry. Those who read the *Bloody Sonnets* attentively will find them a disquieting experience.

The movement of Hviezdoslav's verse is more unsettled than in the classical sonnet. There are abrupt alterations of perspective, voice and manner. Sonnet 3 begins with the activity of the demon, who produces mighty and spectacular material effects but (like any military pilot) has no relevant feelings. By contrast, when in line 6 we turn to the human race, their humanity is immediately expressed in feeling: they are vaguely troubled, then suddenly shocked, and on awakening to the full reality of war, appalled. A burst of direct speech follows, a frantic questioning and appeal to God for a way out of disaster. This is followed by the brief, clear and uncompromising response of the narrator, that no such escape exists.

Hviezdoslav ably sustains the difficult rhyming scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet, and in many fluent quatrains and perfect individual lines he shows that the stately, assured movement of the classical sonnet is not beyond him. However, in most of the *Bloody Sonnets* there are marked sudden changes of pace, rhythm and sound, and the movement is complicated by interjections, cries, exclamatory utterances, parentheses, prayers, phrases embodying gesture, interrupted trains of thought, strings of questions... All of this can be justified in terms of the movement of thought. None of it is gratuitous, and none of it halts the powerful onward sweep of the poetry. I would say that here we have a distinctively modern style of utterance: Hviezdoslav, who is often thought of as un-modern and certainly disdained the literary fashions of his time *("I do not understand the decadents, symbolists, verists and futurists")*, discovers it originally for himself.

I have tried to convey at least the intensely earnest statement of this unknown lawyer, living in a small remote town in Austria-Hungary, who defended the best traditions of Europe as he understood them: Christian humanism, constructive work, democracy, humane social policy, tolerance,

avoidance of bloodshed, mutual respect of nationalities and their free development... All of this was threatened by the nihilistic plunge into violence. And again, the attentive reader of the *Bloody Sonnets* will think of much that long outlasted the immediate impact, or even the living memory, of World War I.