

## MARCUS MARULUS SPALATENSIS\*

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Let me start with words from a letter written five hundred and ten years ago, on 19 July 1501, and discovered only recently (recently at least from a scholarly perspective), in 1991. The letter was sent from Split to Venice. The sender was Marko Marulić, fifty-one years old at the time. The addressee was his friend and compatriot Jerolim Cipiko. In the postscript, Marulić wrote:

Fatto ho una opereta in lingua nostra materna, per rima, distinta in sie libri, nela qual se contien la historia de Judit et Olopherne, fecila questa quadragesima passata et la dedicai a misser lo Primicerio nostro. Conposta è more poetico, venite et vedetila, direte che ancora la lingua schiaua ha el suo Dante. Troppo presumere me fa baldanza che ho con vui. Iterum valete.

I have written a small piece in our mother tongue, in rhyme; it is divided into six books and tells the story of Judith and Holofernes. It was finished last Lent and dedicated to our honorable Dean. It is composed as a poem should be. Come, see it, and you will say that the Slavic language too has its Dante. Such presumption is due to the self-confidence that I have when I'm around you. Goodbye once again.

This document is fascinating on several levels. First, the work that Marulić is writing about is obviously his most famous epic, *Judita (Judith)* – and we get a chance to peer over the author's shoulder during a time that will turn out to be key to his modern-day fame. Second, the letter shows a Croatian, a Dalmatian, writing to inform his compatriot that he wrote a work *in lingua nostra materna*;

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he does so in precisely these words, in *Italian*. Third, there is the bold comparison: *ancora la lingua schiaua ha el suo Dante*. And, almost at the same time, there is a *consciousness* that the comparison is bold; if you remember the beginning of the postscript, *una opereta in lingua nostra materna*, and the end, *troppo presumere me fa baldanza*, you'll see that the person who wrote this is very well aware of all the implications, that he has thought about it. And that he must be really, really sure of what he is saying.

Let me read a few verses from the *opereta composta more poetico*, to demonstrate what a 500 years old Croatian epic sounds like.

Dike ter hvaljen'ja presvetoj Juditi,  
 smina nje stvoren'ja hoću govoriti;  
 zato ću moliti, Bože, tvoju svitlost,  
 ne htij mi kratiti u tom punu milost.

What kind of a man wrote this, and how did he come to write it? This is a story that I'll try to tell today.

### **The city of Split**

The world has changed in a thousand ways since Marulić's times. A time traveller from today visiting Split in 1501 would have a hard time getting herself or himself understood, linguistically (modern standard Croatian is considerably different from Marulić's Chakavian) as well as culturally. In Marulić's time the systems of living, behaviour, trade, governance looked nothing like those of present-day Split. And yet, one thing would gradually become clear: that Marulić's Split and modern Split share the same past. And, to a degree, they share also the way they react to their past. In Split of 1501 as in Split of 2012 the past is unavoidable, but it is not something the citizens admire for sentimental reasons. In Split, where the past is all around you, you use it to move on. You use it as a springboard.

The past of Split is primarily Diocletian's Palace. The city is the Palace, that is the first thing you will learn when you come to Split, that was probably the first thing visitors learned from medieval times onwards. The palace is the one the aging Roman emperor Diocletian built for himself in his homeland, about twelve hundred years before Marulić's time, sometime around the year 300. As the Roman Empire fell apart, the palace became less and less a residence, and more and more a shelter, a fortress for insecure and endangered citizens from nearby Salona. Eventually, between 600 and 650, people started refurbishing the emperor's palace and making it into a medieval city, in the process leaving untouched only the main square, the Peristyle. Diocletian's Mausoleum became a Christian cathedral (but you can still see the interior decoration of the ancient Romans there), the temple

of Jupiter became a baptistery. The past was not forgotten or done away with. It was simply repurposed.

So when, as the physicist Arthur Iberall once put it, Europe underwent a transition not unlike that of water changing to a completely different state, from fluid to crystal – that is, when a European network of towns came once again into existence, to persist more or less intact until the nineteenth century and the rise of the industrial metropolis – the city of Split was ready. It had something to build on, to develop, to remember. And because the city, like the whole of Dalmatia, was close to Italy, it had immediate access to the very source of all the new ideas, ways, and technologies we will later call the Renaissance. Dalmatia itself also had something to offer to the quickly growing Italian Renaissance cities: the plentiful material resources of the Balkans and a cheaper local labour force (at one point, Italian cities on the Western Adriatic shore had to protect their shipbuilding, by laws and decrees, from competing shipyards on the Eastern shores).

So in 1450, when Marulić was born, three years before the fall of Constantinople, the Renaissance was in full swing, and could be felt in the city of Split as well. The city, for more than a generation under Venetian rule and protection, seems to have been doing fine as one of the well-positioned Dalmatian points of contact between Italy and the Balkans. The citizens of Split had enough money to start building a new belfry for the cathedral, to hire Italian-taught architects and sculptors for their public and private works, to secure good teachers for the communal school, to value not only business and the good life, but beauty, learning, and education as well.

## Father

For, as the saying goes, *noblesse oblige*. If you pretend to a share of the glorious past (which is at the same time the new culture, culture of the Renaissance), you have to deserve that share: you have to learn about the past, to master the skills which made it glorious.

One of those ready to learn, ready to embrace new humanistic values, was Nikola Marulić, Marko's father. Today we can see traces of his appreciation and readiness on pages of an illuminated manuscript codex of Cicero's *De officiis* copied by Nikola in 1440, ten years before his oldest son Marko was born, *sibi et suis*, as it says in the colophon, »for his own and his family's and friends' use« (the codex is today in Venice, Biblioteca Marciana). Remember, Cicero's views on the best way to live and behave are addressed to his son, and his son's name is Mark, and the first words of the *De officiis* are »Quamquam te, Marce fili«.

## Education

Nikola's son Marko, born into a noble and well-to-do family (from his will it turns out that he possessed almost a third of the real estate on which the modern city of Split is built), received a sound humanist education in his hometown. One of his teachers, the Italian Tideo Acciarini, would later move on to Dubrovnik, there to teach literature to a host of future Latin authors such as Ilija Crijević, Karlo Pucić and Jakov Bunić. What was humanist education in Split like? We can guess at it from a set of Marulić's school exercises. In the Glasgow Manuscript, discovered in 1997, among other Marulić Latin poems there is a cycle of epigrams which retell stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in skilful brevity. It seems, however, that Marulić never went to a university – to a certain extent, he was self taught, learning most of what he knew from books, never travelling around much. So, in contrast with his later cosmopolitan publishing successes (his Latin books were read throughout Europe), Marulić remained in Split all his life, with only occasional visits to Venice. These trips mixed business and pleasure: customs documents testify that Marulić sailed to Venice with agricultural produce to be sold there, but his library proves that he must have spent most of his profits in Venetian bookshops. Later, he was able to find there publishers for his writings.

## Commentaries

These publishers were interested in Marulić because of his two main talents. The first one was his mastery of language, in the first place Latin – it was the *lingua franca* and the medium of learned communication of his day – but also Croatian and Italian (although we have just a couple of his Italian poems and letters, we know that he translated Petrarch and Dante into Latin and Croatian).

His other talent was an ability to select, rephrase and reorganise. Such an ability may not seem grand from a Romantic »creative genius« point of view, but it will be warmly appreciated by any age which has to cope with information overload, as well as by any age interested in »mashups« and »remixes«. The age of the Renaissance, with its rediscovery of classical civilizations and its revolution brought about by Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (a work by Ann Blair on managing scholarly information before the modern age bears the telling title *Too Much to Know*), fits this description well. And so, of course, does ours.

One tool among many used by Marulić to process information was the *Repertorium*, one of his commonplace books (he had several, but only this specialized one has survived). The *Repertorium* is a collection of quotations, structured around a list of lemmas, ideas and notions which he considered important. Its alphabet begins with *Agricola, agricultura; Amicus, amicitia; Auxilium; Aduersa fortuna; Ars, artes; Aqua; Audacia, audaces; Appetitus;*

*Auarus, auaritia*. Under these headings we find quotations taken from some 40 authoritative and encyclopaedic works and authors, such as Pliny, Strabo, Valerius Maximus, Jerome, the Bible. It is important to note that Marulić does not always copy a quotation *verbatim* – sometimes he just notes the page and theme, sometimes he paraphrases. In this way too a humanist scholar made the idea his own, assimilated it.

Commentary was another important humanist tool for transforming information back into knowledge. In 2005 my colleague Bratislav Lučin discovered a hitherto unknown Marulić commentary on Catullus. The commentary forms a part of a very famous manuscript: it is contained in a codex from Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Parisinus Latinus 7989. It is from the pages of this book that we know the longest extant chapter of Petronius' *Satyricon*, the so-called *Cena Trimalchionis*. The whole codex was copied probably in Florence in 1423, from a 9th century manuscript discovered by Poggio Bracciolini in Cologne; later, somehow, the codex travelled to Dalmatia, probably to Trogir, but it travelled further from Trogir to Split (and back). However, from at least 1500 to 1510 the Parisinus Latinus (olim Traguriensis) was in Marulić's possession. The scholar from Split used the manuscript as only an owner would: adding to it, correcting it, writing freely on its pages, composing his Catullus commentary. To compile it, Marulić culled information from two printed books – a commentary by Palladio Fosco, published in Venice in 1496 (Fosco taught in several Dalmatian and Istrian cities), and the edition by Girolamo Avanzi, printed by Aldo Manuzio in 1502 (Avanzi also had certain connections with people from Split).

Concurrently with the commentary on Catullus, Marulić compiled another scholarly work on Roman antiquity with the word »commentary« in the title. This is the *In epigrammata priscorum commentarius, A commentary on Ancient Inscriptions*, a commented edition of 141 Roman inscriptions from Rome, Naples, Florence, Milan and other Italian and Adriatic cities. A special section is devoted to inscriptions from Salona (today Solin, 8 km northeast from Split); the ancient neighbour of Split is proudly presented as a »local Rome«. Marulić undoubtedly read some of the inscriptions included in the *De epigrammata in situ*; others he found in contemporary manuscript collections. At the beginning of 16th century there were not many of them, especially not featuring comments; epigraphy as a discipline was still *in statu nascendi*. Compiling his commentary, Marulić proceeded as a scholar of today would have done, borrowing knowledge on antiquity freely from learned secondary sources – humanist antiquarians such as Niccolò Perotti, Pomponio Leto, Giovanni Tortelli. (Since Marulić didn't report the names of these sources, but only the Roman writers cited by his fellow antiquarians, the scope of his borrowing was one of Marulić's many surprises held in store for later researchers.)

## Religion

What I'm telling you here is a bit different from what is usually said about Marko Marulić. In that more common story we start from his masterworks. They fall into two groups: the two books that saw international popularity during the early modern period – the *De institutione bene uiuendi per exempla sanctorum*, or *How to lead a virtuous life according to the examples of the saints* (1507), and the *Evangelistarium* (1516), which, during the 16th and 17th centuries, saw more than thirty editions, as well as translations into Italian, German, Portuguese, French, Czech, Spanish and Icelandic – and the works that mark the beginning of authorship in Croatian literature: *Judita* and various lesser poems in Croatian. A different approach was chosen because I wanted to stress that, for Marulić, creativity and literary arts were not an end in themselves. The *how* was certainly important, but the *what* was even more so; and even information itself was relevant only if it was about things that matter.

One such »thing that matters« was for Marulić, as we have seen, classical antiquity, regarded by the Renaissance – both in words and in material culture – as a lost superior civilisation. But another such thing, and the most important, was religion. For Marulić, religion is the Bible, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the duty to obey the commandments and to teach and persuade others to embrace the Christian way of life. In this regard Marulić is also a man of the time that would be marked by the Protestant Reformation (remember that Marulić's *Evangelistarium* was published a year before Luther's 95 theses), by European wars of religion, and, of course, by the long-continued strife with the Ottoman Empire: an important part of Marulić's works in Croatian and in Latin consists of appeals for a united military campaign against the Turks, culminating in an open letter to Pope Adrian VI, printed in Rome in 1522. By holding the view that one's life can and should be built on the foundation of the Bible, Marulić was surprisingly similar to another important religious author of his time, the sixteen-years-younger Erasmus (whose works the author from Split read carefully and praised profusely, even though the praise was censored after his death).

## Religion and literature

Now the circle should close: starting from Marulić the poet, I have sketched Marulić the citizen of Split, Marulić the scholar and philologist, and Marulić the religious writer. But how, exactly, did a scholar from a city in Dalmatia manage to reconcile his interest in poetry with his duty to call or recall people to Christian belief and practice?

In the years 1500-1517, having completed his great religious compilations, waiting for these books to be typeset and published on the other side of the

Adriatic, Marulić composed two epic poems. One, *Judita*, was, as we have seen, in Croatian – it is the work we began with, and now we can understand better both why *Judita* has a Biblical theme (Biblical stories are the most important ones, because they contain the Truth) and how its truth is perceived not only as literal, but also as allegorical. Biblical scholars are trained to read and interpret the Bible in ways beyond the literal. So the story of Judith, who by God's grace and against all odds liberates a besieged city, was told in Croatian »through a glass darkly«; it was told from a city in a warzone (during the last decades of Marulić's life the Turks would be at Klis, a key mountain pass just a few kilometers from Split) to a country long anguishing over the Ottoman advances.

Marulić's other epic poem, however, was in Latin. The *Dauidias* was obviously intended as an international counterpart to *Judita*, as an ambitious attempt to meet humanistic demands for Christian Latin poetry, »classical in form, but Biblical in content«, such as was to be written just a few years later by Marco Girolamo Vida and Jacopo Sannazaro. Here, however, Marulić's luck with publishing ran out. Something happened – we still don't know what – and the 14-book epic that presented David's life as a prefiguration and an allegory of Christ and the Church (to the poem Marulić added a detailed self-interpretation *Tropologica Dauidiadis expositio*, listing all the parallels between the story of David and the New Testament), the poem dedicated to a very important person, to Cardinal Domenico Grimani – well, the work remained in manuscript, to find its way somehow to the Biblioteca Nazionale of Turin, and to be published for the first time only in 1954.

So, let us now ask once again, slightly rephrasing: why did Marulić write on Christian themes not only in prose, but also in poetry? It seems that all of his life Marko Marulić felt, and lived, a specific dichotomy. He saw poetry (which, for him, was mainly classical poetry, represented by works of Virgil, Catullus, Lucretius) as opposed to religion – and Marulić, like a lot of people in his time, tried to reconcile the two, to somehow make beauty true, and truth beautiful. Poetry and Theology: which can come nearer the Truth? In his last attempt at an answer, in the posthumously published *Dialogus de Hercule a Christicolis superato* (*Dialogue about Hercules overcome by the followers of Christ*), the scholar from Split eventually – and, we feel, not without qualms – chose the side of Theology, demoting Poetry to a support role. And yet, at one point, he wanted to be recognized as the Croatian Dante. And in this he succeeded.

It is not by accident that there is more extant documentary material, there are more manuscripts (including autographs) and more books connected with Marulić than with any other Croatian writer before 1700. Throughout later times, people cherished Marulić's memory, believing that he had had the luck, skill and talent with words and knowledge – words Latin and Croatian and just words in general, knowledge classical and Christian as well as local and imaginative – to achieve something really good. Something that we should share, and *deserve* to share.