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## IVAN SLAMNIG AND MARA'S CROWN

The author deals with the relationship between creativity and tradition in Slamnig's radio-play from 1976. He analyses the interweaving of mythic, folklore, literary, historical and political elements in the play and explains the cause of its lack of success at the *Prix Futura* Festival in Berlin.

Keywords: radio-play, myth, folklore, literature, politics, Croatian history

I have been motivated to write this text by the death of the poet.

Its theme is Slamnig's radio-play *Truncatio ili Marina kruna* [Truncatio or Mara's Crown], premiered on July 16, 1976 on Radio-Zagreb's drama programme (Director, Zvonimir Bajsić; Music, Jelka Kušelj; Sound Engineer, Krešo Osman; Cast: Ivan Slamnig, Maja Bošković-Stulli, Branimir Žganjer, Neda Bajsić, Zvonimir Črnko, Clare MacGregor, Marija Tereza Robert, Milivoj Telećan, Ivan Kušan; editor-dramaturge Rosa Lozica).

My intention is to analyse the complex relationship between creativity and tradition: both in this excellent radio-play, indicative in understanding Slamnig's opus, and in the historical process in general. I shall do so in the following way: *Truncatio or Mara's Crown* is largely a collective accomplishment, primarily the outcome of congenial co-operation between writer and director, but also of the participation of an unusual team made up of members from diverse Humanistic professions – actors, sound engineers, authors, scholars, and translators along with specialists in music, literature, and linguistics. The synchronic collective creation of the radio-play blends with tradition similar to the diachronic collective creation of the romance about Mara's Crown throughout Croatian history. Forces that have become consolidated throughout the centuries are mirrored in the truncated abbreviations of the condensed and scintillating radiophonic model. These are the antinomies between myth and history, paganism and Christianity, popular and elite culture, the domestic and the international, patriotism and xenophobia, emotion and

rationalisation, identification and distancing, everyday life and science, orality and literature, folklore and its political exploitation, the past and the - ever new - present.

*Truncatio* or *Mara's Crown* is an open-ended work, a radio-play that cannot be definitely anchored in the pages of Slamnig's collected works. Moreover, a full transcript has never been made – and it would have been very difficult to set it down on paper. This is not a matter of a syncretism of an audio implementation or of authorial symbioses. Rather, it is a matter of polysemy, of a wild tectonics of meaning in a clash with context. The radio station's archive houses only an incomplete script that was subsequently filed, *pro forma*, and which did not serve as the textual model in production of the broadcast. Bajsić wrote his director's comments directly onto the margins of Slamnig's prose, published in journal *Forum*. The radio-play was actually created in conversation at the editing table. *Truncatio* continues to exist and be altered in the radio medium – every listening sprouts new variants, in the very manner of folklore. The ancient magic of *Mara's Crown* is also effective on air.

I shall be frank: I think it would be best to switch on the tape-recorder and to listen to *Truncatio*, but there is not enough time for that.<sup>1</sup> So I shall briefly, in a drastically truncated form, present my variant of the story of Slamnig and *Mara's Crown*. As happens in folklore, I heard the tale from my mother who participated herself in the play as dramaturge. I have tried to reconstruct and interpret what she failed to tell me – and what I did not find in her notes.

These are the basic facts about *Mara* and her crown from the pen of M. Bošković-Stulli:

Croatian writers tried very early on to provide a historically allegorical and mythic interpretation to the lovely popular romance: the song about *Mara's Crown* (- A gentle breeze blew / a gentle breeze from the Levant...-). When the breeze carries off the *Crown* (head-wreath) of a girl in the *kolo* circle-dance, she promises to wed the one who returns it to her, but is deeply disappointed when she sees it brought back by a Romany or a Black Moor. Pavao Ritter Vitezović had already given an early interpretation of the song as being allegorical in terms of public law, believing *Mara* to be the daughter of the last Trpimirović, the exiled consort of King Koloman. Baltazar Krčelić thought that *Mara* was the daughter of King Stjepan. The 19th century historians, Klaić and Smičiklas, continued to search for the royal persons concealed behind the names in the song about the ostensibly lost *Crown* of Croatia. In our century, *Mara* has been "a personification" to J. Modestin, "of Croatia itself, which is in mourning for its lost crown". Petar Grgec subjected this interpretation to expert criticism, although he finally succumbed to the most ominous myth of our time: *Mara* was

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<sup>1</sup> The text was read at the *Krleža Festival* scholarly conference in Osijek in December, 2001. It has been published in Croatian (see Lozica 2002).

"the faithful daughter of her birthplace and the guardian of the racial purity of her nation" (Bošković-Stulli 1999:156).

The scope of a more detailed folkloristic commentary on Mara, the crown and the head-wreath, and on Slamnig, Bajsić, Petar Grgec and Maja Bošković-Stulli would excessively encumber this paper. Therefore, I shall limit myself only to the essential. It is not possible to interpret unequivocally the text of the popular song about Mara's Crown. All poetic statements are, of course, stratified and polysemic, but the problem here is even more complex. The song about Mara's Crown is not the work of a single author; it is a folklore work that has lived for centuries, changing performers and audiences. Moreover, the song lives in at least two media, the oral and the written: as a performance and as a notation. It is sung in the oral medium, and references in the text to the *kolo*-dance, the crown/head-wreath and marriage make us think that this was probably a marriage/ritual song that was sung to dance and that survived – as a fragment – its early ritual/customary function and transferred to the secular ballad/romance genre. By its assumed departure from pre-Christian ritual function, the song was desacralised and its partly preserved text became somewhat incomprehensible in its new context. The mythic stratum has been forgotten: Mara, who had, perhaps, once been the innocent virginal sister/wife of a divine pagan hero could have transformed into a secular, historical Croatian queen – through the royal personage of the Christian Mary. The dark personage of the Moor could well have been that divine young pagan king who returns from the Netherworld and, unrecognised, marries his own sister (Belaj 1998:349), later turning into an historical Croatian enemy outside the mythic context (an Arab, Venetian, or Hungarian – as the respective social and political situation demanded). It is difficult to distinguish the historical Crown from the mythic head-wreath.

Briefly, what probably happened to the song of Mara's Crown is what usually happened with similar pre-Christian segments of tradition. The texts, actions and personages who have managed to survive Christianisation are in a constant search for new meanings. Maintaining tradition, each new generations tries to interpret early enigmatic symbols. It is almost a rule that mythic is replaced by historical content, and that historical content is then modified according to the current requirements of the community. I believe that the situation was the same with the song of Mara's Crown. It is impossible to reduce the interpretation of Mara's Crown to the so-called "original" mythic meaning or to any of the later historical explications – the semantic strata interweave and contribute to the song's worth. Truncating the accumulated meanings of the song would mean to truncate and impoverish Croatian literature, but Croatian history, too. We can hear that directly on the tape of the radio-play in the inserted conversation between Maja Bošković-Stulli, the scholar, and the author, Ivan Slamnig. And it is that very connection between the song and the

social community that is the key to understanding Slamnig's work, *Truncatio* or *Mara's Crown*.

The idea of the connection between song and community in Slamnig's opus is not a new one. I shall continue with several excerpts of Slamnig's thinking from the chapter headed "The Song as a Factor of Collective Awareness" in the book *Disciplina mašte* [Discipline of the Imagination]:

A song belongs to a particular community and such song can be defined only in relation to that community. To avoid uncertainty, I shall add that the community to which a song belongs can also be a very small one. /.../ So it is that larger communities – nations, for example – also have awareness. We must not think that the national awareness in question is something abstract or ideal: concrete things such as the railway, the post office, publishing, oral tradition, and the like, all belong to it. It is also just as concrete (or inconcrete) as is the language of a certain group. /.../ The language of a certain group presents to us only the most frequent, most highly disseminated linguistic forms of that group. In that way, it is separated from the individual and belongs to the community as the basic means of communication. It is on that foundation that all forms of group, social and national awareness are constructed.

I think that the right way forward in efforts to define a song – and/or art in general – is to define its relation towards the awareness of the community, its position in the awareness of the community (Slamnig 1965:11).

Nine years later Slamnig literally applied the above theoretic precepts in his literary practice: a short prose piece *Truncatio ili Marina krana* appeared in *Forum* in 1974, the text oscillating in genre between fiction and autobiography (Slamnig 1974). The writer Ivan Kušan, in the role of Ivan Slamnig, the narrator, spoke this text – slightly augmented and adapted to the needs of directing and editing – into the microphone in 1976. The subject matter is simple: the narrator is located in everyday life in Zagreb and has set out on foot from the suburb of Trešnjevka to the Upper Town, mulling over truncation as a literary procedure, that is, about the meaningful understatedness of poetry, about the starting points of popular songs whose remnant is snapped off. His intention is to speak with an expert in the field, Karla Deandreis (alias Maja Bošković-Stulli). At the top of Gundulić Street, the narrator's literary and folklore reflections are interrupted by the switching on of Elliot's united sensibility: although a pedestrian, he checks whether there is a free parking place. Reaching Tomić's Steps, he composes the first stanza of a poem in English about the Croats as self-adhesive postage stamps. By using the urban idiom of a foreign language and slipping into restrained "lowbrow" humour, Slamnig achieves the necessary ironic shift away from the patriotic pathos of the Croatian national issue. The rhythm of the English ditty reminds the narrator of the *Song of the Niebelungs*, but he still decides not to continue

with composing the remaining three stanzas so that this would not lead him away from truncation. Again, as if by chance, everyday life penetrates his thought in the form of two alcoholic stopovers, *Vinkomir* and *Taverna* – which is one more of Slamnig's anticipations, the motivation of the inebriated end to the entire story.

This is followed by recounting the conversation with Karla Deandries. In brief, with feigned erudition borrowed from the scant information he remembers from his schooldays reader, the narrator sets out his thesis that it is not perhaps the royal crown being referred to in the romance about Mara's Crown, but rather a virginal wreath. It was not that the quiet breeze from the Levant erased Croatian sovereignty, but that Mara "was fed up with her maidenhead"; the Black Moor is not the historical enemy of the Croatians, he is the "old frog" from folklore "who has to be kissed that he turn into a handsome prince". That means that the romance about Mara's Crown is not a truncated reverie on the lost Croatian Kingdom, but that it can be reduced to an ordinary international folklore motif... Karla Deandries agrees with him, consulting the Porkkalainen-Borgwallius cross-referenced list of folklore themes (which is a literary recasting of Aarne-Thompson's manual, or, more precisely, only of Thompson's motif index); the crown and the wreath do not lend themselves to simple differentiation, while the wreath is almost always a preparation for marriage. The narrator rejects the offered coffee, but accepts the domestic plum brandy – "after a few glasses, one forgets the original taste"...

This is followed by the inebriated narrator's return to Zagreb everyday life, by way of the Observatory, Felbinger's Steps on Opatovina and to the Chapter area. He continues to ponder truncation, "already now fairly grey with a silvery shine", he sees images of a truncated sparrow, a decapitated frog, a fish with black eyes, but also indulges in suicidal thinking about the truncated line of his own life. This is a self-referential truncation of suicide by tying himself to the column on Jelačić Square, with sub-variants of dying of hunger and of thirst or self-immolation. The text ends with a Marinković-like tramcar that whistles behind the narrator's back and with the indicative patriotic sentence: "I burped again from that plum brandy, to hell with homebrew."

So much concerning the topic. The radio-play follows the same story line, but is considerably supplemented by audio quotations from international and Croatian tradition. Everything that is only mentioned as a comparative example in the text from *Forum* is encrusted in the text and performed in the radio-play, while much more is added.

Already in 1978, Rosa Lozica wrote about the emergence of the radio-play from Slamnig's prose and on the radio production of the author's text in issue No. 5 of the journal *Republika*. She wrote: "It all took place as if in some game, intuition was the main impulse and provocation for all further premises, all that wonderful confusion was, in fact,

participation in liberated and optional artistic manoeuvrings" (Lozica 1978:481). She emphasised the twofold meaning of the "concocted" literary term, truncation, pointing out its function as the main motif of the text, and identifying the focus of events in the dialogue of the poet with the poetic material. Her description of the creation of the broadcast – which I shall summarise here – is direct testimony to the creative co-operation between Slamnig and Bajsić under the conditions of Zagreb radio production. That description helps to cast light on the sequence of their intentions and compromises, which would otherwise be hard to fathom. We learn that the original idea, later abandoned, was to make a radio-play/biographic broadcast about Ivan Slamnig. After the author refused to play himself – since he did not know how to act and spoke too quickly – it was necessary to augment, develop and add text to the original prose piece, which was too short. The new idea was to relocate the poetic fiction in the contemporary reality of the city and in history. However, the actual city ambiances functioned in the audio sense as a counterpoint to the poetic fiction, and not as a *mis en scène* – two parallel levels were created, a two-fold plot. Then the poetry was introduced as the second dramatic character conducting a dialogue in multiple voices with the poet, a dialogue in which the poet was the ironic catalyst. Krčelić's Latin translation and several folk songs – both Croatian and Spanish – songs from Ranjina's collection, and Kranjčević and Nazor, along with Slamnig's poem in English (*Some People May Be Tulips* – about the self-adhesive Croats) also appear in the romance about Mara's Crown in the radio-play. It was possible to explicate the idea solely by *realisation* of the poetic fiction in the sphere of the *imaginary*, so one had simultaneously to objectify the idea and the emergence of the idea. Bajsić did this in free form in which he combined the document, realistic sound, the actors, reciters, and *naturchiks* and, above all, by editing. He effected the biographic-artistic dichotomy of the central character of the play by engaging the writer Kušan as Slamnig's *alter ego* in the role of the narrator, and achieved a twofold distinction (the author's distance) by the recorded conversation between Ivan Slamnig and Maja Bošković-Stulli. The documentary recording and its textual part are Bajsić's authorial work. At key moments, that recording transfers from description into perception and links the sense of the twofold plan of the plot. This is approximately what Rosa Lozica wrote (see Lozica 1978:483-487).

From the aspect of Bajsić's radio-play direction, *Truncatio* was a forerunner and the Croatian parallel to the much more famous *Prague Spring 1984*. There, as here, one has a subtle collage of the documentary and narration, creative interweaving of the repressive political greyness of the present with the nostalgia of memories, literary reminiscences and the mythic foundation (mildly distanced by the author). However, the Zagreb of the 1970s was still not the Prague of the 1980s, although Slamnig's hero did consider his own truncation by self-immolation on Jelačić Square, which would be immediately given an audio link with the death of Jan

Palach in Bajsić's direction. We do not find here the subversive force of Švejk's humour – instead meditative self-irony prevails, the facial grimace.

Satisfied with the production, Bajsić sent *Truncatio or Mara's Crown* to the television and radio festival, Prix Futura, in Berlin. It did not do very well. It seems that no-one there really understood what it was all about. If one compares *Truncatio or Mara's Crown* today with the later international success – and storage in the vault at home – of *Prague Spring 1984*, the case is clear. *Prague Spring...* functioned abroad as a dissident work within the familiar East/West Block division of the world, while the quiet breeze from the Levant scuttled *Mara's Crown*, hiding it from sight in the murky waters of the mediaeval question of Croatia – that Europe had long forgotten. The disappointed Bajsić returned from Berlin, asking himself if his direction could have been more transparent and comprehensible to the uninitiated. Today, it is clear to us that the problem did not lie in the direction or editing of the play – the problem lay in one thousand years of Croatian history... The director had previously provided the answer to the reason of his own lack of success with the radio-play in Berlin, committing it to tape. Slamnig answers us in Ivan Kušan's voice:

I actually wanted to write this in English for the rehearsal, and then I remembered that no [native speakers] of that language could know what *Kossuth mu Lajos* means, and *o boku* at that (we will come to that later).<sup>2</sup>

And we did come to it later, not only in Slamnig's text but also in the historical process. We experienced that international lack of understanding on our own hides during the war years of the 1990s.

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<sup>2</sup> "Kossuth mu Lajos stalo po boku" [Kossuth Lajos written on her starboard] is the last verse of the patriotic poem *Iseljenik* [The Emigrant] written by the Croatian poet, S. S. Kranjčević. Lajos Kossuth (1802-1894) was the leader of the Hungarian Revolution (1848-1849) and an opponent of Croatian independence.

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## IVAN SLAMNIG I MARINA KRUNA

### SAŽETAK

Tema je članka Slamnigova radio-drama *Truncatio ili Marina kruna*, praizvedena 16. srpnja 1976. na programu Radio Zagreba. Autor razlaže suodnos kreacije i tradicije: i u toj izvrsnoj (i za razumijevanje Slamnigova djela indikativnoj) radiodrami i u povijesnome procesu općenito. *Truncatio ili Marina kruna* jest uvelike kolektivno ostvarenje, prije svega plod kongenijalne suradnje pisca i redatelja Zvonimira Bajsića, ali i sudjelovanja neuobičajene ekipe različitih humanističkih profesija. Sinkronijska kolektivna kreacija radijske emisije pretapa se s tradicijom kao dijakronijskom kolektivnom kreacijom romance o Marinoj kruni tijekom hrvatske povijesti. Uočavaju se antinomije mita i historije, poganstva i kršćanstva, narodne i gospodске kulture, domaćeg i internacionalnog, domoljublja i ksenofobije, emocije i racionalizacije, identifikacije i distanciranja, svakodnevice i znanosti, usmenosti i literature, folklor a njegove političke uporabe, prošlosti i (uvijek nove) sadašnjosti. Razotkriva se slijed namjera i kompromisa u kreativnoj suradnji pisca i redatelja u uvjetima zagrebačke radijske produkcije te se pojašnjava izostanak uspjeha radiodrame na festivalu *Prix Futura* u Berlinu.

Ključne riječi: radio-drama, mit, folklor, književnost, politika, hrvatska povijest