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Love, Be a Poem. The Rhetoric of Seduction in the Love Poetry of Vesna Parun

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In the broadest sense, the paper is a discussion of Vesna Parun's love poetry. The basic idea is that, on the one hand, it adheres to the romantic understanding of literature as a representation of the deepest personal feelings, universal truths, and essential values and, on the other hand, that it acts as a confirmation that the experience of love is fundamentally literary, and that literature is a form of unbridled love for linguistic seduction. For this reason, the author's love poetry is not approached as a representation of her private life, love feelings, or relationships, but as a complex relationship between figurative language and a romanticized idea of love. In other words, it is interpreted as a discourse or rhetorical event that simultaneously constructs and deconstructs concepts such as authentic experience, sincere sensitivity, primordial love, or stable identity, and provides an opportunity to raise important ethical and political questions in the face of its ambivalence.

Keywords: love poetry; romantic concept of love and literature; politics of lyric; rhetoric of seduction; deconstruction; Vesna Parun

Love is inexplicable
Poems are, in fact, our false biography
Vesna Parun

To try to write love is to confront the *muck* of language
Roland Barthes

To write about love is to be in love with writing. Vesna Parun was mad about that kind of love. Her love poetry – teeming with images of passionate attachment, blind fascination, insatiable desire, love encounters and partings, joy and sorrow, jealousy and resignation, accusations and forgiveness, anger that transforms into timidity and kindness – is primarily an expression of love for the fact that love becomes a poem. In the poem *Zrnce ganuća (An Ounce of Emotion)* from the collection *Ukleti dažd (Cursed Rain,* 1969), this aspiration is expressed literally: "I wake up and whisper: love, be a poem, / then, I will live with you, giving you to people. / And people will give some of your leaves back to me / when they go for a walk / through the streets / washed by rain" (Parun, 1969, 15). We are introduced to this *leafy love*, the love of which we only know that it is made of leaves, transformed into a metaphor, translated into the rhetoric of a poem, and turned into verses. Vesna Parun's love poetry – of which a lot has been written, extensively and often under the strong influence of biographical criticism[1] – speaks least about the poet's intimacy and sensitivity. Admittedly, it is not even a completely developed idea of possible philosophical, theological, or aesthetic concepts of love. It is primarily a poetic discourse about the complexity of the relationship between language and love, about the inextricable connection between different types of expressions and feelings of love. This

1 Among others, Diana (1955), Tomičić (1959), Čolak (1963), Vereš (1972), Bilosnić (1977), Šoljan (1978), Milićević (1982), Milačić (1995), Lemac (2015), and Knežević (2022) wrote about Vesna Parun's love poetry. "Love would to such extent become her central topic that almost everything else in her opus can be called tangential" (Šoljan, 1978, 83).

discourse conveys, outlines, brings to light the fact that without showing the ecstasy of love, its suffering, rapture, or melancholy beyond signifying, love would stand no chance. "Powerless to utter itself, powerless to speak, love nonetheless wants to proclaim itself, to exclaim, to write itself everywhere" (Barthes, 2001, 77–78). This is how the fundamental feature of Vesna Parun's love poetry could be presented. Due to the inability to write itself, love cannot stop writing itself. The discourse of Vesna Parun's love poetry stems from the tension between the impossibility of shaping love through the language of a poem and the effort to never stop the poetic shaping of love.[2]

Critics, however, have often recognized something completely different in the author's verses about love, relying on the tradition of the romantic understanding of poetry as a credible expression of the most intimate feelings: namely, a testimony "that almost every one of her love poems is about herself" (Tomičić, 1959, 50); that her poetry is "devoid of remnants and rather submerged in the force of the feelings of its creator" (Bilosnić, 1977, 616); that the poet "lived and felt love" and that through her poetry she provided us with a "well-rounded and complete chronicle of her love life" (Milićević, 1982, 20–21). This opulence of the most literal biographical criticism was encouraged by the author herself. In interviews and other texts, she spoke without hesitation about her own love life full of youthful exhilaration, cinematic twists, and bitter disappointments. However, it can be assumed that the wealth of enthusiastic biographical readings of Vesna Parun's love poetry was also favoured by the fact that, of all poetic genres, love poetry was most often perceived

2 The idea of the importance of understanding and interpreting the linguistic mediation of immediate love feelings in Vesna Parun's poetry is also represented by Branislav Oblučar in *Rasijana žudnja – figure ljubavnog diskursa u poeziji Vesne Parun (Scattered Desire – a figure of love discourse in Vesna Parun's poetry).* Oblučar claims that the "reception of her love poetry was dominated by an emphasis on immediacy", while he pays attention "to the procedures by which the impression of the presence of the lyrical voice is mediated." (…) "The discourse of her love poetry is realized on two levels – on the level of poetic images and lyrical symbolism, i.e. love semantics in a broader sense, and on the level of the voice of the lyrical heroine, with which the relationship is often shaped through invocation and address" (Oblučar, 2023, work in manuscript).

as a direct representation, even as a true and honest delineation of the poet's feelings, experiences, and relationships she had established. In cultural memory, the historically formed idea about the coexistence of creative and love enchantment persists obstinately. According to this belief, artistic inspiration and the act of love ecstasy represent a moment in which the essence of a self appears unmediated. In this manner, identified with forms of immediate emotionality and spirituality, love poetry retains the connection with the idea of authentic authorship and directly expressed intention.[3] It is, however, reasonable to ask what

3 Love poetry of the Western canon is inseparable from its biographical understanding. In an article on love poetry, Camille Paglia tries to warn that "a love poem cannot be simplistically read as a literal, journalistic record of an event or relationship (…). A love poem is secondary rather than primary experience; as an imaginative construction, it invites detached contemplation of the spectacle of sex" (Paglia, 1993, 706). One should, though, bear in mind that in antiquity, love lyric turned "poetry away from the grand epic style toward the quiet personal voice, attentive to mood and emotion" (Paglia, 1993, 706). Culler notes than in Sapphic love poetry "the lyric 'I' of antiquity does give rise to possibilities of individual singularity", which points to "the birth of the modern mind, as poets come to know themselves as individuals with an inner life" (Culler, 2015, 54). The imprint of such an understanding of subjectivity is visible in love troubadour poetry of the 13th century, which led to "the emergence of the modern concept of the author" (Holmes, 2000, 1). It establishes a connection between textual and empirical subjectivity. It is a form of "autobiographical assumption", according to which "the I of an individual text refers in some way or other to its supposed author and that the ideas and feeling expressed there are in some sense his or hers" (Kay, 1990, 2). Individuality is here linked to "sincerity topos", which urges 'the identity between the poem and the feeling which it expresses, thus asserting the identity between the roles of lover and poet (…), uniting the functions of author and performer (Kay, 1990, 139). Relying on the concept of individuality shaped and realized in love troubadour poetry as an unadulterated sensibility brings the pre-Renaissance and Renaissance traditions into contact with romanticism (Kay, 1990, 3). In the period of romanticism, the idea that "the heart, which prompts us without reflection, was a better source of good character and right action than the intellect, which calculates consequences or prudently obeys codes of conduct" (Ferber, 2010, 16). In simpler terms, what is at hand is the shift from "a mimetic to an expressive theory, [which] makes it possible for lyric to become the model for poetry in general or 'the poetic norm'" (Culler, 2015, 76). The implications of this position are visible in the understanding of authorship in early 19th century: "Lyric poetry is expressed in the name of the author (…), recounting nothing, not confined by the succession of time, nor by the

kind of being the reader finds in the text. In other words, the problem of literary, therefore, also poetic, self-presentation is inseparable from the question of "how to use one medium – language – to represent another medium – being" (Jay, 1984, 21).

In the poem *Zlato* (*Gold*) from the collection *Ti i nikad* (*You and Never*), one of Vesna Parun's most acclaimed poems about love, the speaker appears as a split and transformed *self*. In the first stanza, the lyrical subject is stylized as a rhapsode (Greek: *rhaptein* – to sew, weave); the one who literally weaves the poem with threads of allegory (Greek: *allegorein* – to speak one thing and say another). By having *initiated* the conventionalized comparison of life and the river, the rhapsode seemingly attempts to convey a general truth about love and existence. In that sense, a rhapsode is also a prophet; by using symmetrical 10-syllable verses, he sends an important message, albeit in an encrypted form. The greatest wisdom can only be expressed indirectly. It is a simulation of the pseudo-divine address characteristic, for example, of New Testament parables. It could be concluded from this that we are talking about the autostylization of the author according to the Romantic model of the *poeta vates* or *the poeta genius*, an individual directly connected to the

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limits of place (…). It gives duration to that sublime moment in which man raises himself above the pleasures and pains of life" (Madame de Staël in Culler, 2015, 75). In romanticism, therefore, the understanding of authorship as a pseudo-divine activity is renewed. Genius is displaced from himself in the creative act, artistic creation presupposes "mysterious disjunction of cause and effect" (Bennett, 2005, 60). This strongly emphasizes the position that, at the moment of inspiration, genius is seized by an unconscious force that is not connected with his cognitive capacities. In this sense, creative and love rapture are of the same origin. Incomprehensible and unshapeable by reason, ecstasy supposedly represents a moment in which the essence of a self in a work of art simply shows itself unmediated. Since it was most often identified with similar forms of immediate sensitivity, love poetry retains a connection with the idea of authentic authorship and its directly expressed intention. Since "this model of lyric as the passionate expression of the poet remained well-installed, especially in pedagogical contexts" (Culler, 2015, 77), it is not surprising that Vesna Parun's love poetry is most often interpreted as autobiography in verse. I used these theoretical insights and conclusions to read Ujević's love poetry in the study *Ljubavno bezumlje (Love insanity)*. I have transferred parts of that text in this note with minor changes (cf. Vuković, 2018, 34–38).

beyond.[4] However, in the second stanza – in which the use of iambic nine-syllable verses aims to formally mark the difference between the stanzas even more strongly – from the lyrical subject's statement, we understand that the river is actually addressing us.[5] This is the figure of speech of prosopopoeia, which gives the power of speech to that which does not have that power. Prosopopoeia "revives the inanimate" (Bagić, 2012, 269) and thus initiates a retroactive reading of the first stanza. The outcome of that reading is not entirely certain. The reader can conclude that the statement appearing at the beginning of the poem is not the one in which we listen to the words of the rhapsode, but of the river. Admittedly, in that case it would be an aporic self-reflexive gesture; the river speaks of itself as if it were someone else, as if it were simultaneously identical to itself and different from itself. Furthermore, the reader can conclude that the poem features two speakers – the rhapsode in the first stanza and the river in the second – and that the poem depicts their dialogue about the nature of love and the meaning of life. Be that as it may, the effect of prosopopoeia multiplies the establishment of secured meanings and "prevents the poems from being adequately read as a fictional imitation of a real-world speech act" (Culler, 2015, 19). In the poem *Gold*, prosopopoeia warns that it is about "the visual shape of something that has no sensory existence: a hallucination (…)" and that "to make the invisible is uncanny" (De Man, 1981, 34). The hal-

4 On the connection between poetry and the prophetic tradition, see *Poetry and Prophecy* (Kugel, 1990). On the connection between poetic genius and the beyond, see *The Theory of Inspiration* (Clark, 1997).

5 This is best seen in the fourth and fifth lines: "And when I look at my bottom / in the gravel shines pure gold" (Parun, 1959, 101). There is no doubt that a poet or another human being does not appear in the position of the lyrical subject, because she would not talk about her gravelly bottom sprinkled with gold. When interpreting this poem, one should keep in mind the difference between the use of 10-syllable verses in the first stanza and nine-syllable verses in the second. Although we are talking about the so-called lyrical 10-syllable verses, in principle it is closer to the oral, folk tradition than the iambic nine-syllable, a verse of emphasized artificiality since it is created by deviating from the folkloric eight-syllable verse (Slamnig, 1981, 83). To a certain extent, this formal distinction refers to the distinction between the rhapsode as the voice of universally accepted folk truths and the uncanny voice of a revived river.

lucinatory effect of prosopopoeia, "the master trope of poetic discourse" (De Man, 1981, 33), therefore cancels the possibility that the address of the river or the dialogue between the rhapsode and the river will receive a "semantic determination" or be understood as a "visionary reference to a rational context" (De Man, 1981, 34). Since prosopopoeia is "the trope of address, the very figure of the reader and of reading" (De Man, 1981, 31), De Man claims that its effect cannot be ignored when establishing meaning. In other words, "reception cannot be freed from hallucination" (Biti, 2000, 132). One should, therefore, be careful when the statement of the river or the dialogue between the rhapsode and the river is interpreted as if the poet "willingly gives her whole life to love" and that love for her is a "spiritual and ethical category" (Knežević, 2022, 74). Such unequivocal association of meaning with the poem *Gold*, which denies the effect of prosopopoeia, is neither unequivocal nor impartial, but it is also prosopopoeia, a tropological *salto mortale* burdened by different intentions and interests of the interpreter.

If approached this way, the poem *Gold* – and Vesna Parun's love poetry as a whole – can be read as autobiography, but only if autobiography is understood as prosopopoeia: "a figure of reading or of understanding" (De Man, 1984, 70). It is a belief according to which autobiography is "prosopopoeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (De Man, 1984, 76). Therefore, if anyone attempts to interpret Vesna Parun's love poems as an authentic account of the author's life experiences and the resulting emotions and knowledge, they must be prepared for the fact that their interpretation is nothing but another prosopopoeia. Only prosopopoeia allows us to imagine Vesna Parun's voice at the moment the uncanny voice of the river emerges from the poem. Therefore, if we read the statements of the poem *Gold* as a sincere, true, and unequivocal attitude of the poet about love, we ignore the fact that the subject emerging from our interpretation is a new prosopopoeia. After all, this is what the author claims when she says: "Poems are, in fact, our false biography. A gilded screen. The mirage of life" (Parun in Pavletić, 1983, 466).

In the poem *Gold*, prosopopoeia refers to the essential feature of Vesna Parun's love poetry. Therefore, it is not a discourse that presents

what love is, but about one that literally makes something to be, to make something happen. Poetic statements about love are linguistic events, rhetorical acts through which a love poem seduces us. In other words, just as prosopopoeia enables an incomparable and unique case for the river to speak to us, so does Vesna Parun's love poetry enable love itself to speak, to seduce us in an incomparable and unique way. This is, of course, completely contrary to the opinion that the poet's love experience or her understanding of the concept of love are represented in the verses about love. Poems about love "do not aim, nor suppose, nor describe, any object or any activity" (…), they "declare from beginning to end their own universe (…), giving access to an affirmation of being that is not arranged as the apprehension of an object" (Badiou, 2014, 28–29). In this sense, the subject of Vesna Parun's love poetry is not some rationally conceivable, experienced history of encounters, partings, and related sensibilities or "representation of Platonic thought" (Knežević, 2022, 62). Her verses dedicated to love primarily show "what is an experience without object", which the linguistic establishment of a universe is "that nothing assures either in its right to be or even its probability" (Badiou, 2014, 31).

I, therefore, claim that Vesna Parun's love poetry is a gesture of a complex interweaving of love and writing. It is a love created by the tropological work of the poem, whereby the poem is an unreliable witness of falling in love with the poetic work. This love does not exist outside of the poem, it begins and ends with the poem and in the poem, and its semantically and rhetorically unstable and fundamentally unreadable field can be stabilized and read only by violently stopping the tropological turnaround. That is why I would not say that in the poem *Gold* love is equated with gold in order to present through lyrics "all the idealistic principles of Plato about love and beauty" or witness the poet's "life as a permanent sacrifice of love whose spiritual fruits are more precious than earthly gold" (Knežević, 2022, 74). Nothing is presented or witnessed in the poem, nothing recognizable and rationally comprehensible. The poem is simply an act of love according to the trope of *love*; it causes love to appear as a seductive figure. When the river takes the floor and claims that its bottom is sprinkled with gold, that statement can hardly be attributed to the personal experiences of Vesna Parun as

a person. The poem is a machine of seduction, and for its understanding – whether love is as heavy as gold, always at the bottom of life, an accumulated value that is difficult to reach, a currency that does not lose value, an ornament to life, kitsch, a coin that can always and easily be cashed in, luxury unavailable to the majority – there are no guarantees beyond the lines of the poem. In other words, the meaning of a poem about love is nothing more than what the poem does with its language, what its rhetoric does. Our attention is constantly oscillating; we notice that in the poem, love is shaped by a figure and as a figure, and that simultaneously the figure, by its action, deconstructs the idea of love as a uniquely presentable meaning. We wonder how to determine the meaning of love if its meaning is a transformation of meaning. In this regard, what does a firm attitude bring? Is it an act of understanding or self-deception? We understand that the speaker is transformed; from the role of a rhapsode, he changes to the role of an anthropomorphized river of life. But we are in doubt: isn't this a unique subject whose identity appears as its own otherness? On the other hand, isn't its completeness simply the result of the subsequent linguistic harmonization of an inconstant difference? If that is so, what does this tell us about the judgments that the split lyrical subject makes about love? Aren't they also ambiguous, aren't they a subsequent linguistic reconstruction, and not an enduring truth? In the end, we wonder why a poem about love is titled *Gold*. Doesn't this suggest that material values in life are still more important than spiritual values? Knowing that gold is a metaphor for love, we think that the title is actually a metaphor. Perhaps the poem itself problematizes the effects of metaphorical statements; is it a lyrical theory of metaphor and performative? Vesna Parun's love poetry undoubtedly acts as seduction: it makes us fall in love with the charm of her words, the charm of figures and the appeal of tropes, and then prompts questions and suspicions, prompts answers that are not easy, demands constant attention and confronts us with our own decisions, for which it gives no guarantees.

It would certainly be completely foolish to claim that Vesna Parun's love poetry is not in correlation with the tradition of love poetry. Deeply moving, silently suffering, beatification of the object of desire, meeting in secret, painful parting, inflamed erotic passion, spiritual

contemplation, beauty of forgiveness, melancholy, resignation, anxiety, despair, typified rhetoric of trembling or wounded hearts, heated bodies, sonnet form and the like – they are part of the poet's thematic, motivic, formal, and conceptual repertoire. But it should be kept in mind that this tradition often encourages "social and ethical questions and seems to belong more to the mode of epideictic discourse[6] than to anything like personal amorous confession" (Culler, 2015, 318). By shaping original models of existence, encouraging problematic questions, and looking for difficult answers, the discourse of the author's love poetry encourages the recipient to build specific knowledge about the world, giving the recipient the opportunity to change both the world and himself or herself in this way. It is, therefore, possible to conclude that in the poem *Gold*, to a lesser extent, there is a desire to say what love truly is or to present love feelings in an unambiguous way, and to a greater extent, it is a question of the linguistic act and the effects, experiences, knowledge, emotions that the linguistic act can encourage.

I would agree with the idea that "lyric poets – like all of us – are politicians in a broad sense even in their private dealings, especially when they expose these to public view. Love poetry's political character is determined by the writer's awareness of the way that the audience responds to an artist's self-presentation" (Martin, 1994, 5). In that sense, I don't see the sociability and politicalness of Vesna Parun's love poetry in what it presents, but in what it does: "the situations it constructs, the populations it summons, the relations of inclusion or exclusion it institutes, the frontiers that it traces or erases between perception and action, between the state of things and movements of thought; the connections it establishes or suspends between situations and their significations, between juxtapositions or sequences and chains of causal relations" (Rancière, 2014, 112–113, cited in Hollinshead-Strick, 2017, 84). In the poem *Ti koja imaš nevinije ruke (You, Who Have More Innocent Hands)*

6 Culler states that epideictic rhetoric is the "rhetoric of celebration, praise, or blame, focused especially on virtues and vices. It is directed to an audience that does not make decision, but forms opinions in response to the discourse, which thus shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives" (Culler, 2015, 357).

from the collection *Crna maslina (Black Olive)* – which, according to the majority of literary criticism, is one of the most acclaimed love poems in Croatian literature and has a prominent place in the collective cultural memory and in the public space – the noun *love* and the verb *to love* appear only once, in the third stanza. In the remaining eight stanzas, love is not explicitly mentioned. The effectiveness of the poem, its magnetic attraction, is hidden perhaps precisely in the fact that love is not spoken about directly. Not only are the utterances of the lyrical subject not an open presentation of love feelings but they are not addressed to the object of love at all. The utterance of the central lyrical protagonist is organized as a direct address to a third party. That third instance is stylized as a female person, and it is not out of place to note that the gender attribution of the lyrical subject itself cannot be unambiguously determined. The fact that it is a female cannot be discerned from the grammatical elements of the text, but it can be guessed primarily in the sixth and seventh stanzas. In the sixth stanza, the lyrical subject asserts that the "bosom was ravaged by the looks of cattle drovers (…) and robbers" (Parun, 1955, 62), and in the seventh that the subject "will never take by the hand" (Parun, 1955, 62) the children of a loved one. Since men also have bosoms and since taking a child by the hand does not mean giving birth to a child, the assumption that it is a lyrical subject in the role of an abandoned woman comes from a place unequivocally marked by patriarchal culture and a heterosexual normative matrix. Vesna Parun herself testified on several occasions that this is a text based on authentic experience (v. i.e., Parun in Pavletić, 1983, 483),[7] so these observations can seem like inappropriate nit-picking. However, I use them to draw attention to the fact that the language of the poem is not a self-explanatory and transparent medium, and the meanings it conveys are ambiguous and inconsistent with the author's intention.

Conventional and curricular interpretations of the poem boil down to reading the text as the testimony of the poet about the painful loss of a beloved man and about facing the fact that another woman is his

7 According to the poet, the poem was written based on a letter she never sent to the wife of her beloved man (cf. Parun, 2010, 41).

chosen one. At the same time, she is ethically superior because instead of feelings of jealousy, anger, hatred, contempt, and accusations, she cultivates compassion, gentleness, self-criticism and offers sincere understanding and help to the other woman.[8] Even if this is so, even if what "comes to the fore is not only the sadness that what we longed for is unattainable, but also the infinite benevolence of the poet, who comes to terms with defeat, seeks solace in a sisterly relationship towards her rival" (Vereš, 1972, 264) – many questions remain open. If it is a discourse of love, why is love not expressed directly to a loved one; can love be expressed directly at all; what is the function of the third person in a love relationship, does love exist without a third person; is the object of desire always out of reach, and what does this say about the nature of love desire and desire in general; how is it that when talking about love for another, the speaker speaks to a greater extent about himself – does this mean that egoism and altruism are two sides of the same coin, does this mean that love discourse always fails; why is the rival suggested to be pious and gentle, and not passionate and decisive, what concept of femininity is this promoting? Possible answers to these and many other unasked questions are an infinite set. I will, therefore, only offer some observations. The utterances of the lyrical subject are organized as a direct address from the communication situation to an absent addressee whose integrity is not clear and stable. It is an apostrophe which "may complicate or disrupt the circuit of communication, raising

8 Lemac, on the other hand, believes that the poem is about the "semantic predominance of the emotional subject" (Lemac, 2015, 265) and that the text is "the realization of the metaphor of handing over a beloved man to another woman" (Lemac, 2015, 266). He provides encouraging insights that "the Other (…) is the object of lyrical communication and the subject's fundamental attention is not directed to it" and that "the apostrophization of the addressee (lyrical You) is formatively similar to the magical transmission of language and the world, representing the subject's secret knowledge, which is realized as the discourse develops" (Lemac, 2015, 265). In Branislav Oblučar's reading, which leans towards the understanding of the lyric as an epideictic discourse (cf. note 6), the "ritual power of this poem [which] rests precisely on this change of affective registers of voice, as well as on numerous and carefully designed repetitions (parallelisms and voice matches), with which the poem is shaped as a highly organized and harmonious whole" (Oblučar, 2023, paper in manuscript).

questions about who is the addressee" (Culler, 2001, 150). The address in which the absent lyrical 'you' is attributed features such as "wise as carelessness", whose "name provides rest for his thoughts", and whose "throat is the shade of his bed" (Parun, 1955, 61), is "devoid of semantic reference" (Culler, 1985, 40). In other words, it is difficult to understand apostrophe "as fictional representations of plausible historical speech acts" (Culler, 1985, 39). To determine which reality corresponds to the communication between the lyrical addresser and the lyrical addressee means to neglect the insight that their presence in the text is guaranteed solely by the trope of the apostrophe. What the apostrophe points to is the fact that the identity of the lyrical "I" and the lyrical "you" appears only as a figure of identity. This is exactly Culler's position when he claims that apostrophe (invocation) is in essence a staging of one's own voice (vocation) (Culler, 2001, 157). Addressing the absent woman is, in a certain way, a theatre, a spectacle, a performance that places the mask of a grieving poet on the stage of a lyrical text. By addressing another woman, the lyrical subject self-stylizes as a woman scorned whose identity is simultaneously stabilized and transformed by linguistic figuration. Although the poem begins with addressing the interlocutor with the pronoun "you", "apostrophe works less to establish an I-Thou relation between him and the absent but rather to dramatize or constitute an image of self" (Culler, 2001, 157). When reading the poem, this is precisely why we cannot escape the impression that it is to a lesser extent about love, and to a greater extent about the construction of a certain role in the love triangle: a sad, abandoned, but gentle and sincere woman. Becoming a being of language necessarily requires an apostrophe; we build ourselves as social beings by addressing some otherness whose existence is neither necessary nor certain. It is important to notice that in the poem *You, Who Have More Innocent Hands* the apostrophe suspends "the referential aspect of the poem and focuses on a poetic event" (Culler, 2001, 159). Instead of a rationally conceivable communication situation, in which the scorned woman conveys her own experiences and pleas to the chosen woman, we witness an act of apostrophe that dramatizes a seemingly banal, but crucial fact: self-organization and self-affirmation of the self occur by addressing a foreign otherness. *You, Who Have More Innocent Hands* is actually a poem about the construction of the self,

which, addressing radical alienness, acquires the right to its own voice. The abandoned and disgraced conquer their own identity, which, like any other identity, is undoubtedly a tropological construct.

In the poem *You, Who Have More Innocent Hands*, the reader is not only confronted with the complexity of the apostrophe, but also with the complexity of other rhetorical procedures and strategies such as metaphor (more innocent hands, beds of love), epanalepsis (periodic repetition of the same verse *You, who have hands more innocent than mine*), personification (mourning porpoises, friendly lizards), metalepsis (You, who can read loneliness from his forehead), oxymoronic simile (wise as carelessness), synecdoche (the syntagm of *more innocent hands* stands instead of a person). A poem is, therefore, not an unambiguous presentation of intimate experiences, emotions, knowledge, or desires, but is above all a culturally certified linguistic act "in which nothing happens but which is the essence of happening" (Culler, 2001 168). As already indicated, the poem speaks to a lesser extent about a historically verifiable love affair, and to a greater extent through the powerful action of figurative language, it depicts the emergence of a new world and its unique actors. It does not provide the reader with an answer to the question of what true love is, but rather makes him or her confront the idea that true love is a linguistic construct, that infatuation must always be expressed, and that the signs used to express it are deceptive and seductive. When faced with the poem, the reader encounters not only this problem, but also a whole series of already mentioned and some other unmentioned questions that are not easy and whose answers are usually ambiguous. "What is really in question, though, is the power of poetry to make something happen" (Culler, 2015, 240). A poem is an event whose consequences are not predictable. Commenting on it, reading it, interpreting it, understanding it, transferring it to new contexts, teaching it is a social act that almost always results in different reactions. That's why *You, Who Have More Innocent Hands* is not a lyrical poem that simply affirms the theme of love but transforms love in such a way that it prompts different observations again and again.

One of these observations is about the relationship between love desire and language. What the more careful reader will not miss is the fact that the object of the lyrical subject's desire is excluded from the

communication situation and that love (for him) is not once openly expressed to him. In the sixth and seventh stanzas, the lyrical subject speaks about the nature of love, but that love is denied in the name of sexuality. In the sixth stanza, I would say, it is about sexual pleasure – "I did not receive his fertility in my bosom" (Parun, 1955, 62) – and in the seventh about the reproductive function of sexuality – "I will never take his children by the hand" (Parun, 1955, 62). Love is, therefore, inseparable from sexual desire, which is undoubtedly triggered by the loss of the object of desire and continues to circle around the resulting void through murky rhetorical channels. As stated in the final poem of the collection *Jao jutro (Oh Morning*, 1963) – *Pjesme koje se glase umjesto ždralova (Poems that call instead of cranes)* – "We love what will not suffice us" (Parun, 1963, 72). Lacan's concept of desire connects the categories of lack or loss, language, and the eluded or untenable object (Lacan, 1986). This is a fundamental contradiction of human existence: the subject cannot realize the desire, because the language used cannot fulfil the deficiency (language produces a deficiency and is itself deficient); the lack that the subject seeks to complete is constitutive of desire, and with its disappearance, desire itself would disappear, so the subject of desire would be annulled; consequently, the privileged object of desire is not a real, material entity, but a literal linguistic twist, a rhetorical distortion. The poem *You, Who Have More Innocent Hands* warns that love is inseparable from desire, and that desire is always a desire for what eludes, is lacking, and is never present except as a tropological displacement, distortion, and departure from one's own *essence*. The desired man appears in the verses only as a lost object, his presence is inseparable from absence, it is always partial and staged by delays and substitutes such as his *children, fertility, forest, sleep, grief, bed*. If we imagined that *unadulterated* love had not been lost, we might assume that there would never have been a linguistic search for it. More precisely, it would never happen that, through subsequent figurative reconstruction, love is constructed as true and lost. The poem confronts us with the fact that they are privileged objects of rhetorical creation, that ideal love is necessarily an ideal with a deficiency, an always-already absent ideal, and encourages us to think about what we do when we idealize some values at the expense of others. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Vesna

Parun's most successful love poem is truly not only a love poem but also a poem about desire; among other things, about the desire to write and read triggered by an irreparable deficit. That is why, according to my judgment, in the lyrical world the object of desire is presented by not being presented, by being presented as permanently absent or postponed by the action of the tropological effect of the poem. It is not just the fundamental paradox of desire, but the fundamental paradox of writing and reading literature. Writing and reading, like desire, are inexhaustible because they cannot arrive at a privileged object. The reading of this and other love poems by Vesna Parun will never be complete due to an essential flaw built into the process of poetic signifying. Just as the lyrical subject's effort to express as precisely as possible the nature of the relationship to their own object of desire ends in rhetorical detours, so the reader's desire to get as close as possible to the meaning of the poem is always moved elsewhere. The poem points to the mobile, linguistic, and contradictory nature of desire, and indirectly to the dangers lurking if it becomes naturalized and fixed. Criticism, both journalistic and academic, most often restrained the transgressive desire of this text with the concept of painful romantic love, declaring it a privileged object of interpretation. The reductivity of such an approach is in contrast to what is at the basis of the author's poem, her love poetry, and the oeuvre as a whole: to prevent any form of privileged reading, to get rid of the privileged object of writing, to thwart the petrification of meaning, thus, not to allow the love of writing and reading literature to wither. It is possible to observe that love in the poem *You, Who Have More Innocent Hands* is not a simple issue. If the text seeks to be an authentic representation of one person's love for another, the question is why it was necessary to address a third person to express that love. Lacan claims that love is necessarily an illusion, its character is imaginary (Lacan, 2005). This by no means implies that love is a fiction, but that the state of being in love implies a certain kind of rhetorical detour. In other words, the immediate feeling of love is always made possible by some form of mediation; the directness of love is its own opposite, a postponement of directness, so uncompromising direct love must count on compromises, indirectness, and deviations. This poem by Vesna Parun brings exactly this to light; love appears in it as an impossibility

to express itself directly. For love to appear, it is necessary for words to go astray. In the poem *Voćnjak (Orchard)* from the collection *Crna maslina (Black Olive)*, it is claimed that love is "laden with a multitude of words" (Parun, 1955, 35). Burdened by the necessary insertion into language, its nature is both confirmed and cancelled by this act. Therefore, it is the expression that makes love a unique and unrepeatable event. If it wants to be known, love must be expressed, and there is a risk involved in that, which makes it impossible to know what the message of love will lead to, how others will respond to it. When we express love, whether we send someone a love letter or a poem, "your life is on the line: there is danger and excitement, you are not sure what you are going to write, your very identity is at stake" (Bennett, Royle, 2016, 240). In this sense, *You, Who Have More Innocent Hands* is still a true love poem because it is a textual event of love that produces unpredictable effects. Therefore, facing it is surprisingly challenging time and time again: how do I respond to this expression of love, will my response be worthy, equal, did I understand the message, am I not too distant, too scarcely in tune, inappropriately attached? Of course, these are to a lesser extent questions of an emotional nature, and to a greater extent questions of the politics of literary interpretation.

The love poetry of Vesna Parun entices us to attempt to understand "falling in love as a fundamental literary experience" (Bennett, Royle, 2016, 248). It shows us that the only way to know love, to experience it, is to face its countless, exciting, unrepeatable, but always flawed notions. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the poem *Da si blizu (If Only You Were Close)* from the collection *Crna Maslina (Black Olive)* love is claimed to be an "unknown name" (Parun, 1955, 36). It is similar to the poet's remark: "love is inexplicable" (Parun, 1990, 67). We don't know what love is, but that's exactly why we don't stop wondering about its meanings, we don't stop thinking about how they are written into our lives. But if falling in love is a fundamental literary experience, then the opposite is also true. Love poetry, the persistent sending of love poems to an unknown address, is the evidence of a love for writing. Like any expression of love, verses about love undoubtedly encourage a response to them. Numerous and not at all clear messages about love represent a real literary challenge because they are about the transformation of meaning, the transgression

of familiar senses, the metamorphosis of identity, mobility, and ecstatic language. In this respect, Vesna Parun's love poetry is love towards dispersing signifiers of love. When encountering this discourse, we can never be sure what the encounter will bring us. As with any love decision, it is up to us to decide, even though we are sure that we will inevitably fail. But there is no other way. We can express our love for love poetry only if we surrender ourselves to its language without the hope that it will lead us anywhere. It will not be a pointless journey; during it, we learn that love is first and foremost linguistic love, that loving means knowing how to use and read complex sign structures, that love is surprising, exciting, and worth living, among other things, because it is coded love, a love discourse that has a social purpose and value, rather than being a matter of intimacy alone. Vesna Parun writes love poetry that often reminds us that our most intimate feelings are always a social matter, an issue of semiosis and rhetorical conceptualization. Simultaneously, it is a discourse that urges us to face the rhetoric of love, the meaning of which is precisely the dissipation of meaning in love messages. Trying to determine the meaning of love, love of literature, to understand the way in which we fall in love with literature, means to risk being overwhelmed by meaninglessness at every moment. As Vesna Parun once pointed out when talking about love: "There is no new experience without the risk that the old one will wait for you at the beginning and kill you" (Parun in Pavletić, 1983, 488).

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Gold

If life is a flowing river,
love is sedimented gold.
Love swings gold in the riverbed
And gold rises. The further love
carries it, the more golden love is.

I have already crossed three lowlands
Far behind me a well rustles
and I don't know where the mouth is hiding.
And when I look at my bottom
pure gold shines in the gravel.
And the tall summer spikes
spur luxury into my gold.

You, Who Have More Innocent Hands

You, who have more innocent hands than mine
and who is wise as carelessness.
You who can read his loneliness
from his forehead better than I,
and remove the slow shadows
of hesitation from his face
as the spring wind removes
the shadows of clouds floating above the hill.

If your embrace encourages the heart
and your thighs stop pain,
if your name gives rest
to his thoughts, and your throat
is a shade to his bed,
and the night of your voice is an orchard
still untouched by storms,

than stay by his side,
and be more pious than all
who had loved him before you.
Be afraid of the echoes that approach
the innocent love beds.
And be gentle to his sleep,
under the invisible mountain
at the edge of roaring sea.

Walk along his shore. Let the bereaved dolphins
meet you.
Wander in his woods. Friendly lizards
will not harm you.
And the thirsty serpents that I tamed
will be humble before you.

Let the birds I warmed
in the nights of sharp frost sing to you.
Let the boy whom on a deserted road
I protected from stalkers caress you.
Let the flowers I watered with my tears
bring scent to you.

I did not witness the most beautiful time
of his manliness. His fertility
I did not receive into my bosom
ravaged by glances
of cattle drovers at fairs,
and those of greedy thieves.

I shall never lead by the hand
his children. And the stories
which I prepared for them a long time ago
I may tell in tears
to poor little bears
abandoned in black forest.

You, who have more innocent hands than mine,
be gentle to his sleep
which is still harmless.
Yet let me see
his face when unknown years
descend upon it.
And tell me sometimes something about him,
that I may not have to ask wondering
strangers and neighbors
who have pity for my patience.

You, who have more innocent hands than mine
stay by his headrest,
and be gentle to his sleep!

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