

**Athens Institute for Education and Research  
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series  
LIT2018-2486**

**The Mythical Odysseus in Contemporary Croatian  
Poetry: A Representation of the Mythical-Symbolic  
Mode**

**Sanja Knežević  
Assistant Professor  
University of Zadar  
Croatia**

An Introduction to  
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

Conference papers are research/policy papers written and presented by academics at one of ATINER's academic events. ATINER's association started to publish this conference paper series in 2012. All published conference papers go through an initial peer review aiming at disseminating and improving the ideas expressed in each work. Authors welcome comments

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Knežević, S., (2018). "The Mythical Odysseus in Contemporary Croatian Poetry: A Representation of the Mythical-Symbolic Mode", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: LIT2018- 2486.**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:  
www.atiner.gr  
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm  
Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.  
ISSN: 2241-2891  
03/08/2018

**The Mythical Odysseus in Contemporary Croatian Poetry:  
A Representation of the Mythical-Symbolic Mode**

**Sanja Knežević**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**University of Zadar**  
**Croatia**

**Abstract**

In the work “The mythical Odysseus in contemporary Croatian poetry: A representation of the mythical-symbolic mode” we investigate the postmodern syndrome of Croatian poetry. Namely, Croatian Mediterranean poets thematize history and ancient mythology (Greek, Roman and Slavic) through the mythical-symbolic mode. We recognize the relationship towards history—be it as the “New Historicism” (Hutcheon) or as the “the musealization of culture” (Lübbe)—as one of the important particularities of these poets. An escape into history and mythology is in fact an escape from reality. On one hand, these poets are running away from globalist trends (they are retreating from the virtual world and into mythical consciousness and the myth); but on the other hand, they are running away from social crises and into the dreamy, mythical space of Arcadia. For poets, there are no firm boundaries between reality and history—they therefore treat the motif of the mythical Odysseus as their own personal, intimate complex. We will interpret two collections of poems by contemporary Croatian poet Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić—*Poems of Odysseus* and *Odyssey*—as a representation of the mythical-symbolic mode with the central character of Odysseus.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Croatian poetry, Mediterranean poetry, mythical-symbolic mode, Odysseus myth, Bilosnić, T. M.

## The Mythical-symbolic Mode of Croatian Poetry

In the course of the periodization and typology of contemporary Croatian poetry in the postmodern period, the conclusion was reached that the Mediterranean text is indeed a separate, almost autochthonous occurrence within the corpus of contemporary poetry production. More specifically, contemporary, canonical Croatian poetry was most often associated with the philosophical tradition of the Marxist and poststructuralist schools of thought, which promulgated the experience of language as an “elitist” poetic form. However, the poets—who, in their life and work, remained permanently tied to towns on the Adriatic coast—diverged from such imposed poetics and created stylistic modes which were immanent to postmodernist poetics associated with the concepts of nostalgia and space (Oraić Tolić, 1995<sup>1</sup>). In that regard, we performed a synchronic analysis of the opuses of authors in the book *Mediterranean text of Croatian poetry: postmodern poetics* (Knežević, 2013) which were associated with Adriatic towns and islands, but also those which were bound to space, history and heritage (Sorel, 2003<sup>2</sup>) with their poetics at the thematic-motif level. We did that through three typological modes: intertextual-ludistic, popular-cultural and mythical-symbolic (cf. Knežević, 2013: 26-35).

With the Croatian Mediterranean poets, at the first level, the mythical-symbolic mode is seen in the conception of the idea of poetry as a voyage at sea, and the resurgence of the Odysseus-like archetype is common in precisely that regard. Further, the mythical sensibility of these authors is identifiable in their ahistoric understanding of the dimension of time. In their poems they are often prone to thematizing the dimension of time at a cyclical level (that is to say, at the level of a continual return of history and its reconstructions) and at the level of synchronizing history and the present day. It could be said to be a sort of loss of awareness of diachrony in favor of synchrony. Figuratively speaking, such poetry could also be characterized as a constant “return to Plato”.

In that context, the thematization of archetypal images and symbolism at the stylistic level of the poetic text is highly recognizable in their poetry. The motif of the sea is at the same time dominant both as an archetypal image and as a symbol. Considering that the sea is, at a symbolic level, correlated with the female principle and with woman as one who carries a “Little Mediterranean” in her own body (Ferenczi), it is no surprise that the works of the Croatian Mediterranean poets are contrary to cold, conceptual, poststructuralist poetry. Namely, they continually breathe new life into anthropocentric themes which embody essential matters of the human struggle, emotional ties, love.

---

<sup>1</sup>„(...) Memorative nostalgia is characteristic of small nations and dissident groups or individuals, from the northern Baltic states of the former Soviet Union to Slovenians and Croats in the north of the former Yugoslavia (...) Postmodern culture is oriented towards SPACE: after the death of the final Absolute, we turn to the place we happen to have been born in, to the culture and tradition we belong to through no fault or credit of our own”.

(Oraić Tolić, 1995: 51, 53)

<sup>2</sup>The characteristics of the Mediterranean discourse would be as follows: 2. Principal of identity, 2. Affinity for large, universal themes/anthropocentricity, 3. Polylingualism, 4. Pathos/sentimentality 5. Affinity for myths, 6. Idiosyncrasy, 7. Meditativeness” (Sorel, 2003: 26)

Examining the poetic opuses of contemporary Croatian poets bound to the Adriatic region as a whole, it is possible to single out certain typological characteristics:

- a) A nostalgic relationship with history, heritage and mythology
- b) An openness to archetypical symbols
- c) An imagery and metaphoricity of poetic expression
- d) Platonism

The relationship with history and heritage manifests itself in the idea of reconstructing history in an inherited homeland space. In part, history is experienced in the sense of a new reconstruction outside the scope of reality in a dreamy Arcadian space which is consistently situated in the native area of individual poets. In the book *Mediterranean text of Croatian poetry: postmodern poetics* (Knežević, 2013), the opuses of five of today's now classic Croatian poets who were bound to their native land both in their lives and their work—Luko Paljetak (Dubrovnik), Jakša Fiamengo (Split), Arsen Dedić (Šibenik), Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić (Zadar) and Boris Domagoj Biletić (Pula)—were analyzed through three typological postmodern modes. If we were to expand that circle of poets who are nostalgically bound to space—their native land and its heritage—in their work, others who would stand out include

Daniel Načinović (Istra), Adriana Škunca (Pag), Stjepan Gulin (Šibenik), Tonči Petrasov Marović (Split), Drago Štambuk (Brač), Milan Milišić (Dubrovnik), and Milorad Stojević (Rijeka). Of course, they treat their native space through different poetic modes. It is interesting that the poets treat their towns and/or islands along the same lines as medieval and renaissance artists whose creations were essential to their *poleis*. In reconstructing the famous aura of the past, they escape from their own realities and go back in time, to an imaginary golden age “when everything was right”. The return to the past and to their heritage also opened up a space for the reconstruction of cultural and national identity. That is, it should be noted that the periodization year of the beginning of the Croatian postmodern is taken to be 1971, the year when then Yugoslavia's totalitarian government forcefully quashed the national movement known as the Croatian Spring. A great number of intellectuals then found themselves in jail or subject to being followed by the secret police and banned from publishing and public engagements. Another critical year in the context of an identity crisis is 1991, the year when the Homeland War, Croatia's war for independence, began. A specificity of that war was that the enemy's desire to conquer territory was coupled with their desire to abolish cultural identity. During the aggression, the historic centers of ancient and medieval cities—Dubrovnik, Zadar, Šibenik—were toppled to ground. On the one hand the state of crisis with respect to their identity prompted the poets to reconstruct their historical heritage as images of identity, and on the other hand it prompted an escape from the crisis which was being faced in reality. Some of them were not able to deal with the realities of war; they denied its existence as well as their own realities. And thus poet Željko Sabol committed suicide, and during the attacks on Dubrovnik Milan Milišić refused to go to a bomb shelter—he became the first civilian victim of the attacks on Dubrovnik.

Outside the national context, poets were also facing a great identity crisis at a global, cultural level. On a global level, the postmodern age was in fact an age of eschatological awareness (ex. Barthes or Vattimo). Paradoxically, it was also the era which saw the most rapid developments in natural science and technology in all the history of western civilization. Figuratively speaking, the era “drove poets into reservations” (OraićTolić, 1995). In contemporary, postmodern society, poets had lost the privileged place they once held. In accordance with the above, Croatian literary theorist Dubravka OraićTolić’s division of the postmodern into two phases is entirely acceptable. This author maintains that the great modern culture of the west can be divided into six phases from the French Revolution to the present day: 0. Modern culture in the broadest sense, 1. Modernism, 2. The modern in a narrow sense, 3. Avant-garde, 4. Postmodern I, and 5: Postmodern II (OraićTolić, 2005: 43). Within that, she explains the two postmodern phases of culture as:

Postmodern I (light, aesthetic, playful) – western culture after the modern and modernism; postmodernism—art in the postmodern culture; between the death of modern culture in 1968 and its burial beneath the ruins of the Berlin Wall;

Postmodern II (heavy, political, simulacral), post-postmodern, global cultural or the virtual age; culture and art after the 1990’s; the 1991 media spectacle of the Gulf War, CNN, the birth of Dolly the sheep, mad cow disease, September 11, 2001

(OraićTolić, 2005: 43)

In that regard we can observe the relationship towards history and heritage in the first phase of the postmodern in the context of “New Historicism” (Hutcheon), regardless of the fact we are discussing lyrical poetry, and in the second phase as “the musealization of culture” (Lübbe). In the first phase the poets have a tendency towards parody and irony (cf. Hutcheon), and in the second towards reconstructing their own intimate histories on the basis of the heritage and culture they grew up in. They aim to reconstruct a mythical time and its cyclical nature in regards to the linear course of history (cf. Sorel<sup>3</sup>). On the one hand mythology is manifested in the poetic text as a repository from which motifs, themes and symbols are drawn from, and on the other hand it becomes a backdrop for the poetic text. More specifically, displaced into a space of mythology, the poets more openly examine both their existential reality and the increasingly fragile reality of the world in which they live. When mythology becomes the backdrop, poets reach for Illyrian, Greek, Roman and Slavic mythology in equal measure. That is unsurprising due to the fact their native heritage was built up on layers of these mythologies and cultures. However, when it comes to manifesting the mythological heroes whose masks the poets use as archetypal symbols to represent the lyrical subject, they most often reach for the heroes of Greek mythology. The character of Odysseus most certainly holds a special place here. We could here also refer to an idea of Andreas Kilb’s, who, paraphrasing Benjamin, concludes that “history takes the stage (...), it turns into a stockpile of signals, an inventory of artistic

---

<sup>3</sup>“A continuity which relies on an ahistoric understanding of time could be said to be at the center of Mediterranean history”. (Sorel, 2003: 23)

processes” (Kilb, 1988: 26). In fact, the longing to reconstruct personal, intimate histories (and identities) is also obvious in light of the challenge of the virtual reality which brings all previous social and artistic civilizational points of references under question. At the heart of the reconstruction of personal identity is indeed nostalgia, the longing to go back to an ancient, mythical time, just as Baudrillard concludes: “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (Baudrillard, 1988).

A nostalgic relationship with history, heritage and mythology manifests itself at the stylistic level of the poetic text through imagery, the frequent intertextual play with the length of the verses following the example of the ancient hexameter, and the focus on meditation and reflection. In that regard it could be said that that type of poetry renews the poetics of the “experience of space” (cf. Mrkonjić, 1971<sup>4</sup>). An inclination towards meditateness and a return to anthropocentric themes through archetypal symbols can also be considered a Platonic phenomenon found in contemporary Croatian poets from along the Adriatic. This hypothesis was developed by Pavao Pavličić, who believed that those from the north were Aristotelians and those from the south Platonists: “...a disregard for the material world can mean nothing other than that the southerners believe that there is something hiding behind the material, something more important, greater, more essential, something that is the real world and the real truth, a sort of world of ideas. Thus, Plato” (Pavličić, 1995: 17–18). The idea of Platonism in this sort of poetry also manifests itself in the idea of a sea-voyage and return—so, poetry as a life experience of discovery which brings the poet back to the source, or Absolute. In that sense the poetic journey gains philosophical and reflexive depth, the poetic text is more meaningful compared to post-structural ludism or the banality of realistic lyrics. It is therefore entirely clear that the archetype of Odysseus’ journey as a quest for meaning and the source is one of the most dominant motifs in the works of contemporary Mediterranean Croatian poets.

### **The motif of Odysseus in Croatian literature**

The Homeric Hymns and ancient Greek mythology and culture in general held an important place in medieval Croatian culture. In fact, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, a rewriting of a popular novel, mostly likely French, which thematized the Trojan War and the return of Greek heroes to their homeland was recorded in Glagolitic text. This manuscript is known under the title of *RumanacTrojski*. In the Middle Ages, and particularly later, during the periods of humanism, the renaissance and the baroque, Croatian culture was an inseparable part of the then

---

<sup>4</sup> “The poetic experience of country and the experience of the space of poetry itself are not one-directional cause-and-effect experiences. That means that writing conditions the poet’s imaginings of where he resides just as his imaginings on where he resides condition his writing. But the imaginative givens of a particular surrounding will certainly define the poet considerably, in at least two basic senses: the Mediterranean and the continental (northern). A Mediterranean sense of country is conditioned by the thorough experiencing of principles which are markedly present (...) and therefore inspires poetry prone to abstraction and meditation”. (Mrkonjić, 1971: 14)

highly developed European-Mediterranean cultural space. The first university on the Croatian Adriatic was founded in Zadar in 1396, and Greek, Latin, theology and philosophy were taught there. Most Croatian intellectuals and poets were schooled in Italy, most often Padua, Ancona or Venice. These facts support the thesis that the Homeric Hymns infiltrated the Croatian cultural space long ago, just as they infiltrated the rest of Mediterranean Europe, which Edith Hall writes of in her book “The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey” (2008)<sup>5</sup>. After an exceptionally rich cultural and literary life on the Adriatic coast from the Middle Ages all the way up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the interest in Homer and ancient mythology lay dormant until the modern era (art nouveau). The final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought ancient art and culture, including Homer, back into the spotlight. As early as 1882 Tomo Maretić published renditions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In painting and literature, and particularly in poetry, the ancients again played an important role in the repertoire of themes and motifs. Among the more important poets of this era which “revived” Homer and ancient mythology are Vladimir Nator and Vladimir Vidrić, and among the painters is Bela Čikoš Sesija, who dedicated an entire cycle of his paintings to the Odyssey.

After the modern age, which ancient art served as a backdrop for, and where the imagined space of Arcadia was where decadent artists from the start of the century tried to “hide”, two world wars brought the motif of the Odyssey back into the space of Croatian prose creation. Two particularly important novels of 20<sup>th</sup> century Croatian literature were in fact created as “hypertexts” of the Odyssey. In the 30's, Milan Begović published in a periodical the novel *Giga Baričeva and Her Seven Suitors*, a story which has at its center Giga/Penelope, who faithfully awaits the return of her husband Marko/Odysseus from Russian captivity after World War I. Penelope now becomes the protagonist, and it does not hurt to mention that Begović has a deeper understanding of female characters than any other Croatian author. Begović developed the novel's epilogue as a psychological drama about love and jealousy entitled *Without the Third*. In its day, this drama was performed across all of Europe and even in the United States. As a whole, Begović's novel is an example of modern Croatian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

---

<sup>5</sup>“Greek studies started to be exported to Western Europe well before Constantinople was sacked. In the late Middle Ages scholars came west from the Greek-speaking world, bringing their cultural treasures with them. Florence and subsequently Venice were popular destinations, since the aristocrat houses that ruled them followed intellectual pursuits, including the study of Greek. The hero of the story of the arrival of the Odysseus as a cultural presence in the West is the fourteenth-century humanist Francesco Petrarch.” (Hall, 2008: 14)

In Croatian Renaissance literature, an entire generation of poets are called “Croatian Petrarchists”. They were more often than not tied to the city of Dubrovnik, which was then an independent republic. Also, the first Croatian lyric poem, written by customs notary Đonko Kaličević in Dubrovnik in 1421, thematizes the metaphor of the stormy sea as a metaphor of life's journey. Indeed, we can very easily identify in preserved verses a paraphrasing of Odysseus' journeys: “Now I am left in the middle of the open sea / waves beating powerfully; rain coming from high; / when I make it to land, I think...” This fact also substantiates Edith Hall's thesis: “This sense that *all* poetry has a relationship with the sea helps explain the cultural centrality of the *Odyssey*, which lies behind all sea-voyage poems (...)” (13).



Another novel whose basic intertextual relationship is with the *Odyssey* is *Cyclops*, a Croatian classic by Ranko Marinković (1913 – 2001). The novel was published in 1965, just at the dawn of the postmodern. It could actually be said that it is the swan-song of Croatian elitist existentialist prose. The novel thematizes the life of a young intellectual, journalist Melkior Tresić, in Zagreb, just before the start of World War II. Melkior is writing the drama “Menelaj” about sailors at sea on a ship called the “Menelaj” who are left to a cruel fate and see no way out of Polyphemus’ cave. Marinković quotes an entire treasure-trove of Western literature in his novel, and so Homer’s *Odyssey* and Joyce’s *Ulysses* meld into the intertextual opulence of Marinković’s discourse. In this novel, too, Odysseus is a weak subject, an antihero of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who questions the meaning of culture and civilization in light of the fact that they are incessantly relinquished to the man-eating Cyclops, to a war which man is turning into a beast.<sup>6</sup>

In the postmodern age we take note of two novels which emerged built on the pre-text of the *Odyssey*. In 1984 Veljko Barbieri published the novel *Odysseus’ Eroticon*, an ironic paraphrasing of the *Odyssey* at the center of which are Odysseus’ physicality and the victory of masculine powers, in contrast to the archetypal Odysseus, whose strength lies in wisdom. Here the *Odyssey* is ironized completely and reduced to the level of trivial low prose. On the other hand, in 2008 Julienne Eden Bušić published the autobiographical novel *Your Blood and Mine*. In it the author self-identifies with Penelope, a woman who awaits the return of her husband from political imprisonment. All the determinants of feminine writing with a significant symbolic substructure are identifiable in the novel.

### *The Motif of Odysseus in Contemporary Croatian Poetry*

As was already mentioned, the Croatian postmodern representatives of the Mediterranean text were both thematically and stylistically focused on heritage, space and history (Sorel). In that respect they drew on cultural layers of the ancient, the renaissance and the modern for intertextual and citation material. As previously mentioned, the periodization of the beginning of the postmodern in Croatian literature was dependent on a political crisis in light of the violently quashed national movement of the Croatian Spring. Since then, the disappearance of generations of poets who created under a “common manifesto” has been recorded and a dispersion of autopoetics has been present (cf. Maroević, 1996).

Following the example of the anthology which marked the end of the Croatian modern era in 1914—*Young Croatian Lyrics*—in 1981 Drago Štambuk published the anthology *Insulae*, characterizing it with the subtitle *Croatian New Lyrics*, a paraphrasing of the 1914 almanac’s title. In his work, Štambuk, too, collected younger poets (born after World War II), and in his introduction he sets forth a manifesto of sorts whose characteristics we would only recognize *post festum* as characteristics of the postmodern reconstruction of tradition and heritage, that is, of the “new historicism”:

---

<sup>6</sup>Edith Hall also noticed that Odysseus is not rare motif in the novels which problematized the identity crises“ (ex. Hall, 2008: 21-22)

In *Croatian New Lyrics*, there is, I maintain, first and foremost, a different relationship with language: in most of the texts here collected, it is not a despiritualized material with which to construct poems, but rather a respectable bearer of the “experience of the world”, a substrata of spirituality and culture. It is as though all the poets in the collection have an inherent faith in human language, faith in the expressibility of meaning. (...)

The relationship that poetry has with the real world is determined by: a regard for history and its natural ground, a sense of certainty of meaning, a nostalgia for eternity. In working with the artistic form, a pronounced artificiality can be felt, the poem is the form of content before it is a self-sufficient thing.

(Štambuk, 1981: 3)<sup>7</sup>

The relationship of the collective towards Odysseus and the *Odyssey* in the Croatian postmodern is also seen in the experience of Odysseus as one in exile. An awareness of the identity crisis also prompted Ivo Smoljan to assemble an anthology of Croatian emigrant poetry entitled *Croatian Odyssey* in 1980. Indeed, the Croatian people, along with the Irish, Jewish and Polish, have one of the largest diasporas in the world. In terms of population, one Croatia lives in its homeland and another Croatia lives outside the borders of the country. In his anthology, Smoljan collected poems which thematize demigration, exile, and a longing to return. This Croatian anthology also proves the claim made by Edith Hall, whose observation is in regards to Greek exile as a *pars pro toto* image of the global crisis of the loss of home and homeland:

Yet the Greek experience of exile, as focused on the mythical figure of Odysseus, has, especially since the Second World War, become universalized. Odysseus is now the paradigmatic mythical exile in the collective imagination of the third-millennial global village, his suffering something to which the inhabitants of every continent can relate. (Hall, 2008: 173)

The prevalence of the motif of a sea-voyage in Croatian poetry also inspired the poet Luko Paljetka to publish an anthology of “Croatian poetry about the sea, sailors and ships” under the title of *Sea-voyages* in 1990. At an intimate level, too, the archetype of Odysseus in fact carries the meaning of an identity crisis. In the reality of, first, the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the globalization of civilization and never-ending fear and terrorism, Odysseus becomes the poetic role (mask) which poets take on, wanting to return to safety, the genesis, Arcadia. Following the example of neoplatonists, Ithaca becomes their *locus amoenus*, a quixotic place, a “spiritual Jerusalem”. We recognize the direct influence of Odysseus and the *Odyssey* in a collection of poems by Slobodan Grubač (1941) called *The Odyssey*, published in 1979. The author strives to

---

<sup>7</sup>It is evident from the manifesto that Štambuk and his generation are „rebelling“ against linguistic structuralism, the depersonalization of the poem and poet.

synchronize the ancient, mythical time with his own reality. Grubač's Odysseus is Odysseus the Poet, very often compared to the motif of the nightingale. When Grubač's collection was published, it was not recognized as a postmodern play with history and mythology, but from today's perspective it is evident that this lesser-known Croatian poet fits right into the mythical-symbolic mode with his *Odyssey*. Looking at it at a stylistic level, as well, Grubač's poems are written in simple, psalmodic verse where traditional metaphorical relations abound. The collection is also interesting conceptually because, intertextually, it adopts the composition of a Greek tragedy, according to which the author arranges and inter-relates the poems. Specifically, the poems are very often written as roles, for example: "Odysseus (to Nausicaa)", "Odysseus (before Circe)", "Odysseus (looking to where she had been)", "Odysseus (to a nightingale)". Between the cycles, and at the end and beginning of the collection, a so-called choir has been inserted (ex: "Choir of nymphs", "Choir of trees", "voice of a seagull" etc.).

From among the poets who alternate between the motifs of the *Odyssey* and Odysseus in their poetic opuses, another who is interesting to look at is poet Jakša Fiamengo (1946). Fiamengo was born on the island of Vis, which was a Greek colony in ancient times (Issa), and according to legend, Odysseus' cave is located on Vis. Thus, a native spatial determination undeniably conditioned Fiamengo's poetics.

In his first collections of poems Fiamengo thematizes a voyage and return to the island as his own personal destiny—*The sea you are/More kojejesi* (1968), *Wind around the house/Vjetarokokuće* (1975), *The joyful sailor's light/Svjetiljkaradosnogmoreplovca* (1988). Also, his verse is divided, picturesque and prone to artificiality. In his later works Fiamengo turns to reflexivity, spirituality and writing out a "heritage identity". He called his collection of select poems in English "In Odysseus' Cave", maintaining that the archetype of Odysseus is his intimate portrait. In that regard we can truly view his poetic path as a voyage, a return to Plato. However, this poet is also interesting for having opened the poetic text up to popular culture. More specifically, he has written hundreds of song lyrics, the majority of them intended for Dalmatian a cappella singing (*klapa*). Traditional *klapa* songs thematize and create variations of the age-old motif of the *Odyssey*—waiting for a sailor to come back from sea. It is interesting that a group of men, like a Greek choir, sing of the faithful "Penelope", waiting. It is only in recent times that women have begun to sing *klapa* songs. The majority of Fiamengo's Adriatic chansons came to be along the traditional lines of vocal poetry.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Problematizing *klapa* songs and oral creativity in general in the context of examining the motif of Odysseus and *The Odyssey* in Croatian culture and literature is something that would require a separate study. Specifically, the Croatian *guslar* tradition (*guslars* are epic singers who pass on history) truly can be linked to the heritage of Homer. Also, the specific Croatian *oĵkanje* singing, which is of Illyrian heritage, was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Following the example of Croatian national epic poetry, in 1756 Franciscan priest Andrija Kačić Miošić published the book "Pleasant Conversation of Slavic People", where he narrates "Croatia's glorious and heroic history" in order to educate the illiterate people, but also to offer them encouragement in light of the Turkish conquests. In this context it should be mentioned that Croatian poet Petar Gudelj wrote national poems on the coast and hinterland of Makarska about "Ilija from the coast", calling them *Croatian Odyssey: Odysseus' footsteps along the beach of Makarska, in Croatian* (1999).

However, two collections of poems by Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić (1947) will serve as interpretative examples of the mythical-symbolic mode with Odysseus as their central motif. The collections are *Poems of Odysseus* (2007) and *Odyssey* (2013). In this poet, we follow the development of the Odysseus motif at the level of self-referential self-knowledge—on the one hand, the archetype of Odysseus develops as an awareness of poetry and writing, and on the other hand, as an awareness of the self. Considering the complexity of the symbolic layers in Bilosnić's collections which directly thematize Odysseus and the *Odyssey*, it seems to us that their symbolic interpretation will faithfully represent the mythical-symbolic mode of contemporary Croatian poetry.

### **The Poetic Odysseus of Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić; Representation of the Mythical – Symbolic Mode**

The contemporary Croatian poet Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić published two collections of poems motivated by the character of the mythic Odysseus within the span of one decade. What is immanent for the whole of this author's poetic opus is the mythical – symbolic mode (Knežević, 2013). By interpreting his collections of poems that thematize Odysseus directly, we will try to argue the determinants that define the aforementioned mode—a nostalgic relationship towards history, heritage and mythology; an openness to archetypal symbols; imagery and metaphor in poetic expression; Platonism.

#### *Poems of Odysseus*

The book of poems *Poems of Odysseus* (2007) is the collection with which Bilosnić started off his second poetic phase. His poetics are more directed towards transcendence, reflexivity, symbolism. The book *Poems of Odysseus* is a collection of love elegies. The poet dons the mask of Odysseus using the motif of his yearning for Ithaca as a “justification” for his renunciation of and yearning for love. The poems are written in the first person, making clear the author's idea of an intimate likening to the mythic Odysseus. The mythic Odysseus literally manifests himself in these poems as “pain's-son” (“... if only I had as much strength left over as I have pain” [Bilosnić, 2007:87]), just as he is defined in relation to ancient heroes by Nina Alihodžić-Hadžialić:

Odysseus as pain's-son is a creature sensitive to suffering (...). Odysseus endures *pain*—“magic of moments themselves”—therefore, he is an atypical hero in relation to classical myths. (...) In confronting with the pulsating vitality of the *physical*, sensory frame, Odysseus enters the “forbidden land” of individuality. (Alihodžić-Hadžialić, 2013: 45)

Every individual poem in this collection starts with a quote, a verse literally taken from one of the poets that created the cultural wealth of the West from antiquity through to the contemporary age. The quotes can also be read as invocations, which

shows that the poet plays with the ancient poetics in the intertextual dialogue, looking for help and inspiration in his predecessors rather than in muses. It is interesting to note that the first quote is a verse by Jorge Luis Borges, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century artist that self-identified with Homer<sup>9</sup>. The quote by Borges that Bilosnić incorporated into his own poem at the very beginning defines the poetics of his *Poems of Odysseus*—nostalgia as a keepsake, the reconstruction and parody of history, myth and culture, the synchronization of history in the area of the homeland and an intimate anxiety and crisis of self.

“What I wouldn’t give (today) for the memory”  
 Homer said when off the Kvarner bank  
 The blind Borges set sail.  
 What I wouldn’t give that I could watch you awaken  
 That I can go to the sea with you  
 Expecting a morning that will renew my face. (Bilosnić, 2007: 7)

The concept of the book of poems hints that the central theme of the collection is the return to Ithaca. The poet, in mythical Odysseus’s guise, returns to an Ithaca that exists only outside of reality, as a figment of his dreams. For him, Ithaca is a symbol of the final resting place in which his love will finally realize itself, embody itself, turn into earth, story and legend:

“In your big white body I was then left”<sup>10</sup>  
 I was left on the white island, in the silver of Ithaca  
 where the light burned the field.  
 (...)
   
 Once and for all we will lie together  
 secretly in bed outside the reach of day.  
 We will be that big white body  
 the last island that beat the sea.(Bilosnić, 2007:96)

Considering that the poems are divided in three cycles – “I am the only wanderer left alive”, “And the sea slowly climbs into the ship” and “I no longer care about the temples of Troy” – it can be noted that the poems compound towards the gradation of pain and doubt. In the beginning, Ithaca is a dream, and as the journey moves on it becomes farther away, the pain of hyperbole, and the poet’s/Odysseus’ doubt in his own identity becomes more pronounced; “Here all is without a shadow like in a big desert, / here pain starts anew with each morning” (Bilosnić, 2007:91), “(...) I do not know anymore if it is the sea or my tongue that is shouting / or if it is my weapons that are rattling and squeaking / like dolphins that follow me when there isn’t wind” (93) or the lines of the poem “Never so much ominous whiteness in the sea”:

(...)  
 The more I gather my strength the more the storm

---

<sup>9</sup>„I have been Homer; shortly, I shall be One, like Ulysses“ (Borges in Hall, 2008: 10)

<sup>10</sup>Vincius de Morais

Pushes me from you. I fear that  
 that the sun will fall a hundred times in the water  
 Smoking until dawn, before I sail in  
 The harbor without a crew and seamen.  
 Never in this season have I seen a paler moon.  
 (...) (Bilosnić, 2007:92)

On a symbolic level, Bilosnić uses ancient Judeo-Christian archetypal symbols and symbolic imagery: the sea, ship, stars, vineyard, vine, wine, lambs. The division of the collection into three cycles can also be interpreted symbolically, especially when talking about Christian symbols and mythology. The number three signifies the Holy Trinity (the Christian tripartite God). However, considering that the poems thematize the journey as a return divided into “three cycles”, this symbolism can also be read through the symbol of the Paschal Triduum. Namely, the essence of Christian time and existence is in three days – The Passion, the death and the resurrection of Christ.

The building of symbolic images in their traditional and generally accepted meaning in the whole of the collection highlights the neoplatonic dimension of the relationship towards the motif of Odysseus. Bilosnić’s Odysseus or Bilosnić as Odysseus sings his own pain, renunciation and longing in the idea of achieving the fanciful goal. The mythic Penelope is the same as Ithaca, she is transformed according to the tradition of equating woman=land=homeland into *locus amoenus*, the safe and dreamy place. A longing for love is what motivates Odysseus’ journey, and the symbol of the sea is his spiritual temptation. The image of Penelope at the end of the journey shows itself as an image of Eternal Woman, a Laura or Beatrice. For the poet, the longing for love is what initiates his casting off: “Like every woman you give birth to me / you bring me into the world with blood, replenished by milk / myself, filled with vice, the man who does not think of the future” (Bilosnić, 2007:22). The mythical Odysseus actually is the symbol of male initiation (cf. Hall<sup>11</sup>), so this is an example of how the poet synchronizes the intimate and mythical.

At the stylistic level of the poetic text, comparing this collection to his former poetic opus, Bilosnić uses a wider, more divided verse. Even though he wrote with a psalmodic, simpler style earlier (for example, the books *Nearing birds / Približavanjeptica*, *Lovers from Alexandria / LjubavnicizAleksandrije*, *Roar of the deer / Rika jelena*), here the poem’s text (as a whole and each verse separately) gives the impression of a wider (more epic) form. Some poems have more than fifty verses, so they come off as an “imitation” of Homer’s hexameters and singing in one. The author ludically and directly introduces the motif of the hexameter, connecting the motif of the body, vine and verse into a symbolic unity: “Vines bound like hexameters / touch our feet and faces” (Bilosnić, 2007:9).

---

<sup>11</sup>“Odysseus, like Aeneas, is one of the thousand such heroes, moulded upon prime valrites of initiation, in which the youth departs from his community, undergoes trials and returns to be re-integrated as an adult. This conception of the hero, based on ancient religious practices, has also become identified with the universal model of the human psyche as defined the psychologist Carl Jung.” (Hall, 2008: 104)

Metaphor is most represented in the collection *Poems of Odysseus*. In addition to metaphors, aural figures such as alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia are also present. Those stylistic figures also confirm the openness and melodiousness of Bilosnić's verse. Verses from the poem "On the big white island" will serve as a representative example of the author's use of metaphor. The poem is placed second in the collection, and in it the author quotes the Gospel of John as the first verse, and he unites the motif of Penelope, Ithaca and the vineyard into a bachelardian "oniric house".

"I am the first vine and my father is the vineyard"  
 (...)
   
Your body of the tended vineyard is full of sun
   
Full of fire, light in spirals
   
Fireflies on your white shoulders.
   
(...)
   
On a big white island
   
The vineyard really exists
   
It is the scaffolding of our primordial house
   
And every vine is the sight of your shadow
   
The question of when the wine will become the sweet night.
   
(Bilosnić, 2007: 8)

It is here interesting to note that the metaphor of the "white island" as Ithaca comes up for the first time in this poem. Namely, Ithaca as the "white island", meaning island of Light, appears in the final poem of the collection, which thematizes the dream of the eternal embrace of Penelope and Odysseus, whose bodies will turn into the "legend of Ithaca".

### *Odysseus*

Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić published the book of poems *Odysseus* six years after *Poems of Odysseus*, which testifies to the extent of the poet's fascination with the motif of Odysseus. The collection can be read as a sequel to *Poems of Odysseus* considering the shared motif of Odysseus, but also considering the unique concept of poetry as a journey at sea. However, the book of poems *Odysseus* is characterized by a new, deeper, more philosophical—reflexive approach to the motif of the mythical Odysseus. The poet now reaches for a broader "poetic interpretation" of Odysseus; even though his longing to return to Ithaca is constant, the motif of Odysseus now covers a wider array of universal preoccupations of the poet – anxiety about the meaning of his own path in life, doubt in what has been written and created, the relationship between the poet and the external world (ex.: the poems "Circe", "Nausicaa", "Calypso" and "Cyclops"), complex familial relationships (The father-son relationship<sup>12</sup>, for example, in the poems "Father", "As when I guided Telemachus", "Prayer to Athena") and of course, intimate self-realization in the final

---

<sup>12</sup>About the father-son relationship also wrote Edith Hall (2008: 107).

embrace of love with Penelope (ex.:the poems “Penelope listens to singers”, “Odysseus’s bow”).

In building the collection’s composition, within the intertextual dialogue, the poet now relies more on the Homeric Epic than just on the archetype of Odysseus. He thus now divides the book into seven parts – “Trojan horse”, “Prayer to Athena”, “Helen and the heroes”, “Muses, nymphs and other beings”, “Odyssey, or the everyday return to the homeland”, “Odysseus” and “Ithaca”. The poet’s symbolic idea can already be seen from the way the collection is divided into cycles. In Judeo-Christian symbolism, the number seven signifies finitude and roundedness considering that God created the world in seven days. In that sense it can be assumed that the poet’s idea of the journey of life (wandering and return) is lyrically described in the seven symbolic cycles. The seven cycles are rounded off with two motifs taken from Homer’s concept—the collection starts with the poem “Trojan horse”, and ends with the poem “In the bed”. The author “builds upon” Homer’s concept with the Christian symbolism of the tree as a cross. The Trojan horse that Odysseus thought up and the bed he made in a live olive tree become symbols of the cross of life and of fate, and with that a constant incentive for setting sail and writing. The collection’s composition and the complexity of Odysseus’s reflections truly show how the poet’s image of the voyage is also the image of the search for personal meaning—his own existence and essence. For the poet, the place of Ithaca is a symbol of reaching the Absolute, finality. And considering that we’ve already shown that the author has a proclivity towards Christian philosophy and symbolism, in this collection, too, we see the neoplatonic idea of Ithaca as life’s final goal, in the fulfillment in the Absolute.<sup>13</sup> Ithaca as an image of finality, however, coexists in this collection, on a concrete level, as the poet’s homeland (“Name and face of Ithaca / groves of Zemunik in which glimmers / the space between me and the sea” [Bilosnić, 2013: 99]), but also as the symbolic image of the astral:

The town of Ithaca is not as any other town  
 It is neither a square  
 Nor a circle  
 The sea is its ramparts  
 It has no gates like Jerusalem  
 It is not like the Zodiac  
 Or Babylon  
 Gentle timidity rules over it  
 (...)  
 (Bilosnić, 2013:126)

---

<sup>13</sup>,In the fifth century CE the Neoplatonist systematizer Proclus, whose work influenced Islamic thought as much as Christian concepts, stressed that Ithaca represents the metaphysical destination at which any philosophical person is striving to arrive. The soul thus goes on an *epistemological odyssey* as it passes through the successive stages by which knowledge is attained – sensations, images, opinions, sciences, discursive reasoning, to pure Intellect.“ (Hall, 2008: 155)



At a symbolic level, along with the aforementioned symbol of the tree, common symbols are the horse, light, snake and the sea. When these symbols are set in a mutual relationship it can be said that a symbolic battle of the Apollonian and Dionysian principle is formed. Horses and light are trademarks of Apollo, and the sea and snakes of Poseidon, that is, of the Chthonic. It is interesting that in these poems the motif of the snake as an Illyrian mythological symbol is often tied to the character of the goddess Athena (ex.: in the poem “A prayer to Athena” – “Let the snake and Telemachus guard / him and his apples” [Bilosnić, 2013: 27]). Another common symbol is salt—marine crystals reflecting light—meaning the Apollonian and Dionysian, but also as a symbol of pain. For the poet Penelope is a “woman in a grain of salt” (cf. Bilosnić, 2013:124) while in another poem salt takes on the form of Ithaca itself—“Ionian salt / in the foam of Penelope’s hair / (...) / the salt in which there live shrieks / secrets of the island / which emerge from the flame / and sea (122). The symbol of the boat is also often present, manifesting itself through the archetypal image of human life, so in the poem “This is a ship”, the poet metaphorically equates the body and the ship: “My body is this ship / with ropes of sun beams / in the pupil of the eye // (...) // Vanished in the water I sail / the salt at luck’s end lets blood” (Bilosnić, 2013:98).

In addition to the above symbols, it is worth pointing out the symbol of the tiger which is likened to Odysseus himself. However, this symbol does not have a mythological motivation, but rather, a self-referential one. In the year 2004, Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić published the collection of poems entitled *Tiger*, which has in the meantime become his hallmark beyond the borders of his homeland. The poet identifies with the tiger on a comparative and metaphorical level: “As a tiger in the loneliness of Asia / growling bleeds / dark pain for Ložnica / for the heart / cut in half” (Bilosnić, 2013:65) or “The tiger is Odysseus / made out of star-filled eyes / a wanderer that lives off wandering itself” (58), while he ends the poem “The other story of Hector, or how the war laughs at heroes” with the following verses: “When you are too weak to fight / embrace your enemy / So say those who live with tigers” (56). Thus, the self-referential relationship is clear—Odysseus = poet = tiger.

At the stylistic level of the poetic text, the author returns to a more reduced verse, but the length of the poems differs; from poems walking the line of the poetic genre to ones only two verses long. As with the former collection, the author brings in the motif of the hexameter as a stylistic game: “Troy is all made of hexameters” (91), highlighting the idea that both Troy and Ithaca are two initiatory points of the poetic journey.

The metaphor still remains the underlying stylistic figure. The author tries to keep the metaphorical relationships as curious as can be, but without hyperbolizing them, as can be seen from the verses quoted so far. In playing with Homer’s pretext he literally tries to synchronize Homer’s story with his own (ex.: the poems “Odysseus’s bow” and “Odysseus”) and nostalgically penetrate the myth with which he will heal his own intimate escape from reality.

By interpreting the collections of poems *Poems of Odysseus* and *Odysseus*, we have tried to present the way that the mythical-symbolic mode of contemporary Croatian poetry is manifested within the poetic text, but by using as

an example those texts that are directly motivated by the mythological Odysseus. Therefore, both collections are were conceptualized with the idea of understanding poetry as sailing, or the (neo)platonian path towards actualization in the Absolute. Ithaca is present in both collections as a strong archetypal symbol—the oniric house, the *locus amoenus*, the Absolute. By using the nostalgic idea of reconstructing his own personal history using the “poetic story” of the mythic Odysseus, Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić also confirms the theses of postmodernism as an era of escaping from reality into history and mythology.

## Conclusion

We strived to show in “The Mythical Odysseus in Contemporary Croatian Poetry” how the motif of the mythical Odysseus manifests itself in contemporary Croatian poetry through the mythical-symbolic mode. After the introductory definition of the mythical-symbolic mode as one of the distinctive qualities of postmodern poetics, with all the associated social-cultural conditions (particularly that of an identity crisis), we concluded that accepting the Mediterranean poet’s idea of poetry as a sea-voyage in fact serves as the basis for introducing the motifs of Odysseus and the *Odyssey* in a literary text. A relationship with history, mythology, space and heritage is also one of the most important traits of this mode.

In order to better become familiar with the developmental path of the motif of Odysseus in Croatian Culture as well as its later influence on contemporary postmodern poets, we tried to present as faithfully as possible as many facts as we could regarding the representation of the motif of the Odysseus in Croatian literature throughout history, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the subsection entitled “The motif of Odysseus in contemporary Croatian poetry”, we drew attention to poets and anthologists who, consciously or not, incorporated the archetypal motif of Odysseus into their works, and in doing so took part in reconstructing history and identity defined by heritage. Certain properties of the mythical-symbolic mode—a nostalgic relationship towards history, heritage and mythology; an openness to archetypal symbols; imagery and metaphors in poetic expression and Platonism—served us as cues in the symbolic interpretation of two books of poetry by Croatian poet Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić—*Poems of Odysseus* and *Odyssey*. An interpretation of these works indicated that the author used the motif of the *Odyssey* as a mask with which he resolves his own personal crisis, that is to say, it serves him as a justification to escape from reality. He uses the motif of Odysseus to deepen self-referential self-knowledge at two levels—he develops self-referential awareness of the poetic text, but also an awareness of one’s own self (of essence and existence). The collections were chosen as examples of the mythical-symbolic mode with Odysseus as the central motif; however, this type of interpretation would no doubt also be possible on the examples of other poets in whose opuses the mythical-symbolic mode is present. We maintain that, at the same time, that would even more powerfully support an awareness of the specificity of the Mediterranean text in the corpus of

Croatian literature and how culture, history, heritage and climate effect artistic development. Finally, this type of poetry which has “returned” to mythical themes and anthropocentric ideas shows that, no matter how apocalyptic the state of affairs in the world may be today, there still is room for the poetic word.

## References

- Hutcheon, L. 2000. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group, New York – London.
- Lübbe, H. 1993. Croatian edition: Prikraćeno prebivanje u sadašnjosti – promjena razumijevanja historije. In: *Postmoderne oder Der Kampf um die Zukunft Herausgegeben von Peter Kemper / Postmoderna ili borba za budućnost*, trans. Pehar, D., August Cesarec - Zagreb. 117-133.
- Oraić Tolić, D. 1995. *Književnost i sudbina. (A Literature & Destiny)* Meandar, Zagreb.
- Knežević, S. 2013. *Mediterranski tekst hrvatskoga pjesništva: postmodernističke poetike (Mediterranean text of Croatian poetry: postmodern poetics.)* Naklada Ljevak - Zagreb.
- Ferenczi, S. 1989. *Thalassa – teorija genitalnosti (Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality.)* Zagreb.
- Sorel, S. 2003. *Mediterranizam tijela (Mediterranean Body.)* Altagama – Zagreb.
- Oraić Tolić, D. 2005. *Muška moderna i ženska posmoderna (Male Modernity & Female Postmodernity.)* Naklada Ljevak – Zagreb.
- Kilb, A. 1988. Postmoderna: prilog teoriji alegorijskog stava. In: *Postmoderna – nova epoha ili zablude (Postmodernism: A New Epoch or Illusion.)* Naprijed – Zagreb. 16-26.
- Baudrillard, J. 1988. *Simulacra and Simulations*, Selected Writings, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), pp.166-184. DOI: [https://epk.home.xs4all.nl/theory/Simulation/Baudrillard\\_Simulacra%20and%20Simulations.pdf](https://epk.home.xs4all.nl/theory/Simulation/Baudrillard_Simulacra%20and%20Simulations.pdf)
- Mrkonjić, Z. 1971. *Suvremeno hrvatsko pjesništvo (A Contemporary Croatian Poetry.)* Znanje – Zagreb.
- Hall, E. 2008. *The return of Ulysses – A cultural history of Homer's Odyssey*. I. B. Tauris, London - New York.
- Pavličić, P. 1995. Južno od sjevera, sjeverno od juga. (Southern from North, northern from South). *Dubrovnik*, vol. 6, p 15-19.
- Maroević, T. 1996. *Uskličnici: četvrt stoljeća hrvatskoga pjesništva (1971. – 1995.) (Exclamations: twenty five years of Croatian Poetry.)* HSN – Zagreb.
- Štambuk, D. 1981. Introduction in: *Insulae: hrvatska nova lirika (The Croatian New Poetics)*, Archeopteryx – Zagreb.
- Grubač, S. 1979. *Odisej (Odysseus.)* Čakavski sabor – Split.
- Alihodžić-Hadžialić, N. 2013. Poetika ožiljka: „mjesto glasa“ u arhitekturi tijela Odisejeve mape putovanja (The poetics of scar: the place of voice in the architectural body of the Odysseus journey map.) *Sophos*, vol. 6, p 41-56. DOI=<http://eds.b.ebschost.com/eds/de/livery/sid=ee1e9e655=-ec5-4301>
- Bilosnić, T. M. 2007. *Odisejeve pjesme (Poems of Odysseus.)* DHK – Zagreb.
- Bilosnić, T. M. 2013. *Odisej (Odysseus.)* 3000 Za dar – Zadar.