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Between the Rock and the Homeplace: Poetics of Bestiality

One can only study what one has first dreamed about.

Gaston Bachelard

me and Zabláće/I from Zabláće/me in Zabláće/I in front of Zabláće/I once or twice in flight over Zabláće//Zabláće all these years in me/Zabláće taught me about space/how extension coagulates into place/how you have a place/how you don't have a place/how it is being mapped/how it is being drawn and erased elsewhere/how we imagine it/remember it/how it is so much more than extension //in Zabláće I learned how to walk/on gravel and rock/on the red earth/wade through the puddle/the mud/nowhere else did I run so fast/as in Zabláće/I suffered falls there/there I picked myself up/there I became convinced /that the earth could be moved /from beneath one's feet

Stipe Grgas



*Stipe Grgas, 1962.*¹

¹ They say that a picture/says more than a thousand words/Many of those who know me/say this for a photo taken in 1962//A Varteks coat hanging below the knees/so that it serves you more than one year/Borovo shoes/with rubber soles/so that you don't slip/a French beret/to keep your head warm//An eleven year old kid/like a parcel/with the place of departure/and its destination/pasted on his chest/*from Zagreb /to New York//* What can't be seen on the photo:/his crying mother/his sad brother/the snow covering Zagreb streets/his father looking at the kid... the father the kid yearningly looks for/tomorrow/at the airport//What I see now on the photo:/the clenched jaws/the cramp before tears/lips between a smile and an unstoppable crying/eyes that ask/do they know what they are doing//I still haven't come up with an answer/to it (Grgas, *Homeplace* 69).

Introduction I: Toward the I-voice of Theory

Before it was “baptized,” the newest book by Stipe Grgas, *American Studies Today: Identity, Capital, Spatiality* (2014), underwent a process of naming and renaming. Its first working title was *Unconcealed America*. The author admits that, from the very beginning of his thinking about America within the discipline of American Studies, he struggled with terms, flipping their versions while meandering between *concealment*, *dis-concealment*, *un-concealment*, *uncovering/uncovered* . . . considering even words such as *disclosure* . . . all of them, it seemed to Grgas, having to do with semantic, contentual, contextual, and perhaps essential meanings of the United States.

In order to both underscore and justify the need for fixity of terms and concepts despite the prevailing context of floating experiences of reality, in the aforementioned study, Grgas uses (just to mention one among the many examples) the recent work of William Spanos.² Grgas starts by drawing a “demarcation line” in U.S. history that marked the core period of Spanos’s intellectual self-fashioning and articulation. It was the time of the Vietnam War that, according to Spanos, inaugurated the end of the discourse of the “American man.” The reason for putting an end to that discourse has to do with the collapse of liberal democracy followed by the utter marginalization of the relevance of capitalism as it once was. Spanos believes that, after the demolition of the center of the imperial circle, liberal democracy, along with the then dominant discourse of capitalism, has only residual power. And, while the discursive practices of the dying center of the imperial circle still attempt to remain historically and practically relevant and truthful, despite their historical weakening, they will survive (regardless of possible forthcoming requirements imposed on them suggesting adaptations and mimicry) as long as their argument retains the strength needed to convince and capture a global audience appealing to the hearts and minds of Others.

Spanos explains the proposed dynamics in a Derridean mode. He too talks of a decentered center—of a center whose axis is elsewhere and which operates beyond the scope of a free game by creating surplus emancipatory values—by occupying seemingly unoccupied free zones, pretending to surrender itself to a new paradigm. Simultaneously crossing and transgressing borders and shifting/widening its scope, determined to survive at any cost, such a decentered center hopes for its omnipresence. By virtue of such an almost paradoxical situation, where the center still holds for the sole reason that it does not hold any more, its elsewhere(ness) is forced to disclose itself—to surrender its boundaries to un-concealment that suggests a (paradigm) shift, or just its deferral for the time being. If the essence of a particular mode of disappearance (of production, apprehension, evaluation . . .) wants to prevail and to survive at the end of its reign as known to the world, making itself visible becomes an imperative. But, while making itself visible (for the sole reason of preventing its vanishing or absence as a result of its transforming into yet another mode of existence), it opens itself to

² In his study, Grgas uses plenty of Spanos’s works (6). The excerpt I refer to is from his 1999 book, *America’s Shadow: An Anatomy of Empire*.

vulnerability. And, in such a survival game, it has to enter into a dialogue with the world, assuming another, yet unseen, protean shape. Its change of appearance asks for additional adjustments: those of ideology, economy, psychological economy of self . . . adjustments of language, discourses, disciplines. . .

Although aware of the seriousness of Grgas's scholarly analysis as illustrated by this random example as well as other modes of openness, opening up, disclosing and disclosures, concealments and un-concealments, by his strategies of collapsing boundaries while "stepping out of the closet" . . . while reading Grgas's terminology list that floats above piles of his doubts, I think of these as being more of a personal nature and thus closely related to Stipe Grgas himself as a subject of disclosure. Since my aim here is not to test my readers' patience (and I am afraid I have come very close to it), I will return to the floating fixity of the proposed relationship between appearance and disappearance, between closures and disclosures, between covering and uncovering, offering a "hybrid"³ reading of a sliver of Stipe Grgas's work that, in my opinion, while functioning as a synecdoche, contains the wholeness of his intellectual, scholarly, and creative engagement. To put it simply, I will write about Stipe Grgas's yet undisclosed field of creative engagement—poetry.

Introduction II: *Homeplace* Between Free Game and Supplement

If the seven notes written to accompany his book of poetry *Homeplace*,⁴ as Stipe Grgas fears, might be seen as an unnecessary surplus to the entirety of his poetic text, then my decision to begin this essay using his introductory words might be seen at

³ I am extremely cautious when using the word *hybrid*, especially when it is used to emphasize merging in culture, genders, sexes, ethnicities, even genres and disciplines. Although often times it sounds convincing (or at least sexy) in academic circles, the word itself, just like any other word, is neutral. Becoming a key issue for cultural debate, hybridity, in my opinion, to a large extent, has lost its relevance. It is almost all-applicable when addressing not only races but (as I mentioned) genders, sexes, ethnicities, even genres and disciplines. If the word *hybrid*, whose semantic and conceptual intention is antiessentialist, is not used with caution, we may experience an essentialist backlash as a result of its overuse. Promoting the hybridity of the hybrid, we may (unwillingly though) agree that pure breed is the norm, while hybrid is a deviation. Therefore, I tend to think of hybrid as a position more than anything else—a position in which one approaches fixed issues, essentialist concepts, strict disciplines . . . from the outside. Not as a subversive mode of analysis, but as a supplementary one that can coexist within the shades of traditional understandings of the world.

⁴ I am profoundly grateful to my colleague and close friend, Stipe Grgas, who, for some reasons known to him, believed that I was a competent reader when he sent me the manuscript of his book of poetry. When asked to write my contribution to this collection of essays, I refrained from a strict scholarly discourse and decided to analyze parts of his yet unpublished shipshaped collection of poems for at least two reasons: (1) Grgas's poetry is a supplement (or a prelude, one will never know) to his scholarly engagement, and (2) *Homeplace* simply is a great book of verse. The book was originally written in Croatian. Its author drafted an English version of it and shared it with me in my preparations to write this essay. When using excerpts from his poetry, in order to illustrate my ideas of the inter-genres' interconnectedness, I rely on the author's English translation. With all due respect for Grgas' linguistic cultural adaptation of the book's Croatian original, from time to time, I took the liberty to intervene in his translation, adding yet another hybrid take to the already contaminated field of cross-creativity.

least as academic dishonesty, if not plagiarism. The unwanted-surplus-argument Grgas employs is based on the following assumption: a book of poetry (or any poetic text for that matter) is (or should be) a self-sustained and self-contained whole written on the “white emptiness of a page.” Poetry uses the blank void that negotiates with printed letters, with words whose intention is to enable a reader to read while the void (the page’s, not the reader’s) at the same time acts as both a limitation and an invitation. This assumption works for an ideal arch-reader’s position as explained either in Roman Ingarden’s and Hans Robert Jauss’s receptionist theory, or in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s tradition of hermeneutics. But when poets re-read the written, they cannot escape the captive self-imposed position: to recall the circumstances of their poetic creation. Unable to create “a distance,” poets can hardly escape questions such as: what was the impulse that made them speak out in verses? What criteria did they use when mentioning particular situations, recalling particular images, painting particular people, places, events . . . using them not only as motifs but also as the very triggers for their writing. And this parallel register—those explanatory notes of invitation inside the violated whiteness of the paper become especially acute in situations in which the genre of poetry is not the primary field of the author’s expression. It becomes acute in situations like this one, in which the poet is primarily a scholar who, after half a century of rendering great services to the transatlantic academe, working in his two native languages (Croatian and English), decides to take another, quite new venue—that of poetry.

Stipe Grgas’s work in American studies in general and in spatiality, territoriality, and lately, in stripping the seductive demons of Capital off their axis of power, certainly does not require poetry to back up his theoretical arguments nor to reinvigorate his scholarly cadence. Especially not his poetry. But the very fact of its existence (even in the shape of a manuscript for the time being) once again underscores the irrelevance of the question, What comes first? In this case: does theory precede poetry, or does poetry prepare one for more disciplinary and/or genre-ordered, more “mature” discourses? This particular question begs its appendix: what is more important, more relevant, more serious? Is it poetry, or is it academic and scholarly work that makes a scholar go full monty and strip himself of the “seriousness” of academic genres exercising vulnerability in admitting his poetic engagement? Or, let me return to Grgas’s invocation of Spanos’s “hybrid” adaptation of the already “hybrid” Derrida, and to their dialogue concerning decentered centers whose axis is elsewhere and operates beyond the scope of a free game—by creating a surplus of emancipatory values and applying it to Stipe’s decision to supplement his theory with poetry. Whether the decision for a genre-enrichment of his intellectual engagement stemmed from his sense of the limitations of a vanishing mode of production (i.e., academic textual production) or whether it was “just” his personal desire to survive as a joyful productive subject, Grgas did disclose himself. He surrendered his boundaries to un-concealment and made himself visible to the already existing circles of reception, this time entering the arena as a poet. By making himself visible, he opened himself to vulnerability. But, after reading his manuscript, which, again, I see as a continuation of his scholarly

legacy, I am certain that his gesture of entering into dialogue with the world this time as a poet—his very private and personal change of appearance—brings not only new adjustments of Grgas’s reading of ideology, of economy, of the psychological economy of the self, of language, of discourse, and of discipline . . . but also enriches the overall picture of Grgas’s contribution to the humanities and the social sciences.

In my essay, I hope (1) to collapse the hierarchy between the different modes of writing (i.e., poetry and academic, scholarly text), (2) to offer at least literarily suggestive (if not substantial) arguments that in Grgas’s case, his poetry is a logical and “natural” (structural) supplement of his scholarly work, and (3) that Stipe Grgas is a genuine poet who does not need to introduce himself to the audience in any apologetic manner. In my reading, I will address four distinct but organically connected parts of the manuscript: (a) experiencing experience as a concept, (b) experiencing the experience of a particular place, (c) experiencing the experience of immigration, and finally, (d) focusing on a specific “linguistic turn,” hoping to find arguments that would close the circle of generational and personal adjustments to oftentimes overpowering external requirements of the world I will offer my own reading of modes of “sacrifice” as expressed in Grgas’s verses.⁵ Aware that the majority of essays in this collection will address Grgas’s academic engagement, I will refrain from detailing his theoretical contribution to the field, to his specializations and sub-specializations, assuming that this hybrid reading speaks to the educated audience familiar with his academic work whose disciplinary competence exceeds the scope of my external and somewhat poetic intervention in the field as well in the author’s opus.

Experience I: Space-Writing Between “Home-Place” and “Neo-Home-Place”

In the very beginning of his manuscript, Grgas explains why he chose to write a particular physical place (Zablaće⁶) into literary existence.⁷ An answer to the question of why the space-theorist turn into a poetic geo-grapher of his birthplace can be found in the following contextualization of his po-ethics⁸: “I took up the work of writing

⁵ I need to stress the following: the introduction to *Homeplace* exercises an unparalleled level of professional correctness. It honestly speaks of Grgas’s scholarly and intellectual convictions and the need to translate them employing the media of poetry. Aside from (as I pointed out) being a self-sustained and self-contained poetic text, this book is a po-ethical textual testimony of the author’s religious devotion to the discipline of his choice, and an original and unique poetic supplement to his authorial theory. At the same time, this book spells out a substantial argument that points out the arbitrariness of disciplinary divisions, culturally imposed and thus paradoxically self-explanatory, and, at the same time, the overrated importance of the uniqueness of one’s disciplinary discourse/voice whose externally inscribed rigidity castrates the joyfulness of any science.

⁶ This small village nearby the city of Šibenik is Grgas’s place of birth.

⁷ As an expert on spatiality, Grgas wrote a noted study. *Ispisivanje prostora: Čitanje suvremenog američkog romana* [Writing Space: A Reading of the Contemporary American Novel], Zagreb, 2000.

⁸ I introduced the term *po-ethical* in the 1990s, and I used it in my book *A Central Europe of our Own* which first came out in Rijeka (Adamić, 2003).

the experience of a place which has been to me experiential, significant not only because I think that experience merits to be written about but also because I believe that the manner in which the experience of homeplace has been written about falsifies its complexity” (1).⁹

Grgas’s ruminations about the title of his most recent study that included many versions reflect this po-ethical take. The experience of a place *in res* is not the center of Grgas’s search *in verbis*. The center instead is the manner in which that experience is oftentimes written. Micro-historian¹⁰ Renato Serra, relating the departure of a group of soldiers for Libya, writes about biases that not only surround but determine memory. He admits that there are people who, *in bona fide*, imagine and believe that a document can describe reality. But in his opinion, all any document can relate is the document itself. And the reason for this is simple: a document is a fact. A (forthcoming) battle is another fact (an infinity of facts), and these two entities can never become identical—they cannot become one. A man who acts upon something (an event, a situation . . .) is a fact. A man who tells a story about another man who acts upon something is, again, another fact . . . The same goes for places and for memories of places. Whenever one writes of a place, especially through filters of time, some kind of (self-)censorship arises as a limitation. The paradox of this limitation is that this (self-)censorship sees itself as an enrichment of a sort—as an orderly story of the past that deserves to be written about because of the past event’s uniqueness. This writing is not based on depicting the past “as it was”; quite the contrary, it is ornamented, edited . . . in a word—censored. The awareness of the fact that, once written into existence through the media of language, a place as a topic of writing becomes transformed and reappears not as that place anymore but as one’s experience of it, as the newness of the place made Grgas rethink the terminology of spatiality. Determined not to falsify the complexity of place, Grgas gave up the already existing spatial and geographic terminology and replaced the term *homeplace* with the term *neohomeplace*.¹¹ In the same vein, Grgas introduces yet another terminological change. In the same way that he is uncertain whether he can differentiate the trueness of a homeplace from falsifications of its complexity, he asserts that, due to the fact that he is not certain whether or not he could undoubtedly ascertain what is and what is not poetry, in framing the genre of his book and circumscribing the space for his po-ethical voice, he opts for *verses* instead of poems.

Experience II: The Collective Life in a Place: Topophilia vs. Topophobia

Regardless of the genre, writing is to a great extent playing with language. And, at the same time, with reality. It is interesting that the overall treatment of reality in *Homeplace* reflects Grgas’s understanding of reality as related in his scholarly work.

⁹ Due to the fact that I am reading from a yet unpublished book, I am using the pagination as it appears in the manuscript.

¹⁰ I borrow the term *microhistory* from the Italian intellectual Carlo Ginzburg.

¹¹ In Croatian it sounds slightly different: *zavičaj-pseudozavičaj*.

In both cases, reality is collectivity enclosed within spatial and temporal coordinates (Grgas). Aware of the striking similarities between his poetic and scholarly facets of reality, Grgas warns the reader of his *verses* not to expect to find either geography or history in his “neohomely” spatial poetry. Then, without any intention of confusing the audience, he confesses,

True to say, what follows is both a geography and a history but something else also: I write about place and time through the prism of personal experience, an experience which has been mediated by reading experience, by dialogues with others, by lived experience and by memory. If empathy with a collectivity presupposes a dedication to a place and its inhabitants, it also marks a reckoning with its restrictions, a stepping out of its givens and its disciplinary practices. I see the origins of what I hoped to achieve with this book as deriving from somewhere between identification with and an aversion towards a collective life, somewhere between topophilia and topophobia. (1)

In order to understand Grgas’s po-ethical interventions that prepare his readership to grasp the connections between external inscribing and essentialist assumptions of the existence of *spacetime* as well as links between locality and collectivity, some contextualization is needed. As far as our homeland is concerned, the official history-in-the-making that started in the 1990s, along with the wars that struck the Yugoslavian successor states, made remembering the distant past an imperative. Caught in the restructuring of the present, the citizens of all the new nation states that came into being after Yugoslavia was dismantled were expected to “remember” what happened a thousand years ago but were not allowed to remember what took place only a few years ago. The distant past was politically forged as real and near, while the content of the (vanishing) present was marked with words such as “ex-” or “former.” Since Croats were seen as having been the prisoners of the Balkan version of internationalist communism in Titoist Yugoslavia, we were expected to exercise a substitution of remembered facts. The pure and true Croatian “identity” marked by the coronation of our first king, Tomislav, which took place in the year 925, became a demarcation point of the supposedly uninterrupted continuity of national memory that was mobilized in forging a new nation-state—a state that was not a successor state of the First or Second Yugoslavia but a “natural” continuation of its arch-identitarian event that, while skipping centuries of Croatia’s history, naturally continued to live after the 1990s. This is a unique example of simultaneous continuity-in-discontinuity that, while escaping logic, feeds itself purely on symbolic and mythical meanings. This invention-of-tradition process has a name: the “fulfillment of our thousand-year-old dream.”¹²

¹² Does this mean that, after centuries of hibernation, of not being who we are, we finally became who we were all the time (clandestinely though) before we came into being as the collective and individual true “us”? This inspires me to pose the question: *Who we were before we became us?* And this question

Perceiving the modern state as the reincarnation of its medieval matrix, which obviously could wake up from its millennial coma untouched by history and time, one cannot possibly question the very complex problem of the solidity/fragility of *identity-in-time*. Also, the imperative of originality, authenticity . . . the question of who came where first, and thus, whose in fact was the territory they settled, occupied, founded . . . is simply of no use. It is useless for the present to the same extent that it has been useless for historical narratives construed to “legitimize” our Oedipal claim to “our” soil. Even though immersed in questions of space-writing, of spatiality, aware of the importance of the territory in forging identities, Grgas, both in theory and in poetry, disclaims essentialist myths of originality and glorified collectivity. Using bitter irony in *verses*, he hopes to remedy those dangerous myths:

Were those who tended the livestock/Morlaks/were they Vlachs/were they
Croats /Serbs or Albanians /who gives a damn/just as those drovers /lost no
sleep/on account of those who had lived there before them (4)¹³

Such poetic juxtaposition of myths and the rough reality of migrations, driven by empty stomachs more than by a quest of founding collective selves, continues in Grgas’s corrective takes on the oftentimes overseen but real discrepancies between real reasons that made people, tribes, or nations migrate and romanticized falsifications of their basic needs:

If there had been an errand here/by command of either man or God/say
some decree given by a powerful lord/or some kind of exodus/it would be
remembered by archives/or at least in our oral heritage//Nothing, no such
things are to be found here//We came to the peninsula under the command
of our stomachs /the order to move was given/by the dull looks/of hungry
children/in their island misery/by the howling of beasts/on the craggy slopes
//Therefore when you probe into the darkness of the past/voices of your
kin and forefathers/will not reach your expecting ears/but the rumblings of

subsequently leads to the crucial identitarian question here: *Is there such a thing as “us” at all?* Especially seen in such essentialist modes? As for the public treatment of the *millennial dream* (or our hibernation) here are some illustrations of the continuities and discontinuities of “us-ness.” It is interesting that, in spite of many changes in national, social, and societal contexts (such as changes in governments ranging from nationalists to social democrats then back to extreme right wing nationalists [2015] entering NATO and the EU . . .) our identitarian terminology did not change in 25 years of Croatian independence. Quite the contrary: with the extreme right-wing rhetoric and mob-like practice of nationalism that marks our recent politics, such rhetoric grew even stronger, and, as I write this essay, it pollutes our present in the name of our past. Such a “future in the past” paradox is contained in the assumption that the re-birth of an entirely new nation essentially depends on its own reincarnation.

¹³ Jesu li tu stoku gonili Morlaci/jesmo li mi oni Vlasi/jesu li to bili Hrvati/Srbi ili Albaneži/meni je svejedno/kao što ni ti stokogoniči nisu marili/za one koji su tu bili prije njih

hunger/the howling of beasts/that we inherit/like all the other folk of the
Dalmatian Karst (11)¹⁴

Experience III: A Place of One's Own: Poetics of Modesty/Poetics of Bestiality

Official history in fact is to a great extent a patriarchal myth of nationalism.¹⁵ The fact that Grgas in his *verses* applies the Nietzschean model of genealogy enriched with Foucauldian understandings of counter-memory as the infrastructure of counter-history does not need further elaboration.¹⁶ It is impossible to avoid polyperspectivism—to see things through a crushed mirror. It is fruitless to look for the Truth because it cannot be grasped in its fullness. One can only grasp parts of it. Despite the fact that a curious and ideologically disinterested intellectual knows that s/he can deal only with slivers, s/he needs to remain interested and ask questions such as, What is 'truth' here and now? In so doing, s/he substitutes final and essentialist categories such as Good and Evil with more humane ones, such as acceptable and unacceptable or correct and incorrect.

In the later period of his work on territoriality, Grgas includes not only complex coastal lines but also the sea. In his *Homeplace*, he makes clear that the celebratory cant about the Croatian littoral covers up its faithful rendering. And that this celebratory process in fact erases true experiences making them uniform and in so doing fal-

¹⁴ Da je ovdje bilo kakvog poslanja/po nalogu čovjeka ili boga/recimo nekakvog dekreta velmože/nekakvog egzodusa/pamtili bi ih pismohrana/ili makar usmena predaja/Ne, ovdje nema ništa od toga/Na poluotok smo stigli po diktatu želuca/nalog su izdali tupi pogledi/gladne djece/u otočkom uboštvu/zavijanje zvjeradi/u kraškoj vrleti/Stoga kada pustite sondu u mrak prošlosti/do načuleni ušiju/neće doprijeti/pri-san glas srodnika i pretka/nego glasje gladi i zavijanje zvijeri/koje baštinimo/kao sva čeljad dalmatinskog krša.

¹⁵ It is interesting that, while I was writing this part of the essay somewhere in Ireland, three skeletons were found. They were 10,000 years old. After a forensic analysis, the expert concluded that none of the three ancient Irish skeletons are of Celtic origin. The question they asked in an anecdotal way, though, was, What is the future of the Irish past that makes the fabric of their future? Will the NBA basketball team *Boston Celtics* retain their name after the discovery that Irish might not be Celtic at all? And does this relate to our identitarian dilemmas over our Illyrian, Slavic, or (according to some) even Persian origin? Definitively seen as Slavs (and slaves) in the holes in the wall in Astoria, NY, where Grgas spent his young adult years, could the migrants from his homeplace care less about their true origins? Such random intrusions of fact into the bubbles of identity forging question the very use value of our perpetual searches for authenticity. They ridicule the importance of originality, they laugh at questions such as whose is the land, who landed where first . . . because answers to those questions really do not offer the answer to the question of who we are. Not to forget: The Irish, for the time being provisional, discovery of the non-Celtic origin of the skeletons took place on St. Patrick's Day. Steve's first published scholarly work was on W. B. Yeats (and F. Nietzsche). I would rather think of it as a joyful coincidence than a historical or identitarian errand.

¹⁶ It actually seems that Grgas writes his verses fully cognizant of the interplay between concepts of genealogy (F. Nietzsche), archeology of knowledge (M. Foucault), microhistory (C. Ginzburg), and metahistory (H. White). This is just an educated hint and my objectively founded belief. Elaborating on these interrelations would require an entirely new essay.

sifies “the human experience of the Adriatic coast and of the broader Mediterranean basin” (Grgas, 11). And he continues, “Doubtlessly there are common features of dwelling on the rim between the sea and the land. But different factors are always in play to make collectivities on the various configurations of the coast live the collision of sea and land in different ways” (11). In his attempt to do *post festum* poetic justice to both the coastal region and the sea, he invokes the quiet but convincing voice of Predrag Matvejević, who in his celebrated study on the Mediterranean said that it “has not written its *poetic of modesty*” (12). While, in excavating the Zablacé experience by substituting the emptiness of facts with a “poetic of bestiality” in his treatment of the sea, Grgas looks for verses that would objectively relate to the past embracing the task of modesty that also derives from Matvejević’s well-known concept of *geopoetics*.¹⁷ Also, the quote I use to illustrate Grgas’s po-ethical conviction to those familiar with the magnificent and modest Claudio Magris’s novel *Un altro mare* summarizes to a great extent its point of departure and place of arrival:¹⁸

Don’t speak to me of *mare nostrum*/mere gibberish/the sea is always foreign/
it always is and will always be/only its own (10)¹⁹

In recent years, we have witnessed sheer folly in coming up with slogans meant to attract tourists to visit our “pearls of the Adriatic.” In a ridiculous shake-and-bake process of inventing tradition, our state-sponsored agencies entered the race without rational rules of attraction. Its goal was to come up with the most seductive slogan. Among the more inane ones was “The Mediterranean as it once was.”²⁰ Aside from the fact that it speaks of the uselessness of the future-in-the-past identitarian process of self-legitimation, it also demonstrates the basic ignorance of the fabric of the past during which the inhabitants of “The Mediterranean as it once was” were not driven here by higher errands, or because they were tired of the dry flatness of the inland but, in their search for their neohomeland, they heeded the voices of their intestines. Constantly aware that he ought not to betray the experience of the homeplace succumbing to the manners in which it has been written about—manners that falsify its

¹⁷ The term *geopoetics* signifies the geo-cultural spaces of the Balkans and the Mediterranean that are multiple-layered, and, to those who want and know how to listen, these spaces disclose sediments of history emphasizing the enchanting beauty of a simultaneous mutuality and difference of traditions, underscore our historical mistakes and misconceptions, while encouraging poets to transmit almost pantheistic registers of Nature.

¹⁸ Thinking of the relation between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean, Magris writes: “This sea is Mare Tenebrarum, shapeless and bitter nothingness where nothing happens. Ulysses and the Argonauts sailed the Mediterranean and the Adriatic . . . beyond the Pillars of Hercules stories simply end falling out of the world” (18).

¹⁹ Ma kakvo *mare nostrum*/koješta/more je uvijek tuđe/more je uvijek bilo i bit će/samo svoje.

²⁰ Another slogan that can compete with the former in its feeble-mindedness: “Croatia, a small country for a great vacation.”

complexity, Grgas decided to intervene using the bare and *appellative* codes of poetic language hoping to fulfill the *pragmatic function*²¹ of a poem.

Exhausted/their skin caked with the earth/let them walk home/Before they arrive/turn off the electricity/close the faucets/let them fall asleep dead tired/in the dirt and the sweat of their bodies/After this I guarantee/that not even in their dreams/will they want to visit /the Adriatic as it once was (14)²²

The Experience of Emigration I: Zabláče under the Shadow of America

Like in many other places and many other countries whose socialist/communist ideologies were on a mission to falsify historical facts, turning spontaneous peasant uprisings into working-class revolutions in order to justify the Marxist-Leninist idea of a proletariat as the agent of change, in Zabláče, farm workers suddenly became factory workers. Industrialization and electrification, running water . . . , transformed both the experience of place and time. Because of this, Grgas wholly disagrees “with those who maintain that the experience of factory work, the point at which Zabláče is caught in the process of modernization, contaminates the image of the village. On the contrary. I begin with an evocation of the moment when the person from Zabláče enters the factory gate, when the village becomes networked into a broader configuration” (35).

Aside from the regional and global benefits of entering the network of a broader configuration, those times of imposed but, to a significant extent, also spontaneous and enthusiastic collectivization, Grgas relates, were more human, fuller, freer than the now-dominant mostly nationalist-communitarian and neoliberal pseudo-leftist accounts reinvent them. However, as far as Zabláče is concerned, this period is overshadowed by the experience of emigration: “That is why the Zabláče peninsula is at times depicted as being under the shadow of America” (35). Grgas dedicates an entire section of his *verses* to the post-WWII experience and de-ideologizes it in very convincing ways, claiming that—in spite of all the misunderstandings, mixups, confusions; the plethora of armies that were marching through the area; the drafting and redrafting of individuals who never invited History to enter their privacy—“not ideologies but the geographical location of the village determined what befell the inhabitants” during the war. He writes of the shock and the anger that arises as a reaction to the oversimplification of historical facts (one of them being that Zabláče was marked as “the Chetnik village”). The fact that “many witnesses who had lived through those horrific times” expressed anger and sadness “when confronted with these allegations inspired [Grgas] to try to find words for that experience” (25).

And he does it in *verses* preemptively explaining that the reason for searching for poetic justice comes as a reaction to yet another experience of the place—the fact

²¹ These terms I borrow from the linguist Jan Mukařovski.

²² Trudne i prašnjave/pustite ih da pješače doma/Prije toga isključite struju/zatvorite slavine/neka zaspu mrtvi umorni/u prašini i znoju tijela svoga/Poslije toga više ni u snu/neće htjeti prizvati/Jadran kakav je nekad bio.

“that throughout all these years nobody from the village felt the need to show the said allegations to be unfounded lies. It saddens one even more when you realize that so little effort was needed” (25). But more than once, literary and cultural history, along with the history of ideas, has taught us that, where history as a discipline introduces silence, poetry takes over the task of disclosure and speaks up. And this is why, while preparing the reader for his version of “truth-experience” Grgas underscores (I repeat), “not ideologies but the geographical location of the village determined what befell the inhabitants during the last phases of WWII”:

It would be better in all respects/better for the innocent victim of the evil perpetrator/better for the peace of soul and for the memory of the witness to crime/it would have been so much better/if we didn't have to always explain anew²³

Without any intention to minimize the importance of the post-WWII complexity of the place, aware of the spatial limits of this essay, and cognizant of the prevailing experience of peninsular emigration that indeed overshadowed the post WWII period, I will turn to the partially-biased but “true” image of Zabláče being “under the shadow of America.” As in many other matters, claims Grgas, there are no precise facts about when the emigration of Zabláče folk to the Americas actually began. If there is anything distinct about Zabláče emigration, he underscores, then it is the number of people departing, on the one hand, while on the other, it is the continuous nature of the drainage.²⁴

The Experience of Emigration II: Immigrants Between Longing and Belonging: A Story of Four Apples

Stipe Grgas lived in New York between 1962 and 1969, during, as he says, the formative years of his youth. He visited Greater New York afterwards a number of times, and in his poems he erases the linearity of time, mixing experiences of his youth with those of his later visits. In addition to his own experience, he “gestures to” the accounts of his fellow-villagers who, “unprepared, habituated to a way of life determined by their homeplace, by its land and its islands, each lived through an encounter with the most wondrous of all islands, with Manhattan” (57). It is interesting to point out that in one of his earlier writings devoted to that experience, Grgas began his text with the following words:

a ring of islands has always stood in front of us. They served as shield, they tempted us with their beckoning, they were an obstacle. They truly were

²³ Bilo bi u svakom pogledu puno bolje/bolje za nedužne žrtve zlotvora/bolje za spokoj duše/i pamćenja svjedoka zločina/bilo bi puno bolje/da ne moramo uvijek iznova objašnjavati.

²⁴ People from Zabláče are literally all over the world. They now live in Australia and Canada, while some have lived in South America, but the main two centers of the Zabláče emigrant story are New York and San Pedro, California.

places that separate but that simultaneously challenge us to interact with others, with the world. In the row of islands that encircle the Croatian shore, protecting it but also creating a labyrinth through which one steered to the open sea, Jabuka (Apple) could be considered to be the last obstacle. And how could it be that sailors, in the name of that Adriatic crag, whose disappearance on the horizon signified the breaking of the last ties to the place of intimacy and origin, would not hear the siren-call of the other, big, Apple, the city-island that we, with uncountable other multitudes, headed for with both hope and anxiety. (57)

Hopes, anxieties, great expectation, homesickness . . . the dream of boundless opportunity, of being given a chance to become a new “American man,” fluid as it might be in its altogether elsewhere-ness, was unavoidably fixed in the bittersweet experience of the interplay of distance and closeness. The discussion on interconnectedness between spatial and temporal distance and personal feelings is an ancient one.²⁵ Perhaps the most important insight into the issue that bridges Ancient Greek thought with the Enlightenment is David Hume’s.²⁶ Hume insists that distance in time is superior to distance in space because it does more to weaken both our wills and our passions. When he writes on the moral implications of distance, after asking why distance in general weakens conception and passion, Hume continues to ask, Why is it that distance in time in particular has a greater effect on humans than distance in space? But what is important for the role of spatial (and, consequently temporal) distance in the experience of post-WWII emigration is the one Hume poses immediately afterwards, when he asks why a very great distance (also) increases our esteem and admiration (for an object). We might add, for the people we left behind, too. It is known that very great distance in space along with weakening feelings does increase our esteem and admiration for objects.²⁷ Each and every reasonable human being who has experienced emigration is fa-

²⁵ The first serious discussion can be found in Aristotle (*Rhetoric II, Poetics*). In his writing he favors distance in time as the agency that weakens feelings more than distance in space. Some later discussions, such as those of D. Hume (*Treatise of Human Nature*, “Of Contiguity and Distance in Space and Time”), D. Diderot: *Conversation of a Father with his Children* and *Letter on the Blind* (“On Morality of the Blind”), A. de Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, and most recently, C. Ginzburg, “Killing a Chinese Mandarin: Moral Implications of Distance,” recognize and reevaluate the importance of distance in time, putting its importance next to the importance of the experience of temporal distance.

²⁶ “[T]ho’ distance both in space and time has a considerable effect on the imagination, and by that means on the will and passions, yet the consequences of a removal in *space* are much inferior to those of a removal in *time*. Twenty years are certainly but a small distance of time in comparison of *what history and even the memory of some may inform them of* [my emphasis], and yet, I doubt if a thousand leagues, or even the greatest distance of place this globe can admit of, will so remarkably weaken our ideas, and diminish our passions” (“Of Contiguity and Distance in Space and Time,” 272-73).

²⁷ It is not too brave to assume that a person living, for example, in Rijeka will not bring home a rock from Venice but will be more than tempted to smuggle a stone from Ancient Mesopotamia or Jerusalem (distance in time) or that from Xian, China or some place in New Zealand (distance in space).

miliar with the experience of the interplay between emotional numbness and emotional exaltation when recollecting the homeplace's past or while thinking of the loved ones s/he left behind. Both mechanisms and feelings float above reality and can hardly be remedied or replaced by any item borrowed from the so-called real world. Immigrants can feed on fantasies and imagination, but just like their decentered centers, they do not have a palpable anchor. The dream of return is usually full of hopes that to some extent correspond with the hopes the immigrant had upon leaving his homeplace. Unlike their initial projections—phantasmic, oftentimes even surreal dreams—that gave them the strength needed to hush down emotions hard to control when leaving the homeplace, the hopes of return are definite, calm; they call for a closure . . . but, in most cases, they end up being unfulfilled. The question is: who changed in the meantime? Who or what became different between the departure and the return: was it a person or was it a place? These questions cannot be answered. And Grgas is perfectly aware of this when he writes about such experiences of displaced dreams of return. He writes of his uncle Josip, the emigrant and the returnee, on two occasions. First depicting his departure,

When before departure you embraced me/an embrace that still lingers/I
didn't know/that you knew/this to be your last parting with our shore (51)²⁸

And then his return,

My mother planted/an apple tree/in the part of our front yard/that in time
became my uncle's//My uncle loved that apple tree/sat in its shade/picked
up the apples fallen to the ground//When I once visited my uncle/on 49th
street in Astoria/New York/coming there from upstate Ithaca//more exile
than home/he said that he had already bought his plane ticket/that he could
hardly wait/to sit under his apple tree (52)²⁹

But he returned too late. Upon his return, being caught between longing and belonging, he spent only two days sitting under the tree. After he died he lost not only his two continents, his tale of his two cities; he also lost his name as the final frontier of his identity conundrum. Whenever they talk about Josip, those who survived him do not call him Josip any more. They “came to call him Apple.” Returning from the Big Apple that never became his, to sit under the apple that had ceased to be his, dead, the person formerly known as Josip symbolically survives scattered around the untended apple remains that cover the ground “like the footsteps/of the master of the house/making his weary way home” (52).

²⁸ Kada si me na rastanku čvrsto zagrlio/nisam znao/da si ti znao/da je to tvoj zadnji oproštaj od naše obale

²⁹ Moja je mater/u dijelu vrta/koje je kasnije pripalo stricu/posadila jabuku//Stric je volio tu jabuku/sjedio u njezinu hladu/skupljao plodove/koji su padali na tlo/Kada sam onomad iz Ithace/nipošto doma/rekao bih svojevrsnog izгона/posjetio strica u 49. ulici u Astoriji/u kući koja mi je nekoć bila dom/pričao mi je kako je već kupio avionsku kartu/kako jedva čeka da sjedne/ispod svoje jabuke

The Experience of Emigration III: Zabláče Between *eu topos* and *ou topos*

Along with its memory in the immigrant experience, Zabláče continues to exist in the gap between an ideal place (*eu topos*) and no place (*ou topos*). New New Yorkers, new San Pedro men, new Toronto Dalmatians all have one thing in common: they live on the hyphen. Both distance in time and in space plays a cruel game of closeness and distance, placing the majority of them in between two impossibilities: while yearning to be at home in the world, they end up being altogether elsewhere. The question who we are without our piece of land becomes acute in the immigrant experience. That emotional fact of immigrant inquisitorial experience by no means glorifies, romanticizes, or exaggerates the essentialist imagery of the a priori uncontested values inscribed to one's homeplace. The fact that this is an experience without that inscription does not mean that it, as an experience, does not exist. Grgas writes about that experience in an almost archival, diagnostic mode, taking the anamnesis of the experience of a multiple displacement.

If you typed in the surnames/what will appear on the screen is a net/that outlines how we stand/in the world at large/in the Big Apple/in San Pedro/ in freezing Toronto/in the Australian nowhere//How can Zabláče keep up with these cities/The enfeebled knot on this net/Zabláče will seep through its meshes/become a non-place/while you on outside points of the net/will still dream of returning/to a place that no longer exists (59)³⁰

In spite of sameness in difference, of various possibilities to find similar or almost identical things, situations, settings, on the other side of Atlantic, some items are not translatable; silenced by the rough rules of survival. All that is needed for survival for immigrants seems to reside within the limited scope of fast and small talk. Small and superficial talk replace meaningful and intellectually engaged conversation. And, as time goes by, this externally limited space of utterance circumscribes the boundaries of their daily life. What reduces the lives of immigrants to survival is the following: if you, as an immigrant, want to go on with living, you must survive in a rough environment of early liberal capitalism, a habitat you never had the chance to encounter in your homeplace. This is definitely not something you expected to befall you as a core ingredient of your American Dream.

Chased by hostile (usually Irish) foremen, "our people" had no time to reflect— Not even to exchange a word or two mentioning familial symbols that could have fed the remnants of their memory of home:

³⁰ Utipkaš li prezimena u tražilicu/na zaslonu će se pojaviti mreža/koja ocrtava kako stojimo /u domaji i u svijetu/u Velikoj Jabuci/u San Pedru/u promrzlom Torontu/u nigdini Australije//Kako da se Zabláče nosi s tim gradovima/Sve krhkiji čvor na mreži/ono će iscuriti kroz njezina okna/postati nemjesto/dok ćete vi na vanjskim kracima mreže/još sanjati povratak mjestu/kojega više nema

Neither lavender/nor rosemary ever found mention/in Hell's Kitchen/the fields in the old country rarely/the sea and the coast never/The talk was of loading and unloading /cargo/of Irish foremen/that gave them work/after inspecting their muscles/after assessing the prowess of neck/hands (61)³¹

The personal experience of an immigrant worker was not so different,

When harbors were still harbors/and longshoreman still relied on their muscles/before containers/before computers /the longshoremen from Zabláče/spilled out from the piers of the greatest of all harbors/headed for the New York boroughs/exhausted/moping/stupefied/after days of loading/unloading cargo//The docks were a school/in which Irish foremen taught the lesson/here you see nothing/here you hear nothing/don't even think of telling anyone/about what we do here /Marlon Brando/in that film about longshoremen/wears their clothes/has a hook/hanging on his belt/a man-killing hook/but Marlon Brando is not the longshoreman/ who unsteadily walks/down 49th street in Astoria/with a lobster/wrapped around his waist (62)³²

And often times their return, even if it is presented as an ultimate success to the folks back home, turns out to be a returnee's failure illustrated in particular anecdotal episodes that contain his continual disconnection. Such surprising impossibility to reach an imagined connection with the (obviously projected) essence of the homeplace—a lost unity with one's (obviously former) self, manifests itself in a disjointed line of grotesque experiences that entertain the village folk:

(He) did not brag about women/Short but sturdily built/he was the perfect stowaway/hidden amongst the bags in the hold of the ship/He carried cement bags on New York construction sites/drudged and slaved on the waterfront/worked and saved/Tenth Avenue does not remember him//I'll say two things about him:/After returning to the old country/he bought a Mercedes Benz/became the terror of local roads/until he crashed/and landed with his car/on a counter in a butcher shop/When he gave up the

³¹ U njujorkškoj Kuhinji Pakla/nisu se spominjali levanda /niti ružmarin/polja tek ovlašno/more i obala nikako/Govorilo se o istovaru i utovaru/irskim nadzornicima/koji su im davali posao/po izgledu mišićja/po procjeni snage vrata/ruku

³² Dok su luke još bile luke/dok su lučki radnici još koristili mišićja prije kontejnera i kompjutera/iz dokova najviše od sviju luka/razmislili bi se zabláčki lučki radnici/po njujorškim kvartovima/iscrpljeni/sneni /omamljeni/nakon višednevnog ukrcaja/istovara//Dokovi su bili škola/u kojoj su Irci nadglednici naukovali/ovdje niste ništa vidjeli/ovdje niste ništa čuli/da vam ni na pamet padne/zucnuti nešto o našoj raboti// Marlon Brando/u filmu o lučkim radnicima/nosi njihovu odjeću/za pojasom mu je kuka/kuka ubojita/ali Marlon Brando nije doket/koji nesigurna koraka/hoda 49. ulicom u Astoriji/s jastogom/omotanim oko pasa

steering wheel/he would say that it was because of age/because of his leg veins (63)³³

A Linguistic Turn I: Alien Skies / Sheltering Words

As Hayden White claims, history is not only an object one can study: “It is also, even primarily a certain relationship to ‘the past’ mediated by a distinctive kind of written discourse . . . a historical discourse is actualized in its culturally significant form as a specific kind of writing that we may consider the relevance of literary theory to both the theory and the practice of historiography . . .” (*Figural Realism*, 19). When he explains his metahistorical method, White underscores that forms of (meta)historical discourse are, in their nature, poetic because they ascribe and secure explanation and meaning to the historical facts. In history writing, White claims, all the results of literary imagination are opposed to the written material, which itself is a result of a search for historical truths. Historical imagination can be a venue for interpreting the meaning of historical data, but at the same time, it can serve as a veil that covers the absence of former facts. Regardless of its premise, the historical imagination is crucial to re-membering the dis-membered data, and is the most efficient way to enter the mental dynamics of historical figures we are curious to meet. In his further explanation of metahistory, White connects modes of writing, stating that “history is a form of literary expression, just like poetry—neither its subject nor its theory or methodology are purely historic” (*Figural Realism*, 1). The pragmatic value one can extract from White’s method is that it (a) weakens the widely accepted (modernist) idea that one must trust history because it serves a higher purpose, (b) reminds us that language, not reason or experience, is essential in knowledge (truth) production, and (c) warns that, if we are willing to decenter centers of official History we must be equipped with the apparatus needed to initialize practical interrogations of both the role and essentiality of power.

Grgas’s poetic work in supplementing the preexisting experiences as related through histories of his homeplace to a great extent confirms Hayden White’s learned convictions and echoes his interpretations of relating past experiences. Grgas’s treatment of historic experience stems from White’s “hybridization” of History in a specific linguistic turn where history is perceived as a form of literary expression: *just like poetry*. Again, neither history’s subject nor its theory or methodology are purely historical. Language, not reason or experience, is essential in knowledge (truth) production. And it comes as no surprise that Grgas in his *Homeplace* employs poetic language to (a) translate the subject he studied because it was the subject he first dreamed about into its supplementary mode and (b) to rewrite the disciplinary (historical) discourse

³³ Drugi se nije hvastao ženama/Nizak i stamen/bio je savršeni slijepi putnik/skriven među vrećama u štivi Vreće cementa teglio je na njujorškim gradilištima/crnčio na dokovima/radio i štedio/Nije ga zapamtila Deseta avenija//Dvije ću stvari o njemu pribilježiti:/Nakon povratka u stari kraj/kupio je “Mercedez”/ bio strah i trepet ovdašnjih cesta /dok se nije slupao/i s autom završio u “u mesnicu”/Kada je odustao od /ćorava posla/napustio volan/objašnjavao je/da je to zbog vena

of a place the experience of which merits to be written about, because he believes “that the manner in which the experience of homeplace has been written about falsifies its complexity.” The porous borders of disciplines that bring historical, theoretical, and poetic expression close to each other make Hayden White conclude that there is no accurate or truthful history that, at the same time, is not a philosophy of history. The overall textual evidence I found in Grgas’ poetry manuscript suggests the following “translation” of White’s statement: there is no accurate or truthful history that, at the same time, is not a poetry of history. And by history here I imagine an inclusive and open field that invites all the segments of Grgas’s theoretical work on space, land, waters, territories, their economies, ethnographies, semantics . . . whose common denominator is history (of literature, of philosophy, of ethnography, of geography, of hydrography, of travels . . .).

The essential role of language not only in knowledge or truth production but also in finding/reinventing one’s place in the world (especially after the experience of displacement) is written in the following verses:

We shrouded ourselves in a word/torn up from a language we didn’t know/
sewed ourselves into it/and became *pipecovers*//day in and day out/we covered/heating pipes/all kinds of pipes/miles upon miles of pipes/in New York school cellars/in hospital cellars/in the labyrinth of the New York subway//
later we tore down/mile upon mile/of these asbestos coverings/mute astronauts/on the moon/of man-killing dust//fiberglass stifles/fiberglass eats/at lungs/voice/so that if for the pipecover/over the red-hot boiler/I can say Hephaestus/what can I say/for the Puerto Rican superintendent/who cools his bum/behind the open fridge door/every once in a while brings to his lips/a bottle of Bacardi rum/is he watching/or is he laughing at us/pipecovers/and at our hellish business (67)³⁴

A Linguistic Turn II: I Name You Therefore You Are (Mine): A Story of Pipecovers

The word here is not only a communicational item but also a shield from the alien world of alienated labor that unifies all the difference of people whose destiny was made manifest by others—this time literally by those who came (t)here first. In this poem, this is a Puerto Rican whose date of arrival, closeness to the host land, the political role of his homeland as the U.S. dominion, and the linguistic familiarity of

³⁴ Pokrili smo se riječju/isčupanom iz nama nepoznatog jezika/ušili u nju/i postali/jednom riječju/*pajpkoveri*/danju i noću smo pokrivali/grijne/i druge cijevi/milje i milje cijevi/njujorških školskih podruma/podruma bolnica/labirinata podzemne željeznice/kasnije smo iste azbestne ovojnice/milju po milju čupali/nečujni astronauti/na mjesecu/ljudomorne prašine//staklena vuna guši – staklena vuna nagriza/nagriza pluća i glas/pa ako za cijevopokrivača/nad usijanim bojlerom – i mogu reći Hefest – što reći za domarportorikanca/koji guzicu hladi/iza odškrinutih vrata frižidera/svako malo ustima prinosi bocu/Bacardi ruma/gleda li/ili se to smješka/nama pajpkoverima/i našoj paklenoj raboti

Spanish or Spanglish in New York, makes him privileged among the wretched. People from Zabláće were known for covering pipes in the New York underworld. And they, as the voice suggests, shrouded themselves in that word: *pipecover*—the word torn up from a language they didn't know but in spite of their linguistic limitations they sewed themselves into it and gradually became the very word they did not invent: *Pipecovers*. And “day in and day out” they covered heating pipes working under the asphalt of New York. They did not name themselves. Others named them arbitrarily. And this external signifying of their individual and collective selves did not only strip them of their individuality but also made them their namer's property on more than a symbolic level.³⁵ *Pipecovers* were someone else's property being at the will and whim of foremen, those *capos* that were there to fence out first small territories of the American dream that for the underprivileged usually stretched between the proscribed and prescribed. Seen in such a context, they were not only alienated from the results of their work, they were not only deprived of joy that a labor based on free choice is supposed to bring, but also their labor itself was someone else's commodity.³⁶ And it is no surprise that, in his later work in American Studies, Grgas focuses on the triad of capital, spatiality, identity! Because this is the Holy Trinity of ingredients that define the struggle between settling, exploitation, and existence that can be found in the poem above.

Language was not only their shield. It was also a ticket to the world. A free pass whose energy could enable one to climb out from the pipe-covered underworld and bring him to the surface—into the light.

Every time I type in my PIN/and wait for the ooze of bills/on the cash machine /that put me more and more into debt/I recall the longshoreman/and the boy next to his side/on their way to the sanctuary/of Chase Manhattan bank on Steinway /I recall them in line before the Law of the Father/and the longshoreman telling the boy/be good in school/and you will not wear this rough cloth/but will stand on the other side of the bank teller's window//The longshoreman was shrewd/and wise /he sent the boy /who did not know English /to a school for children with special needs/asked tenants in his building to teach the boy/*this is a dog! this is a cat! the dog chases the cat!* and the boy entered the language/found work in a supermarket/because he was good at math/knew his divisors/dividends//It might have been better/ if the boy continued this line of work/it might have been better if the longshoreman/took the boy by the hand to the waterfront/recommended him to

³⁵ The French sociolinguist Jean Louis Calvet, writing on the French colonization of Algeria, stated that the right to name is the linguistic counterpart to the right to possess.

³⁶ There is a wonderfully precise and moving word in Spanish that describes the alienation of labor: *anejo*. In her song *Maria Lando*, Peruvian singer and activist Susana Baca sings of a manual laborer who works “day in and day out” states that her labor does not belong to her. In Spanish it reads: *y su trabajo es anejo*. The rum-sipping Puerto Rican from the poem, beyond reasonable doubt, knows the meaning of the word.

the foremen from Hell's Kitchen/if the boy had not taken to words/become enchanted with stories/that the longshoremen would find hard to understand/that he would not forgive him/because that boy now stands before the Law of the Father/that has devoured the son/and the Holy Spirit and because he knows that words and stories have no place/under the tyranny of the Law/and is at a loss /what to leave as testament/besides this oozing /this expiration of date/which is not in great demand/on the market of life (70)³⁷

Toward the Conclusion: At Home in the Words

To everyone who is familiar with the professional aspects of Stipe Grgas's work, it is crystal clear that the story of the language that, in its beginning needed crutches to free the tongue so eager to utter, has a happy end. This however, does not mean that it had a happy content all along. His work in theory and his existential experience definitely made Grgas aware that *language* liberates. But, as a *poeta doctus*, he cannot stop asking himself whether *language* is also a curse? He actually spelled it out: "It might have been better/if the boy continued this line of work/it might have been better if the longshoreman/took the boy by the hand to the waterfront/recommended him to the foremen from Hell's Kitchen/if the boy had not taken to words/become enchanted with stories..." But he did take the boy out! And because of this mediated "outing," that boy now "stands before the Law of the Father/that has devoured the son/and the Holy Spirit" and "he knows that words and stories have no place/under the tyranny of the Law." Well, what did the boy expect from words to begin with, a reader prone to irony may ask. Was it not enough that words more than anything else brought him to the surface? Would it have been better if the wise and determined longshoreman did not send "the boy who did not know English to a school for children with special needs"? That he did not ask tenants in his building to teach the boy English? Would that boy be happier today if he never entered the language? These questions are not meant to be answered. They are meant to be written about.

But the boy knows that the language (like the boy) is not one. And that without the language the boy, in an effort to look at himself today, could never have revisited his former self. It would be impossible without language(s) whose creative energy

³⁷ Svaki put kada utipkam PIN/pa na bankomatu čekam curak novčanica/kojim dublje zaglibljujem u dug/vrate mi se lučki radnik i dječak/na putu u svetište banke Chase na Steinwayu/vrate mi se u redu pred Zakonom Oca/u kojemu lučki radnik kaže dječaku/uči i nećeš nositi trliš/stajat ćeš s one strane pulta// Lučki je radnik bio promoćuran/dječaka nemušta jeziku/poslao u školu/za djecu s posebnim potrebama/anagažirao stanare svoje kuće/da pouče dječaka/*this is a dog/this is a cat/the dog chases the cat*/pa je dječak ušao u jezik/kasnije u katoličku gimnaziju/dobio posao blagajnika u samoposluzi/jer je bio znalac/znao je dijeliti/s dva/s tri//Bilo bi možda bolje da je dječak nastavio to raditi/bilo bi možda još bolje da je lučki radnik/pod ruku odveo dječaka u njujoršku luku/preporučio ga nadzornicima sa Zapadne strane/a ne da se dječak pomami za riječima/pričama/koje mu lučki radnik ne bi oprostio/jer nekadašnji dječak sada stoji sučelice Zakonu Oca/koji je pojeo i sina/i Duha svetoga/i jasno mu je da riječi i priče nemaju mjesta/pod tiranijom Zakona, /pa ne zna što bi mogao zavještiti/osim curenja/ovog isteka roka trajanja/koje ne kotira bogzna kako/na tržištu života

was essential in rewriting the boy's experience of former places, former times, former people. The wise and shrewd longshoreman put his life on hold and extended it as a favor of sorts to the second generation. And this was a usual practice among responsible and life-experienced laborers—with those who understood the cruel fabric of economic emigration. Because he remained deprived of a language, the longshoreman could never have told us his story. In order to do so, he had to borrow a voice. It is a happy coincidence that he had the voice to borrow from. The same voice he, at the expense of his lifelong silence, first lent to the boy years ago meandering through the pipelike darkness of their shared underworld. And this voice, along with the content of longshoreman's unuttered experience, is in front of us, articulated in the *Homeplace*.

Conclusion: The I-voice of the Verses: Tongue, Speech, Language

And it comes as no surprise that “the Boy” treasures language, writing, and speech that enabled him to reconfigure (to the best of his abilities) traumatic experiences that shrouded his multiple self in words. Now not torn anymore from a language he does not know but carefully chosen from languages and registers familiar to him. Toward the end of the book, in its final section, in which he frees his voice to the point of intimacy, creating the *I-voice of verses* whose “position is mapped not only by the inevitability of the passing of time and process of aging over which the I-voice has no command or control,” Grgas returns to language. Aware of his voice's centripetal “nature,” he uses the allegory of tongue as a muscle to single out the site of his poetic, existential, experiential, and professional essence.

When that hour finally arrives/when the all-too-human catches up with me/do not weep/do not keen/but /please/don't make it a feast/Don't cut branches on the palm tree/spare it/spare marble/there are enough crosses on Makala's field/Don't sing about shallows and crags/let the trumpeter take a day off/Be tight with money/you'll need it/I don't need a priest/forget about the stonecutter/Don't prepare a wake/let those who followed the coffin/disperse/go back to the briscola table/maybe someone will remember/the fighting fullback on the Krš playing field/Tear up a bush of bramble/let the red earth show/in that red earth/dig a furrow/a hole/Lay my body in that hole/open the jaws/put between the gums/a pebble with bits of earth/so that I'll have something to suck on;³⁸ Put a pack-saddle next the corpse/clodhoppers/white cloth-socks/a pickaxe/trowel/suchlike tools of our earth-bound craft/If you really must/right next the skull/stick a plate of Benkovac rock/so that there'll be no confusion about place of origin (97)³⁹

³⁸ Emphasis mine.

³⁹ Kada kućne i taj čas/kada me sustigne ono sasma ljudsko/nemojte žalovati/ali nemojte ni feštati//Poštedite palminu granu/poštedite mramor/križeva je ionako puno na Makalinoj zemlji/Ne pjevušite mi o škrapama i valu/trubač neka uzme slobodno//Uštedite/trebat će vam/Ne treba mi svećenik/zaboravite na kamenoresca/Ne priređujte sedminu/neka se povorka razide/neka se vrate briškuli/možda se netko sjeti požrtvovnog

Coming back to the future, at the point of departure, Grgas once more emphasizes the essentiality of tongue/speech/language,

let the spittle in the mouth dry up/in the mouth in which I now suck and roll/the language that I once forgot/the language that I've here forced to speak/between oblivion and remembrance/the language that I've here/let mutter (98)⁴⁰

The multiplying game of mutuality, of giving, borrowing, landing . . . communicating . . . living the experience of collectivity be it in chosen or assigned places . . . tends to result in splitting selves. Unlike the wise and shrewd longshoreman who put his life on hold and extended it as a favor of sorts to the second generation and quit thinking of the parameters of his voluntary loss, Stipe Grgas, then the boy on the receiving side, these *verses* suggest, still lives the experience of a divided self. Being an exemplary organic intellectual who was educated on two continents and decided to return home to share his knowledge with “his own” for many years (it seems, at least) he suppressed his desire to write poetry. Or at the very least, to share what he clandestinely wrote with a circle of friends.

Although the experience of his practice of theory now supplemented with poetry does not suggest a feeling of alienation, there is a moment in the manuscript that might be more confessional than any other simply because it is, unlike the rest of his “confessions,” implicit. It tells us a story of an experience of a conversation with his friend Miroslav Mićanović, a poet, who, during one of their walks, tells him:

Croatian poets do their job on the side/steal from the morn/steal from the night/steal from their employers/steal from their wives/steal from their children /I am not a Croatian poet/but I also work on the side/and say/that measured by robberies in Croatia/this is not a steal/that needs to be fussed about (104)⁴¹

Each and every one of us who writes poetry in a country whose politics of culture firmly believes that writing is a hobby has asked this question at least a dozen times. Hardly anyone, anyplace, anywhere in the known world can make a living writing poetry. And, for a poet, it is good to have a day job. Steve does have one and does

braniča na Kršu/Iščupajte pokoju draču/razotkrite crvenicu/u njoj iskopajte raku//U tu crvenicu položite tijelo/razjapite čeljust//između desni stavite kamen sa zemljanim mrvicama/da mogu nešto cuclati// Uz tijelo položite samar/suknene bičve/lašun i motiku//Ako već morate/kod uzglavlja zabolite ploču benkovačkog kamena/da ne bude zabune oko porijekla

⁴⁰ neka presuši /pljuvačka u ustima/u kojima cuclam jezik koji sam jednom zaboravio/jezik koji sam ovdje silio/progovoriti između zaborava i sjećanja/silio /da promuća

⁴¹ Hrvatski pjesnici svoj posao rade u fušu/otmu od jutra/otmu od noći/potkradaju poslodavce/kradu od žene/kradu djeci//Ja nisam hrvatski pjesnik/ali radim i u fušu/i kažem/da po mjerilima hrvatskih pljački/ovo nije bila bogzna kakva otimačina

it remarkably well. But still, in order to write (although he would say he was not a poet), he has to steal from the day, steal from the night . . . the feeling is familiar. The open question that closes this essay is the following: if he were to start it all over, what would he do? Would he write theory or would he write poetry . . . , or would he, as he does now, do both? This question is not supposed to be answered. Among other reasons, because it has just been written about.

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