

## “Flute, Why Does My Joyous Breath...?”

Edward Dennis Goy

Cambridge University

*Editor's Note.* An honorary member of NASSS, Professor Edward Dennis Goy passed away on 13 March 2000. Only two days before his death, he sent *Serbian Studies* his excellent article on Momčilo Nastasijević. The editors of *Serbian Studies* wish once more to express their gratitude for and appreciation of Professor Goy's collaboration with our journal by opening the Spring issue with his contribution.

Previously, writing of Momčilo Nastasijević's *Pet lirskih krugova*, I have stated that to seek any exact “interpretation” would merely be to vitiate what one admires. Matija Bečković put this better in an interview when he stated: “It appears that commentaries have sense only if the riddles grow. Only then does art gain. What may be unriddled to the end ceases to exist.”<sup>1</sup> The words might well serve as an epigram for the theme suggested here as the leitmotif for the five cycles. To suggest a theme, as being the basic theme of the poems, is not, however, to risk reducing the mystery and complexity, but, one ventures to hope, rather to open the way to the discovery of those very mysteries and complexities of which they are redolent. In any case, as the title suggests, the aim is concentrated on the first cycle, *Jutarnje*, but with the idea that it directs the attention towards the nature of the work as a whole. At least it assumes that one cannot write of one cycle without referring to the work in its entirety.

The first poem in the cycle *Jutarnje*, “Frula,” was composed probably immediately after Momčilo's article “Nekoliko refleksija o umetnosti.” In any case, a glance at the earlier poems will show variants of some of those of the *Five Cycles*. It is safe to assume that most of the poems making up the *Five Cycles* were written separately at different times and on different occasions. Yet, when the *Five Cycles* appeared in 1932, they presented something very different from a mere collection of poems. The ordering of the poems in their cycles becomes as important here as the ordering of lines in an individual poem. Thus *Jutarnje* does not admit of being treated as nine separate poems.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matija Bečković, “Kosovo je najskuplja, a sloboda vodeća srpska reč,” interview by Miodrag Perišić, *Književne novine*, no. 788–89 (December 1989–January 1990): 1.

The ordering of *Jutarnje*, as of the complete *Five Cycles*, might well make one think of a sonata in music with its passages, or even a symphony. Neither, of course, would actually fit. Indeed, symphony is the term one might be tempted to apply to the *Five Cycles* as a whole, in which case *Jutarnje* is only the opening movement, with its various developments of its leading theme. Certainly, in approaching *Jutarnje* one is compelled to treat it in a twofold manner, both as nine individual poems and as a unified poetic statement that presents both a variation and a development.

To state this is, of course, to make a merely formalistic proposition. Having made it, one is tempted to attempt something more difficult and more risky—namely, to seek a central theme that, through all the convolutions of the cycles, lends them a unity. This comes close to interpretation and this, as Bečković suggests, has its dangers. Equally dangerous, perhaps, would be to seek such a theme outside the poetry, in the critical writings of its author. While never ignoring such writings, one must retain the sense that to write about poetry (even one's own) is one thing and to write poetry is another. Yet any too clear "interpretation" will risk the tragic error which we may at once see as suggestive of the very central theme of the *Cycles*, namely that we kill the thing we express by making it something else. In other words, one may attempt only to point out a general direction which may bring into clearer relations many other qualities, many individualities of the whole work, yet leave its reference still as open as it ever was: to do no more than merely propose that to look at a work "this way" may lend the reader an interesting insight which he is free to allow of modification or, perhaps finally, reject in favor of a yet better one. Imposition, however, must be avoided, if one is not merely to kill what was not killed but rejoined with great effort, if one is not to make language "only language" (or sign only sign!).

The first poem of *Jutarnje* places the predicament of expression directly and, interestingly, in terms of music, of Momčilo's favored instrument, the flute: "Što moj dah radosni žalno u dolji razleže?" This poem constructed of questions, opens up an essential question for poet, reader, critic, and the ordinary man. For the opposite result of my expression, my self-expression, is of two ways. For expression involves not only what is imposed from inward outward, but also involves what I have taken in. What I sense, feel, experience, that I feel a drive to express, to affirm the being which I am and of which what I feel, sense, know, is the basic material. To catch that sunset, to possess it, to fix for ever that passing mood, to affirm for ever this self and its awareness now, this is the drive that requires both input and output. To possess is to express, to revolt against the passing of time. It is Goethe's "Verweile doch." So the questions in "Frula" build up. Is it that dead shepherds called on their loves with these notes? The question suggests both the

pantheistic and also the literary. Are the notes only a repetition? Or is the harm innate, born in the player from heaven, has the dark earth stung him, adorned his song with a tear, with a drop of blood? The verb *pečila* and the *kaplja krvi* make the immediate seriousness of the question almost tangible. The dilemma may thus be rooted in being. Lastly, the question returns to the pantheistic. Is the flute itself regretful of the "escaping mystery" (*odbegla tajna*)?

The questions are profound, profound enough to follow through the struggle and striving of the whole *Five Cycles*. For to express is to risk. It is to lose a part of self as well as to preserve it. The letter I write is no longer me. To express is to name and to name is to reduce to concept. If I call a table table, the table is dead, for it has become an abstraction. Not even if I enter a minute description of its individual features can I preserve its true being. *Onoma* is the basis of all possession and of all communication, yet it is also deadly. What we fix in time is not the true thing, but only our fixation. (The bareness of past photographs!) Then there arises also the other side, the need for the communication of the other. If to possess the *Gegenstand* involves us in abstraction, then to connect with the other consciousness is still further removed. The human awareness dwells, cut off by the abstraction of *onoma*. John Donne wrote that "No man is an island," yet the great problem is that in expression and communication, man is an island, and it is this much of his activity is struggle against, and it is a tragic struggle. On every side the being stretches out his hand only to find that what he grasps changes and evaporates into something else. The yearning to connect, the yearning to affirm one's being, this is the basis of all sexuality. It offers warmth and satisfaction, yet in hours this is gone and one does not know just what and how the other experienced. It has retired again into mystery: "That's why men, and women, are 'had'. Man is always sold, in his search for final knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

For the artist this phantom of abstraction involves struggle. (In painting, paradoxically, there is abstraction in the very attempt to escape the abstraction of *onoma*.) In poetry one has so many examples expressing this dilemma of expression and its attendant connection. One may recall Blake's "Never seek to tell thy love," or Dylan Thomas's "And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose We are both bent by the same wintry fever." The very attempt to express, to name, involves danger of destruction. In Laza Lazarević's *Školska ikona*, the girl, influenced by the "new science" of Positivism, reacts to the song of the nightingale by saying: "Philomela—so what!" One can think of few better

---

<sup>2</sup> D. H. Lawrence, "Edgar Allan Poe," in *Stories, Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 1966), 306.

examples of the fact that *onoma* may also be *thanatos*! Fyodor Tyutchev wrote: “Mysl’ izrechennaya est’ lozh’.”

Yet what is behind expression *is*. The original being, this originating condition, would seem close to what Momčilo calls the escaped mystery. (He referred to beauty as the mystery of a thing.) The mystery always remains. For Momčilo there was a period in which he appears to have considered music a superior form of expression in that it avoided *onoma*. Yet here, in this first poem of the *Five Cycles*, it is music, the flute, that dominates the imagery. To be free from meaning, from abstracted sense, is to have one barrier less. The language which I use is “over against” all things, including even me who use it. I ask “Who am I?” and at once, in all probability, I become a man, a bus-driver, a homosexual etc., and *I*, whom I wished to discover, name and affirm, is lost. (Momčilo wrote that for him description was always a struggle to repossess what has been lost.) Music is free of this. Such freedom may seem to entail a closer identity with the other and with self. Lord Byron in *Manfred* (scene 11) addresses a shepherd’s pipe, for our purposes, most relevantly:

Oh that I were  
The viewless spirit of a lovely sound,  
A living voice, a breathing harmony  
A bodiless enjoyment—born and dying  
With the blest tone which made me.

Yet music too has its idioms, its meaning and, thus, its limitations. The difference between Eastern folk music and Western music. The limitation of what one might say of any piece of music. (Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony means many things to many people, yet few, perhaps, would call it funny.) If music were the answer, then Momčilo would scarcely have engaged in poetry, with its tragic conditions. His expressed views of music, supported by his own undoubted musical talents, have sometimes been rather romantically interpreted. Zoran Gluščević wrote:

Nastasijević was a creative prisoner of words, but in music he saw a source of spiritual and creative emanation. He reduces the whole phenomenon of the poetic and aesthetic to the structure of sound and tone.<sup>3</sup>

This is simply not to judge Momčilo on the one thing on which it is important to judge him: his poetry. True, Momčilo wrote much of tone and even,

<sup>3</sup> Zoran Gluščević, ‘Oh, Be at Rest, Muffled Rock,’ *Serbian Literary Quarterly* 1 (1988): 30.

not very originally, of the relation of particular vowels and consonants to colors, but this does not mean that sense is absent from his poetry. The marvelous use of tone and sound to combine with and thus bear and form meaning certainly does not absolve the poems from possessing sense. In the final count, to the human brain all sound has significance. Music has significance. Words have a more defined significance which we call meaning. If we use the term *semantic*, then all music is semantic only at a different level. The reduction of Momčilo's poetry to sound is merely to repeat Vinaver's somewhat loaded approach to his work. If nothing, else we may return to the image of "Frula."

This does not remove the struggle of the "prisoner of words." Music too has its limit of significance, the point beyond which it seems unable to go further, where it is on the threshold of something else, as in Beethoven's Quartet in C-sharp Major. So, one might say, has poetry when it attains the stage of *Reči u kamenu*. It is here one encounters the difference between the philosophical, linguistic response to the need to connect, and that of art. Art is always experience and not meaning alone. Yet, although it is an experience which one may, on the face of it, repeat, still my second reading of a poem will not be my first. Even if it be superior, as an experience, to my first, it will be "over against" it. In terms of experience there are the same problems of expression. The more I love, the more certainly I shall kill: "To know a living thing is to kill it"... "it is the temptation of the vampire fiend, this knowledge."<sup>4</sup> So, the flute sounds its note only to hear it change to its opposite, with the realization of the mystery as it were escaped and perished. Man is left with his own isolation, while his fear, the oncoming death, the yearning to connect, to affirm that he exists, compels him tragically to struggle, to express, to name. Yet, as the Taoists say: "The Tao that can be defined is not the real Tao." I express—but what I express is something else. I am other to my expression. I see and desire to possess, to affirm myself, and so I name, but gain only abstraction which is other to what I see. If I speak to her—what does she hear? If she speaks, what does this mean to her? Suddenly in the fullness of expression, there is only a desert of abstraction, a wilderness and emptiness that gnaws and burns like a disease. This is the projected theme which we may trace from "Frula" through its variations to the final poem of *Jutarnje*, "Dafina."

The nine poems of *Jutarnje* formally divide into three groups of three poems. This is nowhere clearer than in the two poems following "Frula." The first, "Jasike," continues the theme of "Frula" (three of its five stanzas are questions) with a contrast in style that acts almost as a shock. It is almost a

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, 308.

parody of Dučić (“Jablanovi” coming immediately to mind). The aspens, with the drops of moisture from the fog, dripping down their trunks, bend and mingle their foliage. Why? How? Everything seems a poetic banality. The approach is that of Romantic Pantheism. The final stanza suggests the faint echo of something new with its paradox of *vedre tame* and its conclusion: “ćućore belu tajnu na uranku.” The inanimate may seem to solve the question of communication and expression, but only in a way that clearly does not answer the question of “Frula.” Nonetheless, it notes an area where the problem does not exist. Might one not conclude that the aspens, being inanimate, have nothing to express to each other, only to the conscious being that observes? In the inanimate world nothing “happens,” happening being solely the property of the world of “being for itself.” The poem, as its style and parody suggest, is merely a glance at the more obvious answer to the theme of “Frula.” It leaves the question wide open. Yet, at the same time, it affirms the predicament, which turns to the world of the inanimate in its despair.

If “Jasike” suggests a parody, then the following poem, “Izvoru,” comes as another, but quite different shock. The style moves from the parody of Dučić and the Romantic symbolists to the lyrical folk song and the *maternja melodija*. The question still lingers in the first stanza, but is replaced syntactically by the imperative. The spring is implored to remember and bear witness to the beloved one’s reactions, to the truth that cannot be told in words. The apostrophe of the inanimate is, of course, nothing new in poetry. Here one is slightly reminded of Goethe’s “Erwahlte Fels” with its “Werde mir Zeuge, du Stein!” Yet the syntactical complexity of the poem makes it one of suggestion. It is linked with the first poem by the presence of the flute (whose image is now clarified) and the final (spondeeic) statement of predicament: “Ja sam.” The flute that will, sadly, play rather as all other beings act and sound, expresses the tone of urgency and strife that makes the entire poem suggestive with that same mystery one may feel trying to break out of a Rakhmaninov prelude. The Romantic animation of nature in “Jasike” has moved to a more urgent tone of existence in a dilemma, that of muteness and loneliness. If the trees murmur the mystery to each other, then the poet calls on the spring to remember and tell what she was like on her own and in her unattainable reality. (The verb *pomenuti* seems also to have an echoed sense of to speak). The command has deeper reverberations than Goethe’s to the rock (“Denkmal bleibe des Glucks”).

These first three poems of the cycle consist thus of “Frula” and its setting of the theme followed by two variations, each very different, yet bound together by the theme, rather as one may find in music. The flautist can only echo the spring’s murmur, but this is clearly no solution. He must beg the spring to act as medium for communication.

If these first three poems present a problem followed by two variations, the next group of three poses a different level of the problem. "Rumena kap" abandons the question. It is a poem of suggestion. The sense is the dream, the light footstep. The mystery, here not mentioned, is clearly present. The poem is an atmosphere that defies paraphrase or even perhaps the most general interpretation. It is love, but a love that comes through all nature. Yet the symbolic image affirms the experience of what is the mystery for expression. "Something takes place," and this is the source of the entire predicament, which is on the level of undefined experience. "Lagano nono, milje niz travku," with its sibilant consonants intimates the problem. It is *there*. It may not be avoided. The perceiver has no choice but to perceive and therefore express.

The second poem of the three, "Zora," breaks into a scherzo ("Hej, na belom konju"). It is a new mood of vigorous affirmation by the poet. It is the rhythm of the folk dance and presents a relief and change from the foregoing tone. Yet the directness of mood that, dominated by the imperative, seems, for the time-being, to have solved everything in its moment of ecstasy, is muted by the framing imperative, *stani ne mini*. The expression of experience possesses a time dimension. Thus the re-echoing frame of the three stanzas refers back to "Izvoru": "Jagoda zri; rudi već leto livadom; travka se travci nagnula." The headlong rhythm of the poem is thus contrasted to its opposite, the verb *stani*. The need to possess which is expression must seize on the fleeting moment. The whirl of inspiration is conditioned by a fear.

This fear is now taken up in a very different poem, "Đurđevci." The basis is an everlasting situation. Lilies of the valley are sold on the streets of a town. Yet, as in "Frula," an ordinary (now very ordinary) situation evokes something contrasting: "seta me u čedni dan." The syntax of the poem also becomes more "difficult." Perhaps a momentary attraction to the girl selling flowers is answered by a sense of infidelity to the girl at home? Yet it is more than this. Or is the *rodina* just what it says literally, home? It is more than this. The lilies of the valley were bound together fresh in the morning only to be watered by tears, when, wilted, they return in the evening. The sense again of the passing of time, the decay. The "prosti me, rodino blaga" concludes a sense that perception itself is questioned by the complexity of its very nature. Thus the lines "To u rodini ona, boluje setu bez leka" suggests more than a girl suffering pangs of love, or even pity for wilted flowers. Perhaps it might be considered as the suffering of the truth, the ungraspable truth, in the face of all abstracting expression. In which case it is only a variation on "Frula," but a very important variation. The poet affirms that his predicament interferes with his perception and alters it. This is his sense of guilt, the sense of guilt we may discover laid bare in Radomir Konstantinović's *Pentogram*. For the

first time in all the *Cycles*, Momčilo uses the image of sickness (“boluje setu bez leka”). It is the first appearance in the cycles of the images of illness and cure, relating back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century love poetry of Menčetić and Držić, *boljezan* and *lik*. The situation is a sickness and the poetry becomes now a long struggle for a cure. The ever evasive reality, ever escaping through abstraction, blurs the outlines of experience. What is felt is the Tao, the thing one may only kill by possessing, and this is loneliness. “Tuđini umom ja ginuo,” and this for the sake of the *rodina*, the betrayed reality.<sup>5</sup> “Đurđevci” thus ends the triad of poems with a new contradiction and urgency that makes it the key poem of the cycle. Just as syntactically it breaks away from parody and introduces a compression that is new, so thematically it affirms the urgency and the tragedy of the problem. The sorrow cannot be remedied. The *tuđina* and *rodina* suggest the Other and the reality that is ever injured and abstracted. We are back to *ja sam*. But there is a new tension. All perception is blurred and the triad appears as what it is; a writhing, a frantic seeking. The everyday is distorted. The crisis has reached an extremity. The simple event of flowers being sold on the street on a “modest day” splits the speaker’s perception. Where “Frula” is essentially outgoing, “Đurđevci” is an inward poem. An apex of the theme has been reached.

The final triad of poems presents in the first two a variation again, a writhing against the problem, with a finality in the third poem. It repeats much the same pattern as the foregoing triad. A statement, a hinted muting, followed by a reaffirmation of what might have appeared to have been escaped. Somehow one may feel the poet saying, “No, this is all very well, but it won’t do.”

“San u podne,” a parody of Mallarmée one might ask—returns to the affirmation of the existence of what demands expression in “Rumena kap.” The new tone, however, is dominated by the device of identification (*Topal sam ćuv*). The inanimate world evoked in “Jasike” is now bridged by being identified with the poet. Yet, in a sense, this is a verbal trick, heavily dependent on the images of St. George’s Night, the budding of the trees, and the echo of “Izvoru” almost betrays this: “Vrelini ovoj brizgaj o brizgaj, vrela.” The evocation is powerful, but it cannot utterly convince. “Grozđ,” the drunken orgy of spring and its ensuent ripening into the harvest, repeats the mood, but the identification is dropped. Now it is the poet and his mistress. The reliance on imagery, the ripening of the grapes and the ripening of the girl’s body merge into the riot of the waters rocking, but now, rather as in “Zora,” the two final stanzas introduce a contrasting doubt. The poem is

<sup>5</sup> Compare this with poem VII of *Reči u kamenu*.

clearly addressed to a beloved where "San u podne" relates more to inanimate nature. This is muted with the question in the final stanzas:

Da l' napiti se vina?  
 Ili od zračna nedira  
 u zlatnu maglu da presahnemo  
 za nove zlatne oblake?

The riot of the seasons and its attendant love is again linked to the passing of time. To engage in this is only to partake in a repetitive process. Not to partake is to wither away to form new golden clouds. To partake in the reproductive flow, the rationalisation of nature, an abstraction, is not to solve the predicament. Here it ends with a note almost of cynicism, but will be taken up in poems VI and VII of *Reči u kamenu* where the image of the silkworms and the roses perishing to produce silk and perfumes as the system of nature is rejected: "Pa ne učegne u ljubav ovu lač." It is a rejection of the scientific view of the world based upon the connection of fact and logic. This too is only abstraction and not connection.

The final poem of the cycle, "Dafina," ends on a note of menace. Death *awakens* the unloved. The frustration of the unfulfilled life remains after death. It is a menace. Its image is the vampire. This is a reaffirmation of the first problem. It remains existentially serious. It goes deeper than semantics. The opposition of the expressed and reality in "Frula" is now put in more direct and paradoxical human terms. No matter how insoluble, the matter has to be solved. The isolation must be broken. To die unloved is not to have lived. The suggestion is something else. To die without connection and real expression is not to have lived. Living is the struggle to connect and this is the task of poetry. The final line of this final poem suggests the brooding and menacing demand of the theme: "kad neljubljeno mre."

The purpose of suggesting this theme as central is in no way to deny the presence of other possible themes. Rather it is to offer it as a key to the whole of the *Five Cycles*. From "Frula" to "Dafina," there is a wavering, almost a writhing between styles and approaches, ending in the affirmation of the problem. Taken as a whole, *Jutarnje* seems to set the problem and to embark on a struggle with it. One may see it waver between one possible solution and another as mirroring the entire structure of the *Five Cycles*. *Večernje* develops the encounter with experience through sex and death while *Bdenja* pursues it through the realm of more abstract thought, even coming to a denial of process, more definite than in "Grozd" ("Bratu," "Roditelju"). Finally *Gluhote* returns to the original problem, now in a new style and with a new urgency, a reaffirmation more direct than in "Dafina." To accept the system, the scien-

tific view of nature, does not exempt us from our being and the imperative to be. The more I learn of the Universe and its laws, the less they seem to have any relevance to me. Yet expression is ever abstraction. In *Gluhote* this is put directly:

I za kap samo,  
i za kap  
neizrečje ovo u reč,  
smakom potopilo bi stvora,  
smakom tvar. (II)

To express is to kill, yet it must be attempted. The poet's position is clearly stated:

Dublje to,  
bolnije tim,  
životom bih te,  
muklim ovim nespokojem reči,  
jer smaku  
do u koren smem. (VI)

The task is tragic in its impossibility (“Na pesmu proćerdavam vek”). The final cycle *Reči u kamenu* seems almost an expansion of “Dafina.” All five cycles present a struggle, a battering against the cage-wires. With the gradual veering of the style towards the final “difficulty” of *Gluhote* and *Reči u kamenu* with its final drum beat, a funereal drum beat: “I to pa to, i sve to.” (Can one help thinking of Beethoven?) The question has been rinsed to a point of finality. At the end the poem's key theme becomes clear; it is not so much the solution, but the struggle for it that means to live: “Al' hoću, jer biva, rana li, duboko da je čiva” (*Gluhote*, X). In *Reči u kamenu* nothing has been overcome. The *lek*, the cure is as far away as ever. Radomir Konstantinović (*Biće i jezik*) rightly suggests that Momčilo ends in a form of nihilism, but it is rather the nihilism of the final Zen garden, than of a destructive cynicism. If the language be stripped down to bare essentials, if the syntax be reduced to almost a hint, then this is like the empty concrete of the final Zen garden. The end is nothing, but it is nothing grasped in a new light, reality seen and felt in a new way. The problem is not solved, conditions are unchanged, yet it is the poetry and its experience that has changed. Having read it, it is impossible to look at reality again in just the same way as before, nor to confront the difficulty of expression, the urge of possession and the doubt

of perception with the same fears and protestation. There is, for all the grim notes of the ending, a sense of "having come through," as Lawrence said.

In regarding *Jutarnje* as the opening set of variations, developed through *Večernje* and *Bdenja* to the amazing change and awakening of style in the final cycles, it is tempting to suggest a symphonic character to the work. Clearly, the *Pet lirskih krugova* is no mere collection of poems, but a poetic unity. This, perhaps, far more than in tone and sound, is Momčilo's debt to music.