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Viktor Vida <sup>1913-1960</sup>  
Collected Poems  
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## CONTENTS

FOREWORD	
Božidar Petrač: Viktor Vida – poet of recollection and loneliness	9
COSMOS OF A PERSON	
BURNING BUSH	35
EX VOTO	37
HANDS	38
COSMOS OF A PERSON	39
REMEMBRANCE	41
SOUL'S DREAM OF THE LANDSCAPE	
OF SAINT FRANCIS	42
TO THE GREAT MOTHER	44
ELEGY	46
WOUNDED SOLDIER	48
THE BEATEN ARMY	49
THE ANGEL OF THE DEAD	50
THE MINE	51
DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION	
DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATON	55
DOCK-SUD	57
FAREWHEEL WHITE HOUSE	59
SOUL'S MEMORY	60

ORPHEUS IN THE UNDERGROUND	62	POISONED PUDDLES	
THE HARSH LANDSCAPE OF THE MOON	63	EUROPE, OCTOBER 1956	101
THE CAPTIVE OF TIME		THE OLD POET	103
THE CAPTIVE OF TIME	67	HOBOS' RESPITE	104
SARCOPHAGUS	68	THE HUMAN BEING	105
FRAGMENTS FROM "DEAD TIME"	69	LADDER	107
PROPHETS	71	THREE STONES OR LOVE NIGHT	108
THE THREE KINGS	72	FREEDOM	109
MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS	73	ON PLANTATIONS	110
FLIGHT INTO EGYPT	74	THE DEPARTURE OF GODS	112
TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL	75	HOME, LAMB, BAYS	113
THE PITCHER	76	CREATION OF THE WORLD	114
MEMORY OF DALMATIA	77	TO THE SOULS OF DEAD OBJECTS	115
HORTUS CONCLUSUS	79	GRANDDAD REDCAP AND DIGGER	117
AT SUMMER'S END	80	THE NEW WORLD	118
FISHERMEN OF THE PRIMORJE		BLIND OLD WOMAN BEFORE	
UNDER THE OAK THREE	82	THE TOWN GATE	119
CEMETERY BY THE SEA	84	DEATH IN THE TOWN OF STON	120
COMPOSITION (WITH STORM)	85	WHITE SUNS	121
NIGHTINGALE	87	POISONED PUDDLES	123
MOTHER	88	TRANSFORMATION OF J.R. JIMENEZ	126
ITHACA	89	EPITAPH ON UNAMUNO'S GRAVE	128
EVENING VISITOR	90	IN VINO VERITAS	129
MINOTAUR	91	HAPPY DAYS	131
THE LAST EVENING	92	TESTIMONY	133
THE BODY OF NIGHT	93	FATE OF THE WARRIOR	134
ARCADE	95	AFTERWORD	
GLASS SPIRAL	96	Andelko Novaković:	
FORGETTING	97	Viktor Vida – The Croatian Poet and Fate	137
TO MOTHER	98		

## FOREWORD

Viktor Vida – poet of  
recollection and loneliness

Our literary and cultural history has often been very cruel; in particular to the difficult intellectual, moral and intimate dramas of the Croatian writers, journalists, people involved in culture whom it simply, after 1945, erased from its memory or, with quite unbearable easiness, completely marginalised and anathematised. And yet, can it really for ever wipe out whatever it wills not to see, what it simply wishes selfishly to forget, as if it had never existed? It is true enough that everyone would like to forget whatever bothers or pains him, and will endeavour, if he may not actually pass over in silence, to belittle someone or, according to his own, allegedly objective judgement, to allocate him his proper position. Was it possible to obliterate the drama of Viktor Vida, which attracted particular attention because of his suicide in 1960 in Buenos Aires, as the life-dramas of other Croatian writers, at home and living abroad, were completely obliterated? Clearly it was not. *The Collected Poems* of Viktor Vida, published in 1962, as edited by Vinko Nikolić in the *Croatian Review* Library, as well as Vida's tragic death more or less

forced certain anthologists at least to mention his name. First Miličević and Šoljan, and somewhat later Vlatko Pavelić. He was presented by Mirko Rogošić in a somewhat wider selection, even if one reduced in terms of content, and in 1982 Marijan Matković put him in his *Five Centuries of Croatian Literature*, with some fifty poems, a prose piece and four essays. "Writing of Viktor Vida, Marijan Matković has added anthology pages to his own store of essays, but has thrown little real light on the subject (actually, only about his own intimate pain)..." (Stanko Lasić: *Krležologija or a history of critical thinking about Miroslav Krleža*, Vol. 1, Globus, Zagreb 1989, p. 165). And then: "Literary history is like an ostrich. It hopes that time will cover over for ever anything it does not wish to see."

It is time that this ostrich pulled the literary works of not only Viktor Vida, but of many forgotten, marginalised and ideologically anathematised writers out of the sands of oblivion, away from the margins. This is bound, if not profoundly, then at least to some extent, to alter the mosaic and the value map of Croatian literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Viktor Vida was born on October 2, 1913, in Kotor, in the beautiful bay of Boka, bay of two beatified and sanctified Croats, firmly attached to their native ground, with the purity and whiteness of Perast, exalted almost to myth. "I was born in Kotor, a great brown tower, but, when I am asked about my home, just as the fingers seek and pluck the most beautiful flower, my soul chooses Perast. It is the city of the soul, the sad merriment of the soul, like its gardens with their roses, which rejoice the eyes. Very early

on it filled my soul with serenity, like a well, in which the beams refract. In Perast, as early as my childhood I perceived the necessary order of harmony, the reponses of geometry among things. We Croats from the sea, like other Mediterraneans, experience beauty as one of the first realities, the senses take a whole-hearted part in the play of light that gives shape to things... Praise be to Perast!" (*Native ground*). He went to elementary school in Kotor, and finished high school in 1932 in Podgorica. After Vida had finished secondary school, his parents went to Zagreb, and he entered the Faculty of Philosophy, reading Croatian and other Yugoslav languages and literatures, Italian literature and language, French and Russian language. He finished his university studies in 1937 and went to Rome on an Italian Institute scholarship. On return to Zagreb in 1939 he obtained a position as a librarian in the Italian Institute, and in 1941 taught in a high school. In 1942 he quit Zagreb and Croatia, and went to Italy, first of all to the Venice Biennale, and then to Rome, where he worked in the Italian-Croatian News Agency. The agency closed in 1943 when Italy fell, and Vida was unemployed and found himself in considerable difficulties. Finally in 1946 he obtained a place as a clerk in the Pontificia Commissione Assistenza in Rome. He spent a lot of his six Roman years frequenting the famed Café Greco, about as "old as the declaration of the rights of man" (Vida, *Kavana, caffè, caffè*), where he met many Italian writers. Krklec, Lendić, Nizet, Cesarić and other Croats also made a habit of going into this café. On leaving Rome, Vida wrote in the album of the

café: "Old café, I was brought to your peace by the Angel of the Evening, the sweet suffering of the soul." In 1947 he resolved to go to Argentina. He arrived with his family in Buenos Aires at the beginning of 1948. He scrounged a living for two years in various ways, tasting the full cup of bitterness of an expatriate life, getting a job in 1950 as a petty clerk in the employ of the state. He found a place to publish in the soundly edited Franciscan monthly *Voice of St Anthony*; here he published most of his poems, columns, reviews and essays. In the late 1950s he was a frequent contributor to the *Croatian Review*, edited by Vinko Nikolić. With the help of friends he managed to publish two books of poems *The Universe of a Person* (1951) and *Slave of Time* (1956). In 1954 he wrote the book *A Defence of Croatian Integrity and Public Workers* together with Ivo Bogdan (Croatian journalist and editor, killed in 1971 in Argentina). While Bogdan, in his "The integrity of Croatian land: the prime law of Croatian policy", directed his attention to political questions of the future Croatian state, Vida wrote a piece called *The disintegration of Dorian Vljaj*, and wrote a distinct ode to Croatian youth: "Everything can be said of Croatian youth; what cannot be said is that it was not idealistic, or that it was attracted by the summer bonfires of the regime. This youth, the victim of our paradoxical troubles, was always rebellious and untameable, forty-eightish in its political and social demands and, simultaneously, anti-centralistic and anti-chauvinistic before Kossuth's aggressors. It fell Byronically in the struggle against Pest and Vienna; Croatia, like a pale Lazarus rising

from the grave, appeared to it, wounded as it was with the bayonets and gun butts of the Greater Serbian dictatorships, expiring in blood and tears, with which it moistened its dry bread. And when it was socialist, and when it was convincingly South Slav, or Pan-Slavic, dreaming of Preradović's lime, let us be honest, it was instinctively Christian and passionately Croatian. All of its sons scattered in the struggles with bloody reality, in opportunism, in the treason of its leaders, the dictates of Realpolitik. Its crimson, healthy, full blood ran on the pavements, and over this blood ran coaches, automobiles, shiny black galoshes. In the heart of the Croat, even when he is old and defeated by life, those first twenty lovely years of first youth always flower ... Croatian youth, when it has to, will die calmly and in dignity, without a lot of song and dance, bearing the country in its heart, polished by a thousand hammers." The book arose in response to the harmfulness of the polemics that were tending to split the Croat expatriate community, and an answer too to extremists of the left and right. Vida's text expresses his wit, the sense of humour he sets against part of the émigré press.

"This our dark Orpheus of death and the spot of native ground" (Marijan Matković, *Orpheus from a foreign land*) committed suicide on September 25, 1960, throwing himself under the wheels of a train after 12 years of isolation his Argentine exile. He was buried on September 27 in the Chacarita municipal cemetery in Buenos Aires.

With respect to the question that has bothered many of his friends and acquaintances who have written

about his poetry abroad and those few who have written about it at home, why Vida did not return to Croatia after 1945, we agree with Boris Maruna that Viktor accepted life as an émigré "from inside, without any of the external pressure or real need that dictated the fate of most of the post-war exiles" (Boris Maruna, *Double exile or the principe constante in exilio*). With Ivan Meštrović and Joza Klijaković, whom he had himself met in his Roman years. This was a pure and moral decision: refusal to take part close-to in the so-called days of reconstruction, to pass in silence over the bloody tragedy of Bleiburg and the march of death.

In his poetry, Viktor Vida, from his isolation and uprootedness, sensed and to a very large extent articulated all the aporias through which Croatian 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry passed. All the unease, all the anxiety that particularly came out right after the war, in the late forties and in the fifties, spoke from Vida's loneliness and his bitter experience as an émigré. The poetry arose not only from the exile's Gethsemane, but also from the contemporary shortage of belongingness, the lack of fullness and point in existence, a sense of emptiness, futility and nothingness. It is hard to find any question within the area of the intellect and the spirit that this writer has not, with a greater or lesser degree of success, either posed or attempted to answer. In Vida's verse it is easy to spot the orbits and stations, the aspirations and the searchings, the disillusionment and the hope that racked the whole of the Croatian literary mind, affording a poetical expression of the fundamental questions of human existence.

Vida, precisely in his émigré isolation, felt the existential chill and the pressures of life more powerfully and strongly. And, what is more, before they had become a burning problem for the leaders of a generation of Croatian poets and writers like Petar Segeđin, Ivo Kozarčanin or Ranko Marinković; spiritual anxiety, spiritual questionings, were expressed by Segeđin only later, in the words: "In my consciousness, knowledge flared up of the sheer horror of ourselves the way we are in this great ship. What is it, and where am I?"

Vida had expressed a similar anxiety somewhat earlier, however. For this reason we might wonder how Vida's poetic oeuvre could have been ignored and neglected in contemporary Croatian literature. It is precisely here that Vida is a completely original and independent phenomenon, able to be reduced to any given models in post-war Croatian poetry with the greatest of difficulty. The more so in that in the late forties and early fifties he wrote his most challenging and integrated poetry. Before the appearance of the *Krugovi* group, before Pavletić's programmatic cry: "Let there be life", before Krleža's paper of 1952, before the penetration of Anglo-American literary theory and poetry, before the penetration of the French existentialists and the Italian hermeticists into our public literary communication. Before our literary milieu had managed to accept Friedrich's *Structures of the modern lyric*, Ivo Lendić applied his interpretations and definitions of the modern lyric as an introduction to an analysis of Vida's poetry in his Foreword to Vida's *Collected Poems* of 1962. But as early as 1951, the same writer had

published, stimulated by Vida's first volume of poems, his reflections about the way modern lyrics expressed themselves. "Vida's poetry is from a formal side modern and contemporary, it really does take account of the seventy years of development of western European lyrics from Mallarme to Rilke, Paul Valéry and Ungaretti, being linked through its reminiscences of the Greek classics, bearing at the same time all the formal marks of the poetry of the Mediterranean, from the most ancient Orphic canticles and the fragments of various ancient authors until Mistral" (Ivo Lendić, *The Poetry of Viktor Vida*). It was through his modern lyric expression that Vida made such a copious contribution to the development of Croatian literature, Croatian poetry, and the mere fact is enough to have his poetry placed at the very top of contemporary Croatian, particularly post-war, poetry. Through his lyrics, in particular, it was to be possible to feel a reading of the most serious loners and classics of the modern lyric; from among the French, particularly Paul Valéry, and then the Italians, the three main representatives of hermeticism, Ungaretti, Montale and Quasimodo, Rainer Maria Rilke of the Germans, in England Eliot and Hardy. All these poets derived from the French poetic revolution, from Rimbaud and Stephan Mallarme. All, except the English, were markedly Mediterranean. Vida translated Rilke, Valéry, Supervielle, Michaux, and Quasimodo; Rilke even in 1949. He wrote specially about Valéry; he wrote of Croce, Maritain, Goethe, Jaspers, Eugenio d'Ors, Eluard, Quasimodo... He translated Camus. All this was bound to refine his literary taste, and affect his work.

Nevertheless, if one looked for some distinct literary model in one of these great names of world poetry, it would be hard to find one.

Vida's lyrics demonstrate the wholeness of the searching and the striving in contemporary Croatian poetry; they are a kind of précis of half a century's measuring Croatian poetry against the poetry of other countries. The development of Vida's lyrics moved from Croatian impressionism to western European hermeticism, in a determined search for a form of poetic expression of his own. Yet Vida never fell into the trap of total unintelligibility, and, what is more, in spite of all the traps of modernity and all kinds of 'isms, managed to remain very much his own man. This is an interesting characteristic of Vida's poetry; knowing modernity well, cultivating the modern lyric expression, and yet remaining distinctive, and still within the context of the Croatian literary tradition. Vida's eighteen years of deracination resulted in a very particular kind of poetic expression that at the same time retained all the elements of Croatian poetry – from Matoš, Ujević and Wiesner to A. B. Šimić and Šop – and raised them to the level of contemporary European poetry. On the one hand, S. S. Kranjčević with his pick-axe of the depraved spirit, and Matoš, national and universal, the yearning and mysterious Croatian Young Lyric, the overstrained and protesting phrases of Krleža, the strict expressiveness and austere poetic expression of A. B. Šimić, Wiesner's private world and picturesqueness, the rhapsodies of Tin Ujević, the prayerfulness of the Catholic lyric or pantheistic humanism; and on the other, lyrics that spurted from

the troubled hopelessness and loneliness of western anchorites. In brief, Vida's lyrics precede many poets in the second half of our century, who were to sharpen still more the question of existential anxiety, poets like Mihalić, Šoljan, Škurla or the younger Vučićević, Horvatić and Stamać.

And then, as far as the form of his lyrics and his personal style were concerned, he was certainly himself aware that these features gave him a special place in modern Croatian lyric writing. "Irrespective of the value of my lyrics, irrespective of the quality inherent in them, I think that I managed to create a style that separates me on first glance from the other styles of our poetry, which is in full flower. Within, of course, a general style, patiently built up first of all by the Symbolists, and the so-called Decadents, and then by the so-called Modernists of the end of the last and beginning of our century." Viktor Vida certainly did manage successfully to overcome the effects of the impressionist lyrics of the Zagreb "Grič" group and the new Hermetic poems that he read and studied avidly, and, creating his own poetic style, was able to start on his trans-oceanic, Argentinian, emigrant poetic adventure.

In the prose poem *Boka i Bokelji* in *Voice of St Anthony* of 1949, among other things, Vida wrote the following: "The men of Boka early on learned the tragic side of life, and that feeling of ephemerality, planted in them through centuries of invasions, wars and other pestilences..." He too, from Boka as he was, with the same burden of life, felt the same at the bottom of him. Vida confirmed the rule that the poets of the Croatian south, though there are doubt-

less exceptions, are on the whole metaphysically and tragically more profound, highly sensitive to the hard questions of human existence. A tragic sense for life and transitoriness is a particular feature of most Mediterranean poets, as is an idyllic attitude to their own native ground. Apart from this, is it possible to find, of these poets, a single one who has not sought his own Trebizond, Palmyra, Cornwall? This is the way Vida is too. Death and the transient are the seductive themes of his lyrics. And an idyllic attitude to his own roots, whether they were in Boka, Kotor, the Mediterranean background, the pure whiteness of Perast, in sunny Dalmatia, in the towers, squares and cafés of Zagreb, in Croatia. And a constant search for chimerical places that are inscribed on no map.

While he lived in his own country, in ten years Vida published some thirty poems. Critics have on the whole agreed that the poetic oeuvre of Viktor Vida is clearly divided into two parts: poetic beginnings and initial maturation up to 1942, and the much bigger oeuvre which was mainly published in Argentina. The period that he spent in Italy between 1942 and September 1947 is a mystery. In this period, there are no proofs that Vida published anything, or wrote anything, except for one poem, found in his papers after his death, written in Italian, dated July 12, 1947. Luigi Salvini writes that Vida worked for the magazine *Europa Orientale*, but there is no proof of this claim. It can reasonably be said that this was a period of creative silence, in which he collected himself, looked for a voice of his own. It is interesting that Vida had little interest in his



early poems, and suggested to Vinko Nikolić that he should publish only the poems from his two collections. As if wanting to get free of his first poems, printed in Podgorica and Čačak in 1932 and 1933 (*Epistle of the dead*, *Boka men travelling*, *Desire in spring*, *Boatmen*, *Boka*) and locate his poetic beginnings in his Zagreb days when he started publishing in *Hrvatska revija*, *Hrvatsko kolo* and Krleža's *Pečat*. In these first poems a certain reliance on the youthful rage and rebellion of Jako Polić Kamov might be found, and also the sharp, anti-traditional breaks of Krleža, as in *Boka men travelling*, *Boatmen*, *Boka*. It might be said that these are in a sense a throw-back to our poetics of protest, also perhaps the consequences of leftist, anti-clerical trends, but not without connections to and interests in what had been done by the social-question lyric that Croatian poetry had inherited from Kranjčević via Šimić and the poets in the thirties who had particularly cultivated this kind of poem. It is, though, difficult to deny or hide one's beginnings, as shown eloquently by Vida's first poem printed in *Free thinking* (1932). In this poem, characteristically entitled *Epistle of the dead*, we can find Vida's obsessive theme of death sung about. From this poem, up to his last poems in *Hrvatska revija* of 1960 we will come upon death in a number of variants.

From his first poem, via the sonnet *Eternal peace to the man without an autobiography* printed in *Pečat* in 1939, to his last poems, Vida, then, worked on the theme of death; the idea of death can really obsess a man to such a degree that it paralyzes him. "The journey to non-existence", the encounter with

nothingness, the feeling of pointlessness, all these are characteristic of the existential state of contemporary humanity. At the heart of Vida's tragic sense of life are the fragility and ephemerality of the temporal and the human, the facts of limitation and incompleteness. Talking of the phenomenon of death in Vida's poetry, Ivo Lendić says: "Death in his lyric poems means liberation from bondage to matter and time; it means the transformation of existence into a new form of reality. On the other side of the grave are the angels, a constituent part of eschatological reality. There are the wakeful souls of the dead, who meet in their new life and talk, looking from there at this world. Probably it is hard to find in recent lyric poetry such an intimate experience of the idea of death as was the case with Viktor Vida." As if death would take him away from the temporal and the physical the better to invigorate him in the essence. But this was just one side of the coin, revealing death as an answer to the riddle, as reconciliation and the solution to suffering. "I will take off this body / like a dirty shirt. You will dress me in air and drops of dew."

There is, however, another side, which shows an appalled apprehension of tragedy and fear of nothingness, which reveals an all-embracing emptiness. How hard is the burden of life, how much can the cupola of the sky crush? There are no answers to the questions asked – what is it, and where am I? Vida sings in the poem *Death and transformation*: "I was crushed by the mighty cupola / under which the questions rang / with no answer / while I set up a bridge / among hearts, knowing that I am as tran-

sient / as circles on the water". Sensing a cosmic loneliness in one of his best poems, in *Poisoned pools*, after a description of a phantasmagoric landscape mentioning "rotten grasses", "sundered, hot, saddened dreams" and "great green snakes", Vida paradoxically concludes: "It is not hard to die: / It is hard to live: / to toil upon the asphalt. / To go bleary / to the evening of empty rooms. / On the empty walls / spots of brilliantine head height." And yet, "Ah, death – happy instant!", a verse which appears in the sequence of the poem as if it were a liberation from the "evening of empty rooms" and hollow questions without satisfactory answers.

If death, in the poem *Epistle of the dead* is perhaps the expression of youthful exaggerated melancholy, in the poems from 1949 on no kind of stagginess or exaggeration of the state can be seen. What is more, one could even speak of a pure anti-pathos, an almost concrete conception of death. As early as February 1949 he himself admitted: "I loved life, but its sources have begun to dry up... I lived fast, burned up, as a candle burns down." And in 1959, he wrote the following words in a letter: "It is about a year since it seemed to me that everything had withered in me. I have no will, no wherefore, and if I were not a Christian, I would not wait for a natural death... The more the years pass, the more it seems to me that I have been shipwrecked."

The melancholy verse "My comrade, when you receive this epistle written in blood / I shall not be alive" is later, in the mature Vida, replaced by elusive answers and the constant pressure of questions "...can one really be / so very alone in the world" he

wonders in the poem *Loneliness*. This leads to ice-cold knowledge of the absence and concealment of God: "In the depths of the sky, deep, / Deus absconditus / among the icy flowers" and to appalling visions of a machine that did not only kill Camus but will devour the poet himself: "Machine, wild beast.... You roared / with teeth wet / from spring blood" (*Minotaur*).

Some critics have noticed, like Vinko Grubišić for example, that Viktor Vida is not concerned with death as an event of physical departure. He was more bothered by the life after death. Death as event is more of a longed-for calming down, a rest and a dream; the greater problem is eschatological, the life the other side of death. The colour of these posthumous events in which the lyric subject experiences himself with the "eyes of the heart" and scoops "from the box of memories" various kinds of valuables is very particular. This period after death is full of memories and dreams that fill up the emptiness of death. And this brings us back to the poem *Loneliness* in which the poet does not ask anything "save to die / to rest, to dream".

In the poem *Death and transformation* Vida concludes in verses that completely confirm the idea of the life beyond the grave: "I shall live in memory, / iced, stiffened, seized", in memories, recollections and dreams. Thus Vinko Grubišić's statement that "Vida is by no means a poet of death, but one of the most pronounced of Croatian poets about life after death" seems completely justified.

Vida's second big theme comes from the Bible. This poet, his origins being in a Christian country, in a

Catholic spiritual world, was very much occupied with Biblical themes and motifs, from both Old and New Testaments. In fact, the whole of Croatian 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry is marked by Biblical topics and by the desperate search for the fullness of transcendence. Viktor Vida is certainly no exception from this point of view, perhaps only an exception that has left a profoundly authorial and aesthetic seal in his religiously inspired poetry. In all the diversity of poetic phenomena, from Kranjčević, Kamov, Nazor, Krleža and Šop, it is as if it were precisely through Vida's poetry that some covert but nevertheless apprehensible synthesis of the existence of the Croat, of the spiritual realm of Croatia and its very existence, were going on.

Although in his first poems some typically anticlerical though by no means irreligious views can be seen, particularly in the poems *Boka men travelling* and *Boka*, the mature poems of Viktor Vida particularly show the direct hand of God in human history. Epiphanic motifs seem to be dominant in most of the songs in which there is a specific Biblical reference. Vida had a great friend in Ivo Lendić, editor of *St Anthony's Voice* and the friendship must have left certain traces in Vida's poems. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to say that these poems were created under the direct influence of not only Lendić but also the other writers, poems and intellectuals brought together in the magazine. For the poems are the consequence of Vida's thirst for a present and revealed God. In his anthology pieces, in *Elegy* and *Poisoned pools*, Vida uses the very common phrase of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry, *Deus absconditus*. The

feeling for existential loneliness, helplessness and homelessness, specific symptoms of the sickness of contemporary man, the constant wrestling with God prompted the poet to ask the question: "Where are you? to bring a little discipline / into this mess of blood and desires. / a tiny glow-worm / into the mown grass / Oh hidden God!". In his nightmares, "among the icy flowers" of his loneliness and the everyday confrontation with the same problem, Viktor Vida came to the conclusion that this God is distant and absent. If he exists at all, he is concealed in the endless spaces of the sky. God is limitlessly above human thoughts and words (Job 42 3), he is the concealed God (Isaiah 45 15), inaccessible; his purposes cannot be fathomed. Man, trapped and grappling with the riddles of his life cannot make his way through by his own powers to the necessary clarity.

Without going particularly into Vida's personal religion, about which even Ivo Lendić was very reserved and cautious, without wishing to insist on it, we can agree with the ideas and conclusions of Danilo Čović: "There is still one thing: one cannot pass over a certain number of Vida's poems with religious and biblical motifs, because they are an important part of the poet's bequest. In his poems of a religious or biblical character, Vida recalls the greatness of Ujević, who, more than once, and not in his weakest but in his best poems, calls on God as a witness to his sufferings, to deliver him from his martyrdom" (Danilo Čović, *Like air circling among crystal glasses*).

The poem *The burning bush* is certainly one of the

best Croatian religious poems. In a sense it is complementary to the poem of thanks *Praise the Lord my soul*. It is an obvious symbol of Revelation. On the holy mountain of Horeb Jehovah's angel appeared in the flames of a burning bush (*Exodus* 3,4). The poem is, in effect, Vida's credo about the revealed God. It begins with the initial prayer formulation "In the name of God, the Son and the Holy Ghost." In his poetic clairvoyance, Vida manages to link the divine revelation of both testaments, and to say his Our Father at the same time. Like Ujević, in his *Mystic space of night*, to be returned, by the momentary awakening, from the arousal of the divine operation and the mystic state, to the world of phenomena and things. "Until I aroused from Thy whispering / In the world / I was alone. / Like a forgotten flute / or a broken pillar in the grass." This sudden awakening and the shifts away from the direct closeness of God are not visible in Vida's poems alone; they also appear in his essay writing. These are frequent sensations of Vida, somewhere at the edge of dreaminess, some kind of other-worldliness, dream-visions, the sweetness of brooding. Writing of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Jacques Maritain, Vida describes one of these special spiritual states: "I had a strange sensation one night, while I was sitting and thinking at my desk, in the quietness of the room. The window was open and I was taking pleasure in the coming of spring, with the mysterious moonlight on the planes in front of the house. It felt that my breathing was in tune with the respiration of all things around me, and I was happy, to be alive upon the earth... the curtains moved

gently, kissed by the night breeze, and came into the circle of light under the lampshade, caressing the edge of the desk, the books, dictionaries. I felt a joy that it is hard to describe, that brings a beam of eternity from the touch of the being that surrounds us and that appears in self-oblivion in the face of the mystery of life. And when from this sweet brooding I returned, when the clock struck, to this transient life, and to time, I was at the first moment so struck by the ghostliness of its utterance and this moment of history with uncertainty emanating from it, that for a moment I thought of the primal fear of man, who looked into the world of threatening and inimical things, that instinctively my first care was to close the window and lock the door well" (Viktor Vida, *Echoes of Maritain*)

Lunar landscapes are often to be found in Vida's poems, often the moon bends like an orange over the heavenly, star-studded cupola, nocturnes often accompany the poet's longings for transcendence, and for wells and origins in the home country. Through this dark moonlight there often come angels, dark and light, creatures that redeem, free and transfer him to the other side, or endeavour to make earthly reality more tolerable. Vida's other-world elegies, the melancholic plaints of our Orpheus from both Croatia and abroad, as Marijan Matković points out, move between Catholic pictorial aesthetics and Pantheist humanism.

Vida's biblical motifs figure with particular aesthetic and poetic success in poems that have genuine anthology value: *The Prophets, Three Kings, Flight into Egypt, Annunciation Evening and Night, To-*

*bias and the Angel.* Vida, that is, does not take over ready-made Biblical clichés, but uses them and gives them a new, experiential value that is just his. In the poem *Annunciation Evening and Night*, Vida concentrates on the mystery of the incarnation and the miracle of Bethlehem, and fills in the dispositions of the girl Mary: "The maiden stood timid / three twigs quivered between her fingers. / She, who woke, was to be called mother." Vida with reason, as a kind of counterpoint, mentions the "evening of Jonah", that disobedient prophet, and yet chosen by God; he also refers to the "night of Pascal, who listens to the eloquent silence / like God's people / when, putting down their hoe and net, / they concur, Father, with your signs / and eat the bread of solitude, and moisten it with tears". The evening of the Annunciation is obviously in opposition to the night with which the poet in his solitude is faced, in which he bites the bread of his own loneliness, sprinkling it with his tears. The night of Gabriel's Annunciation has a particular effect on things, people and objects: "The outlines of things that night were / as if lit with a green lamp /, as it is wont to be in childhood / at church fetes / with a smell of carbide and roses / so that the child marvels and enthuses.

Then follows a magnificent, modern and deeply felt triptych: Vida faithfully follows the Gospel according to St Matthew, from the prophet's words: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which is, God with us" to the gifts of the Wise Men in the poem *Three Kings* – this event announcing the conflict that will occur between the governors of the official king and

the saviour of his people, while in another sense, rejected by the official government, the pagan nations do obeisance in the likenesses of wise men, Babylonian astrologers – up to the poem *Flight into Egypt* – the poem of Jesus's exile – which does not only miraculously draw the unfathomable ways of God but reminds us in our present time very much of our brothers who have been driven out and persecuted.

Vida's preoccupation with the Revelation, the Incarnation and the presence of God in human history had not so far had so much poetic power, contemporaneity of expression or such an individual inspiration. With good reason, this complex of poems can be placed among the best Croatian religious verse. Some other poems, for example, *Ex voto*, *Slave of time*, *Ladder*, *Autumn in Umbria* bear clear witness to the Biblical grounding and Franciscan spirituality of Vida's lyrics. And it was not for nothing that Vida stopped over Unamuno's *Epitaph* and translated it into Croatian, adding four of his own verses: Prepare me, Eternal Father, in your bosom and in the fatherland a home / there shall I dream, for I am crushed from the grievous battle with evil" Viktor Vida followed the tradition of Croatian poetry suffused with Biblical topics and motifs, but as a Mediterranean and a follower of the ancient Greek and Hellenic spirit often makes use of ancient myths, whose motifs (Odysseus, Ithaca, Orpheus, the Minotaur) are frequent guests in his lyrics.

An exceptionally stimulating theme that Vida often resorts to is his native ground. Not only Perast and Boka, his immediate origins, but Dalmatia and Croat-

ia as well. Frequently, in the meagreness of his native ground, in the absence of his homeland, Vida goes back in his memory to the days of childhood, Zagreb days, and with nostalgic poetry brings to life his memories of Dalmatia, Croatia, even of Europe, captured by the far off Argentine overseas wastelands. An exile, as Matoš and Ujević were in their day in Paris, anguished by his personal tragedy of homelessness, he bore the heavy burden of his feverish struggle for existence. The motifs of his early youth, of childish longings, a longing for a real and a spiritual homeland, are ever-present in Vida's poetry. The alien land increased the intensity of his longing; the native ground and the homeland live in the poet's memories, recollections and dreams. The fragrant pang of the Mediterranean lives in the poems, the warmth of the south resounds, the dirge for the lost homeland tolls: "Friendship is fine, / And I do not know why, while it snowed / on memories and things / I thought of Osijek, which I do not know / and a clay stove. / That is the old Croatia / with snow upon the roof", he sings in the poem *Notes for a biography*. The life that knows the warmth of memories, the embrace and the sense of merging with the hearths of home, sings dirges and complaints for the native ground and the beauty of the homeland, Boka and Perast. Vida's nostalgia of exile, his European nostalgia in the poem *Remembering Europe* has almost no parallel in contemporary Croatian poetry. The Bay of Boka, the Church of St Mary, the Zagreb towers, squares and cafés, the scented landscape of southern Croatia, and the broad European horizons – the spiritual landscape of Croat and

European – made of Vida the archetypal poet of the lament for home, a troubadour who from the box of memories and strange sensations attempted to bring to life the music of the old days of home, yet was always so very aware of his bread of solitude. On the one hand Vida feeds on the bread of solitude, on the other he attempts to share the crumbs of this bread with the rare loners whose fate in life and poetry was similar, stabbed sometimes with the occasional beam of merciful light.

Viktor Vida wrote columns, essays, literary and art criticism. He tried writing a novella, *The Secret Mission* (1951), which he himself felt to have insufficient interior consistency, considering it more an attempt than a finished prose work. His columns are, one might say, an offshoot of Croatian impressionist column-writing recalling Matoš, Nikola Polić, Wiesner, while the essays, mainly of an occasional nature, although they do lead to a better understanding of his poetry, are mainly the consequence of his current mood, and most commonly, by sequence of associations, of his thoughts about various kinds of art. In fact, they are a good introduction to his poetic world. One of them particularly stands out, an essay on the poetry of Quasimodo, the Italian poet who, with Ungaretti and Montale, had an essential influence on the way Vida wrote.

All in all, Viktor Vida, as a poet of loneliness and of other-worldly elegies, a double émigré, from Croatia and from the émigré community, is, on the map of contemporary Croatian poetry, an essential, valuable and great poetic name. A distinct and original voice that can only with difficulty be subsumed with-

in any poetic trend. If in the structure of his verse he is partially close to the school of Grič, to Ujević, Wiesner and Nikola Polić or Alfirević, and partially near to great names in poetry such as Rilke, Valéry, Eluard, Ungaretti and Quasimodo, he nevertheless managed to retain his own individual poetic style. From the board of life, nothing remained to him except memories and the bitter bread of solitude.

*Božidar Petrač*

## COSMOS OF A PERSON





I could say: your room,  
Your night . . . .  
Now I am left with  
The invisible arc of your leap in play  
That I look at my hands,  
At the orange,  
And say: still another day  
Has passed . . . .

Immortal is the soul  
Rustling silver of leaves  
Turned by the wind . . . .  
The cosmos grows ever smaller, and remembrance  
Ever greater.  
In vain we count distances of stars,  
Icy spaces,  
To scatter  
The person  
Into the Abyss of numbers.  
You passed through my life  
Like the tip of a fingernail over wax . . . .

## REMEMBRANCE

We walked embraced by the river  
That glistened like quicksilver  
Among artificial grass  
And leaves of tinfoil  
While bandits broke mirrors.  
You smiled at the clear night  
And asked: where is the moon?  
Silent, it shone behind your back.

Now above all I long  
To dream behind the hard grotto  
That calls itself world  
Like a scarab in the exhalations of grasses.  
In the night coppery from stalactites,  
Glaciers of dormant volcanos.  
The moon behind your shoulders  
Lit up fields of executions . . . .

I shall meet you ethereal  
As during life.  
Through your fingers we'll watch the moon,  
Yellow alga in the sky of the dead  
And the tiny bodies of dead  
Crickets.  
I'll embrace your waist  
With a pure movement  
To remind you of your stay on earth  
In the green peace of still images . . . .

## THE THREE KINGS

The first king fills the desert:  
now time begins.

The second loads the languid camels  
with Arabia of fragrant oils.

The third one spies for spring air,  
strains the ear; palms bow.  
On his index finger like the hawk to the hunter  
the tame owl descends.

The mysterious desert responds.

## MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

Soldiers diced the heart of night,  
Cock after taps.  
To ransack houses.

With drunken clamor they lit torches  
To seek through darkness the naked armpit.  
Every screech is a flaming crow  
Out of soundless dreams of full moon.

Ends the cutting of the crowns of lilies  
The rowdy, sweating rabble drunkenly regroups.  
Behind the door with skirt and bosom  
A mother stifles whimpers of an infant,  
Lamp for unknown traitors

Pewter night that gasps on the moon  
Who will ever fathom your abyss?

## FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

The guard asks what is in the saddlebag.  
Dry grass, bread and new wine,  
Food for meager meals.

The soldier dozes, they walk through the town  
gate,  
Approach the bramble bushes.

They vanish into the bristling sand  
Where through the providence of mineral salts  
bones of lion cubs gleam.

## TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL

In the desert or in the neon-lit bar  
under the palm tree or the awnings of black shops,  
the angel will encounter me  
blind and old.

The Angel of jasmin and camphor  
will be unattainable brilliance  
with the wing of the night butterfly  
on which the eye is stitched.

I'll fall asleep on his neck  
like a quiet day in birds' nests.

With a gentle kiss  
he will light the way  
(when the desert masticates the weed)

but does not reveal the soul  
nor the measure of his mystery.

Sweetness of my captivity,  
sustenance of my faith.

## MOTHER

In the bright house by the sea  
on the elegic coast of Perast  
you'll always remain by the toys of childhood.

Silent reflections of the blue bay  
on your white dress  
delight my eyes  
when I run out of the pine grove  
at your call, and sink into your arms.

I fall asleep with swallows.  
The shepherd playing the flute  
carries a sweet tune into my sleep.

## ITHACA

When Poseidon for a moment fell asleep  
from his chest tore a sigh.  
Thus with bubbles swam out an island.  
Thus Ithaca was born  
(one red evening).

Above her gods placed hands,  
from which the wind wiped off a drop of sea.  
Now the wind hangs in the cage of the green market  
where they sell olives and spring rain  
plucked on islands that are undiscovered.  
One can only sense them on mild evenings  
when a sun ray pierces a cloud  
and from ashes strews gold dust  
on the shells of lobsters.

On Ithaca's skirt, crouching among nettles,  
children dream voyages  
while in the quarry hammers break  
marble for graves.  
Pitchers for green oil.——

## GLASS SPIRAL

Mysterious and hidden He circles around me,  
bears down upon me with the ray of moon,  
lets ivy into my dream  
and voices  
die upon my pillow.

He is impenetrable, I am transparent  
and after him I grow into a glass spiral  
where spring starts chirping  
a market with wisterias.

When I dive into a deeper dream  
his look stabs my heart:  
a child gazing into the eclipse of the sun  
through the neck of a dark bottle.

I startle because fingers wake me  
and still within me echo words  
uttered from the flickering  
of illuminated forests.

Stars, sparks of taciturn heavens  
above my dew-dropped body.

## FORGETTING

After the burial one remains alone.  
Yet it is still day and the sun shines  
peacefully above the graveyard.  
Grasses rest. All rests.  
Only the bee buzzes.

The branch breaks, the bone turns to dust;  
now begins the age of earth's nothingness.

To those in the city the shadow only reaches to  
their shoulders.

He is the call under the stone.

Only the early days (when the first star appears)  
will they think of him.

EUROPE, OCTOBER 1956

*To The Hungarian Patriots*

*Motto: Nikita Kruscov vzdal manifest  
Mertvim Slobuoda, a zivim arest.*

They lead the Hungarian rebel to the hanging place  
in the name of "Humanity, Progress, Freedom."

The moon pours green light  
on the tyrants' bayonets.

On the streets of Buda  
mothers' throats contract  
with fear. Chests convulse with horror.  
The Soviets do not spare gunpowder.  
Grotesque sounds of the Marseillaise rip the air  
machineguns mow the streets  
and strike boys dead.

From there: horse hoofs. Artillery's boom.  
Hollow echoes of Lake Balaton.  
From here: raging roar of police  
ingratiators. Welcome to our home!

The last hour strikes  
from the familiar ancient clock  
for the Pajdas<sup>1</sup> who sways to its beat  
as a Tovariš<sup>2</sup> pockets his watch.

- 
1. Hungarian buddy, chum.
  2. comrade.

It is cold as the grave. Desolate.

Silence bears the tarogat's<sup>3</sup> distant lone lament.

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3. Hungarian instrument resembling a clarinet that was used by the Rakoczi troops to call out to each other in the Hungarian wars of independence.

## THE OLD POET

(In the pose of a donor)

In the room the first shadow grows:  
Night descends along the path.  
In the sky torches are lit,  
a star shines for the lonely poet.

He said everything he wanted to say:  
— life's sorrow — from deep within.  
Christ whispers to him from the wall: Kneel.  
Around him silence. And moonlight.

### THREE STONES OR LOVE NIGHT

The goddess of golden autumns  
Crept up through the brushwood of lullabies  
And whispered: pick me.

Her armband slipped off.  
Embracing we sank into the night  
Full of blinking lights.

Afterwards we rolled off  
Like two tired stones  
Each into a dull sleep.

A cricket sings on her palm.

The moon is a big yellow stone  
On the smooth thigh of the night.

### FREEDOM

Freedom, I love you like bread.  
Freedom, I love you like star and bird.  
Freedom, I love you like a love dream.

And what are you?

You are bread, star, light,  
Love dream. Bird.



## CREATION OF THE WORLD .

(Night in Dalmatia)

In the beginning there was the Hand  
stretched into the wasteland of time.  
From the opened palm the bird flew off;  
its chirp of happiness strewn through empty space.

Bird-stars fell into the mandrakes,  
(it died of joyful song)  
its blue eye: the returned skies,  
and its beak the white-haired moon.

Bird-sun dries clay  
sleeping behind that mountain.

(Everything hums, flashes, dreams:  
the sea, the stone, the olive grove, this night.)  
Gold of its eye  
changes colors with the blinking  
of the sleeping brook.  
Silver of its iris  
flashes into the half-shadows of pine trees  
where the shepherd with gourd and staff  
sleeps.

On his lips are stars,  
in the shell the night and the sea asleep.

This is the song of the bird dead of happiness.

## TO THE SOULS OF DEAD OBJECTS

I am not forgetting you, dear things,  
Penates and Lares of my childhood home  
abiding, valued, tame occupants:

(Plates, glasses, saucepans and bowls,  
embroidered table cloth with the flat loaf  
beneath the sheath of wheat.  
And you, pitchers in the china cabinet,  
you clanked with a clear sound.)

Caressed into cleanness  
by loving hands,  
awakened in the bright  
aired-out rooms.

On the suns of May, beside the stove  
of our past's mild winters.

Whenever a flock of birds flies over the garden  
their warble flutters across the glaze of pitchers.

And you caught my image, my bare foot,  
sunbeams in the grass, bread, morning dew,

But you too died a long time ago.  
You rest peacefully in the clear brook,  
your bright fragments glisten  
in earth's sediments.

As she picks a flower in the meadow  
the little girl's finger grazes this glass shard.

She doesn't know that a long time ago  
my mother's lips touched it.

## GRANDDAD REDCAP AND DIGGER

At dawn he went with the shovel to the eddy  
to turn over earth between rocks.  
A clear day reddened . . . .

With the shovel he returned to the threshold of  
the peaceful home.

The day died on stones:  
turned into the starry night.  
A drop flickered on the cobweb of gooseberries,  
in the grove the nightingale woke . . .

Granddad lay down sweetly tired.

The linden its holy fragrance,  
the nightingale silver of the native sky  
dusted gently into dream.

God kissed the giant man's forehead . . .

## AFTERWORD

### Viktor Vida – The Croatian Poet and Fate

Viktor Vida “shares the destiny of many of his fellows who were only in the future to obtain the recognition they deserved”<sup>1</sup> stated Zdravko Zima in 1983 in Zagreb’s *Vjesnik*. Although: “He was much too individual to be like anyone...”<sup>2</sup> said Marijan Matković in the Academy’s *Forum* in 1981. In both cases Vida was an Orpheus – an Orpheus in the underworld, and an Orpheus in a foreign land. For Branko Kadić (1919-1991) and Ante Kadić, Vida was the “peak of post-war Croatian poetry”.<sup>3</sup>

However, the approaches to Vida’s poetry have been fairly diverse, and sometimes quiet superficial. Quite frequently, his sudden death has been insisted on as not only a frame of reference from which to start, but as a context indispensable in the process of “unriddling” the secrets of his exceptional poetic oeuvre. Regret, of course, for the homeland does not

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1. Zdravko Zima, *Orfej u podzemlju*, *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, Aug. 28, 1983

2. Marijan Matković, *Orfej iz tudine*, *Forum*, Zagreb, 1981, 9.

3. Ante Kadić, *Hrvatsko emigrantsko pjesništvo* (HR, 1960, 4)

eo ipso assume a creative, poetic act. And some critics have got caught up in their nets of words; both when they belittled and ignored, and when they were being politically manipulated...

In 1947 Vinko Nikolić published a collection of poems called *The Lost Homeland* in Rome. At the end of 1971 in the Zagreb *Telegram* (most ungrateful moment), Ante Stamać, talking of Vida as someone who experienced loss of country, made actual the fate of the man and the poet of the "lost native ground, in the literal, figurative and poetic sense". Stamać continued: "...in this pure lyric of the Croatian language are mirrored mostly the loss of God, to whom aestheticised prayers are sent, a not absolutely complete soul, conscious, divine. And thus Vida, very likely one of the first among us, named the event which had happened: Deus absconditus."<sup>4</sup> In addition, we might recall, Stamać insists on the great difference between the deserted (the private realm), and Vida's lost native ground ("a state of the spirit").

From an Orpheus who is not immortal, our thoughts go to the already noticed and highly significant homeland story of Slobodan Novak.

In his graveside speech (September 27, 1960), Branko Kadić was to say to Vida: "Perhaps you felt that it was better to go than to stay, to go far off, where Deus absconditus was waiting for you."<sup>5</sup>

4. Ante Stamać, *Vidin poziv zavičaju*, *Telegram*, Zagreb, 17. 12. 1971

5. Vinko Nikolić et al., *Zadnji zbogom Viktoru Vidi...* (HR, 1961, 1-2)

"The biography of Vida's life is very short and simple, completely unlike his spiritual biography..." states Tonko Gazzari.<sup>6</sup> But for Zima, as for Marin Franičević (1940) "it is possible to identify Vida's life and his works."<sup>7</sup> What is more, Ante Kadić supports Matković's idea or stance that Vida "without his émigré sufferings, without his long period of loneliness and isolation, would never have developed his poetic potentials to the depths and dimensions of the primordially dramatic."<sup>8</sup>

To Matković's apparently opposed judgements (Vida's life was "interesting in many ways, full of question marks" – "recent Croatian poetry has no other poet whose private life is so built into his poetry") a possible answer was offered by M. Franičević in distant and pre-war 1940: "His poetry is himself. But there has to be another Viktor Vida. Deep inside him."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the best answers are given the major novels *Cyclops* and *Never More* by Ranko Marinković; Ugo and Longo were at least of the same generation.

In line with this, the path inevitably takes us to the systematically ignored (in Croatia) Zvonimir Katalečić: "Less spectacular in his life, but the more at its close. Like a classical hero, he is subject to the fall of

6. Tonko Gazzari, *Estetska analiza poezije Viktora Vide*, (HR, 1981, 2)

7. Zdravko Zima, *Orfej u podzemlju*, *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, Aug. 28, 1983

8. Marijan Matković, (*Viktor Vida*) see *Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti* vol. 139, 1982.

9. Marin Franičević, *16 pjesama Viktora Vida*, *Novosti*, Zagreb, Nov. 17, 1940.

contemporary anti-heroism. It is not important that this fall had its clinical and medical overtones. Since he was no saint, nor master of compromise, nor draught animal, he did not have the patience to crawl on the muddy asphalt, among the bubbles of oil, under the smoky sky of a mechanised Babylon."

"It is said that Vida the poet stepped into émigré life as if into poisoned puddles, but those who think this are wrong. Precisely because the nature of our everyday life is an exile all by itself (as human minds have always borne witness), oblivion of that essential, the soul of our soul, our ontological authenticity. Without this, and against this, every life is exile, absence, ex-centricity (Heidegger) and expulsion, as Vida explains exactly:

I do not know what I am, where I am, where  
I am going  
only this enigmatic body is my warrant,  
that, broken off from Fullness, cast into the  
time  
between Nothing and Everything, I would  
wander alone.

*Slave of time*

This kind of existential absence can be experienced on our own native spot of ground and outside it, everywhere. We can be saved only through the invigoration of faith – the sweetness of our slavery in expectation of return to the divine moment..."<sup>10</sup>

10. Zvonimir Katalinić, *Sužanj i pobjednik vremena* (HR, 1977, 2)

On the other hand Ante Kadić blames Ivo Lendić for attempting in the foreword to the book *Viktor Vida: Collected Poems* to present Vida as a "religious man, because in essence he was not."<sup>11</sup> Vinko Nikolić's wish that Antun Bonifačić should write a study, this preface, that is, was not heard.

But let us go on, because there are always plenty of disagreements and differences.

Thus on another occasion Kadić said: "Most of Vida's poems are dedicated to God, to death and his birthplace. God, who is the poet's abiding companion, almost friend, often surprises him with the mysterious way in which he governs the world and our destinies."<sup>12</sup>

In a letter to Magda Osterhuber on June 30, 1959, Vida confesses: "Since about a year ago, everything in me seems to have withered. I have no will for anything, and if I were not a Christian, I would not wait for a natural death."

Lucijan Kordić was on the same path, for Vida's "poetic religiousness was neither aggressive nor violent". He concludes: "Seldom can you find a poet of his generation and his poetic achievements so deeply and subtly linked with the idea of the divine and the sacred in human life."<sup>13</sup>

11. Ante Kadić, *Nekoliko hrvatskih emigrantskih pjesnika*, see Šimun Šito Ćorić, *45 hrvatskih emigrantskih pjesnika* (Zagreb, 1991)

12. Ante Kadić, *Hrvatsko emigrantsko pjesništvo* (HR, 1960, 4)

13. Lucijan Kordić, *Viktor Vida: Pjesnička vizija osobe*, Knjižnica HR, 1973, vol 11

In addition, Vida is "one of the few angeologists in Croatian poetry" (B. Kadić).<sup>14</sup> We are also led to this by Vida's highly suggestive "Leonardo's angelism" (HR, 1952, no. 4).

What, then, is (not very importantly) for some anti-religious is for Vinko Grubišić only anti-clerical. "Vida, with his poems of a religious and Biblical character, reminds us of the greatness of Ujević who.... called upon God as a witness of his sufferings, as a redeemer from his martyrdom."<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the Matica at home was still talking about anti-religious themes in September 1973. In mid-1967, VUS, so many years after Vida's death, wrote this: "Vida's humanism of the early years reached its peak in communism, which happened later in his soul."<sup>16</sup>

Thus he was given no peace even in death.

Although Vida had very bad dreams while he was alive, both Matković and Pavletić agreed about their nature: "the only refuge from the dark"<sup>17</sup> – "a flight from brutal reality"<sup>18</sup>.

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14. Branko Kadić, *Svemire osobe – Viktor Vida, Croatian Review* (HR), 1951, 3

15. Ante Kadić, *Nekoliko hrvatskih emigrantskih pjesnika, see Šimun Šito Ćorić, 45 hrvatskih emigrantskih pjesnika* Zagreb, 1991

16. S. *Sjećanja povratnika. Naši u Ulici Viamonte. VUS*, Zagreb, May 24, 1967.

17. Marijan Matković, *Orfej iz tuđine, Forum*, Zagreb, 1981, 9.

18. Vlatko Pavletić, *Uvod u vrednovanje poratnih i preocjenjivanje nekih prethodnih pjesnika, Kritika*, Zagreb, 1969, 4

In other words: "Viktor Vida often evoked night in his poems. The black bird of Night settled on his shoulder; a second time night was stannic; then serene and friendly. The hearty cockcrow drove away night and measured time; the shriek of the bird from the bosom of night. Night, then, was not darkness and emptiness, odiousness and nothingness. It was also a battle and constituted a time in which man – meant for time and Eternity – measured his orbit in this world."<sup>19</sup>

This thought of Branko Kadić recalls to our thought one more of a number of critics and writers ignored with amazing efficiency at home.

Vida's journey was in Matković's eyes, "interesting in many ways, full of question marks", while for Pavletić Vida was "a poet with a failure of a life who, in a foreign land, a more or less accidental, more of a spiritual than a political émigré, in conflict with his environment and himself, far from his home country and sick with longing for his native ground, for the warm Adriatic, went to meet death personified in the steel of a roaring train."<sup>20</sup>

Vinko Nikolić reprinted Matković's inspiring *Forum* essay in *Croatian Review*. In his introductory note, Nikolić said: "Vida was on the edge of the political émigrés, and this self-placing of his was respected by all, even by the die-hards, and Vida thus lived a kind of doubly émigré life."

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19. Branko Kadić, *Viktor Vida – Sužanj vremena* (HR, 1957, 2)

20. Vlatko Pavletić, *Uvod u vrednovanje poratnih i preocjenjivanje nekih prethodnih pjesnika, Kritika*, Zagreb, 1969, 4

In a polemically tinged text, Boris Maruna (who became a fugitive from the Versailles creation in the year of Vida's death) provides the nuances to this clearly very delicate position of Vida's among the Croatian émigré community and recalls:

In the émigré community, with Meštrović and Kljaković, Vida was the third man, who accepted emigration from within, without any of the external pressure or real necessity that dictated the fates of most of our post-war refugees.

That there was a certain alienation of Vida's lyrics, and with it of memories about him, needs no stressing. And that it occurred at all can be blamed on the unhappy circumstances of émigré life and, to a very large extent, on the pointless, to a degree malicious and at all events difficult to understand and stupid neglect of Vida's works in the events in Croatian literature in the home country.

In my twenty-year-old, lyrically tender heart and Croatianly confused brain the death of Victor Vida came like a terrible, evil god. As an enormous, terrifying warning of some wandering, hopeless threshold.

The end of the war (was)... a pathological exultation by the victor in the slaughter of the defeated...

As well as the problem of trust, which Vida, except in a very narrow circle of friends, never enjoyed (leading to isolation and the no man's hundred metre space between the two doors of Croatia and the Croatian émigré

community), an important role in his misfortune was played by the temporally backward and mistaken understanding of the national problems of Croatia today by the rightist and ultra elements in the émigré community. These elements, vociferous in their sacred conviction, seldom forgave each other or other, opposed groups of what was for them a Croatian people that was entirely abstract.<sup>21</sup>

Someone else however was to say "Vida is always in my memories from those refugee days in Rome, when he managed to bring so much laughter and beauty into our milieu." (*Croatian Review*, 1964, no. 3-4)

But irrespective of the conditions and tensions of the time and the decade, at home and among the émigrés, in Vida's case there was certainly nothing that was unambiguous or simple. This is shown by the impudent attack of V. Raić, from left and right, on Vida, and Vida's consequent ironical and supremely sincere answer entitled *The disintegration of Dorian Vljaj* in a book that has also been systematically ignored:

the undersigned was thrown out of the Kotor high school in the seventh grade because he didn't want to enroll in Raić's *Yugosokols*. The undersigned's father, a minor taxation official, was transferred to Montenegro for this, and the undersigned is sorry. Not because of

21. Boris Maruna, *Dvostruki emigrant ili principe constante in exilio* (HR, 1967, 1-2)

the *Yugosokols* and Mr Raić but because of his old father. Before that Mr Raić was into sport, chucking bombs at Croatian Houses and Reading Rooms in Dalmatia, under the aegis of a gendarmerie with a somewhat dirty collar, and Mr Josif Subašić somewhat later, as a guest of the Émigré Commissariat went round, went about and went up Yugoslavia and the whole of the difference between these gentlemen on the one hand and me on the other is that they cannot be said to have empty pockets and I cannot be said to have an empty head.

The very fact that as a student I worked for *Obzor*, publishing columns, could lead to the conclusion that I was a Yugoslav, but the fact that I was also publishing in *Croatian Review*, *Kola*, and *The Contemporary (Savremenik)*, which did not publish Serboslavs or Raić, excluded this possibility and overturned the thesis of Mr Vlah, with a quick accent on the first "a". I did get, during the regime of Mr Stojadinović, which Mr Raić flirted with through *Obzor*, a scholarship but not from the regime, rather from the Italian Institute, when I was reading Italian at the university, where my essays on Italian literature were noticed and praised. Then, Mr Raić, abandoned by his memoir vitamins, says that in *Preporod* I was on the Italian payroll. The fact is quite the opposite, i.e., he was on the Italian fascist payroll, while I was on the payroll of the State First Real Gymnasium in Zagreb,

from which I was seconded, as teacher of Italian literature and language, to the Italian Seminar of the Croatian University.

...And now for the question of my move to Italy in mid-1942.

I did not report to the Italian consulate in Zagreb qua someone living in Kotor, which the Italians had occupied and annexed in 1941 without my knowledge or authority, in order to become an Italian citizen, and I didn't go to Italy with the ambition of voting in the elections there, but simply to retain my physical integrity, and our Talmi-culture (i.e. fake, worthless) representative, writing for cave-men, knows this very well. Thousands and thousands did the same thing, from one reason or another, and well-meaning and reasonable people do not make a fuss about it, but there are a large number of idiots living in the world, to make mortals' stay upon the earth a bit more difficult. If the number of them cannot be reduced, we can pray earnestly, each in his own temple, that the damage they do is as small as possible....<sup>22</sup>

This is a vigorous riposte and full of autobiographical facts. In this case Vida was offered backing by a few Croatian émigrés from New York, primarily by Bogdan Radica, who thought "Vida one of the most

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22. Viktor Vida, *Rasulo Doriana Vlaja*, see I. Bogdan - Viktor Vida, *Obrana hrvatske cjelokupnosti i javnih radnika*, B.A., 1956



constructive contributions to Croatian culture in the émigré community" (letter of B. Radica to Viktor Vida, September 25, 1947).

As well as Vida's intriguing double emigration, one should also mention his double loss: he lost his country, Croatia, which lost his native ground, Boka Kotorska.

And then there is the question of radical language changes: from Croatian to Italian, from Italian to Spanish. The continents divided, the longing for Europe multiplied.

Marijan Matković is probably right when he says: "As a man, émigré life crushed him, as a poet, it steeled him, enriched him with sufferings and rare moments of blessedness."<sup>23</sup>

An enviable poetic praise to the Croatian émigré community from what we might provisionally call the other side of the barricades.

Of course, for the development of Vida's undoubtedly representative poetry, what was most important was his obvious poetic gift, the power of creation, the endowment of power that, on the one hand, from 1942 on in Italy came into contact with Ungaretti, Cardarelli and others, definitely confirming "how much the modern form of expression dominates in contemporary Italian poetry after Carducci, Pascoli and D'Annunzio, in the form known throughout the world as hermeticism" and, on the other hand, in conditions of manifold rejection (no suitable audience, no media, no suitable criticism,

23. Marijan Matković, (*Viktor Vida*) see *Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti* vol. 139, 1982.

in oases of highly politicised impulses) inevitably aimed at a different, more thorough and more crucial unity of expression and attitudes, world-views and the mysteriousness of the ways of the Lord... Put more simply, the fires and heats got to the bottom of his soul in his every greater solitude. The demands of discipline, conciseness and the unclouded architecture of verse as against the desire for publication, understanding, belonging.

How was he to follow hermeticism, and yet admire St Francis, brother of all things and creatures? How unintelligibly to sing of "lovely Croatia"?

Let us give Montale his due ("If the problem of poetry consisted in having yourself understood, then no one would write in verse any more"), but how could one do this as an émigré, in constant danger, often going hungry, and then, in addition, in the *Voice of St Anthony*?

That is why Vida's Madonnas are brilliant in Mediterranean colours, his rooms are full of signs and scents, and closeness. Overgrown dreams fertilise strange, clear images. And while he sometimes seeks Christ along the frigid universe, He was revealed to him in the quiet of the family table....

Overcoming these exceptional barriers, creating his classic verse, Vida enthusiastically and unsparingly drew from a river whose tributaries had ceased to flow into it. In order to overcome such severe and unhappy circumstances, he completely wore himself out.

Thus towards the end of his journey in this world he was to cry:

For all of us, the old familiar words of home gradually turn into a presentiment, and if we do not return in time, to refresh them, to bathe in our linguistic sources, we shall be completely impoverished... (in a letter to M. O., July 8, 1958)...

I converse with God for I'm alone  
from the beginning to the end of time,  
alone, left all to myself.

And he knew that "like a child he revelled in small things; a cigarette, coffee, a glass of wine, a nice word, even if he doubted it."<sup>24</sup>

"He was a lover of music and the fine arts, an impassioned reader, a talented actor and an ingenious imitator, a cheerful entertainer and a tireless singer."<sup>25</sup>

That was correct, but what was there behind the mask?

"His first collection (*The universe of a person*, 1951) acted like refreshing dew after the thunder of patriotic odes and dithyrambs; Vida did not write hymns of war, neither did he complain; he did not need declamatory poses to feel how his pulse beat faster because of his personal and national persecution."<sup>26</sup> Vida's last collection of poems really put its author at the very top of Croatian expatriate poetry and literature as a whole. "The collection *Slave of Time*

24. Tonko Gazzari, *Estetska analiza poezije Viktora Vide*, (HR, 1981, 2)

25. Zvonimir Katalinić, *Sužanj i pobjednik vremena* (HR, 1977, 2)

26. Ante Kadić, *Hrvatsko emigrantsko pjesništvo* (HR, 1960, 4)

is a big event in Croatian literature, especially in the writing done in the émigré community."<sup>27</sup>

Just as the Cosmos was "the work of the Great Poet, who managed to reconcile the spirit of geometry with the spirit of fineness" (Vida), so Vida's poetic adventure was a lovely mirror of the same measure, shade and mystery.

On September 25, 1960, one rainy Sunday morning in that southern spring, by himself, with a terrible dream he had had between March 21 and March 22, and a picture of a Madonna from his hometown in his wallet, but no money at all ("My poverty is the wealth of my soul") set off for an encounter with a train. Stepping forward, he stopped. Forever. In Buenos Aires.

The prize for the best poem of an anthology of Croatian émigré poetry between 1945 and 1955, *Under a foreign sky*, edited by Vinko Nikolić, was shared by Viktor Vida for *A window on the sea* and Antun Bonifačić for *Symphony*.

Shocked by the news of his tragic death, some people dedicated poems to Vida: Alan Horić, Lelio Janin, Antun Nizeteo, Vinko Nikolić and even Novak Simić back at home (*Oko*, 2-16 December, 1976).

But, we ought to stress, Vida had already had a "Collected Poems" abroad, in 1962, thanks to the tireless work and promotional efforts of Vinko Nikolić. It had biographical and bibliographical notes, facsimiles, portraits, a list of critical accounts (Nikolić) and a foreword by Ivo Lendić.

27. Branko Kadić, *Viktor Vida - Sužanj vremena* (HR, 1957, 2)

However, let us go back to the reception of Vida's poetry in the home country.

Vida made it into the *Anthology of Croatian Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from Kranjčević to today* as early/late as 1966. The editors of this pioneering venture, Mihalić, Pupačić and Šoljan, placed Viktor Vida between Ivan Goran Kovačić and Mak Dizdarić with two poems – *Ex voto* and *Glass Spiral*.

This was an act of courage.

In 1969 in *Kritika* (Matica hrvatska) Vlatko Pavletić, no less deliberately and courageously, devoted a special part of *An introduction to an evaluation of post-war and a reevaluation of some earlier poets*<sup>28</sup> to Viktor Vida.

In 1970 in the *Golden Book of Croatian Poetry*, Pavletić found room for Vida and six of his poems: *Slave of time*, *Sarcophagus II*, *Arcade*, *Ex voto*, *Glass spiral* and *The deposed emperor* – between Ivan Goran Kovačić and Oto Šolc.

In the next year we finally saw *Poisoned puddles*<sup>29</sup> a book of selected poems by Victor Vida; the selection was made by that very distinguished but retiring writer Mirko Rogošić.

This first book of Vida's to be published at home, by the Culture Centre of the People's University of the City of Zagreb, was printed on the coast, in the proud city of Šibenik.

28. Vlatko Pavletić, *Uvod u vrednovanje poratnih i preocjenjivanje nekih prethodnih pjesnika*, *Kritika*, Zagreb, 1969, 4

29. Mirko Rogošić, *Poezija Viktora Vidića* (See: *Otrovane lokve*, Zagreb, 1971).

No account of the reception of Vida's fate and poems in the home country in an adverse time, even one as short as this, should neglect three pieces by Ante Stamać.

Just at the time of and just after the stifling of the "Croatian spring" in Karadordevo, Stamać wrote two "unacceptable" pieces about Viktor Vida for the weekly *Telegram*, one after the other even: *Pools of Criticism* on December 10, and *Vida's call to his native ground* on December 17, 1971: "Only the entirety of the questions of some poetry can give rise to a critical opinion. If we cannot state this entirety in Vida's case, we cannot see any point in our own work. What is enjoined is silence; and picking over the parts, secretly, of course."<sup>30</sup>

In Stamać's article *The penetration of everyday speech into Croatian poetry 1928 – 1952*, the sixth example and embellishment of the problem of the title was Viktor Vida and his poem *Angel of the dead*: "A new manner of writing is guessed at. This appeared as early as in Kaštelan and Parun, and would be in full flower after 1952, as a way to an abstract metaphor, another reality."

Vida's verse, then, was "the limiting case of everyday organised speech".<sup>31</sup>

The reader at home doubtless did not miss the talked-of article of Danilo Čović *Like air circling among*

30. Ante Stamać, *Lokve kritike*, *Telegram*, Zagreb, 10. 12. 1971

31. Ante Stamać, *Prodor svakodnevnog govora u hrvatsko pjesništvo 1928-1952*, Zagreb, Zbornik Zagrebačke slavističke škole, 1973, I,1.

*crystal glasses*<sup>32</sup> with ten previously unpublished poems.

Then complete silence again. With a few exceptions, giving Matković's inspired, well thought-out and daring essay *Orpheus from a foreign land* (*Forum*, 1981, 9) particular prominence. In fact, this was an overture to Vida's entry into the series *Five hundred years of Croatian literature* (*Delorko - Šolc - Vida: Selected works*, Zagreb, PSHK, 13, vol. 139).

In a final note about the works of Viktor Vida selected, editor Marijan Matković gave exceptional and (at that time) pioneering praise to the editor of the *Selected poems* of Viktor Vida - Vinko Nikolić, the bard of Croatian expatriate publishing.

On the basis of correspondence that had been kept (the gift of Štefica and Vinko Nikolić to the National and University Library in Zagreb), with, in particular, Vinko Nikolić, it was Mrs Nikolić who was to give a great deal of assistance to Matković in the preparation of the Vida project.

And so on, up to, for example Zdravko Zima<sup>33</sup> (*Vjesnik*, 1983), Dubravko Horvatić (in the book *Mirrors of reality*, Zagreb, 1986) and a book of selected poems by Vida, *Spiritual Croatia* (1992), selected with an afterword by Božidar Petrač.

Unfortunately, Vida never managed to receive the thanks and praise of Nobel prizewinner Quasimodo ("... I can tell you that your deep knowledge of Italian poetry, and of my works in particular, greatly

32. Danilo Čović, *Kao zrak kad kruži između čaša od kristala*, *Republika*, Zagreb, 1971

33. Zdravko Zima, *Orfej u podzemlju*, *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, Aug. 28, 1983

surprised me..." *SP*, 1962, p. 273). This was a letter written in Milan on September 30, 1960; alas, a few days earlier, Vida had already stepped out into his own *new reality*. Into a new life. As Jure Kaštelan was to say to Dobriša Cesarić once at Mirogoj: *Orpheus is not immortal*.

In the last poem he sent me from Rome, he said to me: Perhaps we'll meet in Rome, perhaps in America, or on some star, my good war-comrade. That luminous heavenly body is the little star Croatia, which with its distant flickering gleams lights his grave.

With these words, in *Orpheus on the catafalque* (*Croatian Review*, 1951, no. 3), Vida bade farewell to Ljubo Wiesner.

In these images, was not Vida perhaps seeing himself, far from Croatia, with its distant flickering gleams lighting his grave?

Another from that marvellous generation of Croatian writers born in that prewar year of 1913: from Ranko Marinković, who in his novels *Cyclops* and *Never More* gave a nuanced account of the fate of his friend Viktor Vida, to Ivan Goran Kovačić who clearly and with justification in the literary primer *Fruits of the heart and mind* edited by Mate Ujević stressed that Vida was "the only one in the younger generation to follow the Grič school, having though his own particular observations and stylistic characteristics. He made very good translations of some of the Italian poets"<sup>34</sup> and to Antun Nizeteo, also an

34. Ivan Goran Kovačić, *Vida Viktor*. See Mate Ujević (ed.) *Plodovi srca i uma*, Zagreb 1941

émigré, who Vida made friends with in "Kotor, Zagreb, Rome..."<sup>35</sup>

— Andelko Novaković

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