

Marjan STROJAN

## Poems

### ***An Important Visit***

*By Admiral Nelson and Lady Hamilton, on their return from Haydn's Mass  
No 11 in D minor at Eisenstadt in the year 1800.*

I remember a snowy evening, when a wonderful sledge-coach  
bearing a coat of arms stopped in front of the only illuminated  
building in town – a hostelry displaying on its signboard  
a painted monster called the Elephant, though in the general  
opinion it was thought to represent Leviathan – and when  
a monkey, all covered in snow with a turban and a lighted  
torch hopped down from the seat. It opened the red and  
gilded door of the carriage through which emerged a silken  
foot in singing shoes under the ermine lining of a dark coat.

Many recall how on the other side her Lord, in his plumed  
admiral's hat, with scarlet piping down the side of his  
tight trousers and wearing black lacquered boots stepped out  
into virgin snow, overtaking her just as one of her small feet  
was about to touch the step and caught her tiny gloved hand  
in the air as she waved to us, pressing it to his silver breast  
so that in the carriage-door appeared a blue fur hat with  
a pearl and a white peacock feather under which one could see  
a face with ruby lips, teeth of alabaster and a swan neck.

His Lordship, who by an almost indiscernible nod of his head  
and by lightly clicking his heels saluted the servants and other  
staff pouring out of the hotel (some of them still in their aprons),  
was still firmly holding her hand level with his epaulette as  
she with the other hand lifted her coat to brave the snow.  
But already the grooms were at hand to help with the horses  
and gear, hurriedly laying down crimson Persian rugs borrowed  
from the music salon, sweeping the doorstep and staircase.

Numerous windows were opening with maids beating dust  
out of bed-quilts and with whole clusters of curious guests  
hanging out of them, some of them toppling over into the street  
below. Since there was snow in abundance nothing much  
happened and no one got hurt. What did happen, however,  
was something else. A large sperm-whale (*Physeter catodon*),  
making a stop at Tyre on its way to the Sargasso Sea, spewed  
out onto the pebbled beach myself, my father and the prophet  
Jonah, with whom I had been since early autumn splitting  
logs in the vaults of the monster to make ready for winter.

Furnished with these, dipped in tar and happily lit up for the occasion, the hotel personnel were lining the floors for them and then, headed by his extraordinary flunkey, escorted them upstairs to the dance hall, where a temporary reception room was prepared for the pair. Later, I often went to admire the red snow-coach in the Town Museum where, changed after the earthquake into a kind of hollow mouldering pumpkin as brittle as parchment, it is preserved to this day, while as for the whale, it could be seen only when it was exhibited in the University Park one hundred and fifty eight years after the event. Their arrival was noted in gothic letters in various imperial newspapers, but in none that I could read.

*(Translated by Alasdair MacKinnon)*

### *The Pope's Letter to the Bees*

Until very recent times there existed in the West a memory, containing a word – or at least, the last chance of a word in the West. In the years when the Moors broke through the Pyrenees, there was on the French side, huddled in the shadow of the mountains, a little monastery, where there lived a man unwilling to bow to the new order. His actions have, sooner rather than later, cost him his life. Nobody knows how he came to lose it or what heroic deeds he performed in his remote solitude nor for how long.

All that has come down to us is a tale, according to which his executioners, who kept him locked up in a nearby village, cut off his head; yet he did not die, but like S<sup>t</sup> Dionysus before him, he made his way to the grave he had dug for himself beforehand in the mountains. The man therefore takes his place in a series of younger *Cephalophores*, whose last headless walk which they were able to perform after decapitation may in some instances be computed, and which in the above case was estimated to be some three miles long, giving Mme du Deffand an excuse to have said *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui conte* – a remark that, as you know, has become proverbial.

More interesting, however is the continuation of the story, for soon after the incident there gathered over the saint's grave (made famous for its healing powers and remission of sins) a swarm cloud of bees, stinging all who ventured too close to the site. They tried all conceivable means to drive them away, burning brimstone and rocks, boiling tar, lighting fires, leading processions and generally creating such racket and stink that the Caliph of Cordoba himself had to step in, urging the abbot to act against troublesome worshippers and the bees whom neither bad weather nor sticks would drive off.

The abbot, himself at his wits' end how to act, turned in panic to his bishop and since even he seemed unsure what course to take, the event didn't take long to come to the highest of ears. Rome, herself conscious of the Caliph's advantageous position in the affairs of the bees (which The Koran for their industrious character admits into Paradise to bring food to the blessed in the embrace of houris), considered long how best to undertake the delicate task. Finally the ambassadors were dispatched through autumnal mist to the abbot with the letter and an order to have it read thrice to the bees over the grave.

The letter contained some very powerful words, and if we take into account – not the moral that only tries to instil some respect into wavering authority – but the excellence of the story, the last such powerful words in the West. When it was read to them for the third time in the prescribed

fashion the bees withdrew and heavy downpours extinguished the fires in the woods where they took refuge. After that they disappeared; they simply decided to sever all ties with men and long after the letter, the grave and even the saint's name were all forgotten, some previously familiar flowers and plants were not to be found on those slopes.

According to tradition the sting of a bee was long thought of there as possessing healing powers, but only on the condition that the one who was stung was not in love. Of lovers it was said that they would swarm like bees over the grave, a phrase proverbial in the hills but now long forgotten. Since soon after the memory of it had died out, the bees returned, it is likely that in a manner of speaking it retained the words which drove them off. So, the letter read to them in utmost secrecy may now be remembered only by the bees.

*(Translated by Alasdair MacKinnon)*

*A Sudden Death Delayed*

I was trying to do three things at once. To read the time away, to smoke less, to ride somewhere far away. The blue lights were coming on in the first class carriage. The red Chinese lantern sank into the poplars. Awkwardly, into my pleasant compartment a poet was trying to get, whose book I have just put down. It was lying spread open on a pull-out table like a dead bird on a deserted beach, its lines shyly facing the board under the window, meaning the world. In it were bridges with canals silently rising and falling, there were tufts of highway grass and waterway traffic signs shooting up. ‘Stai caminar fin Trieste?’ barked a young man in army fatigues, proceeding onwards, or rather backwards (considering the direction of the journey).

He was looking older than his picture and as if out of touch with his comings and goings. He must have had a suitcase, which now, having found himself a place to sit, he was eager to return to and bring in, when he saw the book. ‘Stai aspettar fin Torino?’ barked another young man, who could not get on past the poet (nor back, considering the direction of the journey). ‘Entra! Entra!’ He inspected his own face on the covers, some twenty, thirty years younger, cut out and blown up from the photograph, showing him in a circle of the unknown standing in front of the Louvain University. He mumbled an apology, nibbling (characteristically) the corners of his moustache, slowly closing the sliding door to shut himself off from me, or rather, to shut me in from him. I did not recognise him immediately.

I felt I had seen him before, that having found a vacant seat in my compartment, he was only gone to come back with his luggage. ‘Lei è molto gentile, ma io non posso essere capita,’ said an elderly blonde to her younger companion, who, shoving herself through the door and obediently choosing a seat opposite hers, could not take her eyes from the book. ‘Non si tormenti, la prego, quando ha saputo che era sposata...?’ It was lying there, facing its windowpane negative. Where there had been crows, the young night was by now setting in, turned upon itself, flying away on the reflection of the covers, illustrating the glazed glass with the ornaments of an evening. Portogruaro, it was an international train, calling at all stations. I saw him again in the morning, leaving the train as if descending into someone’s embrace.

By then of course I had no doubt who he was. I too would not care to share a compartment with a stranger who knew so much about me, and carried an image of my younger self round the world with him. I watched him disappear

among the platform crowd into a neon mist at the exit.  
I wondered what he was doing now in Milan. 'Molto gentile',  
repeated a woman behind me whom I was trying to help  
from the train with her bags. Not really looking for him  
I stared down the far end of the platform, then returned  
to my own world. Skimming through life on the inside slip  
of the cover, I noticed he had died five years ago.  
I remembered a poem of his, describing his own death,  
and how young I was when I first read it. It described the  
pre-war oarsmen and the steamers at Vevey. For the first  
time, that night, I was only a step away from immortality.

*(Translated by Alasdair MacKinnon)*

*The Status Report*

We stood in front of a building  
no different from the one on  
the other side. Yet, entering it,  
we found our bodies gone;  
viewed from back home they  
would have looked like strings  
of Italian spaghetti, stretching  
over the Milky Way.

A few more unpleasant things:  
we were struck by the same  
thoughts at the same time, i.e.  
is our present position a physical  
fact or just the result of an operation  
within a pure thought experiment.

As we entered the building, the time  
pointers showed us in different  
directions, but we went up in an  
elevator. It stopped in front of an  
empty room with a dimmed mirror  
inscribed 'Museum of Causality'.  
It was obvious there had been  
no one there for a long time.

We stepped out onto a terrace,  
but it allowed us no view worth  
a mention. A surly caretaker  
was busy sweeping hastily  
lost memories under a rug,  
much to our amazement leaving  
ours untouched. He left us with  
our sick mothers, with our  
uncertain offspring, with our  
own unstable childhood.

When he turned his back  
on us his back read 'Carry  
on as if I'm not here'. There  
were other signs, though,  
like a smell of iodine on  
a deserted beach or echoes  
of interpolated sentences  
as after a storm, as well as  
a firm conviction we were  
in a big city. Yet it was  
anyone's guess where they'd  
come from, or if there was more  
to them than just a superficial

exchange of ideas. Rain.

We were aware of our  
free will but we had our backs  
pressed against the wall:  
try to explain to an apple, falling down  
a steep slope – whose free will  
is to turn round in the air  
and float back to its branch –  
the extent of the notion.

What finally left us in no doubt  
was the scene in the floor between  
with the Creator, beleaguered  
on all sides and brought before  
the tribunal (which, technically  
speaking, was an Inquisition),  
absently answering for  
himself 'Eppur si muove'.  
And ever since one is obliged  
to express oneself on almost  
anything in metaphoric terms,  
the sensation that we were

a rainbow from the two  
time bent banks of the river.

*(Translated by Alasdair MacKinnon)*

From *Steamers in the Rain*, 1999



*In our small room, imperceptibly*

Swedenborg reports that, in a way of speaking, the act of passage is a matter of detail.

When he is no more, man is not conscious of his moment. He walks the streets and the riverbanks, his friends come to pay him a visit, they drink tea, banks and churches go on with their business, cats keep themselves warm in the sun, the army is in a state of alert. Tea tastes like tea, friends discuss football, the radio is on, parents complain what all this is leading up to. We imagine that the time

of the passage is shrouded in mist, because our senses die off, etc. Then there is also the possibility of death making them sharper. But it is not so. Imperceptibly, in our small room things take up a different shape. We see there is more colour to the world than we were used to take notice of. Turning the high street the late night tram utters an indescribable sound; the language of humans and animals is transformed into unintelligible music; a muted conversation in the café is full of light.

Still we carry on as if nothing had happened. We keep up with our dates, with our musical recitals, with our Sunday outings to the lake; every so often we would go to the movies or to the theatre. But we don't pick up phones, since the contents of the calls are known to us in advance; we read books in languages we never learned to speak; we notice the florist whom we have last seen in our childhood giving us a nod of recognition. There would be unposted letters and complete strangers arriving

at our doorstep, we would speak to them under the passageways, on the roof tops and terraces, in the suburbs, where, had it been otherwise, we would never have cared to venture. All this may go on for weeks, months, even years. By then one is made aware of who the callers were and what he himself has become; he makes ready for his moving away, takes leave of his friends and relatives, who seem strangely un baffled by his decision. Then comes the day when he takes off in one of the Charon buses

and riding with a strange taste of copper in his mouth comes into a high valley of fens and gorges with big cities and towns, many of them devastated and charred as if consumed by fires. The sky is dark and deep with no stars and no sun. Soon, without realising how, he starts coming into an office, finds himself a job, recognising in his superiors the visitors of his unlikely conversations. His is a world of conspiring and hatred, fast decisions and summary injustice, where everybody gets promoted and nobody seems excessively

unhappy. A place of blooming opportunities and uninterrupted promotion. On one occasion he takes part in a secret meal where they are shown the world of the sun and the celestial bodies, which he rejects. Then, on another, they visit the park opposite the music school where he used to teach and where he now watches the undergraduates, entangled in the network of time, sitting on the grass, resonating like an old piano concerto he remembers from a long time ago. He declines any suggestion of return.

*Not in Noah's Flood*

They say, we write to remember and we read  
to forget. Ignorant of either, I wished  
I could write to get bigger, especially the letter Y.  
I was practising Y since I first saw it printed

on the covers of American picture books  
arriving in U.N.R.A. parcels, safely tucked away  
up in the attic. Y never failed to impress me,  
looking like both, girls' legs pressed together

and the forked sprigs we broke off from the alder  
tree to put our fishing rods onto when we were  
going after the dace; and in my dizzier moments,  
like the throats, slit open by broken bottlenecks,

of long coated dark men in gay hats, who,  
a few pages on, were turned into corpses, floating  
in booze or drowning in some other disastrous liquid,  
but not, for all I could see, in Noah's flood.

*(Translated by the author)*

From *The Day You Loved Me*, 2003

From *Paradise Lost Annotated*, ACT V, scene 4

London 1665. The Tower Archives. Lucius Carr, York's footman, and Bab May, King's privy purse, in conversation with William Prynne, MP.

Bab MAY: No good prying around these rooms, sergeant. One may as soon discover oneself in there.

Lucius CARR: Or loose, even sooner...

William PRYNNE: Indeed! Be assured, gentlemen, one or the other is happening to me by the minute.

CARR: William Prynne, the archivist?

PRYNNE: Found! What's left of him, anyway... At your service. With whom I have the pleasure... if it is fitting to ask?

MAY: But of course it is... fitting. Terribly unsuitable for the occasion, though. (*Has a good look at Prynne*) By God, you were badly served, Sir! You can still hear me, can't you? (*At the top of his voice*) Are you quite content here? Do you have everything you need?

PRYNNE (*whispering*): You tell me! Since I forfeited my ears my memory is somewhat impaired.

CARR: Your ears? How could you?

PRYNNE: I pledged them as collateral.

CARR: Oh? ...Against what?

PRYNNE: Against the rest of my person. They were so fond of them they wouldn't have let me walk away without entrusting them to their good care. This one first... and then the other... You didn't bring them back, did you? You may as well keep them, for good fortune, Sirs!

CARR: Today Fortune is on your side.

MAY (*hands him a purse*): Take this! Your pains are old, but the remedy is new.

PRYNNE: You aren't God's angels... perchance?

MAY: Not yet, but we keep faith.

CARR: Our mission here is of more consultative nature.

PRYNNE (*covers his ears*): This is going to hurt...

CARR: Not as much as ever.

MAY: More than not at all, though. Tell me, how did it happen... twice, I mean?

PRYNNE: Whims of vile Calamity, if I may say so. Firstly, I blame it on the Arts. As a conscientious subject of his majesty I felt an urge to express my opinion as to the faculties of one performing artist in a play that everyone else was praising to heavens.

MAY: In what fashion?

PRYNNE: In print.

MAY: With good reason, no doubt! And who was the artist?

PRYNNE: His majesty's consort, her Royal Highness Henrietta Maria.

MAY: This seems reasonable enough. Theatre criticism is a hazardous occupation. And then...

PRYNNE: Then I tried my pen at political criticism. It seemed safer at the time. That's when I got this. Here... (*Shows them his cheeks*) The executioner has made the letters upside down, you see. The second time round he burned them in correctly, but to no good effect. It should have read SL... short for seditious libeller. The celebrated case of Bastwick, Burton and Prynne, you may remember. We were made famous all over the kingdom, especially after a certain man, a papist from Lincolnshire who went by the name of Hauton, had his three cats exhibited throughout the county with their ears shorn off, claiming they were Bastwick, Burton and Prynne. To better inform his audiences as to who was who in his little entourage he tried to brand one of them in this manner, but the same foul thing happened to him... To the cat, that is.

MAY: Now that you mentioned it, I do seem to remember it... the cats. However, speaking on the subject...

PRYNNE: Of cats?

MAY: Calamities, Sir... Did you know Secretary Milton before or after that, say, unfortunate incident?

PRYNNE: Before and long after. Why do you ask, if I may? (*Bows ceremoniously at May*)

CARR: Spare us the comedy, Prynne. Tell us more!

PRYNNE: The chief difference between us was... is he still alive?... Alright, alright... We were both of one party, of one church, yet we seemed to differ widely on almost anything else. I was in support of the prevention act on theatres throughout the country, especially in London, which at the time was most hurt by this plague. I'm aware that from today's point of view such measures may seem at odds with our more civil days... Back then however – I acted solely on the grounds of good morals and in the interest of public health, which, taking into account all the circumstances and constraints of manner... was not an unreasonable thing to do.

MAY: Given the circumstances, by all means! And... err...?

PRYNNE: He had an interest in this field; to tell you the truth, it was not the first time we had an argument of sorts... I'd say we couldn't stand each other from the very beginning, that's what it was! There was something about him... I wrote a generous dissertation on the disreputable habit of wearing one's hair long, lasciviously long that is, if you pardon my saying so, Sir. I know your party interpreted it as an insult and shame, but I assure you, this too was argued in public from purely moral as well as practical considerations. Such unmanly mane is the root of all lust in our young and no less a hindrance at sports that his Majesty has ordered them to take up on village commons. On Sundays of all days! On Our Lord's Day!

CARR: You said... from the very beginning?

PRYNNE: Well, he was some seven or eight years my younger, and yet... Not only to me, even to my betters, he seemed... He took it upon himself to better us all, at everything, not for his own sake, mind you, just to prove himself in front of... Prove what, to whom? He had no need to, such as he was. Astounding! Then again, his tongue was pleasant enough, but his pen was like Satan's quill.

MAY: You're right there; I've heard this, too. He seemed to be always attracted to... He was writing a play, wasn't he? Some say, there was more to it than that... a connection, perhaps?

PRYNNE (*gives him a curious look, then laughs it away*): No! Our Magister Latinus? This time you had it all wrong, your Highnesses. From Beelzebub to Lucifer he knew all his devils by heart, but no more these than the others, his Greeks and Romans and Hebrews and all the pious lot, so that at the end everyone felt stupid and took offence.

CARR: Yeah, and wasn't this said of Lucifer, too? That he can quote Bible and the holy fathers to his gain. Or something to that effect...

PRYNNE: I can't vouch for the devil's preference in reading. As for the Secretary, he was said to have kept two wives in his house at one time, and that he was in league with the Quakers and with those who were digging the Surrey hills at Saint George's and were known to have kept land and women in common for everyone's pleasure. But I remember when one of their leaders stood up to demand a grant of religious tolerance for the pagans... He was so distraught he couldn't be stopped. No! And you can quote me on this in any headquarters you want, his convictions were more dear to his heart than their sins, the book dearer than the sword. True, he was against bishops, but so were I and many good men besides. And he opposed presbyters, too – neither one nor the other, if you can have it both ways.

CARR: We are putting him up for canonization now, are we?

PRYNNE: He was a sinner alright. But proud as he was, he was hard to confess to his erring; he'd rather always be in the right – a great sin, no doubt! Yet it fades away completely in the face of all this fashionable Sodom and Gomorrah. Look at them, Buckingham, Rupert, Monmoth... right down to their youngest, like... what's his name... Rochester! We were no angels ourselves, but this... this, I feel, is all going too far. And, sadly, his merry Majesty... I'd better say no more. These walls were not shorn of their ears; I know it for a fact!

MAY: Quite so! The devil is keeping himself as busy as always, I suppose, and to make matters worse... I hear that his prime hour is yet to come?

PRYNNE: You hear well. The Beast is on the loose, and Gog and Magog, and there will be weeping and wailing and grinding of teeth... or something to that effect. Don't take my word for it; see for yourself! The savages in the Colonies have had their sun rising on them from the west... (*Throws some papers at them*). The Moors have observed a comet coming from the stars of Leo... Already, they say, it is of such vile proportions that the nights there are bright as daylight... The Chinese... the Muscovites... (*Throws some more papers*). Read, gentlemen! Over Lapland the moon has given birth, and now there they have two. And worst of all, back here. It takes no celestial propagation to see London is rife with plague. If it carries on like that whole of the City will flee its walls or retire to Cripplegate Churchyard... There's no mystery to it, the Beast is at the door. The day and the hour of his coming were made known far in advance. Drunkards and whores are busy rising him maypoles by way of their sins, and prophets are levelling his ways.

CARR: I suggest we carry on for the few baby moons to come; then it will be each to himself.

MAY: That should keep him happy. But say, how did you dispose of your... revolutionaries? Did you have them... hanged?

PRYNNE: Levelled, finally... with the ground. Fairfax and Cromwell. Their leaders were mostly killed or jailed. John Lilburne met his end at the walls of his penitentiary just as he was turning himself in.

CARR (*to May*): He must mean he was shot.

PRYNNE: Pardoned would be more precise, and left to die. The rest had just given up or had themselves translated by their own free will.

MAY: Translated? Transported, you mean... Where to?

PRYNNE: To the Colonies, Sir. For good.

CARR: Poor savages.

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*Translated by the author, unpublished, 2005*