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Traveller (“Putnik”) by Petar Preradovic

TRANSLATED (2003) BY
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Petar Preradovic (1818–1872) was a nineteenth-century Romantic poet from the Balkan Krajina region on the current Croatian/Serbian border. His poems appeared at a crucial time in the struggle for the establishment of Croatian identity and language. The poem “Putnik” was and remains a cultural icon worthy of translation.

Born in Grabrovnica to a Croat father and a Serbian mother, Petar Preradovic became a professional soldier, rising to the rank of general in the occupying Austrian army. While stationed in Zadar, on the coast of Dalmatia, Preradovic began writing poetry for *Zora Dalmatinska* (Dalmatian Dawn) and was influenced by the Illyrian movement, which was connected to the “Pan-Slavism” movement. He was thus exposed to nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism, often associated with political activism and idealism. Interestingly, in the Balkans the most influential English poet was Byron. The impact of the French Revolution and Napoleon’s reforms was profound. Hundreds of years of occupation by the Austro-Hungarian Empire had resulted in severe colonialist cultural oppression to the extent that writing in Croatian had been banned.

“Putnik” is a lament of the lost traveler, and asks: “where do we belong?” The sense of place is and was profound for rural folk tied to the land. Many of his poems are thus “poems of the homeland” and “Putnik” is probably the best known Croatian poem of this genre. It is a poem very much alive in the hearts of Croatian (and Serbian) people today in much the same way that “Waltzing Matilda” is alive in the hearts of Australians with the story of the swagman. The poem is significant in that it still has the power to re-connect the huge Croatian diaspora to the homeland of their ancestors.

The narrative of the poem is not clear because it is about the transcendental/timeless “traveller” or “putnik” who wanders away to a foreign land.

The most obvious sub-text, influence and connection in reading “Putnik” is Homer’s *Odyssey*:

Dear child, whatever put this in your head?
Why do you want to go so far in the world –
And you our only darling? Lord Odysseus
Died in some strange place, far from his homeland

Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald
(London: Everyman’s Library, 1992)

This resonates with the opening stanza of “Putnik”. . .

Murrumbidgee, Melbourne, and Dulwich Hill, Sydney

Boze mili, kud sam zaso!
 Noc me stigla u tudinju,
 Neznam puta, ne znam staze,
 Svud go kamen noge gaze,
 Trudne noge po pustinju !

Jos nocista nijesam naso!
 Sjever brije s snjezdog brda,
 A tudincu siromaku
 Jos je veci mrak u mraku,
 Jos je tvrda zemlja tvrda!

Naokolo magla pada
 Zastrta je mjesecina ,
 Ne vidi se svijezdam traga;
 Majko mila, majko draga,
 Da ti vidis svoga sina!

Da ti vidis njega sada
 Okruzena bijedom svega,
 Ti bi gorko zaplakala,
 Ruka bi ti zadrhtala
 Od zalosti — grlec njega!

Zasto tebe nijesam sluso,
 Kad si meni govorila:
 “Ne idi, sinko, od matere,
 Koja mekan lezaj stere
 Tebi usred svoga krila

Ne idi , sinko, draga duso,
 Ne id’ od krova ocinoga
 Tuda zelmja ima svoje,
 Ne spoznaje jade tvoje,
 Tuda ljubav ljubi svoga!” —

Govoreci sobom tako,
 Ka kolibi jednoj klima
 Koju spazi iznenada
 Umoreni putnik sada,
 I zakutca na vratima.

Otvarajuc sve polako,
 Pitajuc se : tko ce biti?
 Glavu pruzi jedna stara.
 “Daj u ime Bozjeg draga
 Bako, meni prenociti!

Good Gracious God what have I done!
 Trapped by night in a foreign land,
 I don’t know what track to follow,
 On bare rocks my feet do wallow,
 Weary legs in a wilderness!

No shelter here have I yet found,
 The North wind blows on snowy peaks,
 While this poor wayfaring stranger
 Finds in darkness darkest danger,
 As this rough earth with hardness speaks

All around the fog has fallen
 And covered up now is the moon,
 Star tracks have disappeared and yes
 Mayko mila (mother dearest),
 If you could only see your son!

If only you could see this soul
 Surrounded just by poverty.
 You sure would shed a bitter tear,
 Indeed your hand would tremble here
 To see him in such misery.

Why did I not listen to you?
 When all of this you said to me:
 “My son please don’t leave your mother
 And a bed soft as a feather
 Forever beneath my wings

“Please don’t go, son - my dearest one,
 Don’t abandon your father’s roof.
 All distant lands they have their own
 And won’t recognize your sorrow
 A foreign heart just loves itself!”

Thus speaking softly to myself,
 I approach a lonely shack
 Which has suddenly appeared.
 From travelling now I am so tired,
 And so I knock upon the door.

The door is opened very slow,
 The question asked: “And who are you?”
 An older woman’s head looks out.
 “In the name of our Lord
 Old lady let me lodge tonight!

Ne znam, gdje sam –kud sam zaso,
Noc me stigla u tudinju,
Ne znam puta, ne znam staze,
Svud go kamen noge gaze,
Trudne noge po pustinju!

Drugi nocaj gdje bi naso!
Sjever brije s snjezdog brda,
A tudincu siromaku
Jos je veci mrak u mraku,
Jos je tvrda zemlja tvrda.

Naokolo magla pada,
Zastrta je mjesecina
Ne vidi se svijezdem traga,
Majko mila, majko draga,
Primi pod krov tudeg sina!"

*"Primlia bi tebe rada,
Ali vidis: tuj spavaju
Tri mi sinka I tri kcerce,
Koji cijelo majke srce
I svu kucu ispunjaju!"*

"Nij daleko vec do dana,
Vec pozdravlja pijevac vile;
Dok zagrije danak bozi,
Malo vatra bar nalozi,
Da otopim smrzle zile!"

*"Vatra mi je zapretana,
Drva nemam skoro nista,
Ovo malo, sto j'unutra,
Traba mojoj djeci sjutra,
Kad se skupe kod ognjista!"*

"Za tudinca nista nemas,
Tuda majko, kad te moli,
Tude dijete tvoje nije!" ---
Tim mu grozne suze dvije
Niza lice kapnu doli.

*"Gdje su ruke tvoje majke,
Sad da skupe suze sina?
Gdje koljene, da pocine,
Da ti tesko breme skine,
Gdje je tvoja domovina?"*

Where am I? Where have I come?
Trapped by night in this foreign land.
I don't know what track to follow,
On naked rocks I just wallow,
Weary legs in this wilderness!"

What other shelter can I find?
The North wind blows on snowy peaks
While this poor wayfaring stranger
Finds in darkness darkest danger
As this cold earth with hardness speaks."

All around the fog has fallen,
And well concealed now is the moon
Star tracks have disappeared and yes,
Mayko mila (mother dearest),
Take under your roof a foreign son!"

*She said: "I'd take you in with pleasure,
But look; see how they are sleeping –
Three sons three daughters, a full house,
Which fills this mothers heart of course
To the brim – it's overflowing."*

My answer to her: "Look the dawn,
Is near, see how the rooster crows;
Until God heats the day for us,
Start up a little fire, no fuss,
So I can thaw these frozen veins!"

*She thus replied: "The fire's gone out,
Firewood here I don't have any.
What little that there is inside
Is for my children who reside
So that tomorrow we can be"*

I cry out: "So for me nothing?
Foreign mother I do beg you,
I know that I am not your own!"
Suddenly the tears are flowing
Down my cheeks and falling ...

*She speaks: "Where are your mother's
palms,
Collecting up her sons tears?
Where are the knees on which to rest,
To unload burdens from your breast.
Where is your home – where is your
country?"*

Ko da su mu grci ljuti
Timi rijecmi srce stisli,
Sav ukocen putnik stoji,
Leden znoj mu celo znoji
I otimlje mozgu misli.

Ali oci mu uzdignuti
Okrenu se, oj onamo,
Gdje od drage domovine
Svako jutro sunce sine,
Tamo zeljom hiti, tamo!

Tebi opet dusa dise,
Tebi opet srce bije;
Domovino, majko srce,
K tebi opet sin se krece,
Od radosti suze lije

Primi opet svoje dijete,
Dovijeka ce tvoje biti,
Ljubit tebe svako doba,
U tvom polju daj mu groba,
Tvojim cvijecem grob mu kiti!

As if gripped by some evil cramps,
With these words my heart was stricken,
All rigid there from travelling,
Beads of sweat upon my forehead,
I was coldly stopped from thinking.

Then my eyes became uplifted,
I turned around and looked beyond,
Where the sun shines bright each
morning
Where a land of love is burning.
With my desire to run upon!

Oh! my soul again is breathing,
Yes this heart again is beating;
This land, our home, our happiness
Your son is now returning,
From pure joy these tears I shed.

Accept again your long lost child
I belong to you forever.
With fresh new love out in the field,
A filial strength in time will yield
Your flowers to adorn my grave.