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Poetry and Engagement: Monika Herceg in the Labyrinth of Herstory and Itstory

Abstract: Monika Herceg is an award-winning Croatian poet of the young generation. She has published three volumes of poetry: *Početne koordinate* (2018), *Lovostaj*. (2019) and *Vrijeme prije jezika* (2020). Herceg's poetry abounds in multi-layered, open metaphors, and makes numerous references to vital contemporary problems, primarily connected with systemic violence against women and nature. Particularly the second volume, which is less personal than the poet's debut, yet more programmatic and engaged, refers to the issues raised by feminist theory. Its compositional axis determines the theme of femininity and women's stories (*herstory*). Herceg's poetry's engagement not only concerns the choice of specific topics, but is also visible in the gesture of the lyrical subject taking over the perspective of the characters, including non-human actors (*itstory*). Another major thematic field of the poems is nature, which functions both as a capacious metaphor and in its actual shape. Above all, nature's and women's worlds are related by the experience of patriarchal oppression.

Keywords: Croatian poetry, engagement, feminism, Monika Herceg

Abstrakt: Monika Herceg – wielokrotnie nagradzana chorwacka poetka młodego pokolenia, wydała dotąd trzy tomy poezji: *Početne koordinate* (2018), *Lovostaj*. (2019) i *Vrijeme prije jezika* (2020). Poezja Herceg obfituje w wielopiętrowe, otwarte metafory; liczne są w niej także nawiązania do kluczowych problemów współczesności, przede wszystkim systemowej przemocy wobec kobiet i natury. Do problematyki bliskiej feminizmowi odwołuje się szczególnie drugi tom wierszy poetki, mniej osobisty od debiutu, bardziej programowy i zaangażowany, którego oś kompozycyjną wyznacza temat kobiecości i kobiecych historii (*herstory*). Zaangażowanie w poezji Herceg nie dotyczy wyłącznie kwestii wyboru określonych tematów, jest również widoczne w geście przyjęcia przez podmiot liryczny perspektywy bohaterów, w tym także aktorów nie-ludzkich (*itstory*). Kolejnym istotnym polem tematycznym wierszy jest przyroda, która funkcjonuje zarówno jako pojemna metafora, jak i w swoim realnym kształcie. Świat

natury i świat kobiet okazują się połączone przede wszystkim wspólnym doświadczeniem patriarchalnej opresji.

Słowa kluczowe: chorwacka poezja, zaangażowanie, feminizm, Monika Herceg

Monika Herceg is one of the most recognised and acclaimed Croatian poets of the younger generation. Her 2018 debut volume of poems titled *Početne koordinate* [Initial Coordinates] won almost every award and honour a poetry debut from the Balkans can receive (Barzut 2019, 180). Her two next volumes of poetry are *Lovostaj*. [Protective period.] and *Vrijeme prije jezika* [Time before Language]. In 2020–2022 the writer published five dramatic texts collected in the volume *Ubij se, tata* [Kill Yourself, Dad]. The author's poetic and dramatic works have been enthusiastically received by both critics and the public, and her works have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Herceg has also been awarded a number of literary prizes: for her debut volume she received, among others, the Goran and Kvirin prizes for young poets, as well as the Fran Galovic prize and the international prize for the debut "Bridges of Struga." Herceg's second volume of poetry was honoured with the Na vrh jezika award, while her third volume was awarded the Zvonko Milković prize. The poet is also the winner of the Biber and Lapis Histriae awards given to authors of prose works. In 2022, she was nominated for the Gdańsk European Poet of Freedom literary award (it will be granted in 2024). On a daily basis, she works as an editor at one of Croatia's largest publishing houses, Fraktura, is an editorial board member of the magazine "Poezija" and hosts regular meetings on literature.

Born in 1990, Herceg is present in the Croatian literary field in a variety of ways¹ – primarily as a respected and award-winning poet, playwright and editor. At the same time, critics emphasise a certain outsidership of her biography, whose echoes can be found in the themes taken up by the writer: growing up in a poor family living in the small village of Pecka near Petrinja, the experience of wartime exile related to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, as well as education in the sciences – Herceg graduated in physics. Another important aspect of the writer's résumé is her activist work, primarily for gender equality and against violence against women, as well as in defence of the rights of refugees and migrants. She was granted the "Strašne žene" [Scary Women] award in 2021 for promoting gender equality and popularising feminism.

Traces of this extra-literary involvement are not difficult to see in Herceg's literary output. Especially in the poet's second volume entitled *Lovostaj.*, the ideological dominant lies in referring to various concepts related to feminism and the problem of gender equality: the opening poem of the collection is titled "Prolog za ginofobe" [Prologue for Misogynists], while the main thematic axis of the vol-

¹ I take Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the literary field as a conceptual, relatively autonomous space in which institutions and individual actors (publishers, critics, editors, writers, among others) clash, often representing different interests especially in the economic context (Bourdieu 2001: 84–177).

ume is marked by stories of women – prominent female scientists, writers, figures known from mythology and religion, but also victims of violence or femicide. In all her three collections of poems, the poet's eco-poetic sensibility also clearly comes to the fore: an awareness of the relationships that connect us with other, not only human, beings, which is marked by a sense of responsibility and empathy (Beltrán, Fiedorczuk 2020, 16–17). This undoubted commitment to feminist and pro-environmental issues, however, does not make Herceg's poetry didactic, as it lacks unambiguous demands or explicitly expressed opinions. The poet appears close to the ideas expressed by the famous feminist theorist Hélène Cixous in relation to her own work: "[...] I transformed this engagement by subjecting it to a whole system of displacements and metaphors on the poetic plane; the content, however, always remained political, of course" (Cixous, Majewska 2004, 59).

Regardless of the ideological background of Herceg's poems, her poetic world remains an original and self-sufficient space. The poet accumulates metaphors and uses topoi, allegories and symbols gaining specific meanings at different levels of the work, be it a single phrase, a particular image, a single poem or the entire volume. For example, an element that acquires a variety of meanings and must be interpreted each time inside the poetic world of Herceg's latest collection of poems *Vrijeme prijete jezika* is the figure of the bird. Birds function here in a variety of contexts, primarily as a symbol of radical otherness that allows us to challenge the established order of the human world. Depending on the context, they can indicate an inability to show affection or, on the contrary, point to a microcosm created by two people close to each other ("podstanari u istoj ptici" – "roommates in one bird,"² as the title of one of the series puts it). Birds are the key metaphor of the collection, but at the same time are a metaphor that is impossible to explain explicitly; in many works they are a counterpoint that allows one to look at one's own limitations: personal, familial, social. Herceg constructs metaphors in an open-ended manner, allowing for multiple interpretations; consequently, viewing her poetry solely in terms of political engagement does not exhaust the potential of this literature. At the same time, reading it in the spirit of feminist criticism, ecofeminism or animal studies, which I propose in this analysis, seems perfectly legitimate, not only because of the poet's activism and statements about her own work, but especially the individual elements of the texts themselves.

The dominant theme of the author's debut volume is the problem of growing up in the countryside, as well as a childhood marked by wartime exile. The key concept that binds the works together is death, primarily animal death. The entire collection is divided into four parts: "zmijske smrti (podrijetlo) – ptičje smrti (bijeg) – mačje smrti (izbjeglištvo) – zečje smrti (povratak)"³. Autobiographical events of exile correspond here with the dying of particular groups of animals – these are "sitne smrti" [tiny deaths, trans. Marina Veverec], as the poet describes them in one of her poems. Although this approach might seem marked by an anthropocentric perspective, the poems lack any sign of species chauvinism, un-

² Unless otherwise noted, English translations of excerpts from the poet's works and other sources are based on the translations into Polish by the author of the paper.

³ "Snake deaths (origin) – bird deaths (escape) – cat deaths (exile) – hare deaths (return)."

derstood as prejudice and discrimination against animals, which usually translates into oppression and cruelty towards them (Ryder 2000, 242). On the contrary, dying turns out to be a democratic process, identical for all beings, human and nonhuman, including plants, in a sometimes paradoxical way: a felled beech tree bleeds more than a butchered pig; birds do not die from frost at all, but with the first warm wind they return to their “initial settings”; a neighbour’s brother’s death has thickened next to his mouth; consequently, he has to dilute it with rakija.

In the poems, animals are not reduced to symbols, especially those established in Western culture: for instance snakes, which in the Judeo-Christian tradition are considered a representation of evil and transgression, in the poems in the *Početne koordinate* volume sleep under the house, are guardians, good homestead spirits, and the greatest sin is to kill them in front of the house; they even watch over the uncle who was shot dead, “raščetvorivši tako smrt / koja je spavala u njemu”⁴ (Herceg 2018, 23). There is also no question of animals’ oedipalisation (Bakke 2007, 224–226); they have a high degree of autonomy, although they are often anthropomorphised, as are natural phenomena. The animalisation of humans is also common, alongside the identification of animal and human characters (“half-doe half-grandma,” trans. Marina Veverec); however, the adoption by humans of some animal behaviours is not seen as a reason for their criticism, but instead is intended as evidence of their original innocence, sometimes limited by culture: the great-grandmother sleeps in the leaves only when no one is looking (Herceg 2018, 15).

In the volume *Početne koordinate*, the human world and the natural world are inextricably linked, not only because of the rural necessity to coexist with nature – the poet consistently uses animal and plant metaphors rising to the rank of the most important symbols of her poetic world. The time of action of the poems is strictly defined by changing seasons: the continuum of nature’s processes creates a holistic picture of the described world. The first series of poems takes place during the various stages of autumn, from late summer to the first frosts, which is not a random choice: “analogija propadanja tijela / i jesenskog propadanja / potpuna je (...) treba kiseliti krastavce i paprike / da se očuva osjećaj punoga kruga”⁵ (Herceg 2018, 13). If death is the key phenomenon here – it is a death that brings us closer to nature, the animal world, and thus prompts us to return to the “initial coordinates,” in accordance with the title of the volume. Similarly analogous are other transformations that all of nature, animals and people undergo – biomorphosis, to use a term taken from biological science. In Herceg’s works, human and non-human beings function in symbiotic relationships, and in line with the demands of ecofeminism, the dichotomy of life and death is also negated – passing away becomes a natural consequence of existence (McGuire, McGuire 1998, 50).

Despite this, the native village described by Herceg is not an idealised space, an Arcadian and mythical *locus* where people enter the great circle of life and harmonious contact with the natural world. This is because the patriarchal and con-

⁴ “so quartering the death that slept in him” (trans. Marina Veverec).

⁵ “the analogy of body decay / and autumn decay / is total (...) pickling peppers and cucumbers / preserves the sense of a full circle” (trans. Marina Veverec).

servative conditions of the rural community stand in the way – a commonplace element of everyday existence in the countryside is the violence against women, children and animals, i.e., creatures that are inherently weaker and less privileged within the social framework of the dominant culture. The theme of the patriarchal society and women's subordinate position in it is fundamental to the poet's second collection of poems. Its title, *Lovostaj.*, signifies a protective period, a time when hunting is not allowed, which once again returns us to animal symbolism, this time in the spirit of primarily ecofeminism, which assumes a convergence of patriarchal oppression of women and violence over animals and all of nature (Warren 1990, 126–127).

The dominant subject of the reflections included in this collection of poems is the issue regarded as the most pressing problem of our modern times by feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, namely: gender difference (Irigaray 1993, 7). While Judith Butler sees it as a cultural and social construct that should be negated, in Irigaray's philosophy and Monica Herceg's poetry, the gender difference turns out to be indelible, and its awareness is indispensable to finding a female voice and for women's attempt at understanding themselves.⁶ "Speaking from an embodied, or gendered, position is the strategy that enabled Irigaray to make a thorough critique of the 'single-gender' Western metaphysical tradition and to develop a path towards a philosophy of gender difference" (Szopa 2018, 14). Although Irigaray has been accused of essentialism in her approach to gender, and therefore of reducing differences that do not grow out of their very otherness and thus ignoring racial or class contexts (Whitford 1991), her approach allows for reflection on how an authentic female experience is formed that is not merely reduced to a series of oppositions to masculinity. The philosopher looks into cultural texts for a gap left in them by female difference, and thus for traces of women's subjectivity – their hitherto suppressed real otherness.

A similar creative idea is evident in Monika Herceg's poems, especially those collected in the volume *Lovostaj.*, which, as the poet says, was born: „[iz] želje da artikulira to višeglasje ženskog iskustva, da kaže naše borbe, naše boli, smrti, da kaže naše postojanje.”⁷ The very act of finding one's voice and speaking one's own truth is a meaningful act, for a woman's silence upholds the *status quo*. Moira Gatens notes that in Luce Irigaray's philosophy, opposition to silence is an important category, for as soon as a woman begins to speak, she automatically questions the patriarchal foundations of our society, by challenging the axioms that exist in the culture (Gatens 1991). In *Lovostaj.* Herceg also addresses the theme of a woman's speaking out and draws upon the tradition of *écriture féminine* (Cixous 1993, 147–166), of female writing: of transforming female experiences into literature. In a series of poems about the poet and poetry, faith in the agency of literature constantly battles with an ironic distance from the naiveté of

⁶ For more on the gender difference in Luce Irigaray's philosophy see Olga Cielemeńska's detailed account (Cielemeńska 2012, 73–87).

⁷ "...out of the desire to articulate the polyphony of the female experience, to tell the story of our struggle, our pain, our death, to tell the story of our existence" (Herceg 2022).

the creator who believes that “riječi mogu napuniti dječju glad ili praznu sobu”⁸ (Herceg 2019, 97). In a self-reflexive commentary, Herceg invokes the very notion of women’s poetry – in its context, the following lines about the need to “razgraditi metaforu ozbiljno kao mesni obrok / i reći vegetarijanstvo je potreban odmor, / čišćenje”⁹ (Herceg 2019, 82) can be interpreted as an awareness that literature has so far too often been seen as a field reserved only for men, and that a radical change is needed to clean up the literary field: not only the actors, but also the concepts by which we think about culture. In doing so, let us note that feminist issues are combined here, at least at the level of metaphor, with themes related to animals and ecology (the need to move away from eating meat as a rest, a purification).

While Gatens and earlier Irigaray show the phallogocentrism of philosophy and socio-political theories generally considered neutral, Herceg invokes the figures of prominent female scientists to show how patriarchal culture belittles the role of women in science, silences their achievements, and makes it difficult for them to function at every turn. Telling the story of late-19th–early 20th-century mathematician Emma Noether, the lyrical subject asks: „Emmy, Emmy, je li te hranila matematika / tih sedam godina kad su muškarci / uzimali iz tvog mozga / nikad plativši uz izliku / da u tebi ima samo / brojčanih vrijednosti,”¹⁰ and then she adds: „sjećam se kako su ti zavirivali pod teorem / na satovima klasične mehanike / misleći da je ispod sigurno brkato muško”¹¹ (Herceg 2019, 25).

The poet evokes not only women who lived at a time when equality was a dream of the distant future (in addition to Emma Noether, Herceg writes about Ada Lovelace and Lise Meitner, among others), but also contemporary figures, such as astrophysicist Jocelyn Bell, born in 1943, who was the first person in history to observe pulsars. The Nobel Prize for this discovery was awarded to her academic advisor Antony Hewish and Martin Ryle, which is considered one of the most controversial decisions in the history of the award, as was the failure to award the Nobel to the physicist Lisa Meitner, also mentioned in Herceg’s poems (Judson 2003). The phenomenon of overlooking women’s contributions to science and attributing their discoveries to men is referred to as “the Matilda effect” after the 19th-century feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage, who described it in her work *Woman as Inventor* (1883).

Thus, in Herceg’s poetry we see a perspective that coincides with the assumptions of the project known as *herstory* – consisting in recovering women’s history that is part of the internal decolonisation of social groups marginalised by the so-called “Big History” (Nora 2001, 41). The poet often refers to the biographies of female scientists in a camouflaged manner, requiring the viewer to know

⁸ “words can fill a child’s hunger or an empty room.”

⁹ “decompose the metaphor seriously like a meat meal / and say vegetarianism is a needed rest / purification.”

¹⁰ “Emmy, did maths put bread on the table those seven years / when men took from your mind / Without paying, with the excuse / that there were only numerical values in you” (trans. Mirza Purić).

¹¹ “I remember when they peeked under your theorem /in the classical mechanics class /thinking there was a moustachioed man underneath” (trans. Mirza Purić).

about the life of the woman described. In a poem entitled *Maryam Mirzakhani tri beskonačnosti slaže na kruh uz sir i majonezu* [Maryam Mirzakhani makes a sandwich of three infinities, cheese and mayonnaise], whose heroine and addressee is the famous Iranian mathematician, Herceg writes: „u tvojim dojčkama gašenje dana / bubri slično olujnim oblacima, (...) / svjesna da ljeto podgrijava tumore, / da se matematika pokazuje upornima / i nema veze ako će glasne geometrije / uskoro preseliti u kosti”¹² (Herceg 2019, 24). The passage is difficult to decipher clearly without knowing that Mirzakhani was diagnosed with breast cancer, which then metastasised to her bones, leading to the scientist’s death at the age of just forty.

Another strategy used by the poet, which serves to emphasise the contemporaneity and at the same time universality of the *herstories* of the women described, is the personal dialogue of the lyrical subject with the experiences of the heroines. In a monologue addressed to Mirzakhani, she admits: „Ja još uvijek prije predavanja iz kvantne mehanike / uplašeno odstranim ženu iz sebe / pa pregovaram s Heisenbergom satima / o neodređenosti grudi / koje ostavljam na porti”¹³ (Herceg 2019, 24), thus emphasising that functioning in the masculine world of science requires adopting masculine rules of the game and almost literally “cutting” the woman that she is out of herself. The poem dedicated to Emma Noether directly compares the fate of the 19th-century scientist and the contemporary lyrical subject, and the resemblance manifests itself even in the physical sphere: “Pa mogu pretpostaviti, Emmy, / da smo žilavo žensko meso / Objema crte lica govore / svaki je dan bio usamljena srijeda, / simetrična kao polutke tvoje pameti”¹⁴ (Herceg 2019, 25). Through the use of, to quote Cixous again, “a system of displacements and metaphors on the poetic plane,” the real-life fates of outstanding women are not only recalled and retold, which in itself is a highly significant gesture, but become a universal image of the problems that people who identify as women also face today.

The poems included in the volume *Lovostaj*. are characterised by a high degree of narrativity, evident also in the titles, which are often full sentences referring to press or documentary discourse (e.g., *1940. Nada Sremec piše da žene po selima umiru od abortusa nekontrolirano kao u Africi*¹⁵). As I have indicated, the lyrical subject usually enters into a dialogue with the experiences of women whose stories are thus restored to the collective consciousness; also evoked, by means of sensory focalisation, are their bodily experiences (see Rembowska-Pluciennik 2006, 56). Thus, the lyrical subject identifies with the heroines; she begins, as it

¹² “In your breasts the day goes out / swells like storm clouds (...) / aware that summer warms the tumours, / and mathematics reveals itself only to the stubborn / and it does not matter that this noisy geometry / will soon metastasise to the bones.”

¹³ “Still before a lecture on quantum mechanics / terrified I cut woman out of myself / and then for hours discuss with Heisenberg / the indeterminacy of breasts / left at the reception desk.”

¹⁴ “Therefore I may suppose / that were both sinewy female flesh / Our features tell us / every day was a lonely Wednesday / as symmetrical as the hemispheres of our mind” (trans. Mirza Purić).

¹⁵ *1940. Nada Sremec writes that women are dying in villages from out-of-control abortions, like in Africa.*

were, to speak on their behalf and from their perspective. In some poems, the poet also allows the heroines to individually talk about their own experience in their own words: this is exemplified, among others, by the biblical Eve, who in her monologue points out the patriarchal foundations of religion and tradition, and by Lisbeth Salander, the heroine of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*, or by Ana Magaš, a Croatian woman who killed her husband in self-defence.

At the same time, as in Irigaray's philosophy, femininity is usually contrasted with masculinity in Herceg's poetry, or at least portrayed in its context or rather in its shadow. In the series about prominent female scientists, men are usually the collective hero, emblematic of the invisible violence of patriarchal society. Women, who in Western culture embody the archetypes of the virgin mother and the goddess of erotic love, namely Mary and Venus respectively, discuss the ideal of femininity, revealing the misogynistic nature of the two traditions considered fundamental to European tradition, that is, Christianity and the ancient heritage of the Greeks and Romans, but also of modern capitalism. Europe itself is evoked in one poem, in which the mythological figure kidnapped by Zeus in the form of a bull, and the European continent separated by barbed wire from refugees trying to enter it, form a single poetic image of violence and the oppression of the divine/male/dominant over woman, animal, child and migrant. This domination takes its most radical shape in poems that speak directly about violence against women, gender-induced killings, rape and sexual harassment.

Many reviewers have pointed out the interesting combination of discourses in Herceg's writing – the poet builds multiple metaphors drawing on the language of science, primarily physics, but also mathematics or chemistry. However, what is more interesting for this study is the consistent reference to animal metaphors – a combination of feminism and environmental awareness. Many of Herceg's poems are devoted to motherhood, which is a primal and absolute experience – its corporeality brings the woman closer to the natural world. For instance, the mother becomes a sparrow with full bones (Herceg 2019, 25), while to create a human inside her she must carefully blow out her skeleton, combining beech, wolf and nettle into one being (Herceg 2019, 19). The most direct reference, however, appears in the poem *Sklonište za žene* [Shelter for Women]: the women mentioned in the title are compared to “deaf and malnourished does” (Herceg 2019, 65). Elsewhere, a woman gives birth to a son who will not, in the likeness of other boys, abuse cats, but eventually the cats turn out to symbolise women as well: “sve žene u ulici gorjet će kao mačke”¹⁶ (Herceg 2019, 14).

Thus, what unites the natural world and the world of women is the pervasive violence to which women, animals and nature itself are victims. This concept brings Herceg's poems closer to ecofeminism, which sees the causes of the destructive oppression against nature in the patriarchal domination of men over women (Radford Ruether 1995, 36), which is a consequence of the “paradigm of dominant-subordinate dualism” existing in European culture, within which in the classical hierarchy of values the man is always situated above the woman, child

¹⁶ “all the women in the street will catch fire like cats.”

and animal, and categories associated with femininity and nature, such as passivity, carnality or emotionality, are considered less valuable than those traditionally ascribed to masculinity, namely, above all, reason and rationality (Warren 1990, 125–144). Such a division and perception of the world has far-reaching consequences: nature becomes subordinated to civilization, while patriarchy objectifies and controls all that is considered to belong to the female gender. Change becomes possible only by giving voice to hitherto silent actors. The feminist demand for the presentation of women's stories (*herstory*) combined with the optics of non-human subjects (so far, the term *itstory*, built on the model of *herstory*, has appeared relatively sporadically in animal studies¹⁷) calls for a radical rethinking of the categories that form the foundations of our culture. The overarching goal becomes the search for a poetic language which can be used to describe experiences hitherto too rarely represented in literature.

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¹⁷ However, some researchers point to the problematic nature of the pronoun "it," as it emphasises the passivity and lack of agency of nonhuman animals (Fudge 2014, 269).

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