

Boris A. Novak

DANTE IN *THE DOORS OF NO RETURN*

Dante Alighieri was a great inspiration for me when writing my epos "The Doors of No Return (Vrata nepovrata)", 44.000 verses in three books, on 2.300 pages published by the Slovene publishing house Goga (2014-17). It took me long years of a hard work to accomplish this epos. However, the basic rhyme was offered to me as a gift of the language: Dante – Ante, Ante being the name of my late father. This rhyme enabled me to construct Dante as my poetic father, and my biological father Ante as the first story teller.

I use Dante's terza rima as the basic stanza structure. With this firm formal backbone, the poet constantly changes rhythm and sound patterns in order to suggest the different characters of places and landscapes, historical periods and moments, living and deceased persons.

The first book of the epos, "Maps of Nostalgia (Zemljevidi domotožja)" starts in the West Australian Pinnacles Desert, among the rocks of an aboriginal temple of the dead, which I, a contemporary poet, opened as the doors of no return, as an entrance to the underground world – to the other side. In this way, I followed the ancient disposition of epic poetry from Gilgamesh and the Homeric epics to Dante – the descent into posthumous space, a dialog with the souls of the dead. "Maps of Nostalgia" is an atlas of memory, a gigantic geography of the places where I or my ancestors have lived, that they have touched, and that they have abandoned and lost. These places of nostalgia spread from the Balkans and Central Europe to France, Australia and both Americas. My ambition with this mad project was to save the souls that I loved from oblivion with the power of the poetic word, forwarding their stories to the next generation. In this effort Dante and Ante helped me as my guides. The demanding and ambitious yet clear composition of the book is based on the principle of geographic taxonomy.

The second book, "The Time of Fathers" starts at the railroad station in Trieste where I meet Dante and Ante again, and they invite me to the journey through the painful landscapes of the Slovene, Yugoslav, Central European and world history. Both Ante and Dante play crucial role in this book: Ante as a main hero, and Dante as a voice of poetry and consciousness in the times of evil ...

The third book, "Dwelling Places of Souls (Bivališča duš)" is the most unusual, original and personal among all three books, although obviously modelled after Dante's "Commedia". It is the most poetical of all the three books: even the narrative lines are here deeply influenced by the free grace of poetry. It irradiates a universal message about the human destiny, about the destiny of artists and art, about love and death.

The book has a firm composition structure necessary to hold a huge text of 20.000 verses on 1.100 pages. It is divided into 9 notebooks, each one of them containing 11 cantos, together therefore 99 cantos. The structural parallels with Dante's *Commedia* are obvious, and the "small difference" as well: a canto less than 100 cantos of Dante's masterpiece serves as my humble homage to the greater master.

Even more important might be the parallels on the narrative and spiritual level. The narrative frame of this book is the naval travelling to the North; the cargo of the ship turns out to be Memory, Souls, Stories ... The Captain of the ship who has Dante's nose guides me deep into the underdeck where all the Memory is stored, starting with mythological stories about the creation of the universe, gods and the human world. Ancient myths are constantly transformed into their later historical repetitions: the flight of Aeneas from the burning city of Troy is transformed into destinies of exiles over the centuries, trains to Auschwitz and boats of today's refugees sinking to the bottom of the Mediterranean sea. I re-interpret Dante's *Inferno* as – History, including recent tragedies like wars in the former Yugoslavia.

In the eleven floors above the deck I have built spaces of arts and other privileged means of maintaining the Memory. With the grace of the poetic imagination I give a chance to the souls of my beloved ones to live in a way that they would like to live if there was no History to limit and tragically mark them. Only one example: in the seventh floor there is a concert hall *La musica mai perduta (Music never lost)* where a philharmonic orchestra performs compositions created by my uncle Leo Novak, a composer tortured and executed by Gestapo in 1941 (his destiny is treated in the second book) whose notations were burnt in the bombing of Ljubljana in 1945.

The eleventh floor is the attick reserved for poetic souls. Here I entertain a dialog with the great epic and lyric poets of all times including Dante.

At the end of the journey to the North the ship becomes a prey of the ecological catastrophe causing war conflicts threatening with the apocalyptic end of our civilization.

The last verses of this book and of the entire epos reverse the meaning of the title *The Doors of No Return*: there are only Doors, the point of no return does not exist, everything turns and returns, as a carousel ...

The word *carousel* is the last word in all three books of Novak's epos, equally as *stars* are the last word in all three books of Dante's *Commedia*. So everything in history turns and returns ...

Boris A. Novak

THE DOORS OF NO RETURN

(epos)

Book Two: THE TIME OF FATHERS

Notebook One: *THE TIME OF POETS*

Canto One: *DANTE'S TIMES, ANTE'S TIMES*

1

Time is shorter and shorter, and this poem longer and longer, doubt
never payed. I spent endless hours of insomnia and delusions
on that train, taking me away from my story to silence, to knock-out ...

Between my eyes and lashes of the horizon just a tiny ribbon ...

The only thing I remember is a railroad station of Trieste:

how I run out of the wagon, that cargo of the sweat and stench,

carrying my heavy suitcase, full of books and leaves, and wandering
around the place which was so familiar to me, yet strangely lighted:
a white starry light was flowing from chandeliers and nightingales

were singing in unison: *Attenzione, passeggeri per Firenze!*

Il rapido diretto parte subito dal numero uno!

I caught it in the last moment, jumping among travelling Germans,

nervous children and Italian *mammas*. Sleepy, I changed the full moon,
my fellow-traveller from the corridor, for an empty compartment.

A railway guard opened the door and murmured: *Non c'è nessuno!* ...

And indeed – I was not there: I had no travelling ticket, my heart
was bumping on the railroad tracks and an old book – *Dante:*

Commedia – fell from my hands to the lap of time ...

... eternal now,

eternal express ...

translated by the author

Boris A. Novak

VRATA NEPOVRATA

(epos)

Druga knjiga: ČAS OČETOV

Prvi zvezek: ČAS PESNIKOV

Prvi spev: ČAS DANTEJEV, ČAS ANTEJEV

1

Čas je vse krajši, pesen pa vse daljši, neizbrisni dolg.
Neskončne ure med nespečnostjo in blodnjami me vlak
odnaša stran od zgodbe, ki me piše, v moreči molk ...

Med vekami in vekami obzorja le še droben trak ...
Spominjam se samo, kako sem na tržaškem kolodvoru
jadno zbêžal iz vagona, tôvora smradu in srag,

in s težkim kovčkom, polnim knjig in listja, begal po prostoru,
ki mi je bil na moč domač, a čudno razsvetljen: z lestencev
je lila bela zvezdna luč in budni slavci so v zboru

zaškripali: *Attenzione, passeggeri per Firenze!*

Il rapido diretto parte subito dal numero uno!

Komaj sem ga ujel in skočil gor med potujoče Nemce,

tečnobno deco in italijanske *mamme*. Polno luno,

sopotnico s hodnika, sem – zaspan – zamenjal za kupe.

Ko je odprl vrata, je sprevodnik rekel: *Non c'è nessuno!* ...

Saj me res ni bilo: nisem imel vozovnice, srce

mi je razbijalo na tračnicah in stara knjiga – *Dante:*

Komedija – je iz rok padla v nekdanji čas ...

... v večni zdaj,

večni ekspres ...