

Michal KOVÁŘ (Prague)

## A response to the article “Olaus Sirman runojen vertailevaa luentaa” [The comparative interpretation of Olaus Sirma’s poems] (SUSA 97, 2019)

*Toute interprétation authentique doit se prémunir contre l'arbitraire des idées baroques...* (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Le problème de la conscience historique*, 1963, p. 70)

In this paper, I would like to add some comments to the article by Kati Kallio, Taarna Valtonen, and Marko Jouste mentioned in the title, especially regarding their main questions (p. 109): “[W]ere these poems [Olaus Sirma’s Sami poems *Morse faurog* and *Kulnasatz nirásam* published in 1673] individual artistic creations or examples of an indigenous folklore genre of this later assimilated Saami group? Was Sirma documenting his own oral tradition, using and modifying it for literary purposes, or creating something new?” The positive matches made by Kallio, Valtonen, and Jouste within their honest and exhaustive quest for similarities in a culturally “neighboring area” swung the pendulum to one side. According to them, both of the poems could scarcely be considered an individual artistic creation. An argument for this opinion is also articulated in a negative way: “[In the poems] a rich variation of poetic tools is used, that in many ways differ from the literary ideals of that time, emphasizing regularity”.<sup>1</sup> I am afraid that this negative statement is incorrect and at least one of Sirma’s poems carries “typical” Baroque features, i.e. follows some of the literary conventions of that time.

There are a couple of arguments supporting the conjecture of Sirma’s strong authorial gesture. Before listing them and perhaps outlining what kind of gesture it might have been, let me come back to the negatively proposed objection concerning the differences between Sirma’s poems and Baroque literary ideals.

In my opinion, every viable text must differ from any literary ideal. The literary *ideals* are expressed only in theoretical treatises and are fruitfully impracticable, unlike the literary *conventions* leading to *norms*, which are immanent to literary texts and which may become an object of inductive thinking. Perhaps that is the reason why literary texts written by literary critics or researchers with the Romantic ambition to fulfill an external literary ideal do not often function, and why e.g. texts written according to the ideals of socialist realism are barely legible as *belles-lettres*. Within the Finnish literary historiography, the term “ideal”, reestablished within the

---

1. “Niissä käytetään rikkaasti varioivia poeettisia keinoja, jotka monelta osin poikkeavat aikakauden kirjallisista, säännöllisyyttä korostavista ihanteista” (p. 143). Another similar statement is found on page 112: “[T]ekstit eivät juurikaan vaikuta aikakauden kirjallisten ihanteiden mukaan muokatuilta. Runot näyttävät edustavan sellaisia perinteen muotoja, joita ei tuona aikakautena ole muuten tallennettu, ja niillä on moninaisia yhtymäkohtia myöhemmältä ajalta tunnettujen lähiperinteiden kanssa.”

aesthetics of German Romanticism, has been used rather to describe the period of Romanticism and the preceding period of Classicism.<sup>2</sup>

Classicism, compared to the Baroque, is not that manifold. Its strict manners grounded in a conservatively and selectively understood past, allow a small degree of variation and their tropaic devices are limited mainly to allegories, opposing the proper symbols (cf. Lyytikäinen 2001: 66). When it comes to Baroque literature, typical are different sets of norms, their turbulent dynamics and even frequent subversion pointing at them. The Baroque is rich in various genres and forms, including folklorizing efforts, a feminist reflection of masculinity (Elizabeth Jane Weston, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, etc.), social criticism (Comenius etc.), vernacular, Macaronic, Latin texts, and so on and so forth. The tropaic and figurative devices of the Baroque often go intentionally beyond the horizon of comprehensibility (Gongorism), and they follow the medieval hypertrophied symbolism working with “nothing-symbolizing” symbols. Thus, it seems to be extremely difficult to pin down Baroque literature, which consists of an immense amount of varied texts.

When interpreting and classifying a text from a historical period, we may search for a pretext, a text serving as a pattern, and identify related features and divergences. This is the case for many scientific approaches, e.g. in terms of the textual consequences of the poem *Homo quid?* by Aegidius a Sancto Joanne Baptista and its inventive Bohemian remake *Co Bůh, člověk?* by Fridrich Bridel (Svatoš 1994), or the Finnish remakes (*Etkös ole ihmis parca* by Johannes Cajanus Jr. and *Katoowaisuus* by Henrik Achrenius) of the Swedish poem *Sviiktige Världens oundvijklig Öd'* by Lars Lucidor. Owing to a specific concept of authorship in the Baroque and earlier times, we may reconstruct even a long chain of similar textual receptions. The other possible way is to search for parallels, e.g. the parallel contrastive description of the human essence in the poem *Christuxen piinast ja cuolemast* by Maskun Hemminki and in the already mentioned poems *Homo quid?* and *Co Bůh, člověk?*. It is scarcely plausible that the Bohemians Aegidius and Bridel knew Hemminki's older Finnish poem. The correspondence between the poems may at most refer to an identical particular source text, if not to a cultural generic archetext.

Not that glaring, but still noticeable, is the correspondence between Sirma's poems and the pastoral love song *Klagan öfver Iris afresa* by Johan Paulinus-Lillienstedt, written some years after Sirma's texts were published. There is an invocation in the beginning of the *Klagan* (“O himmel”) and *Morse fauog* (“Pastos paivva”). The lyrical subject addresses by the invocations celestial phenomena – the heavens and the sun – not a mate like in the bucolics by Theocritus, Virgil, etc. The sixth stanza of the *Klagan* even starts with an invocation of the sun (“Du klara sol”), and in both poems the sun's perspective is an interim and substitutive vision of the beloved. Perhaps also the obstacles in the landscape (“mörka bergens klyfter”) and the emphasized verticality (“allt längtar opp åt nordens höga pol”) connected to the ability of seeing could be considered associated. However, even if we accept the hypothesis that

---

2. Cf. the subtitle of an anthology of literature of Finland covering 19th-century texts: *Suomen kirjallisuuden antologia II. Ihanteiden aikakausi* [The age of ideals] (Otava, Helsinki 1961).

Lillienstedt was influenced by Sirma’s poems, it cannot serve as a proof of their artificial character. Being fascinated by folklore is not limited to Romanticism only – and we would not regard as evidence of the artificial character of Sirma’s poems the fact that Franzén and other Romantics wrote paraphrases on the poems – and the genre of the pastoral itself is by definition linked to folklore.

In the genre of the pastoral, a special device emerged in France in the 15th century, and then spread all over Europe also to other genres emphasizing musicality during the 17th century. This device is a repetition of the same word or slightly modified word at the end of or inside two or more verses or within one verse (i.e. in a textual representation it may occur vertically, horizontally, or even diagonally) and is called the echo-rhyme (Szepes & Szerdahelyi 1981: 91).<sup>3</sup> In the word carrying the rhyme, there might be a slight change in its beginning, e.g. an added or changed prefix. Along with a rhythmic change and in accordance with the prevailing theme of a particular poem, the echo might have a special effect on the perception of the poem, as it occurs in the persuasive way of the late 17th-century Finnish poem *Etkös ole ihmis parca* (“Coscas suret **suuttumata**, / **puuttumata** / ... Eij ole toiwo **toiwo-tuxis**, / **woiwotuxis** / ...”; incidentally, this poem was soon incorporated into Finnish hymnals),<sup>4</sup> or in the contemplative way of hymns, pastorals, and love poetry of that time.<sup>5</sup> Formally, but also in terms of the function, we are dealing with a similar device in *Morse fauog*. Actually there are some cases of epiphora, too, e.g. “Parne **miela**, piægga **miela** / noara **jorda**, kockes **jorda**” (“Puerorum voluntas, voluntas venti, juvenum cogitationes, longæ cogitationes”).<sup>6</sup> The Nordic literary historiography calls the phenomenon “rhyme anticipation”, since a dependent morpheme often creates the “echo” before the “echoed” word (cf. e.g. the 1st person singular conditional suffix *-dzim*: “**dzim** soop**dzim**”). The echo changes the rhythm and offers an opportunity to rest on a word with a certain semantic importance.

It is true that the rhythm and the meter in Sirma’s poems are rather uneven – positively less uneven than any of the Sami folk epic poems recorded by Jacob Fellman. Often we locate the bounds of a verse only by an anticipation, epiphora, and actual rhyme. However, in Baroque poetry the uneven rhythm was sometimes perceived as desirable. To sustain this statement, we may refer to the Hungarian Tassoan epic *Obsidio szigetiana* (1651) by Miklós Zrínyi. There are two versions of the poem. The

3. The echo may be an epiphora, a calembour, a homonymic rhyme, a concord between a dependent morpheme, and a whole (short) lexeme, etc.

4. The echoes in the poem by Johannes Cajanus Jr. sometimes function as an elaboration or echoing of the antecedent verse, sometimes are by the meaning of the word connected to the subsequent verse, or bridge two surrounding verses. Thus, the course of the rhyme and of the meaning in the short verse with an echo may differ – the rhyme always points back, the meaning carried by (ambiguous) syntagmata may be pointing in both directions.

5. As an example of an echo and a different means of repetition in Baroque poetry, cf. the verses from Trutz Nachtigal by Friedrich von Spee (1649: 13): “Ich **sprach**: bistu dan **IESVS nicht?** / **Und seufftzt** auß dem grunde. / Da **sprach** eß deutlich **IESVS nicht:** / **Und seufftzt** auch zur stunde.”

6. Nevertheless, these examples of epiphora creating an internal rhyme (connecting both sides divided by a diaeresis) are typical for folklore, too, cf. for example “Onpa **kokko**, maini **kokko**”, or “Suin **verisin**, päin **verisin**” from the Finnish incantations collected by Lönnrot.

earlier version has survived in manuscript only, but the later version was published. The earlier version is metrically regular, while the later version, revised by the author, is metrically uneven to some extent.

So far, any of the features mentioned here could be attributed to folklore as well. And it holds also partly in the case of the subject of my following comment.

It is well known that both the oral and written Sami tradition often have an intentional cryptic meaning intended for insiders, alongside a manifest meaning intended for “all” (cf. Gaski 1999; 2004). However, the “other” meaning of Sirma’s poem *Morse faurog* is intended for the European reader of the 17th century, i.e. the outsider. I shall try to explain this statement in the following part.

When reading *Morse faurog* as a pastoral love song, we may become confused by the inconsistency of the lyrical subject’s thoughts. He first expresses his strong will to see his beloved. Being far away from her, he conceptualizes obstacles on his intended way, and after that he confirms their strong mutual attachment: “Mi os matta lædæ sabbo Korrassabbo / Nu ly paddæ soonapaddæ, / ia salvvam route salwam, / Kæk dziabræi siste karrasistæ / Ia kæsæmyna, tæm aivvitæm / punie poaka Tæmæ jardækitæmæ” (“Quid firmitus validius ve esse potest, quam contorti nervicatenæve ferreæ, quæ durissime ligant? Sic amor contorquet caput nostrum, mutat cogitationes et sententias”). The next four verses, however, either testify to the fact that the subject is not fully devoted to his love after all, or perhaps express some general presumption concerning the emotional lability of young men. Nevertheless, also the general statement is thereafter applied to the subject, i.e. the lyrical subject is having doubts about the permanency of his own passion.

How should we understand such an inconsistency?<sup>7</sup> The inconsistency in the *Kalevala*, for example, originates in its genetics: the *Kalevala* is to a large part a compilation of diverse texts. The wise Väinämöinen from the etiological mythical songs is not identical to the foolish Väinämöinen from Lönnrot’s Aino story,<sup>8</sup> nor to the Väinämöinen – the Finnish Herod – from the final part. Also Sirma might have placed together, within a single text, songs of different genres: a love song and a satiric song or a lament. One may also propose that hybridization, or rather a loose combination of the units like whole verses and stable collocations, is typical for folklore. In my opinion, the inconsistency in *Morse faurog* is a signal intended for its reader.

There is a way to overcome the inconsistency in the poem: an anagogic reading. The poem offers a metaphorical depiction of a spiritual journey towards God along with the human psychosomatic and moral imperfection expressed by the lover’s hesitation, as being the main obstacle. To support the hypothesis, we may refer to the Christian tradition of anagogic interpretation of love songs in general, or to the emphasized verticality in the first half of the poem (the celestial phenomena, the climbing up, the wings, etc.).

7. For reasons why we should take inconsistencies seriously in our interpretation and what may they mean, cf. O’Hara 2007.

8. Here, we may also consider the paradigmatic influence of the story about the foolish old Aristotle and Phyllis.

The contextual arguments are the following: Sirma was a student of theology. He must have known the levels of biblical exegesis, of which the highest one is the anagoge. Secondly, the intention of Schefferus' *Lapponia*, for which Sirma arranged the two poems, was to correct the image of the Sami (the alleged sorcerers used by the Swedish army against its enemies) and Sameland – and Sweden in the first place – after the propaganda of the Thirty Years' War. The generic choice is clear: the theme of a love song is universal and a love song preferably engenders a certain sympathy. The representation of the conspicuous self-reflective habitus of the Sami young man in the poem *Morse faurog* beats the alleged primitivism of the indigenous peoples. The anagogic meaning of one of the poems would be just icing on the cake, and seeing the poem through the prism of an anagoge together with attribution of the poems to the Sami in general may have served the same intention, i.e. to demonstrate the moderation and “standard” piousness of the Sami, besides of course Sirma's own amusement brought about by such a witty mystification.

I comprehend the motivation of those preferring to count Sirma's poems among the Sami folklore. I could not argue against the statement that the poem *Kulnasatz niråsam* is most likely a folk song. However, the other poem, *Morse faurog*, could be regarded as Sirma's own composition, and this assumption would not reduce that work's autonomous Sami character. Sirma showed that the Sami verbal art is strong and vivid enough to function outside the indigenous environment as well, he created a cultural “meeting point” (Harald Gaski's term). After all, the Sami people have been a part of Western culture for many centuries, but always also something more, successfully resisting “the colonization of their minds”. The strong ardor and ecstatic quality perceivable in the poem *Morse faurog* and the images depicted in it may be understood in the context of general European Baroque symbolism as well as of Sami literature.

## Sources

- Gaski, Harald. 1999. The secretive text: Yoik lyrics as literature and tradition. *Nordlit* 5. 3–27.
- Gaski, Harald. 2004. When the thieves became masters in the land of the shamans. *Nordlit* 15. 35–45.
- Lytykäinen, Pirjo. 2001. Aavistuksen poetiikkaa: Symbolismi ja Otto Mannisen runous. In Hökkä, Tuula (ed.), *Romanttinen moderni: Kirjoituksia runouskäsityksistä* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 830), 62–81. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- O'Hara, James J. 2007. *Inconsistency in Roman epic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Svatoš, Martin. 1994. Jiljí od sv. Jana Křtitele, Fridrich Bridel a jejich tázání: Co člověk?. In Pokorná, Zuzana (ed.), *Česká literatura doby barokní*, 117–157. Praha: Památník národního písemnictví.
- Szepes, Erika & Szerdahelyi, István. 1981. *Verstan*. Budapest: Gondolat.
- von Spee, Friedrich. 1649. *Truzt Nachtigal*. Cöllen: Verlag Wilhelmi Friessems Buch-händlers.