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Prayer in Contemporary Slovak Poetry : Current Genre Tendencies

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Prayer in Contemporary Slovak Poetry (Current Genre Tendencies)

It is almost impossible to find a comprehensive collection of prayer poems or extensive prayer cycles within the contemporary period of Slovak poetry¹, although the major representatives of the previous period were well known as authors of this kind of poetry (eg. Ján Silván: *Písne nové na sedm žalmů kajících a iné žalmy* [New Songs for Seven Penitential Psalms and Other Psalms] /1571/; Juraj Tranovský: *Cithara sanctorum – písně duchovní staré i nové* [Cithara sanctorum – Spiritual Songs, Old and New] /1636/; Benedikt Szöllösi: *Cantus catholici* /1655/; Ján Hollý: *Katolícki spevník* [A Catholic Hymnal] /1842/; Pavol Orságh Hviezdoslav: *Žalmy a hymny* [Psalms and Hymns] /1885–1896/; Emil Boleslav Lukáč: *Hymny k sláve Hosudarovej* [Hymns to the Glory of Hosudar] /1926/; Pa'lo Oliva: *Oblaky* [Clouds] /the final part is called *Modlitby* [Prayers] /1939/; Milan Rúfus: *Modlitbičky* [Little Prayers] /1990/, *Žalmy o nevinnnej* [Psalms of an Innocent] /1997/). Still, the prayer genre continues to be topical, constantly searching for new forms of spiritual and fundamental testimony available to the contemporary human being. The topicality of the prayer genre is also proved by the fact that prayer texts can be found not only in the work of the poets of the spiritual tradition, but also in the works of the authors of nonconformist gesture, in the works of the poets of privacy, and in the works of experimental poets (the so called Text Generation). Unlike the religious prayer, the literary prayer allows for a greater degree of individualisation, while keeping the prayer matrix /pattern (a dialogic principle between man/community on the one side and God/transcendence on the other, expressed in the first person and second person singular or plural). It is this greater individualisation in particular that literary studies desire and appreciate.

When reviewing a poem with religious content or revealing a prayer scheme, literary criticism often reacts with reservations to its clarity and stereotypicality. For example, the poet and literary scholar Marian Milčák, reflecting on the so

¹ Some of the quotations (eg. Kucbelová's quotations of D. Albahari) have been back-translated from the Slovak language. The translated titles of the collections and poems which have not yet been officially translated and/or published in English are placed in square brackets, eg. [*Ra-il-ro-ads*].

called eschatological poetry, is critical of „the unquestioning acceptance of what is considered traditionally religious, never diverging, that, which is non-confrontational and almost anxious to accommodate”. Nevertheless, he perceives as inspiring the texts of the authors whose eschatological sentiment leads „into the contradictory world of tantalizing reflection, to the doubt and never ceasing tenacious questions, to inconsistency and contradiction which make everything relative, and to often extreme attitudes emerging in the joint but turbulent and volatile area of religion and art.”² Milčák views, for example, the poetry of Czesław Miłosz as a prototype of such a poetic position.

The increased presence of certain tendencies found in a poetic prayer can also be an indicator of sociological changes. For example, at the turn of the millennium, at the time of the fall of the socialist regime and shortly afterwards, several texts parodying the Lord's Prayer (Our Father) emerge in Slovak poetry. For example, the poetry of such authors as Viliam Klimáček (b. 1958), Jozef Urban (1964–1999), Ivan Kolenič (b. 1965) and Vlado Puchala (b. 1967) could generally be characterised as a gesture of revolt which spoke of the end of one paradigm – that of socialistic realism – but at the same time disavowed the conforming creation of the ancestors, while opening up to pluralist pro-Western thinking. The post-Beatnik impulses, such as the rejection of authority, scepticism, the de-tabooisation of erotic motifs or the brutalisation of language are also reflected in their prayer texts. These poems place God in the dock to be judged (Vlado Puchala: *Pút'ová nálada*, Coll. *Anjeli na špičke ihly* [Pilgrimage Mood, Coll. Angels on the Head of a Pin], 1993), God's high status and the principles attached to Him are degraded:

„bôžik, boháč, láskodaj / ochráň ma dnes / pred nenehou // ochráň ma dnes / pred sám sebou
// neuvod' ma / do bezženy // umáraj ma / v pokušení”³.

This same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„Little god, the rich one, love-giver / Protect me today / From non-tenderness // Protect me today / From myself // Lead me not / into being without a woman // Let me pine for / temptation”;

(Viliam Klimáček: *Prosebníčka buch do stola*, Coll. *Až po uši* [A Supplicatory Thump of the Table, Coll. Up to the Ears]).

² M. Milčák, *Od eschatonu k ortodoxii a heréze (O poézii Czesława Miłosza a Milana Rúfusa)*, [in:] *Mýtus a báseň (7 úvah o poézii)*, Modrý Peter, Levoča 2010, p. 68.

³ Viliam Klimáček: *Prosebníčka buch do stola*, Coll. *Až po uši*, 1988, p. 34.

Supplications associated with religious values disappear, and in the centre of the prayer are pleas that do not correspond with Christian ethics, though they express the desire of man for human warmth, understanding and peace

„bav nás, / zbav nás zábran, / zbraniam strieľať zabráň. // Radšej bav dav. / Poteš nás, niekto-
rej na poprsí. / (...) / A hlavne / Nech mlčia hlavne.“⁴.

This same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„Entertain us / Deliver us from inhibitions / guns to shoot forbid // Rather give crowds some
fun / Give us comfort on a female's bust. / [...] / And mainly / Let weapons be silent.“

(Pavol Janík: *Bud' vôňa tvoja*, Coll. *Bud' vôňa tvoja*
[Thy Scent be Done, Coll. Thy Scent be Done]).

Such dimensions soften the derisive tone of the poems, they show individualized and collective values which have an anthropological, though non-religious, depth.

The poets of the so-called Barbarian generation (Adrijan Turan /b. 1962/, Róbert Bielik /b. 1963/, Ján Litvák /b. 1965/), which established itself in the 1990s, form a distinctive group without contemporary successors. Their prayers make an eclectic use of elements and practices of various religious systems (Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnosticism, New Age, Western and Eastern Mysticism). Prayer texts are modelled as simple mantras. They work on the principle of lexically-based repeated motifs, using amplified rhythm and often employing a rhyme scheme.

In the following four selected texts I will pinpoint and analyse certain current trends within poetic prayer. The works of the selected authors represent various features of contemporary Slovak poetry of the highest quality.

1. Peter Repka

Peter Repka: Predspev (Že-lez-ni-ce, 1992)

Pohl'ady, vybielené chrámy, v ľadovcoch
vysekávať stopy, z kroka na krok, získavať rozhľad.
Na nástupištiach, bez batožiny
zrkadlíme sa v sklách nezastavujúcich expresov.
Pohl'ady zhora, do polí, do mihotu telegrafných stĺpov.
Mosty, magnety, preskakujú tiesňavy.

⁴ Pavol Janík: *Bud' vôňa tvoja*, Coll. *Bud' vôňa tvoja* [Thy Scent be Done, Coll. Thy Scent be Done], 2002, p. 10–11).

Uvoľnené sústredenie pozorovateľov signálov.
Zázračná voda údolia teraz a všade.
Prosím o cestovné lístky, výherné, hlad bez hanby,
o priame rýchlosti, o more, v nás neviditeľné,
keď vstupuje do izby, o belasé koníky vôd,
čo spoznali soľ
(sklonení a štedrí),
o zrkadlový obraz a ticho plachetníc na hladine.
Za malátnych jarou, náhlým tepom, mladým vínom,
za všetkých v cestách vegetácie,
za zabudnutých v skladoch liekov.
I za bojzlivých výhercov, zmeškané vlaky,
za cestu do stanice Purgatorium, za kartu srdcovú
Sľubujem,
Železnice, nebudem falošne, z ostrova na ostrov –

Ó sivý ružový svet.

(...)

Prosím o správne vedy,
o vysvetlenie spletnosti železničnej siete Antarktídy,
o križovatky, cesty hlavné a vedľajšie.
Za slušných sprievodcov v možných nebezpečenstvách
i za sprievodcov vyhodených z idúceho vlaku,
za cestu svetla listami, za studne,
za nedele, ktoré budú veselé
i za maličkosti prerastajúce v hymnu.

Prosím za zručných výhybkárov, ktorých nepremôže
ospalosť, za kráľov v sestrách a kráľovne v nás.
Prosím o vlak bez meškania
a ďakujem, veľmi ďakujem, za žiarivosť srdc.

(október 1989)⁵.

This same text in unpublished translation:

Peter Repka: *Prelude* [Ra-il-ro-ads], 1992

Glimpses, whitewashed churches, in glaciers
Cut out the tracks, step by step, obtaining insight.
On platforms, no luggage
Mirrored in windows of passing fast trains.
Glimpses from above, into the fields, into the flickering of telegraph poles.
Bridges, magnets, skipping gorges.
Relaxed concentration of signal-watchers.
Magic valley water now and everywhere.
I ask for tickets, for gambling, for starvation without shame,

⁵ P. Repka, *Že-lez-ni-ce*, Slovenský spisovateľ, Bratislava 1992, pp. 5–8.

For straight speed, the sea, for the invisible in us,
 When entering the room, for the blue horses of water
 Which know what salt is.
 (Bowing and generous),
 For the mirror image and the silence of the sailboat on the surface.
 For listless of spring, sudden heartbeat, young wine,
 For all those on roads in vegetation,
 For those forgotten in storerooms for drugs,
 Even for timid winners, missed trains,
 For the way to the Purgatory station, for card of hearts
 I swear
 Railways, I shall not misleadingly, from island to island –
 Oh gray pink world.
 (...)

I ask for exact science,
 To explain the intricacies of the railway network of the Antarctica,
 Of road junctions, major and minor roads.
 For decent conductors in potential dangers,
 Even for the conductors thrown off from a moving train,
 For the way of leafy light, for the wells,
 For Sundays, which will be merry,
 Even for little things growing into an anthem.

I ask for skilful switchmen, whom drowsiness never
 Overcomes, for kings in sisters and queens in us.
 I ask for train with no delay
 And thank you, thank you very much for brightness of hearts.

(October 1989)⁶.

A number of characteristics referring to ‘the lonely runner poetic principles’ can be identified in this poem by Peter Repka (1944). It is particularly the principle of motion, reflected in the motifs of an expeditionary voyage and railways, and ethical accents which the 1960s Lonely Runners emphasised as more important than the aesthetic priorities of Tmava poets. After the fall of the regime it was the poetics of „forbidden” Lonely Runners that provided a strong impetus for the young Slovak poets who came to be known as modern seekers of spiritual expression. The notion of movement is reflected in their perception of creation as an open process which is completed by the reader's perception (the so-called Processuality of Poetry). The ethical as a belief in the moral transformation of a man (the belief in angels within us)⁷ is indeed close to spiritual themes and motifs.

That collection of poems *Že-lez-ni-ce* [Ra-il-ro-ads] (I – IV) opens Repka's monumental cycle, inspired by the footprint of Biblical Calvary (15x15

⁶ The text translated into English by Jela Kehoe.

⁷ Compare the Lonely Runner manifest titled The Angels' Return in: „Mladá tvorba”, 1964, No. 1.

poems). The cycle continues within the collections *Priateľka púšť* [My Friend the Desert] (Že-lez-ni-ce V–VII, 1996), *Karneval v kláštore* [Carnival in a Monastery] (Že-lez-ni-ce VIII–XI, 2002) and *Relikvie anjelov* [Relics of the Angels] (Že-lez-ni-ce XII–XV, 2006). Every cycle contains sometimes explicit and sometimes hidden motifs of different Stations of the Cross (e.g. IV: Jesus meeting his mother, V: Simon of Cyrene helps carry the cross, XII: Death on the cross, XV: Resurrection), while the layered composition of the poems also allows for developing civil news coverage-like motifs. Not only does travelling in space become important, but also travelling in memories, in visions and in dreams (e.g. sudden meetings with his mother). Series of observation, visual perception, meditation, prayer fragments, meeting people, and also cultural works and historical facts, are shaped in the manner of Dante's Divine Comedy, creating a dynamic image of human falls and rises. The chronology and hierarchy of the Renaissance epic are here replaced by the principle of equivocalness („Oh gray pink world”), associated with polymorphism and the return motifs in ever new constellations. That which is understood as high is constantly appearing in motifs and choice of lexis and through the expressive category of grandeur, the sacred, ethos and clause syntax as well as the syntax of larger passages. Nevertheless, it is also being systematically played down and ironised (though not mocked) and this also applies to religious motifs, for example in the titles of the collections: *Sliepka v katedrále* [Hen in the Cathedral], *Karneval v kláštore* [Carnival in the Monastery]. The journey from the shadows to the light, to the meaning, to the completion of the motion, is carried out continuously again and again, since –

„Boh nás, spotených a s nečistými srdcami, / čaká na moste. // Most je neistý.“⁸.

This same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„God is waiting for us, sweaty and unclean of hearts, / on the bridge. // The bridge is uncertain.”⁹.

The poem *Predspev* [Prelude], opens Repka's opus, his modern lyrical epic. A bidding prayer, with a thank-you fragment that forms the central part, does not have, in terms of the completeness of the genre matrix, an explicitly expressed addressee. The lyrical subject accumulates prayers which are marked by the desire for values („obtaining insight”) and fears for a fragile human race („in glaciers / cut out the tracks”)¹⁰. The accumulation and mutual permeation of structurally original images and motifs with open messages, as captured in this poem, are an important

⁸ P. Repka, *Relikvie anjelov*, Modrý Peter, Levoča 2006, p. 16.

⁹ The text translated into English by Jela Kehoe.

¹⁰ Ján Gavura mentions Repka's oscillation on the scale me – God, me – me, me – the others. Vide: J. Gavura, *Lyrické iluminácie*, Slniečkovo, Prešov 2010, p. 12.

method of constructing Repka's texts. The enumeration of these images models the ritualized rhythm of a prayer, and at the same time underlines the deliberate blurring of meaning¹¹. The meaning of the text is constantly kept away from the reader, forcing the reader to repeatedly employ contextual reading, until the meaning gradually emerges (the principle of dynamic stereotype), although the text deliberately rejects a single interpretation. The contextual character of the texts allows for a clearer reception of the poems, as well as finalizing the genre matrix. It also allows for naming the recipient of the *Predspev*; since in the entire text of *Ra-il-ro-ads* we repeatedly find scattered fragments of prayers and Christian motifs.

2. Erik Jakub Groch

Erik Jakub Groch: *Ventil* (Coll.: *Druhá naivita*, 2005)

Nech je požehnané tvoje mosadzné bruško,
liehový varič, tvoj okrúhly, naplnený bachorček;
tým, o čom nič neviem, len to stúpa ako špiritusová
vôňa cez malú dierku zásobníka; nech je požehnaná
iskrička, ktorá ťa vznieti, ktorá zovrie vodu
v plechovej nádobe, ktorá rozvinie lístky čajovníka,
vylúhuje v nich teín, bergamotový olej; nech je
požehnaný malý, otočný ventil, ktorým možno zastaviť
prívod liehu a – dá sa povedať – vrátiť iskričku naspäť;
kde všetci stúpajú po lístí asi 10 cm nad lístím.¹²

This same text in unpublished translation:

Erik Jakub Groch: *The Ventil* [Coll.: *The Second Naivety*], 2005

Blessed be thy brass belly,
Spirit burner, your round, full little paunch;
By what I know nothing, it just rises as liquor
Scent through a tiny hole of the container, Blessed be
The spark which ignites you, which brings water to boil
In a tin pot, where the tea leaves unfold,
Brewing the tannin out, Bergamot oil;
Blessed be the small ventil which can stop
The alcohol flow and – so to speak – put the little spark back;
Where all rise on leaves about 10 cm above leaves¹³.

¹¹ Vide: J. Gavura, *Rozptyl mímézis u Osamelých bežcov*, [in:] *Vô svojich stupajach: básnické dielo Ivana Štrpku a hodnotové kritériá*, Literárna nadácia Studňa, Bratislava 2004, p. 36.

¹² E. J. Groch, *Druhá naivita, Zbrané a nové básne a príbehy*, Edition Ryba, Tmava 2005, p. 74.

¹³ The text translated into English by Jela Kehoe.

Erik Jakob Groch: *Prosba* (Coll: *Druhá naivita*, 2005)

Strom, veľký mohutný strom, ktorý sa kníšeš,
a strom malý a vetchý, ktorý sa kníšeš,
a všetky stromy všetkých koreňov a korún,
čo sa mohutne alebo celkom zľahka kníšete,
pre zmilovanie a na kolenách vás prosím,
ešte chvíľu, chvíľočku sa kníšte¹⁴.

This same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

Erik Jakob Groch: *The Plea*¹⁵ [Coll: *The Second Naivety*], 2005

A tree, a great huge tree swaying,
a small tree, infirm, swaying,
and all the trees of all the roots and crowns,
swaying mightily or somewhat softly,
for heavens' sake and on my knees I beg you,
keep swaying for a moment more.¹⁶

Erik Groch is currently considered to be the key representative of the poetry of a spiritual line in Slovakia. Both presented poems, which come from the author's own collection *Druhá naivita* (*Zobrané a nové básne a príbehy*, 2005) [The Second Naivety (Collected and New Poems and Stories)], possess echoes of Novomesky's well-loved „things and gadgets of the world". Earlier on, by creating tight internal bonds between natural events and the heavenly world, Janko Silan (1914–1984) created a peculiar type of (Christian) poetic pantheism, having a particular regard for things of objective reality¹⁷. Groch's poetry makes this dimension apparent in a more modern poetic garb. At the same time it should be emphasized that Groch's „naivety purified by education" found strong resonance in the poetry of other contemporary Slovak authors with spiritual leanings (Rudolf Jurulek, Peter Milčák, Joe Palaščák).

Neither poem formally implements the matrix of the prayer genre. The lyrical subject does not carry out a dialogue with God or transcendence, but with the objective natural world. It is not the form that allows us to perceive the texts as prayers, but the complex semantic relationships that can be reconstructed from the wider context of Groch's work. It should be emphasised that behind Groch's appar-

¹⁴ E. J. Groch, *Druhá naivita, Zobrané a nové básne a príbehy*, Edition Ryba, Trnava 2005, p. 78.

¹⁵ In the second edition of the poem *Prosba* (Coll. *Druhá naivita*) Groch used the parallelism of rhyme and syntax. However, the first version of this poem (*Prosba cestou po zelenom znamení*, Coll. *Bratsestra*, 1992) rigidly realised enjambment verse, which is typical for Groch's poetry.

¹⁶ The text translated into English by Jela Kehoe.

¹⁷ Vide: J. Zambor, *Báseň a ticho*, LIC, Bratislava 1997, p. 67.

ent „Franciscan simplicity”, bordering on the genre of elemental odes, is hidden his thorough understanding of Christian theology and modern philosophical and linguistic notions.

A careful reading of both poems will uncover that the focus is not the objective or natural reality, but the processes that form the reality – functionality, leading to a desired outcome (delicious tea), and movement, sustaining the world (and trees) in existence. Ultimately, it is a celebration and a plea for maintaining some sort of teleological force, which can be traced, even without a more thorough excursion into theological and philosophical literature, in the work of Henri Bergson as the living activity, the energy – *élan vital* –, or in the work of Thomas Aquinas as a confirmation of some of the evidence for the existence of God (the evidence of movement, the evidence of purpose or the finality of the being).

The presence of this hidden, though pervasive, teleology is confirmed by several excerpts from Groch’s works. For example, the collection *To [It]* (2000) begins with a quote from the Spanish baroque mystic, St. John of the Cross:

„Od toho, čo vidíme / a nejestvuje, / musíme ísť k tomu, / čo nevidíme a jestvuje.”¹⁸.

This same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„From what we see / and does not exist, / we must go towards that, / that we do not see, though it exists.”

(E.J. Groch, *To [It]*, 2000, p. 7)

He alludes to the poetry of the French poet Francis Jammes or the paintings of the Flemish master Pieter Brueghel, where the spiritual is mediated through the expressively natural (in the sense of base instincts and lack of stylising), and God is ultimately present in the herd’s bleating:

„A preda, nebolo to ani ticho, kde ma (Boh, pozn. J. J.) / miluješ, nikde som nepočul tvoj hlas / tak zreteľne, ako v tomto hladovom údolí, / zovretom svahmi; bekot jahniat, namáhavé / chrčanie dobytky, všetko to bezprizorné / bytie, stúpajúce do hôr.”¹⁹.

The same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„And yet, not even in silence, where You (God, note J.J.) / love me, I’ve never heard your voice / so clearly as in this hunger valley / clamped by slopes; lambs bleating, strenuous / wheezing of animals, all that forlorn / being, rising to the mountains.”²⁰.

¹⁸ E.J. Groch, *To*, *Drewo a srd*, Banská Bystrica 2000, p. 7.

¹⁹ E. J. Groch, *Druhá naivita, Zbrané a nové básne a príbehy*, Edition Ryba, Tmava 2005, p. 19.

²⁰ The text translated into English by Jela Kehoe.

According to Groch, a man can gain a true exposure to Being / transcendence, which nature reflects simply by the fact of its existence, only through the act of emptying, through passive 'giving in:

„Môj domov je cesta. / Zároveň ma ustavične ktosi píska, ako chce. A spieva si ma. / Som akýmsi dlhým, nikdy nepreušovaným tónom, notou tvo- / riacou sa z tvoriacich sa chromozómov. A zároveň akoby do mňa / ktosi zhlboka vdychoval dušu, takže zvučím všetkými píšťalami / z mojich vyschýnajúcich kostí; krehké, pergamenové gajdy / v rukách toho-ktorý-je. / Môj domov je pieseň. / A zároveň ma ktosi odovzdane vzniká a premieňa a rastie. / A zároveň ma tichučko vykračuje a našľapuje. / A zároveň ma kráča.“

(b. *Domov*)²¹.

The same text in unpublished translation:

„My home is a journey. / While someone dances with me whatever way they want. And they sing me. / I am a kind of a long uninterrupted tone, the note ma- / De out of ever forming chromosomes. At the same time it is as if / Someone was breathing a soul deeply into me, so that I resonate with all whistles / From my drying bones; so fragile, parchment bagpipes / In the hands of the-one-who-is. / My home is a song. / While someone arises and grows and transforms through me with devotion. / At the same time it is as if they quietly strolled and treaded me. / At the same time it is as if they stode me.“ ([Home]).²²

Both Groch's poems can be seen in the context of these teleological (sacral) dimensions, which is why I attach to them the prayer purpose. Other readers, however, may not consider them prayers. For example, Pavol Markovič considers the fundamental Groch attitude to be astonishment and he perceives his „hymns” to be outside a specific ideologue, including a Christian one. He sees the act of giving vegetation a soul as a manifestation of a renewed and uninhibited childhood²³. Since the poet consciously works with bifurcation points, places of non-definability and un-decidability²⁴, when questioning the intent of the text both readings are justified.

²¹ E. J. Groch, *Druhá naivita, Zbrané a nové básne a príbehy*; Edition Ryba, Trnava 2005, p. 27.

²² The text translated into English by Jela Kehoe.

²³ Vide: P. Markovič, *Škrtnie prívlastkov okolo pojmu údiv (Dynamika básnického postoja na podklade zbierky E. Grocha Druhá naivita)*, [in:] *Literárnokritická reflexia slovenskej literatúry 2006*, I. Somolayová (ed.), Ars Poetica, USL SAV, Bratislava 2007, pp. 193–195.

²⁴ Stanislava Repar says that Groch uses „cultural metaphors spreading beyond clauses created through Lotman-like „negative method,” where something always remains withheld,” while utilising the correlation between entire cultural layers. S. Repar, *Ohnisko reči alebo mlčanlivá hĺbka horizontu*, Kalligram, Bratislava 2007, p. 68.

3. Ján Gavura

Ján Gavura: Hráč (Besa, 2012)

Dovoľ mi, Pane,
prosiť o šťastný život mojich troch dcér.
Plán hry predo mnou sa vlní ako mapa.

Vybral som si pre nich vynikajúcu matku,
z rodu, čo všetko stratil a zanovitosťou
znova získal. V ruke ho držím ako šťastnú kocku.

Dievčatá chodili do najlepších škôl,
malbe ich učil taliansky majster.
Jazdia na koni a dojkám som prikázal,
aby ich učili tajomstvám milovania mužov.

Prvý sobáš bude z rozumu.
Daj teda najstaršej srdce pokojné,
nevzrušivé, lásku k divadlám a maskám.

Druhá si určite zamiluje básnika
a všetko, čo sa jej na ňom páči,
raz znenávidí. Nech radšej miluje väčšmi on ju
ako ona jeho. A keď sklamaná
odíde do kláštora, nech jej
zvon v hodine smrti odomkne nebo.

Najmladšia ešte aj v noci spí nahá,
jej oči sa nevedia odvrátiť,
keď vidia bolesť.
Pane, daj, nech k nej bude manžel slušný
a nepodvádza ju so služkami,
aspoň nie príliš často.

(Fintice, august 2010)²⁵.

The same text in unpublished translation by J. Gavura:

Ján Gavura: *The Gambler* [Besa], 2012

If it is your will, Lord,
Grant me this request I beseech you:
I ask for happiness for my daughters.
The game-plan is out on the table;
Its folds and creases
Are like those of a map.

²⁵ J. Gavura, *Besa*, Modrý Peter, Levoča 2012, pp. 55–56.

I chose for them a beautiful mother
Of a redoubtable lineage,
A family that lost everything then won it back again.
This helix I hold in my hand like a lucky dice.

The girls attended only the best schools.
Taught painting by an Italian Master,
They learned to ride.
Their governesses, as was my wish,
Made sure to teach them
The mysteries of lovemaking men.

The first marriage will be one of reason.
Let have the eldest girl a heart that is calm and still,
And affection for the theatre and masks.

The second will, alas, fall for a poet.
Everything she will love in him
Will eventually spur her to hate
But let him continue to love her all the more,
Until, heart-sore, she enters a convent.
Let the bell that sounds at the hour of her death
Unlock the gates of heaven.

The youngest, she sleeps naked each night.
When her eyes see pain they cannot close or look away.
O, my Lord, give her a husband who is kind,
And who will not cheat on her with the housemaids,
Or, at least, not so very often.

(Fintice, August 2010)²⁶.

The author of three collections of poems (to date), the young literary scholar Ján Gavura, is an enlightened poet. Personal experience and its reflection (often projected into a proverb) has been an important part of his poetry since his second collection *Každým ránom si* [You Are Every Morning] (2006). From the very beginning he correlates his experience, his knowledge, and their internal evaluation, with cultural prototypes (especially biblical, Homeric or Shakespearean inspirations). Zoltán Rede speaks about the poet's expressive, semantic and formal conciseness and coherence, which is highly cultivated and which draws upon inspirations from classical cultural life, and still continues to be living lyric poetry²⁷. Such

²⁶ The text translated into English by Ján Gavura.

²⁷ Vide: Z. Rédey, *Charakteristika (Gavurovej) tvorby* [online], [in:] *Album slovenských spisovateľov*, LIC, Bratislava 2013, http://www.litcentrum.sk/slovenski-spisovatelia/jan-gavura#production_description [cit. 2013-09-21].

observations are also applicable to Gavura's work with religious themes and the prayer genre. „He perceives difficulties determined by personal motivations through the prism of divine entity, which gives him the necessary distance and detachment”²⁸.

The poetic prayer with epic elements *Hráč* [The Gambler] shows the immediacy of the author's personal bias (he is a loving father of three daughters) and a cultural filter inspired by a fairy-tale or Medieval-Renaissance world. A man (nobleman), with the same care as was dedicated to the education of his three daughters, wants the best (understood as the happiest) possible marriages for them. The prayer reflects the human desire for perfection, but it also reveals the vulnerable love of a father who is otherwise a strong man and strategist and who knows his daughters very well. On the other hand, we see in the father's consciousness the confrontation between his wishes and the reality that he has experience of – the world is not such as we desire. The vivid picture of a father stepping out of the text is a kind of artist's self-portrait, painted with a subtle self-irony in the sight of God. The poet believes in God's governance, which can be liberating and comforting. However, he also recognizes the fierce freedom and entropy of the world in which we live. Prayer does not have a classic arc formed by tension and ease, but both principles are gradually spun together and even culminate in a single sequence.

4. Katarína Kuchelová

Katarína Kuchelová: *Malé veľké mesto* (2008)

IV.

snážila som sa / pamätať si / ale tie mená sa ďalej / menili mizli menili / ich davy ľudí ktoré nepretržite //
prechádzajú mestom // s dokonalým zmyslom pre prítomnosť / robia dojem stáleho obyvateľstva //
(schopnosťou davu / vytvoriť jedincov / rovnakých vďaka jedinému cieľu / odlíšiť sa) // nechcem
prestáť / pamäťou pomenívať znovu / ale znovu a znovu strácam schopnosť / orientovať sa v dňoch /
ktoré prechádzajú mestom // všetky vyzerajú ako jeden // (podľa štatistik zostávajú návštevníci v tomto
/ meste priemere jeden deň)

XII.

môj život trvá jeden deň // ale tvoj / je poskladaný z rôznych / životov v každom jednom dni / a /
v každom jednom z nich // prežívam / niekoľko smrtí // tých smrtí je veľa // príliš veľa na to / aby som
nedostávala závraty / z úplne nového usporiadania / sveta // hraníc // ach

XV.

dni prechádzajú mestom / ako obrazy // prechádzam mestom / skladám obrazy / skladám mesto /
zaznamenávam ho do máp / prechádzam mestom ako dni / dni zaznamenávam do máp (...)

²⁸ L. Suchá, *Ján Gavura*, [in:] *Antológia súčasnej slovenskej poézie. Päť x päť*, Gavura, J. (ed.), LIC, Bratislava 2012, p. 178.

XXIV.

Svätý Jozef, patrón umierajúcich, Ty / si blažene umrel v náručí Ježiša a Márie. Prosím Ťa / s detinskou dôverou, stoj pri mne v hodine smrti / a vypros mi svojim orodovaním dokonalú ľútosť / nad hriechmi a dôveru v Božie milosrdenstvo, / aby som na chvíľku smrti čakal s vierou a dôverou / v srdci, smrť prijal vd'áčne z lásky k Bohu a dušu / vrátil Stvoriteľovi, volajúc na pomoc mená / Ježiš, Mária a Jozef.

XXVII.

Každá interpretácia tohto mesta je // iným obrazom / inou mapou / iným návodom

XXXIII.

hranice tohto mesta / sa menia aj / bez väčších či menších konfliktov // často si to uvedomíme / až keď ich prekročíme // alebo // vôbec²⁹.

The same text in unpublished translation by J.Kehoe:

Katarína Kuchelová: *Malé veľké mesto* [Little Big Town], 2008

IV.

I tried / to remember / but those names were further / changing disappeared changed / the crowds that continuously pass through the town // with perfect sense for the presence / make an impression of permanent population // (ability to crowd / to create individuals / equal due to a single objective / to differentiate themselves) // I don't want to stop / naming with memory again / but again and again I lose the ability / to orientate in the days / that pass through the town // all look alike // (statistics says the visitors remain in this / town on average one day)

XII.

my life lasts but one day // though yours / is a compound of different / lives in every single day / and / in each one of them // I'm experiencing / several deaths // too many deaths // too many to / keep away the dizziness / caused by a completely new layout / of the world // borders // oh

XV.

day pass through the town / like images // I pass through the town / stocking images / stocking the town / making its map / I pass through the town as days / I record days in the map (...)

XXIV.

Saint Joseph, patron of the dying, You / died a blissful death in the arms of Jesus and Mary. I ask Thee / with childish confidence, stand by me in the hour of my death / and ensure for me through your intercession perfect contrition / over the sins and the trust in God's mercy, / so I would wait for the moment of death with faith and trust / in my heart, and would gratefully accept the death, for love of God and my would return my soul / to the Creator, crying the names of / Jesus, Mary and Joseph for help.

²⁹ K. Kuchelová, *Malé veľké mesto*, Ars Poetica, Bratislava 2008, pp. 12, 24–25, 27, 42–43, 45, 50–52.

XXVII.

Any interpretation of this town is // another image / another map / another set of instructions

XXXIII.

boundaries of this town / change without / any bigger or smaller conflicts // we often realize it / when we cross them // or not // at all³⁰.

In order to show the plasticity of Kucbelová's prayer text I have quoted a greater range of her collection, which is made out of a cycle consisting of *Pocta J.K.E* [Tribute to J.K.E]; 36 Roman numbered parts, and the final *Pocta J.K.* [Tribute to J.K.] Kucbelová wove a number of quotations into the frame portions of the text, called Tributes, for example, the text from *Snowman* by David Albahariho:

„(...) V priebehu jediného storočia sa každé mesto stalo niekoľkými mestami, ani jeden jazyk nedosiahol sebaistú pevnosť, ľudia si večer líhali nevediac, kde sa nasledujúceho rána prebudia“³¹

[Katarína Kucbelová, *Pocta J.K.*, Coll. *Malé veľké mesto*, 2008].

The same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„(...) in the course of a single century, every city became several cities, not one language reached the confident position, people lay down at night not knowing where they might wake up the next morning“.

[Katarína Kucbelová, *Tribute to J.K.*, Coll. *Little Big Town*, 2008].

She quotes Jiří Kollár:

„Výškrtej nebo podškrtej / v jakémkoli časopise / slova nějaké písničky / návodu modlitby proslovu / vyhlášky dopisu nebo básně“³²

[Cf.: Katarína Kucbelová, *Pocta J.K.*, Coll. *Malé veľké mesto*, 2008]

This same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„Underline or cross out / in any magazine / words of a songs / instructions prayer speech / decree letter or poem“.

[Cf: Katarína Kucbelová, *Tribute to J.K.*, Coll. *Little Big Town*. 2008, p. 7],

³⁰ The text translated into English by Jela Kehoe.

³¹ K. Kucbelová, *Pocta J.K.*, Coll. *Malé veľké mesto*, 2008, p. 7.

³² *Ibidem*.

And at the end she quotes Jiří Kovanda:

„prepíš v mape mesta / v ktorom žiješ / názvy / ulíc, námestí, ciest / nalep nové / parky, sady,
jazerá / presmeruj cesty / dokresli sochy, fontány, aleje / (...) / urob niekoľko kópií / rozďaj ich priateľom
/ a stretávajú sa / v meste / podľa týchto máp“³³

[Cf.: Katarína Kucbelová, *Pocta J.K.*, Coll. *Malé veľké mesto*, 2008].

This same text in unpublished translation by J. Kehoe:

„rewrite in the map of the city / where you live / names / of streets, squares, roads / stick in
new / parks, orchards, lakes / redirect roads / draw in some statues, fountains, alleys / (...) / make a few
copies / hand them out to your friends and / meet / in the city / using those maps“.

[Cf.: Katarína Kucbelová, *Tribute to J.K.*, Coll. *Little Big Town*, 2008].

The quoted fragments suggest the point of view, the method of construction and a motif of alternative maps, which inspired Kucbelová during the creation of the collection. The intertextuality, which the author also uses in the internal cycle, is backed up by the bibliography of the sources of the quotations. Admitting to the inspiration for the name of the collection, she quotes the advertising slogan: „It's a little big city“.

Katarína Kucbelová (1979) is the author of poetry inspired by poetics of the Text Generation (Peter Macsovszky, Peter Šulej, Nóra Ružičková), who consider avoiding the aesthetic, reducing traditional lyrical expressions of the text (eg. presence of lyrical subject, emotionality), strengthening the analytical procedures and using quotations as essential. Gradually, however, she returns to the lyrical subject as the epicentre of lyrical focalization, as can be seen in her third collection *Malé veľké mesto* [Little Big Town], 2008.

I perceive the text as repeated, meticulous efforts of a lyrical subject to reconstruct and archive in her memory the image of a constantly changing town in which she lives and where she herself is subject to transformation and memory loss. The composition is not made out of lived uniqueness or specific places and people, but a record of the thought process in progress, where she names the starting points, the efforts and the results of reasoning. An experiential plane is, paradoxically, infused into the text through quotes of conversational fragments, manuals, prayers, and excerpts from Eliot's *The Waste Land* and songs by Karol Elbert and Elton John. *Modlitba k sv. Jozefovi* [Prayer to St. Joseph], which in XXIV the author quotes

³³ Katarína Kucbelová, *Pocta J.K.*, Coll. *Malé veľké mesto*, 2008, p. 54–55.

word for word from the Hamilton issue of 1985, can be interpreted within the text as having more than one intention. On the one hand, the motif of prayers for a blissful hour of death can be seen either as an attempt to capture the fear of an anonymous man before his death in the space of a city, or as a demonstration of a much more fundamental need (also in the spiritual sense), the need for interpersonal communication, which is also referred to in the collection. On the other hand, when searching for interrelation between the text and the thought processes of the lyrical subject (the author) who faces the constant reshaping of an urban space, as indicated for example in part XII., death can be seen as a metaphorical expression of the inability to hold on to the past. Ultimately it shows an ironic outlook at the fear of recurrence of one's own demise due to unreliable memory (in the sense of „I is always someone else”). The author employs a method of recycling and dismantling the texts, reassembling them into new contexts which never quite remove the traces of prior use, extending and updating their semantic potential³⁴.

5. Conclusion

Where can a poetic prayer can be found and how can it be perceived in contemporary Slovak poetry? This poetry has been classified by Jaroslav Šrank into four basic groups (poetry of nonconformist individualism, poetry of privacy, spiritual poetry, and experimental deconstructive poetry)³⁵. Poetic prayer occurs most frequently in the works of spiritual poets such as Erik Jakub Groch, Marián Milčák, Peter Milčák, Rudolf Jurolek, Ján Gavura and Joe Palaščák. However, with various modifications it can also be seen in the work of poets of revolt and negation³⁶, (e.g. Jozef Urban, William Klimáček, Vlado Puchala, Ján Litvák, Robert Bielik), in the work of poets of privacy (e.g. Ján Buzássy, Karol Chmel, Ľuboš Bendzák) or in the work of poets of deconstructive purview (Peter Macsovszky, Katarína Kucbelová). In its affirmative version, a prayer demonstrates a shift towards non-material values and holds our world's hedonism (whether materialistic, experiential or intellectual) up to a critical mirror. Openness to diverse tendencies confirms the viability of poetic prayer in the current production, while strongly reaffirming its individualized character. Creative tension between the religious (especially Christian) framework and creative innovation is the source of its variability. Colloquial expression, pragmatic tone, ironic understatement, toned-down testimony, philosophical analysis and latency are some of the preferred departure points. Pathos, emulating ideologi-

³⁴ Vide: J. Šrank, *Nesamozrejmá poézia*, LIC, Bratislava 2009, pp. 61–62.

³⁵ Vide: J. Šrank, *Individualizovaná literatúra*, Cathedra, Bratislava 2013, p. 45.

³⁶ Negation can be seen as the shift of poets of the so-called „Barbarian Generation” towards non-Christian spirituality of eastern, heretic or eclectic studies.

cal frameworks or the position of an enlightened sage are features which typically receive criticism³⁷.

At the level of expression the authors deliberately work with concealment and latency, especially in terms of shaping the addressee of dialogic communication, which ultimately determines the genre. Its sometimes quite challenging reconstruction requires a broader, contextual reading of the artist's work, and it is often impossible to get by with just one isolated poetic text. The formal absence of genre-determining features potentially allows a poem to be read, and not only as a prayer, which is something the author probably counts on. For example, in some poems from the collection *Nostalgia* (1993) by Mila Haug, it is difficult to identify whether the lyrical subject prays to God, or speaks to the deceased partner. I see these strategies as attempts to covertly implant a certain amount of spiritual content into everyday human experience.

At the semantic level, the contemporary author does not copy the content of canonised religious texts, but very often intentionally points out their problematic aspects (betraying his/her own psychological and intellectual scepticism) and parodies them (e.g. the patterning of the Lord's Prayer by the poets of revolt, or deconstructive revisions of prayer fragments as manifestations of pop culture as is the case in Macsovszky's texts). Leaving farcical texts out of the contemplation, for they demonstrate the author's breakup with religion, and acknowledging that the poem aims to mediate the author's own, individualised spirituality, it is necessary to look carefully to excavate and determine the focal points which are not marked by subversion. These focal points mirror the need for a spiritual dimension, although their reconstruction is deliberately complex and often ambiguous (which is, no doubt, the author's intention).

The lyrical subject (the one who utters the prayer) is often uncertain in texts by the spiritual writers. The importance is not only attached to the content of the spiritual testimony, but through it, also the understanding of oneself as a spiritual being at a certain phase of experiencing existence and one's spiritual growth. The contemporary poet often boldly reveals and identifies problematic human characteristics, such as fear, fatigue, egoism or scepticism, which enter the prayerful message and down-play its „high” subject matter. These positions can be found in poems by Ján Gavura, Ján Buzássy and Marián Milčák.

In addition to muted colloquial expression and realistic positions, some authors of spiritual tradition use allegory or different cultural frameworks (e.g. Peter Repka, Marián Milčák, Ján Gavura). These might be the results of the attempts at timelessness and universality of the statement (e.g. Daniel Pastirčák), or they are expres-

³⁷ Vide: J. Gavura, *Katarína Džunková: Palica brata a palica slnka. (rec.)*, [in:] *TOP 5 2010*, M. Součková (ed.) and J. Gavura (ed.) and R. Kitta (ed.), *Občianske združenie FACE, Prešov 2012*, pp. 104–105.

sions of significantly more complicated structuring of poetic reflection (e.g. Erik J. Groch), or they signify a distancing from the authorial subject. For example, Marián Milčák persistently uses a hypostatic subject in the third person with the matrix of constant properties (Mr. Cogito), which was inspired by the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert.

Some strategies are based on using the prayer quotes to create assemblages. Fervent emotional involvement and carefree faith expressed through the religious prayer enters into a dialogue with disparate visualization and complements the emotional restraint (Katarína Kucbelová).

A source of inspiration for poetic prayers in addition to domestic authors (e.g. Janko Silan, Milan Rúfus, Ján Ondruš, Ján Buzássy, Mila Haug and the Lonely Runners) comes mainly from the rich tradition of the metaphysical poetry of William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Saint-John Perse, Czesław Miłosz, Paul Celan, Wisława Szymborska, and Zbigniew Herbert.

Abstract (Summary):

The research paper “Prayer in Contemporary Slovak Poetry. (Current Genre Tendencies)” examines the innovative practices of poetic prayer in Slovak literature. The study links literary, historical, and theological knowledge. In the background is the author's belief that the change of patterning of the literary prayer genre reflects important sociological shifts within the whole of society. This premise is tested on poetic texts from the turn of the 20th century, which reflect the transition from totalitarian ideology to liberal democracy. This period is marked by an increased occurrence of prayer in poetry which can be seen as a gesture of freedom of spiritual expression. At the same time there is a noticeable tendency to question the testimonial value of prayer poetry in the course of an expressing of rebellion against social and religious authority. Prayer poetry conveys the needs of individualized non-institutionalised faith, mixing aspects of different religions, and the plea for closeness rather than transcending values “from the other world”. The core of the research paper is the analysis of four contemporary prayer poems published between 1992 and 2012. Through the choice of particular poems, the author aims to reach several goals: she wants to introduce key authors representing several lines of Slovak poetry (spiritual poetry, poets of privacy, non-conformist individualist, and experimental line – the so-called Text Generation) while presenting new semantic and structural practices that reflect significant trends in individualized Slovak poetry after November 1989. The texts present a creative, though not a value tension in respect to the genre of religious prayers. Colloquial expression, pragmatic tone, ironic understatement, toned-down testimony, philosophical analysis and latency are some of the preferred departure points. Pathos, emulating ideological frameworks or the position of an enlightened sage are features which typically receive criticism. At the level of expression authors deliberately work with concealment and latency. These features have an effect on the participants of prayer communication. Identification of the addressee of the text, which ultimately determines its genre, requires a contextual reading of the text and an awareness of its multi-dimensional nature. On the other hand, questioning the lyrical subject demonstrates the need for the understanding of the self, moving from ordinary, banal towards the high (sacred). Some poets (especially the Text Generation) use the prayer quotes to create assemblages. Fervent emotional involvement and carefree faith expressed through religious prayer enters into a dialogue with disparate visualization and complements the emotional restraint of contemporary man. Current genre trends of poetic prayer correspond with developmental trends of

Slovak poetry in general. The focus is on creating a semantically open poem, supporting its open, procedural character, in a way creating meaning on the intersection of deliberate polyphony and polysemy.

Keywords:

spiritual poetry, individualised spirituality, specifications of the contemporary poetic prayer (semantic as well as modal)

The title in Polish:

Modlitwa we współczesnej poezji słowackiej (Aktualne tendencje gatunku)

Abstract (Summary) in Polish / Abstrakt (streszczenie) po polsku:

Naukowe studium o modlitwie we współczesnej poezji słowackiej (aktualne tendencje gatunku) śledzi innowacyjne praktyki poetyckiej modlitwy w słowackiej literaturze. Studium łączy wiedzę historycznoliteracką, literaturoznawczą i teologiczną. W jego tle jest przeświadczenie autorki, że zmiana matrycy [wzoru] modlitewnego gatunku w literaturze pięknej (artystycznej) odzwierciedla istotne socjologiczne zmiany (ruchy) w całym społeczeństwie. Tę oto hipotezę na wstępie weryfikuje na przykładzie artystycznych tekstów z przełomu 20. i 21. stulecia, w których odzwierciedla się przejście od totalitarnej ideologii do demokracji liberalnej. Modlitwa w poezji objawia się nie tylko w większej mierze (jako gest wolności słowa duchowego), ale jej wypowiedź jest również problematyzowana – staje się wyrazem buntu przeciwko autorytetom (społecznym i religijnym), potrzeby zindywidualizowanej, niezinstytucjonalizowanej wiary (mieszanie tendencji różnych religii), wołaniem o ludzką bliskość w miejsce wartości transcendujących [transcendentnych], „zaświatowych“. Jądro studium [istota badania] przedstawia analizę czterech tekstów współczesnej modlitwy poetyckiej, publikowanych w latach 1992-2012. Autorka poprzez wybór poezji uzyskuje [jednocześnie] kilka celów: chce przedstawić kluczowych autorów czterech linii współczesnej poezji słowackiej (poezja duchowa, poeci prywatności, nonkonformistyczni indywidualiści, linia eksperymentalna – tzw. „pokolenie tekstu“), a także nowe, semantyczne i strukturalne (twórcze) praktyki, które odzwierciedlają wyraźnie zindywidualizowane tendencje polistopadowej [po listopadzie 1989] poezji słowackiej. Teksty są w twórczym, ale nie – w aksjologicznym napięciu wobec gatunku modlitwy religijnej. Za współcześnie preferowane tendencje można uznać skłonność (inklinację) do osobistej ekspresji, rzeczowości (obiektywizmu), ironicznego (auto)dystansu, filozoficznej analizy i sceptycyzmu, opóźnienia (latencji). Patos, kopiowanie ram ideowych czy pozycja oświeconego mędrca są w literackim poznaniu przyjmowane (postrzegane) krytycznie. Na poziomie ekspresji (wyrazu) autorzy intencjonalnie [w zamierzeniu] pracują nad problematyzacją (problematyzowaniem), milczeniem i opóźnieniem [dystansem czasowym]. Te aspekty wpływają w szczególności na uczestników modlitewnej komunikacji [modlitewnej łączności]. Rekonstrukcja adresata modlitwy, która jest gatunkotwórcza, wymaga kontekstowego czytania i świadomości wielowymiarowości tekstu. Jego rozstrzygalność nie zawsze jest jednoznaczna. Kwestia nadawcy modlitwy – podmiotu lirycznego świadczy o potrzebie samopoznania, [o potrzebie] uzyskania banalnego (psychologicznego) dostępu do obszaru wysokiego (sakralnego). Niektóre autorskie strategie poetów (szczególnie „pokolenia tekstu“) używają modlitewnych cytatów na sposób asamblaży. Wysoka żarliwość uczuciowa i bezproblemowa wiara modlitwy religijnej wchodzi w dialog z odmiennym widzeniem oraz tworzą uzupełnienie do emocjonalnej powściągliwości [człowieka] współczesnego. Aktualne, gatunkowe tendencje poetyckiej modlitwy

równocześnie korespondują z rozwojowymi tendencjami słowackiej liryki. W centrum znajduje się tendencja semantyczna (znaczeniowa), aby nie zamykać poezji (wiersza), ale wspierać jej otwarty, procesualny charakter, kreować [ja] rozmyślnie na przecięciu [na skrzyżowaniu] zamierzonej polifoniczności i wieloznaczeniowości.

[Przekład polski: Marek Mariusz Tytko]

Keywords in Polish / Słowa kluczowe po polsku:

poezja duchowa, duchowość zindywidualizowana, podziały współczesnej modlitwy poetyckiej (semantyczne i modalne)

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