

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S 66TH SONNET

In the depths of the Belgrade night, between the 7th and 8th of May, along with the thundering detonations of nato bombs and the loss of electrical power... by the light of a candle... I'm turning the pages of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*... I'm certain this book contains those fourteen lines of verse which I was used to looking for and finding... in the direst moments of my life... or... simply... the most disgusted.

I also remember as I am turning the pages: not even these verses which I seek have ever neutralized or at least softened to some extent the impenetrable elements of despair in which I have (from time to time) found myself defeated.

But... (exactly like the restless flame of tonight's candle above my writing paper)... these verses of Shakespeare's have given me at least a flickering illumination and have revealed a path to general consolation—somewhere far beyond me and my troubled moments—in some timeless existence and in the power of the written word... above all... pure poetry....

Finally, my candle—which has largely consumed itself—has illuminated for me the long-sought-for sonnet of Shakespeare's, designated by the Roman numeral LXVI:

LXVI

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry:
As,¹ to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,²
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,³
And guiled honor shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,⁴
And art made tongue-tied by authority,⁵
And folly (doctor-like⁶) controlling skill,
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,⁷
And captain good attending captain ill.

Tired with all these, from these I would be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.

LXVI

Вапијем за смрћу, јер ме смори јад:
Што видим праву заслужност у беди,
И бедну ништавност у раскоши сад,
И преварену верност како бледи,
И част указану недостојном ње,
Проблудничено девичанство дивно,
И осрамоћено савршено све,
Моћ од немоћних порушену кивно,
Влашћу ућутканог оног који зна,
Лудост што има надзор над вештином,
Добро заробљено и у служби зла
И сву искреност звану глупим чином:
Умро бих одмах сморен од тих зала
Када ми љубав још не би остала.

¹ As such as, for instance

² *needy ... jollity i.e.*, the festively attired nobody who has nothing

³ *unhappily forsworn* evilly betrayed

⁴ *by ... disabled i.e.*, weakened by incompetent leadership

⁵ *art ... authority* possibly an allusion to state censorship of literature

⁶ *doctor-like i.e.* owlshly

⁷ *simplicity* stupidity

Even though I was completely alone in the apartment... I finally—by the expiring candle—I found my booming-voiced conversation partner and like-minded companion... Shakespeare, my contemporary...(as Jan Kott* would say)....

When dawn came, bearing with it the first rays of natural light, I discovered in the same book—in the commentary—one (coincidental) piece of information which struck me as worthy of note, to add to this, my nocturnal manuscript.

Le Gazette Parisian published in 1940, relates a story about the Third Reich, where each line of this sonnet (LXVI) of Shakespeare's is linked to an event in Hitler's Germany.

In any case... the next day, one that the entire world ought to have celebrated solemnly (but appropriately), commemorates the Victory against... as memories of May 9, 1945**....

Stevan Raičković

Belgrade, May 7 and 8, 1999

Translation © 1999 by Milo Yezesiyevich

(Translator's note: Mr. Stevan Raičković (b. 1928) is Serbia's greatest living poet. Among his many works is a verse translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. A brief biography and selection of Stevan Raičković's poems in translation can be found in *Serbian Poetry from the Beginnings to the Present*, by Milne Holne and Vasa D. Mihailovich, Yale Russia and East European Publications, No. 11, New Haven, 1988, pgs. 310-317.)

* Jan Kott (b. 1914) Polish essayist and literary historian. A pungent polemicist, he struggled against dogmatism, and exerted a great deal of influence as a theatre critic and theorist of stagecraft. He achieved worldwide fame with a study of Shakespeare's works, called *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (1961). He emigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s.

** May 9 is celebrated in Yugoslavia as the *Day of Victory against Fascism*, which marks the end of World War II.