

Ivana Hostová

## Fissuring into Existence. The Visceral, Sculptural, and Textile-Textual in the Poetry of Maggie O'Sullivan and Nóra Ružičková\*

### 1. Introduction

The peculiarities of the development of any textual practices in a literature in the periphery of what Pascale Casanova (2007) calls the world republic of letters make it difficult to draw synchronic and detailed parallels between the work of a poet inscribing herself or himself in this literature and a poet who is a part of a field closer to the centre. But what centre can we talk about with regards to unconventional writing this essay addresses? Peripheral position seems to be a permanent feature of radically innovative writing in general – at least most of the time in most of the places. It is not that there is no sense of literary 'present' and historical development in innovative writing – for more than half a century, its liveliest scenes can doubtless be found in North America. However, given the temporal distances of various locales and writers' individual trajectories, mutual resonances can be found in peripheries of these peripheries, enabling one to draw parallels in the spirit of badiouian *comparatisme quand même* (Apter 2006). In what follows, I discuss reflections, refractions and uncanny synchronicities of the writing of a Slovak poet, Nóra Ružičková, and a UK-based poet Maggie O'Sullivan.

Artistic and poetic "practice[s] of liberty" as Maggie O'Sullivan puts it, have traditionally been dominated by male poets in both the UK and Slovakia – Nóra Ružičková in late 1990s Bratislava found herself in a very similar position to the one Maggie O'Sullivan occupied in the 1970s London experimental literary scene (O'Sullivan 1999: 88, Šrank 2013)<sup>1</sup>. Although their habituses in their respective fields might not have too much to do

---

\* This work was supported by the Scientific Grant Agency VEGA under Grant VEGA 1/0523/18 *Lexicon of Slovak Literature and Culture 1989-2015 (authors, works, processes and intermediary artistic intersections)*. The author is also grateful to the Department of English at the University of Southampton for the opportunity to conduct her research as a visiting scholar there in 2018 and especially to Peter Middleton for his generous guidance which helped the author to acquaint with the landscape of innovative British poetry and for his invaluable comments on drafts and versions of the paper. She would also like to thank the National Scholarship Programme of the Slovak Republic for funding her stay.

<sup>1</sup> Šrank (2013) lists four women (Tatjana Lehenová, Nóra Ružičková, Mila Haugová, and Stanislava Chrobáková) and about twenty men among those who published radical poetry in Slovak in the 1990s. The gendered world of 1970s and 1980s innovative poetry in Britain can be glimpsed in some of the accounts, published in Monk 2012 and Hampson, Edwards 2016.

with it, their poetries communicate with each other in a surprisingly familial language. Ružičková's first two books of poetry, 1998's *Mikronauti* ('Micronauts') and *Osnova a útok* ('Warp and Weft'), published two years later and Maggie O'Sullivan's *murmur: tasks of mourning*, written at approximately the same time (1999-2004) exhibit powerful thematic resonances (coded also in the images of the fragmented and suffering body), similar emotional character (in most cases elegiac in the sense of the prevailing feeling of loss and / or lack), and poetological likeness, including their intense work across various media. Before I offer a comparative analysis, let me briefly introduce the works<sup>2</sup>.

Tracing the trajectory of Maggie O'Sullivan's poetry with its beginnings in the mid-1970s might at times be distorted by its often complicated publication history – so although *murmur* was completed in 2004, it was not published before 2011 and even though it is chronologically and poetologically a continuation of her *red shifts* (2001; written 1997-1999) and *waterfalls* (2009 in a limited edition by etruscan books; 2012 by Reality Street; written 1994-1999), both forming the *her/story:eye* project, in publication it is interrupted by *Palace of Reptiles* (2003; written 1992-1995), belonging to her previous period<sup>3</sup>. The project closely preceding *murmur* excavates (and positions the self towards) Irish (political) history and folklore, the power of singing, storytelling, etymology – it “explores an ancestral self” as the poet describes (O'Sullivan, Thurston 2011: 243). *Murmur* moves to a higher level of abstraction and by doing so allows for a wider range of interpretations – the reader encounters here a baring of the words to the bone combined with an insistence on repetition and variation, a fusing of the “ongoing dissolving / deformance of the verbal / visual / sculptural into one practice” (O'Sullivan, Olsen 2004). With respect to the most distinct motivic stratum, emphasis on the medical body, as Peter Middleton notes in the book's preface and Mandy Bloomfield and Eleanor Perry elaborate in their papers, comes forward (Bloomfield 2011, Middleton 2011, Perry 2017).

Nóra Ružičková's first book of poetry *Mikronauti* ('Micronauts') came out in 1998 during her studies at The Academy of Fine Arts and Design (she was 21 at the time) and its publication aroused considerable critical interest, often motivated by a need to dismiss this

<sup>2</sup> Given the striking similarities between the two poetries, it might be speculated that Ružičková was familiar with O'Sullivan's writing – the British poet even attended a conference (*Different British Voices – Poetry, Locality, Plurality*) in the neighbouring Czech Republic in 1997. However, as communication with Ružičková (personal conversation 20.03.2018) revealed, the Slovak poet was not at the conference and was not familiar with O'Sullivan's work at all. Moreover, as she added, she spoke almost no English at that time and since no Slovak translations of O'Sullivan's poetry existed before 2017, there was no way she might have encountered the British poet's writing at the time she worked on the texts I analyse here.

<sup>3</sup> The poet often paratextually indicates the period when she worked on individual pieces. The dates of production of *red shifts* (O'Sullivan 2001) and *waterfalls* (O'Sullivan 2012) are recorded on the sleeve of her 2003 CD *her/story:eye*. The time she worked on *murmur* is mentioned in its editorial note and the years she composed *Palace of Reptiles* (2003) are stated in its *Notes and Acknowledgements*.

kind of experimental poetic practice. The debut combined her interest in the visual arts, feminisms, and poetry with an accent on the speaking persona's self-scrutiny as a tool for an investigation of the world, language, and possibility of understanding and expression. Her second book *Osnova a útok* ('*Warp and Weft*'), published two years later, tackles the relationships between text, body and textile with a fierce complexity. It takes the analysing, shattering and deleting forces from her debut a step further, opening the book's matter to a greater degree of entropy. Her later projects continued in these traces and at the same time opened to more conceptual approaches and the sphere of visual arts (Gavura 2012, Hostová 2014, Rácová 2014, Šrank 2012).

The following sections will first prepare the comparative ground by introducing parallel (separate, but resonating) and prismatic close readings (reading the poet through the prism of the text of the other) of selected parts of the poets' works (fragment of *murmur's would a yellow do?* and *Kombinácia...* ['*The combination...*'] – an untitled poem from *Mikronauti* ['*Micronauts*']) and then move on to pursue connotations and manifestations of two techniques O'Sullivan and Ružičková use as metaphors for their writing and which also manifest themselves in (their) poetic practices – sculpting and methods of the production of textile.

## 2. *Producing and Destroying the Body-Text-Textile*

In this part, I will look at two textual pieces, selected from Ružičková's *Mikronauti* ('*Micronauts*') and O'Sullivan's *murmur*, reading them both separately and through the body of one another. This kind of prismatic interpretation of mutually resonating, but geographically and culturally distant texts helps illuminate both works in ways an isolated close reading might not be able to. It foregrounds similar procedures, motifs, and forms and also stretches the reading to previously lesser explored areas without deforming or crippling the texts.

*Murmur's would a yellow do?* opens with an image of a "PURPLED MADDER/" (O'Sullivan 2011: [36])<sup>4</sup>, printed in dark red majuscule and positioned opposite one of the three pages streaked with a dark red brushstroke that resembles a smudge of blood with last lines opposite the second of these pages reading "leaking/hands on the wall – bled" (*Ibid.*: [41]). The opening line effectively amalgamates several procedures with which the poet works – it introduces colour on the semantic as well as iconic level, makes strong use of the possibilities the 'bibliographical code' presents (majuscule, uneven font size), layers (and also erodes and collapses) human and non-human meanings into a radically small space, and steps out of smooth and normalised everyday grammar (McGann 1991: 56). More specifically, the line doubly refers to a blood-like colour ("madder" as a shade of red), the slightly unusual use of "purple" as a verb hints at unnamed intense processes (someone's face can purple as a result of strong emotions caused by an unknown conflict; something can be

---

<sup>4</sup> The book is not paginated. I have numbered the pages, beginning with the title page after the preface. Also, to make the citations clearer, I only give the number of the first page on which the quoted word of phrase occurs.

purpled as covered with smudges of blood or other liquid – we can also think of throwing buckets of red paint at statues or signs as acts of political resistance), “madder” introduces the notion of madness and enables the text to shift away from anthropocentrism by abolishing the boundary between human and non-human (“madder” as a plant) and refers to the hues that dominate the section. The visual expressiveness of the adjacent page and the sigh with which it was presented in a 2003 performance at Birkbeck College in London intensifies the impression that the piece is a record of a barely verbalisable (in conventional, disciplined and disciplining language) situation, of a possibly violent conflict (Armstrong 2004: 57). Images of violence in *murmur* predominantly concentrate on bodily pain, strengthened by the medical vocabulary present throughout the text: “excrescen<sub>ce</sub>” (O’Sullivan 2011: [11]), “nil by” ([39]), “occlusions” ([39]), “stitching/ed” ([30]), “sutures” ([30]), “surgical” ([30]), “metronomic” ([43]), “bleed” ([43]), “ill” ([10]), “deliriant” ([5]), “tincture” ([10]), “hypodermic” ([76]), “cardiac load” ([14]), “suscitation” ([64]), “laceration” ([65]), “artery” ([74]), “blood pressure” ([74]), “pulse” ([14]). The wounded body in this view is then not only the source of colour, and – by extension – the source of the ability to signify, but it *is* the text, as explicitly encoded in the compound “BODYTEXT” (O’Sullivan 2011: [14]).

The amalgamation of the “savaging [and] salvaging” of the “BODYTEXT” is often represented as the processing of fabric, foregrounding the etymological connection between textile and text (*Ibid.*: [10], [14]). The possibility of leaving a trace as conditioned by the very existence of the “threading gash” (*Ibid.*: [28]) is then coded both through colour and the semantic particles of the text referring to techniques of joining (and decorating) textiles or thread-like entities: “WEAVING” (*Ibid.*: [7]), “stitching/ed” ([30]), “threading” ([28]), in some cases more strongly leaning towards the body as in “plaiting” ([12]), “braiding” ([10]) or “sutures” ([30]). The tension as the source of the bursts of language and images in *murmur* is also evoked by a constant to-and-fro motion in which a step is always preceded and/or followed by a countermovement, coded in words like “cleave” ([3]), “ruptured” ([52]), “fissuring” ([13]), “clipped” ([11]), “behalves” ([12]), “incising” ([10]), “split open” ([12]), “distreading” ([28]), “decompositioning” ([36]). These opposing forces meet in the image of the “screamed-in sliver” which reaches and presumably hurts or punctures “the / wired foetal heart” ([41]).

The following verse, “here is the line here is the oval” is positioned between empty spaces created by several blank lines and gives an impression of an ekphrasis, a description of a missing visual object, representing the horror-like (or, perhaps more in accord with the poet’s inspirations, folk fairy tale-like) image of the “wired foetal heart” which is then likened to a “raw anticing amulet” (*Ibid.*: [36]). This (an)aestheticisation (the amulet, as a pendant, is “anticing” – perhaps antique and anticipating, but certainly also enticing) of an internal organ helps break the sign and free it from the preconstructed role it is to play in sustaining and strengthening existing (social) hierarchies, constructed by language and literary tradition. The poem continues in what appears to be fragments of narration and the section closes with the third whole-page dark red smudge as if it was closing a curtain on a theatrical performance.

Despite differences between O’Sullivan’s and Ružičková’s writing through the body, most pronouncedly with respect to the degree of (non)attribution of the visceral thematic elements to the (dispersed) speaking subject, at certain points, the two poetries come very closely together – like in *Kombinácia...* (*The combination...*) – one of the untitled poems from Ružičková’s debut. Since the poem has not been published in English, it might be instructive to quote it here in its entirety:

The combination  
of flowers and snow  
in women’s poetry  
red and white  
blood on the operating table  
surgically exact chiaroscuro  
What to write on the skin  
so that it would be worth it  
to butcher  
insert hooks  
and skin?  
Under the snow  
under the ground  
under the skin  
small carrots  
smooth and shiny child fingers  
reach for something deeply dark<sup>5</sup>

(Ružičková 1998: 22)

The juxtaposition of the fragile beauty of the flowers and the snow’s coldness of the poem’s opening line translates into the abstract visual of “red and white” which, as the next line reveals, no longer evokes seemingly harmless decorative elements, but becomes a shortcut for a result of a violation of the body’s wholeness in an operating theatre, morphing into “blood on the operating table”. In making the parallel, the poem quite openly asserts that blood is the means through which women’s poetry is written and in doing so it resonates with O’Sullivan’s “threading gash”, even more closely invoked by lines in the debut’s opening poem: “a wound is the space of self-projections / the knot (inside) the contact with the self”<sup>6</sup>. The spilled blood in the operating room in *Kombinácia...* (*The combination...*) is

<sup>5</sup> Here and afterwards, unless otherwise indicated, the translation is mine. IH. In the original: “Kombinácia / kvetov a snehu / v poézii žien / červená a biela / krv na operačnom stole / chirurgicky presný temnosvit / Čo napísať na kožu / aby malo zmysel / zarezat’ / zapichnúť háčiky / a stiahnuť? / Pod snehom / pod zemou / pod kožou / malé mrkvy / hladké a lesklé prsty deti / siahajú po niečom hlboko temnom”.

<sup>6</sup> In the original: “rana je priestorom seba projekcií / uzol (v nej) dotykom so sebou”.

followed by images of writing on the body and subsequently skinning it. The consideration of marking the skin with text that might provoke a violent reaction reverses the cause and effect relationship in which the wound is the originator of the text and obscures the exact direction and logic, but at the same time strengthens the ties between pain, text, and the body, echoing O'Sullivan's "BODYTEXT".

The poem then returns to the motifs from its opening with final lines bringing forth the image of the buried "shiny child fingers" reaching for the slightly ominous "something deeply dark" – presumably the (woman's) creative force and medium – hidden deep under the skin (and ground). The unexpected and horror-like presence of a child's fingers (carrots) in the darkness of the inside of the body (and under the ground) resonates with O'Sullivan's "wired foetal heart" – Ružičková's lines are similarly visually evocative, reminiscent of decadent or folk baladic imagery and point to a conflicted inner source of creating which is both suppressed and surfaces itself with substantial violence.

Similarly to *murmur*, in Ružičková's first two books, the conflicted nature of making a trace, the constant movement between creation and destruction often materialises in the movements and countermovements of sewing and undoing the stitches (of the body): "I clutch at the thread / tearing myself / sewing the lips / (with a slaver?)" (Ružičková 2000: 20)<sup>7</sup>, "threadiness of pulse unseamed in the opposite direction" (*Ibid.*: 28)<sup>8</sup>, and also in a very similar image of in-screaming, in-speaking: "said inversely / inbreathed" (*Ibid.*: 15)<sup>9</sup>. This tension between creation and deletion, at many places taking the form of producing or destroying the body-text-textile, is central to both poetries under discussion.

Looking at O'Sullivan's text through the prism of the Slovak poet's writing and vice versa helps the reading focus on the folds of texts that might otherwise remain underexplored. Thanks to this method it is more viable, among other things, to read the motif of *murmur*'s BODYTEXT's "threading gash" in the context of corporeal (and trans-corporeal) feminisms. Although the corporeality of the medical body in *murmur*, as has been mentioned in the introduction, was repeatedly noted, it has been less read in more explicitly feminist terms. Ružičková's open embracement of the Cixousian concept of writing through the body illuminates this aspect of corporeal signification in O'Sullivan and in doing so, it puts *murmur* more readily into discussion not only with more pronouncedly feminist poetries, but also – thanks to the trans- and inter-mediality of O'Sullivan's work and its ecological concerns – with art and activism in this field<sup>10</sup>. In a reversed glance, the wounded body in Ružičková's poetry, without explicitly evoking healing procedures, is recontextualised in a way which allows for a reflection of the curative effects of the self-expressive and self-scrutinising process on the speaking persona. The quoted horror-like images inform each other in a similar way. The exteriorised and (an)aestheticised internal

<sup>7</sup> In the original: "Chytám sa nitky / trhám sa / zošívam pery / (slinou?)".

<sup>8</sup> In the original: "nitkovitosť tepu vypáranú v protismere".

<sup>9</sup> In the original: "povedané naopak / teda vdýchnuté".

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, works of Stacy Alaimo (2010).

organ in *murmur* illuminates the image of a child's fingers in *Mikronauti* ('*Micronauts*') by strengthening the potentiality of the fingers' agency, their power to have an effect on or control over the speaking 'I'. On the other hand, Ružičková's image, collapsing the human and non-human in one (fingers and carrots), stresses the possible non-humanity of the "foetal heart" – an amulet can be made from inorganic materials or from parts of animals or plants. Analogously, the eruptions in which the visual and verbal materials in *murmur* emerge – their inherent violence and intense power with which they bring forth the processual character of the creation – provide a prism through which the fragmentary nature of Ružičková's poems reflects the forceful process in which speech has to break the barrier of the silence of the blank page. The following sections will discuss further mutual illuminations, focusing on the metaphor of sculpting both authors use when conceptualising their poetry and on the text-textual relationships explored in them.

### 3. *Sculpting the 'Difficulty'*

Nóra Ružičková explicitly theorised her creative procedures as sculpting the language in her 2012 book of poetry *práce & intimita* ('*work & intimacy*') where she described her creative method as making a glyptic (i.e. carved, as opposed to plastic, i.e. modelled) sculpture (Ružičková 2012: 30). This accent, as she asserts in an interview, springs from the importance of the "method of deletion" she regards as more central to her writing process than appropriation (Ružičková, Suchý 2012: 22). In her first two books, the motifs of deletion, subtracting, disappearance (and subsequent recreation and writing) are connected with textile production techniques rather than the traditional sculpture she talks about later, but the basic concept that evokes a removal of preconceptions regarding (woman's) identity and the tired and "commoditized tongue" is intensely present in them (Silliman 1981: [7]). Similarly, Maggie O'Sullivan, in her *Working Note* on *murmur*, describes her creative process in sculptural terms: "Cleaving-scale-sculpting-voice-body-heart-soul-breath – the multi-dimensional matterings of what? how? are driving necessities in *murmur* where I am extending my searchings within the sculptural painterly textual and aural in an immersion of multi-level visual languages" (O'Sullivan 2007). She also mentions the sculptors Doris Salcedo and Eva Hesse as inspirations for *murmur*. The German Fluxus artist and sculptor Joseph Beuys equally influenced her work<sup>11</sup>.

Likening poetic practices to carving a sculpture fits within the wider scope of the relationship between visual arts and poetry and the interest of both Ružičková and O'Sullivan in various media. The two poets, however, stress a different aspect of the sculptural approach in their metacommentaries. While the words Ružičková uses concentrate on the

<sup>11</sup> As she writes in her *riverrunning* (*realisations* in her *Palace of Reptiles*, "[i]n 1988, after having been involved in the transformative / experience of working on a television film on Beuys, / [she] stepped out, away from the city to the moorland / impress of tongue" (O'Sullivan 2003: 67).

process of deletion, of chipping off bits of material and primarily bring to mind traditional (or votive and folk) sculpture, O'Sullivan's conceptualisation shifts towards an intimate merging of techniques and materials, the "ongoing dissolving / deformation of the verbal / visual / sculptural into one practice" which is more in accord with contemporary sculpture as well as with the soft sculptures she produced until the mid-1990s and that can also be observed in *murmur*, especially in the pages that contain scans of torn paper sewn onto a new sheet of paper (O'Sullivan, Olsen 2004). Despite their differences, these two descriptions have the power to shed light on both poetics discussed here.

In resonance with O'Sullivan's amalgamating view, it becomes clear that both poetics more directly communicate with forms of contemporary sculpture. Poems can thus appear to be installations in the interiors of the book's pages – that is how Mandy Bloomfield reads *red shifts* – and indeed they also were, privately or publicly, installed<sup>12</sup>. Some parts of the books, on the other hand, communicate with land art – Perloff (2011: 131) finds "rock formations" in *red shifts* and the visuals in Nóra Ružičková's *Osnova a útok* ('*Warp and Weft*') exteriorise the contents of the book by referrals to undergrowth, coral-like structures, roots, rhizomes, shrubs, and branches. The evocative images of body parts in their works might find their counterparts in Adriana Varejão's hyper-realistic pieces and the textile-like treatment of the visual and textual together with the motifs of repression, echo Cecilia Vicuña's artwork.

Ružičková's emphasis of the glyptic method, on the other hand, points to the potential violence of the creative process, the "sculptor's physical struggle with highly resistant materials", as Bloomfield puts it in the context of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong* (Bloomfield 2016: 199). In quite a literal sense, the sculpting of the word is very palpably present in *murmur*'s seemingly crippled lexemes. The text is carved from words from which parts have been chiselled away, but are still in view ("re- / semblances (re-" [O'Sullivan 2011: 36], "stutt ERR" [39]), others that are cut to the bone with only a remembrance of the possible pasts adhering to their bodies and are often iconic ("rupt/" [36], "chiz" [65]), words into which holes have been drilled ("b-o-o-m-i-n-g" [3]), words that have been partly carved to expose their entrails ("deciphERRS" [3], "rinsING WEAVING" [7]), words as root carvings that expose meaning-generating deficiencies ("jointd" [6]), words as reliefs with shallow cuts ("Reversal" [25]). In some places, the glyptic and plastic methods combine and the text works with multi-coloured, phrase-like material ("overlippage" [36], "gestage" [41], "racticEOF" [75]). With respect to Ružičková's poetry, the carving of the expressive means usually concentrates less on the vertical archaeological searchings within the word or morpheme and works more on the syntactic level. In her early works, parts of the presumed fictional world – scenes, narratives, conflicts – are removed and what remains are its fragmentary

<sup>12</sup> The second part of Nóra Ružičková's *práce & intimita* ('*work & intimacy*') was originally co-produced with Marianna Mlynářčiková and accompanied by a reading and performance first presented at Intermedia.bb festival on 27 October 2009 as a textual installation and Maggie O'Sullivan constructed both *red shifts* and *murmur* on a wall.



glimpses. What is less noticeable perhaps and only steps to the foreground under the light of *murmur*'s word-sculptures, is the fact that in *Osnova a útok* ('*Warp and Weft*') the disintegration, the cutting of the language also permeates to the level of the text's graphical features which are saturated with hyphens, dashes, slashes, italics, bold, non-standard capitalisation, ellipsis, text *sous rature*, etc. and one can also observe the carving of the word similar to Maggie O'Sullivan's: "ko(z)mického čupenia [of co(s)mic squatting]" (Ružičková 2000: 8), "vonku / vnútri / vlese [outside / inside / inwood]" (10), "žiera-vina [corro-sin]" (14), "predpohybu [premotion]" (18), "znovu-na-stole-ná [re-es-table-ished]" (19).

With regards to both poetics, it might be argued that it is this sculptural force, the struggle and violence, the chiselling away from the safe and known and attempts at discovering the underlying unknown (still partially occluded and covered in sharp remains of the chipped off material) emerging from the poem that leaves some readers at a loss, demanding more links<sup>13</sup>. Sometimes it even scares them (Duncan 2003: 266). Maggie O'Sullivan's poetry is notorious for its 'difficulty' even within the experimental literary scene and reviewers of Ružičková's works repeatedly stressed they needed more information that would make the poem more referential and decipherable. Robert Sheppard observes that an encounter with O'Sullivan's texts (in performance) "can be a difficult experience to relate to", since it has the power to both "baffle *and* delight" (Sheppard 2005: 233). The extremes to which readerly reactions can be divided are also noted by Peter Middleton, who studied responses to O'Sullivan's *Giant Yellow*, published in the magazine *Responses* in 1991<sup>14</sup>. These ranged from abuse (with some readers calling it verbal butchery or worse) to high praise (Middleton 2005: 44-45). One of the reasons causing the lack of understanding and empathy in absorbing O'Sullivan's poetry he sees in the fact that hers is a poetry that makes performance its integral part and the readers that have not seen her perform are unable "to feel part of the implicate readership" (*Ibid.*: 46). Another is, as Charles Bernstein observes, the unfixeness of reading: "Each time I listen to 'To Our Own Day,' [...] I listen anew, almost without recall, the combinations of unexpected words create a sensation of newly created, permutating sense-making at each listening. I keep thinking I will 'get it' (and be finished with it), but I hear different things, make different associations, each time I listen" (Bernstein 2011: 7). Compared to O'Sullivan's radically shattered, but also healing verse (surgical procedures aim towards recovery; in performance, the earnest fluency of the reading similarly 'heals' the injured words), Nóra Ružičková's poetry of the period followed here is markedly more coherent. However, in the Slovak context of the 1990s and early 2000s, the level of innovation and disintegration of the traditional poetics that is characteristic of her writing was similarly seen as a materialisation of a sharply radical practice. Many of the reviews of her first book *Mikronauti* ('*Micronauts*'), a collection which did not abandon

<sup>13</sup> The demand for a higher degree of referentiality was voiced several times with regards to the poetry of Nóra Ružičková, e.g. in the review of her debut by Ján Gavura (1999: 40).

<sup>14</sup> The magazine was edited by Steven Pereira and Anthony Rollinson. In 1992, the individual issues from the previous year were published in *Complete Responses* (Pereira, Rollinson 1992).

a number of the traditional means of poetic expression (most importantly, the self-scrutinising lyric ‘I’ and a relatively high degree of discernibility of the setting and underlining narrative), in one way or another commented on its ‘difficulty’. Reviewers admitted being utterly defeated by the poems, criticised a deficit of information that has an effect on the intelligibility of the poems and noted the disorganised nature of the lyric (Bokníková 1999, Gavura 1999, Kasarda 1998)<sup>15</sup>. Apart from the rather slim tradition of linguistically innovative writing (and lack of modes of conceptual handling of such poetry), the general (but not universal) uneasiness with which Ružičková’s poetry (and experimental poetry as such) was received can also be seen as the result of one of the peculiarities of small literature – and a literature recovering from an era of limited freedom of expression and information exchange at that – namely the weaker encapsulation of individual modes of poetic practice. While the “division between two kinds of poetry” Peter Middleton (2004: 771) writes about in his overview of poetry after 1970 in Britain is “deep and sometimes hostile”, out of several divisions by which Slovak poetry is characterised, the linguistically innovative versus traditional is often hostile, but not always so deep<sup>16</sup>. That is also the reason why many reactions to Ružičková’s poetry – including her later books – have been written by proponents of the more traditional lyric and therefore repeat the complaints about its inaccessibility (Trizna 2012). However, overall, her poetry has been affirmatively accepted by all relevant agents of the post-2000 period in the Slovak literary field and her latest books of poetry receive positive critical responses (Gavura 2014; Hostová 2019; Passia, Taranenková 2014; Šrank 2012; Urbanová 2019; Želinský 2013).

When looking at O’Sullivan’s and Ružičková’s poetry in this way, the method of deletion – the removal and chiselling away – appears to be happening in two directions. On the one hand, the poetries shatter the pre-constructed language, invested with strongly rooted power relationships, break off pieces of the narratives that do not allow for voicing the muted (the unspeakable or the oppressed) and create, in the written-all-over world, fissures through which this paradigmatic difference, the invisible, the unintelligible or non-existent can come forth. In an opposing movement, the carving forces dismantle the silence of the white page, uncovering the fact that silence and blankness are relative and that in order to make heard what appears to be silence, one only needs to remove some of the louder, more obvious layers. The verse then emerges, bleeds into existence on the sharp boundaries between the broken pieces of language (and narratives) and the cut page.

<sup>15</sup> Naturally, not all reviewers were unprepared for such textual practices – quite a few of them (Macsovszky 1999; Oates-Indruchová 1999; Šrank 1999, 2000) were very promptly able to grasp the staccato beauty and depth of Ružičková’s writing.

<sup>16</sup> If Middleton mentions five poets (Roy Fisher, W. p. Graham, Christopher Middleton, Edwin Morgan, and Denise Riley) who are received on both sides of what he sees as modernist / postmodernist divide, in the much smaller literature in Slovakia, we could currently also find at least five such well-established and widely read authors (Mária Ferenčuhová, Michal Habaj, Mila Haugová, Katarína Kucbelová, and Ivan Štrpka).

Returning to O’Sullivan’s treatment of the sculptural as an integral part of the complex “sculptural painterly textual and aural”, the acoustic qualities of the word-sculpture come forth with a renewed vigour (O’Sullivan 2007). The visual form of the sculpted word is also the score of the poetry in performance:

using *different typefaces*, CAPITALISED WORDS, / underlinings, varying sizes &  
**darknesses** of letters & words to  
 pictorialise some thing of the sound <sup>nesses</sup> and weights of the words

(O’Sullivan 1997)<sup>17</sup>

By comparing the visual and aural / performance versions of *murmur*, one can discern some patterns and correlations between the realisations. The sculpted words using both miniscule and majuscule as well as words that use subscript tend to have a break in them that accentuates the dual meaning, the verses printed in red are voiced in a slightly more emotional tone, larger fonts are often louder, diagonally placed lines are frequently signs for gradation of the rising tempo and force while capitalising of the initial letters shapes them into separate nominal sentences and multiple full stops in a line signal the chopping of fluent pronunciation. However, the “bibliographical code” or “material meaningfulness” of the visual page seems to leave a remainder that is open to interpretation (Bloomfield 2016: 5, McGann 1991: 56). So even though “deciphERRS” and “exrescen<sub>=cc</sub>” are both acoustically marked by a brief pause between the parts, the varying visual representations allow for a more complex reading. Upon encounter with the majuscule of the first sculpted word, the reader brings to the interpretation a memory of the use of capital letters in public notices prohibiting certain activities or informing of dangers as well as their use in personal communication where they signal strong emphasis or shouting. Besides enfolding the opposite meanings of “deciphering” and “erring”, the peculiarity of the carving technique encodes an emphatic warning against making superficial or prejudiced conclusions (O’Sullivan 2011: [3], [11]). The subscript in “exrescen<sub>=cc</sub>” also brings iconicity to the text with the beginning of the word being noticeably larger than the “<sub>=cc</sub>” element and the reader might also speculate, encouraged by the equals sign and the overall motivic network of *murmur*, about seeing echoes – one of the meanings the abbreviation CE stands for is “cardiac enlargement”. On the other hand, O’Sullivan’s poetry in performance also releases significations that cannot be collapsed into the pages of the book. The aural stratum adds the mesmerising rhythmicality of the voicing, its urgency, melodicy, and almost narrative fluency, but also the background noises (such as the subtle rattling of the cups and soft buzz of refrigerators and coffee machines if the reading takes place in a café). It also gives the opportunity to incorporate other sounds – like the song which the poet used in the 2003 reading at Birkbeck College in London (O’Sullivan, Olsen 2004). The visual presence of the performing poet also takes

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank Peter Middleton for lending me the unpublished manuscript and Maggie O’Sullivan for allowing me to quote from it.

part in the production of meaning – it can, for example, shift attention to certain parts of the verbal matter through the choice of clothes, as the audience could experience during her reading in Southampton in April 2018 when she exchanged the reds her readers know from existing documentation of her readings for a yellow blouse<sup>18</sup>.

Although both poets use the metaphor of sculpture in describing their creative methods slightly differently, their conceptualisations have the power to illuminate each other's work. This parallel reading slightly lifts their poetries from their localities and opens them to less expected interpretations. Similarly intriguing in this respect are techniques used in the production of textile, strongly evoked in both poetries. These will be looked at in the following section.

#### 4. *Threading Gashes*

In her explorations into female creativity, Susan Gubar interprets the exhibition of blood-stained bridal sheets in Isak Dinesen's 1957 story *The Blank Page* as "both a museum of women's paintings (each sheet displays a unique, abstract design and is mounted in a heavy frame) and a library of women's literary works (the bloodstains are the ink on these woven sheets of paper)" (Gubar 1981: 248). What makes the medium of the thread – woven, embroidered, knitted or sewn – especially interesting in the context of women's poetry, is its inherent contradiction – the fact that, as summed up by Rozsika Parker in the context of embroidery, it is "both an instrument of oppression and an important source of creative satisfaction" (Parker 2010: XII). The poetries discussed here subsume the long memory of the previously explored proximity of text and textile in the etymological as well as feminist tradition. The textile-textual element serves as a complex sign, activating investigations of the tensions between materiality and abstraction (in certain ways also questioning the arbitrariness of the sign) and interpretative searchings into (linguistic, literary, social, economic) histories with an emphasis on the barely recorded ones. In *murmur* and *Osnova a útok* ('*Warp and Weft*'), triggers for these frames are coded on the referential (this has been touched upon in the previous sections), typographical (series of dashes or polyhyphenated words bibliographically enact sewing) as well as the visual and 'sculptural' level (illustrations in *Osnova a útok* ['*Warp and Weft*'] resemble textiles – carpets, entangled threads; the parts of the torn page in *murmur* are held in place with stitches).

Textile-textual reading is activated on the very first material encounter with the books – they both use textile visuals on their covers. *murmur* reproduces a detail of black lace "hand stitched jet beads on black lace (detail) antique gown, provenance unknown, found in Portobello Road Market, London, late 1980s" – as the copyright page asserts – and in doing so prefigures the procedures of mourning, signalled in the title as well as the book's techniques of appropriation (found or overheard words and phrases and their fragments) and, at the

<sup>18</sup> The reading was part of the 'Entropics' series organised by Sarah Hayden and took place on 25 April 2018 in Metricks café in Southampton.

same time, shifts focus towards women's bodies (the reproduction comes from a woman's dress). In doing so, the dress – its part – clothes the body of the book filled with mourning language and imagery. The detail also reveals not only the abstract, organically symmetrical pattern, sewn on the lace, but also gaps formed by its beads and the blank spaces, enclosed by the fine threads of the lace. *Osnova a útok* ('Warp and Weft'), on the other hand, does not work with found imagery, but uses the author's own experimental painting on its cover. The visual looks like a detail or a blow-up of disintegrating woven fabric made of rust-coloured threads whose regularity has been compromised – the threads are of uneven thickness and length, they have been torn by wearing or, perhaps, unravelled on purpose, they form the "[t] issue that loses its stable structure" (Ružičková 2000: 66)<sup>19</sup>. The image creates an impression of being three-dimensional by the shadows the threads cast on a yellowing white background and the colour of the material that resembles old blood, dried on a white sheet. The blank spaces, formed by the threads, seem to be enlarging and gaining prominence over what is generally supposed to be the figure as opposed to the background, as "the female I" is "[g]azing into the fissure / it is supposed to fill with itself" (*Ibid.*: 66)<sup>20</sup>. The fissures, cracks in the textile of the discourse become the objects, the gashes being sewn on the background of the body: "I'm sewing on a Stigma / (it has the form of a fissure)" (*Ibid.*: 68)<sup>21</sup>. Looking back at the cover of *murmur* through this prism, the part of the black dress can be read as clothing that comes after the tragedy of someone's death (and signifies the emotional pain experienced by those who were left living), but also opens to the interpretation in which it is a visualisation of *murmur*'s "stitching/ed breath raw sutures / -flayed black surgical in-", a visualisation of a physical stitched-on wound, anticipating the texts' collapsing of the physical and emotional pain into one, encoded in images like "wired foetal heart" (O'Sullivan 2011: [41]). The opening visuals thus act as gateways to poetics as "threading gash[es]" (*Ibid.*: [46]), bleeding (but also healing) stitched (on) wounds, places and a non-places, heavily invested with meaning, but also gaping emptinesses from which the muted, the unknown can come forth and become.

### 5. Conclusion

Texts, practices, and locales which find themselves – in one way or another – in a peripheral position are often buried behind barriers of silences which make it almost impossible to draw parallels. Identifying enclaves of mutually resonating spaces and poetic practices – without necessarily tracing strict genetic links – can facilitate a comparative close reading that is able to overcome this muteness and, in result, bring new insights to the understanding of the paralleled works and their contexts. Post-1989 Slovak women's experimental poetic practice as embodied in Nóra Ružičková's verse and poetry written by a woman poet based in Britain and linked to the British Poetry Revival in the 1970s

<sup>19</sup> In the original: "Tkanivo, ktoré stráca svoju ustálenú štruktúru".

<sup>20</sup> In the original: "ženské ja [...] Pozerá sa do trhliny / ktorú má sebou vyplniť".

<sup>21</sup> In the original: "prišívam si Stigmú / (má podobu trhliny)".

proved to provide such links. Maggie O'Sullivan's *murmur* and Nóra Ružičková's *Mikronauti* ('Micronauts') and *Osnova a útok* ('Warp and Weft') use a surprisingly high number of similar techniques and motifs that point to a legacy of women's writing and the innovative modernist and avant-garde textual practices and cross-media work. Upon discovering these, the reader finds similar substrates nurturing the poetics (modernist and experimental tradition, feminisms in their various concretisations) and comparable positioning of their voices in the local poetic landscapes, aided by an interest in similar poetic practices (especially with regards to creative strategies that dissolve the frontiers of aesthetic categories and forms) and an endeavour to make the mute(d) speak. Several affinities between their writing were discussed here and further investigation would reveal additional ones, springing in part from the poets' intense explorations of various media and the profound engagement of both oeuvres with the ethical<sup>22</sup>. Mirroring the two poetics in a comparative reading helped strengthen the explanatory force of parts of their rootings (such as the position of the woman poet in the literary field) and illuminate facets of interpretations that might have otherwise gone unnoticed (e.g. the uncovering of the word-sculptures in O'Sullivan or reading Ružičková's early poetry in the context of contemporary sculpture). In result, it provided a possibility to briefly connect two culturally, economically, and linguistically distant poetics and bring them into a rare dialogue.

### Literature

- Alaimo 2010: S. Alaimo, *The Naked Word. The Trans-Corporeal Ethics of the Protesting Body*, "Women & Performance. A Journal of Feminist Theory", XX, 2010, 1, pp. 15-36.
- Apter 2006: E. Apter, "Je ne crois pas beaucoup à la littérature comparée". *Universal Poetics and Postcolonial Comparatism*, in: H. Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore 1990, pp. 54-62.
- Armstrong 2004: I. Armstrong, *Maggie O'Sullivan. The Lyrical Language of the Parallel Tradition*, "Women: A Cultural Review", XV, 2004, 1, pp. 57-66.
- Bernstein 2011: Ch. Bernstein, *Colliderings. O'Sullivan's Medleyed Verse*, in: Ch. Emery (ed.), *The Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 5-9.

<sup>22</sup> One such similarity is the examination of "classification as a form of consumerist ownership" Tarlo (2008) mentions in the context of O'Sullivan's *A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts* (1985). In Ružičková's more recent and markedly more (post)conceptual works she often co-creates with Marianna Mlynářčiková, the explorations into (academic) language's ruthlessly executed powers of classification are pronouncedly acute (see, e.g., their bilingual and transmedial *Exercise with Monographs*, which was realised as an installation and published as a pamphlet, 2016).

- Bloomfield 2011: M. Bloomfield, *Maggie O'Sullivan's Material Poetics of Salvagings in red shifts and murmur*, in: Ch. Emery (ed.), *The Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 10-35.
- Bloomfield 2016: M. Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics. Word, Image, History*, Tuscaloosa 2016.
- Bokníková 1999: A. Bokníková, *Priveľa programu a niekoľko veršov prenikavého pozorovania*, "Aspekt", VII, 1999, 2, pp. 189-190.
- Casanova 2007: P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, transl. by M.D. Debevoise, Cambridge (MA)-London 2007.
- Duncan 2003: A. Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, Cambridge 2003.
- Gavura 1999: J. Gavura, *O ponuke procesuálnej introspekcie*, "Dotyky", XI, 1999, 2, pp. 40-41.
- Gavura 2012: J. Gavura, *Sochy, sochy, premeňte sa (na básneň)...*, "Romboid", XLVII, 2012, 10, pp. 22-25.
- Gavura 2014: J. Gavura, *Slovenská poézia po postmoderne – k básnickým zbierkam 2012-2014*, "Romboid", LXI, 2014, (5-6), pp. 88-94.
- Gubar 1981: S. Gubar *"The Blank Page" and Female Creativity*, in: E. Abel (ed.), *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Chicago 1981 (= "Critical Inquiry", VII, 2), pp. 246-263.
- Hampson, Edwards 2016: R. Hampson, K. Edwards (eds.), *CLASP. Late-Modernist Poetry in London in the 1970s*, Bristol 2016.
- Hostová 2014: I. Hostová, *Nóra Ružičková (1977). Práce & intimita*, in: M. Součková, J. Gavura, R. Kitta (eds.), *TOP 5 2012. Slovenská literárna a výtvarná scéna 2012 v odbornej reflexii*, Prešov 2014, pp. 78-89.
- Hostová 2019: I. Hostová, *Vyvoľ si život*, XXIX, "Knižná revue", 3, pp. 22-23.
- Kasarda 1998: M. Kasarda, *Medzi presnosťou a mnohoznačnosťou*, "Dotyky", X, 1998, 9-10, pp. 14-15.
- Macsovszky 1999: P. Macsovszky, *Nóra Ružičková: Mikronauti*, "Romboid", XXXIV, 1999, 3, pp. 41-43.
- McGann 1991: J.J. McGann, *The Textual Condition*, Princeton (NJ) 1991.
- Middleton 2004: P. Middleton, *Poetry after 1970*, in: L. Marcus, P. Nicholls (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 768-786.
- Middleton 2005: P. Middleton, *Distant Reading. Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, Tuscaloosa 2005.
- Middleton 2011: P. Middleton, *Preface*, in: M. O'Sullivan, *Murmur: Tasks of Mourning*, London 2011, pp. [1]-[2].
- Monk 2012: G. Monk, *CUSP. Recollections of Poetry in Transition*, Bristol 2012.

- Oates-Indruchová 1999: L. Oates-Indruchová, *Nóra Ružičková. Mikronauti*, “Romboid”, XXXIV, 1999, 3, pp. 41-43.
- O’Sullivan 1997: M. O’Sullivan, “so –”, Talk at the International Seminar “Different British Voices – Poetry, Locality, Plurality”, Brno, 13.9.1997 and at “Sub Vocive Colloquium”, London, 18.10. 1997. Unpublished manuscript, pp. 9-10.
- O’Sullivan 1999: O’Sullivan, *Interview*, in: A. Brown (ed.), *Binary Myths 2*, Devon 1999, pp. 86-91.
- O’Sullivan 2003: M. O’Sullivan, *Palace of Reptiles*, Willowdale (ON) 2003.
- O’Sullivan 2007: M. O’Sullivan, *Working Note*, “How2”, III, 2007, 1 <[https://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_1/inconference/osullivannote.html](https://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_1/inconference/osullivannote.html)> (latest access: 12.04.2018).
- O’Sullivan 2011: M. O’Sullivan, *Murmur: Tasks of Mourning*, London 2011.
- O’Sullivan, Olsen 2004: O’Sullivan, D. Olsen, *Writing/Conversation. An Interview by Mail*, “How2”, II, 2004, 2, <[https://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/archive/online\\_archive/v2\\_2\\_2004/current/workbook/writing.ht](https://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v2_2_2004/current/workbook/writing.ht)> (latest access: 30.01.2019).
- O’Sullivan, Thurston 2011: M. O’Sullivan, S. Thurston, *An Interview*, in: Ch. Emery (ed.), *The Salt Companion to Maggie O’Sullivan*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 241-249.
- Parker 2010: R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London-New York 2010.
- Passia, Taranenková 2014: R. Passia, I. Taranenková (red.), *Hľadanie súčasnosti*, Bratislava 2014.
- Pereira, Rollinson 1992: S. Pereira, A. Rollinson, *Complete Responses*, Swansea 1992.
- Perloff 2011: M. Perloff, “*The Saturated Language of Red*”. *Maggie O’Sullivan and the Artist’s Book*, in: Ch. Emery (ed.), *The Salt Companion to Maggie O’Sullivan*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 123-135.
- Perry 2017: E. Perry, “*Routinely Herded Grief Can Never Feed the Livingsmothered*”. *Modes of Inarticulacy as Resistance in Maggie O’Sullivan’s murmur*, “Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry”, IX, 2017, pp. 1-26. Cf. <<https://poetry.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/biip.24/>> (latest access: 11.3.2018).
- Ráčová 2014: V. Ráčová, *Zdravie, mladost, vitalita. (Vy)kúpená identita. Nóra Ružičková: Práce & intimita*, in: E. Tučná (red.), *Invencie, interpretácie, mystifikácie V*, Nitra 2014, pp. 121-135.
- Ružičková 1998: N. Ružičková, *Mikronauti*, Banská Bystrica 1998.
- Ružičková 2000: N. Ružičková, *Osnova a útok*, Banská Bystrica 2000.
- Ružičková 2012: N. Ružičková, *Práce & intimita*, Bratislava 2012.
- Ružičková, Suchý 2012: N. Ružičková, V. Suchý, *Skrytý pôvab uberania*, “Knižná revue”, XXII, 2012, 23, p. 22.



- Sheppard 2005: R. Sheppard *The Poetry of Saying. British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000*, Liverpool 2005.
- Silliman 1981: R. Silliman, *Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World*, "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E", 1981, Supplement 3, pp. [1]-[11], cf. <<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/LANGUAGESupp3/LanguageSupp3.pdf>> (latest access: 11.04.2018).
- Šrank 1999: J. Šrank, *Objavovanie vnútorných vesmírov*, "Romboid", xxxiv, 1999, 1-2, pp. 111-113.
- Šrank 2000: J. Šrank, *Poklona mademoiselle Lazarus*, "Vlna", II, 2000, 4-5, pp. 142-145.
- Šrank 2012: J. Šrank, *Úsek častých úrazov*, "Romboid", XLVII, 2012, 10, pp. 22-25.
- Šrank 2013: J. Šrank, *Individualizovaná literatúra*, Bratislava 2013.
- Tarlo 2008: H. Tarlo, *Women and Eco-poetics. An Introduction in Context*, "How2", III, 2008, 2, <[https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/pdfs/tarlo\\_intro.pdf](https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/pdfs/tarlo_intro.pdf)> (latest access: 17.04.2018).
- Trizna 2012: P. Trizna, *Uviaznutie na plytčine obrazu*, "Romboid", XLII, 2012, 1, pp. 71-73.
- Urbanová 2019: E. Urbanová, *Je v tom čosi metafyzické*, "Platforma pre literatúru a výskum", 2019, <<https://plav.sk/node/14>> (latest access 12.5.2019).
- Želinský 2013: D. Želinský, *Mozog rozdelíme na male obňovzdorné misky*, "Glosolália", II, 2013, 1-2, pp. 89-91.

### Abstract

Ivana Hostová

*Fissuring into Existence. The Visceral, Sculptural, and Textile-Textual in the Poetry of Maggie O'Sullivan and Nóra Ružičková*

The paper, written in the spirit of Badiouian *comparatisme quand même* (Apter 2006), concentrates on establishing a detailed comparative basis between the poetry of a UK-based poet, Maggie O'Sullivan, and a Slovak author Nóra Ružičková, written at approximately the same time. Despite belonging to different generations and being part of different culturally and geopolitically literary landscapes, the two poets treat the language and other media in an uncannily similar fashion. Their poetries come together not only in images of writing through the wounded body, but also in the way they carve the language to make it voice what it had been suppressing as well as in their explorations of the relationship between the text and textile.

### Keywords

Maggie O'Sullivan; Nóra Ružičková; Slovak Poetry; British Poetry; Radical Writing.