

TO VILENICA DESETNICA FOR THE ROAD

1. On a Persisting Miracle (1989)

Whenever I find myself in one of the megalopolises, those, as they say, world hubs of events, particularly cultural ones, in Paris, London, Moscow, New York, I have the feeling that I have both come from a miracle and am witness to a miracle. I do not have a reasonable reply for any stranger as to how it is possible that, in a world where mightier nations with their own national culture and even mightier civilizations have vanished from our history, this tiny handful of people in Slovenia has remained for more than a thousand years, despite losing its independence at the start, perseveringly developing all the elements of nationality from language and literature, to institutions, theatres, an economy, politics and ultimately a statehood for the plenitude of which there is now being waged a final and decisive battle in which the whole nation is taking part. I agree this is a miracle. Nevertheless I can

also sense similar miracles in all other countries of Central Europe, and in towns similar to Ljubljana on both the human and cultural-historical plane, from Trieste on the Adriatic to Gdansk on the Polish Baltic. In a period when so called European civilization is also partly responsible for the disappearance or at least the fatal illness of some national cultures and languages, not one town, not one people, no language and its literature has died out within this region we call Central Europe. On the contrary the miracle persists. The Slovene example is in a great deal probably the most eloquent and characteristic example of this miracle.

We Slovenes barely suffice for one sleepy, boring suburb of one of those megalopolises, even the whole country, which appears spacious only because of its hills and dales and alpine pastures, is hardly much bigger than the most expansive of these megalopolises. Probably never more than the one and a half million that set the original capital of their first country, lost to legend after two centuries,

upon the shores of Lake Balaton in modern day Hungary; that elected their Princes by the polis principle, enthroning them upon a stone in an empty circle; this rite, which much later, on another continent, contributed to the inspiration of the writer of the Declaration of Independence, lived on for centuries in what is modern day Austria in an area where as late as the 19th century there flourished the strongest Slovene cultural centre. A people whose first written words, a prayer in song, lay undiscovered for a millennium in some Bavarian diocesan archives. For whom the foundations of a national literature and contemporary national consciousness were established during the 16th century not only by the sixteenth Bible translation in the world, but also in their own diaspora, by the Slovene Protestants with their own books, which were then all burned, except for the Bible, during the Counter Reformation. For centuries the bright young men of this people left for universities abroad, becoming university professors and rectors of universities from Vienna to Padua, adding to imperial honour as renowned musicians, scholars and so on, but whose own town was a part of the cultural cross-currents of Europe. With one of the first philharmonic societies of the continent, Ljubljana could count Ludwig van Beethoven and Joseph Haydn among

its members, while its orchestra was conducted by Mahler. By the turn of this century, with more than one hundred thousand Slovenes, it was American Cleveland, with its Slovene newspapers, theatrical, political and social life, that had the largest number of Slovene inhabitants, not Ljubljana. After a four year resistance to Nazi occupation, beginning on 27th April 1941, which was like that of Biblical David in its odds, this diaspora still continues today. Alongside two universities in Slovenia itself, there are enough Slovene scientists and professors throughout the world to staff a third university. Of 350 members of the Slovene Writers' Association, some tens of Slovene writers and poets live beyond Slovenia's borders amidst minorities in Italy and Austria and on other continents. For forty years the country has been resisting Bolshevization and is at this precise moment stubbornly attempting to introduce the rudimentary foundations of a civil society and a modern statehood gravitating toward a renewed Europe.

Where does this perseverance come from? Not from a region that could be any definite geopolitical notion.

Nor, as Peter Handke would express it even more decisively, is it even a meteorological concept. The Central European phenomenon can only be found upon the maps of the

spirit. These are not maps of conquests, conquests ideological or civilizational technical, or even Messianic ones, although all these and others constantly pressurize this "boundlessness" of spirit in the form of many and very different national cultures. Central Europe is essentially a corrective to two products of European civilization, a corrective since the 4th century division between Rome and Byzantium, and at this moment it appears to be a corrective between eastern ideological, or Byzantine Bolshevik imperialism on the one hand, and western technocratic and computerized cyberneticism on the other. Among these small but extremely persistent Central European nations full of scepticism, humour and resilience, but cognisant of how to preserve their own identity through adaptability, the preservation of an ever present uncertainty, patience, tolerance, an understanding of differences and also compliance has been a vital principle. Whatever penetrated this zone was most often also victorious, whether from East or West. But it always received fresh and different features on the way, as if adapting to a different human scale. It lost its sharp thrust, as if *sole* and *first* were no longer of importance, giving way to *another* and *different*. This was not *progress* following its own linearity any more. It had become a *process* wherein the *cyclical*

was suddenly more important than linearity and "progress". This corrective, I believe, is no longer a guarantee of survival only for Central Europe, but is also becoming vitally decisive for European civilization as a whole. Such a view of the world and such a vital sense give rise to other matters and significance. Sometimes the actual view held by some Central European is the same or similar to that in the East or West but the emphasis is somewhat different, the point of view has moved, the undertone receives a different content, all reveals another perspective. Such a perspective sets off different energy currents and whenever we are talking of literature also a different style. Death too becomes a surety for a new life, an affirmation of the uniqueness and at the same time a vital need of historical memory. This sense of process reaches down deeply, extracting from, as it were, chthonian roots and strata, bringing to life saps and hues that cause strange chemical reactions in what is forced from the East and what penetrates from the West.

This Central European particularity started to appear more clearly immediately after the Renaissance, during the Counter Reformation and Baroque, and began to form one of the most characteristic traits of its own nature: namely that it is in this spirit of subordination and acceptance that it finds its own movement. As it

gnaws away at progression and linearity it modifies and remoulds itself in its state of process and sense of the cyclical, retaining and impressing upon everything its own characteristic which contains something of an intangible and multifaceted femininity. Possibly historians do not surmise in vain that in these territories, on the routes of all the European migrations, many a race exterminated the men and male offspring, accepting however the females of vanquished nations into subjection in order to augment their own tribes. Sixth century Slovenes were probably no exception when dealing with Illyrian or Celtic women, or, even further back, women of the ancient Christian population or female Roman citizens. The underworld had not been destroyed, it knew death but also renewed birth, despair, scepticism, obscure hope and a derisive persistence.

So that it seems that the most obvious but at the same time the slipperiest characteristic of this Central Europeanness is paradox. It appears that there is something almost schizophrenic in the very foundations of this Central Europeanness, but present as a healthgiving constituent, let us say again paradoxically but quite seriously. To be this, to be that, to become something else, but something again one's very own. We cannot overlook the fact that in the foundations of this civilization's cultural

tradition there is Catholicism, a catholicism squeezed between a block of Protestantism on one side and Orthodoxy on the other. It was precisely this Catholicism, international and Latin and Roman catholicism, which in a way gave Copernicus, and Hus, and, not least, the Slovene protestants, which preserved and encourage the national languages, cultures, and, in a way as well, literatures. And brought about Kafka and Freud (here, of all places!) and heresies of all sorts, religious and scientific and political; in this tradition, as well, most recently Solidarnost, the anti nuclear movement, the Hungarian, Slovene, Croatian... democratic pluralism. Paradox on top of paradox in the midst of a tired and fed up world: these small, stubborn nations after winters want to celebrate Spring.

Like Polish, Czech, Hungarian and other Central European versions of Romanticism, Symbolism, Modernism, etc., the Slovene versions were also different from those in the West or the East, as is the contemporary Slovene response to Postmodernism (whatever that may mean).

Modifications, Slovene modifications in Central Europe. The existentialism in the plays of Primož Kozak, who, without a doubt, did take inspiration from Sartre as well, and yet, in *Afera*, let us say, we do not find just the moral philosophical dispute about

the dirtying of hands inside the formulae of some political ideology; beyond all this, the drama acquires entirely new dimensions and intensity, the grief and keen edge, not at all moralistic, of an existentially ontological fight for a certain autonomy and identity as ideology breaks down in the midst of a struggle for an actual national and at the same time individual survival.

The poet Edvard Kocbek, who died in 1981 aged 77, an existentialist and adherent of personalism, a friend of Mounier since his prewar years in Paris, a Catholic yet one of the most prominent leaders of the war resistance, expressed a sense of terror, anxiety, fear in his poetry, yet also the yearning for an inner mystical freedom. In some miraculous way his Partisan poems turn the harsh reality of combat into an illumination of existential and metaphysical fate. Almost his complete opposite was the novelist Vitomil Zupan, Kocbek's contemporary in years and military and literary destiny (both were persecuted by the regime after the war). In his novels, particularly in one of the most vital war novels of the Second World War known to me, *Minuet for a Twenty-five Shot Guitar*, Zupan portrays with a forceful sensitivity, passionate integrity and an almost cynical removal from every ideology and politics, the merciless, inhuman, yet in this writer's vision so very hu-

man dance of death in which, when confronted with the face of terror and violence, man only as individual remains true to himself. The same forceful resilience is the link woven into the erotic vitality of his autobiographical novel *Levitati* about life in a so called socialist prison.

Of the younger generation becoming adult after the war and beginning to publish works during the struggle against what has been called socialist realism, for a more modern style of expression and particularly for free avowal and artistic formation, permit me to mention the playwright Dominik Smole, the novelist Lojze Kovačič, the poets Dane Zajc and Gregor Strniša, a group amidst whom I myself am numbered. Smole's plays *Krst* (Baptism), *Zlati čevljički* (The Tiny Golden Shoes) and others, particularly *Antigone*, are, above all, a confrontation between a vivid reality, which conceals supertemporal values, and abstract ideals that desire, as dramatized in the plays, to rape the human community and the individual, with their short-lived, temporal, mortal ideologies. *Antigone*, in which the main heroine never steps onto the stage, dramatizes and radicalizes the inner presence of the natural order founded on the universality of divine laws, the laws of metaphysics and irrationality, in contrast to a "state" or "world" order based on the power of authority and the au-

thority of power.

Dane Zajc, the poet whose books were at first received as gloomy, depressive and destructive, has inspiration reminiscent of biblical supplication, celebrating the world of death, destruction and erotic death. This is suggestive poetry about the world and man falling into decay, coming from the twilight depths of a conviction about the immovable, fundamental crisis of existence of modern man. Had the poet Gregor Stрниša written his brilliant poetry, also brilliant in form, in English for instance, I am convinced that I would have translated Stрниša into Slovene, as I have Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Ted Hughes, for Stрниša was a world class poet. Stрниša, who died a year ago, was a poet of transcendence, of the metaphysics of time and timelessness. His poetry was a ceaseless attempt at a poetic articulation as he himself calls it of a "consciousness of Space", which could be comprehended only through the poetically imaginative perceptions of the "naked eye", without the protective spectacles of a spatial-temporal model, as the chasm of the dialectical relationship between appearance and reality yawns before man. It was a comprehension, or better, a presentiment of the bounds of the conscious. It is hardly unusual then that Stрниša called his poems ballads.

Prose writer Lojze Kovačič, with

his numerous autobiographical narratives, represents a singular phenomenon. In his writerly eroticism and his epic investigation of the instinctive he has for years been doing something Postmodernists theorize about a great deal. Although he writes about his own life, his is no Proust-like search for lost time, but a bloody, forceful progress through fragments, events, people, scraps of occurrences that is not infrequently terribly harsh upon his personal identity, an identity formed by love, hate, death, violence, blood, mud and daily coarseness. Kovačič batters his way through the infinitely dense layers of Slovene life during the years of the war and the decades of utterly variegated physical and spiritual violence that followed, in order to delve beneath them to himself, in the course of which this writer's self is moulded into an exceptionally malleable literary figure before the reader's eyes.

This "chthonic" and irrational world I have touched upon is present, for instance, in the plays and tales of Rudi Šeligo, in which he deals with the dramatic struggle between the rationalized and technologized world that is "society" and the marginal people, the outcasts, those women in whom the ancient "sacrality", the archetypal and the secretive come to light, so threatening and destructive to "orderliness" and "profitability".

The poetry of Tomaž Šalamun has

made poetry most convincing through the poet - subject, drowning in the floating, hovering fragmentariness of the world, a world made new in an ecstasy of poetic transformation.

Among the youngest may I mention at least the poet Aleš Debeljak. His verses in their nostalgic descriptiveness evoke the icy travail of melancholy, the melancholy of silence etched into the crisis of intimacy; they call up the restlessness in the palimpsest like mortality, which laconically catalogues the pain of things, of beings, of nature's fragmented phenomena, of the world, of existence, of every occurrence which transcends itself within us and around us. Of every persistent, miraculous occurrence.

2. The Writers' Subterranean Cathedral Vilenica (1991)

The annual international literary award VILENICA is granted by an autonomous jury composed of independent experts relying in their work upon a wide international circle of consultants who select a poet, writer or playwright from one of the Central European literatures as a recipient of the award. The award is bestowed by the President of the Association of Slovene writers at the end

of the second week in September and represents the solemn conclusion of a three day long meeting, consisting of a symposium on a chosen theme, accompanied by collective performances, authors' readings and, of course, the most fruitful: friendly talks among a hundred highly distinguished poets, writers, essayists, editors and publicists from 14 countries, from the Baltic republics, Poland and Germany in the north, to Italy, Croatia and Slovenia in the south.

The award is handed to the winner in the place whose name it bears and whose characteristics provide for the unusual solemnity of an otherwise informal, relaxed artistic meeting: in the karstic cave Vilenica. In 1826 this natural curiosity was the first subterranean karstic cave in the world open for public tourist visits by an official royal decree. From the clearing on the edge of the woods the audience and writers descend old, time-worn stairs carved in stone and enter the first of three successive caves. The experience is one of entering a huge, resounding, real subterranean cathedral with its high arches between the pillars, and tender but at the same time wildly fantasied sculptures of stalactites. The gentle pastel rose colour of Vilenica cave justifies its name, which means: the place where fairies live - mysterious and unpredictable mythological beings elusive to the forms of ordinary life.

When the Central European literati first gathered in Vilenica in 1986, this subterranean gathering bore some of the symbolism pertinent at the time. Vilenica was probably the first place where exiled writers, whose works were smuggled back to their home countries, met with "home" writers and their works - unofficial, alternative, "underground" literature. The symposium table in Lipica, home of the famous Lipizzaners, the friendly karstic inn at Štanjel, the court of the Duino castle, the theatre in Trieste... these were places for talks and literary readings for the guests of Vilenica - for Ewe Lipski from Warsaw as well as for Eduard Goldstücker, the former president of Czechoslovakian writers, now living in Essex, who met after twenty years Ivan Klima from Prague, Jan Skácel from Brno...

Although Vilenica has now lost this "underground" symbolism, its more important real and eternal subterraneity, or if we use a more appropriate Greek word, chthonian fundamentality of literature, poetry and story-telling persists: where, if not in those dark worlds in individuals and society, worlds resisting rationalistic, scientific and political models, do these creative forces trying to artistically mould and articulate their mysterious depths originate? In those worlds of unconsciousness, subconscientiousness, irrationality, etc., in indi-

viduals or in larger communities, dwell sombre and destructive powers, but also spiritual forces and aspirations. With its mysterious miraculousness of a subterranean cathedral Vilenica remains the place offering to literature the miraculous experience of poetical expression, poetical cognizance and flashes of insight.

Leaving behind the visual and political attractiveness of VILENICA, its fundamental mission becomes more and more discernible and important: to call attention to spiritual artistic experiences and remarkable aesthetic attainments developing in Central European national and cultural environments. This area of predominantly small nations and nationalities from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea and from Bern to Belgrade is full of spiritual, cultural differences and differences in tradition - but for all these differences, for all these pluralities, tolerance, nonaggressiveness and mutual understanding were always characteristic, even essential. Can we then say that the principle of diversity is the integrative principle which guides the Central European spirit?

If this is true, then this integrative principle of diversity confers some characteristic artistic power reflected and crystallized in the works of artists with such experiences of life, culture and tradition, from these parts of Europe. This artistic charac-

teristic is particularly noticeable and precious.

György Konrad, Hungarian writer and the president of the international PEN society, spoke at the symposium in Vilenica about the Central European "cultural republic" where "friendly mutual interest" would reign among its voluntary citizens... Vilenica is one of its first locations.

3. About This Book and Vilenica Desetnica - 1995

The greatest pride of the ten Vilenica festivals, from the first in 1986 to this year's, are clearly the ten award winners, ten great names of contemporary, in particular Central European, literature. As they are not included in this book - each in his/her turn represents the most important chapter of one of the ten VILENICA anthologies, the ten milestones of Vilenica - let us mention them here:

VILENICA 86: Italian writer Fulvio Tomizza,

VILENICA 87: Austrian writer Peter Handke,

VILENICA 88: Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy,

VILENICA 89: Czech poet Jan Skácel,

VILENICA 90: Lithuanian poet

Tomas Venclova,

VILENICA 91: Polish poet

Zbigniew Herbert,

VILENICA 92: Czech writer Milan Kundera,

VILENICA 93: German writer of Czech origin Libuše Moníková,

VILENICA 94: Bosnian poet Josip Osti,

VILENICA 95: Swiss writer Adolf Muschg.

Additionally, 316 authors from fourteen Central European countries, countries with their literatures of the "Europe in - between", participated in the ten Vilenica events, publishing their texts in those ten anthologies. Among them, there were 63 Slovene poets and writers, whose texts are collected in this special publication which marks the occasion of the tenth anniversary. It is not a classic anthology, nor a cross-section representing contemporary Slovene literary creativity. Many an important name is missing, from the older and the younger generations, down to the very young but already established talents (e.g. from poet Janez Menart, authors Ivo Zorman, Vladimir Kavčič, Vladimir Kovačič, poets Ervin Fritz, Tone Kuntner, to mention just a few, to the youngest, Aleš Šteger, and many others). You will find their poems or prose in the future Vilenica anthologies. As the authors assembled in the present book have, by one coincidence or another, represented the

Slovene element of Vilenica, in the coming years new names of older or younger generations of contemporary Slovene literature will contribute their share to the annual Vilenica overview of a section of the current literary horizons of Central European literatures.

Leaf through this book, then, take it as an invitation to visit Slovene literature, as an invitation and provisions for the road, for a journey into a splendid, picturesquely varied world, where literature pulsates with intensity.

And why is this Vilenica called DESETNICA? It is not a name easily translated. Literally, it means the tenth child, the tenth daughter, but this does not begin to convey the real meaning. The closest true translation in Europe would be encountered in old Irish tales about ten boys or children, *deachmi*, one of whom their parents sacrifice or drive away from home. This remnant of the dark Indo-European lore, that the tenth child of the same gender must be sacrificed to the gods to break the spell, has been preserved as a Slovene specialty in folk ballads: The most frequent variant of the motif tells how the daughter who breaks off the piece of bread containing the ring the mother had kneaded into the dough has to leave home. The youngest daughter gets the ring and leaves home; when she returns after many years, nobody recognizes her until she reveals her

identity. The mother dies of grief, and *desetnica* leaves forever. The variants of the motif where the tenth child is male, *desetnik*, are more optimistic: The fate of the "tenth brother", "persecuted by God's will", is to tramp from door to door, unearth treasures, bring good luck, and, above all, know how to recount stories and tales like no-one else... FARE THEE WELL, VILENICA DESETNICA!

SREČKO KOSOVEL

PRESSENTIMENT

Champs.

Masure près de la route.

Obscurité.

Silence de la douleur.

Au loin

Une fenêtre claire.

Qui?

Une ombre sur elle.

Quelqu'un regarde

Après moi.

Avec moi

Le non-repos

Et le pressentiment

De la mort.

TRADUIT PAR VIKTOR JESENİK ET MARC ALYN

LES MURS NOIRS

Les murs noirs se lézardent

Au-dessus de mon âme.

Les hommes-lampes

Baissent, s'éteignent.

Un poisson borgne

Nage en l'obscur;

Un poisson à l'œil noir.