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AGAINST PHANTOMS

One: The Phantom of Poetry

We'll begin with books, or better put, with a certain order, a certain contingency: a library. There is a little ritual of preserving the contingency of a library, which separates the ordinary from the non-ordinary users of libraries, especially the professional ones. The French call it *phantôme*. Any experienced librarian will become quite cross if you do not observe the first laws of the logic of the library and of every book: that when you take it off the shelf, you replace it by filling out a card with the book's author, title, and call number, along with your name and library card number and the date of the loan. We think, superficially, that the library is a space where we can displace books, borrow them, and have them for a while. But the library is above all the virtual space of all books, it is the idea of the library, in which the totality of books must always be present, regardless of whether one finds on the shelves the actual books or their phantom equivalents. The library is primarily the thought of totality, the sum of our continuous attempts to access the totality of knowledge.

Take poetry. Given our everyday library, where we can simply reach for the most diverse forms of information, then poetry, whether it be lyric poetry, short prose, experimental forms of writing, or even certain seriously executed forms of the novel, is present in this library as a phantom. Poetry takes part in our everyday life in such a way that it both is and is not present.

Someone might say, as a joke perhaps, that the book that stands for poetry on our shelves has been checked out — by the experts, the literary scholars or the poets — and that is why it is not available in the library of our everyday lives as a source of information; that this is a crystallization of a situation that is not necessarily alarming, but is necessary to understand anyway. What, today, is the phantom of poetry, and what is its function?

Two: Another Metaphor, This Time with a Rotten Egg

When was the last time you played the game of rotten egg? Or to put it another way: When was the last time one of us was the rotten egg? In England they call the game *Duck Duck Goose*. They play it sitting in a circle; one of the players walks around and touches the heads of those seated. When its head is touched, the "duck," now known as "goose," has to stand up and catch the picker. If unsuccessful, he or she takes the picker's place.

In Slovenia, and I think this goes for most of Europe, we played — and still play — a slightly modified form of this game. It is not that someone has lost his or her place, or that somehow a signified is in search of a signifier. The rotten egg is in a way the signified since he sits in the middle of the circle, a laughingstock with all eyes on him, and waits to be exchanged. Not only does the player face the danger of losing her place in the circle, the game is exacerbated by the stigma attached to the one sitting in the middle of it. The German name for the game, *Plumpsack*, is a literal metaphor for the contagious infertility that marks the "rotten egg." Whoever ends up the *plumper Sack* in the middle of the circle is forever excluded from the

community inasmuch as he or she will have no descendants. The rotten egg is the one who, while alive, is all rotten inside and, for as long as the game lasts, sentenced to extinction.

Rotten egg is like the game played by the machinery of arts and culture and of cultural policy. Both are based on constant permutations within the same range of positions. The constant danger of someone switching the position of your signifier is what maintains the tension between the players. Currently, the position of the rotten egg is occupied by the medium of poetry. We still hear echoes of the voices of Celan and Brecht, Eliot and Auden, Char and Skácel, Zajc and Mandelshtam, and yet we no longer feel that the medium of poetry as such can still operate on the same substantial niveau on which it functioned until recently — until yesterday, according to some. We shall see.

Three: Žižek and Dahl

In his recently published book *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek makes the following statement:

> [In post-Yugoslavia] ethnic cleansing was prepared for by the poets' dangerous dreams. True, Milošević 'manipulated' national passions – but it was the poets who delivered him the material which lent itself to manipulation. They – the sincere poets, not the corrupted politicians – were the origin of it all, when, back in the 1970s and early '80s, they started to sow the seed of aggressive nationalism not only in Serbia, but also in other ex-Yugoslav republics. Instead of the industrial-military complex, we in post-Yugoslavia had the *poetico-military* complex, personified by the twin figures of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić.[1]

[1] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 95.

Of course, to follow this logic, one could also safely argue that the three totalitarian slaughterhouses of the twentieth century — Hitler's Nazism, Stalin's Communism, and Mao Tse Tung's Maoism — were ultimately the products of poetry, or at least of artistic imaginaries, since two of their creators were poets and one a painter. But does not Žižek's interpretation of Karadžić as a psychopathic nationalist poet gainsay the fact that the architect of Serbian nationalist policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a trained and practicing psychiatrist with a lively interested in psychoanalysis (which allows us to speculate on the possible influence on Karadžić of reading Lacan)?. But of course that would entirely miss the point of such antics. If Žižek has taught us anything, it is that it is not productive to contradict Žižek on Žižek's terms. For Žižek it is necessary to read *with* Žižek. A declaration in Roald Dahl's *The Twits* serves as an example of this kind of strict reading of Žižek. This children's book presents an extremely wicked elderly couple, sadistic tamers of animals from the circus. The two old people have a cage in which they force four monkeys to constantly stand on their heads. One time, however, they go away, and the monkeys escape and seek revenge. In secret, they glue all the rugs, furniture, inventory, pictures, and everything else, to the ceiling. When the old couple return, they are shocked to find their entire home turned upside down. It starts to turn them upside down as well; they no longer believe their eyes and the only way for them to stop the vertigo is to stand on their own heads. Don't certain texts of Žižek's resist building a consistent conceptual system, and instead describe a particular subversively associative field, a field punctuated with aha-moments, that in the inward contradictoriness, fluidity, speed, diffuseness, and dynamism of its linguistic

workings resembles certain features of modern poetry? I would not call Žižek a poet, but I nonetheless think that his way of writing owes a great deal to poetry, which, on his view, was the source of all evil in the Balkans in recent decades.

Hannah Arendt's pioneering work in the last century has gone a long way to providing the complex analysis necessary for unmasking the banal image of evil. I do not think one can take a shortcut here or simplify this complexity with statements like Žižek's. Admittedly, there were poets involved in mass murder on all sides of the former Yugoslavia; there were poets among those who incited nationalism, among those who actively administered the political and military instruments of evil; and of course there were a great number (if not incomparably greater) of those on the other side, too. The countries of the former Yugoslavia are full of émigré poets; poets who in their texts and actions resisted nationalism, war, and tragedy; poets who actively helped those who needed it; and, not least, the graves of poets who died as victims. To attribute blame for the bloodiest events on European soil since the end of the second world war to the imaginative potential of unnamed poetic texts, and through it to a specific guild, may be an effective rhetorical device for poorly informed readers, but on closer inspection it is simply a frivolous statement that ignores the complex events of that time, processes that began developing long before the nineteen-seventies, and above all ignores the particular Yugoslav experiment, that is, the failure to create a new Yugoslav-Titoist nation and Yugoslav national identity.

Four: The Absolute Negativity of the National

The thesis that the poets are guilty for the collapse of Yugoslavia did not originate with Žižek. The idea is not his; we have encountered it time and again over the past several decades. At the same time, in the case of Slovenia, we find another, converse, affirmative thesis, namely, that the poets are the priests of language, and that the country was established over the course of centuries thanks to this so-called national substance.

Žižek sees himself as following Plato in expelling the poets from the state. On Žižek's account, poets are *sui generis* nationalist agitators. Which begs two questions: whether the poet's vocation now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, attracts only nationalist fanatics following their Romantic role models in cobbling together verses; or whether the medium of poetry, as the language use most attuned to a given language's particularities, is automatically imbued with nationalist tendencies? In both cases the conclusion is clear: it is best to keep poetry outside the boundaries of the state, and to banish the poets, thus establishing the possibility of a "better," or at any rate less "problematic," less "imperiled," and possibly a more "pure" society. The rotten egg of poetry must be preserved as it is: contagious, barren, phantom-like, and permanently on loan from the great library of our modernity. For this reason, the Slovenian philosophers who work in the field of theoretical psychoanalysis turn to texts by non-Slovenian authors. The set ranges from Shakespeare through Poe, and ends chronologically in 1924, the year of Kafka's death. That is the year when the rot begins to migrate into the egg of poetry and when interpretive experiments begin potentially to infect the

interpreter with the disease transmitted by modern poetry, namely, the disease of incendiary nationalism. The point is: in terms of excluding modern poetry from the field of contemporary knowledge, Žižek's thesis about the responsibility of poetry for Balkan nationalist extremism will continue to be so obviously tendentious, and perfect for the Eurocrats, for whom nationalism is the worst of all evils.

Five: From Yugoslavia to the EU

Why Yugoslavia again? Because of a family resemblance to that multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional secular state formation with its strong centralist tendencies and common currency, army, and foreign policy. Irregardless of its communist system, Yugoslavia is comparable to the EU in many ways, from the point of view that the EU has sought to develop over the past several years, especially since the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. For us this is important primarily because Yugoslavia was a federated state created out of autonomous republics, with three official languages and even more officially recognized languages of minorities — hence there were a number of problems in implementing consistent language policies. Kosovo, which was subject to the greatest cultural and linguistic oppression, has become a key problem in the entire region, a problem that the EU and international community have tried to solve by creating new nation-states — despite the fact that their internal policies are expressly anti-nationalist. But has the EU learned anything from the textbook example of Yugoslavia? On first glance, it looks like it has not. Proactive linguistic and cultural policies are not an issue for the EU, with the exception of the admirable megatranslation machine with

which the EU has established a platform for the equal and fair communication and exchange of information between citizens in all the languages of its members. From Maastricht in 1992 to today, cultural policy has been a decorative appendage to EU policy, and literature the appendage of an appendage.

Six: Europe Without Poetry

Europe, which was founded on the free movement of people and capital, resists taking an active role in promoting the freedom of movement of poems. Subsidy programs for promoting translation from EU languages are not sufficient. The idea that "whatever works," which we have seen in the European Commission's guidelines in the field of culture, is not enough. We need a different, more targeted, and considered approach. When Europe has grown up, it will also have a European poetry, or at least a field of poetic practice that one will be able to refer to as specifically European.

Broad literary phenomena cannot be established without intertextual relatedness. National literatures are always ideologically generated abstractions with limited points of contact; they run parallel to the production of new texts, but they attempt to operate on an abstract level, the level of the concept, of the network. Specific poems, however, are in fact generated as points; they cover a comparatively small spectrum, and they are satisfied with failing to satisfy the needs of any coherent ideology. For me, there are two contexts here, at least for the time being. First, there is the context of the language I write in. I understand this not as a national context, but as a local,

even private or intimate, one. Second, there is the amorphous, global context, which is not European, nor Euro-American, but based on a spatial, linguistic, and at times quite diffuse set of texts with which I conduct, in my works, a quiet dialogue. The question is: can my local poetic context interest anyone aside from members of my own local community? And if so, can this interest be specifically European, and not exclusively global (in the way that I find myself interested in contemporary poetry from Hong Kong, Tasmania, or Turkey, for instance)? But then, do we really need anything to serve as the basis for the catchword "European poetry"?

I do not think there is a zero-degree collective European narrative that could serve to generate a particular Euro-poetics. Nor a point toward which one might gravitate, or that one might resist, together with other authors. Aha, you say, we have yet another one of those from the East, rebelling against the reigning ideologies they were breast-fed on. Of course, I reply, it's nice if we agree, but if we don't — is there anything besides our disagreement that connects us? Can you imagine a football match where a referee's controversial decision doesn't solicit catcalls, or a government's decision to raise taxes that doesn't meet with mass disapproval? Why should we assume that the increased mobility of European authors, grants for literary translations, and all the hard work — since the division of responsibilities, as far as culture goes, between Europe and individual nations, has had no effect — will lead to something that, while it may not be a European poetics, is at least a sign to the rest of the world that all of a sudden something interesting is happening in European literatures? That in Europe there is the excitement and interest that

would be the prerequisite for the formation of a meta-level that has never before existed? I don't know how many tons of ideology would be necessary to establish such a meta-level, but we would definitely need at least a field or a context in which the rotten egg of poetry can liberate itself, shake off its inferior position, pull out from the circle and continue playing its game on another level, with different rules.

Seven: Journeying with Paris

The destabilization and dwindling social position of poetry have repeatedly been subject to correction through the laudable efforts of organizers of literary festivals, websites, literary journals on the verge of collapse, subsidy programs, and the sympathy of donors, with the respirators that have kept boutique publishing houses of poetry and other non-commercial literature alive. Despite a certain liveliness in this area, I think that it functions primarily as a cosmetic correction and not at all as a systematic undertaking.

The problem is deeper and has to do with the mentality of people who oversee our European everyday life. For almost a century, poetry has sought to redefine its role in society, its internal moorings in the community, and its function in creating bonds in social communication. By its nature it is limited to addressing smaller communities and only by means of a complex pseudo-hermeneutic apparatus does it gain access to a broader readership in foreign languages. There seems to be an unwritten law that the smallest and most compact basic particles of information, which in my opinion is poetry, travel the slowest. Often it is preserved only by way of a phantom presence, like

those slips of paper that maintain the integrity of libraries, even if certain key books have already been expunged for decades, sometimes even longer, from any broader consciousness.

I love those medieval *mappae mundi* where the world is not represented to the proper scale and where schematism and symbolism predominate, as opposed to the exact cartography of later maps, which are based on Ptolemaic projection, precise measurement, and mathematical calculation. One of those early cartographers, Matthew Paris, in 1250 drew a map of the then-known world. It extended from the monastery of St. Albans, in England, where he lived, to Jerusalem; and it included cities through which one would have to travel on the way to the Holy Land. Such was the Europe of the time, which is geographically similar to the opinion-makers' Europe of our own. On Paris's projection of the known world there are no relative distances between cities, or to be more precise, the distances between all the cities are entirely equal, short, and insignificance. Instead, the intermediate territories between one city and the next on the road are referred to with the same word: *journée*. A journey is the only thing that exists between cities. I think that the task of our common endeavors must be to move in this direction. Aside from precise cartography and the exceptional care given to maintaining Europe's material channels of communication (think of how much money the EU allocates each year to investment projects in infrastructure, roads, railways, airports, communication networks...), we need to work together in order to get to know each other through the *journée* between cities, between countries, between

languages, between cultures. And I think this is the most economical answer to the challenge, with poetry as the medium of that experience.

Everyone understands that the mechanism for establishing a platform for poetry that would not be bound to a single language cannot be bargained for, but must take place on the level of collective knowledge —the knowledge that poetry transmits information that is relevant and can contribute to our understanding of processes within society, especially of the position of individuals in it.

Until it is self-evident that any intellectual who believes him or herself to be European knows poems from at least a dozen living European poets who write in languages other than that intellectual's mother tongue, then something like a European poetry will not exist, but only national poetic traditions, written more or less in isolation, in a region that, when it comes to agricultural or environmental or economic policies, is called Europe.

Eight: Editorial with an Activist's Appeal for a Solution

The writing and reading of literature are both very simple matters: books are made of words, and words are made, above all, of style. As soon as we start to think about these books of words, of style, a problem appears: from where and for whom are they written. what context do they create, where do they situate themselves, and what plural phenomenon — with its attendant sociology, media orchestration, and infrastructural machinery — do they manifest? Writing books is not the problem. As far as that goes, everything is (almost)

clear. The problem lies in our always misguided and inadequate attempt to ideologize literature — which is of utterly no use to me as an author. I sit and I write —and that is all I need. As an author who has been asked to write a few thoughts about the relations between the national and the European in literature, I find myself stepping into the same old trap of attempting to stretch a concept around something that is inherently ungraspable. Books are like winds: a scirocco, a bracing tramontane, or a trade wind blows and refreshes you; and nothing could be simpler, as you know. But if you try to capture them in a net, or even better, in a bag, a *plumper Sack* for instance, then you have a problem.

My proposal is concrete and pragmatic, and as you've already heard, both feasible and necessary at the same time: the curriculum of all secondary schools on EU territory should require every European in the course of his or her secondary education, that is, until the age of eighteen, to become familiar with five poems by five living authors from the more or less immediately neighboring EU member countries. Through those five poems, every European ought to become familiar with the contemporary social contexts and problems, and aesthetic and everyday-life dilemmas of his or her neighbors. He or she will learn the names of other people's winds, which blow through the hair of those who are on *journée*. Future Europeans should be taught, and learn, to return the borrowed book to its place. Otherwise, Europe will forever be haunted by certain phantoms.

— Translated from the Slovene by W. Martin