

BEING

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To say that poetry is the literary genre *par excellence* would be going too far, there is no denying the fact that lyric poetry is the core of every national literature, for it is verse that heralds most eloquently and most accurately the birth of a "new reality" in any given environment or, to quote Rimbaud, attests that JE has once again become UN AUTRE.

"Lyric poetry", according to Latvia's most famous poet, Jēnis Rainis, "is not only the soul of all literature, it is the soul of every major aspiration. Where there is no soul there is no immortality".

In our time the Mouth is quicker than the Word. Ours being an age dominated by technology it would no doubt be more accurate to say that the fingers flitting across the keyboard of the computer have a habit of leaving the nascent Word in our mind behind.

The world we live in is, as it were, a stage bursting with frenzied activity: a lot of movement, but nothing actually happens, and there is no clear orientation; gesticulation and grimacing galore, but little originality and genuine emotion; no end of amorphous, nerve-killing cacophony, but few words poetically meaningful and likely to last...

One has the impression of being transported on a huge conveyor belt that never comes to rest: it takes us upwards, ever upwards and then, suddenly, down we go: up once more and down again, again and again, so that by now we have come to regard this gliding staircase as the *perpetuum mobile* of our civilisation.

This image might even serve as its symbol.

What is being enacted before our eyes - is not a comedy, tragedy or mystery - play of the kind we are familiar with - what we are witnessing is, in fact, cultural posturing or, if you will, cultural exhibition, and the production, call it *vaudeville* or, arce, currently enjoys unprecedented universal popularity.

Analysing the masses' exaggerated interest in culture back in the 1930s, Jose Ortega y Gasset divided people into "creators" and "consumers". In his classic study "The Revolt of the Masses" he foresaw the dominant role of dilettantism and mediocrity unquestionably playing at the beginning of the 21st century. Ortega's cautionary "art is not the monopoly of its creators" gained immediate popularity, and we have only to look around us to see that he was not, alas, mistaken. I do not want to play down the role of the consumer in the conversion of art into "entertainment industry" or in the transformation of reality into "permanent shock". Consumers as well as the masses have a legitimate right to this form of "bioaesthetic" enjoyment or entertainment. Yet this is only one of the innumerable and diverse functions of creative activity. Creation as a civilising act, however, whose mission is to transform a person from being a "lump of metabolism" into a civilised creature remains the preserve of the great lonely spirits, those whom another Spanish writer, Juan Ramon Jimenez, has dubbed "the infinite minority".

We live in a sort of desemanticized present, a present lacking definite meaning and sense, stable criteria, clearly defined values and hierarchies. Postmodernism is entropy and this entropic age of ours produces a multitude of meaningless forms and formless content over and over again, the sole "aesthetic" aim being to shock. The Italian writer and philologist Claudio Magris has put his finger on it when he says that European philosophers are celebrating the

demise of all values and verities, challenging the very concept of *veritas*. European art and philosophy venerate *kitsch* as though *kitsch* gave us spiritual freedom. I, however, maintain that kitsch is our most deadly enemy.

I agree with Italian historian Vittorio Strada, who says that the alternative on which the future of Europe depends is, I quote, "whether the next 200 years will take their cue from Nietzsche or from Dostoyevsky" (unquote). Both predicted that the two centuries to come would see the "progress of nihilism". Nietzsche saw in nihilism an instrument of spiritual and intellectual liberation since it enabled man to cast off the vestiges of older values and shape his life free from frustrations. Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, considered nihilism as the most extreme pathological form of decadence. At present Nietzsche's nihilism holds sway in Europe. I obviously am a disciple of Dostoyevsky. Nihilism, like the current unification euphoria obtaining throughout the whole of Europe, is, pardon, the expression, at best, tantamount to spiritual impotence. What is sorely lacking is a critical attitude towards developments in the political and economic spheres as well as in society and the arts.

A critical attitude be it ever so extreme towards what is happening around us signals vitality and the ability to discern, and cope with, what the future holds in store.

Goethe, in the history of "*Weltliteratur*" (world literature) reflected "the free interaction of national literatures in all their diversity", was surely right.

Instead of focusing our attention on the outward manifestations of a European culture showing unmistakable signs of Americanization we would therefore do well to insist on what is quintessentially European: the awareness that in Europe as everywhere else in the world humankind's last grandiose project is under way: how to save it from itself, how to overcome the crisis afflicting national values and the ideals of humanism, a crisis that I suggest must be countered by the CULTURAL IMPERATIVE.

The term "cultural imperative" has lost its contours and become rather vague. For the sake of convenience we have adapted the term "plurality" though this "much - vaunted plurality" of intellectual activity does not attest the solidarity of the immense diversity of man's creativity, but serves as a useful cover for a pseudo - democratic permissiveness which, far from leading us towards harmony and order, signals almost universal confusion and paves the way for even greater entropy.

It is no coincidence that philosophers, geneticists, physicists and other scientists like to speak of the inertia of the age of evolution and even of its end, emphasizing of mankind where the way is open for either rebirth or universal degradation.

It is for this reason that the role of Poetry seems to me to be of paramount importance for our age, even, I venture to say, decisive. We should not forget that Poetry has always provided an ALTERNATIVE to its Age and, if you will, to Eternity.

If I were asked to define the role of Poetry down the ages, I might be tempted to put it thus: at every moment poetry records the "death" of some "future" (i. e. the aesthetic illusions, models, assumptions and trends of a given age) and, at the same time, the "birth" of a "past" (intimations of reality salvaged from the passage of time), this "illusory reality" too dying in due course to be replaced by a new "real illusion".

In my opinion poetry acts in a manner rather different from, even contrary to, the widespread belief that it presses

onward, ever onward, never deviating from the unequivocal and unalterable course staked out for it by time.

The history of poetry can be seen as a quixotic struggle against cultural entropy, against contours of meaning eroded by the course of history - the WORD POETIC, to quote the Roumanian poetess Ana Blandiana, is possibly "the safest form of deception" or "the only possible evil" enablings us to maintain a minimum of dynamic equilibrium, stability and harmony in ourselves and in the world.

The emergence of a true poet is impossible to predict and he never lives up to one's expectations. On the other hand it is impossible to banish his output from the overall cultural process.

At present, however, look where we will, all behold is inertia: a dead - end propagated and imposed on us by an age of global desemanticisation in which creation has been replaced by production. We poets, too, alas, are constantly producing texts in lieu of creating true poetry.

The sole cure for our TRISTITIA is, manifestly, philosophy; not, however, the entropic centrifugal sirens of the twentieth century but the metaphysical centripetal aspirations of earlier times, and in doing so we shall be shouldering the burden that even a father confessor finds too heavy to bear. Philosophy will take us back to the beginning, and we shall behold not the meaning of being but being itself.

It is not all that long ago that Juan Miro, the famous Catalan painter exclaimed "Down with Mediterana!", in other words art created on Graeco - Roman soil. At the time he may even have been right as he was challenging the aesthetic dogmas of earlier ages and generations. But it is right here in the Balkans that we have to look for the cradle of European history and culture, European poetry, of our entire European civilisation. It is here in the Balkans that we find the roots of our thank God so different peoples, countries, languages and cultures, roots that, one regrets to say, we have all but forgotten.

It is here in the Balkans that Europe was born. Too, the Balkans are the birthplace of Europe's Buddha - Orpheus. I repeat Europe's Buddha, Orpheus. For like Buddha, Orpheus would go up into the mountain before sunrise to witness the birth of a new day. Goethe said, long before me (I quote): "...foresee the rebirth of European literature: no European nation can accomplish this on its own, all must participate in the shaping of the new Europe".

Two conditions are essential if European civilisation is to preserve its integrity: the culture of each nation must be inimitable and unique and at the same time these cultures must be aware that they are interrelated. And this interrelation derives from our common Mediterranean roots - roots brilliantly evoked by the Croat writer Predrag Matvejevic in his essay "Mediterranean Reflections". Like Predrag Matvejevic, I too believe that the road to a new Europe takes us through the Balkans, *via* a return to the origins of our European civilisation, to our cultural roots - to Orpheus.

This implies the fusion of science and art postulated by Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century. A new discourse about Mediterrania drawing on the discourse of the past is out of the question as the source has run dry. Nor will a "poeticized" language do, that is to say discourse rhetorical and exalted or, to use Predrag Matvejevic's ironic label, "touristic". In order to create a new discourse we must reject both of these options and marry the abstraction of science to the emotion of poetry. By science I do not mean erudition or technology. I mean the immense experience of science available to us and which, unless I am mistaken, has already made a direct impact on literary methodology. This, of course, was the dream of Flaubert. And here, I suggest, lies the future of poetry in the 21st century.

Our task is to create an entirely new mode of life, an entirely NEW POETRY, for poetry is engaged in a never-ending struggle against matter in an effort to transcend it. Was it not Byron's Manfred who said: "The Tree of Knowledge is not the Tree of Life"?

POETRY is LIFE, not knowledge. A creative spirit has but two options: he must choose between being true to himself and thus creating his own time or conforming to the dictates of the age he lives in, which is so often the case today. The so - called "creative spirits" of today are prostituting themselves and are more like caricatures of "creators" than true representatives of human creativity. Postmodernism has proclaimed the death, twilight or agony of art. These terminal phenomena, however, are counterbalanced by an inviolable alternative: the indisputable fact that works of art in the millennial primary meaning of the word are being created even now, even in poetry. In this constant return to the beginning I see the only hope for the future of European civilisation and of mankind, for it is our sole means of overcoming entropy and preventing universal collapse. Umberto Eco speaks of a "nascent neo- Romantic aesthetic" in which beauty, virtue, catharsis, emotions and ideas - all of which are of secondary importance in our "racist consumer society" (U. Eco) - constitute ORIGINALITY.

I may not quite agree with the great Latvian poet JEnis Rainis, whom I quoted at the outset, when he says that "the religion of the future must again be poetry - as it was at the beginning of civilisation," but perhaps JEnis Rainis was right after all. "The spirit must strive to be free", he wrote, "a lifelong task, so don't waste a moment...Live and face up to the hardships of life..."

And thus I would say that the tasks of poetry, as of all art, is not to reveal to us WHY we are but WHO we are. The poet is not so much a functional than an ontological phenomena and his chief concern is neither belonging nor serving but being.

BEING?

BEING WHAT?

Being is - TO BE.

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