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*Your country may be on the same continent,
 but it is in another world.
 (An English friend, 1998)*

1 This essay was inspired partly by the long and fruitful conversations I had with the poets Milika Pavlović, Ken Smith and Igor Klikovac. I have also benefited from William Anselmi's and E.D. Blodgett's insightful comments on the issues of language and the politics of exile. Some paragraphs were written in Café Pacifico in London's Covent Garden. The rest was written in Edmonton and on the shores of Abraham Lake (Alberta) in late 1999 and under the spell of the writings by David Albahari, Michael Ondaatje, Julian Kornhauser, Jacques Derrida, Homi Bhabha, Michael Kearney, Benedict Anderson and Maria Todorova.

2 The poem *Bunar [Well]* by Milika Pavlović was written in 1988 and published in his collection of poems *Brod za Jednaga [A Ship for One]* (1990). The English version of this poem appeared in: *Prism International*. Vol. 37, no. 2. Winter 1999. Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia [transl. SP].

This essay, which has the uninhibited nature of a private letter, is the product of a loneliness that is accustomed to being public.¹ This searching, struggling and probing toward the essence, toward the cause of anguish is a story of sediment and a remnant of the years in exile. What follows is the result of an overwhelming tidal wave of memories and emotions, and my speech leaves its cask alienated and personal at the same time. It is the voice of longing for once known and now lost presence whose broken pieces still float through my veins. All I can do now is to try and be honest to myself and to others.

Father, you taught me about basic incongruities between the private origins of one's work and the public impact of his writing, about the dichotomy between the sound, which is born within, and its external echo. You said that to try and balance these two impulses one has to master the art of the extravagance of words, and try to be objective. I am still learning the trade, but I am not sure that there is such a thing as objectivity. I can perhaps try to be impartial and see both sides of a question. However, my intention is not to try and resolve any paradoxes but only to attempt to describe my experience of exile and to express some thoughts about intellectuals in my native country and their creative environment.

Every time I try to speak or write about Yugoslavia I am overwhelmed by hopelessness. Every sentence awakens memories of my youth, brings back all those lovely faces of my friends, and again I can smell the colors of the old country. Fragments are all that I remember. The truth is that they haven't moved an inch from me. We were wrong, father. This is the smell of defeat, father, loss and betrayal. For years I was taught that the physical and spiritual connection to the land of our ancestors, that *sacro egoismo della patria*, is what gives us strength. I believed in a fairy tale. Today, the notion of homeland reminds me of a tree and its roots and of the story about Anteus. It seems that such a concept is a rather conservative myth constructed in a way that keeps people immobile since each crossing of a border (boundary) is an act of bravery and disobedience. It presupposes flexibility and inevitably brings about the change of one's perspective. After so many years in exile I think of my own past, tradition and culture in a more critical fashion. The old idyllic reflection in a Balkan mirror slowly faded away and turned into a gray spot like an old burn-mark that still hurts but heals in time. To me, the Balkans resembles a torso eroded by history and self-deception of its people that is finally washed onto the beach. You see I can not stop thinking about it! No matter how hard I try to change that coded message will always stay a part of. Some things will never happen and my heart is breaking loose. I will continue to be one of many people who eat memory for breakfast and seek the escape route from that deep and dark well of the past. I often think of one of your poems and only now I understand its true meaning.

Its dark depth
 took me by surprise
 without a boat.
 If I had a gadget
 I would have taken out
 a pearl bone
 stuck in our throats.²

Many years ago, when I was a new *émigré*, I learnt an old saying of the immigrants from Eastern Europe. In their phases of resignation, they would murmur: »Once you cross the Ocean, you'll always be on the wrong side of it.« Back then I was trying to tie up loose ends of my new life and I did not understand the message. Now, seven years and two countries later, I do understand. It is all about learning. Learning how to bare the fact that you left your homeland. Learning how to forget and forgive. Learning about different cultural codes, different logic and a different way of life. Learning how to be flexible. This is a daily struggle. I live within the pieces of my native sound-castle, with a few memorabilia that are bound to wash away in time. In this shadowland I take refuge in a home away from home, distanced from my own people and deprived of my own



3 Cf. Ondaatje, Michael: *Burning Hills*. In: Ders.: *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems*. London: Picador, 1989, p. 49.

4 Derrida, Jacques: *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. by Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP 1998, p. 5.

language. Of course, you would argue, my language remains with me wherever I go. But it is like carrying the bones of my ancestors in a bag with me: they are white in silence, they do not talk back.

Only in my dreams and maybe through these words poured onto a white, silent and seductive paper, do I still return to that land of nationalism and hatred, a land of the Devil, of despair, of heart ailments, of hereditary high blood pressure, of hard-heartedness, of wasted bones, of apathy. It is the land of daily violence and nightly murders, of police informers and knights who carry the icon and the axe into heathen darkness. It is the land criss-crossed by borders, a land of death. These are my homecomings, father.

We both know that exile is provoked by political repression. People do not leave because they do not like the climate. When forced to choose between servitude, being sent to the front line or to get imprisoned for refusing to do so, exile appears to be the best available option. Others opted differently. For many of my fellow countrymen being absorbed in a nation with a war cry was a nice way of forgetting one's own weakness and forcing others to forget it. I never was, nor will I ever be willing to kill or to die for someone else's dream or nightmare. I prefer to be wretched on my own then to borrow from the nation by being absorbed in it. The echos of the ideological slogans that have mobilized many of my fellow countrymen never touched me. I always felt indifferent towards all those neatly dressed factory workers and those sharp looking defenders of the faith who marched down the avenues waving huge red flags. It is not as wonderful as many think, to join them with great fanfare. I was more of a poetic disposition, dreaming about the Great Wall of China and giving myself away to the sound of Deep Purple and Ian Gillan's tunes and to all those beautiful girls »under the raincoats in the park on hot days.«³ It runs in the family, I guess. I was aware that going into exile meant the exchange of one form of living death by another, but I had to leave. I hope that you understand.

You taught me that one of the pleasant freedoms of a literary migrant is to be able to choose his parents and that I should not surrender to an internal exile, known as »homeland«. Every morning when I wake up I have to conquer the feeling that the writer in exile is forever lost for literature. Then I think of Ovidius, a tragic, nostalgic wreck of a former playboy. The truth is that living in-between languages means that the master of the extravagance of words and verbal acrobatics slowly loses those faculties. However, I hope that living within the strange echoes of a foreign language might help me to learn more and to appreciate its beauty. On the other hand, I am becoming obsessed with my native tongue and suffer from the nostalgia for the homeland of my own words. I am painfully aware that sooner or later I will write in a »dead language«, a language spoken by only one person, a language frozen in some linguistic past. To paraphrase Jacques Derrida, everything I do only reinforces the omnipresence of my monolingualism.⁴ Such disorder of identity is the result of exile. Often, I console myself thinking of Henry Miller's advice to writers: live abroad and soon you will sense a new flow of energy that highlights the only language you are capable of expressing yourself in. But the world is not greeting us with open arms, father. In exile the writer becomes a borderline case. Every day I try to recapture from outside what I possess from the inside, possess so completely that I do not even know about it. I become alienated and detribalized. My intelligence becomes that of a clever immigrant who belongs only by clever adaptation and not by instinct. I never quite fit in anywhere. It is like standing naked in the street, shivering and envying others for their brocades of belonging and identity.

With whom can I identify? Being in another country may broaden my imagination; I may identify with other intellectuals and their interests. I may, through my exile and my politics, identify with a cause of those displaced, oppressed and rounded up by camp wire. But this is likely to be a one way identification, rather like a dog loving the Moon.

Our former country has become a no man's land between people. It is an artificially created void necessary to attenuate. The very raw reality of genocide, ethnic cleansing, final solution, fratricidal murders, economic, social and cultural misery. In the creation of such a climate, the long ago degenerated structures of power denied to themselves and others any kind of humanity. It was obvious that from the outset of the nationalistic fever there was uncertainty, ignorance and greed. Alongside this – fear and the need to define and contain it.

Carefully projected lies, centuries old, saying that the Serbs, the majority nation in Yugoslavia, were different from those around them, became a bloody demarcation line. Initially, this definition: *Serb, Slav, Orthodox*, allowed greed to be rationalized and determined as survival, while later it enveloped independence, guidance, civilization and justice. The *Tribe* became *Power*.



When you say *Power*, you say *Party*, *Religion*. For, like a *Religion*, the *Party* must have priests to protect its purity – founded on a misrepresentation and often on a lie. By the time this lie is exposed, the *Tribe* has become a closed fist according to the principal *Ad plures ire* (Lat. to join the majority; to die).

At present the regime in Belgrade feels very comfortable and secure. They claim the historical and moral right to do whatever they find necessary to maintain this security. I include the moral dimension, because the powerful never seem to doubt that they have the calling and the ability needed to perform miracles. For the dictator in Belgrade, people are the means of survival for various parasitic microbes. For him death is a statistical phenomenon, like the market analysis. His consciousness, that borderline between nourishment and decay, has become the flat line on the encephalogram.

The army and the police, particularly the secret police, are evolved as the mainstays of the regime. Yugoslavia is an example of a military para-state, not only because the streets are crawling with policemen and because the size of a police baton has become a measure of democracy, but because the treachery and informing are a matter of course, indeed often a means of survival. The dictator and his elite are structured as an occult brotherhood, lodge, or league. They communicate by moving their eyes in all directions while the Balkan urban nomads are slitting each other's throats in hope of finally gaining admission into the Garden of Eden. The system I am trying to describe is, in fact, a calculated alienation leading to mental illness: it is schizophrenic because there is no connection between thoughts, feelings and actions. It is paranoia because its creators have delusions of grandeur and supremacy.

I know, you would say that although cancerous, this system has not succeeded in dehumanizing entirely all inhabitants in former Yugoslavia. I agree, but it has effectively managed to isolate the Serbs. Conditioned by lack of contact with others in the region and, eventually, lack of contact amongst themselves, they have become a mental special branch. They understand and live the syndrome of their own isolation. The windows of their houses are painted white to keep in the night. The entire nation lives in a state of total denial, afraid to face its own ugliness and immorality, its private demons. The dictator and his praetorians are acting as able gastronomes, keeping alive the remnants of long ago faded memories of a once proud nation.

Since the fight for survival of a *Tribe* was proclaimed and begun in the name of its particular *Culture*, its *Language* and *Religion*, the writer has played a very important role as an exponent of all tribal values, not as a dissenter. You know only too well that very few intellectuals in Yugoslavia do not fall into this band. I am not saying that there are no intellectuals voicing their discontent. But the sad thing is that a number of those writers and scholars who do not recognize ethnic and religious borders is relatively small and they are marginalized to the extent that their efforts are being seen as an atavism within the social body. The system has developed a sophisticated strategy in order to protect itself. Dissent may be allowed under special circumstances. Opposition may be tolerated but only to maintain the appearance of the regime's tolerance. Some resistance can be incorporated into the system by rendering it more flexible and the oppressive regime becomes stronger.

The perceptive intellectual feels that he is a product of a cultural bastardization. He is full of the pain of frustration and humiliation. He is a man without buttocks to sit on. He rises and shakes his pen like a spear – a measure of his impotence. At present cultural happenings in Yugoslavia are the framework of lies and compromises. The tune and the climate of a creative artist's environment are that of institutionalized violence. Although this violence is seldom directed at him, he still has to live within the system, he is part of. The artist no longer denounces this violence. The system allows him to be blind to all this by soothing him with ideals of *Holy Duty* and *National Interest*. But such Faustian contract carries in itself certain consequences. If an ordinary person refuses to acknowledge the reality of his life that might be understood as a tactical manoeuvre. But if a writer refuses to do so, he is a liar. So in the name of *Pure Dogma of the Struggle*, one nation can permit itself to betray the other. Remember that I am talking of real burnt flesh, of blood and flies. How wonderful is it to be able to kill in the name of Freedom? If you remind the writer in Yugoslavia of these facts, he will not believe you. How many times they have accused you of exaggeration and said that the regime is a guardian against atheism and chaos and that it might not be a perfect creature, but it is our creature. I know that it is difficult for them, if not impossible, to overcome themselves enough to find out the truth. One has to draw the line somewhere, before one reaches the end of one's rope. But people should realize that a complete presence of mind could be achieved only when based on a clear past.



The corrosive effects of such political blindness are clear in the works of many intellectuals in Yugoslavia. The pamphlets, quasi-scientific studies and popular round-table discussions are the manifestations of a raw sentimentalized nationalism. When you believe in what you want to believe, you are a sentimentalist. Such sentimentalism inevitably creates a special kind of political imagination. And political imagination, like the imagination of an explorer, often invents its own geography. In this genre one will come across the glorification of simple values, of an earthy and patriotic atmosphere, as it is felt that such creativeness bestows some mental stability because it speaks of eternal truths. If you create in Yugoslavia today, you must compromise the only raw material you have – yourself, your own integrity. You become alienated from yourself, which is worse than being cut off from the tribe. The fine intelligence once possessed becomes a raw wound. You are immured in the façade you may once have thought of cracking, stinking while still on your feet. Today an intellectual in Yugoslavia can do one of two things: he can expound the culture of the people to whom he belongs, praise it and clarify it, or he can be the masked clown who remains behind when the king has left town, writing letters of longing and self-pity. People forget that the best way to fight totalitarianism is to disturb the silence. I am trying to do just that, father.

Those in exile, like myself, are by definition those who are disturbing the silence, considering themselves interpreters abroad, constantly trying to draw the attention of the people with whom they come into contact to the nature of reality back home. We are envoys even if there is no mandate. As Fanon said, we still have to write our own history; we can not afford to exist only in terms of the history of dictators. You told me that, remember. Because of that, it is necessary to write like bats out of hell, always searching for that strain of truth. I am, of course, familiar with the saying: »If wishes were horses, beggars might ride«, but I must keep hold of Ariadne's thin inky thread, even with the taste of defeat in the mouth, because every little effort may contribute towards destroying the old labyrinth. I must struggle on – hoping to set off some alarm bells somewhere. Hoping that continued commitment may succeed in being recognized as solidarity by those abroad who need some human concern in order to survive. It is a means of continuing to work on the self, father. Learning to live with the monkey in the mirror.

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