

ITALIAN NOTEBOOKS

from Weeds, or Against Literature

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Translated by Mirzah Purić

The fragment is the fundament of my world. This is not to be mixed up with the notorious ‘god in the details’. There is no god, whilst the fragment is there, around us, merciful, lenient and cruel, but powerless. Heartless.

Sperlonga

5 Feb 2017

The only thing worse than an entrepreneur is a taxi entrepreneur. The only thing worse than a taxi entrepreneur operating in the administrative territory of the City of Zagreb is one operating in the administrative territory of the City of Rome which extends to the Roman airports.

‘Yogi, sodomite, same shite’, shouts P., furious. ‘A yogi and a sodomite, but taxi drivers quite often have something of both in them’, he whispers. Then, down the antique street of Via Appia we descent to Sperlonga.

In its coat of arms an olive branch is interlocked with one of oak, the mountains and the sea are serried, like Templars in the saddle or cheek-to-cheek dancers. It is Sunday and Sperlonga slumbers. She squirms and scowls, because the two of us crash her dream. A Southerly sits and sits on top of the scenery, a metallic coat on the sky’s silver amalgam fillings. It’s warm, as a Mediterranean February often is at two o’ clock sharp. Surfers on the long

beach chase the still bashful surfs, the sinewy plants stretch out their necks absorbing humidity for the unbearably sweltering summer days, young cats mate, old ones have occupied the tables and oversee the sea, as if there were anything left to happen there. Squawking seagulls mix with cawing crows in an insufferable choir: Györgi Ligeti meets Luigi Nono and beats him up. At the Piazza Europa, a square built in the style and honour of fascist rationalism, not a soul in sight. Shops are shut, underwear on low-sagging ropes tremors like fresh staves. Still, a pestiferous shadow passes by; an old man, possibly reminiscent of the one from *The Plague*, reaches into the pocket of his corduroy blazer and showers the cats with gravel. All, it seems, was lost long ago. The waiter moves the last tables inside, first droplets of rain come down. What is the point of existing here and now, what is the point of anything at all, someone seems to be saying, or is it just the shutters slamming into the tarted-up walls, into the breasts of the odd buxom Madonna amongst those in the niches.

Gaeta

6 Feb 2017

In Cetinje, Montenegro, there is a café, a long-standing one, called Gaeta. He looked for it, thirsty in the drizzle, but in Gaeta he didn't find the Ostaria Cetinje. Yet, on the quay, closer to the small pier for fishing boats than to the section where the whales of the Sixth Fleet slumber, rises a corroded obelisk erected by Queen Jelena Petrović-Njegoš, the daughter of King Nikola and wife of Viktor Emanuel, in honour of her fellow Montenegrins. It is three in the afternoon, absolute siesta. In Via dell'Indipendenza there are no traces of life, if we don't count feline lives. If, however, we do count them (no reason for a man to look down upon a

cat), and multiply them by nine, one could credibly claim that the town's main artery is rather crowded on a Monday at three in the afternoon, in a stuffy Southerly. Madonnas from the side alleys, that thick, inflamed web of nerves trying to escape their own damp spinal column, then there are the fluorescent, electrical-powered or just colourfully painted Madonnas in improvised chapels and street shrines that amplify the sense of a temporary, but undisrupted despair. It is a festival of desolation. It may sound paradoxical, but on this street fundamentally dead things are the liveliest.

You can get burnt on Italian architecture: its glowing embers invite you to speak thereof, though you had better kept silent. This architecture, all of its splendour, must be turned inside out like a sock. Then its cornerstone becomes the question of how many generations had to starve and groan under the Church's boot till their bones settled into the white of the marble, how many children's tongues had to polish it to a high gloss that doesn't fade to this day? The answer is in the sound of the Southerly, the roar which the marble grew up on, which compressed in its texture, a cloudy treacle on the verge of a scream, a rough, inseparable multitude: the crash of the waves, the bending of the tree-crowns, the ropes on the masts tapping wild love letter-telegraphs, the black plastic pails rolled about by the wind. About to commit mass atrocities, under the eclectic belfry of St Erasmo's Cathedral, in a deaf, momentary satori, he realises how cats come into this world. Fully *finished*, furry, in Technicolor, they pop right out of the arse of a bigger relative, a playful Venetian stone lion hitched in the middle of the square. No small matter, cats.

Naples

7 Feb 2017

‘To drive to Naples’ – I repeat, and it sounds strange every time, as if it were a fixed phrase, an idiom, at any rate something that obscures and distorts its real meaning. Something like, for instance, the saying, ‘To go to Canossa’; not the small town in Puglia, on the other side of the boot of Italy, over on the Adriatic coast, but the castle in Tuscany Henry IV went to in order to throw himself at Pope Gregory VII’s feet. This counts as a humiliation, and rightfully so. To bend the knee before Catholic clergy is a thing even more execrable than the clergy itself and it is hard, indeed, to imagine more grave a humiliation. I used to know, after all, some who’d been to the Vatican to kiss the hands of popes.

To drive, well, to Naples. Last time – it’s been twelve years – the railway company delivered me to the hot throat of the station Centrale. It was an August as incandescent as the iron with which they crowned Croatian revolutionary Matija Gubec, and the swallows in the sky danced a devilish kolo. Today we’re coming from the north, through Lazio and Campania, through Roman ruins and the ruins of industry, through lack of urban planning that goes back to the Visigoth invasion, migrant slums, tourist towns akin to the pictures of footballers in an album from a forgotten championship, drawn up between the road and the endless boring beaches covered in coarse dark sand. That bee-hive we sneak up on from behind, through the thick suburbs, a hair before noon. We melt and run all around it like warmed-up honey, like the seal wax of quite personal a madness.

It’s unlikely that there’s a name so fitting, yet at the same time so radically ill-fitting, for a philosopher (especially an atheist) as the one that Benedetto Croce ended up with. In the street named in his honour, a similar subdued duality reigns supreme, an inner tension which can be resolved in one of the two ways: with an explosion, or an implosion. Absolute chaos and absolute peace which derives (like the idea of salvation or the sequels of a horror film) from an iron-clad belief that life will never stop, that an entropic collapse is impossible. Nothing, however, precludes the possibility of literal death by heat, I think to myself as the

sun, the bane of the horoscope, sears arabesques into my scalp. I hear a tripe salesman herald his obituary. I see the antennae of the crabs flicking towards a picture of freedom, as futile as only freedom can be, still live leaves flounder about in the plastic barrels. A boy sitting on a wall is immersed in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Tattooed kids beatbox. Arabs flog tolas of hashish, ficuses crawl up the walls of run-down churches. Dust to dust, dust to wind, wind to earth. Porous, yellowish limestone that breaks through the plastering makes everything seem older, half dead, although filled to the brim with life. A lottery salesman flips the table. Accattone sodomises Accattone.

Footnote: As a child I often mixed up Pino Daniele and Pino Silvestre. The former, depicted in the spray-painted mural, sang in an unusual, nasal falsetto. The latter, along with the octagonal turquoise mints stuck together in the jacket pocket, is still responsible for the smell of my grandfather.

Sorrento

8 Feb 2017

To go for a drive around Naples is pure pleasure; to drive around Naples, conversely, is pure pain. The traffic in the city core is akin to a rally race in the catacombs of the Coliseum as thumbs are lifted and everyone, the gladiators, the spectators and the animals (especially the animals), is tremulous from the suspenseful wait, although they know the fighting was slow and the thumb can only point downwards. The soundtrack is the roar of a derby match when a penalty kick is awarded, or a Parliament session. The vehicle inevitably foots the bill, whilst the chassis leaves the impression that the barbarians have been and brandished their battle

bludgeons. Then Vesuvius burps somewhere behind us, cliffs soar in front of our nose and the blue of the sea finally opens up, deep, lined with dark volcanic rock. The traffic, conversely, barely subsides. We crawl for hours on the retailored asphalt, across a leviathan tract of suburbia, desiccated industrial zones, along roads intertwining with tracks, across tracks intertwining with bridges, across bridges with working-class neighbourhoods leaning against silos; everything intertwines with everything else into a barely comprehensible member of a familiar language family. The prosody of dust and downfall.

Ernst Jünger, his cliffs and his sfumato gloaming, the pelagico-celestio-volcanic light, of the kind that beams from above, from the heart of earth and the bowels of the Mediterranean at once, that light, and the rocks, akin to a natural serving platter, that push us towards the final reckoning, that is all that makes any sense in Sorrento. The rest is expensive resorts and hotels, groups of American and Far Eastern tourists in their dotage, boutiques, the stink of new clothes and the stench of rancid cooking oil, fish & chips. All in all a miserable Abbazia, drowned in the squalor and splendour of tourism. This Italian one lacks the Quorum discotheque, the role of the token literato is played by the statue of Torquato Tasso, who was born here. Not a trace of Jerusalem. Freedom in traces only. All in all, Opatija. That moribund town on the Croatian coast. 'Opatija' – wrote Ivica Prtenjača in a poem – 'the cunt of cunts'.

Salerno

9 Feb 2017

Costiera Amalfitana at night. The windiest road in the world, a line of quick-setting glue carefully squeezed from the tube in order to stick the vehicle to the rockface, as vertical as

vanity. Cuttlefish-coloured sky, caves beneath it, cavities in the healthy teeth of the world, further down, the sea reflecting the darkness that sediments in it as if in a priest's heart till it's saturated and starts overflowing, the pitch running down the slick slopes of the seabed all the way to the bottom. The bottom is the home of vultures, the fitness club of death, the *poste restante* address on a card no one will ever read. In between, in the mouse trap, on the sticky tape that gleams under the headlamps and the moon's searchlight, a sixties film: Monica Vitti's shawl is swept up all the way to Positana, rumours of its scent are circulated on the steps of Duomo di Amalfi, and it finally reappears inexplicably on the terraces of Vietrio on the coast. If it weren't the dead of a winter night (a Mediterranean night and a Mediterranean winter, but still), this story would've long since strayed into stucco kitsch.

Parking fee in Salerno is charged till three in the morning, if and when one miraculously finds a spot, and even with the fee paid the car gets towed away. Bad karma has followed the city since it served as the sanctuary for the ustashe tyrant, *esteemed minister and literatus* Mile Budak who, at the hotel Montestella, started and finished work on a text which entered the canon of Croatian disgrace, that Pantheon of despair, under the title *Hearth: a Novel of Village Life in Lika*. According to historian Antun Barac, that voluminous tome, in a fireworks display of historical irony, found its most loyal readership in the death camps of Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška: along with a missal, it was the only reading material available to the inmates. Apart from that, the Bay of Salerno and the city that stretches from its roots towards Calabria is gentle, at first glance almost less Southern: as if a Ligurian, Genovese silencer has sneaked into Napolitan madness. In a way, Salerno reminds of our (Italian, Austrian, D'Annunzio's, French, Hungarian) city of Rijeka. The hum of the unusually green, unusually long quay shaded by palms, evergreen oaks and sycamores, school kids and pensioners, gulls and pigeons. The likewise electrified rhythm of the promenade, the carabinieri and their rotating lights, African purse-and-sunglasses peddlers: Ray Man, Pradda,

Dolce&Baganna. J. returns the car and the carmic equinox is suddenly nearer, more certain. Like a pustule under the skin or an almond in its shell, the idea to cross the boot ripens; the heel strikes a beat, the spur of the Adriatic coast jingles in the brief evening.

Matera

11 Feb 2017

He had been here before, he recalled in the last light of dusk, it had been exactly ten years since, it was early June and a snake slithered out of the rock. Like a little sponge it absorbed, took on the evil tint of the sun, stretched itself in the white light and disappeared in the rock mass. He'd cultivated and would keep cultivating a deep, sophisticated enmity towards those cold-blooded blasé creatures, possibly because he resembled them on the inside. He cursed them and disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a suit of snakeskin on the low branches. Then he promised to the snake he'd return.

To arrive in Matera led by the signal of invisible satellites is an inconvenient, perhaps even dangerous anachronism. To drive through the moonscape of loose marly hills, enormous termite mounds whose inhabitants have devoured every last leaf and blade of grass, to drive, led by the metallic, somewhat offended voice of the invisible woman, the mistress of orbital iron, towards a mediaeval troglodyte settlement sunk into the adhan of time is uncanny in an unusual way, as though USS Enterprise with its lights were landing on the Altar of the Fatherland. After a few brief and unconvincing rounds of peace negotiations, phaser beams and long pinky nails intersect. It is no coincidence that Pasolini filmed his *Gospel According to St Matthew* here, only for the much less talented and much more bigoted American Scot to follow in his footsteps.

It is the middle of February and Matera looks like an abandoned film set. Night outflanks sasse ^[P1] and the dwellings subsequently lowered onto them, the flat roofs are governed by cats. Until the mid-fifties, when the government (Italian, not feline) evicted the inhabitants and forced them into new concrete estates, people here lived on potatoes and maize meal, up to their chin in shite and sorcery. Short life expectancy, sky-high infant mortality, illiteracy, cattle in bed and darkness on the plate. Yet, the blue hours in Matera, those fateful last-man-standing battles whose outcome is well-known, are a dusk that is not of this century. They fall out of clocks and calendars like Toto Cutugno out of a van parked in front of Tripolis, like Aldo Moro out of the boot of a Brigade Rosse car. The cacophony of bells, bouncing off the warm cliffs the caves are set into like luxurious fireplaces, mixes with its own echo. The hanging bridge tremors under a flock of goats. Fireflies, one by one, turn on their glowing arses. From the music school, sounds of the clarinet, the trumpet, the endless paradiddles. From roof to roof, through the winding alleys, the prehistoric bloodstream petrified in a moment notable for nothing in particular, a fossil of a vanished world. Suddenly, like leukocytes resurrected in that sleeping stream they return to the shell of the room. Then a torrent comes down lifting the aroma of earth, washing the dust, twirling it up, only for it to cover everything again.

Alberobello

12 Feb 2017

Here in Smurf City there is no Gubec Linden, in whose shade the leader of the Peasant Revolt rallied his men, no Lebanese cedars, and no Stribor's Forest from the popular Croatian fairy tale. Little houses with conical roofs are planted too thickly. Here and there a cypress juts

from the rock, an anonymous palm, an olive tree or a black oak beyond history, but the tree that gave the town its name probably sedimented into coal long ago and is waiting. Languishing underground waiting for the blind beak of flame to strike from the inside, for the phoenix to break out of his nest and in a brief yet furious salto mortale cast bright light onto a printed page, turn into electricity that powers computers and mixing desks, warm up a party rally in some chilly provincial hall in the north, or Berlusconi's pool.

The whole town of Fair Tree consists of drystack dwellings known in Istria as *kažuni* (they call them *trulli* here), relicts of a vermiculous curse that is bound to fall on the tree of the world along whose trunk races a furious Ratatoskr. Trullis are somewhat larger, designed for permanent occupation and painted white, well-suited for close coexistence of humans and cattle. Such coexistence is, possibly, the very core, the most inseparable part of *conditio humana*. Trullis could also be described as a quarry squatted by the Coneheads from the eponymous film with Dan Aykroyd, or a shrunken version of the cone that makes the hero of Bernhard's *Correction* go insane. At the Central Bar, mystical symbols from the pagan and Christian (i.e. pagan many times over) traditions daubed on the roofs intertwine with the chimneys with characteristic caps and the waiters' 'ciao' and 'bene', till the numbness of the limbs and the torpor of the frontal lobe, as accurate as an atomic clock, announce a siesta and man, beast and symbol, even the dogs lazing about in the square, sink into the black-and-white B-flick of dream, the introduction to the main Technicolor cinemascope screening later in the evening when the world is drowning in popcorn and spraying Pepsi through the nose.

Peschici

14 Feb 2017

The house is *hard by* Peschici, or, more precisely, between Peschici and nothing, for instance like Pluto, the former planet slyly and insanely divested of its planetary status, is located between Neptune and a still unidentified mixture of dark energy and matter just as dark. As far as that part of Gargano is concerned, the railway ends in Peschici, beyond is grace and forest. The cinemascope is again the appropriate technique. Monica Vitti returns, rolling across bare rock with a dapper G. Ferzetti: Antonioni, *L'Avventura*. Or Godard and Fritz Lang on Capri, hand in hand on the flat roof with Brigitte B. somewhere in the background, the resplendent dungeon of Villa Malaparte, the scorn, *Le Mépris*. The house, pent between sky and Earth, a forty-minute walk from the village and some twenty along goat trails from the first neighbours, is crumpled up on the rock, forgotten between two cross-eyed sandy beaches. The whitewashed flat-roofed single-storey house with open terraces and twelve rooms built into the rock was erected by V.'s diplomatic family in the late 1950s. A steep, slippery road descends to the shore, where abandoned tuna observation towers rise from both sides. There's electricity only in the sitting room, there's no hot water at all, fire is used for heating and cooking. Between us and Palagruža there is nothing: on a bright night, from your bed, through the crack of the door, you can make out the faint shivers of its lighthouse. Further along the same straight line lies Komiža, and beyond it the city of Split, yet another final stop.

Johannes is of the Hippy tribe. Born in Melko, barefoot and overgrown in hair and beard, he looks like the canonical representation of Christ. Johnny and V. are friends, he sequesters himself in the empty house from the new year to early spring. B. joins him for a few weeks. They meet the fishermen, so in the morning they are greeted at the door by the still live breams and flathead mullets. Truth be told, life starts to seep out of them before B. and Johannes wake up, and from time to time the fish haunt their dreams, demonically possessed breams and mullets dancing the cosmic kolo. When J. and B. say, 'Come on over, stay as

long as you please, bring wine, pasta and a crate of Peroni', we assume we're invited to a semi-abandoned weekend house, or a burglarised surfing board storage. No one expects the Robisonian palace. Nor do we expect the Carabinieri. For weeks they stalk Johnny as if he were a goldfinch, he is the wet dream of every cop scourged by the off-season Southerly in the seaside sticks. They jump us in the quiet gloaming, while a crusading epic of the sunset unfolds in the sky. The Carabinieri station in the Peschici is a non-place akin to an airport chapel: a place of worship at LaGuardia in the mid-seventies. Amongst all the feeble-minded police forces of the world you'd be hard-pressed to pick one that is more imbecilic than the Carabinieri, with their starched Armani suits and styled van dyke beards. This time, however, farce and grotesque get the drop on tragedy. The following morning the Carabinieri barge onto the terrace with their polished Beretta submachine guns, to fire two or three selfies. They dispense fish-related advice. Brigadiere Bianchi and his assistant-apprentice now join the dead, slimy, descaled bodies in the cosmic kolo.

Vico del Gargano

16 Feb 2017

Death dwells in the forest. The temperature drops by ten degrees Celsius, the perceived temperature, that is, the intangible 'feels like'. The serpentines take us to the top, the palm and olive trees are supplanted by beeches and oaks, the pines are still there. The eye no longer slides down a wavy surface, but glides down the still liquid avalanche of clouds, clouds that clump up into a murky, mealy mass. It's possible, if left in an appropriate press for a while, that they would settle into rough, heavy wrapping paper. We step into a blind tract.

In the window of the Pizzicato bar, they're suspending a daubing with a floral motif on four ropes, as if they were about to have it drawn and quartered by four horses. Through the lace curtains one can see the stands selling sausages, honey and biscuits, on the pastry display case the reflection of a late breakfast. Four blokes at the dawn of a tumultuous era, four double espressos, one halo of sighs. The castle is ruled by cats. They make their rounds through the secret oil works built in the Middle Ages into a dilapidated Slavic church, through the steeple named after a princess, the settlements above the gullies reminiscent of those immortalised by Ettore Scola. A costume drama is on the TV at a different bar. The barman and a handful of super-regulars suckle on their Peronis, the most tenacious ones slamming the slot-machines. I micturate; instead of coins, down the sloping streets roll lemons, bananas, cherries. Just lemons, bananas, cherries, over and over again.

Finally, wholly wrapped into the rustly wrapping paper, we step into the fog of the Gargano Forest. The trunks of the trees soar to the sun like masts of caravels: it is possible one could see from their tops a new, as yet undiscovered world. Suddenly, femurs mix with the leaves underfoot. One by one, some bleating, others in deathly silence underlined by the underground pulse of the old-growth forest, sheep come towards us; like a meeting of two unexpected weather fronts, cumuluses assaulting the area held by nimbostratuses past their prime. The angel of destruction.

Assisi

12 Feb 2017

Excepting the odd art historian, archaeologist, anthropologist specialising in bestiaries, and a few Esthers, Davids, Sarahs and Aarons from Florida, I am probably the most frequent

unbaptised visitor to Assisi. Fuck, I, too, like Giotto, it's all quite legitimate, I think as somewhere far away, beyond the heaving mass, San Francisco perishes in the black of night.

Pistoia

13 Feb 2017

An exercise in ontology of space: 1) Pistoia exists. Just as other towns exist, but of course, they don't exist quite the same. There exist non-places by motorways, washed-out, faceless Adriatic towns ossified round a single idea; there exist Umbrian hillocks, castles, farms and cypresses, abandoned motels with curtains at half mast, their neon signs which send into a sharp dusk false signs of life, just like some stars which slowly fade, or the opposition in our weary land. There exist pistols, too, allegedly named after Pistoia. However, all that existence makes no sense at all.

The scenario is essentially the same. A letter from G. arrives. G. writes to invite us to come over, stay as long as we like, he lives with his girlfriend now, the flat is cold and empty. A 14th-century palace, split-level, with floor heating and a view of the main square, is expected by no one. A present from his parents G. wants nothing to do with, not even the rent income. Borghesiana and its melancholy, collective class compunction, fear of poison. There exist indications that the edifice included a church at some point, too. An electric made-in-China Madonna pulsating like a traffic light, only after the green comes the blue. 'O, sublime Trumpet, full of strange piercing sounds, O, the Omega, the violet ray of His Eyes!' Perhaps, after all, everything did make some kind of sense, albeit quite ungraspable here and now.

Tuscany is in a fit of spring: almond trees in bloom, the room Madonna glowing green. Reared amid dust and concrete, we are not made for such houses. Time drips down the

awnings of the stalls in Piazza della Sala, in the bars Le Blanc and I Salaioli, down the columns of a few bold Romanic pulpits and the green-and-white marble Gothic facades of Tuscany, ending up in a pot of Tuscany tripe. Here, tripe is devoured without thinking twice by rich people too, who also cry. They made their fortunes exporting saplings and seedlings. Poplars and cypresses, palms, olives, flowers and living fences translate the language of earth into the language of wind, while Pistoia pulsates, exiguous from existence, like a bare heart. Trace amounts of Gerry Mulligan in the air, warm streaks of bronze. I stretch my finger out to carnivorous plants, they devour the whole hand, and my torso shorn of a hand now stutters as though shorn of foothold, as though all I have left is words.

Lucca

15 Feb 2017

‘My name is Luka, I live on the second floor.’ *Luka*, Antun Šoljan’s 1974 novel about a fixed idea of engineer Slobodan Despot’s, who was not, though he could have been, a diabolical combination of Slobodan Milošević and Branko Despot, whereby Milošević could be the one from Gazimestan or the one from the Yugoslav film *The Promising Boy*, or even a despot. Gherasim Luca. Gianluca Pagliuca. Luke Skywalker. Banja Luka. The lukewarm waters of the Ligurian Sea. Lucrezia Borgia. The luculent lucubrations of Lucian of Samosata. Lukoil Oil Company. Lucre as a general, inductively derived principle, the lifeblood of the world. Gavrilo, the dark Gavrilo Princip and his comrade-in-arms Luka Jukić, the would-be assassin of Austrian Royal Commissioner Slavko Cuvaj.

In Lucca, a city cramped in a nut shell, to this day wrapped up in renaissance walls, that quiet place in which life seems stuck in the interbellum – girls on bikes, pensioners on benches,

pigeons at their feet (no nooses, no bags, no portents of death), greengrocers wriggling in the sun, a carousel with horses and a group of pupils in blue school coats running across Piazza Anfiteatro – in that particular Lucca lives my pen pal Darko Suvin, of late, amongst other things, the translator of Franco Fortini who, amongst other things, was friends with Lukács (Fortini was, not Suvin). That, unfortunately, I remembered only when we had departed from Lucca.

Pisa

15 Feb 2017

It remains to be recorded. If, however, on the letter S lands a slender seagull of marshy grass and susurrations, the bird of prey of hollowness, city corners could give off the stale stench of urine, the ether that rises and melds with the dust after personal monsoon rains. Something, certainly, remains.

There is one way in which Pisa, unlike other Tuscanian and Italian cities or, shall we say, cities in general, was lucky. Piazza dei Miracoli, which attracts the most visitors to the city, whose mediaeval splendour catches people like the sticky tongue of a Venus flytrap, is located on the city's edge, the farthest corner of the new walls. The name was darned onto the square by the cultured ruffian D'Annunzio, Duce Impresa di Fiume, on whose banner, in a gentle ouroboros, a snake chews its own tail. Prior to that, the square complex answered to the much less poetic name of Piazza del Duomo. Owing to this auspicious circumstance, most of those who only pop down to take a quick picture of themselves holding up with their own hands, like outstandingly temporary Atlases, the famous wedding cake from whose top the bride and groom fell off long ago, stay in the vicinity of that bygone-ness without substantially

interfering with the pulse of the streets which are themselves nothing more than a shadow, which is to say a specific, almost fleeting imprint of the past.

As soon as one leaves this area of wonders, life crawls out of holes and crevices and hits one in the mouth. The wind screens of Vespas reflect students in a hurry, eaters of ice cream and possessors of free time, shirts with ironed collars and cats, if a cat can be possessed in the first place. Along the river promenade parade post-prandial Italians, claimed by some to be cat eaters. Others simply call them frog eaters. Yet, I take as relevant the testimony of Marija Pogačar, née Čebulec, raised in Kras on the Isle of Krk during the Italian occupation: ‘Italians are coming, hide your hens and lasses!’ To this day she is wont to exclaim this from time to time. Cats and frogs, it remains recorded, are not mentioned.

Florence

16 Feb 2017

Put briefly, the explosive, melancholy guerrilla of the Mediterranean can be divided into four groups: militant-romantic guerrilleros, disappointed-pacifist guerrilleros, petty-criminal guerrilleros and hooligans, and soft-academic guerrilleros with homoerotic proclivities. Though it may sound conspiratorial, The Tuscany Group is not a revolutionary organisation, it has nothing in common with the Brigade Rosse, nor is it a fanatical association of fans of Puccini’s soap opera. Under the clock at the Santa Maria Novella train station, it becomes clear that it is about nationalism framed in fascism which the architect Loos was not immune to, and his name just happened to be Adolf. Like Adolf ‘Dado’ Topić. The latter was born in 1949 in the town of Nova Gradiška, smack dab in the middle of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, just after the dust raised by Tito’s fateful ‘no’ to Stalin had settled.

All those insensately-named baby Sovietkas, Stalins and Stalinkas from the early post-war years could have been attributed to rashness, impetuous rapture, whilst the case of the Topić family, obviously, had to be seen as an act of sabotage from within. A clash of the romantics and the disappointed depicted as fractional struggle ultimately benefiting the academics.

As the clock ticks and the wind lifts up the sinewy leaves, he walks unaware of the fact that he has never sought a single one of the houses in which, interned for heresy by the Inquisition, Galileo Galilei lived his last. The injustice is all the more bitter because when in Florence, led by habit and desire, he usually visits at least some of the palaces of Galilei's tormentors, Brunelleschi's magnificent cosmic hair dryer hood, if nothing else. Thus fares a man when he switches off his brain and allows himself to be seduced by architecture. Like wraiths, tombs pop up. Santa Croce, Dante's false grave, shorn of all simplicity, deliberately devoid of the mystique of that ascetic mound in Ravenna. The real-deal Michelangelo, Machiavelli and Galileo, provided that bones have anything to do with ideas, that it is possible to press into them, as if chambering a round, some kind of *soul*.

He is unaware of his quiet collaborationism, until the road takes him to Villa il Gioiello, the scientist's last home, in front of whose clean facade one of the early fifth-column manifestos was uttered, possibly sotto voce, the timeless codeword of resistance: *eppur si mouve*. Here, on the slopes of Arcetri, as gentle night suffocates the city and the bells spread through the traitorous air the coded messages of slavery, it is clear that the war is waged under exceptionally unfavourable circumstances. 'Yes – my idols are dead, and my enemies are in power', he thinks and spits on the ground, joining the ranks of the disappointed pacifists.

Siena

17 Feb 2017

In the lee of the cathedral, a textbook example of the local white-and-green gothic (the green is deep, marshy, borderland-black), I stretch out my neck trying to encompass it with my gaze. On the corner, two figures of suspect physiognomy, errand-runners of the metaphysical mafia, flick their vintage switchblade knives. When the one on the right lifts the blade up to his mouth with a view to removing the bit of lardo stuck between his teeth, a ray of sunlight deflected from the shiny metal reveals the crumpled-up face of Milo, the grim postman. The next flash, predictably, identifies his companion as Angelo. In the next moment I no longer see them, but now, in the lattice with church flyers rests a gentle postcard. I notice it is addressed to me.

The cathedral, the millions of cubic metres of marble dedicated to the Assumption of Mary, landed on the narrow square like a Borg cube from a distant quadrant. Many years ago I remember, I talked H. into sleeping on the steps of the cathedral in Orvieto, partly because of the limited budget for our travels back then, partly driven by a fixed idea, and partly on account of common stinginess. Those nights, packed in a bag made of her piano keyboard, the row of black and white keys running across her ribs, forever imprinted themselves onto my cortex, darned themselves to it as if to an inmate's rough coat. I thought until I fell asleep, just like I am thinking now, I thought about Campo de' Fiori, the stake, the blazing Giordano Bruno, I saw the burning bush, I heard the voice, and the voice said: Durruti was right.

The brick-paved square of Piazza del Campo, that upturned scallop spreading radially in the direction of Fonte Gaia, the perfectly-shaped pearl spat out in an unlikely place by a narcissistic oyster, is strewn with handfuls of varicoloured confetti. Like a hurricane, a carnival has swept across the square – bonfire, fireworks and bars open till morning. Nuns and Batmans in a wild tarantella. Bonnie and Clyde with olive Mortadella sandwiches. Drunken clowns yelling *O, sole mio*. Gondoliers. Paid mourners. Weeping hairdressers. No

sign of Milo and Angelo. Pigeons are mum, shadows have coagulated in humid passages. An we vanished like stacks of hay.

Rome

18 Feb 2017

Peace crept into our bones. That fleeting, fragile, featherweight sensation, possibly the most unreal of words, does not really fit the Eternal City, it insidiously undercuts its very fundamentals. Rome responds to this attack on its uncompleteness, independence & authenticity with restlessness in its every fibre, every manhole and every living fence. Winkler's *Natura Morta* is unassailable in pointing out that this restlessness is best embodied by the Babylon that is the Termini train station.

At Cimitero Acattolico, conversely, we have total transparency of death: Rome rests in peace. Here lies aristocracy of this or that ilk, which belongs, even in a geographical sense, to the narrative of 18th, 19th and early 20th century cosmopolitanism framed in class terms. Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews and others mingle underground with agnostics and atheists, in the lee of Cestio's pyramid, the temple of deathless spirit, as if at a reception, the way they did when they were alive. Class representation of death triumphs once more over its communist essence. Some of the so-called aristocracy of the spirit lie here, some who would reject such a label with indignation, and even some ordinary rabble. Only in this pool of dust, this hourglass of blood and ashes, can one put in the same sentence Keats and Shelley, Goethe's son Albert, the chetnik voivode Dobroslav Jevđević, Gregory Corso, and Antonio Gramsci, on whose headstone, next to a few red carnations, rests a copy of Pasolini's *Le Ceneri di Gramsci*. 'Here you lie, exiled, with cruel Protestant / neatness, listed

among the foreign / dead: Gramsci's ashes...' In the sun shining its way through the thick thorn-bushes, above the 'bones of millionaires from more powerful nations' doze the resplendent, incorruptible cemetery guards – tomcats that have feasted on the dead.

Since the die, to the best of our knowledge, has not yet been cast for us, and 'Un coup de dés' at any rate 'jamais n'abolira le hasard', we keep our legions mostly on the other bank of the Tiber. Tram tracks writhe in the tight sunshine, socks are stuck in bare tree-crowns, as well as the hawking of the peddlers from the flea market. The moment, like a suspenseful musical phrase, double-dares its resolution. We then descend into a bar that is the heart of Italy, and that heart, buried in espresso cups and wine glasses, sandwiches, lottery tickets, chocolate bars, newspapers, altars, saviours and always at least one electrified Madonna, at least one resurrected dog watered with grappa, that heart, the pulse of the provinces, beats in every cell of ours, gathers us and kneads us into the dough of daily bread, into that nagging 'give us this day'. Afterwards, the very next day, the crumbs will slip down the faux, printed grouting on the linoleum, lay low in the patterns on the carpet, till the proboscis of the great Hoover gets them. Vulture cypresses, maiden spruces, the quiet fate of the unbaptised. The fat cemetery tomcats, the shade, the clock: the metronome of death.