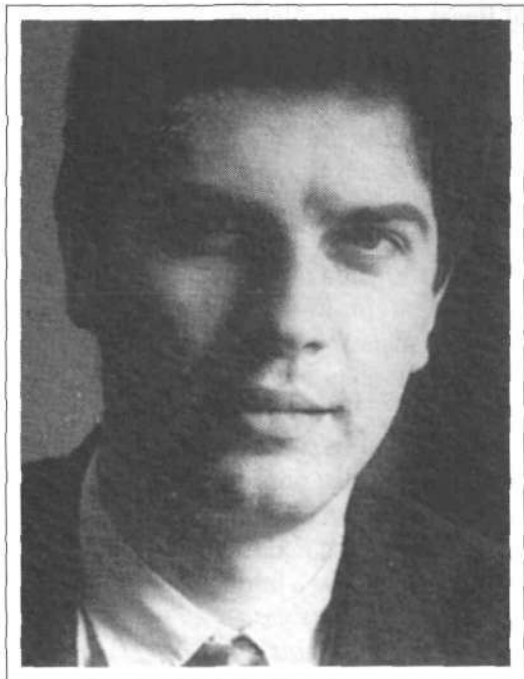


KOŠUTA, Miran



Miran Košuta, born in Trieste in 1960, graduated in Slavonic studies and comparative literature from the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and in music (clarinet) from the conservatory "Benedetto Marcello" in Venice. From 1984 to 1993 he was Slovene fiction editor with the Trieste Publishing Company, then official translator and interpreter with the State Prosecutor's Office, and now he lectures in Rome. As writer, literary researcher, critic and translator he regularly contributes to major Slovene publications and several Italian, French and German journals and magazines – mostly short stories, essays, literary studies and translations. He has published a book of short stories, *Rhapsody in Three Movements*, 1989, and a book of essays, *Krpan's Salt*, 1996.

Miran Košuta se je rodil leta 1960 v Trstu. Diplomiral je iz slavistike in primerjalne književnosti na Filozofski fakulteti v Ljubljani in iz glasbe (klarinet) na konservatoriju "Benedetto Marcello" v Benetkah. V letih 1984 -1993 je bil urednik Založništva tržaškega tiska, potem prevajalec Glavnega državnega pravdnštva na tržaškem sodišču, sedaj pa predava v Rimu. Kot pisatelj, literarni raziskovalec, kritik in prevajalec se oglašja v osrednjih slovenskih ter vrsti italijanskih, francoskih in nemških revij predvsem s kratko prozo, eseji, literarnimi razpravami, študijami in prevodi. Izdal je novelistično zbirko *Rapsodija v treh stavkih*, 1989, in knjigo esejev *Krpanova sol*, 1996.

MIRAN KOŠUTA

Dževad's Prophecy

Sometimes, when the atmosphere in Trst reeks of rot and decay, when the town becomes obsessed beneath a suffocating nightmare, and a harsh electoral gale gusts from people, I long to be Joyce, Stendhal, Rilke, Pushkin, Kette, Baudouin or Burton ... A Tuareg of mind, heart and pen, to stop in these parts for a day or a year, admire Miramare and the Glinščica Valley, the Rezija Valley and the San Carlo pier, the melody of the surf and of the Venetian Slovenian dialect, and then move on with the caravan. *Veni, vidi, fugi* ... Like the lyricist of the Adriatic I would conjure up on paper the "sweet paradise", the "zephyr" and the "sunny garden of the south"; like the poet of *Duino Elegies* I would fly with the gulls over the vertiginous cliffs of Sesljan; like the linguist, author of the *Materiali per la dialettologia*, I would praise the Venetian Slovenian hospitality and the Rezijan ingenuity; or bemoan with the author of *The Charterhouse of Parma* life "in direct contact with barbarians", "among peasants who have but one religion: money". And then, in the next moment, sated with the "grim gracefulness" of Saba's city, of these parts between Milje and Trbiž, I could push on, be off, embark on my journey, set sail, fly away, forget. *Veni, vidi, fugi* ... But as I am not Joyce, or Stendhal, or Rilke, or Pushkin, I can not choose oblivion. What could I separate from? Myself? This region – which we, foolishly aping the Slovenians who do live the other side of the border, call 'the yonder'* – is my fate, it is inscribed in my genes, it was placed in my cradle by the Fates. But a man marked by longing predictably has the hardest time coming to terms with himself, with what surrounds and determines him, thus becoming Handke's dreamer of the far-away land. He perceives life as a gap between what is and what could be, or rather what 'should' be. This Calderonesque vision of

the world is generally human, but here, near the border, among members of a nationally endangered community, it becomes existential, it grows into a daily existential yearning. Prešeren's famed metaphor calls that which is (reality, matter, time and space) hell, and that which could be (dream, ideal, utopia) heaven. And this is what I will make the matter of my following reflection – my, our, minority torn apart between hell and heaven.

ABOUT HELL

If Mark Twain had known the Slovenians in Italy and their minority Hades he probably would never have said: "I love heaven for the climate and hell for the company!" Here, between Trst, Gorica, Čedad and Žabnice, the history, politics, climate, landscape, national character, exposure to assimilation, fragility and insecurity have united forces to make a generation of special people, seen by poets as 'sad' and by psychologists as 'schizophrenic'. Being a member of the minority today means living in a narrow, old, malicious, petty, Pharisaic, greedy, shallow society, where the same people are always cast in the ballet of a thousand roles, where criticism is sent to stand in the corner and laughter punished by kneeling on salt, where mediocrity is an asset, obedience a virtue, pushiness a quality, any membership card the Bible. Can you imagine the open, humorous Twain among us? We would probably have to remind him of Marx's (Groucho, of course) aphorism: "I'd never want to belong to a club that would accept someone like me for a member ..." Our everyday reality – so little European, post-Berlin, and so very Goldoniesque – consists of political squabbles between the (right-wing) whites and the (left-wing) reds, always the same people as though the rainbow of life has lost all its other colors. Our local soap opera is endless diatribes about conciliation and ownership, lobbies and clericalism, uprooting the minority Grozds and Grudens for the sake of the nation, the chronic discord of the united delegations. Our national eschatology, the alpha and omega that will ultimately save us, is at times guaranteed representation, and at other times complete jurisdictional protection – which has been promised and then withdrawn so many times that it has become a platitude we hardly believe in anymore. Our adoptive, fiscal country is a fifty-year old stepmother; our mother country, in terms of nationality, a country with its own problems and priorities, among which the understanding of and concern for the minorities are increasingly the duty of bureaucrats and institutions and where the memory of the united Slovenian cultural space of yesteryear is fading daily. Our work

and our existence are endangered by the economic crisis, which is also always a crisis of the economists, since it points to their being incompetent, unable and perhaps also unwilling to rise to the challenges of the time and the market, and more interested in lining their pockets than striving to ensure the common welfare and a future for the young. We used to have a culture. Nowadays our professional culture is a sinking Atlantis, which the financial maelstroms, succeeding the turning off of the subvention taps, have doomed to a silent, freezing grave on the bottom of the ocean. Glug-glug-glug ... What the decades of fascists burning books and forcing people to drink castor oil could not do to Slovenian literature, music, theater or information in our parts, may soon be accomplished by the clever indifference of Italian democracy and the ruthlessness of Slovenian liberalism – in spite of the Helsinki and all other European regulations concerning the status of minorities. The story we tell our grandchildren is that of Tantalus, our hero and ideal the patient Sisyphus, and the most frequently watched film the *Never Ending Story*, because the fate of our minority is always *à la* Beckett: waiting – waiting for Slovenian schools in Venetian Slovenia, the Režija Valley and the Kanal Valley, waiting for bilingual signposts, waiting to hear Slovene spoken in the parliament, the regional, district or municipal council, waiting for a Slovenian TV channel, waiting for a conservatory, waiting for the promised funds, waiting for the refinancing of the Border Territories Act, waiting, waiting, waiting ... The benches in our waiting rooms are worn smooth with our agony, the express train of history is whistling on some other track while we are left behind on a disused platform. The worst thing about our hell is seeing how this waiting exhausts us, how the deleterious smog of our environment and our own mistakes undermine our brittle ethnic mass until we gradually, but unstopably, bleed into renegades, into blameless, rootless traitors, perhaps soon to be locked in the eternal grip of ice, like Dante's Ugolino. It is hell when a friend with whom you spoke the Križ dialect of Slovenian only yesterday greets you with "*Desidera?*" in the municipal office, and then, embarrassed, adds under his breath: "You know, the boss ..." It is hell when Slovene gives way to the Trst dialect of Italian at the general assembly of the Slovenian athletic club to accommodate those few Italian members. Our shame is hell when on our Sunday stroll along the promenade in Trst we give a wide berth to the Slovenian demonstrators in the Unita Square and then – due more to unease than any political disagreement – shrug it off with: just provocateurs ... It is hell when a few laconic lines of legalese in the name of progress expropriate you of your piece of farmland for a measly sum that can never compensate for the curses and the sweat buried in its furrows. Hell can also assume an inconspicuous, everyday

form, which is no less momentous: the political bias of my Trst radio station, the culture section of my local 'Primorski' newspaper dealing predominantly with events in Ljubljana, the paper's substandard Slovenian. It is a little daily hell to look at my ID which still displays – perhaps due to the legal costs the change would incur, or maybe because of my laxity which is so very much part of 'the yonder' – the enforced spelling Cossutta.

I am not a nationalist. I am bothered by the currently fashionable inflated Slovenian-ness. Even though in these post-1990 times this may sound heretic to some Slovenians from the independent sovereign state of Slovenia, I know that a nation, a people – the entity which served Slovenians to legitimize their claim to statehood – is just one of the many common denominators, prime factors, that humanity seeks to satisfy its atavistic need for an identity, a face, shared roots with which to ease the burden of the cosmic challenge of life. A nation is – according to Hegel and Dilthey, Kardelj and Urbančič – just one of the possible forms of the identification and spiritual organization of mankind, not an ontological but a historical category, and it continues to exist as long as it remains functional for the community, the society which recognizes itself in it. Any modification in the community's way of life also brings about changes in its spiritual organization. The antiquity of the *polis* instead of the *ethnos*, or the Middle Ages of the Marks and the guilds *docent* ... One of the predominant characteristics of the world today is the increasing globalization, the communication which leads to a gradual social integration, to a homologous multicultural space in which individual communities will be able to satisfy their needs for identification with new, previously inconceivable inter-, supra- or even a-national interrelation models with different spiritual and cultural coordinates. The nation will be no more! 'Will' being the operative word ... but here and now, today, it is alive, functional, even vitally important as a unification zenith and azimuth due to the collapse of the directional power of ideologies. Being a member of a minority therefore does not imply sitting on the bank of the Ganges (in our case the Soča) and meekly waiting for the current of history to bring by the corpse of the nation. Nor does it mean jumping the gun and fatalistically bargaining away one's Slovenian identity for some Babylonian regionalism or nebulous multiculturalism. Real regionalism and multiculturalism with a future are not the fusion, blending, conflation of the faceless into an even more anonymous mass, but a coexistence of differences on an equal footing, a unity of what is diverse and complementary. Without thriving minorities, any kind of regionalism must die. That is why a highly conscious, vigorous and resistant minority is a precondition for the success of any future integration and harmony in the national spheres. Like everything else, this will require

the *aurea mediocritas* of the Latin and the common sense of the Slav natures to protect the healthy national spirit from becoming infected with deadly nationalism. Marx (Karl, this time) would nowadays be justified to complain with Engels: "A monster is loose in Europe – the monster of nationalism." What this European social AIDS leads to – the contemporary integration processes notwithstanding – is evident from the Balkan tragedy. Slovenians – within or beyond the borders of Slovenia – are not immune to it. In Ljubljana as well as in Trst there are numerous Tarzans proudly beating their nationalistic chests. Their inhuman cry is chilling, this half-operatic half-simian shriek which could well stir up the never sleeping jungle of Italian nationalism, arouse the passions of the fascist, irredentist, *Lista-per-Trieste* wilderness, and plunge our minority hell into the depths, down to Lucifer. Because I know: hell is bottomless ...

ABOUT HEAVEN

A ubi dolor ibi amor, ubi fel ibi mel. Every minority, including the Slovenian one in Italy, is also a luxury, a rainbow appearing after the rains of hell, curving its iridescent arc into Prešeren's crystalline sky of ideal, dream and utopia: of that which could be. Isn't it luxurious to unite within oneself the scintillating temperament of the south and the melancholy of the north, to live at the confluence of cultures and entwine in one's heart, like Slataper, the strange nostalgia of the Slav blood, the pig-headed obstinacy of the German character, and the classic harmony of Italian culture? Isn't it rainbow-glorious to understand your neighbor, to speak his language, to know his customs and history, to be able to read his poets?

Here, between Trbiž and Trst, Koper and Reka, the border, the contacts, the neighborliness have forged a special kind of people who do not shake hands and sing *Zdravljica*** out of some indefinite philanthropy, anticipated commercial profit, or the proverbial "knowledge is power", but to satisfy a nobly selfish, frequently vital need: to recognize oneself in the other, to see one's own face mirrored in a neighbor. As Michel Eyquem de Montaigne warns: "We are all like patchwork composed of bits and scraps of various colors and sizes, and each strip of fabric has its own role to play in any given moment. Inside us, there are as many differences as between us and others." Discovering the difference in the other thus means making sense of the differences within oneself; tearing down the barriers around oneself is destroying one's own barriers; opening up to a fellow human being is overcoming one's fears, distrust and weaknesses. When I talk about

Maraini, translate Tomizza, read *The Divine Comedy*, or write in Italian about Slovenian literature, I am in reality measuring the atomic mass of my Slovenian-ness, its specificity, influenced in language and spirit by the culturally intoxicating fragrances of Goethe's land of the lemons; I am listening to the purr of that mysterious sense of non-belonging within myself which – according to Ara and Magris – characterizes every son of the border, bringing in its wake the realization: this no-man's-land between my own and my neighbor's cultures is my homeland, here on this narrow strip between the Romance and the Slav worlds blossoms my uniqueness, here are my bridges, here I – a member of a minority – am truly myself. Slovenian, but distinct from those in Ljubljana or Maribor, as well as Italian, like those in Slovenian Istria, enriched with Cankar and Prešeren. Being a member of a minority today means to burn out for the European dream of an equal union of nations and cultures; to live the never-to-be-repeated luxury of the border fate; to take part in creating an open, young, vital, tolerant, civilized society which does not complain in a victimized fashion of its smallness but, on the contrary, attempts to distill this smallness into a concentrate of a high-quality culture. This fragrant gin of the Kras, of Venetian Slovenia, of Istria can only be distilled if the minority is aware of its specific and hybrid nature, its fate and task, in short – if it becomes a subject. The metaphor of a bridge is poetic and – if we believe the words of the Serbian author Dragan Velikić – also founded in life, “because wherever the current of life flows there are at least two shores. And the purpose of human existence is to span the divide.” In literature, this metaphor has inspired many a masterly page and brought some writers – like Ivo Andrić – the Nobel prize. But if a bridge is only “a structure carrying a road over obstacles of depth”, if it is only a construction connecting two shores and enabling communication, without inspiring anyone to stop and admire its piles or gaze from its height at the view below, then it can not serve as a metaphor for a minority. There are bridges – like the bombed one in Mostar – which attract tourists from all over the world with their history, beauty and soul. This is what the bridges of minorities wish to be like.

Before their arcs can rise to the skies of harmonious coexistence, however, we have to become aware of our identity as a minority and of the minority's subjectivity, and gain broad public recognition as such.

Thus it is heaven every time the Slovenian minority in Italy and the Italian one in Istria sit down to talk and draw up a joint document protesting against – for instance – reciprocity, the sordid haggling of the international wheeling and dealing which demeans us into hostages of diplomatic black-mail, into goods to be bartered by politicians.

It is heaven when the beyond-the-border Slovenians receive a drop of justice from the Italian governmental pipette not because of international pressures and agreements, but due to Article VI of the Italian Constitution, due to the democratic recognition of Slovenian tax-payers as equal citizens, or perhaps due to some enlightened statesman grasping the motto: the justice of the majority lies in the rights of the minority. Heaven is politics (though rare as a swallow in winter) which does not accept the logic of force and numbers; a politics of ideal, which the politics of a minority should by definition always be. It is heaven when the Italian ambassador in Koper asks for a Slovenian grammar and textbook as he would like to add the melody of our native sibilants to the ten languages he speaks fluently. It is heaven when an unknown voice from Rome or Palermo orders over the phone "tutto Kankar", all the existing Italian translations of the works by Ivan Cankar, whom Eugenio Montale described in a letter to Bobi Bazelno as one of the great masters of European literature. It is heaven when an Italian post-war refugee from Istria, now living in Trst, declares that she is not interested in getting or buying back her father's house in Koper at the price of new evictions – even if this time only from the apartment – because she does not want to inflict upon the Bosnians, the Albanians, the Slovenians currently sweeping, sleeping, eating, making love in her rooms, what time and politics had inflicted upon her. Heaven is clubs like Gruppo 85 or Circolo 91, cultural estuaries where in the flow of discussions, meetings and lectures the Slovenian river water and the Italian brine intermix. It is heaven when we, minority members, curled up into tight spiky balls like hedgehogs, realize that the only hope for our national survival, or at least for a more successful recuperation from the assimilation processes which are making us bleed, lies in the understanding of the majority, in their support, and in mutual cooperation. Because without the will of the majority there can be no protection of the minority.

Therefore I do not believe in ethnic ghettoizing in national political parties, in administrative or political national reservations where, instead of the Navajo, Slovenians of controlled parentage would put up their tents, offering visitors plastic dolls of a Slovenian couple from the Kras, in national costume ... It is instructive enough to glance around: the politics of ethnic cleansing which succeeded the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire has Balkanized Trst into a Lacanesque uptight community, as Italian as it can get, isolating the citizens of other nationalities in an incommunicative ghetto and condemning the city to economic, cultural, moral, and social decay. The question with which Montale would greet his visitors from Trst has unfortunately not become rhetoric or anachronistic yet: "Do you still hate each other so much in your neck of the woods?"

Recently – it was soon after the Assumption – I attended a meeting of authors, translators, and publishers from Eastern Europe which was organized in the idyllically green Trata near Celovec, Austria. At the press conference at the end of the meeting, Dževad Karahasan, a writer from Sarajevo, was asked the unavoidable question concerning the exemplary peaceful coexistence of nations, cultures and religions in former Bosnia which the war has supposedly destroyed beyond repair. We knew of Dževad's personal tragedies, of the shells which had massacred his friends and relatives, of the VHS cassettes with footage of a busload of gang-raped Moslem girls, which his students of film direction played to him instead of their diploma work. We knew of Dževad's extravagant flight from Sarajevo, of his disgust with Serbian, Croatian or any other bloodthirsty butchers. But the author of the *Eastern Divan*, a charming novel of Arabian content, took everybody by surprise with his answer: "The Bosnia you speak of," he retorted to the journalist, "is not the Bosnia of the past – it's the Bosnia of the future!"

A son of the border, a member of the minority, knows that Karahasan's statement needs to be generalized, expanded to cover the entire "Yugoslavian" territory and more, down to the Pillars of Hercules of the known world. And to say: a Yugoslavia of brotherhood and unity is not a thing of the past, it is a "Yugoslavia" of the future. A Slovenia of cultural, economic and political dialogues with Belgrade, Zagreb, Priština or Novi Sad is not some past utopia but a future certainty. The Austro-Hungarian national pluralism in Trst, a symbiosis of the Slovenian, Italian, Friulian, and German inhabitants of "the yonder", is not past but future. In the global village of world communications, national or state compartmentation is absurd. Wherever there are borders, differences, neighbor relations, and wherever nations, races, religions and cultures intertwine, a peaceful, fruitful coexistence is a vital necessity and inevitable fate. Today perhaps a curse, tomorrow a paradise. Today perhaps hell, tomorrow heaven.

Sometimes, when the atmosphere in Trst reeks of rot and decay, when the town becomes obsessed under a suffocating nightmare, and a harsh electoral gale gusts from people, I long to leave, like Joyce, Stendhal, Rilke, Pushkin, Kette, Baudouin or Burton; but this certainty, this predestined coexistence draws me back again to our hills, our sink-holes, our shores. *Veni, vidi, mansi* ... Because a person – and in particular a member of a minority – does not live for anything but this crystalline sky Prešeren speaks of. The only reason we have come to sojourn on the blue planet, from our first whimper to our dying breath, is to see this shooting star of peace and coexistence. In the hell of Bosnia and of "the yonder". That is why I strain my eyes into the

darkness and the silence of the universe. So as not to miss the flash of the heavenly firefly. To live out the time when Dževad's prophecy comes true.

*The text refers to what is known as *zamejstvo*, literally 'beyond-the-border-region', formally translated as the 'foreign-governed Slovenian ethnic parts', and in point of fact the multicultural, multinational, multilingual region(s), also inhabited by Slovenians, beyond the borders of the Republic of Slovenia.

The geographical names appearing in the text are given (with a few English exceptions) in their Slovenian forms, i.e. in the forms in which the Slovenian inhabitants of the places in questions refer to them in their mother tongue. For easier orientation, the Italian (and two German) equivalents are given below, in alphabetical order:

Čedad – Cividale
 the Glinščica Valley – Val Rosandra
 Gorica – Gorizia
 the Kanal Valley – Val Canale
 the Kras – il Carso
 Križ – Croce
 Milje – Muggia
 the Rezija (Valley) – (Val) Resia
 Sesljan – Sistiana
 the Soča – l'Isonzo
 Trbiž – Treviso
 Trst – Trieste
 Venetian Slovenia – Slavia Veneta
 Žabnice – Camporosso
 Celovec – Klagenfurt
 Trata – Tratten

The Italian equivalents of two other geographical names appearing in the text should also be mentioned, because of the Italian minority living in, respectively, Slovenia and Croatia:

Koper – Capodistria
 Reka – Fiume

**Prešeren's ode to friendship and neighbourly spirit, now the Slovenian national anthem.

Translated by Tamara Soban