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KULTURTRÄGER DRAGAN KLAIĆ¹

Mobilność wyobraźni. Międzynarodowa współpraca kulturalna [Mobility of Imagination. A Guide to International Cultural Cooperation] is the first book by Dragan Klaić published in Poland. Some of his articles and columns appeared in Polish periodicals and edited books. The modest amount of publications stands in contrast with the number of his friends, collaborators and disciples this indefatigable thinker, expert, lecturer and traveller had in Poland. The contrast is even bigger if we consider his imposing expertise in Polish culture concerning not only theatre, he knew inside out, but also literature, history, Polish-Jewish relations, the traditions of the Parisian *Kultura*, KOR and Solidarity, and after 1989, his expertise in Poland's cultural as much as foreign policies.

Lublin was the only city candidate for the European Capital of Culture this expert on European projects came in close co-operation with co-authoring its first applications. Still remembered today is the amazement of the city mayor during his first meetings with this Amsterdam-based expert who pointed out to him all the strong and weak points of the city, beginning from the Polish-Lithuanian Union, Western and Eastern influences along with the multicultural heritage, migrations of the population, historical disasters, rich traditions of the universities and alternative theatre, concluding not only with a description of the current cultural infrastructure of the city but developing it to include a detailed analysis of Lublin's economic investment, demographic and geopolitical problems... This anecdote concerns not only Dragan Klaić's knowledge as such but the way he understood and practiced international cultural co-operation.

Mobility of Imagination is one of those books whose content is as important as the author. And as Dragan Klaić belongs to those reticent in speaking, least of all, writing about themselves, it seems worthwhile to reach to the man behind this systematically ordered guide book for experts. All the more worthwhile that the success of international cultural co-operation depends on something more than just textbook type professionalism, even top quality one. This "something" might seem elusive as it is apparently connected with interpersonal relations, authenticity and life experience of concrete people.

The value of cultural co-operation itself is indisputable nowadays. The world favours it and Europe constitutes a significant factor of integration; it is also aided by the mobility of our fluid contemporaneity and globalization. It all seems obvious, but for its enthusiasts the difficulty lies in obtaining constantly refined tools and means of development. While considering it, it is also worthwhile to remember that the author of the *Mobility of Imagination* experienced himself a fiasco of the project of building of a common cultural space once integrating various nationalities and offering a common identity, language and a dense network of contacts, including artistic ones. The destructive and bloody break-up of Yugoslavia was an experience that for many remained a trauma leaving behind only ruins and disbelief in other "naive" projects, bringing defeatist consent to life enclosed within a national or other similarly horizon-limiting fencing. With Dragan Klaić it was different. His engagement in "Europe as a cultural project" and creation of alternative transnational platforms of co-operation in the world, has acquired the intensity and total commitment of the man who knows very well the price of losing something precious and has the knowledge of how easy it is to destroy the edifice of co-existence erected for years, and understands it cannot be based on ideology, hypocrisy or

¹ Foreword to the Polish edition of *Mobility of Imagination* (Dragan Klaić, *Mobilność wyobraźni. Międzynarodowa współpraca kulturalna. Przewodnik, Warszawa 2011*).

coercion. One sensible lesson that can be learnt from the destruction of a bridge in a neighbourly conflict is the construction of a better, more solid bridge, because there is no other alternative. Therefrom stems the importance of the role of the teacher able to pass on the arcana of his craft, by others unnoticed, ignored or treated cursorily. And that is why Dragan Klaić's book is based on precision and meticulous approach to detail, wide and multi-faceted scrutiny, reference to what is concrete and experienced, dragging idealists back to earth and handing them the tools to work with. This post-Yugoslavian citizen tells us between the lines that the international cultural co-operation performed carelessly is something worse than just some bad or failed co-operation. It means yielding to the forces of parochialism, destruction and xenophobia, whose power feeds on nothing else but our nonfeasance, ineptitude and loss of vigilance towards the darker side of our nature.

In his autobiographical *Exercises in Exile*, Dragan Klaić analysing the vicissitudes of emigrant's fate reveals that, as a matter of fact, already in his childhood he was getting ready for the role of an exile. The same may be said about his preparation for transborder cultural co-operation. Besides, considering a man of culture mastering the art of living far away from his native land, isn't his situation the best school of building a common cultural space for people of different languages and nationalities?

Sarajevo, Dragan Klaić's birthplace, is today a symbol of the tragedy of a multicultural community, the war waged against cosmopolites, the citizens of *charshiya*, those favouring one common Bosnia and common Yugoslavia. He, of course, remembers a different Sarajevo, one that felt home for his mother's family with their tangled Jewish-Polish-Serbian roots. His grandmother turning to her grandson spoke Bosnian accent in her Serbo-Croatian and would weave into their conversations various Polish words which he remembers until today. Quite a similar story can be said about his father family in Novi Sad where he lived before he left to study and later settle in Belgrade. Here ruled Hungarian and German, the latter replacing Yiddish, and of course the Voivodinian accent of Serbo-Croatian. Digging deeper in the family history, one could follow his ancestors wandering from Krakow to the Balkans, and others from the Habsburgian provinces that are now parts of Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania... He would often underline the comfort his family felt living in the world of the Austro-Hungarian empire, moving freely across it in search of better prospects for work and living, changing languages and perfectly adapting themselves to the local neighbourhood, at the same time preserving the feeling of belonging to one and the same cultural *milieu*, so common among the Central Europeans.

I mentioned earlier the break-up of Yugoslavia as the experience of the fiasco of a community building project that Dragan Klaić felt personally. And the presented above short outline of a family history brings us to still another tragic event of the history of modern Europe. Born in 1950, Dragan could only hear the story of the Holocaust. Still, his closest family bore witness to this not so very distant past events. The 9th of November, the day he emigrated West from Yugoslavia, the first night spent in Vienna, meant for him, first of all, the memory of the "Crystal Night", and in his case it was by no means just a loose association of the date from a historical textbook. The tale he recreated later from the stories he heard and the fate of the members of his family, to a large extent refer to the project of building a civilizational community on the Central European borderlands whose capitals were Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Krakow or Czernowitz, the project whose one of the main protagonists were Jews. Not accidentally then, they were called *kulturträger*, i.e. those who carry culture across national borders. A popular misconception wants to identify Jewish culture with enclosed city quarters, such as Josefov in Prague or Kazimierz in Krakow, whereas Jews were also co-founders of the city cosmopolitan agoras. The fact that their descendant writes today a guide of international cultural cooperation for Europeans is an evidence of continuity of a certain tradition, a wonderful one too, if we

consider the fact that this continuity was not established on the foundations of a predictable and simple sequence of events, but persistent and miraculously salvaged belief in the sense of opposing the dark forces of the advocates of the “final solution” or ethnic cleansing, and in spite of the experience of a failure in the field.

The excellent preparation for gaining his skills in the cultural cooperation from his early childhood was Dragan Klaić’s mastery of many languages. The languages of his Novi Sad family were Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian and German. Still in his youth he mastered French, at that time still the language of the European culture. The language he uses daily in Amsterdam is Dutch. He also knows Italian, Spanish, Slovenian and can read the Cyrillic script. But of particular importance in his life is English, the language he chose very early, long before his emigration, to be the medium of his profession. Also in English he defended his Ph.D. thesis at Yale University. With the end of the cold war, he started, together with his friend Dušan Jovanović, a theatrical quarterly *Euromaske*. The magazine’s editorial offices were in Ljubljana but all the texts were published in English, a unique phenomenon in those times, attempting to cover with its range the whole of Europe. It is also significant that his autobiography, *Exercises in Exile*, was also written in English. Beginning his co-operation with Lublin, he alarmed the whole cultural milieu demanding everybody should use English (at least English!) and informing the city authorities that either they sponsor intensive English courses for culture animators or they can forget the title of the European Capital of Culture.

So ardently cultivated by Dragan Klaić citizenship of Europe was for him based, first of all, on the decisive role of the common language for intercultural competences, partner co-operation and integration. However, to be well adjusted to life in the contemporary Europe one needs another level - that of a constant linguistic polyphony, transition from one language into another, to be able to cultivate local tongues and learn new ones, to simultaneously facilitate getting accustomed to changing your place of living, loss of the small homeland and settling into a new neighbourhood. If our imagination becomes, also thanks to the development of cultural co-operation, a mobile one, we have to match it with our linguistic competence, otherwise we won’t be able to inhabit this world where “while in exile we are home” (*Exercises in Exile*).

...what once used to be home became distant, detached, even foreign and to some extent inaccessible. The notions of home and abroad went through a stern reappraisal. In order to carry it out with precision I needed to undertake several experimental journeys. In each of them I was not going back but rather going away, to a destination that despite its certain familiarity has acquired some new features and labels. And with a home base once fixed in the Northwestern Europe, I ventured further in the Balkan region than ever before, making some surprising connections.

What is striking in Dragan Klaić’s words, like in many other fragments of *Exercises in Exile* is a surprisingly positive tone he uses to refer to the loss of home and exile that others usually remember as a catastrophe or a wound that would never heal. The tone he inherited after his ancestors for whom emigration never had any negative connotations, in the worst circumstances it meant a just-in-time escape against an incoming disaster, often bringing better conditions of life and satisfying the curiosity of the world. However, there is more to the quoted by me words of an exile, the experience of the fact that leaving home and journeying towards new horizons do not have to mean losing your roots. Distancing yourself offers an opportunity for deeper and more far-reaching returns to the home places or, at least, constant creative dialogue with them. In other words, it is not permanent settlement but mobile imagination that make the world our home.

Dragan Klaić, just like many other borderlanders, found it difficult to define his identity and for a long time must have wondered how to fill the entry called “nationality” or for that fact, other entries

demanding stating where he belonged. Initially, i.e. around the mid-eighties the answer seemed straightforward and indisputable: Yugoslavian. Today one would say: European with a Dutch passport, but then which blank could contain so many words and which government would allow so much ambiguity... Between the labels of “Yugoslavian” and “European” stretches the space of one’s life drama, intent on search, rebellion and strenuous effort to be at home in the exile.

Mobility of Imagination is an important guide for all who wish to deal with international cultural cooperation. Such a guide remains Dragan Klaić himself, an emigrant finding a home in exile, a confirmed cosmopolitan and European who experienced the loss of illusions and historical catastrophes who goes on travelling gathering friends around his IKEA table at Churchill street in Amsterdam and by sending dozens of e-mails every day in different languages, engaging others in the building of a common cultural space, the only one that includes supranational citizenship.

POST SCRIPTUM

I have just received the news of Dragan Klaić’s death. He passed away on 25 August . He spent a few last months in hospital, in Amsterdam. In the beginning, there was nothing disturbing in it. A treatment planned a long time ago. At least that’s what Dragan wanted his friends to believe. He wouldn’t allow least measure of self-pity and never said what troubled him. It was just, simply, that his somatic “engine” was to be “lubricated” so that he could go into action with renewed intensity. But his organism, accustomed to titanic work, called for attention for a long time already. I remember how surprised I was when Rose Fenton managed to tell him into daily yoga exercise during Dragan’s stay in my house in Krasnogruda - so far such “spoiling oneself” was an unacceptable waste of time... So, we perceived his stay in hospital as a well deserved treatment. But soon Dragan’s e-mails changed their tone. They became shorter, perfunctory, deprived of his usual spark of engagement, and then ceased to arrive. One break from work that could appear in Dragan’s creative life, this final, dividing one... I’m stopped halfway in finishing the sentence by the consistent agnosticism of the author of the *Exercises in Exile*, based on the morality claiming that all man’s actions refer to “here” and another human being, and never to “there” and God.

But it’s so hard to write “he left us”, or change the tense of the text for the past. He will remain with us as long as the memory of his presence remains alive, as long as our determination to continue the ideas, attitudes and paths we shared, always reaching beyond the distant horizon persist. European? Yes, but an ardent one, and that’s what makes the difference between him and those for whom belonging to Europe comes cheap and are almost forced to accept a UE passport. We consulted once Dragan on a Lublin project for Western culture operators meant to enable them to learn East, titled “Abduction of Europe.” His reaction took us completely aback. He was not convinced by its mythological references, demanded changing the title and warned us like a father worrying about his child against “being led into temptation”: irresponsible trifling with the project of the uniting Europe, the most precious acquisition of our civilization for centuries. The same care told him to be at the same time critical and demanding, disciplined and pragmatic, furthest possible from ideologies and mystifications as well as the new European nationalism that instead of strengthening the European identity in its openness and co-operation with other parts of the world locks it into a Europocentric backwater.

I met him for the first time twenty years ago, *Financial Times* in hand, and before our conversation moved towards Danielo Kiš and Czesław Miłosz, I heard his analytical remarks concerning the economic situation of the world in which I heard a note of admiration for Balcerowicz’s Plan. We were united from the start by the borderland ethos and belonging to the Bosnian generation, one that saw the dramatic break-up of Yugoslavia, not a local Balkan conflict but a crisis of the

European culture. Along with it came distancing to all European “hypes” of the type of “multi-culti” or “intercultural dialogue” and criticism towards “festivalization” of cultures and search for economy and rationality in culture management rather than indulging in uncritical financial claims. I had in Dragan a wonderful partner in my striving for active, socially engaged culture, one valuing higher empathy over narcissism not giving up on inventiveness and high artistic ambitions. He hated kitsch as much as lack of punctuality, and he hated the lack of critical thinking the same way he hated verbosity. He was something of an aristocrat, the air he deserved not to his inheritance but the acquired knowledge, sophisticated taste and penetrating intelligence. He used them not to “serve at the court”, but just the opposite - to mark his proud independence from authority, prejudice and coteries. And only in this sense I think about him as a real Prince of this unruly family of intellectuals, wandering artists, outsiders, exiles and rebels for whom Europe remains a still incompletely realized cultural project.