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A Poet and a Forklift

Translated by Vesna Marić

The school I work in is located inside factory grounds. How do you mean, factory grounds, you might wonder. Well, just that, it's in the middle of a factory grounds. Freight lorries rumble beneath the school windows on a daily basis. We hear the cursing of the workers, their shouts, every day. This, you will agree, is really quite *unhelpful* for my fulfilling my work duties.

So there I am, in the classroom, and just as I am about to start reciting Vidric's *Landscape One*, you know the one, *Golden flowers in the grass/The buzz of busy bees...* when, of course, a lorry arrives. The driver jumps out of the cabin leaving the engine running. It's OK, I sigh to myself, and enunciate: **BEHIND THOSE SHADOWY TREES/GLISTEN VOLUPTUOUS CLOUDS...** The room faces south, the sun is strong, beads of sweat are forming on my face. **AND THE SKY IS BLUE ABOVE/WHERE SILENT SWALLOWS SAIL...** 'How long till lunch?' someone hollers across the factory grounds. The already fragile focus of the pupils is thus shattered for good. Basically, I can forget about the rest of the class, I've seen it all before. It's not the first time, nor the last. But, the cool-headed professional that I am, I carry on as if nothing is amiss. 'Hurry up lads,' the manager shouts, 'finish up your work first, then you can go for lunch!' The students start to take an active interest in what's going on in the grounds. 'Mr, did you hear?' they shout. Did I hear! Huh! **UNDER THE HILL WHERE THE RED ROOFS ARE/THE AFTERNOON BELLS TOLL...** I'm not giving in.

The sun blinds me.

Sweat.

Shouts.

Restless students.

I must not stop reciting! **AND STILL BEHIND THOSE ROOFS...** 'for f's sake, I told you to watch it, didn't I tell you to watch it, you IDIOT!' **THE GOLDEN FIELDS UNFOLD...** 'But boss, it was Milan, not me!' **ROLLING, QUIET AND PEACEFUL...** 'You idiot, get out of here, no lunch break for you!' **AND FROM HILL TO HILL (I gulp) IT RISES...** According to the methodical instructions of all relevant methodical experts, now should come the so-called emotional pause during which the students should experience... something... because they have apparently been exposed to a profound artistic impression. Hm.

I lift my tired eyes to look at the class - we're talking Year 3 - and no one appears to be experiencing anything particularly profound. All of the students in the window row of seats are watching the circus that's unfolding

in the factory grounds. It's a shame we're not doing an introduction to drama, I would immediately employ the events thus: 'Here we are, children, looking at a scene of conflict...' The rest of the class is either looking at their phones under their desks (which is forbidden), or chatting among themselves (which is also forbidden, but can be seen as group work).

A forklift has arrived in the courtyard, alongside the lorry and the shouting. I grapple to understand the mindset of the people who decided to build a school next to a factory (or was it the other way round?), and I beckon the students to pay attention, the class is still running, please...

Luckily, the traffic outside is lighter during the afternoon shift.

A Professional

The youth today don't have it easy, and the adults who ought to serve as positive role models are mostly not up to the task. But I don't think the youth itself should be entirely free of responsibility. What's more, it seems that we have gone too far with the pointing out of their rights, whereas their duties, responsibilities and appropriate relationship with adults has taken a back seat. This is no good. There has been talk of an 'epidemic of permissive parenting' which is actually damaging to children. No reasonable person would demand that corporal punishment be reintroduced into schools, but when you read examples from school reports, you might be surprised at how much things have changed since you went to school.

Times seem to be such that one cannot even raise their voice in class, and the experts who sometimes come to deliver lectures to us go as far as suggesting that we must not even be authoritative because that isn't 'educational'.

So, here is how that ends up playing out. After some of my students have been out 'having fun' in city parks with a bottle of cheap wine, or in one of the nightclubs with bad music, or indeed, hanging out in some VIP lounge, falling - guided firmly by a charismatic DJ Dumbo - into a trance with trance-turbo-folk-dance music, they turn up first thing on Monday morning, having somewhat recuperated the day before while watching a weekly celebrity report on TV. They enter in small groups, in pairs or alone, throw their school bags from the door onto their desks... they shout, stare at their phones, and as far as my presence is concerned, they know I'm there, but they don't care. I, of course, used to have a vision of my students entering the classroom and

greeting me politely, sitting down at their desks, getting their pens out and, eyes wide open, following my every move and longing for me to guide them into a world of poetic imagination, expand their horizons, throw before them some pearls of wisdom and elevate them onto staggering heights of enlightenment.... Not that I haven't tried to do this with every incoming year (and I am still trying), but when it has worked, it has only ever happened when the students reached the end of their fourth - and final - year, and right at the end of that year. Then they began, though not all of them, to understand. (Although a cynic might point out that by the time they reached the end of fourth grade, they would start to understand things without my even trying... But I'd better not think about this, I don't want to lose the bit of idealism I have left.)

Whatever the case may be, Monday morning isn't looking good. 'Turn to page fifty-five!' I say in a raised voice - although this isn't educational - so that I might wake them up a bit, so that they can pay attention to my humble self. I know already that they won't react immediately, so I don't get upset. What's the point in wasting my emotional energy at the start of the week? Let's try again. 'Page fifty five!' Good try, I think to myself ironically. A healthy sense of self-irony is essential for self preservation. 'Page fifty five!' I shout. Ah, there, a few are starting to take notice. 'Which page?' 'Fifty five.' (By the way, this 'which page' can be heard several times from different parts of the classroom. 'Fifty five,' I answer each one.) And soon about a quarter, or a third, if I'm lucky, of the class is turning pages, without interest, of course, not as I saw it in my visions, the passionate search for the right page... But OK, it's happening, slowly, but it's happening. Patience is key. I am a very patient man. 'Come on, please, turn to page fifty five,' I call them, tease them, with my most pleasant baritone. I know, of course, that I will finally, after about five tries, manage to achieve my first working aim: to make all, and I mean all, students, even the boys at the back with dog collars and orange mohicans, and those girls by the window with pierced tongues and T-shirts that read 'VIRGIN (this is an old t-shirt)', and the fans of DJ Dumbo who are sitting together with the emos and heavy metal fans, that I will manage to get all of them to TURN TO PAGE FIFTY FIVE OF THEIR TEXTBOOK. If after the fifth attempt they haven't all managed to open their textbooks, I will write out on the board something like *Hamlet*, if that's what we're doing, p55. and draw a circle around it.

Now I know some readers won't believe me, they will think I'm having them on and exaggerating, but I swear on my teaching reputation that it happens that EVEN THEN some students might act as if they'd never seen me before and say: 'Which page?' I point to the board. Pure professionalism.

The Philipines - A Small Culture Shock

‘Business or pleasure?’ the customs officer asked.

‘Both,’ I said.

‘Have a pleasant stay, sir.’ He said and stamped my passport: ARRIVAL, 20 Nov 20XX

We landed at the *Ninoy Aquino International Airport* in Manila around midnight; after leaving the air conditioned airport building, and dazed as I was after a full day’s travel and various time zone differences, I immediately felt the charms of a tropical climate: over 30 degrees Celsius in the middle of the night, my shirt stuck to my back even before we reached the van on the other side of the street. It was the very end of the rainy season, which went on from June to November, but as it turned out, raining or not - you’re soaked.

‘Maligayang pagdating sa Pilipinas’, said a young woman in a singalong voice. The Philipinos are a short people, with big smiles and when they speak Tagalog, it sounds like they’re singing.

Inside the van is a Hungarian guy, two Poles, some unavoidable Americans, the couple who met us, B and me. The Hungarian seemed, in this context, especially familiar and close; we are, after all, almost compatriots! *Hogyan te baratom?* I immediately recalled our common history, I almost spoke to him in Croatian, as if they hadn’t wanted to colonise us at all. All’s forgiven, it was a long time ago. The Poles were being somewhat aloof, but I felt our common Slavic heritage nonetheless. That’s how things work, one’s perception changes with the number of kilometres crossed. It’s good to meet a compatriot when one’s far from home, even if he’s from Gdansk. I understand everything they say. Should I start a conversation about our writers and historic battles? Hm, probably best not, I’m not at some Slavic Studies Congress. The Americans feel right at home. They’ve been in the Philippines since the early 20th century, have had military bases here since WWII, and the local government has been collaborating with the Americans whenever necessary. And it's been necessary for the last fifty years.

We drive to the hotel, which is out of town. The ‘out of town’ must be understood conditionally since Manila is one of sixteen towns that make the metropolitan area *Metro Manila*, where around twenty million people live. There are over twenty million Philipinos, who are quite densely populated on around seven thousand islands. In such moments I remember how tiny Zagreb is, and in the words of Dubravka Ugresic, I pity it. Although, after getting to know Manila, I realised that I live in a beautiful, orderly, relaxed and safe city. Basically, trying to cross the road in Manila is a kind of gamble: what are my chances of survival? The rule is: pedestrians should be killed! Luckily, the traffic jams are often so bad that you can easily leave your car and do a spot of shopping; the pedestrians can thus enjoy the opportunity to meander in a relaxed manner.

There is a lake near Manila, called Taal, with a volcanic islet in the middle, which I shall talk about more later. I was invited to the Philippines by a US institution (no, no, not the CIA) that organises an annual international conference for publishers, editors and translators, and the conferences were always held in a different country. I was working as a translator at the time, so the publisher I worked with told me to apply as one of their employees. There were around a hundred and fifty participants, from forty different countries, a decent sample of humanity. I tried to get in touch with my family when I arrived, and I didn't like it when I couldn't get through. When you travel around Europe, you always know you return home, at least on foot. You can't really do that from the Philippines.

I shared a room with a Brazilian man, from Sao Paulo, a man of German ancestry, who literally slept with his handbag. He explained that crime in his city was so bad that holding onto his bag in this way had become second nature. And true enough, I never saw him without it. We were quite formal at first, but after a few days we realised we had a very similar sense of humour and we spent the rest of the trip constantly giggling. I also made friends with a Kenyan woman from the Kikuyu people, an incredible woman who had travelled the whole world. Along with these two, I also spent time with a fun Indian man from Chennai, the skinniest person I'd ever seen. He looked like a kind of yogi, but it turned out he was an authentic Indian Christian.

I don't have much to say about the conference itself: lectures, workshops, book launches, and exchanges of opinions, experiences and business cards. The most interesting moments were that I ate one-year-old eggs (they sit buried in salt, and the older they are, the more valuable). Or that rice is sometimes served wrapped up in a banana leaf. Philippino cuisine is eclectic: its foundations are Malaysian-Polynesian, with a mix of Spanish, Chinese and American influences thrown in. Basically, you can expect anything. For example, *lechon*. One might expect an exotic dish, but no. It's grilled suckling lamb. Or *adobo*: pieces of pork and chicken (they often mix different types of meat, such as fish stuffed with chicken, or something similar) which are stewed in soya sauce and wine vinegar. Ice cream with pieces of exotic fruit and all types of - beans. We started a conversation about fruit once and I said that I had never eaten a mango. 'You've never eaten a mango?!' a local woman was genuinely surprised. 'No. Have you eaten figs?' She shook her head. 'You've never eaten figs?!' I was also genuinely surprised. Everyone laughed. What is actually exotic? In any case, I tried all kinds of fruit and made the conclusion that what we buy in Europe has nothing to do with the real thing, except perhaps that it looks like it.

The anecdote I wanted to tell took place one day when I decided to get out of the conference lectures and see the place for myself, without being lead by an official guide on one of the tours. I wanted to go around the area near the hotel, nothing much. I had a look around a nearby church. Apparently some Philippino believers, at Easter time, are keen on self-flagellation and getting crucified. It was also where I saw some of the most

dramatic images of the crucified Christ. (I sometimes wonder why the Christian iconography doesn't accentuate the resurrection rather than only the suffering?) There was an enormous statue of the Virgin Mary next to the church: each of her fingers was half a metre long. I saw the volcanic islet in the distance. I came across some huts further down the street - one of them was a type of local bar: a tin plaque with a rusty Coke sign sitting above the door. Drained looking men sat in the semidarkness. I sat down and ordered a beer. Everything looked really miserable, poor, drastically different to what I'd seen a few days earlier in one of the natural parks where the wealthy had constructed villas akin to Austrian chalets: alpine style, in the middle of the jungle - something so perverse can only occur to the super rich, without sense or taste. Or an image from Manila: a street full of homeless people who sleep by a fence that separates them from a golf course where you can contemplate the meaning of life and do business deals while you pay a yearly membership of around ten thousand dollars. Or entire 'HOTO' neighbourhoods guarded by gates, barbed wire, and local security men with machine guns and Alsatian dogs, while the majority of the city's population lives in shanty towns with open sewage drains (though some do have satellite dishes, to help enhance their sense of envy). That's capitalism.

So there I was drinking my beer, when suddenly an American man turned up. I recognised him from one of the seminars - he owned a small publishing house in Albuquerque. 'Do you want to join me for a beer?' I asked him. 'Why not?' We sat like that in the semi darkness talking about nothing much, when a local man turned up. 'Hello! I am Johnny!' he shouted in an entrepreneurial voice. 'I have a taxi! Do you wanna ride? I can show you a village beside the lake.' A village beside the lake? My colleague and I looked at each other: Why not? It turned out that the taxi was a three-wheel vehicle, a kind of a rickshaw with an engine. Soon we were rushing downhill and I wanted to yell like one of the monkeys that were watching us from the treetops; I felt euphoric. Once we reached the banks of the lake we were surrounded by a bunch of little kids who clung to our legs quite freely, hoping that we might give them some money or take them home with us, which would have probably been agreed upon by many of their parents. I looked at the mansions on the hills and the little ones who were trying to climb on top of me and my sense of social injustice brought tears to my eyes. 'Oh, you are so tenderhearted,' my American friend remarked; he was used to massive class differences. Then Johnny turned up again: 'Do you want to see the island?' The island? Why not. And there we were, thanks to Johnny's elaborate contact network, in a kind of canoe, heading towards the volcanic islet - again confirming that the best things are never planned. The village on the island was like something out of a TV programme: straw huts, semi naked people in harmony with their natural surroundings. I had a feeling that, as a Westerner, I was an example of an overdeveloped Intellect and an underdeveloped Body. But we were about to encounter our next mode of transport. 'Would you maybe like to see the volcano?' asked our tour agent Johnny, in an incredibly polite manner. Well, hey, why not? And so, quite unexpectedly, two little boys turned up, bringing small horses that would take us up to the volcano. They were ponies, suitable for an average Philippino, not

for two white men, each almost two metres tall. When we got atop the horses our feet almost scraped the ground. Johnny disappeared again, and we were alone with the boys. We started on an uphill path; the landscape was... 'breathtaking', my companion said.

It was late afternoon, I was on the other side of the world, close to the equator, going up to the mouth of the volcano. It wasn't a large volcano; there was some smoke rising, breathing became difficult. We had a look around and headed back, when suddenly - it was night. It was as if someone had turned off the sun. This is how it is at these geographic locations: now you see it (the sun), now you don't. We could see the flickering of fires at the village houses. The boys disappeared with their horses, and there was no Johnny. It was dark, no one knew where we were... and our pockets were - I knew that that's what they were thinking - full of dollars. We started walking fast, there were hands pulling at us... We got to the beach, there was the boat... And thank God, there was Johnny! He smiled professionally. We jumped in and he turned the engine on. Some of the children stepped in the water and tried to follow us, but that's it, we were gone.

When we docked, Johnny discretely asked if we might want to have a bit of fun, he knew some girls... We didn't say Why not this time, since even if I were keen on this type of entertainment, the thought of HIV or any type of disease would be sobering. We ate some meat, something off the grill, with a sweet and sour sauce, made in the street, while Johnny gave us his life story. He pointed out, regardless of what he'd just offered us minutes earlier, that he was a 'Christian' and that his wife had died, and he invited us to visit his home. He lead us through the winding streets to a half finished house which he said, with inexplicable optimism, he wanted to rent out to tourists. We walked into a rough walled room and sat down, and then Johnny said:

'Do you want to see my wife?'

The American and I looked at each other. He had turned pale. Hadn't Johnny just told us earlier that his wife was dead? I saw several images from horror movies in my mind. The Shining: 'Here's Johnny!' Western prejudices about native cannibals came out of the corners of my unconscious. This is it, he's going to cook and eat us now, and our heads will be shrunk to a tennis ball... Or is that what they do in the Amazon? Or maybe they will turn us into zombies? I snapped out of my morbid reveries and saw that Johnny was politely and patiently waiting for our response.

'Weeell...' we started.

'OK, I'll bring her!'

Johnny had understood that we WANTED TO SEE HIS DEAD WIFE. He walked towards a wardrobe. The door squeeeeeaked. He dug out a shoebox from somewhere deep inside and brought it to the table. We were confused.

‘Here she is,’ he said in a tender voice. He opened the box and took out - an urn.

‘Ooooooh!’ We yelped with respect that betrayed a significant sense of relief. Lovely, lovely, how nice, well done Johnny! That’s love. A small culture shock is always welcome. He gave us his business card, he was a true professional. He invited us to come spend our holidays in his house next summer.

We returned to the hotel high on adrenaline. I sat at the table with the Hungarian. ‘Hey guys, I just had the most extraordinary experience,’ I said, excited. ‘Oh really? What was her name?’ the Hungarian asked. In any case, he went to find Johnny the next day.

If you’re interested, I can give you his phone number.

Paris - A Travelogue

As I was carefully trying to get through the hundreds of bodies that were pushing to get a spot in front of La Gioconda, who sat behind (what must have been bulletproof) thick glass, I remembered - as every true intellectual must - Walter Benjamin’s essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. I remembered all of the reproductions that I saw wherever I went, from the earliest childhood - in village huts and kitchen walls next to ‘holy’ pictures collected at markets: the blue-eyed Jesus, Mona Lisa, and deer drinking from a river. For some reason, humanity has been told for centuries now that this is the woman with the MOST mysterious smile in the world, and I can recall a scene from primary school: Mrs M, who - while smiling mysteriously herself - is passing on the mantra of Mona Lisa. Well, the smile of this lady, Lisa Gherardini Del Giocondo, is truly somehow ambiguous, perhaps a little ironic, it suggests a melancholy sensuality, one could go on forever trying to interpret it; one art historian even saw in it ‘the expression of the fact that she had experienced everything’. Apparently some - unless this is an urban myth - committed suicide in front of the painting.

Whatever the case may be, here I am, two to three metres away from her, observing her, and of course, there’s no chance to really immerse myself in any deep thinking while I’m being elbowed from all sides. I can’t enter into an intimate dialogue with her and let her work her magic on me - as can happen when you’re facing an

authentic art work. Rather, my attention is attracted/diverted by two museum workers who occasionally open up the path for people to get closer to the painting; their faces display pure boredom and exhaustion. My attention is also attracted/diverted by teenagers who are pulling silly faces and taking selfies, which they post on Facebook. The spirit of the times is most evident in the dozens of smartphones on whose screens I can see Da Vinci's masterpiece, endlessly reproduced and 'shared', in ways that Benjamin couldn't have dreamed of. Lucky cleaners, I thought, who can contemplate every detail of the original to their heart's content, in utter tranquility, after hours.

Out in the courtyard, next to Pei's famous glass pyramid, a bizarre scene plays out. Three or four young black men whizz past us covering - I'd bet my life on it - a hundred metres in ten seconds, clanging with dozens of miniature Eiffel Towers that hang off a large ring and are sold to tourists for a euro or two. Behind them, two policemen rush past at an even greater speed, on roller-skates, but a few stairs give the runaways fantastic advantage. This game - *gendarmes et voleurs* - repeats itself several times a day, and everyone knows it will never end. The Louvre is, otherwise, a hopelessly large mega-museum (around 60,000 square metres; tens of thousands of artefacts), particularly for a passing traveller who's only got a few hours at his disposal. According to some studies, a visitor would need five weeks to really look at all the artworks exhibited here. So, in those few hours we saw - walking past the Nike of Samothrace - the Italian Renaissance hall (there were so many paintings in this room alone that I was already oversaturated; one can really overdose on art), and then, more or less we strolled through the Levant (which holds the oldest exhibit in the museum, a male statue around 9,000 years old), Mesopotamia (the Code of Hammurabi) and Persia (bull heads from Souza), finding pieces from cultures along the way that I'd never heard of - although I am reasonably literate in art history (this is why I travel, I guess, to learn something new). Then we saw some Medieval art, Renaissance, the Flemish painters, neoclassicism. In any case, it's good to prepare yourself mentally - and I remembered visiting the Met in New York City - for the fact that you can only really see a tiny piece of this incredibly impressive art collection in a short time. Otherwise, you can feel desperate.

The eastern cemetery, the cemetery of father La Chaise, Jesuit and confessor of Louis XIV (what a tough task, the confess the Sun and the State), where around a million dead lie buried. I visited it for the second, and probably not the last time. It looked like it might rain, the dark gray-black clouds brooded, low over the Cimetiere du Pere Lachaise. And as we walked past graves that were two or three hundred years old, the torpid atmosphere was increased by the shrieks of the crows who preened themselves atop angels' heads. We took the path along the right side of the graveyard; Jim Morrison's grave was meant to be near the entrance, but my memory betrayed me - I was here 23 years ago - and we managed to locate him only after wandering around for a while. Back in 1991, twenty years after Morrison's death, his gravestone was a spot of lively gatherings for dozens of lovely young people - myself included - playing music, drinking wine and pouring

that same wine onto the tombstone where KATA TON ΔΑΙΜΟΝΑ ΕΑΥΤΟΥ is written, as well as ‘decorating’ the surrounding gravestones with graffiti such as *Jim is not dead, he just smells funny*. This time there were almost no pilgrims, just a half-interested tourist here and there who is ticking his sightseeing boxes for the day (Moliere, Proust and Balzac are buried here, among others). I felt lethargic; I sat down on a tree stump, next to an iron fence that wasn’t there the last time I visited. The graffiti had been removed, but there were some flowers on the grave, and two or three photographs of the ‘lizard king’. ‘Expose yourself to your deepest fear; after that, the fear has no power and the fear of freedom shrinks and vanishes. You are free.’ Free and completely dead for 43 years. I’m lethargic because it has been two decades and I am - as introspective as I am - wondering where I’ve been and what I’ve done in that time (many different things). I’m lethargic because of Jim’s observation, ‘the future is uncertain but the end is always near’. Huh. But there’s no point in being melancholy. Paris, La Ville-Lumiere, awaits. We also visit Chopin; opposite his grave, someone’s tomb is overgrown with grass, where a beautiful black and white tomcat stretches out. I leave the graveyard deciding that next time, I would stay longer. And go and see Baudelaire, at the Cimetiere du Montparnasse.

In front of the Notre Dame, whose construction started in 1163 and went on for around a hundred and seventy years (this is what I call having a vision), there is a longish queue. I imagine what it might have looked like to the Parisians of the time, who were living in huts surrounded by muddy streets. The grotesque gargoyles, with their disgusted, bored faces, watch as the city spread out, witnessing its history with a mute indifference, seeing all those kings and popes and the millions of people who have come here to pray to the Almighty to bless their plans, plans that always included some kind of a scheme. It’s Sunday morning mass. The dimensions of the church are impressive; my heart skips a beat at the sight of the southern rose window, from the 13th century, that western mandala, with Christ in its centre. Despite the fact that the space is packed with thousands of people, it still exudes mysticism, in a truly meaningful way. But the revolutionaries didn’t feel this: they first robbed the church in 1793, then renamed it the Temple of Reason, and finally turned it into a winery. The space was exorcised of its anti-theistic spirit in 1904, thanks to Napoleon. In any case, it’s unmissable. And do pray to the Lord, with sincerity.

We then wandered around the streets of St German des Pres like a pair of flaneurs, the part of town where Sartre discussed existentialism (‘Hell is other people’), and around the Latin quarter where, back in 1968, rocks were launched along with slogans such as: ‘Let’s be real and demand the impossible!’ (here we are), around Beaubourg (Centre Georges Pompidou), along the Seine (a pleasure in itself, with dozens of ‘bouquinistes’ - another Parisian tradition that is centuries old - selling old books and memorabilia (such as the poster for the 1974 Pink Floyd French Summer Tour), by the Eiffel tower, from the Sorbonne to the Pantheon, and from the Pigalle (Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, an 18th century sculptor, who had nothing to do with the sex industry) we went up to the Montmartre, the hill where Christians were tortured in the year 250 AD,

to the Sacre-Coeur Basilica where someone prays day and night for the city and the world... all this full of brasseries, cafes, restaurants... where guests eat snails, frogs' legs, seafood and anything edible. Glasses of wine are everywhere. *Bon jour, Madame!* A small glass of wine is four to five euros. Of course, the finer the wine, the higher the price. The traditional onion soup is nine and a half euros. *Bon appetit.* Fancy dessert? *Crepes au chocolat*, six euros. *Au revoir, Monsieur!* The Parisians are well groomed, and speak to each other (and expect this from foreigners too) with great formality and politeness. 'The French daily reality is thus always lit by the rays of conventional politeness. It improves the atmosphere, the mood and the social temperature, and it is as natural to the French as the air they breathe... One ought to learn these formulae even if your French is rudimentary as a result of the most recent educational reforms. In such a case, you must know, however, that the French are linguistic snobs. They consider French to be the pinnacle of linguistic sophistication and thus the only language in which one can express one's thoughts clearly and elegantly, or rather, the only language worth speaking.' (D. Schwanitz)

We come across the homeless occasionally, as they drag themselves along the doorsteps of the buildings in the first arrondissement, buildings whose price tags read several million euros. (Or are these the artists? Someone once said that Paris was the only city in the world where starving to death is seen as an art form.) They drag themselves along the Elysian Fields with their designer clothes shops (for anyone who's interested, the current top label is Maje; I wanted to order a hand sewn shirt from Charvet, but I think I was overambitious - the prices were between 350 to 1000 euros). Across town, we see police officers and soldiers bearing heavy machine guns. Just so we don't forget the times we live in. We are also dragging ourselves across town since we're spending around twelve hours a day walking around, crossing an average of twenty kilometres every day. We are staying in one of those functional, but faceless (i.e. cheap) hotels in Nanterre, and we walk through a forest of skyscrapers like those in *The Matrix*. We used the metro several times, reluctantly at first because some of the stations were like mini-labyrinths, but when, in a moment of enlightenment, I understood the logic behind the railway network, I used the reliable service with gusto and confidence. My general impression is that Paris - providing that one has a decent income - is an exceptionally pleasant city to live in. I don't mean this only for the things that it has to offer, but it is organised and conceived in a thoughtful, intelligent way.

In terms of the museums, of which there are dozens, we saw the Orsay (mostly for its incredible collection of (neo)impressionists - I just strolled through the other parts of the museum: intoxication by art is a fact) and Centre Pompidou, specifically the Musee National d'Art Moderne. Before going around the Orsay, which was once a railway platform - and had been nearly destroyed in the 1970s - I had a double espresso in the museum restaurant, and was buzzing as I gazed at Pissaro, Sisley, Seurat, Signac, Manet and Monet's paintings. Going back to Benjamin, although I had seen the reproductions of these paintings many times, seeing the original

was an incomparable experience. I was impressed especially by the light captured on the canvass - it literally radiated from the frame. There is no point in detailing each painting - one can find information about the museum easily, but one thing is sure: don't miss it. And yes, of course, book your tickets in advance, online. This goes for the other museums too. Need I say why?

I've been interested in modern art since high school (I got my first facts from the great book *Art Today*, by E. Lucie-Smith) and so I did not want to miss visiting the Modern Art Museum inside the Centre Pompidou, an architectural perversion (designed by Rogers-Piano-Franchini) with its sewage and plumbing pipes, ventilation tubes, electrical wires - everything that is normally hidden from view is on the outside here, for everyone to see. The collection is as impressive: works that start from 1905 to today; I was especially keen to see the works from the last three decades because I don't follow recent art trends so much (you know, a video of a woman cutting herself across the chest and forming letters, or purple rubber gloves suspended in the air...). There are all sorts of things, of course, because this is modern/postmodern/altermodern art. It makes sense in the historical context and the context of the gallery. I stood for a long time in front of Rothko's 1964 painting, *Untitled* - it's hard to explain why. I spotted the artworks by Croatian artists such as Ivan Mestrovic, Mladen Stilinovic and David Maljkovic. My heart warmed when I saw them.

We did not go to the Georges restaurant on the fifth floor. Although the guidebook stated that the 'view is breathtaking' and the 'cooking light and inspired - red cakes made of tomato and goat's cheese, sole meuniere (?), lamb served with a spicy fruit sauce and pasta', and that the 'baked lemon tarts are a hit', the kind restaurant worker told me that the restaurant was 'terribly expensive, monsieur'.

'Merci beaucoup, monsieur.'

Fascism ex cathedra

The year is 1967.

Jimi Hendrix set his guitar on fire for the first time that March. The Beatles are recording *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The Doors are playing in local clubs in LA. Roger Corman is filming *The Trip*, written by

Jack Nicholson, and starring Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper. LSD is everywhere and is taken on weekends, recreationally, for mind expansion and opening the doors of perception. Cannabis is grown in courtyards and on balconies, and hash cakes are being baked. Timothy Leary, the oracle of the psychedelics, utters the most famous slogan of the 1960s: 'Turn on, tune in, drop out', to around thirty thousand hippies ('Human Be-In') at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, while Jefferson Airplane plays the song White Rabbit in the background, with the curious lyrics: 'One pill makes you larger/And one pill makes you small...' Around half a million American youths are in Vietnam; their mission is called 'Search & Destroy.' Thousands of their peers are back home growing their hair long and refusing to be cannon fodder. The Summer of Love is at the door. Thousands of young people gather in the Height-Ahsbury suburb of San Francisco over the summer, trying to form a utopia: the food is free, the accommodation is free, love is free, drugs are ample. Even medical help and basic supplies are available to all; never mind the system! They form communes, they are rebelling. They cannot be ignored: they are offering an alternative and captivating the imagination of millions, not only in the US. It's an anti-authoritarian and counter culture movement; basically - a romantic movement. And of course, doomed to failure. But in that moment, everyone thinks it's the dawn of the new world, the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.

One of those young people was the twenty five-year-old teacher of social sciences, Ron Jones, working as a lecturer at Elwood P Cubberley High School, in the small town of Palo Alto, not far from San Francisco. Even though he'd started his job only six months ago, his mind was already on something entirely different. As a teacher, he wanted to pass on to his students - he was teaching the first three grades - particular social and historical processes, and thus inspire them to think critically and independently. And since the syllabus prescribed the history of the modern world and 20th century events, he had to teach Nazism and its genesis. He was loved by his students - he was only ten years their senior and he worked hard on his relationship with them. They were also used to his unconventional approach to the material. In the first hours that he spent teaching Nazism, it turned out that the students could not understand how it could happen that the German people would allow Hitler to come to power, and they could simply not fathom how they had not mounted mass protests against the persecution of their friends, neighbours, work mates, and so on, and how they could allow war to happen. Mr Jones decided to go for the 'show, don't tell' approach, or rather, to give them a 'real life experience.' He suggested they start a 'movement' that would be organised according to certain rules. The students readily accepted since the experiments that came before had always been exciting. The whole project was to last a week, and their grades were based on how actively they participated.

On day one, the teacher presented himself as the unquestionable Leader. The Leader, he explained, must always be obeyed. He must be addressed as 'Mr Jones' and any answers to his questions must be brief. The beauty of discipline. Willpower. Self control. They started with simple things such as the proper (and only)

way to sit: both feet on the floor, a straight back, correct breathing. They practised entering the classroom in total silence and quickly sitting down in this way. Soon everyone realised that the new order and the posture, which required a new awareness, had improved the work atmosphere and classroom efficiency. Jones held himself authoritatively and cautioned strictly anything that might be amiss.

The next day the students came into class without speaking, in a few seconds, and sat down assuming the correct posture. The change in atmosphere was palpable - there was a presence of discipline and unity. Seeing that they had taken on the game, Jones wrote out slogans on the blackboard: Strength Through Discipline, Strength Through Unity. He ordered them to pronounce these words in short, loud and confident syllables. Then they all started chanting. He announced that they, as a 'movement', needed a special greeting, which he then demonstrated by moving up his right arm. The students accepted and practised the greeting. He ordered them to salute each other in this way when they met each other outside class. He ceremoniously announced that the name of their 'movement' was Third Wave. They came up with the movement's symbol and agreed which armband they'd wear. After the bell went, he told them to remain silent. Then he raised his arm in a salute. Everyone saluted him back in unison.

By day three, word had spread about the movement: the Third Wave was joined by students from other classes, who were inspired by the 'original' members (after the first thirty students, the movement grew to forty three). All of the participants concluded that their ability to concentrate had improved and that they were doing better work, and that they were dizzy with motivation: let's go! And the Leader ordered: make membership cards. Apart from this, everyone had a specific task, working on the flag, getting new members to join, stopping non-members from entering the classroom... Because discipline and unity make no sense without action. At the end of the third day, the Third Wave was joined by over two hundred new members. The students were delighted. Each newcomer had to recite the rules and vow to obey Mr Jones' orders. Something else happened. Some students come up to him and reported on those who were breaking the rules and criticising the movement. A student offered to be a kind of body guard.

On day four, Jones felt that things were getting out of hand - he himself was getting carried away. The students chanted short, succinct statements, spied on and watched each other, saluted, wore armbands, handed out pamphlets in hallways - all consumed by the desire to strengthen and spread the movement. Loyalty and discipline were - on that Spring day in 1967, in the heart of liberal California where parks were full of people getting high on hash - at an enviable level. Strength Through Discipline, Strength Through Unity. He had to end the experiment somehow. He summoned the students and told them they were part of a wider national movement which would ban democracy and the governing of the two leading political parties, who had shown themselves as incapable of leading the country. He told them that they had been 'chosen' and that

their presidential candidate would address the nation on TV and present the Third Wave. And that then they would begin. He ordered them to turn up at noon so that they could witness this event.

On the fifth day, before around two hundred teenagers who were all dressed alike and had fire in their eyes, with security at the entrance, in the expectant atmosphere of the Great Leader, after saluting and chanting slogans, Mr Jones turned on the TV. But the screen was static. Amid a collective anticlimax, Mr Jones reminded the students of the beginning of the experiment, what they had talked about a week ago, what they had agreed. He made them aware of the manipulation, and that they, accepting the manipulation, had managed to create a sense of an arrogant elitist superiority that had been felt by the Germans during the Nazi rule. Reason was replaced by rules. They accepted uniformity. They were ready to isolate the 'undesirables'. He reminded them of how readily they got rid of those who refused to join. 'We saw that fascism is not something that others do. No. It's right here. In this room. In our personal habits and way of life. Scratch the surface and it's there. We carry it around like a disease. Beliefs that require a strong leader and discipline in order to keep social order intact.' He then played a film about the Nazi regime and its consequences, which was the end of teaching for the week.

...

The film that was made about this experiment became part of the curriculum in Germany, which means that it is obligatory viewing for all students.

'Eichmann? Never heard of him.'

A group of mature, spritely men gather in a villa near a lake. As each enters, the servants jump up and take their coats - it's below freezing outside, those who come in rub their hands. They greet the host, an elegant man in his thirties. They laugh loudly and pat each other on the back in a friendly manner. Canapés are served, drinks, the atmosphere is relaxed, friendly. Everyone has met before. The final, fifteenth, guest joins them - an energetic blond gentleman with the cunning eyes of a wolf. An aesthete and bon vivant, he is delighted by the beauty of the villa, which was built in 1914.

They're all respectable members - or rather, pillars - of society - lawyers, doctors, diplomats, civil servants responsible for many social functions, good husbands and fathers, knowledgeable about classical music and literature, lovers of fine wines and perfectly tailored suits, intelligent, lucid, charming, generous, manicured and pedicured, rather normal people according to regular standards, with a developed sense of humour. They

have dedicated their lives to caring for their homeland and its people, and they are about to embark on a meeting during which they will have to resolve certain technical issues. Although 'technical issues' sounds banal - it is a colossal project, in fact, which will secure their position in history. They were right: they have a place in history.

The last arriving attendant presides over the meeting. He is eloquent, piercing, an alpha male, he radiates a strange energy - he is a little like a top businessman, an entrepreneur with a vision which he is dying to share with his colleagues so that they might make an investment. It is clear, however, that those present, although they are used to meetings such as this one, don't know exactly what he is talking about, and follow his introductory speech with great interest. They have been told that the meeting is being held in secrecy and that they must not talk about it in public. Their thing is going well, the smoothly shaved speaker informs them with enthusiasm. Still, along with the progression of projects that had been started before, there are difficulties. And they are here to finally resolve them.

Since each of them had faced difficulties in their own area of work, and although they had sometimes taken radical measures to resolve them, the measure proposed by the presiding member leaves some of them astounded, and while not exactly upset, they are certainly disturbed. They point out the possible formal and legal obstacles and the economic consequences of the proposed solution, with the obviously unprecedented level of complication in organising such a task. Still, Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich, the presiding member, shows them the undeniable facts: one can not deport all those millions of *Untermenschen* - there are too many of them and no one wants to take them. So the wise leaders of the people, the Fuhrer, Reichsmarschall and Reichsfuhrer, had concluded that one must make every, every! possible effort - especially in the midst of war - to finally solve this problem.

To the right of the presiding, SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Heydrich, sits the host, SS-Obersturmbannfuhrer Adolf Eichmann, an unusually neat man, known as someone who is well informed on the nature of the problem. Dutifully assisting, he adds precise statistical details to Reinhard's lecture: how many men, women and children, who only resemble human beings, are left in each country. Estonia? *Judenfrei*. 'The first good thing I have heard about Estonia,' someone comments. Laughter. *Kroatien?* 40,000. It is 1942, 20 January, the outskirts of Berlin, Am Großen Wannsee 56-58. The room is filled with cigarette and cigar smoke. It is snowing.

There's a short break, time to have a drink and a snack. The service is impeccable, the host is the perfect organiser. French wines, German food, *Schlesisches Himmelreich*, *Gänsebraten*, *Westfälischer Schinken*, *Saure Zipfel*, *Bratkartoffeln*, *Jagdwurst*, *Brühwurst*, *Knoblauchbrühwurst*... They chat informally, tensions need

calming before they get back to the table. No, no, it's not about someone not agreeing with the suggested measures, but still, it's millions. Herr Heydrich notices that some attendees are nervous, he feels their reluctance, a hesitation, the disloyal remains of humanity, the disgusting sense of compassion that weakens a man's resolve. He knows that he has to find a way for them to get on board with the proposal without the slightest bit of reservation. One needs to make sure that the entire state system, lead by the SS, works in harmony.

When the conference continues, Heydrich and Eichmann remind their colleagues what they have done so far in order to cleanse Germany from the subhumans. The usual type of executions, by shooting, has turned out to be too expensive and ineffective - a simple look at the sums shows that it's not sustainable. This is when Eichmann, otherwise formal and reserved like a bureaucrat, not to say aloof, speaks to the audience about the experiments done with poison gas, displaying gushes of self satisfaction normally reserved to top students presenting in front of their class. He dishes out the sums. Some of those present calculate rapidly - it still seems that the final solution would take too long. But, after he introduces them to the latest technological advances and the capacities of a camp such as Auschwitz, the room is filled with euphoria - it's possible, after all! This is the conference's pinnacle. Heydrich immediately wants to hear that each individual person will take on their part of the work, and indeed, each of the fourteen present decides to willingly participate in... well, one doesn't know what to call it? Here are some observations of Joseph Brodsky on the subject of Evil: ... *the most interesting thing to do with Evil is its overwhelming humanity. Nothing can be twisted and worn inside out as easily as someone's idea of social justice, civic conscience, a better future, and so on. Evil is bait for reliability, security. It's always following behind large numbers, hard granite, ideological purity, well rehearsed armies and stable bank accounts. The tendency of Evil towards such things is primarily in relation to its natural insecurity, but observations such as these are quite useless once Evil has won... and we know that Evil starts when one man thinks he's better than everyone else...*

The meeting lasted around ninety minutes. At the end, Heydrich, otherwise a decent violinist from an artistic family, was satisfied. He invited his friends to have some food before leaving. They slowly started to each go their way, firm in their decision to do their share of the work. To execute orders. Professionally, neatly, as the service required them to do, unquestioningly obeying their superiors. It's a strange thing. Probably none of them (half of whom held PhDs) had not personally killed anyone. Yet the meeting of these sophisticated, high society specialists started the mechanisms that ensured that a man who'd been a tram driver in his civic life, or a baker, carpenter, teacher or merchant, or a tailor, weaver or laundry worker, turned into a sadistic overseer and murderer in a concentration camp. It isn't an exception in human history, either - more like a rule: the intellectual elite drinks whisky in salons and makes decisions, and the executioners are the ordinary, quiet neighbours who are not aware of the dark drives (this is an important thing to acknowledge: each of us

has a dark drive, and the very awareness of the humbling knowledge of our own potential savagery, the demonic in us, is the best way to protect ourselves from it). It isn't difficult to manipulate these people through a combination of suitable slogans, an imposed sense of threat, an invitation to sacrificial acts for a higher cause, and promises of a bright future. Only, before the bright future dawns, there are a few dirty jobs that need to be done.

Why am I writing about this eery meeting held on 20 January 1942? One could say it is circumstantial. The other day, I saw Frank Pierson's film *Conspiracy* (2001), never screened in Croatia (but available on YouTube), which is actually a reconstruction of the events I have described. The film was made according to the recorded protocol and traces out the conference minute by minute. The excellent actors portraying the members of the meeting are the brilliant Kenneth Branagh as Heydrich (he won an Emmy for the role) and Stanley Tucci as Eichmann (Golden Globe). But this wasn't what drove me to see the film. There was a recent screening of a 1996 film *The Man Who Captured Eichmann* on terrestrial television, directed by William A Graham, and starring Robert Duvall. So, it was that Saturday that got me thinking about Eichmann, the Wannsee villa conference and the Evil which can be defined as 'militant ignorance'. The film shows Mossad agents kidnapping Eichmann in Argentina; it was shown in afternoon hours. I saw it and went out. I got on the bus and sat down opposite two students. Headphones in, caps and hoods on, *y'know mate...* nothing extreme, just local youths. It was raining, the bus windows were steamed up. At some point, a young man sitting next to the window, almost half consciously moving, in the midst of a chat with his friend, drew a cross with his finger. Then, a few seconds later, he added a few lines so that the cross had turned into - a swastika.

'Oh, you're into that?' I asked him.

'Yes.'

He was slightly surprised by my addressing him, but he answered right away. The tone of his voice was a mix of a standoffish youthful arrogance mixed with wonder - what kind of a question is that?! Of course he's into it.

'You know who Adolf Eichmann was?'

'Eichmann? Never heard.'

'Well, type it into Google, you'll find out. E-i-c-h-m-a-n-n.'

I felt sorry for him. Drawing swastikas, but not knowing who Eichmann was. I wasn't surprised, however. After one's spent some years in the education system, he's ready for anything. And I knew that it would have been extremely counterproductive to raise my finger and start a moral-educational lecture, such as, are you

crazy, don't you know this is against the law... His ideas would have just been cemented by that. I have long understood that when it comes to teenagers, it's better to stay away from too much cautioning, warning, lecturing and nagging. On the contrary, it's a great way to get them to do the very opposite of what you want. I've learnt through experience that the chances are greater (and they remain just chances) that they might pay attention if you work with them with genuine, implicit respect, and that you should simply suggest that they themselves check out whatever the topic is.

The young man and his friend watched me, trying to figure out: *Is he f***in' with us, or what?*

'Google it. Check it out.'

'OK, I will do.'

I didn't say anything else and they carried on talking. Before I got off the bus I told him again to check the facts on the internet.

'But is it someone who's still alive, like, acting right now?' He asked me, his tone now quite friendly.

'No, he's not alive, but, look, you can't be into this (I nod towards the swastika on the window), and not know who Eichmann was. D'ya see?'

He said he'd check for sure. If he has, maybe, maybe he'll get it.

Adolf Otto Eichman was executed on 31 May 1962. He didn't get it, he was simply following orders.