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CROSS-CURRENTS IN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

DUBLIN
UCD DEPARTMENT OF ITALIAN

1996

SHOULD WE FORGET THE EUROPEAN TRADITION?

Marella Buckley

When Paul Valéry wrote *Crisis of the Mind* in 1921, he launched the European tradition into a new line of enquiry. Valéry was querying our identity as Europeans and asked where we had gone wrong. Writing after the "war to end all wars", he could not have known that he was pointing us down a new path that people like Benjamin, June, Steiner, Kristeva and Miller would have to take again: sadly, their enquiries have had to punctuate our century.

In trying to grasp Europe's reaction to the War, Valéry reached for the simplest metaphor available, the image of the traumatized organism or self. And he found that in order to speak of this "agonie de l'âme européenne",[1] the "agony of the European soul", he had first to find out who Europe was. When trauma strikes consciousness it brings with it a brutal existential awakening, and the self awakens into the nightmare of its own life.

For me, enquiries like that of Valéry, embodying a *concern* which crosses disciplines and national or linguistic frontiers, are a very precious part of our European tradition. These enquiries ignore the barriers that we like to pretend exist between our inner and outer worlds. They know and show that our planet is a macrocosm of ourselves. They try to "fly higher" in order to view the spirit of the time. It is hard to situate the present in the history of ideas that it is then very easy to teach a hundred years down the road. Firstly, however, we shall be dead before future generations can tell us what is happening to us now, and secondly, they will hold us responsible for what happened and for the world they will have inherited from us.

So while we teach probing and multi-layered versions of past movements of thought, we often seem to accept for our own time a lot of official answers from that newly minted public discourse that

society passes around. In an information culture like ours, where for the first time in history information is the number one product in the market-place, it is hard to know where to aim your questions. Another dilemma is the choice of discipline or ideology by which to rise vertically to get an overview of the terrain, because the land below looks different depending on the balloon in which you go up. But this is the challenge which the university poses to society, and we do not just take in the public discourse. We are paid not to generate or disseminate information (the politicians and the mass media do that) but to form ways of questioning.

Just thirty years after Valéry, Steiner had to take up the same mode of questioning again—how was Europe feeling after the Second World War? In the absence of a healing discourse, Europe had internalized and re-enacted its trauma, this time plunging deep into self-annihilation. How was this trauma to be articulated? The new European truth was a forum of horror where no intact speaking self could go. After the Second World War the European intelligentsia huddled in a wilderness outside the gates of the city, the citadel, that concept on which Europe had founded its intellectual and metropolitan life. Who could go back in there, now that the trance had ended in this second and worse awakening? All speech would have to be left at the gate. What were the intellectuals, the professionals of language, to do?

Many of those who were accustomed to making art with words faced into this awful corner of the European self. But the new truth could not be caught with words; words and this horror could not co-exist. Writers like Günter Grass, Samuel Beckett and Marguerite Duras introduced a new aesthetic of the unspeakable, framing a new literature around nothing, around the absence of an adequate means of seeing or way to think.

But there are always plenty of people around, usually among the other professionals of language—the politicians, the journalists, the academics, and even the psychoanalysts—, to set up a new camp at a little distance from the old city gates and lay plans, like the *Lord of the Flies*, to build a new city with shiny, brand-new words, words like bricks and mortar, while also denying that the old city still stands and smokes and smells of the flesh of their own family and of parts of themselves. It is because language and this horror cannot co-exist that a nimbus of brave new words can work for a while in making the horror seem to disappear. The speaker's own discourse can dance

around him and mercifully beguile his eyes. Such a speaker is unable to see the old city any more. But the word-artists have always known that words can never be clean and new. The words of our various European languages had spoken unrepeatable things: simple orders in simple words. Were the writers now to suck these words clean for re-use?

The survivors lived out a nauseous dilemma: to speak in anger and hatred against anything is to stand among the angry and the hateful. So those called upon to react found themselves in an endless wrangle, an almost fascinated passion, with the dominators, while the millions who had died quietly filed ghostly and silent to their deaths. Inside themselves the mourners forever met the killers while serenity and the children filed past and could not hear them when they called.

The Tin Drum by Günter Grass is a book that faces directly into this post-war panic in language. Its hero refuses the middle ground of speech and aligns himself with screaming and silence, those two poles or extremities at either side of talk. Oskar turns a speechless face to the world around him, feigning what he calls a "psychic emigration",[2] pretending neither to understand nor to be capable of words. He covers his inner life with a silence that is rent only by the screams that are his his gift to the world; and Oskar's screams can shatter things.

It is very hard to answer when we ask where all the death came from and where all the selves went to. At one indisputable level (perhaps the only one) the death came out of bullets, grenades, chemicals and bombs. Matter took breath away and shattered selves. In *The Tin Drum* the hero does not talk for anyone, but his voice, his breath, shatters things. In order to salvage a part of his human-ness, Oskar must diminish: he retreats and takes a stand with his scream and his little tin drum, because "no other weapon was available."[3]

The drum, at once diary and public address system, plays both inwards and outwards. Usurping language, the drum not only conveys information, it is also the only true source. Because it speaks to and of the deeper self, like a crystal ball reflecting the self, it is a medium of genuine self-seeing and so never lies. Awakener of anarchic feelings, the drum calls out asymmetries that dismantle the fixed structures of fascism.

Oskar uses the drum to write the memoirs he is composing throughout the book. The drum functions as a historical and

personal archive, on which Oskar draws to write the memoirs that constitute the novel. It is encyclopaedic and can conjure up the past as it really was. The drum colonizes the functions that we relegate to the stenograph, the word-processor, the dictaphone, the answering machine, the fax machine, the filofax—in short, those things from which we seek truth and accuracy for our own words. But here words are washed away like so much dirt on the tide of true visions that the drum can conjure up.

Although this wiping of words occurs in a novel, any novel-writing that goes on is ascribed to Oskar. He is allowed to write in the asylum (perhaps only a madman would attempt book-writing now), and *The Tin Drum* that we are reading is supposedly Oskar's production, while the author's will to words is officially severed and his hand seemingly never appears in the book. But if Grass's compositional will is obscured, Oskar's struggle with language in "this vast verbal effort" is not.[4] Naming is problematized throughout the book. Namings are seen as arbitrary and interchangeable strategies, as a bottomless bag of possible solutions, the truth in words being that there is no final solution: there can be no last word. Oskar's language models itself on his jazz improvisations: his discourse always takes the long way round, favouring the "tortuous and the labyrinthine".[5] He caresses notions, juggles terms, stretches phrases into elaborate patterns, and in this way preserves within incantation some tatters of the human-ness which has been expelled from the symmetries of rational speech.

For the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, the novel is "nothing other than the investigation of forgotten being".[6] "The spirit of the novel," he says, "cannot live at peace with the spirit of our time [...], a whirlpool of reduction where social life is reduced to political struggle and that in turn to the confrontation of just two great global powers."[7] Both Grass and Kundera realize that public and private are entangled with each other: in their books, effects percolate inwards and outwards through the concentric circles of society.

Kundera offers his novels as investigations that are impossible in real life, where we circulate horizontally, only guessing at each others' inner landscapes by means of the signs we exchange. Here the reader sits above with the omniscient narrator, who lifts the lids on the heads interacting below. Saussure highlighted the arbitrary sense that we fix into words in order to talk to each other. Kundera's way of seeing also revolves around the lexical. It is about meaning and the

way we all experience words differently. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Kundera puts in place a few centre-pieces—concepts like the body, freedom, fidelity—, and four characters waltz around them viewing them through that unique fabric woven from their experience, the elaborate lace-work of their own lives. No two characters see the same things: as they circle around these notions and cross each others' lives, they are viewing entirely different things. They cannot even know this about each other, nor can they ever glimpse each others' versions. In life we cannot see inside each others' heads, but the novel that has an omniscient narrator is larger than life.

At the centre of the book, Kundera places a "Dictionary of Misunderstood Words", in which he demonstrates how a handful of terms mean irremediably different things to Sabina and Franz. This mirrors the essay "Sixty-three Words", a dictionary of what he understands by some of his favourite terms, published in *The Art of the Novel*, that is to say, outside his fictional work. Kundera launches Saussure's model inwards towards that sanctuary where the individual keeps a unique and incommunicable dictionary, where the psychoanalyst and the omniscient novelist, but rarely the naked self and never the other, can go.

Franz, like the lonely man grabbing drinks from a tray at a party, grabs the public discourse as it passes. He inherits meanings from his society—terms and notions like notes and coins. Nourished by his institutions (his family, his social class, his profession as an academic), he seems to suckle blindly like a nursling on the language and concepts he receives. Franz thus serves the conservative impulse in society, in that, like the man in the Bible who buried his talents, he hands it all back the way he got it.

Tomas, famous surgeon and Casanova, must penetrate the surface of things; he cannot co-exist with intact surfaces, with the smooth skins of signs. Armed with his scalpel and his penis, a latter-day Don Juan, he charges through this world of façades and screens. Tomas's world is full of veils to be rent: he charges to reassure himself that there is nothing behind him, nothing heavy, nothing lastingly meaningful, nothing real. Behind everything, he finds only other people's meanings, and his life remains light.

Tereza finds herself in a different world. The arena offered to her experience is a small life locked inside a brutal family, an arena whose versions of woman, freedom, work and body constitute for her an unbearably smothering void. One day Tomas passes through the life

of Tereza the waitress, a nobody in her own world. Tereza sees the bird of chance passing and grabs the rest of her life out of the air as it is flying by. With sheer compositional will, she weaves up the few inconsequential coincidences that bring her to Tomas's table on that day, and presents them to him. These are the first signs he, to whom even paternity is light and meaningless, has ever encountered that are weighty, that he is unable to pass through to nothingness, because behind these flimsy hieroglyphs stands Tereza with her suitcase and her need for life.

Valéry and Steiner asked what Europe was. Grass wrote in reaction to who Europe turned out to be. And Kundera believes that by writing novels he is working within a genre which is specifically European both in form and in spirit. Originating in the European vernaculars of the Middle Ages and shaping itself across the Enlightenment, the novel is for Kundera "incompatible with the totalitarian universe [because] the world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are moulded of entirely different substances."[8]

Sabina, Tereza and Tomas face into the infinite differing of persons. They live it instead of passing it on like an unopened present as Franz does. And we know by now how our fears are passed on unconsciously to amplify across generations like an electric current running through a human chain. History has shown us that as the sense of an unarticulated and unresolved public distress grows like a cancer, the public discourse will tighten like a belt. This is how fascism works. Its language has a shameful function: it acts like a fire-blanket or a bandage to our own wound and helps us transfer that wound onto someone else. Kundera, however, makes the dictionary a means to, and not a flight from, the complexity of being.

He is right about the novel's potential for truths fuller than those which public language can accommodate. The spirit of the European novel crossed this century at least eighty years ahead of corresponding social and political institutions. The past few years, however, have seen the manifestation in politics of a value that was nurtured at the heart of the European literary tradition from the turn of the century onwards.

Although for Valéry, and people like him, Europe has always been "le cerveau", the brain of the world,[9] a glance at its history shows it also to have been the planet's organ of phallocentric expansion. To look back either two hundred or two thousand years

and watch Europe behave is to see it swell in periodic inflations where its sense of itself spills over to colour the map. Until now this intermittent eruption, ideologized as an overflow of innate vitality, has always been valorized by the European public mind. Even in the wake of Hiroshima, those who took no pleasure in it could only disapprove. International relations admitted as yet no other model to valorize.

But, as Hans Enzensberger points out in *Granta*'s special edition on the New Europe, the dawn of the twentieth century had long since seen "the end of the literary hero whose principal preoccupations were conquest, triumph and delusions of grandeur".[10] Europe's modern literary heroes have been "specialists of denial [...] representing renunciation, reduction and dismantling".[11]

To review the behaviour of our century's literary heroes across Joyce, Dostoevsky, Proust, Mann, Hesse, Kafka and many others is to reel from inadequacy to introspection at the beginning and on to mental aberration and incarceration later on. Falling down towards truths, these are purely novelistic heroes and there is no place for them on the upper crust of language. Only by reading the literature will you hear from them, because to society they turn a blank and diminished face.

In 1989, this literary consciousness of Europe suddenly manifested itself in flashes of unprecedented political action. *Granta* declared that "the real hero of deconstruction is Gorbachov, the greatest proponent of the politics of retreat."[12] The dismantling of the Soviet empire got under way while the continent appeared to initiate planetary disarmament. With the fall of the Berlin Wall Europe took a deep breath, preparing to dissolve all its internal barriers.

Europe's literary self was offering to its political face a new model of virile bravery that may save the lives of many through its ability to back down. Are there ten, twenty or thirty years left to save the world? And are we fostering the spirit of Europe's literary anti-hero, so new to the public eye? Are we breaking outmoded and dangerous structures in disarmament and in ecology, or are we inflating again the balloons of deadly heroisms? Is the New Europe, so named on the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" and "exploration", proud or ashamed of what he did in our name?

The public discourse sent from the United States speaks of a "New World Order", to which our continent replies that we have a

"New Europe". Could this public discourse be a gloss over the reality of young Europeans' lives today? Is language being used once more to ward things off?

Maybe the sense of an ending into which younger Europeans have grown up is honestly invisible to those over thirty. Or perhaps we are viewing here the gap between what we carry inside us and what we have a discourse to express. Sociologists tell us that those born in the Sixties had nightmares as adolescents about the nuclear holocaust. When this sense of an imminent end was dismantled in the late Eighties, we were taking down a shroud to find a tomb behind it, and we were told that our environment would be uninhabitable before our old age. These are different types of endings. The nuclear nightmares of the Seventies were all about red buttons and red telephones: would Big Brother punish the world or would he not? But maybe this Brother would be assassinated, or overthrown in a coup; or perhaps Superman would stop him.

The mechanism of the environmental holocaust, however, is already under way. And it is not Big Brother but each of us who is causing it, merely by the way we were taught to live. Raised as little Platos and Cartesians on empiricism, rationalism, hierarchies, dualism and models of linear progress, we children of the European tradition now find that the institutions and philosophies which reared us have apparently been helping to end the world since long before we were born. We urgently need means to express this hitherto unprecedented relationship of a generation to its source. Or are we to stand by and let Europe's new fascism offer the only voice to this pain? Luckily, many of us now find in other traditions modes of research which fill in the holes in our own. And in the New World, love has become a virus with which we are killing each other. We do not even have language for this area of our experience, for endings that dissolve into larger and different endings, for birth into a dying world, for this relationship of ours to the tradition that fathered us. But a discourse will have to be found for this trouble in the family.

Outside the institutions, young people are forging such a discourse in their music, which is now a theatre of cruelty like the one Artaud called for in the Thirties (a time very like our own). Are they the only ones forging new symbolic means for the spirit of our age? There is a hole in the discourse we are sharing just like the hole we have made in the sky above. Writing from Paris on the front page of *The Guardian*, John Berger recognized this: "Between the experience

of living a normal life on the planet at the moment and the public narrative being offered to give a sense to that life, the empty space—the gap—is enormous. This is why a third of the French population are ready to listen to Le Pen."[13]

Grass has stated that he writes against a tide of forgetting, what Steiner called "the creative amnesia" that swept over Europe after the Second World War.[14] And Kundera has said that he writes against a "forgetting of being" that he sees as the spirit of this age.[15] Berger put the problem very clearly in *The Guardian*. Both in the black faces of the Parisians riding the Métro alongside him and in the international behaviour that is currently reshaping our world, he sees the same symptom, "a refusal to focus on what is near" and the deadening of "that special form of attention" that is full of being.[16]

So what should Europe be forgetting? Even our tradition has realized that there is no such thing as forgetting. Freud told us that Mind, the deep self, remembers everything. Recently we have realized, to our dismay, that matter always remembers too. The planet that sustains us is suddenly appearing as a larger single mind, like an unconscious on the outside, like the omniscient God of our first confessions.

For Grass and Kundera, the opposite of forgetting is seeing. Their works catch within themselves society's taboo on full seeing, and their characters infringe it. In *The Tin Drum*, Mama's stare clings forever to the severed horse's head that is retrieved from the sea. From King Arthur to Freud, it is an ancient European notion that things, especially parts of heads, discarded in deep waters will eventually bob to the surface again. Meanwhile, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas and Sabina inherit that space of play which is the European libertine tradition: they exult in sex-play with mirrors, in full seeing, while Franz will only make love with his eyes closed.

For me the opposite of forgetting is letting things be. To admit that things are in being alongside us or inside us seems somehow to loosen the hold they have over us, while avoiding things, denying them their actuality, seems only to make us shrink. Of course forgetting is impossible and we are unable to dissolve or eject what still lives for us. We can merely pretend to ourselves and to others that we are only part of what we really are. We are not urging Europe to "remember" anything. The past does not exist. What no longer is has already evaporated from our sense of things. If Auschwitz and

Hiroshima really are not a part of us and the things we do now, then let them go. We know so little anyway about the people who went into the graves of the past. But we seem at present to be finding their graves inside us. Do we leave them alone or do we allow them to *be* and let them yield up whatever of them still lives in us?

If we are to stop forgetting and let the different parts of ourselves be again, it is too late for blame to do any good. The European attitude, wherever in the world it manifests itself, must simply be seen wholly, for both its strengths and its incapacities. This attitude, which is of Greek, Roman and Judaeo-Christian origin, is a very particular way of dealing with the world. Like a goldfish in water, we may have become too familiar with our own element to perceive it and to perceive that a universe lies outside it. Our tradition seems to specialize in separation. It studies things separately and educates selected parts of the self at any one time. A Western education might be the best in the world if it included a process whereby, unlike Humpty Dumpty, one could put oneself back together again. But most people do not. And such people run our world in bits and pieces. When they operate in public, these people banish what they know from their private lives, and when they set about organizing their society they banish the attitudes they met in the arts they claim to revere. They behave as if their sense of their inner self had nothing to do with the state of the world.

Although we sometimes have cause to be ashamed of the European tradition and have reproached it for the limits of what it has offered us, it may always be our family. It offers a forum of intimacy, a sense that for better or for worse these people formed us. And the amount of forgetting that we Europeans do in the near future will decide whether the 1990s will subsequently be seen as an end or a prelude to a new beginning.

NOTES

1 Paul Valéry, "Crise de l'esprit", in his *Œuvres*, edited by J. Hytier (Paris, Gallimard, 1957), p. 990.
2 Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (London, Penguin, 1965), p. 117.
3 Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, p. 61.
4 Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, p. 173.
5 Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, p. 45.

6 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London, Faber, 1988), p. 5.
7 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 17.
8 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 14.
9 Paul Valéry, "Crise de l'esprit", p. 995.
10 H. Enzensberger, *New Europe = Granta* [Cambridge], 30 (Winter 1990), p. 136.
11 H. Enzensberger, *New Europe*, p. 136.
12 H. Enzensberger, *New Europe*, p. 140.
13 J. Berger, in *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 1991, p. 1.
14 G. Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (London–New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971), p. 59.
15 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 5.
16 J. Berger, in *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 1991, p. 1.