

DZEVAD

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In Praise of the Border

Translated

from Serbo-Croatian

by Christina

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About ten years ago,

when I was editor of the Sarajevo journal *Odjek*, I published a text by Edgar Morin called *Rethinking Europe*. Around the same time and in the same journal, I published a selection of papers from a Berlin symposium entitled *The Dream of Europe*. Was the similarity of the topics, the timing of these essays, of these messages which reached Sarajevo from Western Europe, pure chance?

At the time the Berlin Wall was still very much in place, the curtain between the two military and political blocs looked as convincing as the second law of thermodynamics, as convincing as an illness, and the European Union was still much more an idea than an actual project. The political processes which have since descended on Europe looked the way an accident or death looks to us – like something that is logically feasible but usually happens to somebody else. Everything seemed so stable, so eternal, like fate or the sea. Yet intellectuals wanted to “rethink Europe” and discuss the “European dream,” posing the question of Europe in their own minds, and in those of others. They cautioned that it was no longer clear exactly what was understood by the notion of Europe, what meaning and substance its name connoted. They discussed, they questioned, the interpretation of a notion whose meaning and form, as we understood it at the time, seemed God-given. Within the secret plan of Time, the question marks were already there, as was to become evident only a few years later. Was that by pure chance?

If so, it was chance of the kind which determines that rain does or does not fall and that bees die near big cities. A chance

occurrence, one we most certainly do not comprehend, may have laws which repeat themselves, as in the plot construction of a well-written story, revealing the logic behind it. It is to this order of happenstance that we can consign the fact that these messages about Europe were so well-heard in Sarajevo and taken so seriously even then.

There is one possible explanation which, like any pleonasm, is well-known, true and uninteresting. It declares that for those of us who are true intellectuals, the real issue of our time is what is to come rather than what is now before us. Edgar Morin and the people in Berlin who wanted to "dream of Europe" are indisputably serious intellectuals and it is perfectly natural that they should have articulated what was to be questioned just a few years later. Like all notions with a wide range of meaning, the notion of Europe must be constantly delineated, determined and defined anew. It is perfectly natural that true intellectuals should register when a notion's range of meaning has become limitless and that they should feel the need to rethink this notion, in other words to determine and delineate it anew, to set its boundaries, i.e. to give it shape, to give it concreteness and genuine substance. While indubitably true, this explanation is tautological because it claims something that has not been questioned: that *Rethinking Europe* and the symposium on *The Dream of Europe* are important and intellectually truthful writings.

Could there be a different explanation, the sort offered by a well-written story whose plot repeats the logic of the happening we are trying to understand?

It would mean a lot to me if we could find such an explanation, perhaps because of what Morin's text and the papers which "dreamed of Europe" meant to me personally.

At the time, I was completing a book of essays called *Of Language and Fear* in which while noting the maladies of my own language I discovered those of the society in which I live and of the cultural structures which determine my attitude to the world. (I am devastated today to see how prophetic that book was.) The book was very important to me because it was my attempt to articulate (to explain to myself and then argue) the revolt against scientism which in my youth I had slavishly espoused with all the ardor of a disciple. The papers I published

in my journal ten years ago confirmed to me that the obsessive object of my study was indeed a valid theme and that what I was trying to do was not all that original. They were like a reply, an answer from someone I had been talking to the whole time without even being aware he was there. And when a man devotes himself to language, then what he needs most is a reply.

Rethinking Europe and *The Dream of Europe* gave topical and methodological confirmation to my obsessions. I was painfully aware of the absence of reality in my language, in society and its cultural structures, and it made me feel like a lunatic because everything seemed to function so perfectly. Posing the question of Europe, with which Yugoslavia shared fundamental cultural structures and values at the time (please let us not mystify the differences which did exist and are real, but not so great as to overshadow the similarities), and the clearly manifest need to redefine a Europe which seemed to function so perfectly, convinced me that my need to restore reality to the structures that shaped my life was not the product of my own autism or some mental disorder, but rather a feeling others shared as well.

Morin's promise gave me truly invaluable methodological support. A European who rethinks Europe is also rethinking himself. And that means that he cannot continue to think scientistically, upholding the "subject-object" relationship. He cannot let his rethinking take the shape of a circle with the subject as its center and the rest of the world as its circumference which is real only inasmuch as it is referred to by the center. If he wants to rethink himself (or what he belongs to) then the subject must either step out onto the circle's circumference and thus give reality and identity to the other points of the circumference, or else, through the thought process, create an ellipse, a figure with two centers. In either case, he must base the thought process on the "subject-subject" relationship, i.e. make it a dialogue between two subjects. This methodological promise meant a great deal to me because I did not feel at all well in the scientific world which, because it is composed solely of objects, is silent, i.e. in the world of inorganic matter. And what made it worse was the knowledge that the problem was not my fear of solitude, but the fact that there was simply no point to being a subject in a world of objects, in a world which cannot speak.

The title *The Dream of Europe* encouraged me both thematically and methodologically. I am deeply grateful to whoever thought of the title. (I wish I knew who it was.) I saw it as an invitation to learn about Europe by dreaming of it, and I read it a year after I had completed *Of Language and Fear* which I was still reluctant to deliver to the publisher. In that book I tried to think, to learn, to understand through intuition and the narrative form, through the Arabesque form (repetition), through love, sorrow and sympathy. I tried to defend my right to an objectivity which is not neutral, not disinterested, to knowledge which is knowledge about something that greatly concerns me, to my human integrality which even as such can know something, understand and think. Work in the theater had already convinced me that a person can also think with his hands, with his body, and by moving in a space which has meaning (i.e. an identity). My work in the theater had led me to conclude that I am really a freak if I have a terribly smart head and a terribly stupid hand (which is a mute object) and that I really learn when I am communicating with what I am learning about. And it is only as an integral whole that I can learn by listening to the subject that my desire for learning is addressing.

That is how I discovered the border, as a metaphor for a possible form of learning, as a place of extraordinary symbolic potential, as a source of tension which is, by definition, fruitful. You can rethink Europe as a European only from the border (the border of Europe and of your own being); you can learn by dreaming if you take up a position at the border (let's say between sleep and consciousness); you can learn about the world which concerns you (which you love or fear, strive for or resist), the world which is not a silent object, only when you approach it and stand at the border between you and what you are learning. This is the form of learning that classical European art used to dream of: the border region where the material, the author and the form sensed in the material by the author all converge; a work as a symphonic sum of voices emitted by the author and the material; the author who both belongs to his material and is removed from it, is on the border. The border is an extremely accurate metaphor for the objectivity of art – objectivity which is not disinterested, yet is genuine and impartial.

The border is actually objectivity itself, because the two

identities which meet there are equally constitutive and equally present. What meets at the border are two units of space, or two units of time, or two units of meaning, and both units must be equally present in identity, they must in equal measure constitute the border as their meeting-point if it is to be truly a border. That is why borders are the site of drama par excellence: they are the site of tension, which is why they are so unusually fruitful.

At and with the border one identity ends. The border still belongs to it but is already something quite different because it is equally constituted by that other identity whose beginning it marks. The border is the basis of identity because it is what gives it shape, which means that with it and within it one identity is indeed rounded off and completed; and it is precisely here, in the very thing which completes it, that identity overcomes its own dull concordance and opens up to something quite different. This is yet another aspect of the marvelous objectivity of the border, an objectivity which does not have to turn the other, the one we are trying to learn about, into an object. The objectivity of the border teaches us that the other is proof of ourselves, that it enables us because it marks off our completion, that the other is a (perhaps better) possibility of ourselves. The inner structure of the border shows that there could be a form of learning which would build its objectivity on the equally crucial, equally determining presence of two subjects of learning. Let us say that this could be the form of learning promised me, in my time of painful confusion, by the title *Rethinking Europe*, written by a European.

Rethinking Europe. Rethinking a miracle (because Europe is undoubtedly a miracle). A miracle of aggression: a peninsula of the Asian continent virtually occupied the rest of the world, as was still the case at the beginning of our unhappy century (when Sarajevo first became a symbol embodying fundamental European issues). A miracle of productivity: it is almost incredible that in the past couple of centuries so much should have emerged in Europe in such a short span of time and in so small a space – from new types of weapons to new kinds of beer, from totalitarian political theories to the apotheosis of individualism.

A miracle of "borderings." Miracles, medieval European sages teach us, are a border phenomenon – the revelation of a

higher form of existence in a lower form, for instance the foliation of a rock or the speech of a hawk. Perhaps the miracle of the border offers a possible explanation for the miracle of Europe?

For, apart from everything else, Europe is also a very dense web of borders. By that I do not mean, of course, state borders. That I cannot talk about because with the passport I have there are very few European state borders that I can cross. (I gratefully accept the cards fortune has dealt me, the passport and the thin hair, the myriad allergies and the confusion which makes me keep questioning.) I mean cultural borders, the borders that lend shape to the structures which give concreteness to our experience of the world and course of the day, to daily rituals and one's attitude to the community. I mean the borders between languages of which there are so many in Europe and whose value we shall know how to appreciate if we remember W. von Humboldt's warning that language determines not only our understanding of the world but our feeling, our experience of it as well. I mean the borders between different traditions for deriving a family name. The borders, for instance, between the space where occupation provides the root of the family name, the space where that root stems from tribal ancestry and the space where family names are based on real or desired traits. Do these different traditions have anything to do with different systems of kinship? I don't know. What I do know is that these different traditions have a lot to do with feeling the collective, the community to which one belongs, with the basis of belonging. (There is a vast difference between the feeling that membership in a community is based on inherited occupations and the feeling that it is based on blood kinship.) I mean the border between beer and wine which was once relatively clear but which has become so fluid that in many European homes it now runs straight down the middle of the dining table. I mean the border between different kinds of curses which in some regions are genital and in others anal, in one place blasphemy and in another theomachy.

The border is the site of drama because it is the site of tension, a place where two identities meet. And, like any tension which is truly a meeting of two internally fulfilled identities, it is fruitful. That is why I believe that one could rethink the miracle of Europe, or at least discern its inner form, if one tried to understand it in terms of the nature of borders. The borders I am

trying to describe here are the borders where two cultural structures meet and give shape and concreteness to our perception of and attitude to the world. Is Europe a miracle because its web of cultural borders is so dense, because at each step you hear a new language and encounter a new type of family name, learn about a new religion and discover a new understanding of curses, insults or praise? I believe that by listening to the voice of this web of borders, we can perceive the logic behind the happenstance which decided to make a miracle out of Europe, just the way we can perceive it in a well-constructed plot.

Need it be said that Europe's web of cultural borders is at its densest in the center, in the belt which connects the Mediterranean and Scandinavian peninsula? Need it be said that in the course of our unhappy century most of these borders have shifted from internal to external reality, so that today they are no longer denoted by different forms of table manners or different perceptions of the community to which one belongs but rather by police guards at state borders? Need it be said that this shifting of borders from their internal to an external reality, this change in the understanding of borders, this moment where the border ceases to be a meeting-point of two cultural structures and becomes a dividing-point between two states, is virtually simultaneous with the moment when the theory of drama begins to believe that drama stems from conflict rather than tension? Need it be said that all this became strikingly evident and literally started when Sarajevo became a symbol, collecting, like rays in an optical prism, the outstanding issues of Europe?

It must be clear to you, my dear interlocutor, that I am trying to assemble and neatly arrange all the elements of an excellent plot, one of those plots where the logic of the incident which has been dying near big towns and which knows why rain falls and waters rise repeats itself. The cursed thing is that the elements of the plot are arranging themselves into a form which I definitely do not want to see and whose inner logic I do not want to understand. But they are arranging themselves into a form which already exists latently in the material itself and there is nothing I can change here because my belief in the classical theories of art is inherent not acquired.

Are the elements of the plot, whose form is already

discernable, clear? The border is between two centuries, the year is 1913 or 1914. Sarajevo embodies all European doubts, questions, fears, mistrust in the cultural structures that shape the everyday life of the European. It emerges with painful clarity that social communities have principles, i.e. fundamental values on which the community as a structure is based, and that individuals have either identifying principles, or they have character. People with character feel that the community cannot exist as an organized whole or structure if it loses the principles on which it is based. But for the tragically large majority, there is no difference between the individual's and the community's manner of existence. Borders begin their great migration from internal to external reality, a war starts which will turn Central Europe from a mosaic of cultural communities into a pack of states. Central Europe is broken into small pieces, caught between two blocs each of which is relatively homogeneous from the point of view of its cultural logic. It is like being caught between two millstones.

The other collection of elements in our plot is mere repetition. Once more the border is between two centuries, only now the year is 1995. Once more Sarajevo is a big question mark embodying all of Europe's fears, doubts, mistrust in its own cultural structures. Once more people with principles account for a frighteningly large majority, people who exist in the manner of a community or who believe themselves to be one (because they are determined by what determines the community). And once more, a region with the densest web of cultural borders possible is caving in. (Bosnia is a true metaphor for Europe precisely because of the density of its cultural borders which is such that in every town you will find shrines of worship representing two, three and even four different religions.) Once more borders are moving by force of arms from internal to external reality, once more the border is ceasing to be a site of tension and becoming a reason for conflict.

There is a form of internal unity which lends cohesion to the plot: the obvious correspondence between time and space – the beginning and the end of the same century, both times in Sarajevo. There is also the topical unity – at the start and at the end of the same century literally the same thing happens in the same place. And there is something which I find absolutely

terrifying because, seen from the perspective of my own experience, it lends emotional substance to the entire thing; there is, as I say, the kind of unity which the main character gave the traditional Bildungsroman. For I refuse to divorce any of this from my own personal fate, and could not do so even if I wanted to. I "rethought" Europe and, encouraged by my interlocutor's voice which meant so much to me in my time of confusion, recognized it as a web of borders. I was confused because I had just finished a book in which, analyzing the minor ailments of my own language, I recognized the invisible – the collapse of the cultural structures which lend shape to the world I live in. Like a character in the Bildungsroman, I discovered I had interlocutors among people who do not know I even exist, who perhaps do not want to know, so that even my feeling of gratitude means little to them. And like a character in the Bildungsroman, I wonder about the coincidence which made Edgar Morin and the Berlin meeting's organizers my interlocutors. We felt at the same time the need to rethink the cultural structures with which we feel the world, we wished at the same time to redefine the fundamental notions of these structures, we wanted at the same time to restore form, i.e. borders, to the fundamentals of our cultural structures.

What is the meaning of this string of coincidences, contingencies, concordances which set the plot with a sorrowful anti-hero as the mechanical connection between its various episodes? What has happened to me has happened: the collapse of cultural structures which I had detected in the minor ailments of language triggered off the shift in borders from the internal to the external reality of my small world. What about the big world which my unwitting interlocutors had wanted to rethink and dream about? I see in that big world the processes I discerned at the time. I understand what the need to rethink or dream of cultural structures means. I also see a great deal of what already happened once before, what I know from memory or the experience of others. (The magnificent wisdom of a well-constructed, true plot enhances my inner understanding of it all.)

I see the terrifying numerical superiority of people with principles instead of character, people who exist in the manner of a community, people who have so lost their concreteness and any

connection with the real world that they no longer recognise even the obvious similarity between two forms. The similarity, for instance, between a besieged city surrounded by hills and an enclosed space. They do not have to recognise the inner similarities, such as the one evoked during that first winter of the war in Sarajevo by the grim joke which explains that the main difference between Auschwitz and Sarajevo is that Auschwitz had gas. But how is it that they do not recognise the similarity between the two forms? Will they recognise it if the British generals on temporary assignment in Bosnia keep the French President's promise and open the so-called blue road which would allow entry into Sarajevo? Then the similarity would be even more striking: two enclosed spaces each with one way in and an exit heavenwards.

Please do not get me wrong. I am not interested in people who have principles instead rather than character, they are not the reason for all these words. I am interested in people who some ten years ago became my interlocutors without wanting or knowing it, who meant so much to me at the time and to whom I am still most grateful. In the world they are rethinking and dreaming about, internal borders have become invisible while external borders, those marked by the border police, are increasingly visible and closed to all else, to everything that is on the outside. I fear the process this may be heralding. Which is why I am most grateful to my chance interlocutors of ten years ago and I would give a lot for them to avoid the experience that has been mine. Naturally, I mean the kind of chance which knows why rain falls and waters rise and why bees die near big cities. As for me, I believe that it was just such chance that linked me to my interlocutors all those years ago. I secretly implore it to spare them my experience. The shift of borders from internal to external reality can be stopped, I deeply believe that it can. One need only renew the forms, i.e. the borders, of basic notions, yield to dreams and equip oneself to rethink borders, to believe, to feel how drama does not require conflict and how tension is good, fruitful, European...

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