



An age of vampires

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Natural history of a disease

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An age of vampires

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Tvrтко Kulenović is a well-known Sarajevan writer, the author of works on theatre, art theory, literary criticism, and of novels, travel books, short stories, radio scripts, and a film script. The present book was first published in the original in 1994, and won the Writers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Award. It is a literary salmagundi based on the author's own life and works. Among its various elements are: novelistic passages; autobiographical entries; social commentary; passages of what could be radio or film script; and accounts of travel.

The book is the record of a highly intellectual literary life, lived in the vicinity of continuing urban warfare; it recalls a past often coloured by violence. It contains numerous references to other books and writers – Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita*), Dostoyevsky, Camus, Malraux, Stendhal, Priestley and Borges – as a matter of necessity, certainly not show. That is, Kulenović acknowledges the 'postmodern' nature of his work, permeated by intertextuality, the 'cultivated surfaces we keep returning to, from which the light bounces off and reflects from other surfaces' (p. 109). But he immediately qualifies what he feels could be seen as an aesthetic indulgence with a sense of the reality of contemporary Sarajevo, and so touches on the nerve centre of this disturbing book:

But who would, in this unfortunate town, in these terrible times, use such foolish words as postmodernism, where its tendency towards the specific and individual appears here in the form of the words bread, water, electricity, snipers, shells. (p. 109)

And yet he cannot resist resorting to the realm of books and aesthetics, surely to provide himself with some respite, some means of coping with the situation. And this strategy offers some relief to the reader too, in the midst of the private and public destruction recounted. But though he engages in dialogue with Camus, for example, he cannot escape the awful circumstances of the present. Camus's 'Return to Tipasa' idealises, from a child's perspective, the presence of the sea: 'I grew up with the sea and poverty for me was sumptuous; then I lost the sea and found all luxuries grey and poverty unbearable' (p. 23). Kulenović, who had originally considered 'Return to Tipasa' 'sacred', now declares:

I find it sounding grotesque now: children in basements of Sarajevo drawing their longing for happiness do not draw the sea: only a brook, a tree, a flower, a blade of grass, a peaceful and unbroken bench in the clearing among demolished buildings. (p. 23)

The book immerses one in this disfigured world, and it is heart-breaking.

At intervals the author refers to the present in Bosnia as 'the age of vampires'. Violence is ever present; the times are awash with blood:

[M]y close friend Vesna was killed by a shell flying in from Trebević, killed almost outside her own building, at Obala, before she had turned the corner around the old Merchant Academy, later the School of Applied Arts; her leg was torn off and she bled to death before she could reach the hospital. (p. 37)

Kulenović, with the type of minute prosaic focus on local buildings and their history juxtaposed with the horror of this incident, needs to bear witness, and one can understand this, but it does not make the book any easier to read. The 'disease' proclaimed in the title is death (p. 161). Father, mother, friends, scores of people die unnaturally, through atrocities, through vendettas. In such circumstances one needs all the consolation from other sources that one can get, and, as hinted above, this fact links the book's postmodern aestheticism to a level altogether different from the writerly 'play' usually associated with the term.

The book is divided into eight sections, each dealing with different autobiographical circumstances, and incorporating various modes of expression: a diary's entries pertaining to his mother's illness and death; a personal narrative pertaining to a vendetta started because of an accidental death;



a radio script which takes its cue from a Pink Floyd song, *Shine on, you crazy diamond*; a private letter; a movie script; a literary requiem. And interspersed in the different sections are travels to other places, Italy, Provence, America, and, most significantly, India, a country that played a significant role in the building of the author's areligious value system and his scholarship: Indian art and theatre were at the centre of his research.

There are typographical errors in the book, and the worst is linked to the author's interest in Indian art. I only make this observation to warn the reader that there are moments of irritation to be overcome because of such errors: writing about the Taj Mahal, Kulenović refers in the original to the 'beloved wife' of the Great Mughal, Shah Jahan, translated

here as 'bellowed wife' (p. 95). Other errors have to do with spelling, grammar and syntax. This said, the book still reads well and strikes one as a valuable artefact to emerge from an immensely troubled society, yet one which is still committed to just values and great art.

Natural history of a disease should especially appeal to readers interested in Eastern European literature, but also to the more general reader of contemporary prose. However, as I hope has been made clear above, it is not for the faint-hearted.

References

Bulgakov, A., 1967, *The Master and Margarita*, Harvill Press, London.

Camus, A., 2012, 'Return to Tipasa', in *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, Vintage, London.