

## **Dževad Karahasan: Literature is the defence of history**

*Volk und Knecht und Ueberwinder,  
Sie gestehn, zu jeder Zeit,  
Hochstes Gluck der Erdenkinder  
Sei nur die Personlichkeit*

J.W. Goethe, *West-Ostlicher Divan*

There's a joke I was told was Bosnian, though it sounds Jewish, in which Ivek is in a local tavern and the moment he hears that the name of the man standing next to him is Moshe he kills him without thinking twice. He does not deny the deed to the police, he simply justifies it by saying: "And what about what they did to our Jesus!?" "But that was two thousand years ago!", the police inspector exclaims. "Yes, but I only heard about it yesterday", says Ivek.

What are the logical premises underpinning Ivek's action and line of thought? There are probably many, but three stand out and are worth noting. The most obvious is certainly the ahistorical: Ivek has no sense of the past and no distance from events that took place in the past; for him the past, wherever and whenever it may have occurred, has a potential presence and topicality; for him, the only form of existence, not only of time but of existence as such, is "the here and now" of his life, so that everything he learns about, regardless of where and when it occurred, becomes immediate and current reality. Hamlet, here and now, right next to Ivek, is hesitating over avenging his murdered father, thus risking the danger of inflaming Ivek's righteous anger. Brutus right now is brandishing the knife by which Caesar will die, Lisbon right now is being shaken by the great earthquake and Harun al-Rashid right now is presenting a watch to the barbarian ruler Carolus Magnus. All this and all else that really did happen in the past, that is described in literature or dreamt of in legend, is happening right here and now, the instant Ivek learns about it. The kind of ahistoricity typical of Ivek's sentiments could be called barbarian or pre-cultural, and in any case should be clearly distinguished from the ahistoricity of non-European cultures, such as India's for instance, and from the seeming ahistoricity of certain forms of western culture, say the "ahistoricity" of liturgy which, of course, is not ahistoricity but rather discontinued time: like Ivek's conscious, liturgy turns events of long ago into the present, but only precisely defined (sacred) events, and it does so by means of a precisely defined cultural form - the religious rite.

The second quite obvious logical premise of Ivek's action and thinking is a type of collectivism which I would like to call industrial collectivism. An industrial perception of the world is the necessary postulate for this type of collectivism and it would be truly wrong to attribute it to tribal, primitive or some other type of non-modern thought. It is an undeniable truism that it was indeed the industrial age

and its attendant outlook on the world that brought the forms of collectivism that we encountered at the turn of the last century, that I encountered and felt on my own skin in the Balkans at the start of the twenty-first century, and that, unfortunately, we will obviously have a chance to see all around us for a long time yet to come. We have seen it, for instance, in the ideological and national totalitarianism of Bolshevism and Nazism, which saw membership in a particular nation or party as the true definition of a person's identity. At the heart of reducing identity to membership lies the clearly recognizable logic of the industrial series: each and every copy of any given model must be identical to all other copies of that model and must, without exception, be interchangeable with any other copy. In the pre-industrial age human identity could not be perceived in this manner for the simple reason that human life and existence in its broadest sense were perceived quite differently. It is unfair to ascribe our stupidities to times past, it is unfair to blame our madness on old forms of collectivism and earlier forms of human collectivity, especially if they had their own madness. As we can see from the joke I told at the beginning, for Ivek individual identity is embodied without exception in the collective identity and is completely identified with it: it is "us" and the Moshe he kills is "them"; Ivek is absolutely called upon to "avenge" and Moshe is the perfect object of revenge. "I" is the same as "us" and every member of the collective who is "us" is the same as and interchangeable with "I". By extension, "you" in the singular is equivalent to "you" in the plural, and every member of "your collective" is equivalent to, and without exception interchangeable with, "you".

The third obvious logical premise of Ivek's action and thinking is the attitude of opposition or, to be more precise, conflict that his "I" takes in relation to any other identity. By reducing human identity to belonging, Ivek reduces the relationship between individual identities to a single possibility: hostility, i.e. mutual exclusiveness. Anything that exists and that is not "I", i.e. us, is Other, i.e. Others, to which the "I" must somehow relate. As we saw in the joke, Ivek's "I" behavior toward the Other that was so irrefutably extant and present in his vicinity, i.e. toward poor Moshe, followed the principle of exclusion, i.e. it was within the scope of "either/or". Moshe is either one of "us" or he isn't; if he is, then he is equal to my "I", and if he isn't, then he is a "you" which necessarily rules out my "I" because "either/or" is based on the relationship between things in a mechanically perceived world. Moshe, I reckon, would not have minded if Ivek had been less faithful to his mechanical concept of the world.

But why make such comments about a joke out of the blue like this?

Unfortunately, we all know why: because the worst feature of Bosnian and Jewish jokes is that too often they are too reminiscent of reality. (It would be extremely interesting to draw a poetic comparison between Bosnian and Jewish jokes, see the means and structures by which the two cultures defended themselves from outside pressure,

and think about the similarities and differences between them. The similarities are striking and it is on the basis of these similarities that their differences assume an importance that is yet to be deciphered.) The world we live in reminds us of this joke every day, with each step we take; indeed today's world almost seems to have been engendered by it. Did not the ideologues of Serbian aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina demonstrate the same kind of ahistoricity as Ivek's in the joke? Did not Milorad Ekmečić, member of the Academy and professor of historiography, proclaim this aggression to be the continuation of the first Serbian uprising (which, *nota bene*, took place in 1804)? Did not General Ratko Mladić explain the massacre in Srebrenica as the "avenging of Kosovo", applying the same logic and reasoning that Ivek used to justify his shooting of Moshe in the joke? The battle of Kosovo that General Mladić was "avenging" occurred in 1389 and did not involve anyone from Srebrenica. The general could not have cared less about such technical details; he had just learned about the battle of Kosovo and had to avenge it; in order for him to do so he had to find anyone who was not him, or his collective.

General Mladić not only demonstrates the barbaric type of ahistoricity that we recognized in the joke, but also resembles Ivek in his typically industrial perception of the individual. He considers himself utterly interchangeable with any other member of the collective to which he belongs, regardless of the time, place, gender or other minor details that might have some bearing on the life of the collective and especially of the individual; he sees himself as utterly self-contained in belonging to the collective just as an industrial product is utterly self-contained in belonging to a certain model. This self-violence would not be a problem if he did not carry out his concept of identity consequentially at the expense of others. But let us not deceive ourselves: this industrial type of collectivism is not limited to the Balkans and is not the speciality of the "Balkan tribes" to which I have the fortune to belong. Exactly the same kind of logic and industrial type of collectivism is displayed by terrorists who invoke Islam: they believe that they have won over all members of the "Moslem model" to their cause by mere virtue of uttering that "model's" name. And it is precisely this logic and this type of collectivism that is then demonstrated by politicians, policemen and intellectuals in the West, who subject people to police questioning merely because they are Moslems, expecting and even demanding of them to declare themselves on and distance themselves from specific acts of terrorism, only because they are Moslems, like the terrorists who committed the crime.

It is important for me to emphasize here that I am talking about logic, not actions. I in no way wish to equate or even compare the actions of a general who orders the massacre of 7.000 people, a terrorist who kills 3.000 people and a politician who has ordered the police questioning of a Moslem who happens to want to study. No, it would honestly never occur to me to compare such people or actions, and it is precisely out of an aversion to the "terror of nominalism" that

I wish to recall that human beings are real only and to the extent that they are individuals. Of course there is a “small difference” between the fate of the passenger on a downed plane and that of a citizen who is called in for questioning and then goes home; of course there is a “small difference” between 7.000 and 3.000 people killed and of course I cry out with all my heart: “Long live the small difference!” The logic inherent to each of these acts denies the fundamental difference between them because it overlooks the irrefutable individuality of each and every real being; this is the nominalistic logic which fills our spirit with notions, while suppressing images of real beings, suppressing a sense of life and pretending to replace it with arithmetic.

From the nominalist standpoint, from the standpoint, say of infinity or pure notion, these differences are indeed small. According to Islamic learning, the Prophet says that to kill one person unjustly is the same as killing all people, just as to save one person is the same as saving all people. This is indubitably true, murder is murder and whoever commits it is a murderer; arithmetical differences cannot bring into question the type, i.e. the name of the crime. And yet, perhaps it is after all worse to kill a person rather than humankind, because humankind would not leave behind a woman tearing her hair out in grief for its demise or a weeping child who perhaps does not yet know that he is now and ever after an orphan. Here one must not forget, of course, that “humankind” is not the same as “all people”, humankind is a notion whereas all people are a mass, humankind is an abstraction whereas all people are a multitude. The arithmetical difference between one person murdered and two is to me crucial if the other one is me. Viewed from the nominalistic standpoint, even the difference between the questioned student and the passenger on a downed plane is not that important – death is an inalienable attribute of the living person; it is closer to him and more his than his own stomach, more inalienably and more crucially connected to him than his own name. The fact that after questioning the student goes home simply means that at some point he will find himself there where the passenger of the downed plane is waiting for him. The difference between the two is very small and purely technical. I am not at all questioning this truth, which, from the nominalistic standpoint, is quite evident; I am just asking that the student’s viewpoint regarding this small difference also be taken into account.

The truth that reveals itself to us when we look from a realistic point of view, from the standpoint of real life, does not refute the nominalistic truth, it merely supplements it, i.e. it adds to its abstract infinity the indisputable truth of the specific life and body. It is only when we take into account the unbreakable connection between nominalism and realism, when we bear in mind the forest and each individual tree, as the old metaphor teaches us, only then will we be sure of not overlooking the life for the sake of the notion, and of not neglecting the notion either. Then, when we think as literature teaches us to think, that is the highest form of learning because it is the fullest

form of learning. Of all forms of human learning, only literature does not abolish or deny the presence of the notion or idea in the body it observes, only literature can articulate the uniqueness of that body without bringing into question its connection (and, if you like, containment) in the idea or notion, only literature can achieve the full symbolic potential of a body, show all its “notional generality” without bringing into question its uniqueness and specificity. Of all forms of learning, literature alone produces a form which functions like a living body, a form in which both structure and history neither supplement nor clash with each other; literature alone shows that at every moment of his life the individual is everything he has been, everything he is now and everything he will be.

I did not, therefore, compare utterly incompatible acts so as to say that they are similar; rather I wished to show that underlying such different acts is the same logical operation. The differences between some of these acts become even more evident when they are placed on a common footing, but these differences do not bring into question the said common footing, i.e. the “omnipresent” nominalistic logic which by virtue of its own nature reduces the individual to belonging and produces the “industrial image of man”. This logic ever more crucially and ever more fatally moves our spirit and our language farther away from corporeal reality and toward arithmetic - not toward the world of Platonic ideas, not toward the world of archetypes, but toward the plain series of natural numbers and collection of notions that are incapable of having a body. This logic has brought into our language countless words that have no denotation, it tries to reduce the word to serving as a mere bearer of information, it suppresses the body from the language and introduces oblivion of the absolute uniqueness of every living body. This logic and its attendant image of the individual is already clearly present in all spheres of our life. Has not the “industrial notion of man” held sway in the economy where man is no longer really the aim or the purpose but merely the means of labor, i.e. of profit? Has not the feeling that man is really a set of spare organs become so commonplace that the trade in organs is no longer covert and no longer upsets anyone? If this nominalistic epidemic continues to spread at the present rate, perhaps soon we will perceive even ourselves as a given, like those little men on the traffic lights who tell us when we can and cross the street and when we must stop, because we understand, sense and experience the world the way language depicts it.

Modern life offers a myriad of examples for the third logical premise of Ivek’s action: the reduction of all possible forms of a relationship between two identities to a single, hostile form of mutual exclusion, to an “either/or” relationship. One of the best known and unfortunately most relevant is Samuel P. Huntington’s widely commented book *The Clash of Civilizations*. The way in which the “either/or” logic of our joke is consequentially adopted in this book is strikingly: since various cultures exist in the world, and since these

cultures differ among themselves, they must inevitably and necessarily clash. As with Ivek: Moshe is here, I am here; ergo, one of us must go.

Huntington bases his belief in the inevitable clash of different existing cultures on human nature. He says that it is human to hate, that people need enemies to define and motivate themselves. Literally. Would Mr. Huntington have any doubts about his theory if I, as someone who does of course hate certain things and certain people (because it is human to hate), were to swear and give him a dozen examples showing that friends have meant much more to me for my self-determination and self-motivation than enemies? Would it give him cause to doubt if I presented him with a dozen true examples from a dozen people showing that love and friendship motivate and help to define one's own identity much better than enmity and hatred? I do not think so. As Empedocles says, we tend to see and recognize ourselves in the world. At best, my examples of proof might prompt Huntington to wonder if I am a man and to conclude that I am not a normal man.

But let us not dwell on me. The question is this: how is it possible that someone who studies culture can write a book which so simplifies the very being of culture, and does so with such caricatures? Like language, every culture is a blend of the universal and the specific; one side is turned to the universal, the general, the common, and the other is turned to the individual, the specific, and the concrete. The former opens it up to all people and links it up with other cultures, while the latter separates it from other cultures and makes it the spiritual environment of a particular group of people. Like death, which is common to and awaits us all, yet our different cultures prepare us for it in different ways, offering us different images of death and what follows. "Omnes una manes nox", says Horatius; but the stars in that night, which is common to us all, are differently distributed in different parts of the world.

That is why a single nucleus of the universal, the general, is common to all cultures, and that is why the space for cultural overlapping is relatively broad. That, too, is why the clash of cultures is logically impossible, for in that event every culture would be fighting against a part of itself. If there seem to have been times in history when cultures have clashed with each other, for instance during the Crusades, that is only because of our nominalistic simplifications. For, the Crusades were not a clash between Islam and Christianity as cultures, they were a clash of political programs which attached themselves to these cultures. Surely we are not going to seriously debate whether the political program of Pope Urban II was really the equivalent of Christianity, whether it is the equivalent of Christianity to claim, as St. Bernard de Clairvaux did, that the Christian seeks glory for himself in the death of the infidel, whether Catholicism is the equivalent of Christianity (wherein the Eastern Orthodox church and lands did not participate in the Crusades). Just as we should not have to discuss how equivalent the Seljuk Empire is to Islam or the struggle in the army of Sultan Salah al-Dina is to the struggle for faith. If these wars can be linked to cultures at all, if there

is a desire to connect them to cultures at any price, then it can only be done with the “politically prepared” versions of these cultures, with simplifications patched together from individual elements of these cultures and connected into a whole which, of course, is not culture but rather an ideological system. Such ideological systems, patched together out of the elements of a culture that have been extracted from their actual context and reduced to a single, prominent political dimension, are called politically instrumentalized cultures. “Cultures” that are thus prepared and reduced to ideological caricatures, can clash. But then they are no longer cultures because both the one and the other have been deprived of that universal dimension through which they address every individual. And that is why I maintain that when he spoke about the inevitable looming clash of cultures, Mr. Huntington meant, must have meant, the caricature ideological distortion of individual cultures, and not the cultures themselves. In order to arrive at his conclusion, Mr. Huntington had to apply the same operation to cultures that the Ivek of our joke applied to himself and to Moshe: reduce them to political, i.e. mechanical caricatures of themselves.

Mr. Huntington has the ahistorical in common with our Ivek as well. He claims that it is human to hate and sees in this ability to hate the fundamental, underlying characteristic of Homo sapiens. Several centuries of anthropology from the Age of Antiquity, which Plato had already systematized and integrated into a broader philosophical system, some fifteen centuries of Christian anthropology, which recognizes in the human capacity to love the proof of man’s connection with God, innumerable anthropological projects in the modern age - Huntington simply ignores all this and contents himself with his revelation that man is a being of hatred. It is human to hate, ergo conflict between cultures is inevitable. Perhaps Mr. Huntington would rather not ignore all those fine minds, which contemplated man, and all those many centuries during which they did so. But, perfectly in keeping with his logic: it is human to perspire, ergo the Deluge certainly happened.

I confess that even in happier times I would have thought poorly of Mr. Huntington’s book, it would have aroused negative emotions in me; but in better times I would not have examined it at such length, and certainly not in the presence of an audience. This is necessary today, however, because caricature “adaptations” of cultures are emerging all around us, “versions” adapted to a single political program and reduced to a few elements of the original culture, “versions” that might even be able to conceal their caricature-like and vulgar mechanical quality if they managed to produce confrontation with some “enemy” or find a real enemy. Like in a play where a well-constructed conflict can conceal the fact that your characters are unconvincing and poorly motivated, so well-developed characters greatly impede the construction of conflict, indeed make it virtually impossible (think of Chekhov, for example). Conflicts are, of course, possible among these “versions” of culture (which, for reasons that

will always remain unclear to me, we call fundamentalist) because they are not the cultures they depict themselves to be but rather their ideologically processed products.

Obviously, every fundamentalism - Islamic and Jewish, American and Catholic, neo-liberal and communist - proclaims itself to be not only the equivalent of the culture it invokes, but also its only true face and guardian. Obviously, educated people will receive such statements with a questioning mind, because reading and questioning are the first thing one learns in a good school. What remains when we ignore what a political program says about itself and what rival programs say about it, when instead of its intentions and reasoning we look at its affect on the everyday life of society and the individual? Well, what remains is its impact on real life, what remains is the form of time it offers us, what remains, in other words, is its true cultural value. For, it is culture that gives shape to our presence in the world, that shapes our day and our year, that shapes our attitude to the past and to the future. How do those who today proclaim themselves to be the guardians of certain cultures shape our presence in the world?

This can best be seen from “true life” pictures, from details which can have a symbolic value because they reflect the whole. Or would it be more correct to say that I see and understand best from the details of real life because I am a writer, whereas someone with a different, say nominalistic view of the world would see and understand better from a notion, a law or something else? The images that reveal themselves to me, their symmetry, bizarre at one moment and too logical the next, convince me that our guardians of culture tend to misrepresent themselves, regardless of whether they mean to or not. In one picture I see women in Afghanistan during the rule of the Taliban (or in many other societies where Islamic fundamentalists hold sway), women whose bodies are completely covered, reduced to silhouettes, to figures, relegated to the nominalistic environment of pure arithmetic, women who are no more corporeal or concrete than a notion or than the little figure on the traffic light. And all this in the name of the culture that produced *1001 Arabian Nights*, probably the most “feminine” book in world literature, and in the name of Sheherezade, the so-to-speak emblematic female character of that culture. This one picture suffices to make one wonder exactly which Islamic culture, which Islam its self-proclaimed guardians wish to protect. Perhaps they really do represent someone and something, perhaps the world they would shape really would have something to do with Islam, but very little similarity with the Islam that I know, love and feel as my own. Another picture shows the US Justice Department building where drapes cover the statue of the goddess of Justice who is depicted naked from her waist up. It is the US government whose battle cry for the defense of western culture is: “you’re either with us or against us” (again the either/or” logic, again the Ivek of our joke; to hell with both Ivek and his joke). Is the symbolic denial of ancient heritage really the way to defend western culture? Denial of centuries



of sculptural art which depicted the body as it was created in heaven?  
Denial of Justice and all that it connotes?

Let us be clear: I am comparing, not equating, and comparison points to similarities and underlines differences. It shows how much less violence against living beings there is in covering up a sculpture than in forcibly covering up women; it shows how grotesquely comic it is to dress poor Justice who could not even comprehend that she was indecent because she hails from ancient Greece. But it also warns of similarities: in both pictures we see the female body, we see the fabric that covers it and deprives it of its specific details, that reduces it to a figure, a model, a contour. In both pictures we see the breakthrough of nominalism into the real world, the violence of arithmetic against the body, we see how the real body, the real form loses its unique individuality and becomes general like a notion, a number, a symbol. All women in the chador look the same, just as the curtained sculptures of Justice look the same as those of the provincial official. This draws attention to yet another important similarity: at the heart of both acts of covering up is the need to negate, and to stop time, a need characteristic of all eschatological projects and movements. There is no patina on the sculpture, no awareness of the tradition that lends meaning and form to the sculpture, no lines on the faces of the women because there are no faces to start with, no difference between old and young, nothing to indicate the passing of time. There is no time because there are no real forms which show duration because they remember; only we exist - the creators of notions, figures, models - and these notions, figures and models exist.

Goethe said that someone who at the end of his days can look back on his life and recognize in his time on earth a whole, a form, a possible story, can consider himself happy. In other words, a person can consider himself happy if he has managed to reconcile and balance out the nominalistic and the realistic, structure and history, if he has lived as if writing good literature. Delivered to the theory of arithmetic like this, can we hope for the happiness Goethe speaks of? I cannot know the answer, it all depends on whether or not we want to save our cultures from their fundamentalist "guardians". And whether or not we will have enough good literature. For, if anything can save us from arithmetic's penetration into this world of real forms, then it is literature, truly good literature. The kind of literature that always knows that "Die Rose is ohnne warum; sie bluhet weil sie bluhet" (Angelus Silesius).

Translated by Christina Pribichevich Zoric