

Ferida Duraković

WRITING IN AND BEYOND THE CITY

For the Casablanca encounter, April 2009

“Will fiction and poetry [have to] give up their love affair with the *polis*?” was one question in the invitation letter of this meeting. If, according to Zvonimir Radeljkovic, “God created the village and the Devil created the city”, there is no chance at all that writers will give up this appealing idea – that of the City –if for no other reason then because it is the “politically incorrect” option: if the city was created by the devil, that means it is more interesting, more challenging, more artistically useful! Is that not so, my fellow writers?

I come from Sarajevo, Bosnia. When I say ‘Sarajevo, Bosnia,’ I know your imagination will automatically produce images of a futuristic horror in a besieged city; thousands of dead and wounded civilians, more than 1,600 killed children, an image of the “Balkanischer Inn”, full of hatred for/of Others; the slaughterhouse of Western Balkans, a place where the uncivilized and untamed tribes tapped into their ancient hatreds, of the sort decent people would be ashamed of, etc., etc...

And that was indeed so it was. I was there. I am the witness of that. And now and here I also say: believe me, it can happen anywhere in this world, to any city in this world! If it happened in New York, do not ever think that this can never happen in your city as well. Every truth has not one but two, three, four.... faces; nothing is just black or just white: we all live in the various grey zones between the two.

The 20th century began in Sarajevo, with a terrorist act-- that of the assassination of the Grand Duke Ferdinand of Austria. The 20th century history, i.e. the modern or post-modern history of the world, closed its last bloody page in Sarajevo... to achieve what? To open the 21st century with the bloody history of New York and 9/11!

After the war I went through, after Sarajevo, and after New York, the notion of the City became more vulnerable, more unsafe and therefore more useful for manipulation. The Agora – the central element of the City, the Souk Ukaz – is no longer what we imagined it to be: the place where cultures and ideas are exchanged. Nowadays the city is a global war zone, filled with global trade, heavy guns and drugs – with no r&r at all. Charles Baudelaire, a poet of the City, said: “in the labyrinths of the City even Horror has its own charm”. In Borges, cities are connected “not by love but by fear”.

In 1993, in the middle of the horror of the besieged Sarajevo, I wrote an essay titled “Death in Sarajevo”, from which I quote:

Yes: “Death is what you eat, death is what you drink...” said the great poet Tin Ujević. But those were the words of Tin the Great, rather than, for instance, those of Mr. Aschenbach – oh, how irretrievably distant *Death in Venice* seems now! One of my absolutely most favorite books has failed me. As have many others. But other books have come up from behind: *The Plague* by Camus, or *The October in the Wagon* by Marina Tsvetayeva. Mordor from *The Lord of the Rings* has come to life (...) As for myself – I have always been terrified by those muddy grave pits we have. Let alone of the funerals in the heavy Sarajevo rain or sleet, when life on earth is hard enough—no imagining how it must be under it. Everything here has become its own counter-fact...

Here, you are not an individual, a single and exceptional being, free from harm. Here you die humiliated, in a crowd, en masse, with other people, queuing for bread, queuing before a death squad, queuing for being raped, while walking around city in search for food (for death!), in a movement begun but never completed, in a bed that is not a death-bed but suddenly becomes one, in the air that you breathe in and then breathe out for the last time. Here, you are just one out of a daily average of ten killed and forty wounded, without a name or personal history, without anything particular, anything of your own, or any right to your own death... You are just another corpse which has to be buried quickly in mud in a shallow and hastily dug grave, unwashed, bloody, mutilated, in a coffin made from furniture boards, one in a pile of corpses filling mortuaries and hospital corridors. You are extinguished in a hurry, mourned in a hurry by a few of your shocked relatives and friends (and sometimes only by neighbors), you leave without or with a minimum of rites (..) And all this is performed with a certain feeling of shame, as if the dead were also ashamed to leave this world so suddenly and so unprepared, and those who bury them are also ashamed since they can hardly wait for it all to be over so that they can run back home, to shed a few tears, sincerely and in privacy of their desolated homes, over the photographs of the deceased (...)

In Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, one of the inquisitors, when asked what is to be done with the citizens of a town where the heresy of differing opinion has prevailed, replies, "Kill them all, and God will recognize among them those who belong to Him." I have a terrible urge and determination to survive all this and to die as a human being. When the time comes, I want my death to be modest, ordinary, decent, mine, private, without the presence of foreign reporters, and without blood. And I do not want to be buried at the soccer stadium... And God will know if I belong to Him anyway, even if I do not get killed in Sarajevo under siege.

At the same time, Pascal Bruckner in his text about Sarajevo asks: "How can it be possible that in the Belgrade parks people happily play chess while Sarajevo, a couple of hours away, is being destroyed?"

It was possible. And after 9/11 anything is possible. I know it today, as my late Father knew it after the second World War. It is possible to survive the horror and to talk about it calmly and distantly. It is possible to shout loudly about what you know happens in wars and besieged cities without anyone actually hearing a word of it.

But God will know who among us belongs to Him.

Today, therefore, I want to proclaim a new motto: the City is a lie, the slum is the truth! But this statement belongs to some other meeting, some other Souk Ukaz, which ought to be called "The world is no longer a global village, nor a global city; the world is a global slum". Long live the slums of Humankind – they are the Truth of cities, for they are not decorated by fine arts, or any other arts, except by the art of surviving the day.

Sarajevo, April 2009