

1985

*Bacač kamena* (The Stone Hurler), selected poems

1987

The Forum magazine published Šoljan's play *Bard* (The Bard), staged in the Croatian National Theater by Tomislav Radić in 1987.

1987

Šoljan's *Izabrana djela* (Selected Works) published in two books in the *Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti* edition (The Five Centuries of Croatian Literature, volumes 174/1-ID), selected by Branimir Donat.

1991

Grafički zavod Hrvatske started publishing *Izabrana djela Antuna Šoljana* (Selected Works of Antun Šoljan). The first and only series comprised four titles: *The Port*, *The Second People on the Moon*, *Mjesto uz prijestol* (A Place by the Throne) and *Sloboda čitanja* (Freedom of Reading). In the difficult wartime conditions, the publisher went into liquidation. For this gap to be filled, we will have to wait for peace and a more clearly defined Croatian cultural policy.

1992

Durieux published a collection of poems called *Prigovori* (Objections). Publication of a book of articles, *Prošlo nesvršeno vrijeme* (Past Unfinished Time).

1993

Although he had long suffered from a very serious illness and had undergone a number of major operations, it was quite unexpected when Antun Šoljan died on July 9 in consequence of a cold.

Branimir Donat

# A Brief Note Instead of Autobiography

Antun Šoljan

The Romantics, like Keats, believed that «a Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory». Our modern, science-oriented age believes that a man's life is valuable in itself, as a sum of exact facts that could some day, through a careful statistical procedure, be reduced to a single significant and perhaps ultimate Fact.

To me, who am either too modest or too cynical to discern any allegory in my insignificant life, except perhaps in merely biogenetic terms (which, of course, could be hardly expected to fill one with a sense of romantic pride), and seeing in the facts of my short life only a hopelessly confused jumble of illogical data that cannot be filed according to any system of values, to me, then, it seems that the autobiography of a writer can only be read from the same viewpoint and judged by the same criteria as his fiction.

We read autobiographies of writers to see how the experts in fabrication fabricate

their own lives. Being writers, we select the facts from our own lives in the same way we select facts from life in general when writing our own books. This does not necessarily make an autobiography false; just as a fabricated story can be true, so can an autobiography — if it has been fabricated skilfully.

Otherwise, everything else from our lives that we could divulge to our fellowmen is nothing but the material for a *chronique scandaleuse* or for pedantic historians of literature. I certainly see no reason why my personal digestive problems should be more important to anyone than the obstinate constipation that for years troubled my late aunt, who finally died of it, and who in any case dismissed all my literary attempts — as well as, presumably, Shakespeare's — as so much fooling around.

Which sometimes, at some particularly difficult and self-critical moments in my life, I tend to think myself.



# m DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN 0

At such moments I also think that I would gladly give everything I have already written for a single book which I have yet to write.

The true biography of a writer is his spiritual biography — his works. The reference points connecting the spiritual biography with the real one are so elusive that each reconstruction of them is also nothing but fiction, better or poorer literature. When there are conspicuous coincidences between the biography and the works, we must always allow the possibility that we ourselves have later superimposed such an interpretation over the facts.

What I sometimes find frightening, however, in this interrelation between my personal life and things I write about in my books, is the possibility that one actually writes one's own biography in advance.

I shall tell here what happened to me once: some fifteen years ago I wrote a poem, *The Stonethrower*, which was included in many anthologies of poetry. Many years after writing this poem, which is about herons on a river bank, about throwing stones at them and about growing old, I happened to find myself

standing with my friend Slamnig on the bank of an identical river in an almost identical landscape with the same herons — it was hard to believe that herons still inhabited such an industrialized landscape — and talking about something completely irrelevant, we suddenly saw that, randomly and without any conscious attempt to hit or frighten them away, we were throwing stones at those herons. My friend said: »If anyone were to see this scene, they would never believe that this had not happened before you wrote the poem«. And I myself, although I knew it was after, deep down in my heart was no longer sure what came first.

And this: I wrote a novel called *A Brief Excursion* which tells about Istria and the medieval frescoes which can still be seen on the walls of old churches in that region. Two or three years later, I happened to go on an excursion with a group of young art historians who most certainly never read my novel and I suddenly found myself literally visiting places described in my book, places which I never laid eyes on before nor thought they could exist in pre-

cisely this shape anywhere else but in my novel.

I was by no means cheered by this eerie experience, but rather filled with apprehension: who knows what absurd or monstrous thing will come out of my pen next, and then shall I really have to live in that kind of world?

Writing his works, a writer, naturally, has many occasions to be apprehensive about much more concrete things. Sometimes in his books he does indeed foretell the subsequent course of his destiny in this merciless world which can be worse than the most monstrous of imaginations.

And then again, from the beginning of the world writing may have been nothing else but an attempt to overcome fear — fear of the gods, fear of man's impotence in the face of his fate. This is perhaps the sacred duty of literature: to help man bear his fate with human dignity without closing his eyes to the truth, no matter how terrible it may be.

And nothing is more terrible than a short date in parentheses at the end of the biographical note — the date of one's own death.





## *The Metaphysical Ideal and the Writer of the Small Nation*

**Antun Šoljan**

**E**very writer, I believe, deals almost always and almost exclusively with concrete material, the objective correlative of the unattainable, and is consequently unhappy about embarking upon abstract or metaphysical speculation. His habits of work, creative experience and entire attitude equip the writer only poorly, if at all, for such speculation. Many great writers have been thoroughly second-rate philosophers, and many great philosophers have been poor writers, or no writers at all.

However, the avoidance of pure speculation does not mean that every writer does not have »a philosophy of his own« or even his own metaphysics. The working value, if we can so christen it, of this is not diminished by its being indefensible as a logical system, or by being occa-

sionally composed of just one firm principle: a blind trust in some absolute value of literature.

I am aware that for the willful amateur there are many dangers lying hidden in this kind of discussion. Nevertheless, I am compelled here, in the name of that blind trust that I referred to, to introduce into the argument a highly abstract and unverified metaphysical category: that of the *common ideal of all the writers of the world*.

Put baldly like this, the notion seems, of course, excessively sentimental, and is bound to be obnoxious to a refined ear. What is more, I am unable to offer any evidence for the existence of this ideal other than my own belief in it. It gleams through this belief from some far off and not entirely defined literary Empyrean. Although it cannot be de-

fined in its logical and actual coordinates, I would state — to the extent that such a statement is worth anything — that the ideal is closer and more tangible to the writer than many others that are more frequently and facilely proclaimed.

When I talk here of writers, I do not have in mind of course a mere professional designation but good writers, pioneers in the »unexplored regions of the imagination«. If all such writers have anything at all in common, anything that binds them in one invisible brotherhood, that sets them apart as a special breed, then it is, when we have settled all the countless and often insuperable differences among them, precisely such a nameless ideal as this: a metaphysical, well-nigh mystical ideal, beyond a doubt cosmopolitan, an ideal to which they aspire, though

# m DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN o



by different roads and from different reasons, towards which in their different ways they feel a single ultimate responsibility.

This is not to say, naturally, that all writers aspire or should aspire, to the same kind of prescribed »ideal formula« of literature, or that there is any kind of recipe to define their paths and methods for them (or ideology, when it comes down to it). The ideal we are talking of embraces in a certain way all their aspirations, capacities, creations, ideologies, in all their endless versatility and diversity. How much we are entitled to identify this ideal with beauty, goodness, truth, the divine, pure art and other equally undefined categories is a question, of course, that is also subject to speculation.

But we emphasize our distinct impression that the writers of the world, without regard to the character of the speculation used in this respect, without regard to all the linguistic, geographical, racial and goodness knows what other differences, do feel a certain shared connection, a kinship, they belong to one international fraternity.

This feeling of kinship and brotherhood is founded partly upon the prerequisites of the profession, partly on the similarity of the destinies of writers in all corners of the globe, partly on the contemporary feeling that the entire literature of the civilized world, the heritage today of all writers, is a heritage that all have an equal right to draw upon, irrespective of what nation they belong to. But it surely is also partially founded upon the awareness of that one shared mystic ideal that guides our every inspiration, that compels our inquiries, that offers us common measures of value, and that finally constrains us with a collective and an individual responsibility.

The responsibility of every writer, whether he will or no, whether he is aware of it or not, is due before and above all else to that ideal, which is in spite of all its esoteric unclarity as tangible for every writer as tomorrow's lunch. It is true that the writer can betray the ideal and the responsibility for the love of tomorrow's

# m DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN o

lunch or for some other more noble cause, but in doing so he will betray himself as a writer. As long as a writer is really a writer, and not a politician or moralist, or machine for the production of entertaining or instructive texts, every stroke of his pen is directed towards this ideal, directly or indirectly. As soon as this is not the case, in the depths of his soul every writer knows (and has often known) dissatisfaction with himself and his pen.

If we now quit the region of metaphysical speculation, we shall see that the concrete individual writer is bound by many other limitations, ideals and responsibilities: above all else by his own language, and then by the literary tradition in which he was raised, the historical and social situation of the milieu he lives in, the taste and requirements of the public for which he writes, and a thousand other things that we can put down more or less to the human community to which he belongs. Responsibility to the metaphysical ideal of which we spoke in no way relieves him of responsibility to these and many other elements of his human and literary being. This whole complex of responsibilities is the fruit of the writer's life and work within the specific structure of the human community in which he is placed, and is called, by way of distinguishing it from his responsibility to the first ideal, »national«.

As can be seen, we have no desire in the slightest to mystify the concept of the national: by this concept we simply understand the set of elements from the historical to the individual that make a human community into a distinct unit. Similarly, it would be undesirable for our introduction of the notion of responsibility to be understood in some vulgar sense or to be identified with *engagement* or the *social directive* — in the way that we have heard about these things for the last half a century.

*Engagement and the social directive* are notions so heavily burdened with the recent past that they have lost, it seems, every meaning except the vulgar: engagement as an es-

pousing of some political party (frequently even of just the one party) and of some more or less practical aims, and the social directive as organized pressure upon the writer to propagate certain ideas or undertakings. Here, responsibility may quite clearly simply be reduced to responsibility to the nearest arm of the party or the government.

In our understanding, every good literature advocate, is engaged on behalf of, those things that good literature has always advocated; and every good literature has always fulfilled some social directive or other if only because the writer was a genuine member of a certain society or milieu, and felt, like every other citizen, a responsibility towards the society. Without one and the other, literature would hardly have anything to say.

But both one and the other can be and are only the result of the writer's talent and power, and in no way of his political convictions, nor of his evaluation of the current needs of society, and certainly nor in the least the result of methodical coercion. If someone is not a good writer, it is completely a matter of indifference to us whether he is engaged. If he is a good writer, and if we find that he »struggles« for something, then this engagement of his is inseparable from his work, is an integral component of his art; we have no reason to separate it out, as we do not separate other elements out either. Every writerly responsibility and obligation towards such engagement is pointless and barren in the absence of a responsibility towards the metaphysical ideal of literature. Any engagement that is void of this ideal may be and almost always is political and literary dilettantism.

To continue with our discussion, we ought to ask whether those two ideals that we have called the cosmopolitan and the national are not in opposition. Doesn't one get in the way of the other, as their very names would suggest? Don't they cancel each other out? Do they not require from the writer that he should choose either one or the other? Our answer to all these questions is: no.

Not only do these ideals not conflict with each other, but they partially coincide, and partially complement and confirm each other.

The writer's double responsibility can be expressed very simply: the writer is at the same time a cosmopolitan and an inseparable part of his own nation. His concrete and particular ideals, bequeathed to him by his national being, are an integral part of the metaphysical and general ideal that belongs to all the writers of the world. Only as an authentic part of his own national literature can the writer make any kind of contribution to world literature. Only as a genuine part of the world literary matrix does the writer contribute something to the literature of his own nation. The writer, in conclusion, is one of those elements through which the nation as an independent and particular unit is enrolled in the world family.

And so, in a paradoxical way, the more national a writer is, the more responsive he is to his own particular tradition and to his particular assignments, the more cosmopolitan he is. The more he is as a writer a citizen of the world, the more clearly and with more truly literary responsibility he will see the problems of his homeland in the narrow sense. In the foreword to the *Anthology of Croatian Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, called *A Muddy-Winged Icarus*, I attempted to draw attention to this dualism with concrete examples from old Croatian poetry in Dubrovnik and Dalmatia, and with the example of the Croatian Modern movement.

In particular historical conditions there may of course be a tragic discrepancy in this dualism. However it can be predicted with a fair degree of certainty that in every such given case the discrepancy will be seen to have arisen as a result of pressure from outside forces, and is not the result of internal division or the opposition of one and the other aspiration. A literary crisis of this kind is as a matter of course the result of a crisis into which a given society, or a part of it, has fallen. In Croatian literature, for example, instances of

# **m** DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN **o**

such a discrepancy or disproportion can be seen with great clarity in the period of the Illyrian movement, when the national directive threw everything else into the shade, or in the period 1945-52, when the political directive was dominant.

While we observe the writer in this way in the concentric circles of his world: above all in the circle of his generation and immediate moment, then in the circle of his nation and national literature, history and cultural tradition, and in the end in the circle of the entire literature of the world of his time, it might seem that we are denying the role of the individual talent. There is nothing more erroneous. In every one of these circles the writer shows one face after another, like the facets of a jewel. Every one of these faces, insofar as they are at all diverse, insofar as they are not the same face, is equally essential and evident at each moment of his creativity, equally constitutive of his individuality, and consequently plays an equal part in his work.

Responsibility towards the nation is not the responsibility of a mercenary towards an employer, but, as it were, an inherent and essential part of the individual talent. Responsibility, both artistic and human, towards the nation, is felt by the artist immediately, in the same way as towards himself, towards his own existence. The very language of a nation obliges the writer who makes use of it to respect the specificity of the entire history, culture, literature, and the whole social situation, of the given human community.

Although the modern age affords many examples of the migration of writers, it is difficult to find a concrete case, especially of any significant writer, in which this kind of responsibility does not have a crucial role. We can frequently ascertain that migration does not only not entail a loss of responsibility but brings a doubled sense of responsibility to the new country. As an example I might adduce a writer who more than most has the right to bear the insignia of the cosmopolitan, Vladimir Nabokov, who without any doubt has lost not a drop of loyalty

and responsibility towards the Russian nation and its literature, from which he arose, and similarly without a doubt belongs with full responsibility to America, its literature and language.

It is not to be doubted that this kind of responsibility and belongingness to a nation is for a writer both a well of inspiration and an insuperable barrier, both wings and ballast, Antaeus' footing and quick-sand. In any case, this can be said of other marks of humanity that enhance him: every human virtue is also a defect, a blessing and a pitfall.

But for the birth and creation of a powerfully creative personality individual talent alone is not enough. It is as if the whole spiritual inheritance of a community were crystallizing in such an individual, a community that concentrates all its powers to give him birth. Only through this birth does a man gain his passport to the world community. Nobody can become a Shakespeare all by himself. Combining in himself the potentials of the community that created him, the writer can give something to the world, as an individual. It is only by belonging to his own nation that an author has the right to the metaphysical cosmopolitan ideal.

Considering now, against the background of these observations, the writer of the small nation, we should state at once that everything we have so far said applies to him too, just as to his more fortunate fellows, and that his nation's being smaller does not mean that his responsibility is the less. The very phrase »writer of small nation« carries somewhat tragic connotations, and if belongingness and responsibility to a nation are both blessing and pitfall, then the blessing is for him typically smaller, and the pitfall more dangerous, the wings are weaker and the ballast is heavier.

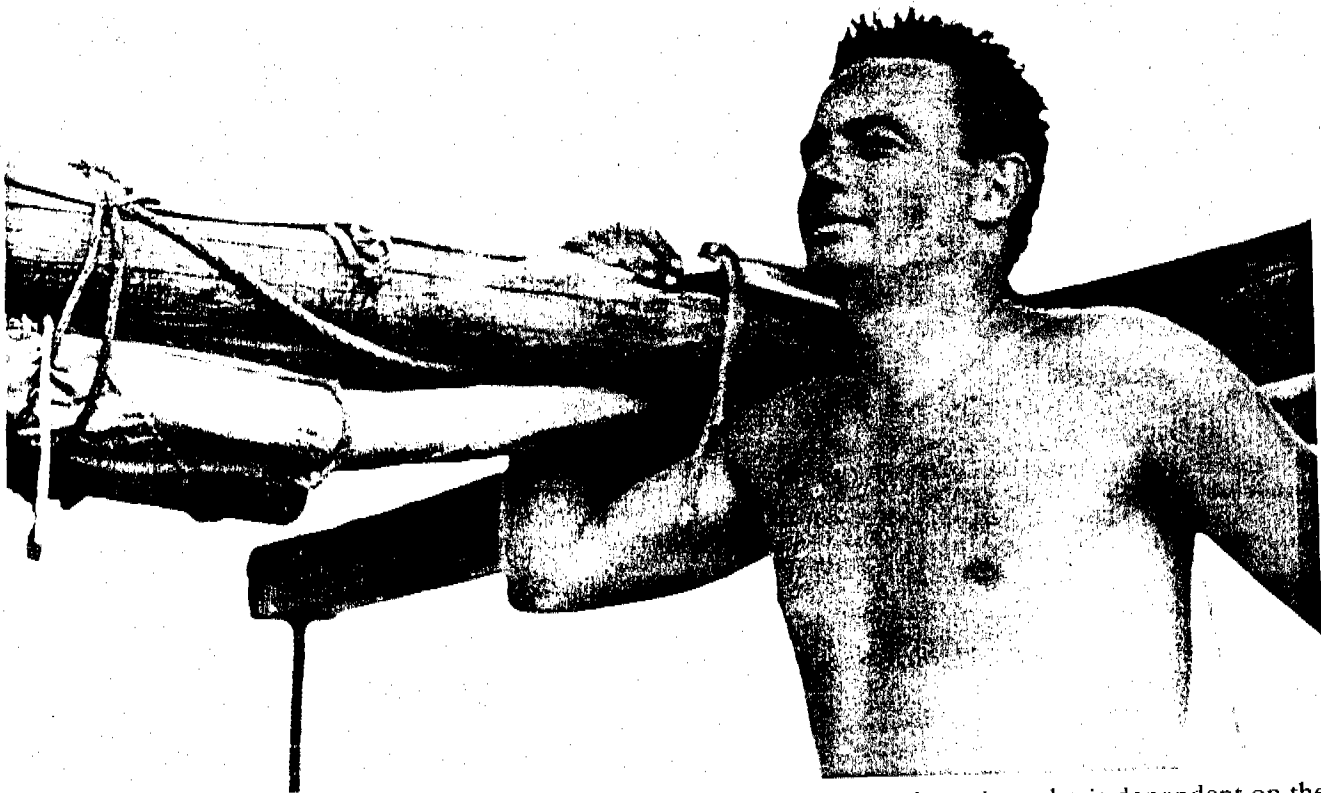
Many of the reasons for the specificity of his fate will be clear to all of us: first of all there is the limitation of the language, which is but poorly known outside the confines of the country. Then there is the absence of a cultural sphere in which his na-

tion, and thus literature too, would play a more significant role. The small country, furthermore, usually does not possess sufficiently strong financial and promotional machinery for the development of an internal cultural sphere, and thus neither of a reading public. Within the narrow framework of national literature, by which measurements are perforce made, the writer has neither competition enough to stimulate him nor a reading public refined enough to follow his more esoteric endeavours. In addition, the small nation is usually within the cultural sphere of some stronger neighbour, and is exposed to the pressure of imports from outside and a craze for the foreign from inside. Because of the numerically limited and non-stratified public, the scale of values is simplified and easily becomes petrified, usually oscillating between two extremes: total neglect or uncritical and megalomaniac apology. This list could be extended without end.

It is of course clear that within the confines of this article we can neither be exhaustive nor pretend to give any kind of useful generalisations. We shall merely consider in a little more detail certain phenomena that seem both important and not entirely self-evident.

We all, for example, know that a writer from a small country can not have a numerous audience. Accordingly, we also know that such a writer will find it much more difficult to make his living from the sale of his works on the market than a writer with a large audience. A writer from a small nation must then rely upon other sources of income: above all, on some every-day occupation, and also upon kindred literary occupations (translations, journalism, films) and second-order literary tasks (reviewing, editing, revising other people's texts). It is quite clear that every such occupation means a dissipation of energy, a detour, regularly to the detriment of writing.

It might be observed with justice that the great majority of writers in the world, with the exception of the



most successful, have to resort to the same or similar ways of earning a living. However, there is here one great difference: the writer from the small country has very little or no chance of making his way by any means whatsoever into the rank of writers who do not have to. With very few exceptions, the writer from the small nation, whatever his talent and capabilities, has no chance of achieving financial independence through his own works. Every writer who composes for a large audience has this chance with every single thing he writes.

What is more important, however, is that the market available to the writer of the small nation is so puny that it can not only not ensure him a living, but can not even guarantee him the ability to publish independently. On a purely commercial basis, such a market can publish only trash, the classics or extremely well-known authors who are naturally either foreign writers or very rare birds. The publication of most literary works, in very small editions, must then be underwritten from other sources. This is usually done by the state or by various branches

of its machinery, which charges it against either propaganda or cultural decoration. The state does this directly or indirectly, through subsidizing either the writer himself (the least frequent mode), or the publisher, or the purchaser (libraries most often), or any other institution connected with books.

However much in practice this kind of subsidy can be highly elastic and stimulatory, and as a necessary evil really be a minimum evil, yet the evil remains at the very root of the need for subsidy: for this will automatically limit the writer's independence. And if this is done only in the smallest measure, even with a deal of understanding for the needs of literature, the feeling of incomplete freedom is in itself quite fatal to the writer, especially if accompanied by an apprehension that the whole machinery of subsidy can at any time be perverted into a total limitation of freedom and turned against the writer.

A feeling of dependence will certainly affect the character of the writer's works. If we can now consider a simplified scale of the writer's choices in such a situation, we shall see that

the writer who is dependent on the machinery of the state must opt for one of two possible courses, with cases that pass clear between these extremes being glaring exceptions: on the one hand, resisting all limitations, he can choose to be a martyr and a pauper, or, in the last resort, to keep quiet and choose another occupation; or on the other hand to become a state monument, a paid decoration, a writer for school curricula and ceremonial occasions. It is very rare, although theoretically possible, that an author can emerge as a writer and as a human being within these boundaries.

Another important difference, which is usually overlooked, inheres in the fact that the writer from a small country is too many things at the same time. In a big country a writer is accepted as a writer — the burden he and his work, with all various aspects and consequences of that work, constitute is typically far smaller.

The smaller a country is, the greater the burden. A writer is not just a writer, he is a state investment, a political coin, a torchbearer of nationality, a disseminator of literacy, an



# m DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN 0

educator — all these things are expected of him, demanded even, often without any respect to the kind and character of his talent and his capacities, not to speak of his inclinations.

In this way the role of a writer in a small country is at once greater and smaller; greater in a national and social sense, and smaller in an artistic. The pressure on him to play out his role is often very strong: as a writer and as a man he is always exposed to what is called »negative attention«. Here too he has no chance, as his fellow writers from bigger milieux do have, of liberating himself from such pressure, for the pressure and the negative attention keep pace with the growth of the writer's significance and popularity in his own surroundings.

Since a small nation has even fewer important writers than would necessarily follow from numerical ratios, the writer, and this also falls within the context of negative attention, has to submit if not to persecution then to being put on a pedestal. During his lifetime he is often the subject of uncritical admiration, a national monument, a political asset, which is for a healthy literary atmosphere and a vital, critical, spiritual life about as deadly as when a talented and accomplished writer is during his lifetime repressed, unrecognized and consigned to literary history.

At the end we might mention a psychological detail that is not perhaps without significance. Every writer, as we have said, feels he belongs to the world fraternity of writers, which means that it is easy for us to understand a situation in which a writer might feel closer to some writer of another nation, who is developing the same ideas and procedures as himself, than to a fellow-writer in his own immediate surroundings. Nevertheless, although to belong to the cosmopolitan fraternity is a matter of spiritual predilection and personal feeling, there are in this brotherhood matters that are thoroughly material, and since these matters are shaped by big-nation writers, it often turns out that the brotherhood

has less reciprocity than it ought to have.

This international brotherhood, for example, establishes an unwritten but closely defined scale of world values at any given moment. Measuring himself according to the criteria by which this unwritten scale is framed the writer from the small country might well decide that he is a better writer than many of his fellow-writers from bigger countries who are however placed much higher on this international stock-exchange. But his opinion, or the opinion of his milieu, however accurate it might be, will seldom be accepted, just as his worth will hardly find ready recognition as an international currency.

All this, along with countless other things, will create a feeling of injustice in the writer from the small nation: the injustice of being born in a small nation and of having settled on his fate as a writer just there. In modern times, we are witnesses to a fantastic intellectual migration of technical talent. The writer is by the very nature of this work save for rare examples barred from this migration. In this sense, he is like a peasant, bound to the earth. Becoming a writer, he is sentenced to his own country, not only for life, but after his death as well.

Although the writer's love for this country may be limitless, his responsibility towards the nation self-abnegating, however much he may place the metaphysical ideal above petty personal injustices, still, at the bot-

tom of his soul, there remains a bitter and unhealthy feeling of injustice. Naturally, this feeling, like all other things, can be *sublimated* and take the form of a divine injustice; and yet it is more commonly the case, with smaller format writers, of less personal power, that this feeling of injustice is *substituted* for a sense of divine injustice, with the war against the gods being reduced to small local skirmishes with the authorities or the illiterate and ignorant milieu.

The feeling of injustice can gnaw at the root of a man, like a worm. Worms of course gnaw at all of us, and writers too, whether they belong to great or small nations, but the writer of the small nation has a worm or two more.

It hardly needs mentioning that the writer of a small nation, like the nation itself, will not have smallness counted as a mitigation. In the face of the metaphysical and cosmopolitan ideals, and of the drawing together of the world, we are all equal; the yardsticks to which we must submit are not, it must be admitted, exact, but are, precisely because of this, absolute. We are condemned to aspire towards this absolute with the whole of our human baggage. That some have more and others less of this baggage is just a part of that divine injustice that is anyway instinct in the whole of this unrealizable aspiration.

(1969)

Translated by  
Graham McMaster

