

ERRI DE LUCA

Europe: The Way I See It

Translated from Italian by Jim Hicks

TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY incited me to commit literature. No other literary form could render the century that killed, imprisoned, and emigrated more massively than any other moment in human history.

Poetry alone was able to answer the question *Can you describe this?*

Anna Akhmatova was asked that question. And she was up to the challenge, rising to an unprompted, impromptu truth.

During the fifties, in a city then called Leningrad, in line on the sidewalk standing before the barred entrance to a prison: these are the conditions necessary for such a question.

More details: it is winter, and a column of family members waits hours for fortune or misfortune in response to their petition to visit.

A woman standing stiffly in line finds out that behind her someone has recognized a poet.

The poet stands there, not to bear witness, but because her own son is locked up inside the bars.

You get put inside the bars, not behind them. Like being between the jaws of a vise.

The frozen woman might never have read any Akhmatova, but she defines what makes someone a poet: the ability to extract words from ice.

Some parts of the world I've visited still have quarriers bringing block ice to market. The woman couldn't care less about that: the existence of the poor is managed through all sorts of bizarre trades—even the larvae of cockroaches get brought to market.

Thus, a poet: to her one can ask the question that true poetry has been able to answer since before Homer was born.

Can you describe this?

Anna answered with the *¡Ole!* of a *torero* slipping his *espada en la cruz*, the point where the bull's shoulder blades cross the spine. Perfection: in the *cruz*.

Before uttering another syllable, Anna answers: *I can*.

Through her voice poetry takes up the charge given by a woman standing stiffly and firmly in line.

From that moment every reader can learn that at the summit of all literature stands its peak, in verse.

I can: not a will to power, a willingness to serve, to sacrifice. Anna had taught her son that freedom is peril. Now he pays in isolation, for having learned from her, for having obeyed her.

It may seem strange, but that's how it is: freedom doesn't depend on a choice, it comes from inexorable obedience to a commandment.

"Necessity is a sacred storm / that does not listen to human prayer." Hölderlin sees poetry as a tattoo etched by coercion, by the Greek goddess Ananke.

For that reason during the twentieth century the names of poets were heard in the roll call of prisons, concentration camps, and exiles.

I read haphazardly, the only order suitable for readers. Systematizers don't want to read, they want to have read already.

I listened to Lorca on vinyl, cut by an actor's voice that seared it into my ears.

Back then you could buy records without music; the words were enough.

My father bought them; in the evening, he would recite the verses by heart together with the record.

From Lorca, backed up against a wall and shot, I remember only a single nocturnal line: "The streetlights went dark, and the crickets flared up."

In the dark our hearing opens wider.

At night I've climbed boundless, high altitude slopes by the light of headlamps. I know the sound of footsteps sticking spikes in the snow-pack, moving at the interior rhythm of the heart and breath.

I know there is no silence. In such hours, your hearing senses what is very near and what is far.

The twentieth century's poets beat their syllables out at a climber's pace.

I read the fifteen psalms called Ma'aloith, for the ascent of pilgrimages toward the heights of Jerusalem. "We were like those who dreamed," yet immersed in a vigil, intent on the enterprise of breathing out the verses, by syllables, according to the rhythm of the steps moving forward.

The twentieth century's poets went for a climb, at least those who didn't stay sealed up in their houses, weeping while History with a capital "H" razed the forests, sending chips flying.

There are tears, and then there are tears. In Russian, those that are wasted are *lishniy*, superfluous. Not so the prodigious tear that fell from the snuffle of Fleming over the bacteria in a petri dish.

Private Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote the opposite of tears, one night when he found himself next to the body of a dead comrade. He began writing letters full of love, declaring in his final lines, "I've never been / so bound to life."

THUS HAS BEEN the poet, one who transformed even a massacre in song.

I have wanted to rummage through the ashes of a European language, a tongue that has been burned and buried, in order to prize from it the Yiddish song of Yitshak Katzenelson.

"It is good that there is no God, even if it's bad enough without him.

If he did exist, it would be even worse. Both God and Ulica Miła, what a couple!"

In the caulk-tight perimeter of the Wohnung Bezirk, the residential district (a perfect falsification of the word "ghetto"), a people numbering tens of thousands were stuffed into housing on Ulica Miła in Warsaw. It was the kettle, the *kesl*, during the summer of 1942, where the only piles of flesh were human, waiting to board the cattle cars.

"This city is the cauldron and we are the flesh," Ezekiel had already prophesied.

I needed Yitshak Katzenelson in order to arrive at the apex of the verb "describe."

From that point on I've known that nothing is indescribable. Poetry has learned to say it all, including what can't even be imagined.

From that point on I've known that the teachings of the new Europe were born from ashes and ruin, just as penicillin was born from a culture of bacteria. I was born and raised in a Europe that has been antibiotic against war.

FROM THE EXERCISE of reading I know there are no borders. I first learned this truth from birds, and mammals, from fish and flowers, then I practiced what I'd learned while mountain climbing, crossing those imaginary and insignificant borderlines.

I continued and confirmed this practice as a reader, where with no passport I entered the cities of Europe—with pages as my precise, economical means of transport.

Even before an astute, clairvoyant coalition wrote the constitution for a new Europe, immunized against war, I had already grown used to visiting the continent from my room in the backstreets of Napoli.

I grew up in the twentieth century's most shattered territory. Outside the window of my city, a volcano smoked a peace pipe above the most heavily bombed inhabited area in Italy. In the competition to destroy, the fascists lost due to manifest inferiority. My father, the son of an American girl, was finally able to read books from that nation stretched out between two oceans.

Europa—thanks to the *liceo classico*, I learned the name of my part of the world from ancient Greek. That language is a dictionary for those who travel back to the source of names, the biography of words.

Europa—terra firma, according to Hesiod, Homer, Herodotus, and Pindar. The debt owed to Greece for the insemination of its vocabulary in the world's languages has been turned upside down, ironically and tragically, with the bookkeeping of a loan shark, waged by the European Union against its principal supplier of vocabulary.

Greece has never claimed its patent, permitting free plundering from its immense fountain of words.

What other nation, possessing such a precious source, would let just anyone draw from it, without asserting its copyright?

Who knows what would happen if Greece took back those words, long used by the truckload in all the world's dictionaries?

A similar appropriation today is found in certain industries that impose patents on wheat, corn, and other grains. As if they had created them, rather than the art of farmers across the planet over thousands of years, as they transmitted their advances, passing them from hand to hand.

For me the fiscal debt imposed on the Greek people is a source of sorrow: I accuse the European Union, finding it guilty of ungrateful imbalance.

WHILE LOOKING UP the word *Europa* in my Greek dictionary, I find the word *euporia*, ease of passage.

Europe is *euporia*, a freedom to circulate that the young these days take advantage of readily, never thinking twice about it.

Europe is their thing: the property of kids who need history books to learn what internal borders are, what barriers between neighboring peoples can mean.

My sorrow has since been intensified by the massive numbers of haphazard hindrances, barriers, and rejections all along the seaways.

Mediterranean-born, I feel the chemical alteration caused by its waves, adding centimeters to my growth.

If a sample of the sea were taken and analyzed in a test tube, the ingredients of my blood would be found. Today the Mediterranean is the world's most intensive laboratory for transforming human bodies into plankton.

Today the bodies of human beings have entered into the alimentary cycle, by way of fish, markets, and kitchens.

Not even the crematoria managed such a level of efficiency. There the fat of incinerated lives continually needed to be scraped away.

In contrast, the sea's constant cycle ruminates and grinds the carnage offered to its floor.

Only the Mediterranean, among the world's seas, was once called *Nostrum*, ours, in the Latin of Rome—the Romans, through conquest, possessed it all. They didn't say *Meum*, mine, they didn't hoard; they admitted it was *Nostrum*. That it belonged to the people that faced its opposing shores.

Today the *Nostrum* extends farther, because it also belongs to those who came there and drowned.

It was the sea of transit for whole civilizations. Italy, which boasts about its major share of humanity's cultural patrimony, owes that privilege to geography.

It owes to the Mediterranean every item in the generalized list of culture: food and philosophy, spices and astronomy, navigation and geometry, theater and history, numbers and monotheism. It owes to the sea its cities as well, Napoli for example, which was a Greek colony, founded by sails and by winds, the *scirocco* and *greco*.

For that reason Homer's definition of that sea is the most precise: *hygra keleutha*, a liquid road.

Who instead would consent to the Mediterranean becoming a barrier?

What sailor would permit shipwrecks to occur in calm seas?

Sorrow is a Europe that imagines herself sealed off, aging in a rich man's nursing home.

Europe can do without England, but not without the Mediterranean.

Despite every decimation it admits, and tolerates, Europe will need to continue absorbing young, working-class laborers.

Otherwise it will become like Hungary, forced to impose hundreds of hours of overtime each year on its citizens, due to the self-willed amputation of a renewed workforce.

I'M A READER, even if in these pages I speak from the other side, as a writer. Because I want to read, I've studied a few European languages, most recently Russian. I want to try and listen to its literature unmediated by translations, a thin sort of border.

Even groping through Dostoevsky's "White Nights," with dictionary in hand, was an act of pilgrimage.

Europe crossed by, under my eyes, flowing past my fingers like a river with its tributaries.

On a map I trace out the course of the Danube as it joins the Black Sea, transforming it into a reservoir of Europe.

The output of other solemn waters, the Dnestr, Bug, Dnepr, Don, their floodwaters decanting into the Mediterranean and filling its brim.

The currents in the Black Sea flow in only one direction, from the Bosphorus to the Aegean. Even seas can be tributaries, one to another.

History at times is a corollary to geography.

I owe to Odessa, to a dawn one day in its port, the music for the song 'O Sole Mio. I owe it to a young pianist, Edoardo Di Capua, aboard a ship anchored there. Lyrics written in Napoli found the chords to accompany them under a soft morning sky in Odessa, in 1898.

Music, too, ignores borders.

I'M HAPPY WITH THE EURO — with its metallic currency I can get myself a coffee almost anywhere.

I managed to make peace with Germany by way of its poets; they redeemed the language of the assassins. Also thanks to the euro, the unstable, inflated lira was fused with the solidity of the mark; the mark itself first united two nations separated by a wall and then served to unify the extensive common zone of Europe.

Heine more than Goethe, Celan more than Brecht helped me when I crossed Germany hitchhiking, at the age of eighteen, from

Lake Constance to Travemünde.

One August a half century ago I arrived in Sweden, where a century earlier Strindberg put *Miss Julie* on the stage.

I was in love with her, just like her servant Jean, and I looked for her all through the streets of Stockholm. In those days I didn't drink, but literature went straight to my head, made me weave. Bouts of drunkenness in later years never equaled those obtained by reading.

I've kept that sense of inferiority in comparison to those Misses and Mrs. Julies I've met ever since. I've fallen in love with them just like the servant Jean, out of admiration.

The Europe of youth hostels was my homeland for a year. A form of voluntary exile that I served in an age when you exist in the world as apprentice to everything.

TODAY I ADMIRE Borges more than any other writer of the twentieth century. And I feel that way because of his determination to plant himself—stock from an American vineyard—into European culture.

His decoding of Icelandic sagas, his respectful skepticism toward the divinity—"one of the most audacious creations of fantastic literature."

Mirrors, labyrinths, and metaphysics are European utensils. Scatterbrained, I looked for his tomb at the Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires, where his family is buried, in the Borges chapel.

He may have wished to compensate me for this fruitless endeavor, and caused me that evening to pass by chance next to his home. I asked for my photograph to be taken under the plaque, *Aquí vivió* . . .

That same year I was invited to Geneva, and I immediately asked to be brought to his actual tomb, so I could crouch down beside its gray stone.

We belong to a birthplace and the place where we die. I speak of Borges because he directed me to the backstreets of Europe, those which prefer to show themselves to a foreigner.

TO THIS CURSORY, incomplete list of authors that made me part of a vast, unbordered territory, let me add Albert Camus—and the experience of reading his novel *L'Étranger* (a title that translates literally as *The Foreigner*). Because reading it made me feel just the opposite, an interior form of statelessness, as if I had no fixed address or identity papers.

In my early years, I needed that feeling of uprootedness, that deep sense of dismay and disorientation, of being superfluous, not right for

the task.

The threads of a screw are made so that it fastens where it's lodged. Camus made me aware of the hole I was screwed into, stripping the screwdriver of its point of contact.

We don't last long in such intimate exile; we soon try to make our lives useful in some way. Still, finding my bewilderment written in a character did me good, to wander in the middle of a crowd instead of the desert. That too is part of being European.

THE MEDITERRANEAN IS SHAPED like an octopus crouching in its lair. An octopus has three hearts, the Mediterranean may have even more. One is Napoli. A port city and thus a distribution hub for merchandise and bloodlines.

To my mind, nobility consists in the crossroads of lineage poured out through the circuit running from the heart to the capillaries.

Nobility is mixture, not pedigree. In the analysis of my blood I'd like to learn the full list of races that left their seed in my globules. If any happen to be missing, I'll arrange for a transfusion.

Napoli was taken and held by invaders from the four cardinal points of the compass. It belongs not to the South but to a crossing of winds.

My city of origin has given every corner of Europe temporary residence in its museums and brothels.

With the French we have an ongoing dispute concerning syphilis. They call it the *mal napolitain*, we say it's the *mal francese*, referring to a sexual intimacy dating back to an incursion from King Charles of Valois, eighth of the dynasty, along with his army.

Epidemics too have created the sanguine union of Europe.

In this continent, racism, based on a selection of a single, original lineage, has no biological basis. Whoever suffers from this derangement in their perception and behavior separates themselves from most of their own identity; they would need to drain most of their own blood to avoid hypocrisy.

Whoever feels a sense of nationalism—that historical sentiment well past its expiration date—exalts one part of their self at the cost of all the rest.

Racism and nationalism are first of all medical disorders, in addition to carrying political contradictions. Victims of these conditions should be treated by state-run health care and sent out for reeducation.

Reading the world's literature remains an obligatory, immunizing rem-

edy. I owe to books my various citizenships and my fraternity with Europe. AND FINALLY, for me, Europe is the duty-free zone for free expression.

When, in my country, for expressing my convictions I was charged with—and then absolved of—a crime that dates back to the legal code under fascism, many European voices were raised in support of the speech rights owed their fellow citizen.

For this reason I am duty-bound to support the freedom of thought of certain Catalan politicians who have been charged and jailed for the very severe charge of insurrection, and who are guilty only of committing opinions and ideas.

They didn't throw stones, they didn't take up arms. In the heart of Europe, Jordi Cuixart, Jordi Sanchez, and other Catalan citizens suffer in prison for what they wished to say.

I have no need to express my own opinion or discuss the merit of their position regarding independence for Catalunya. They expressed their convictions, and they are being prosecuted for it.

Governing officials in European states do not interfere in the internal questions of one of their member states. They don't, but I do: I interfere because for me it isn't an internal question, and it isn't only their business. This is a matter of the zone of free expression within this dense continent we share, where we also claim to believe in free exchange between people, not simply merchandise.

Such freedom is not subject to posology; it cannot be divided up in doses.

Where a wound opens, there the greatest quantity of blood must flow in order to repair the rupture, to stitch the rift closed.

As a reader first, and then as a writer, I must be faithful and loyal to the free use of speech. I defend theirs in defense of my own.