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The Radiance of Unspeakable Spring

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"The time is always now." That sentence often appeared in the works of the artist who called himself Viktor IV. He was American born but spent most of his life on a houseboat in Amsterdam, collecting driftwood for his strange pieces. His companion was a Danish woman who had left her husband and children to come and live with him on the Amstel. I guess the time had been now for her as well, when she met him. He had an accident once he was diving to repair the boat. 30.000 people gathered along the quays of Amsterdam, throwing flowers as he travelled one last time down the water.

His widow moved back to Copenhagen and settled in a house on the canal not far from where I live. I have never met her but she must sometimes have thought that the stream she looked out on was connected to the sea and thus to the Amstel where she had been happy. Water is always connected, like past and future; like language is. I sometimes think about the raw nakedness of changing directions like she did, abruptly, at all costs. Not only the moral implications but also the emotional dizziness of throwing it all away, surprising yourself as much as everyone else.

About eleven years ago, I did a similar thing when I met the woman I now share my life with. I remember standing in the street between the life I had ended and the one I had not yet begun. The time was certainly now, and the present tense of everything was as painful as it was promising. Maybe that is why I am sensitive to the enigma of another outrageous lady in the mythology of Danish arts and letters.

This happened at the beginning of the 20th century. She was the much admired wife of a well-known poet and the mother of young children when she fell in love with the gardener. They went to New Zealand hoping to begin a new life there. On the boat, she wrote a diary of sorts addressed to the children she would never see again. She described Italy and Egypt but her deeper emotions remain a secret. What she didn't know was that her lover had made sure to buy a return ticket. Hers was single fare and when things failed to work out the way she had hoped for, she shot herself in Auckland where she is buried. A poet friend wrote about her; he described what he knew he would never understand, remembering the calm of her eyes, large with unrest, and her "radiance of unspeakable spring".

So, the time is now until you're no longer there, or is it? Not always. It is never "right now" for more than a moment; fleeting moments rushing into the past, leaving one's memories to fade only a bit more slowly. And much of the time is spent waiting for "now" to finally arrive. Love, redemption, or just that train which will take you into the unknown. I am dwelling on these anecdotes because that is why we have come to this party. To celebrate the telling of stories about decisive moments in the lives of women and men caught in the flux of time. So many stories have been about leaving everything you know to embrace that vast, blank, open space where hope grapples for something to hold on to.

I am interested in the stories of these women, and others, too, because they come with an alien gift for passion. Alien, because of their readiness to let go of everything safe and dear and precious until the point

of losing themselves, happily or tragically, on the Amstel or in Auckland, New Zealand. They radiate something beyond words, something deep down in the lonely recesses of a person. And that is what writers reach for, now and always; unspeakable grief, unspeakable spring. Although we are passionate about the writing itself, language is rather like a witness; its eyes calm yet large with unrest.

As I move along, past moments are constantly reflected in the present, and memory is just as impermanent as the ever-changing “now” of this day or hour. I keep telling my story again and I am told by it as well; the story and I are never quite the same. We are imbued with one another, meandering through the bends of weeks and years. When I look back on the books I have written, I can see how they have changed positions as new ones were added, and how their meaning changed as well. While I was writing them, each felt like a reflection of who I was at a given age. But afterwards, when I had left them behind, I became their author in a different, unchangeable sense; as if I were their product and not the other way round.

I am the result of how I have spent my time. And with each book it is now or never, knowing that I will never write the same one again. With each of them I hope to somehow be done with all these stories about men and women caught in time and love, regrets, attachments, confusion and hopes for another spring. I tell myself that next time, I shall write something different, yet there I go again. It is not that I fear repeating myself. I know that I do but I am also convinced that returning to the same mysteries of thought and emotion, of relating to others and being related to, is a way of assessing the gradual connectedness of change, of time itself.

I do not believe in reinventing myself, as a writer or a person. The story is to be continued, not to start from scratch with every book or sentence; as if “now” were all there is. I think I believe in developing myself and my work, perhaps even improving, and I always want to write

another book. And yet there is that eerie urge to finally have said whatever there is to say; to have emptied myself completely and then fall silent.

I hate the thought and I fear that I wouldn't know what else to do, but as I write, caught between language and silence, I do feel driven by the wish to have one day told it all exhaustively. It is unlikely to happen, though, for the story is basically about the unfolding of being itself, as I construe it through imagined characters. I shall not be there to end it with a final full stop. If I am lucky, I shall leave it unfinished, making death look like a meaningless interruption. I find it a true sign of happiness if death has no meaning. It is one way to define tragedy when it has; when you had to die for something more important than life itself.

I agree with the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz when in his diary he said that aging, not death, is the problem. In it, he also notes what became the motto of a novel I wrote years ago: "There should be two languages: one for those for whom life is ascending and one for those for whom it declines." In designating the opposed perspectives of youth and aging he really pointed, with slightly bitter irony, to the manifold strata of literature. If anything, novels are the language of ascending life and life on the wane as complementary parts of one coherent narrative. In a novel, the time is never now.

I recently wrote a memoir about my early years and as I worked on it, I discovered something peculiar about that word, "home". They say that you cannot go home again and it is true, but on the other hand, was it really home? When I was a child we moved around a lot and I discovered from early on, that "home" can be anywhere you decide. They were really just houses, and when I finally prepared to leave home and start my own life my parents got divorced like many parents do. As I turned around in the door, "home" had already evaporated behind my back. But as I began to write about it, twenty-five years later, those houses became "home" in a way they never were when I lived in them as a boy. I found that home had

never really been a place, a point in space, not for me at least, having been on the move regularly since I was born.

I realized the extent to which we are temporal creatures, “like giants submerged in the years,” as Marcel Proust writes at the very end of his odyssey down memory lane. Looking back in our minds we touch distant periods and moments, and memory becomes the real space for the self to occupy. In it, home – for me – became those early moments and faces, encounters and ties, attaching me to the surrounding world and forming the beginning of what was to become the narrative of who I am. Home became the story itself, its opening pages when you still only have a hunch as to what the book is about and where it will take you. That prelude where you will nevertheless begin to sense the atmosphere of a life.

Later, when I attended film school, I became infatuated with a film from the late seventies by the German director Wim Wenders, *Im Lauf der Zeit*, or *Kings of the Road* as it was called in English. I much prefer the German original. It is a black and white road movie about two men in their thirties who meet by accident and travel together through the desolate eastern parts of Western Germany, along the Iron Curtain then dividing Europe. At the time, the director was in love with everything American and the film certainly has its share of rusty signboards squeaking in the wind above abandoned gas stations and abundant references to the mythology of cinema. The two men are homeless in several ways. They are single and both have painful memories of failed relationships but they also face the impossibility of inheriting their immediate past, as sons of their fathers and as Germans born during World War II.

In a sense, they have nowhere to go, or they could go anywhere. There are moments when those perspectives come to the same thing. At the time, I felt completely in tune with the two hapless fellows, realising that, although we are constantly on the move, at the end of the day we are

not going anywhere, really. At least not in terms of a final arrival other than the grave.

One of them, Bruno, earns his bread repairing film projectors in village cinemas and they travel in his truck after meeting one morning on a river bank. Bruno is shaving, using the truck's side mirror, as Robert emerges after driving his Volkswagen beetle into the river. "*Gestern war ich in Genova,*" says Robert to Bruno and tells him that he has just left his wife. Bruno answers that he need not tell his life story to which Robert replies: "*Ich bin meine Geschichte.*" When I wrote my first novel, turning my back on my movie dreams, I put those words on the title page. Twenty-five years later, they have come to epitomize everything I have written. Like Robert, my characters realize that our backgrounds have nothing much to say about us. They discover that identity – if ever there was such a thing – is to do with the life-long narrative of becoming the person you will have been when you are no longer around and only the story remains.

Bruno and Robert are Romantic heroes but they are also typical of the period when I myself was coming of age; the late seventies. Europe was divided, the nuclear threat was looming and political radicalism had already proved its violent madness. Those were melancholy days, to be sure, but there was also an enormous urge to break away, uproot oneself; a vague but acutely felt longing for change as it is phrased at the end of the film when one morning Robert leaves a farewell note to the sleeping Bruno. It simply states: "*Es muss alles anders werden*". It reads a bit like the last remaining fragment of a utopian political manifesto but you can also interpret it differently, in a more existential mode. Today, we have almost forgotten the openness and thirst for departure marking those years. One thing I do remember is the hope, the demand even, that women and men would one day finally be able to meet at eye level; that we would be free individuals and yet closer than ever.

The night before they part, the two have been talking about women, at long last, one might add. Bruno confides that he craves for all the women he meets. His problem is that he always felt lonely when sleeping with someone, and the reason for his loneliness was that his own desire didn't care who she was. It makes me think once more of that poet, a hundred years ago, writing a poem about what he could not fathom in the woman friend who shot herself in Auckland, abandoned by her lover, herself having abandoned her children.

In the poem, a man's eyes rest upon that in a woman which cannot be reduced to an object of desire. In his thoughts, he meets once more the gaze of her calm eyes, large with unrest, and for a moment, within the imaginary space of his rhythmic stanzas, there is a strange mental reconciliation. It is not because he abstains from passing judgment on her although he does keep silent about her crime as a mother, delving instead into that "radiance of unspeakable spring". Nor does the poem make any effort to efface the difference between male desire, lonely as it is, and that awesome capacity, in a woman, for abandoning everything and dive into the abyss. But what is it, then?

Upheaval and departure are no longer exceptions to the norm; both are normal now, in private lives as well as in culture and society. The time is constantly now, everything can happen from one second to the next and nothing will remain the same. We are all on the move in a "floating world", as the Japanese called their small woodcut prints on thin paper, and sometimes there is a deep sense of loneliness to the freedom we have almost come to see as the last remaining law. The freedom to break out, take leave and go one's own way. And yet, as we twist and squirm out of our previous selves we can sometimes meet the other, without imposing our own perceptions and beliefs, without projecting our expectations. In poems and novels that happens time and again.

The poem I have been returning to has a woman in it and a man who writes and there is no explaining, no reduction of the horror and the

beauty into something neatly manageable. With all of his art he tells us that life is bigger. His words linger on the threshold of this formerly well-known woman's total strangeness and he stays there, balancing his tenderness against his grief. Sometimes language can do that and then it is not just an expression of our own selves; then it doesn't merely render an impression according to who we are. Then it becomes a movement of the mind in which, unreservedly, one feels the reality of the other. I think that is the only demand there is to be made on writers and writing.

So much of European history and of culture, too, has been about saying goodbye; abandoning everything old in favour of modernity's heroic and sometimes cruel voyage into the future; seeking progress and the utopia of something new, something far better and never seen before. It has often been forgotten that human beings are normally too frail and short-lived to see those grand schemes become realized. Much too often, those in power have been willing to sacrifice the perspective of individual lives, and violently so, with reference to the unavoidable, undeniable march of history.

All of that is behind us now, it seems. Literature was always wary of ideologies and their murderous or just unfeeling delusions. To see reality, to render what it was like to be human in a given place, at a specific moment in time; that was by far enough and it still is. That is the true motion of literature. To escape my own self and imagine the alien other with all the sensitive nuances of intimacy – and continue to the point where I discover that I am the other, too; in life as well as in the silence of my encounter with the invisible reader.