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THE TIME OF THE AUTHOR

Does literature have to be contemporary, and what does that mean?

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I believe it is something every child experiences with books: at the age when we have already learnt to read but haven't quite sorted out the meaning of many of the words in them, these words take on a kind of primal mysticism. We are often fascinated by the titles of books whose significance we cannot fully reveal for ourselves. In my childhood, one of those books was *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* by Jan Kott. Two words of the title were unknown for me – *Shakespeare* and *contemporary*. When I asked an adult to define the meaning of the word *contemporary*, and when she tried to explain who Shakespeare was (or who he was not), the mystical color of these words may have faded slightly away, but the mystical quality of the title was strengthened, even brought to another level, a paradoxical one. I wondered: here was a man who lived centuries ago, and who often wrote about people that lived centuries before him – how could *he* be our

contemporary?

Since then, I always feel this paradoxical echo whenever I read or hear the word *contemporary*. One can look in the dictionaries in an attempt to clear up this paradox. We can immediately disqualify the noun *contemporary* as a possible explanation – “a person living at the same time or of approximately the same age as another” – as we have already agreed that William Shakespeare is our contemporary. *Contemporary* used as an adjective leads us in more diverse directions. One of them equates this word with “conforming to modern or current ideas in style, fashion, design, etc.” If we relate this explanation to literature, it would seem to suggest that contemporary literature is the one *conforming to modern or current ideas*, but this word *conforming* sounds too close to the word *conformism*, which is not a characteristic we would like to connect to *contemporary literature*. Other definitions, like “having approximately the same age as one another”, refer to something that has no essential differential qualities in itself, as it points only to the coincidence of being created / born in the same time. Some of the other interpretations could bring more light to our understanding of the word: belonging to the same age; living or occurring in the same period of time; existing or occurring at the present time. They refer to the volatile category of time, and they insist on the present time – everything that is contemporary has to do only with what is now, and yet – what is *now*, and can we precisely separate this *now* from *before* and *after*? Even more, isn't this *now* a result of what was *before*, and for how long it will be *now* before it becomes *before* when *after* will become *now*?

We can try to think about language in relation with time. As

language is the basic material out of which literature is created, does it mean that we need to use contemporary language if we want to create contemporary literature? If the answer is 'yes', then we have one more paradox: the word "contemporary" itself is not a contemporary one. It belongs to Medieval Latin. But does using a "medieval" word in the 21st century mean that it is a contemporary word, too? Maybe this paradox (that the word *contemporary* is both "medieval" and "contemporary") suggests for us a direction, or directions, we could think when trying to understand what *contemporary* means at subtler levels – a meaning for our time; a meaning for our present existence.

Thinking over the relation between time, art and existence, Milan Kundera writes in *The Art of the Novel*: "A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he is capable of. Novelists draw up *the map of human existence* by discovering this or that human possibility." Does this then mean that only a literature that is focused on narrating human existence occurring at the present moment can be considered as contemporary literature? And, do all books that are set in the present moment simply *de facto* belong to contemporary literature? And one more question: can a literary work written in our time and set in the past be contemporary literature as well? Let us go back to Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, where he differentiated between a shallow description of the past and a grasping of the human existence at a given time in history: "There is on the one hand the novel that *examines the historical dimension of human existence*, and on the other the novel that is

the illustration of a historical situation, the description of a society at a given moment, a novelized historiography.” It seems to me that Kundera insists that what matters is not the time during which a literary work is set, but the intention (and the capability of the author to fulfill this intention) to examine existence – to go deep into human existence – to discover what it means to be *I* and to relate to the *Other*.

Perceived from this perspective, to be a contemporary in literature would mean to unify the past, the present and the future. When writing about the past, an author needs to mirror the present; while writing about the present, an author touches the essential phenomena of human existence. These certainly differ from one epoch to another but at the same time there is something constant in them. *Timelessness* is the word often used to describe this quality. But, I prefer another word: *all-timeness*; *totaltemporality*; *eternity* perhaps. Because timelessness seems to deprive itself of time, as if it has already won the battle over time, while, all-timeness contains all times in itself – it is not deprived of time nor has it conquered time. It goes hand in hand with time, with all times, fills itself up with time, although it is very often focused on a specific moment *in* time. There are works of literature that were created in the past but, when we read them, seem to mirror our present situation; there are works of literature written today that, although they may refer only to this very moment of our existence, contain the experiences of the past. Some of them have a very special relation with time, and they are contemporary in a very special way.

I would like to try to name several characteristics of all-timeness in

the novels *Alamut* by the Slovenian author Vladimir Bartol and *The Death of Vergil* by the Austrian author Hermann Broch. Vladimir Bartol published his novel in 1938. Hermann Broch began working on his novel that very same year, and it was published in both German and English in 1945 in the United States, where the author was living in exile. Bartol's novel is settled in 11th-century Nizari Ismaili State, present day Northern Iran, Broch's novel in the Roman Empire in the First Century BC. At the time of the publishing, both novels were read as a reflection of the time of pre World War Two and World War Two – *Alamut* as a warning against Nazism (the first edition has a sarcastic dedication to Benito Mussolini), and *The Death of Vergil* as a meditation on the fragility of creating art versus the cruelty of power, the contrast between the emperor and the poet, politics and art, and the meaning of poetry in the meaningless world. The questions raised in Broch's novel echo various eras, and each time that happens, they mirror each other, albeit in a way different as time changes. Nonetheless, I believe it is a novel that can be read as *contemporary* in any century, so long as there is art and power. Vladimir Bartol's novel was forgotten after the war, and remained so for about half a century. But then, right after the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, the existence of *Alamut* was re-discovered. It is now being translated into many languages all over the world, and, although it is set in the 11th century, was written in the 1930s and was read at the time of publication as a warning against the horror of Nazism, it is read today as a novel that can help us understand the mechanisms of terrorism.

Then we see examples of contemporary literary works, set in our

time, that mirror time past and dialogue with previous epochs even when they do not mention them. We see that works written in the past can dialogue with us today. We see, too, that a novel written today but set in the past can dialogue with our time and past epochs. But what if an author is an escapist? What if an author intentionally creates a work that by no means belongs to our time? I would like to try to find the answer for this question in poetry. Whenever I read Wisława Szymborska's poem "Children of an Epoch", I feel that it gives me an answer to the question: what does it mean to live in a certain epoch, to be marked by it, to have it as a seal on the soul, willingly or not. The poem begins with the verses: "We are the children of an epoch, / the epoch is political." The following verses reflect the idea that every single act and every single form of being and every single gesture are colored (some may use the word *contaminated*) by a political connotation: "Like it or not, / your genes have a political past, / your skin has a political hue, / and your eyes a political aspect. / What you speak about has resonance, / What you hush has a voice / more or less political. / Even walking through field or forest / you take political steps / on a political basis. / Apolitical verses are also political, / and the moon above is shining a thing no longer moonly. / To be or not to be, that is the question. / What kind of question? answer, my dear. / A political question. / You don't even have to be a human being / to profit from political significance. / It suffices for you to be crude oil, / animal feed or recycled materials. / Or a conference table, about whose shape / they debated for months / as though it were a matter of life or death: / should it be round or square? / Meanwhile people perished, / animals died, / homes burned / and fields

went to seed / as they did in less political / bygone epochs.”

Szyborska's verses convince me that there is no escape from the time in which we live. These verses suggest that we, whether we want it or not, are contemporary, even when we position ourselves against our time, even if we choose escapism as a form of being. We ourselves, as human beings, are a crossroads of space and time, and whatever the author writes will be marked by our contemporary world. The main question is: will it be marked by the trivia and trivialization of our world, or will it be something that comments on the trivialization without being contaminated by it? I think that I would try to find the answer in Kundera's work, which was mentioned previously. He wrote that the novel tries to answer the questions: "What is human existence, and wherein does its poetry lie?" I think this refers not only to the art of the novel but also to all the art of literature. And I think that is the solution to the quandary of how to be contemporary, without being contaminated and slowly destroyed by the negative sides of our time. We must face this quandary, as Szyborska faced over-politicization, and in an effort to remain in the realm of humanity, an effort to continue to draw the map of human existence with the written word.