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## ABOUT RAVENS

Among the abundant news of bloody events, the papers recently also reported the following: A raven was torn to pieces by a police dog. However, the raven was no ordinary raven, but one of those inhabiting the London Tower and of whose constant presence there special care is taken as one of the traditions linked with the British crown. The history of this crown, as we all know, is an event-filled one and the eyes of those long-lived birds have seen a lot. Certainly not the eyes of this particular raven, though, our contemporary the papers wrote about. Passing before them was only a uniform flow of tourists, among whom nothing happens and whose faces reflect expressions in the very limited range between curiosity and boredom.

Because, like anyone else, a writer cannot choose either the place or the time of his birth, he gets the material from which to shape his works the way cards are received in one and, regrettably, only deal. He can play his cards in one way or another, which some may qualify as good or bad, but the result will in any case depend on what he was dealt. I would not venture to arrange the hierarchy of values in the system of such a metaphor, but I nevertheless think that wars or revolution, for example, no matter how unreassuring it may sound, tend to belong to aces rather than to threes or sevens. One could object that literary creativity is something far broader than historical annals, that the human soul is a boundless galaxy, providing a possibility for infinitely more distant travels than the social or political landscape surrounding a writer. But is the movement through this galaxy possible without the impulses generated by the power fields of place and time?

That which became the lot of writing people of my generation in my country was the end of a world war and two major social upheavals. Some of us dimly remember the army which came across the Danube from the northwest, they remember better the army which came from the northeast. As a four-year-old I myself sat in the lap of a blond woman in soldier's uniform who, as I found out later, was a German. She had seen me in a roadside inn, where a motorized unit had stopped, offered me chocolate and I, with collaborationist shamelessness, accepted it. As a seven-year-old, I sat in the lap of a Russian soldier. In one hand, besides supporting me, he was also holding a photo of some other children, and in the other, alas, not chocolate but a tumbler full of grape brandy which held no temptation for me at the time. In those years our teachers were still "misses", later they became "comrades", some of them are still alive, and if we were to turn to them now, neither one nor the other form of address would sound natural, because the turbulent times have considerably shifted word and concept.

Recently, while I was rummaging through apparently familiar texts, I came across a passage, written by one of the most celebrated inhabitants of that same London Tower. It says: "The normal penalty for any major crime is slavery. The utopians say it's just as unpleasant for the criminals as capital punishment, and more useful to society than getting rid of them right away, since live workers are more valuable than dead ones, and have more prolonged deterrent effect."

The places in which until not so long ago the unquestionably useful slave labour for the state was performed, were called reformatories or camps, they were located in countries in which, just as in the conception of the author of "Utopia", there was no private property. Further correspondences could be enumerated, just as discrepancies. With great certainty we could

assume that the great humanist who lost his head because he spoke his mind did not rank among the category of "major crime" the telling of an anecdote, for example, even if it was aimed at Henry the Eighth himself.

It seems to me that the question arises of what testimonies we will leave behind, we on whom time has bestowed the happy or unhappy, but with certainty unique possibility of inhabiting a real rather than some kind of imaginary Utopia, no matter how much this might contradict the etymology of the concept. The world after us will still be imperfect, this means, that there will again be, there ought to be, seekers of nowhere existing lands.

In these travels perhaps the testimonies of literature could be more useful than the testimonies provided by science. I leaf through or remember pages of what has been written during the last decades and only say "could be". But time will not pass its sentence in a conditional mood. Let's hope that what is valuable in these pages will turn out to be in a somewhat decent proportion if not to the stupidity and meaningless exercises in stylistics, at least to lies.

Otherwise what does it matter that so and so ravens inhabited the Tower at the time of the Eighth Henry?

*Speech presented at the Third Thessaloniki Meeting Of The European PEN Centres,  
September 1995*