

Felix Culpa at Ventspils

"Felix Culpa", as Saint Augustine put it, evokes Christ's coming through man's inherent and recurrent fault. "O happy fault that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!"

I am fond of Saint Augustine's idea, Augustine the Algerian, Bishop of Hippo in Algeria. To write it in 2015 is something I take pleasure in, at a time when the idea of a fault, the idea of washing away a fault, the notion of the Redeemer, are so diluted by the backwash of the centuries and their blood-drenched tides.

"The Unbearable Lightness of Being"* which has no more conscience of the idea of fault (culpa) than it is conscious of happiness, or of the good fortune (felix) in which it bathes. The Being takes a bath, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, or the Aegean Sea, or the Channel, the light being of the 21st century among so many other light beings who bathe there.

In June 2006 these waters did not yet carry, did not yet transport those flimsy craft and the bodies of thousands of migrants from the East, light as well (a migrant does not carry much weight...). That year I was fortunate enough to discover Latvia, the unlikely Latvia : Riga, Ventspils and the International Writers and Translators House.

And due to a mistake by the French harbour masters, France, daughter of the Enlightenment, a cultural beacon to the world and Lay Teacher to those lands still to be explored, I ended up landing in a former Soviet port on the Baltic.

Looking back on it, I am led to observe that in my life I have met very learned Doctors. And that most of the time these Savantissimi Doctores frankly piss me off, and that when I manage to get one over on them, it is usually because my good friend Maryla has been there for me.

It started with a mistake :

The French harbour masters, proudly representing France daughter of the Enlightenment, a cultural beacon to the world and Lay Teacher to those lands still to be explored and what is more member of the 23rd section of the specialist University committee in charge of celebrating the year of Latvia, but not sure of its place on the map :

"You are a Polish specialist, dear colleague. We are trying to set up links with an artists' residence which is opening over there, right next to the university."

Maryla : "Which part of Poland do you think it is in, my dear colleague?"

The representative in charge of the year of Latvia, not recognising the mistake : "somewhere over there, in Ventspils, it is a Baltic port, Professor."

And this is how, several months later, I ended up in Latvia. From Riga, crossing forests and fresh water lakes, wild strawberries, and on to Ventpils and the House for Writers. Felix Culpa indeed. I did not find the snow which Ieva had talked about; it was the high season.

(Yes, you should see me running naked during the Festival of Winter, when we run through the snow, you could never catch me, I have longer legs than you...")

It was a picture postcard, and the beautiful baroque façades seemed to stroke the sun. The doors to the Protestant church were open wide; they were rehearsing for a concert in the afternoon. With Rollands I hummed a few bars from Fauré's Requiem, which the musicians were playing inside the church.

Old Europe, old Europe, whose northern reaches I ignored. And this is where real geography (the literary one) starts, here within the cold lands between Germany and Russia which the magician Jules Verne brought to life in his novel Drama in Livonia!

There were a host of ambassadors, many inhabitants with many languages and friends of fine writing at the inauguration, 30 of June 2006.

There I was able to state in public that Ventpils International Writers and Translators House will now be the Eastern sister of the Residence for European Writers at the Villa Mont Noir, between the Baltic and the North Sea. Let the two sisters work with each other, sharing the love of European literature; work together towards encouraging literary creation.

Was it Astra who introduced me to that elderly lady ?

“Monsieur, vous êtes français? Si, je le vois à votre façon de marcher. C'était une friandise, c'est une friandise, Monsieur, pour nous, le français.” *Sir, are you French ? Yes, I can see it by the way you walk. It is a real delight for us, the French language.*

“Vous le savez, bien sûr, vous le savez,” the elderly lady went on, in perfect French”Nous avons connu deux tyrannies. L'une des deux était plus barbare que l'autre. Asseyons-nous, Monsieur”. *You know, you must know that we have known two tyrannies. One of the two tyrannies was more barbaric than the other.* She put down her glass of wine on the table. She was ninety, and repeated her words in a lower voice, looking me straight in the eyes:

“L'une des deux tyrannies était plus barbare que l'autre. Dites-le, quand vous retournez dans votre pays. Dites-le.”

One of the two tyrannies was more barbaric than the other. Tell them this, when you return to your country.

I went back to France and I repeated what you said, Madam. I even think your words have had some impact. And after that I often went back to Latvia to meet Renata, my editor in Riga. I visited the Headquarters of the K.G.B. (Felix Culpa. No. CULPA).

And of course I went back to Ventpils and I will go back again, to walk along the sands with Anna, the author from Saint Petersburg, to whom these lines are dedicated.

Guy Fontaine, founder of the Residence for European Writers, Villa Mont Noir, Villa Marguerite Yourcenar.

* The Unbearable Lightness of Being, a novel by the Czech writer, Milan Kundera