

To read *Gottland*, the incredible adventure of the Czech industrialist BATA, dictator Joseph STALINE's dreadful Caesarism, with young 16 year-olds studying in the North of France: the idea is to propose them, from a contemporary Polish text (the French translation dates back to 2008), a political arborescence, but also geographical, religious, literary, linguistic, dreamlike, historical, of which each ramification, as "unheimlich", bizarre and twisted as it may appear to them, leads them toward an unknown substance, toward a known meaning.

Gottland, Mariusz SZCZYGIEŁ

Polish writer Mariusz SZCZYGIEŁ's novel Gottland describes the years of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia. We are in 1949, the year during which dictator Joseph STALINE's 70th birthday is celebrated.

a) A comment on the book's title, and the main character's name: at first, Gottland, 'God's Land', with its Germanic consonances, evokes nothing to young French people living in the North-West of Europe, despite the usual town names such as Godwaersvelde, and surnames like Godelieve or Godeleine. The fact that the possessive precedes the substantive to which it is linked - and that is typical of Saxon languages- must also be clarified. It must be said that a literature teacher in France is never invited to directly refer to a foreign language. If he does so, he finds himself confronted to the almost inexistence of the teaching of German and Dutch. Concerning Joseph STALIN's patronymic, the contrast between his nom de guerre - the Man of Steel - and his Christian name, which connotes kindness and sweetness, is a most striking contrast, and is emblematic of the tyrant's will to embody the ambivalence of a fatherly role.

When approaching a literary text with a European perspective, the written form of the text as well as the phonetics of the original language - beyond their exoticism -, deserve to be observed. I think of the Ł which appears at the end of writer Marius SZCZYGIEŁ's name, which does not graphically belong to the Latin alphabet, yet corresponds to a visible phonetic phenomenon: velarization.

A PROOF OF LOVE

PART ONE: ETERNITY LASTS EIGHT YEARS

Mrs. KAVITKOVÁ, a goose plucker, plucked seventy-two geese in only eight hours, which afforded her a place in History.

b) Mrs. KAVITKOVÁ's achievement is a matter of Stakhanovism. A kilogram of feathers nonetheless weighs less than a kilogram of lead. There is something naive about the determination she puts into plucking goose feathers like Stakhanov would crush down coal. But the ambient ideological bludgeoning encourages and legitimates such a childish imagination. Here we are, in 1950, in a GRIMM brothers tale - (Jacob 4/01/1785-20/09/1863) and Wilhelm (24/02/1786-16/12/1859)-, The Valiant Little Tailor; he is ready to compete with giants, to bring down mountains because in the flick of a finger, he killed 7 flies all at once... !

The minister of Information, Mr. KOPECKÝ, declared during a scientific conference in Brno that Mount Elbrus is Europe's highest point: according to him, stating that it is Mont Blanc is the "remainder of reactionary cosmopolitanism".

c) It is just as precarious an exercise to establish a hierarchy of the heights of Europe's mountain massifs as it is to propose a corpus of reference concerning European writers! To state that Mount Elbrus is "Europe's highest point" is an approach which is totally opposed to the required rigor of exact sciences – especially when the Minister of Information is at the origin of such an approach! - : indeed, French Mont Blanc's 4,810.90 meters can seem shabby when compared to the 5,642 meters of Mount Elbrus. If we consider the Caucasus as being European, Mount Elbrus is, in fact, the highest summit of Europe. This *petitio principis* (statement of principle) is mainly established on Armenian and Georgian geographical and historical traditions - and this brings us back to Stalin who, by stating he is of the Religions of the Book, also claims that he is a direct descendant of Japheth, son of Noah, ancestor of the Europeans. Let us not forget that Noah's Ark wrecked on one of the summits of the Caucasus ... And now have appeared these western "reactionary" theories, annihilated by a new geography which bases itself on the Bible! ...

The authorities have just established a final list of authors that are never again to be published: DICKENS, DOSTOÏEVSKI, NIETZSCHE. And a few hundred others.

d) The blacklisting but also the ban of DICKENS, DOSTOÏEVSKI and NIETZSCHE publications invite us to think about the tradition of censorship (censorship by the Church, censorship by dictatorial regimes). The eviction of DICKENS as well as, further on in the text, ANDERSEN's disparagement are particularly surprising. Perhaps the analysis of ANDERSEN's incriminated tale is the key to this ostracism. We may also question, with the students, the current practices of censorship in today's European democracies. I paid tribute, at the beginning of this discussion, to Poland's educative programs for 2010, which included many non-national works and authors in its reading recommendations. I confirm that to strive for the emergence of a European literary corpus is a compelling democratic necessity: three years ago, in Poland, an ethnic and literary purge was attempted and became the object of attention.

I quote, from memory, a dispatch published on the 10th June 2007 in European press: The provocations of the Polish Minister of Education, herald of the extreme right. English version of an extract (translation : C.R.) of the French 490-word article published in LE MONDE on June 10th 2007, by Célia CHAFFOUR:

He may smile and sooth his image, Roman GIERTYCH cheats nobody in Poland: since being appointed at the head of the ministry of education in May 2006, the young leader of the catholic and nationalist extreme right, 36 years old, makes most of the controversy and invests the whole media. Made public on May 31st, his last project hit the bull's eye: to cross off GOETHE, DOSTOÏEVSKI, KAFKA, GOMBROVICZ and CONRAD of compulsory reading lists in high schools.

French original version:

http://www.lemonde.fr/cgibin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=992831

It is therefore the second time since 1950 that DOSTOÏEVSKI is recognized for what he actually is: a writer of continental dimension, universal, and thus a freedom-bearing creator. Of course, our European literary corpus will remember this.

The poet SEDLON writes that the words “food” and “production” are eminently poetic words.

e) What does the adjective « poetic » evoke for an “official” Czechoslovakian writer in 1949?

It is not permitted to doubt when it comes to the word “production”: the STALIN prize, awarded for literature, is attributed, in 1949, to the Russian novelist GLADKOV (1883-1959). It is his only work translated into French that I can quote, the novel *Le Ciment*, title which leaves no doubt whatsoever concerning the narrative content.

More ambivalent is the word “food”, with its weight of symbolism and ideology: The Host and the Ciborium, body and blood of Christ in Christian tradition, find a new incarnation of the person of Stalin on the 18th of December 1948, in the popular French communist daily paper *L’Humanité*, by Paul ELUARD’s pen. If we can notice him, “under his mortal form with grey hair”, under his divine appearance, his Christ dimension becomes obvious, and the word “food” therefore takes on all its dimension...

Paul ELUARD, Ode à Staline (Ode to Staline)

Staline dans le cœur des hommes
Sous sa forme mortelle avec des cheveux gris
Brûlant d’un feu sanguin dans la vigne des hommes
Staline récompense les meilleurs des hommes
Et rend à leurs travaux la vertu du plaisir
Car travailler pour vivre est agir sur la vie
Car la vie et les hommes ont élu Staline
Pour figurer sur terre leurs espoirs sans borne.
Et Staline pour nous est présent pour demain
Et Staline dissipe aujourd’hui le malheur
La confiance est le fruit de son cerveau d’amour
La grappe raisonnable tant elle est parfaite.
In newspaper *l’Humanité**, December 8th 1948

*The full poem cannot be found in Paul ELUARD’s *Oeuvres Complètes (Complete Works)*.

I should also underline that Paul ELUARD is an author who is almost systematically studied by French high school students who sit their baccalaureate. He is considered as a major figure of surrealism and Resistance poetry.

The reading of an extract of Marius SZCZYGIEL’s *Gottland* concerns a French public. It is hence in the work of Francis PONGE that I will point out another aspect of the ambivalence of the word “food”.

Because the Nazi ideology of the 30s and 40s taken up by the Vichy ideology of Marshal Pétain perverted the most usual terms, and because language was diverted from its course, it was essential to give things and words their poetic force back. For this reason, in 1939, Francis PONGE takes on the Parti Pris des Choses (name of his work often translated as the 'The Voice of Things', 'The Way Things Are', or 'The Nature of Things'). By his pen, le Pain (The Bread), Le Verre d'Eau (The Glass of Water) or La Pomme de Terre (The Potato) are the basis of genuine work on poetic metamorphosis, from thing to word.

The number of books destroyed at that time in the whole country is estimated at twenty-seven million. Here is how Prime Minister ZÁPOTOCKÝ summarizes the new time: "It is no longer possible to live as before, our life is far better and happier."

f) The acknowledgement of the Prime Minister's blissful optimism, "our life is far better and happier" followed by the very neutral use of the term serial killers, sends any French pupil and student to pursue his reading of VOLTAIRE's *Candide* ("a heroic butchery").

In *Candide*, philosophical tale by Voltaire, Chapter 3: "How Candide Escaped from the Bulgarians and What Befell Him Afterward".

Gottland's narrator is a picaresque character (in this case a Polish observer) whose life's hazards led to Czechoslovakia of the 30s, 40s and 50s. He is the brother of the brave Soldier Chveik of Jaroslav HAŠEK (1883-1923): arrested on grounds of high treason following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Sarajevo, the brave Soldier Chveik is declared struck by congenital cretinism. This pathology saves him and enables him to take on the attitude of an observer, which does not implicate him too much.

The contemporary Spanish novelist José Manuel FAJARDO sees in Chveik a "modern reinterpretation of the figure of Sancho Panza and of the picaresque", and this character of the picaresque has also left, across all Europe, a mark of popular wisdom in the difficult art of surviving, despite all the horrors of war and misery. The Lazarillo de Tormes in Spain, GRIMMELSHAUSEN's *Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus* in Germany, Voltaire's *Candide* in France, or even the said Brave Soldier Chveik in the old Czechoslovakia, all express this simple and witty spirit, formed by the extreme characters of this type of protagonist.

*Two years later, the most eminent political leaders are condemned to death by hanging on the order of STALINE. Wenceslas Square, on the façade of the Zlatá Husa hotel – where ANDERSEN had written his most famous tale on the Leisure Class, entitled *The Princess and the Pea* –, the following inscription is hung up: "With the Soviet Union for eternity".*

g) I must admit that I can neither manage to understand, nor to interpret the hostility of the Czechoslovakian and Russian regimes regarding Danish writer Hans Christian ANDERSEN (1805-1875). With no effort, when I request a student, I always find one capable of telling or commenting the story of *The Princess and The*

Pea. The author's well-known aggressiveness toward the Leisure Class is probably founded on the disrespect of the nutritional goodness of the pea as a food produce (here, we fall back on Francis PONGE or so many other European poets' refusal of ideology). When PONGE writes *Le Pain*, he succeeds in poetically making form and content coincide, word and thing.

When it comes to ANDERSEN, and to focus on what I said about the necessity of studying Polish literature in French classes, but also to progress toward establishing a European literary corpus, I wish to name a practical example: at the demand of the editor Hachette, I had the occasion, now 15 years ago, to publish in 'Livre de Poche' format (pocketbook), a dictionary of European authors. After consultation with the University Network Les Lettres Européennes, a list of 430 authors has been established.

In order to fall on the name journalists and the grand cultured public are both familiar with, by flicking through the letter A pages, one must pass the ones concerning Hungarian Endre ANDY, Russian Anna AKHMATOVA, Spanish Vicente ALEIXANDRE, Italian Vittorio ALFIERDI, Portuguese José Sabral de ALMADA NEGREIROS, Swish Henri-Frederic AMIEL...! Until one finally falls on the illustrious Hans Christian ANDERSEN.

Cruel is such a tangible experience, that the European readership know so little of European authors. It only makes our work more essential.

Every day at midnight, to conclude its programs, Radio Prague broadcasts the national anthem of the Soviet Union.

It is with this spirit that Czechoslovakia of the 1940s enters the new decade: the 1950s.

In order to celebrate Joseph STALINE's birthday, seventy years old in December 1949, the Czech authorities decide that nine million people, amongst the fourteen million the country counts, are to send him their best wishes.

The signatures are collected in only four days. On this occasion is also decided that shall be set up in Prague, on the hill overhanging the Vltava, the greatest monument of STALINE the world has ever seen.

h) Caesarism, undeniably evoked when SCZYGIEŁ writes about the "greatest monument of STALINE the world has ever seen", enables us to tackle this type of derivation with historical and literary approaches: Czar, Kaiser, Kaisar have all, at every age and time, in all areas of Europe, desired to be erected as statues during their lifetimes. The novel *Gottland* contains an implicit reference to The Lives of the Twelve Caesars by Suetonius. The following quote reflects this:

The Mad Prodigalities of Nero

Suetonius, Latin historian of centuries I and II A.D., writes a column on the different reigns of Rome's first emperors in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. In the part dedicated to Nero, he describes with irony and lucidity the sixth Caesar's megalomania.

In nothing was he more prodigal than in his buildings. He completed his palace by continuing it from the Palatine to the Esquiline hill, calling the building at first only "The Passage," but, after it was burnt down and rebuilt, "The Golden House." Of its dimensions and furniture, it may be sufficient to say thus much: the porch was so high that there stood in it a colossal statue of himself a hundred and twenty feet in height; and the space included in it was so ample, that it had triple porticos a mile in length, and a lake like a sea, surrounded with buildings which had the appearance of a city. Within its area were corn fields, vineyards, pastures, and woods, containing a vast number of animals of various kinds, both wild and tame. In other parts it was entirely over-laid with gold, and adorned with jewels and mother of pearl. The supper rooms were vaulted, and compartments of the ceilings, inlaid with ivory, were made to revolve, and scatter flowers; while they contained pipes which (360) shed unguents upon the guests. The chief banqueting room was circular, and revolved perpetually, night and day, in imitation of the motion of the celestial bodies. The baths were supplied with water from the sea and the Albula. Upon the dedication of this magnificent house after it was finished, all he said in approval of it was, "that he had now a dwelling fit for a man."

De Vita Caesarum, Suetonius (The Lives of the Twelve Caesars).

No sculptor has the right to refuse taking part in the contest organized at that effect. In a nine-month delay, fifty-four artists have to present their projects. Thank God, Ladislav SALOŮN is already dead! say the inhabitants of Prague about the most renowned Czech sculptor. To make sure he doesn't win the contest, Karel POKORNÝ, considered as his successor, draws the supreme leader arms wide-open in a friendly gesture, thus giving Stalin a likeness to Jesus.

i) We can, of course, construct a development relative to cultural patronage. For the relation between the artist and the Prince, and between the artistic production and its accompaniment/controlling by the State. However, the notable submission of sculptor Karel POKORNÝ to the Prince's desire sends us back once again to HAŠEK and to the brave Soldier Chveik. The unlikely parallelism between Joseph (STALINE) and the carpenter's Son poses the question of a European country, at a given time of its History, at its roots. To refuse any identification to Jesus, but to claim Noah's legacy, to belittle ANDERSEN but to accept GRIMM, to praise the Caucasus and to despise the Alpes, to extol GLADKOV's Le Ciment and to vilify David Copperfield or Crime and Punishment : the dialectic may give way to some smiles, but Chveik, Lazarillo de Tormes, Sancho Panza, Candide and Simplicius are accustomed to such ironical tunes. Europe has outlived the Soviet Union, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Spanish Golden Age, France of Louis XIV, the Roman Empire, the Biblical Times, the Romantic era... and we could draw a list of all the references that Marius SZCZYGIEL's brilliant Gottland is filled with. To turn over the pages of this novel by a Polish author, is to journey through the millenniums that are the foundations of our cultural European identity. I, with modesty, desire to help young readers make sense of it all. Not to set boundaries for their imagination. But to help them become European Citizens.