

WILL THIS HUMANIST MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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My answer of course is yes; my story will make a difference for the simple reason that every person's story makes a difference. In recent decades, in the human sciences, as a healthy reaction against globalisation which somehow lumps us all together and recognizes us as valuable even as it threatens us with universal indistinctness; we have become interested in difference, otherness, cultural identities. Thus in my case the determinants of my birth define me forever as being female, Czech, of Jewish origin, from Prague, middle-class (and very, very stubborn). The congress program for which I prepared this story was entitled "Scientists who make a difference"; I was reassured that scholars working in the Humanities also belonged to the group and I told my story...backwards, beginning with the present. Here it is in the same form. The reason for this device is that if the purpose of the exercise was to trace the evolution and preservation of our Czech heritage through time and space, wherever we are now, with all the changes that have taken place and might yet take place, I wanted to begin with the richness of the present and go deeper and deeper towards the roots without minimizing the importance of all that I have encountered on the way.

One of my secrets is that I consider no experience to be in vain. There are of course experiences we could do without such as the major historical storms of the XXth century. But if you are forced to go through hell you at least have the opportunity to study the topography of hell. In that spirit I am not resentful, but grateful, to have spent World War II in occupied France. The French under the German occupation were much more interesting, diverse, and many of them, courageous, than they appear in tourist handbooks and cheap novels. Similarly, if you are displaced - and I was displaced several times - I regard the process of adjustment not as a gradual loss of who you once were in a vanished home but as the gain of a new, multi-layered person; ultimately as riches, not impoverishment. It is that enrichment that I wish to describe by going from the present moment more and more deeply into the past.

I now live in Toronto, Canada, once reputedly a boring city where everything was closed on Sundays but today a bustling, multi-cultural megacity (I am using this term without knowing how many millions of inhabitants a city must have before being called a megacity. Toronto houses 3 million - and I can think of at least two national states, Uruguay and Slovenia, with that level of population). I was called to Toronto from McGill University in Montreal, where I had taught French and Comparative Literature for eleven years, from 1976 till 1987, to assume an administrative function, that of President of a small University called Victoria University, which is an institution of higher learning obviously enjoying some independence since it has its own Board of Regents and much property, yet is part of the University of Toronto, in many ways integrated within it: a University within a University. I became interested in Victoria because it seemed to offer all the academic fields in which I was interested, especially Renaissance studies (it has a Centre for Reformation and

Renaissance studies, and an undergraduate Renaissance studies program; more generally a strong concentration in the Humanities; protestant theology at Emmanuel, the partner college of Victoria College; with a graduate program in Comparative Literature next door. Just this year, in fact, Comparative Literature moved into Victoria). It is in this privileged environment, near the Robarts Library which is the largest research library in Canada, that I am teaching Renaissance studies and Comparative Literature on a limited post-retirement basis under what in America is called a name professorship. (Mine carries the name of two women who were pioneer female academics). In the province of Ontario professors must retire at the age of 65. This happened in my case in 1994 after I had been President of Victoria for seven years, from 1987 till 1994; after this I was asked to head the Centre for Comparative Literature for one year but my age precluded further administrative duties after that, nor did I wish to be given any. During this period from 1994 until now I have been researching and writing predominantly in the Renaissance or if you wish early modern field, directing the critical edition of the complete works of a XVIth century French poet and philosopher named Pontus de Tyard, and co-directing a Renaissance series within the major project of the International Comparative Literature Association entitled *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, a collection of reference works dealing with the history of literatures in an international and intercultural spirit (and this incidentally also means that more attention is paid in it to Central and Eastern Europe than had traditionally been the case in Comparative Literature studies). The two projects are hugely different from each other, yet strangely complementary in that both require one to immerse oneself in a completely different time, to be historically as informed and accurate as possible so as to understand the origin and the evolution of the concepts which have been passed on to us by the Renaissance, whether it is God, beauty, truth, poetry, love, nature, or relationships between the individual and society...The Tyard project exercises my ability to reconstruct the poet and thinker through the texts in poetry and prose that he has left us. They are difficult texts, which is why relatively little had been written about Tyard despite his place of honour among the Pléiade school of poetry. The Comparative History project poses a different challenge, that of the discipline of Comparative Literature itself. Literatures tend to be studied in isolation in their respective countries, where often one predominant language is spoken; that situation has been changing, since many countries have become multilingual and multicultural; and since there are writers in exile participating in other literatures than that of their country of origin. Comparative Literature seeks to show commonalities and differences among national literatures, and more generally to deal with historical, cultural, theoretical problems common to all literatures. In the area of my project, for example, a number of European countries have known a Renaissance in the 16th century although the movement did not occur simultaneously in every country. But such phenomena as the revival of Greek and Latin letters and the development of a literary capacity in the national language are quite widespread. On the North American continent I am often asked whether being born in Central Europe and being forced to learn different languages at a young age predisposes one to being a comparatist; and, even though I believe anyone can learn languages so as to read a variety of texts in the original, I must admit that those of us who have known linguistic displacement certainly have an easier time fulfilling the interlinguistic requirements of Comparative Literature.

During the nineties I also served for three years as President of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures, the umbrella organization which regroups a large number of international learned societies dealing with national literatures or with interdisciplinary areas relevant to languages and literatures. In turn it joins other such federations working in other areas of the

humanities under the Conseil international de la philosophie et des sciences humaines, which encompasses all humanities under UNESCO and which has sister councils in the social sciences and the exact sciences. FILLM, as it is called by its French acronym, often meets outside Europe and North America - we have been, for example, in Islamabad, Sydney, Harare and Bangkok; this is in order to implement the UNESCO endeavour to give scholars from developing and/or economically weaker countries opportunities for international participation.

At a much earlier time of my life - 1979-82 - I was president of the International Comparative Literature Association which makes the same considerable effort to encourage effective international cooperation: congresses and smaller specialized conferences are often held in non-Western locations. On that score let me mention an aspect of the life of the International Comparative Literature Association which I think has left human, social traces, in addition to book series and congress proceedings: it has served to maintain truly scholarly dialogue between universities in Europe and North America on the one hand, and those in universities and academies in Central and Eastern Europe on the other. As organizer of the 1973 Montreal-Ottawa congress I was able to bring in young people whom the Communist régimes would not support financially - they always supported their senior academicians - and some of these then young people are still in the profession today and bear witness to the fact that what we did in those days to make tiny holes in the Iron Curtain kept up their courage.

But in order to be faithful to my backwards journey I should now go to the late eighties, early nineties (1987-1994 to be exact) when I was president of Victoria University. This displaced me from McGill University in Montreal to Toronto. I was appointed as the result of a rigorous selection process, and God knows how it happens that someone is chosen for a given post rather than someone else. When I was interviewed for the position a large variety of questions was asked very seriously in all sorts of domains, probing my knowledge, my convictions, my management style. One question was asked very lightly, almost ironically: "Eva, do you like real estate?" I just said: "Sure!" It turned out that a major part of my responsibility, since Victoria has considerable properties, was to increase the rental income for the benefit of academic programs such as student scholarships, research funds etc...I admit there was excitement in cleaning the stone of the old XIXth century college building so that it emerged polychrome from its layers of black dirt, in building a new residence for 400 students, in swapping downtown land with another institution to acquire a beautiful old house which now serves as a residence for law students. What I had least expected however was the stir created by the fact that I was a woman president. Journalists swarmed around me upon my arrival, pointing out that there had been no women university presidents in any Canadian province except Nova Scotia where a nun was president of a Catholic women's college, and British Columbia where a true pioneer, the late Pauline Jewett who served as president of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, a major university, and later became a member of Parliament. I was often asked whether I thought that women had different style of management. I thought so, because - perhaps - they might be more inclined to listen for the needs of their staff, have more patience with imperfection, less expectation of automatic results, and more resolve to search for practical ways and means.

I used to say that administration is like housework: you do it in the morning and forget about it. I also refused to accept permanent hostilities among faculty and was determined not to let their quarrels destabilize me. My motto was: "They can irritate me but they cannot make me suffer". But these

attitudes and experiences go further back beyond the presidency of Victoria, to the 11 years of my second period at McGill University. I was living in Ottawa when, in 1976, McGill University invited me to chair its Department of French Language and Literature, at the time torn by all kinds of divisions, including serious conflicts between professors imported from France and Quebec-born professors, eager to free themselves from the intellectual domination of the French. I calmed down my colleagues to some extent, taught them that a devising and implementing a constitution helps you to work together regardless of personal feelings, made the students feel part of the community, and encouraged professors in their research and publication endeavours.

My main hope, however, was disappointed. I had taken the job hoping that the department would become a vital element in Québec life under the Parti Québécois government that had just been elected. This did not happen while I was chair. During these eleven years at McGill I continued to live in Ottawa, where my husband was professor of biology and where my three sons were studying. I just travelled by bus between the two cities.

Before this 1976 move to McGill I spent fifteen years at Carleton University in Ottawa, where I had followed my husband from our previous location. At Carleton University I taught XXth century French Literature, a field for which my thesis on the myth of Orpheus in contemporary French Literature had prepared me; and, after creating a Comparative Literature program, I also taught in it and chaired it for a number of years. That was also the time when I began to work on French Canadian poetry; I found it difficult not to explore the literature of the country in which I lived. The federal capital was a pleasant city in which to live, with its tree-lined avenues. For six of my years there I was a member of what is now called the Canada Council for the Arts, which at the time was the granting agency not only for all the arts such as literature, music, dance, the visual arts etc. ...but also for the humanities and social sciences. After that, when the humanities and social sciences were endowed with their own research council, I served on it and was its vice-president for three years. These experiences made me think a lot about cultural policy, science policy, and the importance of the humanities and of the arts for a country, especially a country like Canada still defining its identity and its role - often a peace-keeping role - in the world.

We had come to Ottawa in 1961 from a small isolated city in Northern Ontario, Sault Ste. Marie, situated between Lake Huron and Lake Superior. I had followed my husband there from Montreal because his work called him to a Forest Insect laboratory under the Canadian government. There were no universities; I did substitute teaching in the high schools, translated texts for the United Church of Canada, worked on my doctoral thesis, and sometimes in the summer went back to McGill University to teach. I have never regretted my five years in the Sault: without them I would always have lived in and around Universities. Teaching high school boys and girls was an opportunity to get to know them. Languages were not their favourite subject...Two of my occasional students were the Esposito brothers, of hockey fame. As high school kids they were not very well behaved.

The stay in the Sault was interrupted by fifteen months in England, the academic year 1958-59. My husband had been called to the National Institute for Medical Research in London. I was fortunate to be hired by the French Department of University College London. The cultural life in the British capital was fabulous, especially when compared with that of Northern Ontario in the fifties, where we nevertheless returned for two years.

For me the Sault period followed my studies and the beginnings of my teaching at McGill University. I had come to Canada in January 1946 because my father had been called to Montreal to take up a position with the International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations agency. I only had the vaguest notions about this country. First I completed my high school diploma at Collège Marie de France, a secondary institution run by the French government along the French model and offering, at the time, a high concentration of philosophy in the final year. This enabled me to start at McGill in the third year of College with a diet of mostly philosophy, psychology and sociology. I wanted to be a protestant minister and in fact after graduating I took a year of theology along with a master's degree in philosophy. A summer of parish work with a French-speaking United Church congregation in the East of Montreal persuaded me that the ministry was not my calling. So I simply pursued studies in philosophy, took a Master's degree, and was married in 1949. My husband, a scientist, was also a graduate student, arriving from Harvard. He wanted to pursue his doctorate at McGill; for me there was no doctoral program in philosophy there at the time but the French Department had just started a doctorate and accepted me, since I had studied a different discipline, on condition that I take a lot of remedial work, which I did. There were no graduate fellowships there at the time. When I said to the chairman that we needed financial support he suggested that I teach and this is how - it will be fifty years ago in a few months - I began to lecture, in French at McGill and Philosophy at Sir George Williams which since then became Concordia University.

I had arrived in Canada in early 1946 from Prague, after a fall term 1945 in a country just emerging from the occupation and from the war, a country ruled by a coalition government and hopeful of holding a mediating position in Europe, a country where I had begun to make friends and which I was sad to leave, and where I no longer lived when the Iron Curtain came down. I had spent the war in occupied France, having left Czechoslovakia with my mother and sister on Sept. 9, 1939, six days after the declaration of the war by the Allies, and reached Paris in roundabout ways via Austria, Yugoslavia, Italy and Southern France. My father was waiting for us in Paris, but he soon enlisted in the Czech regiment of the French army in the South, and sent us to Cognac in the South West of France because many Czechs had settled there after World War I. When France collapsed he was able to escape to Great Britain, where he spent the war in the Royal Air Force, while we remained in Cognac. My mother worked heroically, no one betrayed our Jewish origin, we children learned French and this how my secondary schooling was French. We returned to Prague and met my Father again in September 1945 for the brief but for me so important four-month period which I just described. My mother, however, had to face the disappearance of her parents, sister, and many relatives in Nazi concentration camps...

Thus - apart from the four-months return to Prague in the Fall of 1945 - all the time I really spent in former Czechoslovakia were the first ten years of my life. Until 1937 we lived on Vaclavské náměstí on the present spot of the Yalta Hotel. From our balcony I had watched in 1937 the funeral procession of T.G. Masaryk. I had written poems about his death which were published in newspapers (I have a whole book of nostalgic poems written in Czech including poems describing our exile in France). From 1937 till our departure in 1939 we lived in the suburb of Hanspaulka. I left the Czech school system at the end of the fourth grade, never to return. I am, however, firmly convinced that it gave me a structured education which has remained with me and opened my mind to other people, languages, modes of thought and somehow gave me a sense of confidence through

thick and thin, and believe it or not, though we were very young, a political consciousness. And it is to bear witness to this early foundation that I have led my audience to it through the outer layers of my past.