

## Meaningful Marginalities

As I have travelled through east, central and south-eastern Europe, wherever there is an Orthodox church, I have found myself in it. I take a kind of rest in the homely peace that settles over me, I sniff the remnant whiffs of incense and beeswax, gaze at the icons who gaze back at me, and mumble the lines of text I know from the hymns and prayers of the Orthodox Liturgy.

I had been baptised Orthodox and all these churches - in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, and Greece - were open to me, as were their prayers, their Feast Days, their saints.

St Demetrius, for example. On the icons, he is young and pretty-faced, beardless, with thick hair tucked behind his ears. He wears the green tunic and red cloak of a Byzantine army officer and holds a round shield and long-armed cross. He died young, speared through his right breast, in the basement of the Roman baths in the northern Greek city of Thessalonica, for the crime of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This was the year 304, his name was Demetrius, and he was going to become a saint.

As Demetrius of Thessalonica, he would be one of the most powerful saints in all of Christendom. But he had been hastily buried in the red earth of the baths, then the little shrine marking the spot fell into ruin, the relics disappeared and, after a time, the details of his life and death vanished from living memory. But he came back three hundred years later to perform miracles, and the greatest of these was the defense of his beloved city, Thessalonica, from the repeated assaults of the barbarians at the gates. The barbarians tried over and over again to crash through the walls and gates but to no avail. Demetrius appeared miraculously on the ramparts and saved the day. He and the Thessalonians had thrown back the enemy, which is to say the Slavs. Which is to say me.

Then the barbarians became Christians and embraced the saints, including Demetrius, patron and guardian of Thessalonica.

In one of the numerous religious bookshops in Thessalonica I bought a comic book. St Demetrius is displayed on the cover as a warrior saint in Roman breastplate and halo, mounted on a sturdy steed, with an expression of beatific resignation to his task, which is the defence of the city laid out below the crest of the hill on which he stands. Inside the book, however, Demetrius is something like the Incredible Hulk of Orthodoxy: he stands up in his stirrups, with his stallion pawing the air above the ramparts, to give an almighty shove to the scaling ladder from which the barbarians, brandishing battleaxes, fall like so many fleas off the back of a dog. A few panels further, they are back at the city walls, this time with formidable catapult machines and a supply of enormous boulders against which the terrified Thessalonians can only marshal a procession of priests bearing icons and swinging censers until – lo! – St Demetrius appears hauling a boulder of his own. On it is inscribed a cross and the text of the very message that had flared in the midday sky on October 28, 312, the day of St Constantine's victory over his enemy at the Milvian Bridge north of Rome. *Hoc vince* (Conquer by This) Constantine read there above a cross of light in the heavens. Demetrius's boulder is inscribed in Greek but carries the same effect: the Thessalonians load it in their catapult and BOOM! KRAK! it hurtles over the walls and into the barbarians' infernal siege machine, blowing everything to smithereens.

In another miracle, the Saint, impatient for the thick of battle, and in order to be seen as well as felt by the faithful, clambers over the ramparts as light as a bird, his shield and sword and Roman armour weighing no more than the cape clasped at his throat. FRAP! he swings his sword. OOG! UGH! he spears a barbarian who slithers down the ladder, spraying his blood all over the battlement. Demetrian scholar Paul Lemerle concludes. "The great city remained impregnable, and this alone

doomed the successive assaults of the Avars, the Slavs, the Bulgars. This is the deep meaning of the Demetrian legend.” [Lemerle, 162]

Yes, but what did it mean to the Slavs?

In 253, Goths had vainly attempted a capture of Thessalonica; in 479, Theodoric of the Ostrogoths approached the city walls and turned away in hopelessness; in 550/51, barbarians formerly settled on the far shore of the Danubian frontier spent their first winter on Byzantine soil; in 581, the assault came from northern barbarians who were overrunning all of Greece, capturing, devastating and burning cities and enslaving their populations. They even brazenly settled down in the Greek countryside “and dwelt in it as though it had been their own without fear,” to quote John of Ephesus, a Syriac historian [cited in Obolensky 51]. These ones will not go away. Although they will repeatedly attack Thessalonica, they will not take it, and for generations ever after their descendents in Macedonia will long for this lost city of their hopeless dreaming even as they put down roots in the country all around. Thessalonica would never be theirs for it was under the protection of St Demetrius.

These are, by remote but sure connection, my people. They swarm around the Balkans, driving south from the Danube, mere plunderers and looters and rapists, they terrorize the Greek world and enter its texts. Probably they wear animal skins and drag cudgels along the ground.

A medieval pilgrim to the Basilica of St Demetrius in Thessalonica would have made the rounds of the aisles of the nave, pausing at each votive icon or pillar mosaic to make the sign of the cross and to kiss its frame, perhaps to light a candle, perhaps just to stand there awhile, contemplating the story told by the image. For example, the mosaic panel of St Demetrius with his arms around the shoulders of Bishop John and Eparch [governor] Leontius, founders of the church, all three in splendid voluminous robes. The pilgrim looks more closely: underneath the picture is an inscription, a flourish to the literate Greek viewer: “You are looking at the builders of this famous house from where the martyr Demetrius is the one who turns back the barbarian wave of barbarian ships and redeems the city.”

What exactly is my “point of view” as I gaze at the mosaic inside a church that represents the faith I was raised in, and named for a saint who has his feast day duly celebrated in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, and whose exploits celebrated here in Thessalonica amount to the repulsion of the Slavs, which is to say of the forebears of me?

In the third century, the Goths cross the Danube, in the fourth, the Huns. Finally, in the sixth century, it is the Slavs’ turn. It was a passage as portentous for European cultures as that of the Germanic barbarians who had poured out of quarantine over the frozen Rhine in 406 CE into Gaul and never went back.

The Slavs destroyed Roman cities and moved on, through watered plains of wheat to the northern limits of the olive tree, past battle sites, below wooded hillsides and between mountain ranges. Barbarians that they were, they nevertheless made use of the superb Roman highway system to spread out from inland cities such as Naissus (Nis) and Serdica (Sofia) and their own dugout canoes, to cross even to the Peloponnese, densely slavizing the territory they had chosen as their new home.

And there, at the mouth of the Vardar where it spreads out into the sea from its ascent in the mountains behind Skopje, is Thessalonica, commanding the northern Aegean with a massive citadel: if the Slavs moved by easy stages, they could reach it in eight days from Singidunum [Belgrade] on the Danube. When they get there, they call it Solun.

And so the Slavs stand at the gates and gawk. Inside are stone mansions and gardens of pomegranates, wagons laden with amber, olive oil and plush brocades and bales of airy cotton, there are tent-makers, mariners and scribes who ply their trade for merchants and travellers journeying to the City, the King's City, Constantinople. The Slavs stand and gawk, and want it all. Fine tunics embroidered with gold, slaves pouring rose water in the bath, cooks in the kitchen, barrels of wine in the cellar. What they don't yet see, for they mean nothing, are the tiled roofs and the frescoed piers in the narthex of the basilicas, and they can't hear the chants in the monasteries nor smell the musk of the incense in the crypts but eventually they will want these too, and one day also they will want St Demetrius. They will call him Dimitri Solunsky.

The immemorial destination: "Sloboda ili smrt! Od Koruna do Soluna!" It is the slogan, in October 2000, of the farmers of Cacak, Serbia, marching to Belgrade to oust President Slobodan Milosevic from power. "Freedom or death! From Kordun [historically Serbian town in Croatia] to Thessalonica!" From the Adriatic to the Aegean, this great swath of Slavic longing.

In 1988, a young Yugoslav Macedonian man scribbled on a napkin a rough map of the southern Balkans: it was my first lesson in what constitutes, in his vivacious mind at least, Greater Macedonia. It comprises three parts – Vardar (a squiggle of his pen) named for the river as it flows in then-Yugoslavia; Pirin, for the mountain in western Bulgaria; Aegean, for the sea rimming the unrequited lost home harbour. The salt water laps at Macedonia but the Greeks threw the Slavs back from the shore. The Slavs would build their cities elsewhere, on Balkan plains, in Balkan valleys and on the shores of Balkan lakes they would call seas.

The brilliant, tragic Bulgarian king Samuel moved his capital to Ohrid. My Macedonian friend and I climb up the crag to the old monumental gate and the remnants of ramparts from which he lorded his authority over southern Serbia, Albania, Macedonia, Thessaly and Epirus, between the Black Sea and the Adriatic. Unopposed, up and down valleys and across plains he marched his armies to the Isthmus of Corinth in southern Greece. The Byzantines finally stopped him on his way back, at Thermopylae in 997.

He had built himself a palace of towers ornamented with stone and fresco, and churches of marble and copper, silver and gold, in a kingdom of mud-caked hovels. He hung a mantle around his neck, embroidered with pearls and gold bracelets on his wrists and he wrapped his hips with velvet, and slung a sword in a jewelled scabbard. His boyars sat in ranks before him.

He would throw himself repeatedly at Thessalonica, too, but didn't he know? It was under the protection of St Demetrius, and the seawater was his.

*Ohrid, 1988:* I watch Goce across the café table, his dark face disappearing into the shade of the chestnut tree, and around us dark men drink red wine while pieces of lamb, jasmine and garlic, lemon and salt, sizzle on the grill. On Goce's face I watch the aggrieved expression of an ancient disappointment: the Slav who was thrown back by Greeks from the salt sea at the mouth of the Vardar and who now stands with his back to the lake at Ohrid, which, to comfort himself, he calls the Macedonian Sea.

Goce has been turned away at the Greek border. What are they afraid of? "Write this down!" he shouts at me. "The Greeks force the Slav Macedonians within their borders to write the epitaphs of their tombstones in Greek!" I write this down, swallowing a large mouthful of wine to stop my protest that Cyrillic is after all based on Greek letters, so..."And this! Marshal Tito, super-partisans of partisans,

scourge of fascists – may his memory be eternal – directed his partisans at the end of the war to head north in pursuit of the retreating Germans instead of unleashing them to go south. South! South all the way to Solun...to get it back.”

Back?

Goce did live there once, or may as well have done, so intensely can he taste the dust off the red Byzantine brick and the salt of the gulf. He had a garden and cultivated gourds and vines, combed the fleece of his sheep and built a stone altar to his gods. Then a Greek saint threw him out.

### *Slavs Come Down to the Balkans*

In 1912 the French Byzantinist, Alfred Rambaud, surveyed the ethnographic maps of the Balkans. Setting aside the Turks for the purpose of his argument, he saw there on the maps no “uniform hue consecrating the triumph of Hellenism” but rather “the strangest hotchpotch of colours.” If it weren’t for the Greeks of Thessalonica and the Macedonian coast, those in Constantinople and Athens would be “completely isolated.” [Rambaud p 264] British Byzantinists weighed in too, as late as the 1960s, when Romilly Jenkins mused on the decline of the Hellenic creative genius since Alexander of Macedon, due mainly to the decline in the *biological* stock of the Mediterraneans. [Vryonis, 1978, 238]

But what was more striking to me was the degree of Greek indignation at the very thought that they may have crossed bloodlines with the Slavs. After all, the barbarians did settle down and live alongside them, and eventually became Hellenized and Christianized and practically indistinguishable from their neighbours. Byzantine was not an ethnicity but a culture, at least until its late period, its name for itself *Roman/Romaioi*, indifferent to its racial antecedents and “quite accustomed to the situation in which the Empire had become, since late Roman times, an ethnic mixture on an enormous scale.”

If any culture had been exterminated, it was the Slavs’ What was so intolerable in the notion that there is no such thing as a racially-pure Greek? To quote a British–Russian–Jewish traveller to Monemvasia in 1995, “the idea of ethnic or genetic homogeneity in societies which have lived through centuries of movements of population, of immigration, emigration and re-migration, let alone invasion and occupation, is bogus and dangerous romantic twaddle.” [Kark 88]

Engineers of the great Byzantine emperor Justinian (483-565) had constructed a string of fortresses across Macedonia precisely to keep the Slavs out, and away from the Thessalonian prize. [Cheetham 15] The repair of the ancient wall across the isthmus that connected the Peloponnese to the Greek mainland was futile labour, however, and the destruction of the Justinian walls was so complete they are now unlocateable. The Slavs poured through and in 581, according to the ecclesiastical history of John of Ephesus, Slavs overran the whole of Greece, “captured the cities and took numerous forts and devastated and burned and reduced the people to slavery, and made themselves masters of the whole country.” [cited in Cheetham 16]

Byzantine culture was overwhelmed in the greater part of the southern Balkans. And “when the darkness begins to lift from the peninsula” in the ninth century, the Roman names for places have vanished, replaced by Slavic, Greek replaces Latin as the official language of the state, the Byzantine populations have been reduced to “murmur indignantly and endure.” Roman historian Polybius had warned, from the second century BC, that “what is more dreadful than a war with barbarians?” [cited in Obolensky 52]

Where the barbarians settled on Byzantine territory was called Sclavinia. In 581 John of Ephesus called them Slavonians and “an accursed people.” [in Obolensky 51] The countryside had become a wasteland abandoned by its farmers, turned now into a “Scythian” (Slav) wilderness of pestilence and

famine. Bishoprics were uprooted and administrative machinery collapsed. Highways fell into disrepair. When God is angry with humankind, it was said, He sends signs: plagues, earthquakes, floods, shipwrecks, civil wars, enslavement, and barbarians. Four thousand people in Patras were buried by an earthquake in 561; in 542 a great bubonic plague consumed whole villages and towns. The long stretch of the sixth to ninth centuries is sometimes called Byzantium's Dark Ages, or at least obscure times, according to which the Christian, Greek-speaking world centred on Constantinople in the eastern Mediterranean emerged forever differentiated from their identity as *Romans* - in direct lineal descent from the glories of the empire centred on Rome - by the two centuries of Slav barbarism that interposed. Unlike the Latins, however, who had succumbed to the Goths and Vandals, the Byzantines gradually began a reconquest of their territory, stationing troops in coastal cities such as Thessalonica, Patras and Monemvasia, and settling Greek farmers in the Balkans, then enserfed the Slavs, pressed them into the army, and evangelized them. One scholar calls this the "reconquista." [Vryonis, 1981, 423]

The gradual transformation of Slavic pastoralists who worshipped a god of thunder into Christians who paid tax to Constantinople was underway, and a new Byzantine character type pops up in the literature: take Pervund/Perbundus, for example, the Slav chieftain in the neighbourhood of Thessalonica who spoke fluent Greek and enjoyed parading about in Byzantine robes, or the comic bishop Niketas who mispronounced Greek, or the rich landowner in Constantinople who, boasting of his Peloponnesian origin, was given away by his Slavonic cheekbones. [Cheetham 22]

How was it possible for such unsophisticated barbarians as the Slavs, without political organization, to have wreaked such havoc on the Byzantines as to bring a "Dark Age" falling down upon them? They had lived peaceful, indeed monotonous, lives in forests and marshes, an economic niche "underexploited by their more sophisticated neighbours," [Whittow 49-50] beyond the gaze of the ancient world until they reached the Danube, and are finally mentioned at the beginning of the sixth century by Pseudo-Caesarius Nazianus.

The remains of their material culture found in excavations are unprepossessing in the extreme, the early Slavs having built their shelters half-sunken into the earth. As herdsmen, they knew neither ploughing nor slash-and-burn agriculture; as hunters and fishers, they lived in marshlands and along rivers, and hollowed out their boats from trees. They did not try to inhabit the Greek towns in the Balkans, such as remained, but set up their own villages organized around family groups. Later Romantic historians had them as bee-keepers and diligent cultivators of grain, fruit-growers and brewers of mead, with an aptitude for commerce, but this was not the culture they arrived with.

Why, then, the Greeks' historic sense of having been terrorized, and polluted, by such people? They were historically, after all, the more "cultivated and dynamic race." [Stratos 157]

Emperor Nicephorus I crushed a massive Slav siege – some sources say a riot - in Patras in 805, which was under the protection of St Andrew. Nicephorus enserfed them all, men, women and children, and handed them over as property to the church. By this time the Slavs had been on Greek territory for more than two hundred years, pushed around by Greek colonists forcibly settled from Asia Minor. "Their [the Slavs'] back was broken," writes Peter Charanis of the campaigns of Nicephorus. "Nicephorus saved Greece from becoming slavonicized." [Charanis 86] By his feat the Slavs were then absorbed into Christianity, and discharged into the great currents of history, their gods and their names for things exhaled as effluvia of cultural failure.

*There are two Ukrainian Orthodox churches in Saskatoon: the original one, located in what is called*

*here the Core Neighbourhood and which used to be East European working class but is now mainly aboriginal (Good-bye Dnipro Cafe, Hello White Buffalo Youth Lodge); and a suburban one beautifully done in wooden Carpathian-style. I picked the first one because it was closer to where I live and I got hooked. The congregation is middle-aged and elderly with a sprinkling of young and fertile Ukrainian immigrants, it is working and lower middle class, it has a pretty darn good choir; beautiful Byzantine-style frescoes, and a young priest who grew up on a Manitoba farm and decided to join the priesthood the day his boss on the oil rig in Alberta wouldn't let him go home for Ukrainian Easter. I was immediately welcomed into this community and have got into the spirit of the thing: I've driven a carful of women around to sing Ukrainian Christmas carols at people's homes, laid tables and cleaned up after community lunches, sung with the choir (once and never again), joined a short-lived group learning to sing the Liturgical chants. We were five: me, my friend Elaine, cantors Wally and Ernie, and Stefan, the church caretaker. Well, the men already knew how to sing, in all eight tones of the Byzantine chant. Me, I couldn't hear the difference, and sat abashed.*

I wrote this in a notebook, then wondered: Were Ukrainian-Canadians all pious once upon a time? All of us – from the women in fantastically-flowered Easter hats to the men on the farms who took wives and children to church but themselves stood outside the building, leaning on their wagons, smoking, and talking about grain prices? From the Ukrainian-speaking priest who threw his stole over my head to hear my confession and wondered how to get through to me, to the tiny old woman, bent over at a right angle from her waist, in permanent paralysis, kissing and stroking the icon laid on the lower altar? I am told my paternal Baba was a woman of great piety, although I have no memory of any particular instance of it, unless it were her remark that her one wish at the end of her life was to die when it was not winter, for how were the poor gravediggers to dig her grave in the blasted heath that is the Canadian parkland in the winter? (She died in a February.) My paternal grandfather died before I was born, but I did come across the small black and white photograph of his funeral in the cigar box with the hinged lid that so fascinated me: it was taken outside the church somewhere near the farm, my father was one of the pallbearers, hatless though stout with a winter coat (another winter funeral), my grandfather laid out in the open coffin, his hands crossed over his dark-suited chest, his face bearing a large moustache. Fortunately, Baba had borne a family of sons; she did not have to sell the family farm. Is this what constituted Ukrainian-Canadian piety, a church for the rites of passage, the twelve dishes of Christmas Eve for the twelve Apostles, a bowl of painted Easter eggs on the coffee table, and a prayer at the end of life not to be a burden to anyone, not even in one's coffin?

My maternal grandparents were something else altogether. What I know of their attitudes to the Ukrainian, or any Christian, church I know from my mother's familiar anecdotes as well as from what I sensed when I was in their home: they never went to church and hung no icons. Arguments between my father and Dido were as often as not provoked by the brandishing of their respective newspapers, *The Ukrainian Voice* vs *Farm and Life*. Dido was not my biological grandfather – that man had died in his early thirties, from pneumonia contracted from one walk too many on the long, dark, cold walk home from the rearing plant in east Edmonton. Dido was his brother, a thin, bug-eyed, gristly-bearded man in coveralls and long johns who spoke no English and who had married, as was expected, the widow of his brother. As the story goes, he forced his new wife to give up her Bible and placed it in the outhouse – Baba, whose best subject in four years of school in Galicia had been religion – and made a fuss whenever mum was invited by the daughters of “English” neighbours to join them in going to a Sunday service at the neighbourhood United or Anglican church. For this was the same householder who who spat invective against priests (“blood-suckers”) and hung large portraits of Lenin and Stalin in the front room.

When I have supper with my mother in a restaurant now, with its luxury of time, I know I can always

count on her revisiting her young womanhood. I have heard some of these stories many, many times but now I listen alert to the meanings they might hold for my own narrative.

For example, the tale of the surprise suitor, a Bill M. He was a fellow student at Normal School but otherwise she had no acquaintance with him. “Imagine how I felt,” she invites me, meaning that I should share the shock of her surprise when Bill M. showed up unannounced at her parents’ home in east end Edmonton. Mum was studying in the little vestibule/porch. “I was a serious girl,” she says, “I studied hard and helped my mother with the cows and chickens and there was certainly no money for hair cuts or new dresses and I had no time for boys,” but here was one, asking her to go out with him that very evening. At least, she assumed that was his intention; but, having caught a glimpse of the imposing portrait of Lenin on the front room wall, he made his excuses and departed. He never approached her again.

I had always found this anecdote mildly amusing. Mum always tells it with a tone of reproach, both toward Bill M. for his fecklessness and toward her parents who should be so unhelpful in her social life as to hang such pictures on a Canadian wall. But now I want to know more. Why is it that she did not align herself with the politics or at least the community of the Ukrainian-Canadian left? “I just felt there was something wrong about it.” I think I am meant to understand her as admirably her own woman in such a milieu but now I am irritated and regretful, for by never associating with the “goings-on” at the Hall (the Communist-fronted Labour Temple), she has effectively deprived me of an interesting legacy: that of a parent who marched in May Day parades or learned labour songs or heard speeches by Ukrainian-Canadian Communist militants or memorized proletarian verses by Ukrainian poets or saluted the hammer-and-sickle flag or... whatever subversive or at least alternative culture was incubated away from the churches.

“Oh, leave her alone!” said Baba in mother’s defense. “Let her go to church if she wants to.” And off mama went, a few times, and to this day longs for the hymn-singing of those Protestant immigrant and working-class congregations who sang their hearts out, the minister’s wife joyfully banging away at the rickety upright piano, singing texts that were *normal* – everybody knew them even if they themselves weren’t “English” from song books and glee clubs and school recitals: *Rock of Ages, cleft for me, and let me hide myself in thee... Glory, glory, hallelulia, His truth goes marching on...* just as everyone knew the words to *The Maple Leaf Forever* and I would eventually be able to sing *La Marseillaise* and *The Internationale*.

I see now that I was more my Dido’s granddaughter than my mother’s daughter. I have spent most of my conscious life as a secular humanist, receptive to movements that followed on my adolescence: the New Left, the counterculture, feminism, Canadian cultural nationalism, environmentalism, Soviet and East European dissidence. I was overwhelmed by wave upon wave of distress and outrage at the iniquities of the powerful and ruthless around the world, and I found solace not in spiritual practices (as others did in Buddhist meditation and Native American peyote ceremonies and Liberation Theology, anywhere but in a church) but mainly in political texts. I pored over Marx and Lenin in Sunday morning (!) reading circles and Germaine Greer and Kate Millett in feminist reading groups and Malcolm X, Regis Debray, and eventually the entire library of New Left Canadian critiques of the world order in the books I was piling into my own library. If that’s what we mean by ‘modernity,’ there was a very good reason why I spent most of my life inside it, namely my conviction that the human heart is a capacious enough organ to enable me to live life as a good person.

And I suspected that faith in the transcendent was some kind of luxury for the lucky few who know how to pray.

“The illusory importance and autonomy of private life,” wrote German philosopher Theodor Adorno, “conceals the fact that private life drags on only as an appendage of the social process.” [cited by Jacqueline Rose, p 21] All through the decades of my intellectual maturation and beyond, even as the idealized models collapsed – the Left into a dustbin of history, feminism into post-feminism, the “peace dividend” into perpetual war - I believed passionately in the possibility of human solidarity.

But as I stood in the Basilica of St Demetrius in Thessalonica, surrounded by images of his ineffable beauty and venerating them, I can see now that I was struggling for a “self” that was neither reducible to some private psychodrama nor dismissible by an ironic, despairing flourish of postmodernism. I was admitting to myself, icon by icon, that my “self” was embedded in the matrix of spirit, as well as in history, politics, culture. And even as I began to thresh about for a spiritual vocabulary for my desires, I knew that “salvation” was not personal but would still somehow be a communal struggle, as “liberation” and “revolution” had been. That it might be taking on the form of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of my childhood was not yet an issue; the struggle was.

*It is fitting for Greeks to rule barbarians.*

Euripedes, *Iphigenia in Aulis*

December, 2001. As I made my way back to my hotel in Monemvasia, in the Peloponnese in Greece, I heard the bells pealing from the church in the next street. Vespers? I slipped inside, and stood at the back along with several women and a couple of men. There were two cantors at the front, an old man leaning on a cane and warbling weakly, and a young man I recognized from the old town in the afternoon, still in his windbreaker and sneakers. I stood, hands at my sides, and tried to recognize “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” so that I could make the sign of the cross - *I am Orthodox, see me sign!* – but I remained baffled. The little altar in front of the iconostas (I know there’s a word for it) consisted of a simple folding table dressed with a white cloth on which had been placed a bowl of *kolivo* (cooked wheat, the food of the dead) impaled by three burning tapers. The white-bearded priest, big-bellied under his black cassock and gold stole, gestured perfunctorily. Well, he was a civil servant, after all, and wanted to be home. *This is how I become one of those Slavs at the furthest reaches of the Peloponnese: I stand motionless in front of an iconostas, my hands by my sides, bewildered by the goings-on, and become a Christian.* It will be ages and eras before I believe, but I will show up in Orthodox churches because it is my memory of the gods.

I want to understand what happened at that moment of transformation of the Slavic world by the Christian Gospel, and how the Byzantines felt about these very same barbarians – from whom they so recently had had to save themselves – now that they too were in possession of the Word. When I returned to Thessalonica, I put the question to Byzantinist Dr. Antony-Emil Tachiaos. He offered the notion of “transplantation,” not “assimilation,” to account for what happened – as in “transplantation of Byzantine cultural elements into the Slavonic world.” The Slavs found Byzantium irresistibly attractive because, argued Tachiaos, “they could not produce Byzantine culture themselves...could not say the Liturgy as such, the readings of the Holy Scriptures as such, even make the movements of the priest during the Divine Service. The Slav Christians did not *imitate* these, they *transplanted* them,” into the quiescent humus of their souls.

In the Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity in Saskatoon, there hangs the iconic representation of the Baptism of Ukraine. Saint and Prince Volodymyr in Byzantine court dress looks Mongol, high-cheeked and mustachioed, not at all Nordic, as he supervises the rite. His people throng waist-deep in the river while priests lean over from the riverbank, blessing the waters while soldiers stand in disciplined ranks before them. Here then are all the social orders. From Volodymyr’s hand spills a scroll: *God Almighty*



*who created heaven and earth, look now upon these new people, and grant, Lord, that they acknowledge you the true God as the Christian nations have done.*

There's one in every Eastern rite Ukrainian-Canadian church I've been in, in vestibule, nave or basement – a depiction of the Christian baptism of Rus' in the waters of the tributary Pochaino River. The entire population of Kyiv has been assembled on the river shore and some are already knee deep in the stream while Prince Volodymyr, dressed as a Byzantine knight in long white tunic and bejewelled belts, sternly directs this compulsory conversion of his people. Until this moment, they have been satisfied with a cosmology peopled by forces – Hors, the sun god, Volos, god of cattle, Striboh, wind god, Dazhboh, god of abundance and fertility and mightiest of all, capped with silver, Perun god of thunder - whose veneration and conciliation they had shared universally with all peoples who have not yet become "historic."

Marriage had forced Volodymyr's hand. The Byzantine emperor, Basil II, would betroth his sister to this barbarian chieftain on condition that the bridegroom convert to Christianity, baptised by a Byzantine bishop. Anna walked solemnly out the gates of Constantinople accompanied by a retinue of priests and a loud and eloquent lamentation that she was being married to no better than an idol worshipper and slave trader. With the ardour of the newly-converted, Volodymyr ordered that the idols should be overthrown. His people fell upon them with axes - they tilted woefully on the riverbank, awaiting their fate - and built a pyre of them and burned them. Almighty Perun was tied to a horse's tail and dragged about the city, bashed pitilessly by citizens wielding sticks seeking vengeance on the Fiend who had chosen this attractive form – the silver cap, the golden mustache - to walk among them, before being tossed ignominiously into the river and disappearing over a waterfall. Then Volodymyr sent the children of the noble families to school, to learn to read Greek and Slavonic, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah: "In that day shall the deaf hear the words of a book, and the tongue of the dumb shall be clearly heard."

*A few months ago, away from home, I picked up the copy of the Gideon's Bible discreetly shelved in the hotel cupboard drawer, and let it fall open. The passage I read there was from James 3:6. "And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell".*

*It's still a shock, that vivid Biblical language of harsh judgement, yet so vivid and stirring. I had 'left the church' (that is, stopped going to Sunday services) in order to go out into the world of ideas and argument, my tongue on fire. I will never agree that such fiery speech could ever 'defile' the entire body of the community.*

One hot July afternoon in Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley, the air so stilled from heat that even the flies could not be bothered lifting themselves off the window panes, I sat with a friend, also a writer, who had bought this land we were sitting on, a serene and undulating landscape shaped by the meandering ribbon of water in the valley bottom. We talked about ambivalence and anxiety, that peculiar state of people who have experienced themselves all their lives as rational beings (we two, for example), only to be sabotaged, blind-sided, shaken, upended, by what my friend called "a longing for the holy" which arrives seemingly out of the clear blue heaven but which also, if you think about it, makes perfect sense. I was listening to him with mounting agitation, for I guessed where this was heading.

My friend, an environmentalist and amateur ornithologist, is a practising Roman Catholic (after a long lapse) who was unafraid, to judge from his books, to speak publicly as a man of faith, and to interrogate

that faith. The “sense” to be made of this was that not everything could be known by the exercise of logic and judgement (a modesty lost to us since the Enlightenment). Considering all the materials I had gathered in my “Demetrius project,” did I not feel, he asked, the urge to go beyond the narrative and intellectual limits of history, ethnology, and what I was calling my deep, personal cultural grammar? Did I not want to push the boundaries of what I already knew from intellectual experience, a push from my religious heritage, not to mention from a certain saint of Byzantium? Saints are our intercessors with God, and here was one who was tapping me on the shoulder. God may or may not be out there (or in here), but we certainly aren’t going to find out one way or another by the application of our reasoning alone. We are likelier to find Him through the slippages offered by uncertainty and ambivalence, what he called *the anxious threshold experience* of travelling between *rationality and faith, doubt and spiritual longing*.

“Think of what happens in the act of creativity,” my friend invited me. “That mysterious arrival out of nowhere of a thought or image you did not know you were thinking or seeing? St Paul said to the Romans, ‘And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.’ ”

Mind, yes, but mind *renewed*, transformed into the highest faculty of human nature – the eyes of the heart, “the eyes of your understanding,” as Paul explained it to the Ephesians.

“Illumine our hearts,” Orthodox Christians pray before the reading of the Gospel begins. It is not Christianity which needs to be “rationalized,” writes Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, but reason which is to be “Christianized.” “I believe,” we begin, and perhaps from the believing proceeds a new understanding of who and where we are, and not the other way around, as my lonely, rational self has believed.

#### *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: How the Slavs Got an Alphabet*

It is told that in 862, Rastislav, Moravian prince, sent messengers to the Byzantine emperor Michael III, saying, ‘Our nation is baptised, and yet we have no teacher to direct and instruct us and interpret the sacred scriptures. We understand neither Greek nor Latin. Some teach us one thing and some another. Furthermore, we do not understand written characters nor their meaning. Therefore send us teachers who can make known to us the words of the scriptures and their sense.’ [*Russian Primary Chronicle* 62-3] Michael heard them out, then sent for Cyril the Philosopher (born Constantine in Thessalonica) and had him listen to the matter:

And he said: “Philosopher, I know that you are weary, but it is necessary that you go there. For no one can attend to this matter like you.”

And the Philosopher answered: “Though I am weary and sick in body, I shall go gladly, if they have a script for their language.”

Then the Emperor said to him: “My grandfather and my father, and many others have sought this but did not find it. How then can I find it?”

And the Philosopher answered: “Who can write a language on water and acquire for himself a heretic’s name?”

And together with his uncle, Bardas, the Emperor answered him again: “If you wish, God may give you this as He gives to everyone that asks without doubt, and opens to them that knock.”

The Philosopher went and, following his old habit, gave himself up to prayer together with his other associates. Hearing the prayer of His servants, God soon appeared to him. And immediately Constantine composed letters and began to write the language of the Gospel, that is: “In the beginning

was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” and so forth. [Kantor 111]

What Cyril employed was the Glagolitic script, from Slav, *glagol*, “verb,” or, as the *Macedonian Times* has it, “called Glagolitic because its miraculous signs could speak.” If speak they once did (and into Croatia and along the Dalmatian coast as well as in Moravia), they do no more, for it is a most peculiar-looking script -although an improvement on the scratches and glyphs with which Slavs had had to make do until then – even “outlandish,” for in its sequences of what I think of as dipsy-doodles it resembles no known alphabet. Scholars have come forward to claim its origins in Georgian, Hebrew-Samaritan, Syriac and even Byzantine alchemical symbols, but to the biographer of Cyril it was God-given. And at its arrival from his prayer, “the Emperor rejoiced, and together with his counsellors glorified God.” [Kantor 68]

Certainly, Cyril had heard all about the history of the Slavs in the Homilies thundered against them in the Basilica of St Demetrius, in the cautionary texts inscribed in the mosaics, and in the account of his miracles assembled as a single text in the seventh century. And it is generally agreed that he and his brother were familiar with the Slavic speech of Macedonia, perhaps were even born to a Slavic mother. As he and his brother Methodius walked about the city and its marketplaces, they would have spoken with Slavic-speaking peasants selling their produce from the Macedonian countryside. “Each morning, when the great gates in the city walls opened – the Golden Gate, the Letaea Gate and the Cassandria Gate – groups of Slavs would enter the city and pursue their affairs there,” including buying and selling among the Greeks in verbal exchanges of broken tongues. [Tachiaos 16]

So, Cyril gathered his brother Methodius and other monks, and together with them set off in the Spring of 863 for the court of Rastislav.

Once they were in Moravia, the missionaries taught their flock Matins and the Hours, Vespers and the Compline, and the Liturgy in Slavonic -the *Vita* of Methodius recounts how he and Cyril placed their translation under the patronage of St Demetrius, who surely took no offence - and “the ears of the deaf were unstopped, the words of the Scripture were heard, and the tongue of stammerers spoke clearly. And God rejoiced over this, while the devil was shamed.” [Kantor 69]

This, at least, is how the Byzantine world saw matters. In the Latin-speaking west, where German clergy held sway in Moravia in direct competition for souls, these two pious, long-bearded, ascetic monks speaking Greek and dragging parchments of new-fangled Slavonic scriptures around with them, were bordering on a heresy. In defiance of a doctrine of Trilingualism (ignored in the east) that held that there were only three languages in which the name of God could be praised, Hebrew, Greek and Latin (the three languages of Pilate’s text nailed to Christ’s cross on Golgotha), sacred texts in Slavic might be blasphemous.

Bishops, priests and monk of the Latin church fell upon the Greek missionaries “like crows upon a hawk,” saying, “Tell us, man, how is it that you have created a script for the Slavs, and teach it to them, a script such as none other has ever found before, neither apostle, nor Pope of Rome, nor yet Gregory the Theologian, Jerome or Augustine?” [Kantor 71] The problem did not lie in the Slavic language as such but that it was used in the texts of the Liturgy and Sacraments: the Slav was free to preach and pray in Slavonic but not to be baptized or prepare the Eucharist in the barbarian tongue.

The brothers were forced to defend their work before synods and symposia in Rome. Cyril’s reply has been recorded by his biographer in Slavonic, although it is certain he addressed the Latin clergy in Greek. With this masterful stroke, to all future generations of Slavic Christians this little treasure of

spiritual and moral compassion, this gesture to the Slavs of recognition of their dignity before the face of God if not of the western church, was given. He said: “But does the rain not fall equally upon all people, does the sun not shine for all, and do we not all breathe the air in equal measure?... Tell me, do you not render God powerless, that He is incapable of granting this?... For David cries out, saying, ‘O sing unto the Lord, all the earth: sing unto the Lord a new song.’” [Kantor 71]  
And so the Slavs came into Byzantium, singing.

*Listen now, all Slav peoples, listen to the words coming from God, which feed human souls, words that heal our hearts and minds.*

*Constantine's Prologue to the Scriptures*

Pope Hadrian in Rome, happily, looked on the Byzantine missions with favour and, taking the books of Slavic translation that Cyril and Methodius brought him, laid them on an altar in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, consecrating them, and celebrated Divine Liturgy over them. The next day and the day after that and the one following, the Slavic liturgy was celebrated all over Rome, approved and accepted as sacred.

“And his many labours overtook him and he fell ill.” [Kantor 77] Constantine/Cyril died in Rome in 869, saying from his deathbed that he was “neither a servant of the Emperor nor of anyone else on earth, but only of God Almighty. I was not, and I came to be, and am forever. Amen.”  
And forever to us, who regard his iconical aspect in the churches of the Slavonic liturgies, he is a saint in the softly-folded garment of a priest, white-bearded with a wavy fringe of hair on his forehead, haloed, the Gospel resting on his left arm: serene and immensely dignified as is fitting for a great teacher and scribe of a whole new world. Slavs harkened to the word inscribed for them by a monk who dreamed in Byzantium.

November 27, 2009

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