

ALICE IN WASTELAND, WONDERS AVAILABLE  
(Croatian writer Irena Lukšić: a portable portrait)

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To judge a writer from a 'minute' - and oh, so provincial - country like Croatia (our national anthem praises only the looks of the country, mentioning nothing about its *brains*) means also that everyone, conventionally, expects you to introduce both the artist and the native ground as Arcadian, exotic, perfect, *de luxe* and faultless. But, interestingly, such a utopia is boring. As is, ultimately, every lie.

Reality check: ever since the nineteenth century, Croatia has had and continues to have many bitter (male) novelists, expressing mainly our very rustically designed intellectual vacuum - Antun Gustav Matoš, Janko Polić Kamov, Miroslav Krleža, Ranko Marinković, Antun Šoljan. Irony's edge has always been so sharp, so desperately, militantly grotesque, that Swift's *Modest Proposal* could stand as an acutely close literary relative to the cynicism of our fictional heroes. Hence Croatian literature is, generally speaking, grim, pessimistic, reflexive and highly influenced by expressionism. We still scream a lot.

And Irena Lukšić - ha! - is an exception.

For she is *not* discouraged beforehand by the 'social pathology' of small communities and small nations. Namely, she is not interested in the myth-and-history agenda, the great movements of the masses or the murders of past and present kings. What she explores is an autobiographically stated meta-fiction (her many different lead characters are always portrayed in the same, female first person). Given that her inner story-teller is also an eminent - and even boring - scholar of slavistic provenance, Lukšić escapes her academic loftiness by writing vivacious literature (think of David

Lodge, John Barth, Umberto Eco); and thus employs various games of intertextuality, interdiscursivity and auto-meta-narration.

Lukšić produces mentally *isolated*, ultimately individual micro-selves. Not by 'floating' in the hermetic/hermeneutic waters of contemporary impressionist, solipsistic 'female writing' (Croatia too, unfortunately, has several terrible examples of that trend) - no. Irena is more interested in weaving a *post-modern (inter-)'net'*, with numerous *stories* and even more 'broken ladders' or subversions of the classical (master) narrative technique. But all "violations of the tale's laws" are hidden in one, firm, coherent, well-plotted and open-ended story. She may remind one of Nabokov, or his pupil, John Updike, especially in his early works, such as *Centaur* (incidentally, *Centaur* is one of her favourite novels).

Lukšić's literary voice - *style*, if you will - manages to woo one with a witty, humorous, colloquial and simultaneously surreal manner. She particularly enjoys mixing fantasy, genre-playing, Zen and *joie de vivre*, not to mention the overlapping of the festive "let's celebrate every moment of our lives" mood with parodic bits and pieces of trivial literature (commercials, newspaper or popular culture titles, advertisements, etc.). In the novel *Seven Stories Or One Life* (1986), Lukšić creates special comic effects by mocking the serious genre of *scholarly footnotes*: they are ironic counterpoints not only to the 'official' fictional text, but also to the 'seriousness' and arrogance of the grown-up (frowned-up), stiff system of thinking ('facts', as Russell would call them, are contrary to creative, philologically produced, fantastic 'explanations' - *Croatian* words are 'explicated' in an amusing context of *European* language systems, like an inverted dictionary in which the meaning is substituted by deliberate and humorous errors).

Suggestive, poetic images - "veins resembled a simplified picture of intensive traffic under the surface of a complicated urban organism" from *The Shining Star of Rovinj* - are another luring feature of her writing skill. As well as the calligraphic "brush", an eye for detail in the hand of a miniaturist, that easily performs extravagant literary images plus verbal puns - "She smiled at me so mysteriously, like a face from an old German twenty-note" from

*The Wizard's Latest Self.* That's the better looking, Cheshire-smiling side of her portrait.

But let's also discuss the other side of the coin.

In trying not to be effected/infected by the typical Croatian lack of enthusiasm (swamp-phenomenon), Lukšić's characters often fall into paranoia and escapism. They believe their destiny is oftentimes fixed in a genre called *road story* - "a thousand ways to escape from the native swamp" (perhaps it should be noted that the narrator's narrow field of scholarly interest is *emigrant literature*) - in which their expected final destinations, possibly encompassing a happy ending, easily turn out to be lost, imagined, postponed forever, deceptive or simply wrong. Alien spaces are frequently interpolated within the character's familiar space, as McHale would have it, and by the method of many 'double expositions', of imagined zones within imagined zones, we travel deeper and deeper into the narrator's mind.

*The Shining Star of Rovinj*, for example, incorporates ten independent, encircled stories: 1) the narrator's story about a business trip to Geneva, an "encounter on a train" story and, ironically, a contemporary version of Tolstoy's *Kreuzer Sonata*; 2) the melodramatic story of a female fellow-passenger; 3) a suspense story about a very famous and rich old lady, Sidonia Polak-Wilson, thereby intimating a parody of *Crime and Punishment*; 4) a tale about the sex life of the narrator's tomcat, Panda, back home; 5) a story about academic life abroad and a visiting guest, Professor Ralph Jones; 6) a story about academic life in Croatia and Professor Fortuna; 7) a story about a fellow passenger's diary and changes to the narrator's identity; 8) a sardonic 'folk-tale' about the life of village teachers; 9) a Zen story about the light, mass and secret of the universe; 10) a story about *making wishes*, which unites all the previous stories insofar as all of them, either by retrograde or chronological narration, sooner or later encroach upon wishful thinking, initiated by the shining star of Rovinj.

At the end of the path - and that's the weakest point of Lukšić's text - this whole constructed mental adventure turns out to be the writer's daydream. As simple as that. You *cannot* change the

world, you cannot *act*, the author states. You can only fancy the change.

Lukšić prefers to leave her Oz, her meditation routine, which, in most cases, is structured as a *huge rhetorical asyndeton of dreams*, through an abrupt awakening. In her most recent story, *Dogs at the Supermarket*, the overall situation is only slightly different. While passengers wait for the train to depart, the author travels through their imagined destinies, fears, joys and hopes; and the chain of endless, fictitious stories ends with the first sighs of the locomotive breathing. The iron curtain of reality once more divides the material (immobile) world from the fantastic (active, creative) world. For Lukšić, literature is not a supernatural force of cathartic exercise, nor is it merely mimesis. Writing is a legitimate, beautiful dream area - and a very lonely and self-sufficient one at that - in which one's mind does everything it feared to do in reality. But it is *not* a game. Lukšić writes (1986: 35,53):

“The game is the only reality without micro-worlds. Because its only reality are the rules... Where do all of these men rush so frantically? From life into game-playing, into a closed system of precise laws, into a system dominated by the best and most cunning. They are the weaker sex, they don't take any surprises too well. Igrac too will go somewhere to play, to run away from his thirty years of marriage, from the relationship without any mutual digging, and why? Because the players, so scared of getting lost, constantly cheated on each other.”

As noted in an extract from *The Shining Star of Rovinj*, Irena Lukšić treats literature as though it were “a world moved by our own will and hence endlessly good”. Or as the territory of endless daring alternatives to an otherwise intimidating universe (1986: 31):

“In a real life there is only one road, the others are here only at the level of possibility. And these possible paths shall be used by writers, for that's the place where a writer's marionettes walk.”

It would be mistaken, however, to assume that Lukšić is incapable of noticing hyper-realistic details. Indeed, her stories are

*overloaded* with the exact titles of various commercial products, with all kinds of everyday information, with ordinary people and village crowds. She even calls her own backyard a 'theatre', suggesting Lope de Vega's playful togetherness of performing semi-urban individuals. And her language is, not surprisingly, a common language. Yet Lukšić's road stories, as *A Day in the Life of a Laponian Princess* highlights, imply that "a reality itself does not exist. Dream is nature's masterpiece" (Lukšić, 1995: 25).

So, why does the woman travel into parallel worlds that much?

*Compared to what are they 'more real'?*

First, and on this point I agree, sincere fictional characters are 'more real' than usual, everyday 'false authorities', figures that Lukšić describes as the "will to power and inner shabbiness." Secondly, the jobless heroine of her novel *Making Connections* (1987) happens to be sufficiently educated to be able to lecture at the university or earn her living as a rock star, but - no. The character's actual qualification proves to be *fantastic, completely useless*, in comparison to 'successful', useful, employed mediocres.

Conclusion: as psychoanalysis reasonably claims, dreams, including the literary dreams of Irena Lukšić, compensate for the real (injustices). They serve to release subconscious desires, to *tell the truth* about 'us' and 'them'. Nevertheless, the author's literary dreams also represent exercises in the 'will to power', with the exception that this power shall now be utilised *over the text*. Dreams certainly have an anarchic, power-trip potential, similar to, say, the non-linear, linguistic orgy of contemporary novels. One should not overlook their vindictive potential as well - anger silenced in real life rages in our nightmares. The seductiveness of projected desires lies in their feigned, cartoon-like superpower, while a fall from the eleventh floor of reality would not transform one into a nightingale - but a corpse.

Dreams are lethal weapons (see: propaganda, Romanticism etc.).

One step further: the creativity involved in making illusions is frequently the heart and soul of creativity itself, but literature must

*never be* used for the sole purpose of escapism. We, writers and readers, must believe that the artistic text could communicate its signs even if there is *nothing to compensate* in the author's life!

As for Irena Lukšić, she still has not made up her mind whether to finally *live out* her dreams, her passion for endless text-and-reality knitting, the 'curse' of being a concrete incarnation of her own utopias; or whether she is ashamed of her own gift of speech and thought, and would rather 'wake up' into being silent. If the bigger, funnier, smarter parts of her *oeuvre* favour the first option, then the tiny monster of 'dare not!' still lives in the secretive corners of her imagination. Here, I cannot resist citing a definition of Lukšić's narration, by my dear friend and colleague, Dubravka Petrović:

Irena is, surely, a whimsical, wistful writer, that knows how to laugh at things she is otherwise unwilling to confront. She's a painter, not a confronter.

The same could be said about Jerome David Salinger, or Sasha Sokolov, or many writers formed during the notoriously fantastic nineteen-sixties, *those strawberry hills forever* and *across the universe* and Martin Luther's *I have a dream*. For them, both dreams and laughter, as tender, non-confronting, childish and non-political ways of avoiding the new maladies of our free-market society, are all that's left from Woodstock's high hopes.

Irena Lukšić is a talented writer because, in most cases, she manages to defeat the demons of sealed lips and blind obedience (she has not become one of those converted, established hippies), and when I say 'blind obedience' I mean that she reduces herself to neither narcotic fantasy nor plane (realistic) ordinariness. Like a jazz musician, she takes advantage of disharmony.

Now it's your turn to take her up on the challenge.