

## IN MEMORIAM

### IVO VIDAN (1927-2003)

Ivo Vidan, professor of English literature at the University of Zagreb and its head for many years, was the editor of *Studia Romanica et Anglica Zagrabiensia* from 1986 till 1994. Professor Vidan will be remembered as the author of five books and many notable articles, both in Croatian and English, on Joyce, Conrad, Faulkner and other Modernist authors as well as the chronologist of Croatian literature for *World Literature Today*. However, his major contribution was in the advancement of comparative methodology. His intertextual readings of Croatian authors in the context of European and Anglo-American culture opened up new perspectives. He was a respected representative of Croatian culture abroad, and an inspiring teacher under whose supervision many generations of Croatian scholars in English Studies wrote their MA or PhD theses.

But, this is not how Ivo will be primarily remembered by those who knew and loved him. We will mostly miss his wry humor and his sharp mind, verging on cynicism, but never turning into it. Ivo loved to laugh, and the corridor in our department is certainly a sadder place for the lack of the echo of his laughter. But even more than this, we will miss his attentive ear. Ivo knew how to listen to his students, to his colleagues, to books. Ivo, the critic, and Ivo, the friend, shared this quality. As a critic, he never theorised about books, he did not force them within the framework of any preconceived theoretical structure. He let books speak to him, interpreting what they had to say. As a friend, he did not try to influence one's opinion but listened attentively, trying to understand.

The best way to characterise Ivo is to describe him as a cosmopolitan. Although it may sound almost like an oxymoron in describing someone who was from a place which Westerners usually perceive as an Eastern European

country blocked by the Iron Curtain (in spite of the fact that the Republic of Croatia, within ex-Yugoslavia, was a non-aligned country, west of the 1948 Iron Curtain). However, Ivo was a true cosmopolitan, though his cosmopolitanism was not a happy fate. Due to their Jewish background, Ivo's family had to flee Zagreb at the beginning of the Second World War. They escaped to the Croatian island of Korčula, where, under the less oppressive Italian regime, though still banned from attending regular school, he received his education from private tutors. This adolescent experience influenced him in two important ways. Living a more secluded life than boys of his age normally do, he developed a passion for reading. Also, at this early age, he cultivated sensitivity for social prejudices and injustice and the need to open up to other ethnicities and cultures.

Ivo Vidan received his PhD from the University of Nottingham, with a thesis on Conrad. Throughout his life Conrad remained his major research interest. He also wrote about Joyce, Forster, and the Nobel prize-winning Bosnian author of Croatian background, Ivo Andrić. His choices were, I believe, governed by a characteristic shared by all these authors. In today's critical terms it can be described as the postcolonial interest in the ways of production of the cultural Other. Given how Ivo read them, I would rather describe it as an admiration for a particular kind of social sensitivity, one which strongly reacted against judging people because of their skin colour or the shape of their noses. These, together with a sense of loyalty, the notion that 'one should not jump' whatever the danger or the temptation, I believe to be the root of the affinity Ivo felt for these particular authors.

This concern with ethics and ethnicity permeated his own critical writing, its major concern being the human being's struggle for dignity and self-realisation, within the limitations of historic circumstances. Following Conrad, Vidan believed that the meaning of the text was not in its centre but in the halo surrounding it and shedding light on it. Close to the contemporary notion of cultural studies, Vidan's reading never limited itself only to the explication of the text, but looked into the wider production of meaning dependent on the cultural context, the interaction between the text and the discursive tradition within which it was written and read, and the general social and cultural circumstances which influenced and modified its reading. This interaction between the text and the relevant cultural background, Vidan described as context, intertext or aura (*Texts and their Contexts*, 1975; *The English Intertext of Croatian Literature*, 1995; *Explicating the Aura*, 2003).

Whether writing about Croatian authors for a foreign audience, foreign authors for the Croatian audience, or exploring the presence of a foreign context

or intertext in the work of a particular author, Vidan was always aware that each work was in a certain way a translation, in a sense that it was a transposition of one culture to a new context. Or, as he himself put it: “It is not the actual amount of borrowing ... that matters most, but the function which these borrowings acquire in their new context. Our concern is not only with what they contribute to the Croatian text but also how these appropriations from foreign sources make part of the world view and the spiritual, political, or artistic intention of the Croatian author and how they express his milieu.”<sup>1</sup>

Though Croatian culture is indebted to Professor Vidan both for his interpretations of English speaking authors (even at times when it was not opportune) and for his inspired contextual readings of major Croatian writers, which shed a new light on their works, his major contribution to Croatian criticism is that he read and wrote in the tradition of an English scholar. Making his critical effort look more like a hobby than a professional discipline, Vidan produced critical texts free of rigid theoretical jargon and a delight to read.

The last thing that Ivo did before he fell asleep, to wake no more, was to read. He read *The Hours*. The ending of the novel, which he never reached, in an uncanny way highlights the meaning - and meaningfulness - of his life. Pondering the fact of Richard’s death, Clarissa thinks thus: ‘We throw our parties, we struggle to write books that do not change the world, despite our gifts and our unstinting effort, our most extravagant hopes... There is just this for consolation: an hour here and there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we ever imagined ... we cherish the city, the morning: we hope, more than anything, for more.’<sup>2</sup> This is how I like to think of Ivo: as one who lived life, who indulged in it, and did not let Kairos pass by. As in the photograph in his wife’s room, I see him as a small boy with angelic curly hair, holding a book in his hands. Yet, this book is not a shield; it is a means to the fullness of life, to its jouissance.

Ljiljana Ina Gjurgjan

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<sup>1</sup> Ivo Vidan, ‘The English Intertext of Croatian Literature: Forms and Functions’, *Studia Romanica et Anglica Zagradiensia*, XLII (1997): 391-2.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p. 22.

