

EDITORIAL: BROCK, GREGOR AND DENNETT

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Peter Brock, Emeritus Professor at the University of Toronto in his 84th year of life still works on the various aspects of pacifism as well as publishes exceptionally valuable works dealing with Slovakia. Two years ago, the publishing house Kalligram published his book Slovak National Awakening (1787-1847). He translated into English Škarvan's The Notes of Military Doctor and recently published in Canadian Slavonic Papers a fascinating essay about the relationship between Albert Škarvan and Adela Mazzuchelli, which we present here in an excellent translation by Dagmar Kročan-Roberts.

Who is Peter B. Brock and how he came about these disparate and rather obscure topics for a born Englishman (with French roots – his middle name is Beauvoir)? Although he is the world specialist in the topics of nonsectarian pacifism, his academic background in here in Central Europe. In the early 1950s he received a Doctorate in History at the Jagelonian University in Krakow. We can say, however, that he taught about and studied Central Europe, but the majority of his works relate to pacifism, which is not only his academic passion but also his world outlook. In fact, he came to Canada also thanks to his pacifism. Although he received a position at the prestigious Columbia University in New York, his consciousness had not allowed him to remain in the USA during the Vietnam war – he could not bear that some of his taxes were used for financing the military. Hence he left for Canada where he became the Professor of Central European history. Yet even then his focus was nonsectarian pacifism. I remember how H. Gordon Skilling “complained” to me about his younger colleague and a close friend, Peter Brock, that he was retiring and

wanted to focus entirely on the history of pacifism, yet Skilling considered him to be an excellent historian of Central Europe.

It is the topics of Central Europe and pacifism that are interrelated while he became captivated with the life of our pacifist and Tolstoyan, Albert Škarvan, about whom he wrote several essays. It is hard to believe, but maybe without this Englishman we would never have found out the details about the fascinating love story between Adela and Albert. This story is also important because we have detailed evidence about this affair thanks to Tolstoy who asked Škarvan to describe it to him in detail. Tolstoy had already passed through his spiritual conversion but as a former hedonist was surely mesmerized by this passionate-pacifist relationship. Škarvan eventually responded and in April 1896 he sent a letter to Tolstoy that as Brock writes: “of its fifty closely packed pages thirty-four deal with his relationship to Adele (Adela) von Mazzuchelli”

Brock found out not long ago about this letter which is until today (still not published) in the Tolstoy Archives in Moscow. Brock spent considerable time to complete this text because he attempted to get another side of the story. He searched for descendants of Adela von Mazzuchelli in Austria, Italy, as well as in Germany in order to find out whether there is any correspondence or whether there is any family tale or any information about this unusual relationship. Unfortunately, Brock's efforts were unsuccessful. We must hope that the trail is not completely lost and historians will also unravel Adele's part of the story and her fate afterwards. I believe that this story of Adela, Albert and Tolstoy is so intriguing and unusual that it deserves to be dramatized as a film. It would make Slovakia more “vis-

ible" that all those outlandish and expensive efforts of promoting Slovakia abroad.

In the second part of the K&K we offer a profile of a poet, aphorist and writer of radio plays, Peter Gregor. Beside the fact, that some of his works seem to exceptional – which could be my subjective perception – I am struck how little known Gregor is in Slovakia even after 1989. His style and the way he portrays the world around him is very thought-provoking and his epic poem "Chandra" that we reprint here is excellent, reminding me of some poems by Leonard Cohen. Nevertheless, the publishers who are eager to publish any type of trush, especially if translated from English, ignore an artist who for forty years writes without ever being in a service of the Communist regimes or any trendy style.

For the publisher, Gregor is not a discovery of a young rebel surfing in cyberspace or someone with post adolescent commotion. He is neither as exotic as Daniil Charms or a cult figure like Charles Bukowski. It might seem rather provincial to compare Gregor with these excellent poets but he is equally authentic and brilliant. The "problem" is that we do not have to translate him... If he was successful or, God forbid, if he received a prize somewhere abroad, he would become an instant hit here in Slovakia. Unfortunately, he has no skills promoting himself and the agencies that should do so care more about their own self-maintenance and advancing a few selected bards. At the end, Gregor does not belong to any fashionable literary current and during all those years he was so used to be *out* that he is no longer obsessed to be *in* at any price.

Besides, he can be very rude towards literary critics and hence there is no one to promote him. Pierre, as some of us know him, can with his ironic and abrasive style offend and hurt people and hence some of those who respect his work try to avoid or ignore him. As literary historian, Vladimír

Petrík, writes about this aspect of Gregor in a very kindhearted contribution, that "the thing with cynicism is that it usually is an armour of sensitive people..."

Publishing profiles about authors or books often brings unusual moments. Besides the fact that we urge interesting and wise people to write on a specific topic, the material from which we select the final texts often disclose some new aspects of that that we profile. When I received the clippings from various newspapers with Gregor's interviews I became suddenly aware that I had in front of me a book that even the author does not know about. Gregor rarely repeats himself though the questions are predictably similar. He usually responds to questions in written form, weights every word and often provides a very original and personal answer however banal the question might be. And if sometimes the interviewer is knowledgeable and intelligent, the reactions are witty, wise and sincere. The most difficult part was to select items from his interviews and yet we published a much larger portion than planned.

The end of this issue offers, in the cooperation with one of the K&K Advisory Board members, Egon Gál, a profile of an American philosopher, Daniel Dennett. He is rather unknown for many here, but to those that know his work he is almost a cult figure. As for K&K Richard Rorty wrote about Dennett: "Taken as a whole, the corpus of his writings is one of the most impressive achievements of contemporary Anglophone philosophy".

I was particularly impressed by the cultivated polemics that Dennett has waged on behalf of the so-called "the Brights" movement. It is an unusual term but basically it is an aim by its proponents to distance themselves from atheists who have a rather militant anticlerical reputation or from agnostics who, though do not believe in God, accept that there is some higher transcen-

dental entity that we, rational being, are unable to comprehend. (Let's disregard here Engels' label for agnostics as being alibistic atheists). Who are then the Brights? As Dennett explains: "We brights don't believe in ghosts or elves or the Easter Bunny — or God. We disagree about many things, and hold a variety of views about morality, politics and the meaning of life, but we share a disbelief in black magic — and life after death". Such a direct and open way to deal with this sensitive topic is unusual today and in Slovakia almost unheard of. Yet it is not directed against anyone's faith. Dennett even claims that: "Many brights are observant members of churches precisely because they appreciate the impressive power of religious organizations to generate teamwork for moral causes".

It is interesting that Rorty's reservations about Dennett's views on religion belief do not spring from Rorty's faith — he calls himself an atheist — but because atheism must also be a matter of belief. Rorty agrees with William James that "the choice between theism and atheism is not a matter of deciding between alternative explanatory hypotheses. It is not one that can be made by an appeal to evidence, or to lack of evidence." Hence, if a believer cannot prove the existence of God (can only believe in God), Dennett cannot prove the non-exis-

tence of God. Paradoxically, Rorty not only respects but also openly accepts the legitimacy of the faith to God as opposed to Dennett, who tolerates someone's faith but considers it to be an illusion.

The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida died this year. We presented his Profile in the issue 3-4/1999 (check www.kritika.sk). A year before I had the privilege to meet Derrida thanks to my friend, Serbian philosopher, Obrad Savić. Despite my initial anxiety, we spent an exceptionally pleasant evening. Derrida recalled his arrest and expulsion from Communist Czechoslovakia where he gave lectures at an illegal "home university". The main reason he wanted to meet Savić was to receive firsthand information about the situation in Yugoslavia and the way he could be of any help to his colleagues and friends in Belgrade. All those years, Derrida was in contact and travelled to Belgrade and did everything to preserve and provide encouragement to the island of democracy in Milošević's Yugoslavia.

Hence the death of Derrida is particularly sad for Obrad Savić. The issue ends with his "In memoriam Jacques Derrida". It is also a privilege to welcome the philosopher, publisher, dissident and a wonderful individual, Obrad Savić, to the Advisory Board of Kritika & Kontext.