

**Introduction:
On Climbing the Mountain of Life (2011)**

Darko Suvin

Let us assume we are in an S-F world consisting of one huge, continent-like mountain, but for the rest physically similar to Terra. The fauna and flora are also as on Terra, but all animals, including people, find themselves upon birth at the foot of the mountain, and each day wake a bit higher up the mountain. We don't do anything to achieve this, it's just a cosmological given of this world. The mountain has belts of horizontal climate, maybe with pheromones and other substances influencing behaviour, that correspond to our infancy, youth, middle age, older and old age. Our freedom consists in what we do, while awake, to each other and to our self-understanding, but whatever we do, we shall wake tomorrow morning another bit higher on the mountain. So too shall all the people around us: the very many who are at the beginning above us, those of our cohort progressing vertically at the same speed, and an initially small but inexorably increasing number of people below us following us upward. We can all meet during the day as chance and will have it, but next morning our height on the mountain will have changed equally for all of us, however we may have roamed left or right.

At the beginning, the fact that we can mingle freely during waking, indeed the very fact of being on Life Mountain, makes us neglect this ascension. There is no other way to ascend anyway, nobody can go up and nobody can go down (unless in fancy and in memory), and of course nobody has ever seen the Top of the World. We all simply live together during the day but wake in the morning in our new higher belt, impregnated by its colours and effluvia. The naturally or artificially sleepless ones fall asleep at a given point before dawn and simply wake up higher. Some of us may suspect the way up the world is arbitrary or indeed unjust, but of course, the mountain shape is the only one possible in any world. We have many sayings by our philosophers roughly meaning "the way of the Mountain is unfair," and I spare you the silly preachments of our priests (mostly Gnostics) why their benevolent or malevolent gods have made Ascension a law for life.

The only thing that changes for a given height (that is, age) cohort is that our view widens. When we are low, we all look simply around us, at our own height and generation; then we become interested in what those above do, for they rule and teach us. Sexually, for example, higher-up males are much more interesting for girls, and higher women ever more so for boys. But until we are in, as we say, the 10 veli-s (that is, after

10,000+ daily ascensions) we don't really look down, except to laugh at the mistakes of the neophytes, very similar to our now forgotten ones; of course, for some it happens much later, or never. However, around the age of 18 veli-s (and given our ever progressing age in this epoch of progress, the average length of life is now about 25 veli-s), when the cohort has begun noticeably thinning, some people begin to look wistfully not only at their memories of the foot of the Mountain but also at the lower cohorts. Indeed, for the sillier among us (usually male), there is a rash of divorces at what is called "the airy eighteen" in order to marry anybody between 6 and 10 veli-s, in a kind of magical belief that prolonged contact with a younger skin shall make you shed many veli-s. This doesn't happen, you inexorably wake up each morning at your given heights of ascension, so the new cohabitations usually don't last too long, but I suppose they can be fun for both sides while they last.

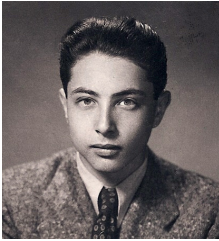
For those philosophically disposed, which means seeking sense, the airy eighteens and perhaps the next five veli-s are a kind of imaginary apex of one's personal metaphorical mountain, pictured as a cut-out your ascension has made on Life Mountain: still in possession of fair health and good sight, yet relatively high enough up the slope, one can begin looking at what one has done, why not more or better, and perhaps remedy the worst ascensional aberrations. This has been happening to me, dear Terran Reader for the last, say, four-and-a-bit veli-s, or to make it more comprehensible to you, dozen or so solar years.

This little apologue or parable is a way to tell you how I look at the present book in our less clear and more complex world, how its letters, so to speak, "sample" my life. My metaphorical path is here not necessarily ascension, but I look at it as it were from above, maybe as at a geo-satellite shot of a winding river. What do I see?

I see a naïve, not too stupid youngster who, having undergone the horrors of utter insecurity in World War 2 under the Croatian, German, and Italian Fascists, decides to do his utmost so that this shall never happen again to him or anybody else. The only alternative in Yugoslavia—and a very fetching one!—was Tito's socialism, militant Enlightenment in the Balkans, into which I threw myself with zest as a high-school and university student activist, and then as a budding writer of literature and theatre criticism, occasional translator



age 6



high school

of poetry from the main European languages and soon verse-smith myself.¹ There I also encountered utopian and then science fiction. The first seemed to me clearly my ancestors, the second my fellow-pioneers hewing out new imaginative, not necessarily unreal, possibilities for people; both were sources of understanding, when read with critical discernment. Also, while participating in student theatre in the 1950s and early 60s, a largely utopian institution, I encountered Bertolt Brecht, an adorably sly and heretical Modernist poet-communist, whom I've since never stopped learning from and writing about.

I then see an initially unconditional lover of socialist Yugoslavia being from, say, 1949 to 1965 subjected to a series of refusals and scorns by his beloved, whom I really thought of as (in, say, a version of the French Marianne) a beautiful young woman: a libido cathexis in Freud's terms. The apex of these refusals was for me a nasty incident in which I was, during my tenure of a Ford Foundation grant in the USA (mostly at Yale) refused re-election as teacher at the University of Zagreb. I concluded I



1961

could be an alienated intellectual anywhere in the world; and it would be morally and materially easier to be such in the Welfare State West. So I took up one of the invitations, that I had at first loyally rejected, to teach in the USA for 1967/68. At this time, the time of the murders of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and much turmoil by my students at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, whom I supported, I decided I was also a supporter of the Monroe Doctrine: America for the Americans. I had a semi-serious fantasy that most of them had been conceived on the back seat of a car and had imbibed its fumes into their germ-plasm, making them kinda car-centaurs—which I was not. Their races and battles were important and interesting, but not mine.

I finally see a revolutionary intellectual while there was a revolution around; but when he had to choose pragmatically between these two aspects in non-revolutionary times (it was quite clear to me that the 1968 youth revolt, for all its fertile aspects which I tried to absorb, politically led nowhere), he chose to be an intellectual, transporting the

¹ I have described this in two instalments of my *Memoirs of a Young Communist*, the first pertaining to childhood up to and including life under the Ustashi and the second to 1945-51; they can be found in the periodical *Gordogan* [Zagreb] for 2009 and 2010, alas as of yet only in Croatoserbian. Further instalments up to the mid-60s are planned.

estranging and still radical viewpoint of “it ain’t necessarily so” into cultural studies. Thus I accepted a tenure-track teaching offer at McGill University in 1968 to there demanded university and They got the shape (so one in suit and tie that SF begins and Swift, Czechs too....



1970, with favorite Picasso

2000, got a Canadian citizenship, and would not have left Canada after pensioning if it had been nearer to the Caribbean. True, Yugoslavia was on the Mediterranean, but it was no more in 2000; so I opted for Italy, where I had frequented high school during World War 2 and had many friends. I did not realize the climate had shifted quite a lot: Milano is now where Morocco was in my youth, a meteorologist tells me.

Eventually, looking better at my geo-satellite river after a landslide, I realized that I had been meandering through two historical landscapes. The first is Fordism: the late Leninist period and the post-World War 2 Welfare State. The second is Post-Fordism, where corporation is wolf to corporation, state to state, human to human, and the resulting psychophysical horrors are unmitigated. Between the two, there was a (for me) psychologically important transition ca. 1973–1992, in culture called Post-Modernism.² My poems and short prose of this transition (chapters 5, 7, 8, 9, and 15), while facing the personal price to be paid

² I have written a lot about this plague of Post-Modernism, but it doesn’t seem worth retraversing this particular battle today; a brief list:

“The Soul and the Sense: Meditations on Roland Barthes on Japan.” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 18.4 (1991): 499-531 (now essay 1 of my book *Lessons of Japan*. Montreal: CIADEST, 1996).

“A Modest Proposal for the Semi-Demi Deconstruction of (Shakespeare as) Cultural Construction.” In Loretta Innocenti et al. eds., *Semeia: Itinerari per Marcello Pagnini*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994, 67-76.

“Introduction to the ‘Non-Cartesian Subjects’ Issue” and “Polity or Disaster: From Individualist Self toward Personal Valences and Collective Subjects.” *Discours social/ Social Discourse*, special issue “The Non-Cartesian Subjects, East and West” (10 essays) co-edited by Kōjin Karatani and D. Suvin, 6.1-2 (1994): 7-21 and 181-210 [large size].

“The Use-Value of Dying: Magical vs. Cognitive Utopian Desire in the ‘Learning Plays’ of Pseudo-Zenichiku, Waley, and Brecht.” *Brock Review* 3.2 (1994): 95-126 (now essay 5 of my book *Lessons of Japan*. Montreal: CIADEST, 1996).

by an émigré, still held to the larger framework of Blochian hope. No doubt, the dominance of Fordism and the Welfare State ended economically about 1973, but my understanding was very laggard: I only began to realize it after 1989, while the full consequences dawned on a cushioned intellectual with the NATO bombings of Belgrade in the 1990s. Thence a certain break in tone, say beginning with chapter 16 of this book. The horizons, though not the orientation, shifted: before that break I was still confident that the antifascist impetus and achievements of my youth could be carried on—with whatever modifications needed towards a New Left and whatever huge difficulties in finding a way between capitalism and Stalinism. After the mid-1990s I was confident no longer: my team was in full rout, not only material but also moral, and all that could be done was to try and understand how come and why, what were some possible rearguard skirmishes, and how to salvage some valuable methodologies and approaches of radical Modernism into our increasingly horrifying future. The dystopian horizon of the poems in ch. 18, 22, and 24 renders this realization. A look at the contents of this special issue of *Paradoxa* shows that the earlier essays could be inscribed in a somewhat heretic or innovative wing of academic cultural pursuits, themselves marginal to orthodoxy, such as studies of science fiction and utopian studies, or of Brechtian stances. To the contrary, in the essays of chapters 20, 21, 23, and 25, new subject-matter demanded to be met—laboriously, since for all my interest I had never analytically focused on economics or politics, and the methodology had to be somewhat different from the one I had followed for almost half a century.

And yet, the book ends with an allegorically realistic poem, on *My Lady Hope*.



Mid-70s, with wife Nena in Montreal

“Synchrony as Aim and Reference: A Thesis on Parody’s Horizons.” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 23.2 (1996): 475-83.

“Two Cheers for Essentialism & Totality: On Marx’s Oscillation and its Limits (As Well As on the Taboos of Post-Modernism).” *Rethinking Marxism* 10.1 (1998): 66-82.

“Besinnung and What May the Century Amount To.” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 17.2 (2004): 287-311.

TO CARRY OVER

The following poem has been rendered possible by one of the great masters, John Berger, to whom it is illicitly dedicated.

We exiles are all
Specialists in packing
We know what to leave behind

We take with us
Suitcases that we can lift
We leave behind us
Connections and ways of life

We take with us
Birthdays, marriage anniversaries
The shelters of gestures and jokes
The words for bread and coffee
We know desperately well
Railway stations and airports
We anesthetize this Fate
By crosswords and mystery stories

Our luggage is
Anxiety and hope
To survive
To work

Wherever we come, languages shift
To the dismay of lexicographers
The orthography grows unreadable
We build new houses of words

We are carriers
Transported and deported
Thus metaphors

This wine our blood

The poetry of mulatto tomorrows
Will be in our languages
We carry it
Like cattle-cars cattle

The maximum diameter of the universe
Is 240 times 10 to the 24th kilometres
We had no need
For this calculation

It's not so easy
Bridging Milky Ways
We are thirsty
Carrying goods over

London 14509

