

Josef Tomáš

Agneska
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THE RETURN OF AGNES OF BOHEMIA

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OF AGNES
OF BOHEMIA

Agnes





Dedicated to an unknown guide through
the convent of St Agnes of Bohemia in Prague

Josef Tomáš

THE RETURN
OF AGNES
OF BOHEMIA

Nakladatelství
U Veverky

Text and translation © Josef Tomáš 2015
Illustrations © Petr Probst 2015
Afterword © Hana Tomková 2014

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This English translation relates to the second edition of *Návrat Anežky Přemyslovny*, published 2015 by Ing. Petr Lukšíček, Nakladatelství U Veverky, Sídliště 521, Hrušovany u Brna, 664 62, Czech Republic www.nakladatelstviuveverky.cz
The first Czech edition was published 2000 by Carpe Diem

Text editor: Alex Skovron
Cover design: Jana Průšová
Typesetting: Pavel Hora
Production: Jan Čermák

Printed by XXXXXXXXX

ISBN 978-80-87836-09-5

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*"... quoniam eam, ut verum fatear,
sicut conjugem et liberos et universa
bona diligo, cunctisque mortalibus
praefero in affectu."*

—King Wenceslaus I (fourth king of Bohemia)
in a letter to Pope Gregory IX



THE ARRIVAL



So here I am then ... flying in
from far, so far away, into this land
where the heart of Europe,
as he wrote to me, "though hardened now,
goes on beating still".

He, a foreigner, whom I've never met!
And yet, in one long letter after another,
he became more and more familiar,
until at last this voyage to the unknown
takes on the feeling of a true return.

A return from where? To where? And why?
Long ago now, I learnt
not to enquire too much into such things.
Doesn't mystery stare us in the face
most of the time, and we don't know it?
Yet not for a single moment do we cease
that constant restless turning of our heads
to and fro, to and fro ...

But I'm not there yet: I'm still in the air.
From beneath the blue of heaven I can see
a snow-dusted landscape, a country
that to me is completely foreign—
as if it were petrified or dead. The land
of Sleeping Beauty perhaps? I wonder
if the prince has braved the wood already
and woken her from the wicked fairy's curse;
my prince, who even now, somewhere below,
awaits an unknown *me* he has never met.

It's only because of him that I have dared
to come so far, where everything,
I am convinced, will be different and strange;

only for this foreigner, my guide—
my fantasist as well—who assures me
that he was my brother once!
I know nothing of this. But I have come
because of him—I care for him so much
that if he sends no message for a day or two,
I worry that something may have happened ...

He was waiting for me; I caught sight of him
the moment I stepped off the plane.
I recognized him, waving at me
from the height of the observation deck.
Of course, at such a distance my eyes
couldn't be certain—he was just a shadow,
waving against the open roof of the building,
a shadow in the steel-grey February sky.
With my eyes alone, no, I couldn't be sure,
but in my heart there was no doubt
that it was he. I had known him only
from his letters: first from a few dozen lines,
then later—as he took up more space within me,
so that words were less and less needed—
from all that was left unvoiced.

He was really only a shadow, and yet
I leaned on him with the confident trust
of one who had known him forever.
So in the end, when I entered the terminal,
it was an encounter of two intimate people.
He approached me, kissed me on both cheeks
and said: "Oh yes, I was not mistaken, it *is* you,"
and, as in a dizzy spell, a swirl of emotions,
it flashed through my mind that to be with him
and not to love him above everything
would exceed all of my strength!

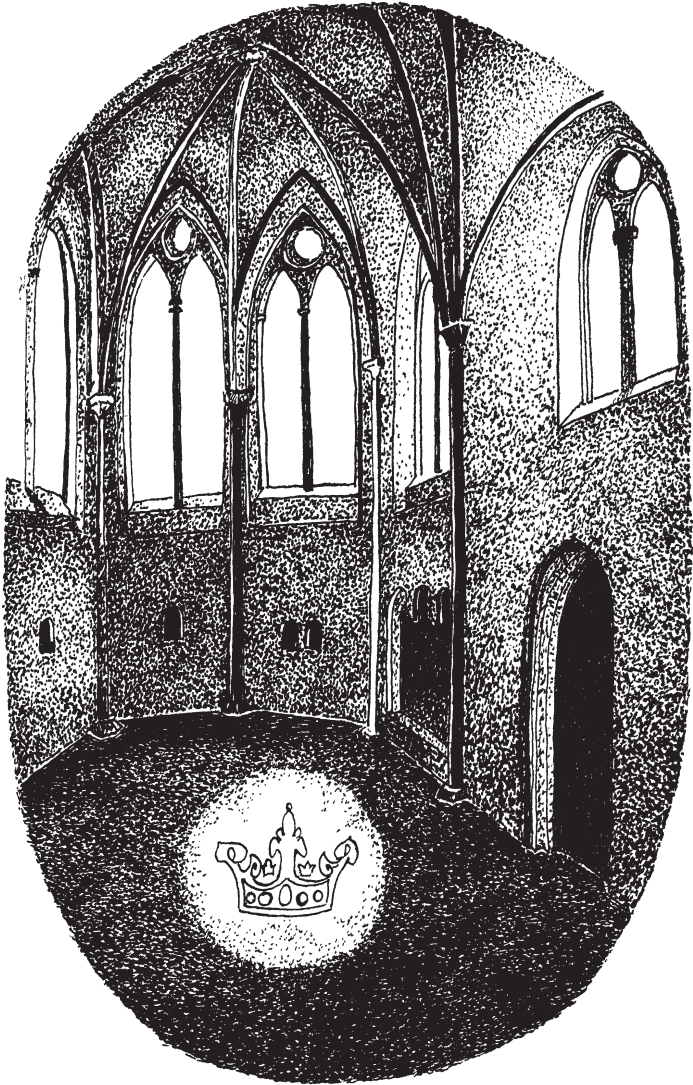
Just recently, all of a sudden, he had written:
“Don’t you know? Remember? I am your king.
Your brother. So beloved a brother
that for the love of him you gave up heaven.”

I know nothing of that. They were just words,
albeit charming, mysterious. I couldn’t imagine
what could have planted such an idea in his mind,
the certainty to claim such fantastic things.
He’d written next: “Come. You will see.
Your heart will tell you that you are at home—
that once, ages ago, this city *was* your home.”

So here I am then, close to him in this place.
With *him*—with the actual person at last ...
Actual person?



THE CONVENT



I don't understand why he brought me here.
Does he expect that I might recognize something
beneath these vaulted arcades and lofty aisles?—
where the moulded ribs and window arches
are curved upwards as if clasped in prayer,
while the patches on the brick and stone
showing here and there through the plaster walls
know nothing of ever having supported
anything of heaven!

"Here rests the body
in which I used to visit you,"
whispers my guide in the silence,
pointing to the pavement.

17

I see engraved on the tomb:

VENCESLAUS I. REX BOHEMORUM IV. 1205-1253.

In a lowered voice he continues:
"I once wrote to you
that I loved you above everything—
more than my own wife and children.

Only from one visit to another did I live.
Each time I looked into your eyes was for me
like looking through a window into eternity.
How often I pleaded with you, 'Do not leave me
here, outside of you! Take me *there*,
where I can feel constancy unchanging.'
You found that place, you resided there,
once, long ago. And from then on,
whatever might disturb that state
had no hold upon you any more."

What words! What are they supposed to mean
now and here, and for me?

Now they are so inappropriate, and here
they do not seem in place any longer, even though
deep within me they do stir something
once known but long forgotten!

His voice still muted, he goes on to explain:
“Those ancient times were not much different
from ours. In seven or eight centuries
nothing of any substance has really changed.
Even today, as then, hardly anyone knows
how to pause, and consider, and calculate,
at least once within the span of a lifetime,
the ratio of transience to eternity.
And yet, there can be no other way
anyone could comprehend the message
you bequeathed to us here, in this world:

18

*That to possess here,
means to lose forever there,
while to deny oneself here
promises unimagined delights without end!*

I admit, I was among those who didn't understand.
Just occasionally, I would grow a little envious
of your striking transparency, your near-permeability,
as if your self, at some point in the past,
had disappeared into something. But into what?

No, I couldn't understand you at all.
I was no monk—only the king
who had a duty to govern. I would arbitrate
strife and contention and, every now and then,

even hang by the neck some wretched felon
from the mob, or some nobleman of my kingdom,
for crimes so atrocious that this whole country
seemed to be growing more and more evil,
as if headed for eternal damnation.

Every so often I faltered,
especially when, by some mistake of judgment,
I harmed one who was innocent.

Then I would toss sleepless for many a night,
fearing that the inevitable hour of retribution
might strike me at any moment.

It was from you that I have learnt
to be sensitive to every human action;
to feel how it disturbs
that mysterious something,
which fills up—as you used to tell me—
the void of elapsed time.

And then, a short while later, or later still,
when that almost imperceptible disturbance
has been completely forgotten,
suddenly and without warning, the past
returns, reinforced more than a hundredfold,
and starts blowing, stronger than any storm,
into the sails of God's windmills—
which grind between the stones of fate
all our intentions and all our plans to dust.

Whenever I could, I paid you a visit
to find—you being always at peace—peace
for myself. I, the one man you were permitted
to see during all those years ... I admit
that for a long time I didn't understand that rule.
Only now, perhaps, I understand a little
why I too should have been barred.

Yet in spite of that, I allowed myself
to be buried here—so that, several times a day,
you could kneel down at my tombstone
and pray not only for my salvation
but for our reunion in heaven.

Did you find me there? I myself don't know,
and if you did, it was for the briefest moment,
because my concentration has always been
like a quick glimpse, little more than a glance
into the brightness of the light in which,
as you revealed to me, everything reposes."

I remain silent, strangely calmed by his words,
although they don't make a lot of sense to me
on this mundane, clamorous side of the world;
but in that other sphere, where I too rest
for a moment sometimes,
anything may indeed be possible.

And then, as if enticed into playing his game,
I ask him: "Where is *my* grave?"
"It was here," and he points to a small alcove.
"But it was lost—stolen or destroyed—
in those times which, despite all good intentions,
collapsed into indiscriminate madness.
Nothing was sacred: no place, no building, no grave.
Every kind of bestial act they forgave themselves
in the name of *their* God, under *his* sign."

So—nothing remained here
from my past. Yet what is the past?
From heads into books, from books to heads,
there flow, in scanty records, austere dead facts
held together by exuberant fantasy.

Like everything; everywhere. Who can tell
how much from those days survives at all?—
trusses, roofs, whole sections of walls
are entirely new, imitating only
what, a long time ago, may have been.

Is it therefore surprising that I don't feel
any trace of compassion, despite the claim
that here stood a shelter for the sick?
For centuries this air has not resounded
with prayers. Mere curiosity
rules everything—a spectacle,
to the point where an entrance-fee is asked!

21

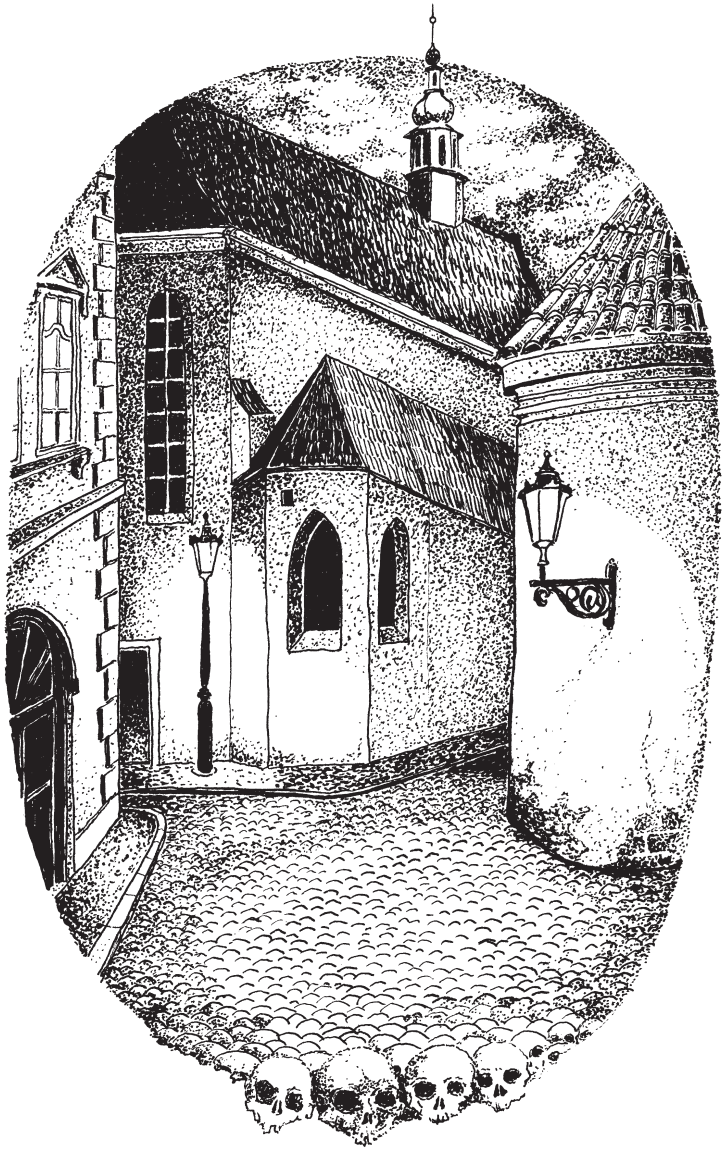
So, if She-I was ever at home here,
and for so many years, as he has been explaining,
it could have been only out of duty
laid upon her by her royal birth,
and then, later, by the humble discipline
of serving the sick, which she took voluntarily
upon herself by joining a religious order.

But what about her woman's heart?
Where did it stay? Did she hide it perhaps
somewhere here, deep in Przemysl's kingdom,
when on one of her many travels from castle to castle
she'd had enough of waiting for her father
or brother, or future father-in-law
to decide her fate?
In the end it was she who decided,
and chose permanence over transience for her love!

But then, to whom does *this* heart belong,
now so ardently echoing inside me?



THE STREET



My first steps through the city,
uncertain and unsteady,
along and across ramshackle streets
into which credulous time
has unknowingly ploughed—
and goes on ploughing—the city's
useless history.

Everything stays the same: today as then,
time is intoxicated with the future,
promising always to be different, better, new.
It's no wonder that anything hardly ever
manages to stay in a straight line
or to describe a circle. Everywhere around,
there has been only obliquity, distortion,
increase, depression or decline,
so that after no more than several paces
I have to focus meticulously
on each step I take.

And there is more here: oh, how much more!
Layer on layer, descending beneath the earth,
a resting-place for the buried residue
of all manner of things, of plants, animals, humans—
anything that time makes new at each moment,
then drags along for a while, and at the end,
like a spoiled child, whenever it decides,
throws away and, in no time, forgets.

I feel as though I am treading on human bones
and turn questioningly towards my guide—
who, strangely oblivious, his hand in mine,
seems lifeless too. In fact, the whole world now
appears extinct, including the two of us,
two skeletons precariously walking about.

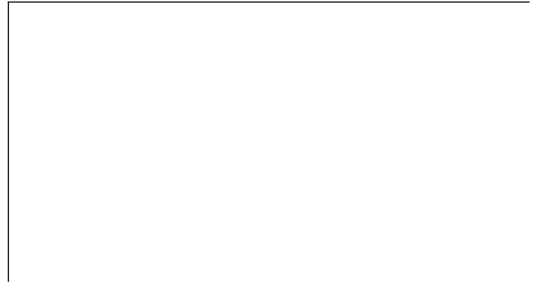
Disturbed, I press against him, ask:
"My friend, my ... brother; do you see it too?"
So, I still can talk, crosses my mind.

"What, my dear? Those bones?
They are embedded here, many metres deep.
Until a hundred years ago this used to be
the old Jewish quarter."

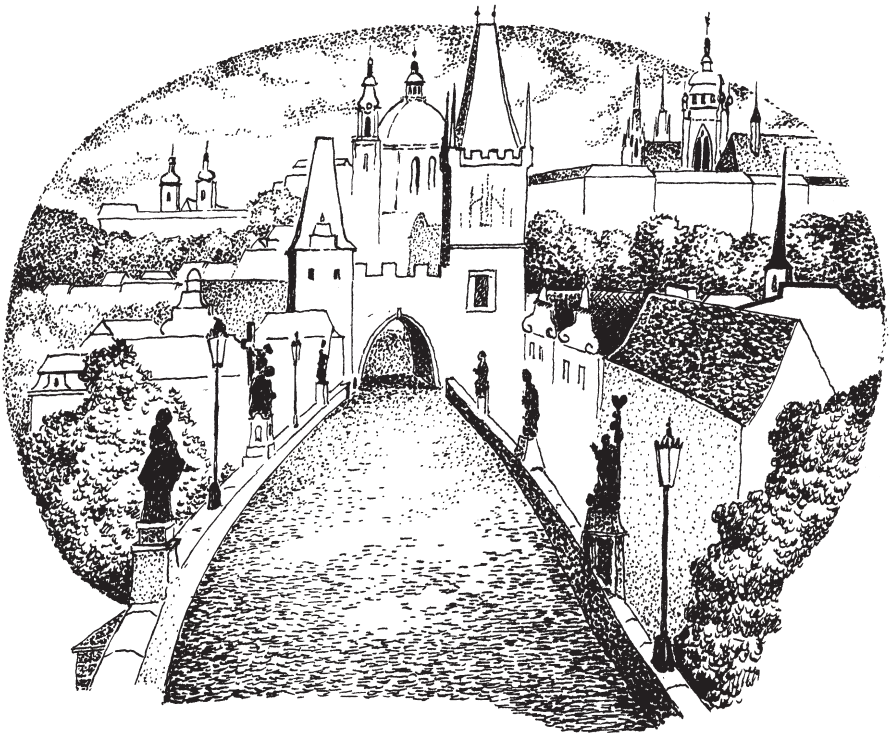
I go on in silence, carefully,
as if along a narrow ledge. I wonder
how many more steps I will have to take
in order to find some balance in life
before that inevitable disintegration
into the dust of the earth, and the return
to forgetting everyone and everything.

How absurd human love appears
at such moments, when the crowded earth
echoes from all around:

Memento mori! ... Memento mori! ...



THE BRIDGE



At that very instant we emerged
from the shadows of the winding streets,
and I, unprepared for such dazzling radiance,
felt as if I had crossed a threshold
from darkness into light,
from nostalgia to joy,
from the sad and ordinary into limitless glory!

Oh, such an encounter! But with what?
With space? With freedom? With light itself?
With some unstable mixture of the elements
exploding—although gently, snowily—
through my eyes into my innermost being,
then continuing to echo in the valleys
deep beneath my senses?

29

My first encounter with something,
some presence, that must have been here
since time began and had waited
only for me to return,
for me to reclaim this place of enigmas—
where even the bridge thrusts forward
and up beyond the horizon,
as if unhindered, to lighten its weight
and set free the silence for me.

Then, standing a bit to the side and below,
I feel my enthrallment fading.
I move my eyes to the right and upwards,
where, upon an extended hilltop,
a silhouette of the castle is merging with the sky.

This place *is* truly mine!
I breathe in unison with it, with its very rhythm.
Here all my worldliness melts away.

Here I am flowing out of an undreamed depth
that has opened up all around me.

Oh, what reassurance
resounds now in deepest tones within me!
What harmony, what perfect unity!
No need now for the eye to wander—
it rests tenderly, like a lover's hand
on the face of the beloved
after all the passion has been calmed.

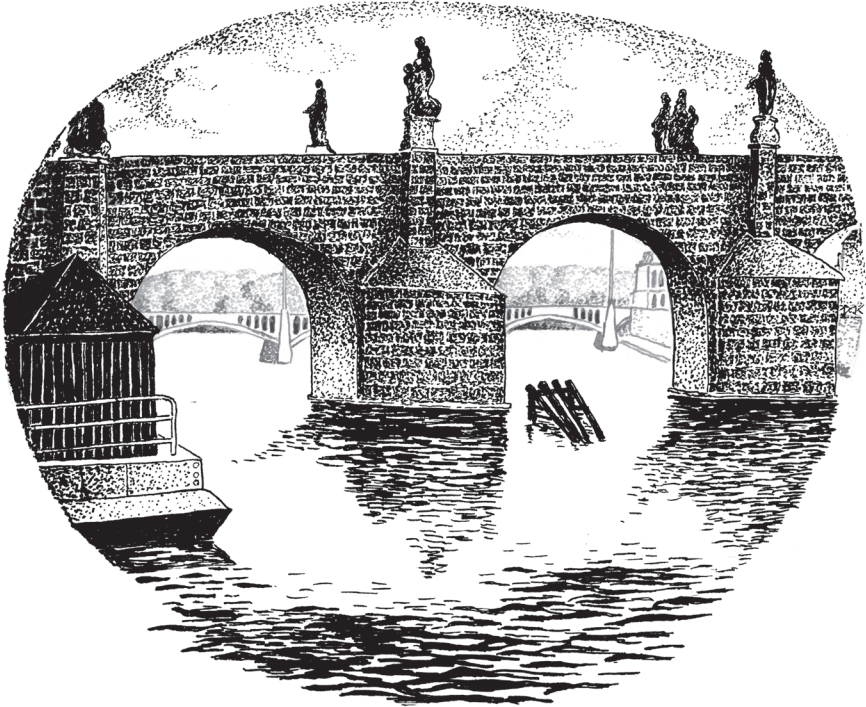
This is a meeting with true mystery;
with something that has hovered, for aeons,
in the void above the waters,
waiting for its time to be fulfilled—
then drifted into the dreamings of a king
to emerge at last in the form of ... this bridge,
this powerful pedestal of mystery.

Oh, what luck! And what reward for me
to find it so willing to present itself
in its all-surpassing completeness and beauty.

Indeed, what reward
to be able to catch a glimpse of the sublime,
that lasts ... that lasts ...



THE RIVER



And another mystery,
similar to the one we have just encountered
but with its elements in a different harmony—
this river here, which, seemingly free,
is flowing out to sea as I watch.

The water's current, of its own accord,
diverts my eyes to the bridge on the left,
whose great bulk from here resembles
even more clearly the pedestal for a statue;
or, more precisely still, the threshold
of a sacred house, half-undermined
by a never-ending stream of human unbelief—
which nevertheless an angel, his face averted,
has taken to his heart.

I perceive him quite clearly
in his unmoving solemnity.
He is a being stripped of worldliness,
therefore without joy and without sorrow,
made visible to us only through a narrow slit
of purest self-forgetting.

To be so close to such immenseness
flattens me into a paper figure
amid the shadow puppetry of bare black trees,
projected since the beginning of winter
as if by the cold hard murmur of the weir
upon the fine linen of the fog, draped over
the backdrop of chimneys and towers of the city.

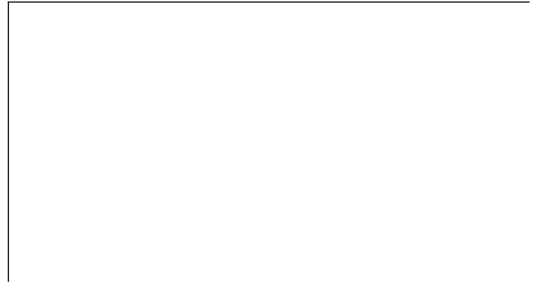
One day, along with me, everything will disappear ...
The bridge, the river, the castle, and the whole city
will dissolve into nothing, and then, along with me,
he also—ah yes, he!

This place, however, will remain
as a permanent trace of the bare feet of the angel,
who, like us, has his face and his heart
pointing to paradise, yet the rest of his being
still cannot break from the Earth, fleeting
yet magnificent because it is all we have.

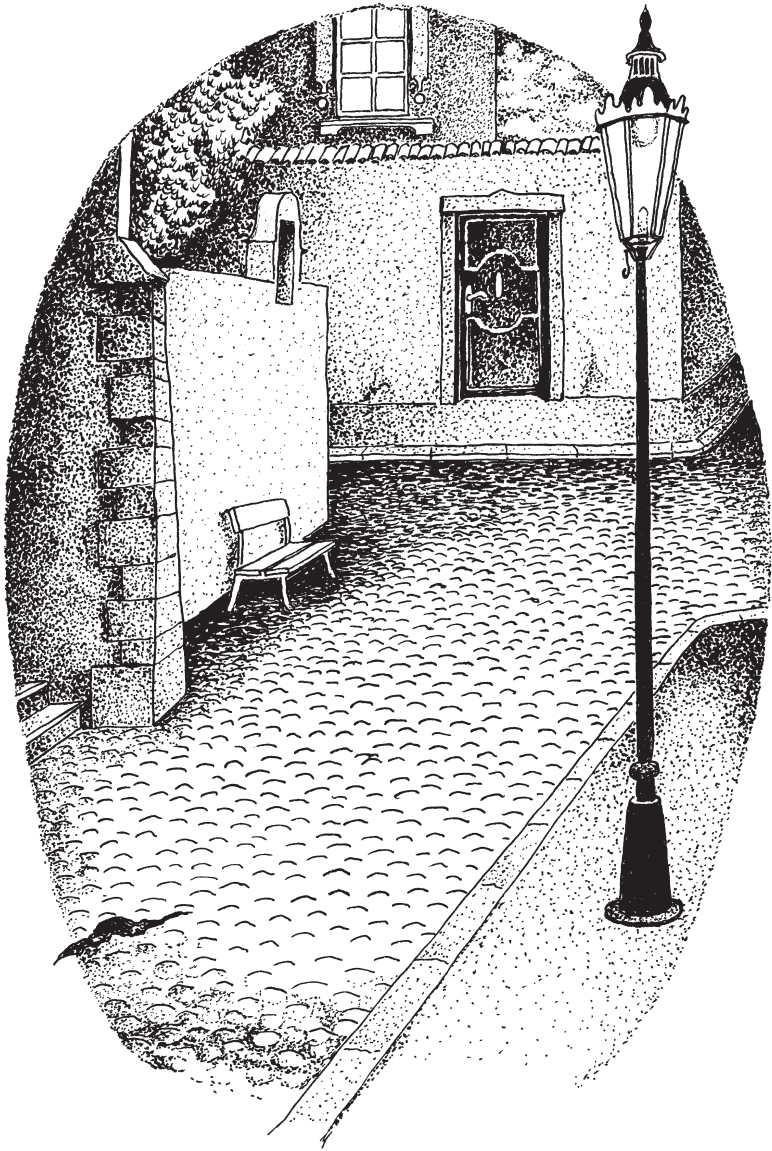
And so, what is subject to change
can always find refuge here,
a place to rest for a while
when it tires of its restlessness.
But we both—the river and I—continue
on our journey downstream
along gravity's inexorable slope
from the fountain of birth to death's ocean.

34

So I wonder if I too, like water
in its cycle from the sea to the earth,
will return again and again
(as my guide persistently tells me),
from the oblivion of all existence
back into the mystery of life.



THE SILENCE



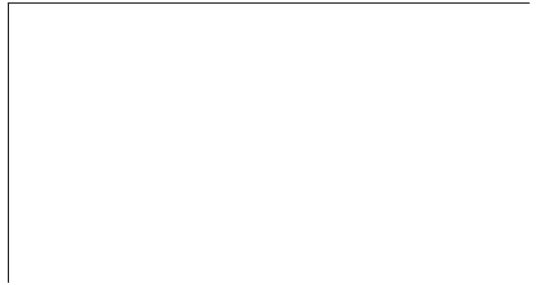
Where did it come from?
From the air? From stone? Out of me?
That sudden lull of noise and sound and words,
even though the number of tourists
passing through the narrow street,
down and up from one square to another,
did not seem to be dwindling.
Surely, in the *normal* course of events
the volume of prattling voices
would instead intensify and spread,
their manifold reverberations skimming
the walls of houses and the cobbled street!

It came so unexpectedly
that I felt as if I had fallen from heaven—
or rather, I thought, had re-entered heaven—
when this mysterious all-encompassing space,
which to everyone, including me,
had seemed quite obviously a single entity,
began, without a warning,
slowly, lingeringly, silently,
to split apart—
until everything, except for me and the city,
became the *other side* ...

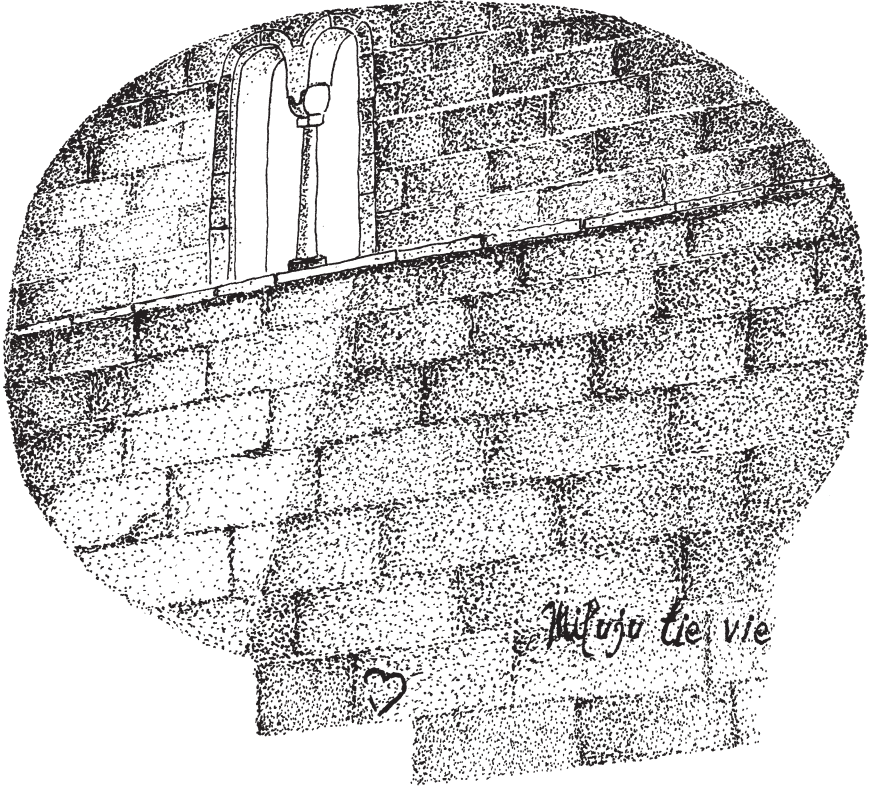
The air became solid glass:
I could see lips moving,
feet striding, even hair blowing
in a slight breeze—yet everything
remained absolutely soundless. It lasted
all the way down that narrow stony street,
as far as the second square.
There, it suddenly turned so *heavy*
that I needed to sit down on a bench
in front of a church ...

I don't remember how long I sat there.
Time simply was not. For how can there be Time
when all is silent? It must have retired
into that other mirror image of the world
and gone on ticking there, as if nothing had happened.
But then, when Time began to return,
it overwhelmed me, more than redoubling its weight.

Before, I had felt boundless, amplified,
set free from earthly life, unborn.
Oh what a lightness then, just moments ago!
Oh what relief, to be able to strip off Time
as if it were little more than a coat!
Time had ceased to exist—and I also.
Only my *essence* had continued to be,
from time immemorial to time immemorial,
like a riverbed without water,
carved out by the streams of departed lives.



THE CASTLE



This is how the castle spoke to me,
through the mouth of my guide
(my one-time brother, perhaps?):

"I am solid and unmoving,
so I am not discomfited
by the fiction of passing time.
The present gathers itself within me
without forethought and without memory;
therefore no cravings or disappointments,
no regrets or nightmares,
can ever torment me.

What can I offer you
within my sprawling halls?—
Anything that would make you remember
that this place was once your home?
Anything that could remind you
of your too-brief girlhood here,
when running and shouting, songs and words,
were swallowed up by the past
the moment they died away?

Where do you now hope to find,
for instance, that windowpane
where he, with so much tenderness,
pressed his kisses
onto the fog from your breath?

Or the imprints of your feet
that he showed you once
in the hardened mud on the ramparts?
He insisted it was pure chance
that he'd discovered them there. And yet,
in every single one of them you saw
a handful of little wilted leaves.

After you begged him, he revealed
that it was he who had ripped the petals
off some daisies—to reassure himself,
again and again,
that you loved him, truly and eternally,
but also to enliven within himself
your likeness, your image that he cherished—
all he possessed of you
after you were taken from him.
Without that, he would not have been able
to hold on to you, entire and complete,
until the day you returned.

Of all these signs,
not a speck of dust is left ...

42

And yet, something is here;
something that miraculously survived
those eight unimaginably long centuries.
Come and descend into me! Down to that place
on which my ancient foundations rest!
For you, died-and-reborn, it is impossible
to carry knowledge across the threshold of death,
but in me, lifeless and ever unchanging,
all is recorded, accurate, enduring.

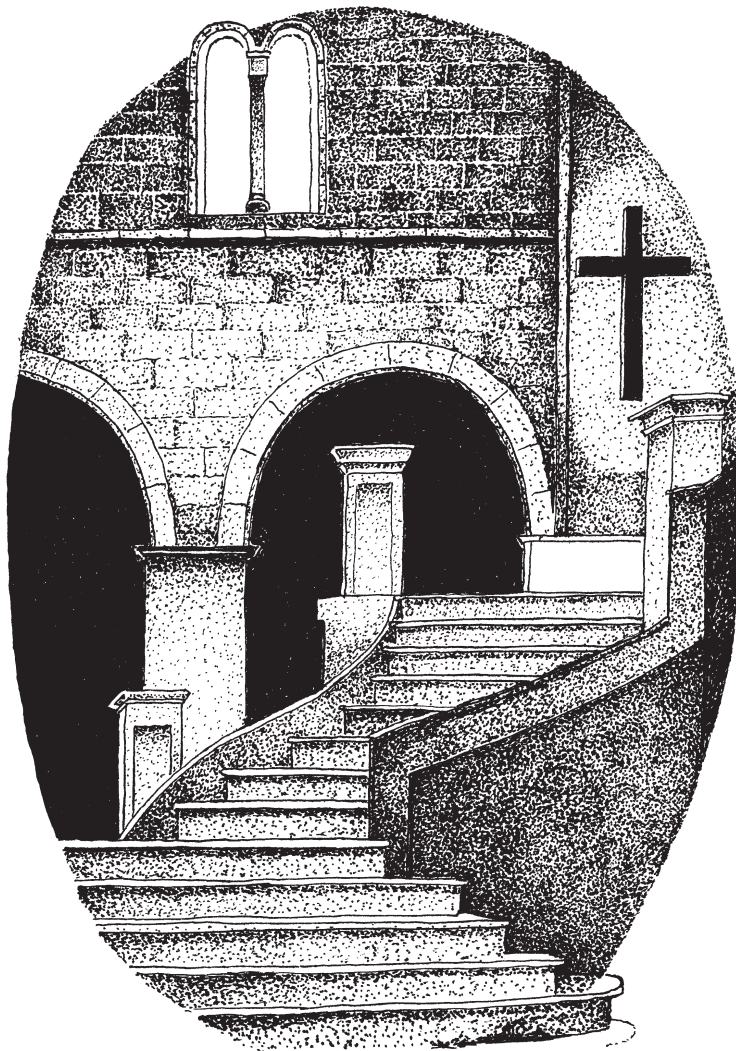
It took him many long weeks
to scrape into stone what he knew to be
a bold and dishonourable boast,
if he had dared to say it out loud.
(Only much later, after he had grown
into the courage of a man, the burdens of a king,
did he write it down for you, once, with quill on paper.)

Look here! Look! And let me
read it to you, and then translate it into the language
that this short life chose as your mother tongue:

*Miluju tie viece nez sie.
Je t'aime plus que moi-même."*



THE CHURCH



My church is the one that hides
behind the lofty pomp of the Cathedral;
mine is the weightier one,
which for more than a thousand years
has held firmly to the earth.
It was there that I, never baptized, knelt down,
and my hands of their own accord
folded in a silent prayer.

The Cathedral, I went through quickly.
But as before and in other countries,
so here again—with my head bent back,
in order fully to savour
that beauty that doth cover thee,
around which the daring audacity
of builders of medieval temples
flung their towering vaults over height itself.

47

Oh yes, it entices me always
by allowing me to escape from myself,
to surrender to that other power
in the rapture of taking flight. Yet, alas,
that intoxicating, liberating *sursum corda*
only ever lasts a short while for me.

But in this church, I can remain forever.
The weight of its massive walls attracts me
like some irresistible force to the earth,
as if it were wanting to draw me inside,
into itself, into its marlstone blocks,
and wall me in alive!

And yet, here I feel safe.
As if I have returned—where?
Into my childhood? Or much further back?

Further?—Is not this return
from sandstone into marl truly a return
to a completely *different* depth,
where heaven, to which
I used to reach up in my trances,
is firmly anchored in the ground?

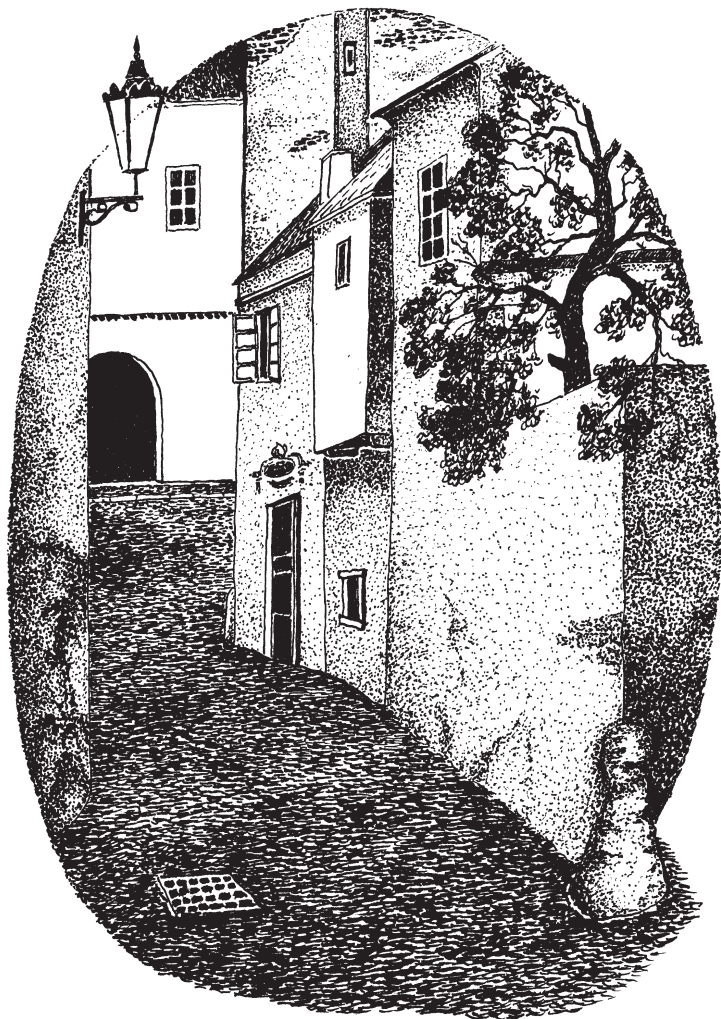
But then it had to be the earth
that called me back! Perhaps
for no other reason than to show me
that it is not really possible
to forget its pull
and ascend with one's heart alone.

So here I kneel, surrounded on all sides
by weight, weight, weight ...
Even the white light that flows in
through the clear windows
does not rise here, but only settles;
does not lift up, only illuminates.

Here, I am alone,
in a void with weight and silence.
And he? Where is he? Why, this time,
has he not come inside with me?
He too must know that in the depths of one's self
everyone becomes a stranger to that self.



THE CITY



I find him at the castle parapet,
where he stands gazing steadily
over snow-covered roofs,
across the river, the bridge,
and out to the city beyond.

He remains silent. But then I hear him
reciting something under his breath.
It is probably in his mother tongue
because I'm unable to make anything of it.
So when he pauses again,
I beseech him: "Please, translate."
He replies, "It was written thirty years ago
by a great Czech poet, when,
in his unbridled fantasy, he heard you
crossing the river over the old Judita Bridge."
And he proceeds to translate, word for word,
into that third, neutral language
whose understanding, though limited, we share.
He speaks slowly and with brief pauses,
as he calls up from his memory
the most appropriate words:

*"And he could hear them,
those most real little steps in sandals ...
It was Saint Agnes of Bohemia
walking across Judita Bridge
(Agnes virgo, fundatrix ordinis cruciferorum
cum stella et monasterii sancti Francisci),
and reflecting upon what joy would be
without the thought of death, what joy would be
without pain ..."*

And as if it's of the utmost importance,
he continues loudly and with emphasis:
"I never heard you crossing in this way!

I don't remember you walking the bridge on foot!
A royal princess is seen rather than heard,
I know that well—after all, how many times
did I not seek out your features
when your train appeared at the far end of the bridge.
Then I would run, and when older ride on horseback,
to be the first to welcome you back home.

Home?—It was always for such brief moments,
and so many years between your precious returns.
Oh, how terribly I missed you, every instant!
Even as a boy I needed you so much.
And then you crossed the bridge for the last time,
out, away, to your monastery, and forever.

52

Yes, it's true I would hear your steps in sandals
and the rustle of your habit, but that was only
within the cold anteroom, as you were descending
the stairs concealed behind the wall.
You would always emerge like a revelation
from the dark alcove,
and at once everything shone.

Oh, that smile of yours! After each visit
I would feel it on my face for many days;
and after a while, when it had faded to sadness,
I would hasten as soon as I could to see you,
and to beg you for another. Many a time,
as I rode or walked across the bridge, I pondered
where you could possibly be finding them,
when everywhere around you there was nothing
but suffering and death.

Sometimes I was convinced
that you stored them away secretly
like sprigs of fragrance among your coarse linens
on a shelf in your cold, dark chamber.

Or else I would imagine
the way they caught up with you,
like feathers from the wings of an angel,
in that barely perceptible moment
when you descended the hidden staircase.”

He pauses once again. And I?—
What can I say, what is there to say?
So I remain silent, but I feel
as though I too have been kissed by a smile.

He continues with his monologue: “I was the one
who used to walk across Judita Bridge.
After practically every visit to you
I used to leave my horse behind
and slowly, as if under compulsion,
continue on foot, up the hill to the castle,
back to what I called *my side*—home.
And on every such occasion it felt to me
that, for the second time on one and the same day,
I was stepping again over a fateful threshold:
first it had been joyfully, to *your side*,
to you, into eternity; but then, in distress,
from you and back to me, to temporality.
Countless were these dislocations, countless!
Until the day—the last one—when that joy
was finally denied me because my body was dead
and they carried it in a mourning procession to you.”

All this I do understand:
from joy to distress, and from distress to joy.
After all, today I have experienced more than once
such a strange and curious suspension of everything.
And furthermore—his voice:
as if it would desire to accompany me
to that other part of the town, *your side*, he calls it,

to leaf through the album of the past
and bring it to life for me, here in the present.

He goes on: "Then I came back. I don't know why.
I'd forgotten everything—even you and me.
Oh, how terribly alone I was feeling—
all alone in this city, at such a frightening time
when murderers were hanged by murderers.

Your Spirit evaporated like a rare essence.
I remember how, soon after my arrival,
I would crumple to my knees every night
and, my head in my hands, struggle to detect
at least a *trace* of God in myself. And I remember
how desperate that cruel futility made me,
and how often I would turn to the window
and, into the narrow mouthpiece
between the silhouettes of chimneys and gables,
I would call earnestly upon Him,
to let the world resound at least once
with just a few fragments of His music!

Night after night, however, for four long years,
He never made Himself heard with the merest echo.
I don't know why at the end I always seized upon
that much-thumbed little prayer-mill
to grind out, from habit and mechanically,
a few little words, human words, as though language
might contain some magical power
that could, miraculously, protect me
from self-destruction in my deepening despair.

But every time, as I reached lethargically
into the bottom of my empty soul,
a sudden, unexpected calm would descend on me!

As if, at that very moment, I dissolved
into the black liquid of night."

For long, long afterwards we stay silent; and I—
I feel like dashing back in time
and fervently, even desperately,
seeking him out in that solitude of days long past.
Soothingly I cradle him in my mind,
tenderly whisper: "My little brother, it's me,
your loving, your beloved sister.
Pour into me as you used to, long ago,
the deepest of your concerns
and all your fear of the world,
a fear that revealed itself, as you came of age,
and proved to be what it truly is—
uncontrollable, ruthless, and terrifying.

55

It's no wonder that even your city offered you
only its dark abandoned side.
You had not yet discovered that, in this world,
everything is shown to us differently each time.
Nevertheless, although you find this city
at one moment horrible, at another beautiful,
it persists, and it grows, and it advances,
and, from time to time, suddenly breaks through
all the residues and leavings of humanity
and, like a gold monstrance on Corpus Christi Day,
flares up to mirror the life-giving sun."

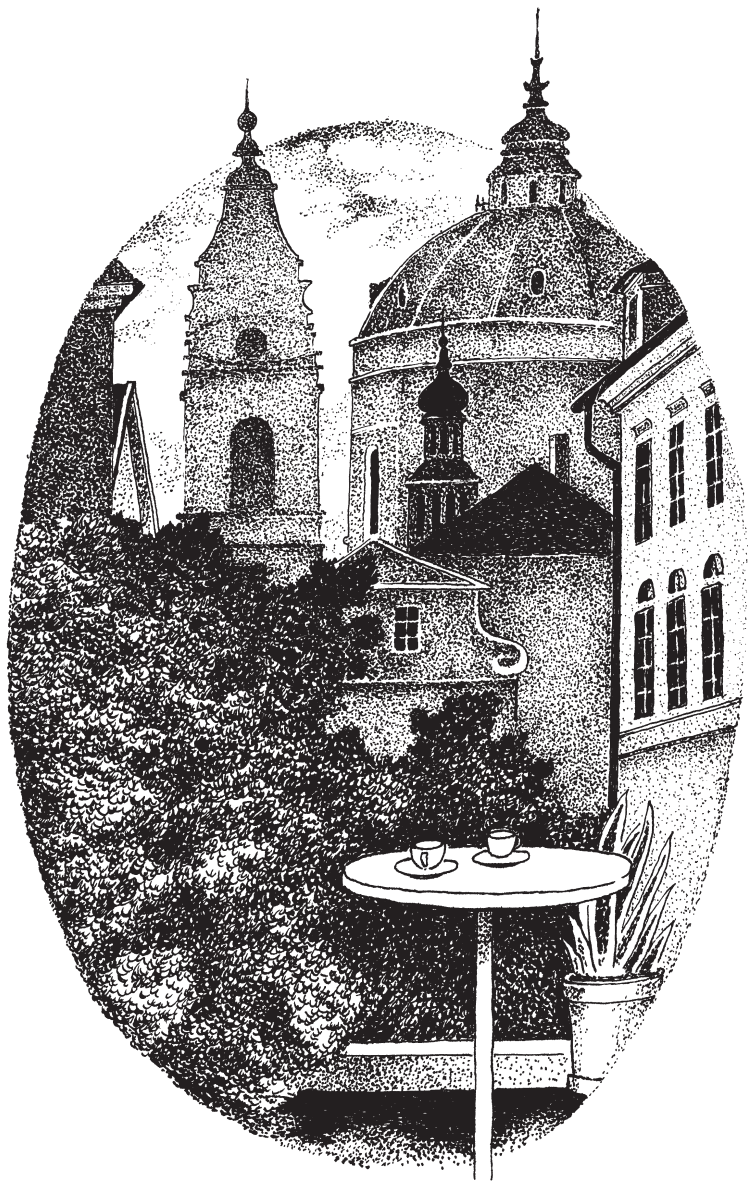
As if reading my thoughts, he continues:
"How often I have asked myself
why it's not possible to change for a while to stone,
or at least into an ages-ancient tree,
and to stay here, stay, with what is left of life
to suck in all that's essential for living.—

To discover whether it's from that which is human
(in other words, conscious and cognizant),
or rather from what lies deeper and unknowing,
that everything arises, and into which
everything returns without a trace.

But can there really be any point
in trying to fathom the mystery of life,
when even this inanimate town of stone
has thus far guarded its secret?
We'll never know whether its being *here*
was achieved by human effort alone,
or whether the people who built it, and still build,
have not been driven by something other,
that—occasionally—they sense in themselves,
yet not one of them even slightly understands.”



THE PALACES



Lady of silences
Calm and distressed
.....
Terminate torment
Of love unsatisfied
The greater torment
Of love satisfied ...

—T. S. Eliot, “Ash-Wednesday”

I enjoy being with him
in the spaces of palaces and galleries,
where high ceilings are decorated
with colourful allegories of life
in the Golden Age (or in heaven?)
and I—thrilled already in the entrance-hall—
feel as though I am walking on air
and rising swiftly up.

In the middle of a crowd of people,
head bent back and mind preoccupied—
no one can stay like this for long.
A relief when coming back to earth,
my eyes tracing the starched stucco on the walls
half-hidden behind massive columns,
feels so soft and lightweight.
It reminds me of my first ball,
where I waited, bashful,
hiding behind the ballroom’s pillars
yet eager to show myself
to my impatient admirers.

No, no one can stay like that for long—not here,
where everything moves with discipline
from sign to sign in a prescribed direction.
Human voices are seldom heard,

and then as a mere half-whisper;
and even then they are muffled, inaudible,
as if ashamed to disturb
the deep concentration of silence.

Our progress through the halls rustles
rather than walks. A fleeting thought comes to me:
it is space that winnows us
with the breath of the present, while staring
only into itself, which is beyond and elsewhere.

And so we tiptoe along together,
up or down the beaten stairs
into other rooms and exhibition halls;
and I?—From time to time, out of the blue,
it occurs to me that I have come here for nothing else
than to grow accustomed to the beauty
of this temporal world.
Until now having known only self-denial,
as he has told me, and thus being a penitent,
I examine one painting after another with affection.
And my foreigner (my brother?): I know
that he watches me, in secret, tender and loving—
and I, with affection, let him.

Another day, in the evening, we sit
shoulder to shoulder in the city's concert hall.
Slowly it all unfolds: secret dreams
are realized, long-forgotten images
start to take shape, flow freely for a while
then trail away, yet go on echoing still—
vibrations such as must have existed
since the world was born,
and waiting only for this very moment
to thrill us with music that I,
with him and with affection, hear.

Afterwards we always end up
in one of the cosy little cafés,
facing each other, tête-à-tête,
sitting silent for prolonged moments
while the colours and tones
continue to reverberate within us.
Outwardly motionless, we wait patiently
until our excitement subsides,
and at last, smiling shyly at each other,
give ourselves over to tastes and odours
which I, with affection, savour.

We return step by step, slowly,
through the Old and the New Town,
aimless for a while, raggedly-crookedly
wandering along the icy polished skulls
of medieval paving. Before long,
we start flying about, smoothly-sweetly,
as if on a magic carpet above fairytale streets,
enchanted by the waterlily patterns
which, mounted upside-down
from frigid streetlamps,
sway slowly without ever stopping.

No one about. Then a shadow, two,
but distant, solitary,
reminding us that the city is deeply asleep.
It is natural for us to long for closeness,
to hold each other tight;
sometimes our hands touch as well,
and perhaps, later, he will even dare
to press his face to mine—and I?
I, with affection, will let him!

At that moment, totally defenceless
against the flood of powerful emotion,

I hear myself asking him:

“Do you really think that I am *she*?

And that I had to return to this world
only to learn about carnal love for a man?

Advise me how to become worthy
of loving in the flesh without attachment?

How to love the other, yet not *need* the other?

How later to remove obligation and habit,
and that never-ending craving

for again and again? Oh, I know, I know
that this reimagining, over and over—

the gestures, the words, the smell, the touch—
is nothing more than a fantasy in me.

Yet how do I learn not to succumb

to that ravishment of imagination? ... No, no!

Thinking about myself, about you, about us,
how should I find any affection at all?”

62

He answers, “Observe your breath.

Whenever you remember, observe your breath:

inhale-exhale, inhale-exhale,

feel it flow in and out, in and out.”

He tells me also that, with this advice,

he is returning to me at least a part
of what I gave to him centuries back.

How does he know? How *could* he know

what I used to “advise” *him* so long ago?

From whom would he know? And how?



THE STATUE



On the last night before departure
I finally resolve to compel him
to explain everything to me once and for all:
“It may be enough that we’re together,”
I begin, “but something deep inside me
still keeps insisting that I ask you,
again and yet again:
Why do you think, or believe, or even know,
that for both of us, it’s not our first time here?”

He answers, in a low voice, with a song
that I actually know. Yes, Monteverdi,
from Solomon’s *Song of Songs*:

*“Nigra sum, sed formosa,
filiae Jerusalem.
Ideo dilexit me rex
et introduxit me in cubiculum suum ...”*

Seeing my puzzled look, he goes on:
“I hear you sing this song
whenever I stand under your statue,
for its face is also *nigra*, black,
and yet its beauty is not diminished in the least.
Tomorrow, you shall be convinced of it.

But first, I must explain
who those mysterious daughters of Jerusalem are
—or who they are for me.
I call them your sisters
because it was they who led me to you.

Each one of them resembled you,
because each, like you, had no need of the world
in order *to be*—didn’t need to demand,

time after time, from her reflection in it,
an assurance that she existed, that she was *real*.

The first one was called Mary,
about half a generation older than I.
She seemed to embody a true ordinariness,
and her job was indeed most ordinary:
she worked as an accountant
in a neighbouring town, to which for years
she commuted every working day.

I knew her by sight, so to speak.
But on one occasion—I remember to this day
that it was in summer and in the evening
and she was returning home from the train—
she stopped in front of me on the bridge over the mill-race
and unexpectedly said: “Why do you run so wild?
There is so much good in you,
and you don’t know it!”

Today I know that I should mark that place
with a gold ring. But ah, back then? If she had thrown
a handful of pebbles instead of those wasted words
over the bridge railing, they would have caused
more ripples in the flowing water
than her words did in my immature mind.

Only after the years had calmed
the current of my life
did her long-forgotten words
flash along the muddy bed of my memory
as a newfound and precious gift from her,
offering, so matter-of-factly,
her remarkable, calming wisdom.

Your second sister I met
six years later. It was here, in our city,
during the cruellest of years, nineteen fifty-two,
when a band of arch-villains,
who believed in nothing and usurped everything
and brooked no thinking different from their own,
made life unendurable
and sometimes even destroyed it.

But Henrietta, an educated doctor
and assistant professor, ignored all that.
She not only ignored it, she didn't see it!
Even now, she is no less alive in my mind
than she was then—down on both knees
on the cold stones, for all to witness,
at evening mass inside the church of St Giles.

I was young then, and thus very curious,
so I often pondered what it was
that could evoke in her such earnest piety.
Some serious concern of her own?
Or an irrepressible desire to live and to endure
every possible suffering of the Mother of Sorrows—
who, standing under the cross at Calvary,
could not find it in herself to comprehend
why this world will so zealously destroy
anything that seems arisen from beyond it.

I do not know and I will never know
why Henrietta's fate was destined otherwise.
She too bore a son, yet instead of him
it was she whose cross it was to die—at his birth.
What did she reveal to me, you may well ask?
It was, I believe, a profound understanding
of unconditional devotion.

For many years afterwards nothing happened.
I was abroad by then, the north of Germany,
when, without any warning,
I came face-to-face with your third sister, Pamela.
It was exactly as I say: face-to-face,
because her face was the only part
that remained fully alive. From her sixteenth year
she had lain in bed, paralysed up to her neck.
Imagine—to spend more than twenty years
as if embedded in concrete.

And yet, each time I visited
she would greet me with a welcoming smile.
It seemed to me that she used her useless body
as ballast against anything superficial.
After all, not once did I detect in her
the slightest sign of any restlessness,
or catch the hint of a gossipy remark.
Throughout all our German conversations
she lay there perfectly composed.

The fourth of your sisters
—your daughters of Jerusalem—
I came across in a Protestant church in Lund.
A young minister, in flowing black vestments
with a starched white collar, she seemed to me
like an apparition that had just stepped out
of a painting by an old Dutch master.
Her voice, her face, her movements and her gait,
her every gesture, so pure and dignified!
Clearly, they were all manifestations
of what in that moment was truly real: her being.
Because it wasn't only that she gleamed;
she *was* that very gleam, that holiness.

A distant niece of mine was your fifth sister.
So young, fifteen or sixteen years,
but already fully devoted to her mission.
Children from nearby houses flocked around her
as soon as they heard that she had come to visit.
It didn't take her long to enlist me
in some fairytale, or in several games—
whether by dancing with a smudgy girl
or fighting with a walnut-brown gypsy boy.
And she, all around us like a ribbon,
with a firm and yet most delicate mastery,
tied us together in the innocent splendour
of such a joyous, delightful occasion.

69

The last, the sixth of your sisters,
you never saw but must have felt her presence.
Do you remember? Up there, at the castle?
How you had to sit on a bench in front of that church,
having returned from silence into the weight of the world?
Near there, in a recently reclaimed monastery
a few days before it closed its door on this world,
I had observed in the meditation chapel the sloping back
of a young novice kneeling in deep reverence,
and I pondered the meaning of such idle prayer—
and the worth of any deed without it.

From the wide-open window in front of us
the immense airiness, like a magnifier, enlarged
the lure of spring gardens along Petřín hill.
But it was surely I alone who so perceived it,
because she, completely immersed in herself,
was clearly elsewhere, and peering
into the more lasting, heavenly gardens of paradise.

These sisters of yours—the daughters of Jerusalem—
have gradually brought me to you.
And tomorrow morning, when daylight comes,
I will explain the remaining verses of Solomon’s song.”

- - -

I needed no persuading
to prepare myself so early in the morning
to start out with him into the dark wintry cold,
once he announced that we were going to the spot
where I could catch sight of what he had noticed
not long before he’d found me again.

70

So we arrive, and he begins to explain:
“There is nothing at all sublime in this place, truly.
The world here is very different from the one
around the bridge, the river and the castle.
There, everything was opening us to permanence,
but here? Only the slag from molten humanity
collects, and sublimity is the last thing
that could enter into minds such as these.
They are forever asking for something:
first it is freedom, then freedom from freedom,
now conviction, then dispensation,
now execution, then liberation—and, most of the time,
just for a cheap piece of bread and noisy revelry.

I know, I know what you want to say,
and I must agree that one can always glean
a few precious grains
from a seemingly dead heart.

But follow me—we’ll take a look
at that majestic monument over there,

and I'll tell you why it, too, represents
very little of what's truly sublime.

That sainted duke sitting on a horse above all the others
is our great-great-uncle, whom our great-grandfather slew;
and the holy woman to the left in front of him
is his grandmother, and thus our great-great-grandmother;
she was murdered by his mother, our great-grandmother.

On the other side, there stands the holy monk.
He was allowed to live out his natural life,
but soon after his death one of our other ancestors
expelled all of his brethren from the land.

Behind him we see what is most horrific!
The statue of the bishop-saint laments, above all,
that ruthless, infamous brutality
with which one of our other grandfathers
butchered almost the bishop's entire family
for not being part of our clan.

What a terrible legacy for us!
I find it beyond comprehension
how the descendants of our subjects
can exhibit all these statues with such pride
for the whole world to admire!

Yes, there is one more statue here,
and it stands to the rear
like black-skinned Balthazar at the Nativity.

Look at her face, though!
It is not only *formosa*, beautiful,
but also quite *nigra*, black.
So many times they have attempted to clean it,
yet always it turns black again soon after.

I noticed this change on an occasion
when I happened to be standing here,
meditating, as I had often done,
on the legacy of that sainted duke.
It crossed my mind that this recurring blackness
must certainly symbolize something
of immeasurable importance!

Around that time I became absorbed
in a holy book that came from an Eastern faith,
which, as I recall, captivated me
mainly because, unlike ours,
it doesn't make saints out of martyrs.
In that book I read:

72

*For on whomsoever one thinks
at the last moment of life,
into him in truth he goes
through sympathy with his nature.*

It was like a bolt from a cloudless sky!
A sudden realization—that if this was true,
then you could not have stayed in heaven forever.
You might be there, yes, perhaps for centuries,
but eventually you had to return to this earth,
to what you loved more than anything else.
And the blackened face was clearly a sign
that you must now be somewhere among us ...”

Fascinated by his story,
I gently allow the last of his words
to fade within me. Something, however,
like a multiple echo,
is agitating me and won't let go.
For a while I remain silent.

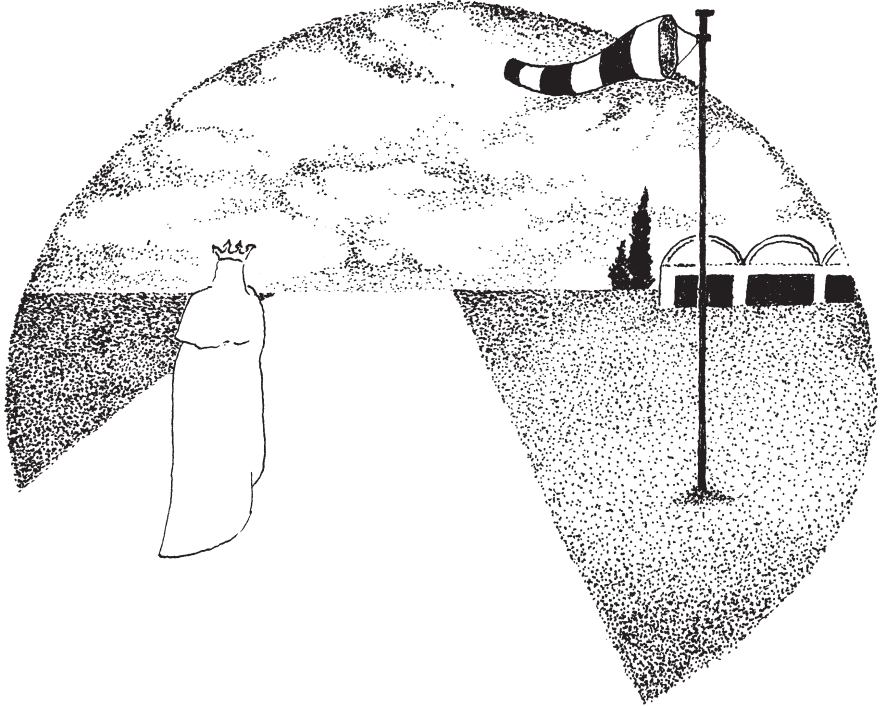
Then, all at once—I know, I know!
“Didn’t that holy book,” I cry,
“speak of returning *into him*, not *to him*?
If so, which of us is that former king,
and which his beloved sister? Or perhaps
there were *many* returns—in alternation:
you-I, I-you. And it always happened,
as in the *Song of Songs*,
that ‘the king delighted in me
and led me into his chamber’.

O secret of secrets!
Your name is woman, your name is man,
your name is all around us and within us!
But how to end this eternal cycle?
Advise me, since you know so well
the advice that would have been given
by her-me to him-you, or by her-you to him-me!”

He replies: “It is really quite simple.
And it doesn’t require us to stop loving.
Only—it must not be loving only each other.
One must learn to love everything
without distinction. That means to love
all living creatures, and plants, and trees,
and even stones. Yes, to love every single,
solitary, insignificant little piece
of this omnipresent mystery all around us,
until we too become a part of it.”



THE DEPARTURE



I am leaving ... And I'm alone again,
but full of thoughts of what I actually am.
And perhaps more—
of what I was before I had ever been,
or what I shall become when nothing at all
is left of what I know,
in this constantly changing space
that I've inhabited for a short while,
which seems alternately to expand, contract,
quite spontaneously to the rhythm
of the world around me.

Do I really live? Or am I *lived*?
Played with as in some kind of game
in whose design I don't have a say?
As if mere repetition, repetition, repetition,
settled my nature, but superficially,
and everything happened without my will,
without any contribution of my own.
So that, when waking into another day,
I have no choice but to continue
in what has been prescribed for me by fate.

After all, how little I can really do
all by myself, alone! Because in truth,
almost everything has been decided. *To be*
seems akin to an unavoidable drug
administered to me by life.
Every morning the aspirin of hope,
so that everything will stay
more or less in its current place—
otherwise I would seldom dare
to come out of my house, and even less
out of myself. Of what use, indeed,
is my innermost self to anyone?

That subsoil full of the spawn of forgotten things
that suddenly—out of fragments, shadows,
echoes of what may have been—
revives, reassembles for me into a meaningful game
which, in varying forms, in a fraction of time,
allows me to live through more, so much more,
than any waking reality ever could.

Then, through the morning,
I feel I've been nailed to this cross
of my fate: stretched out, suspended, pressed flat—
helpless and exposed to the course of events.

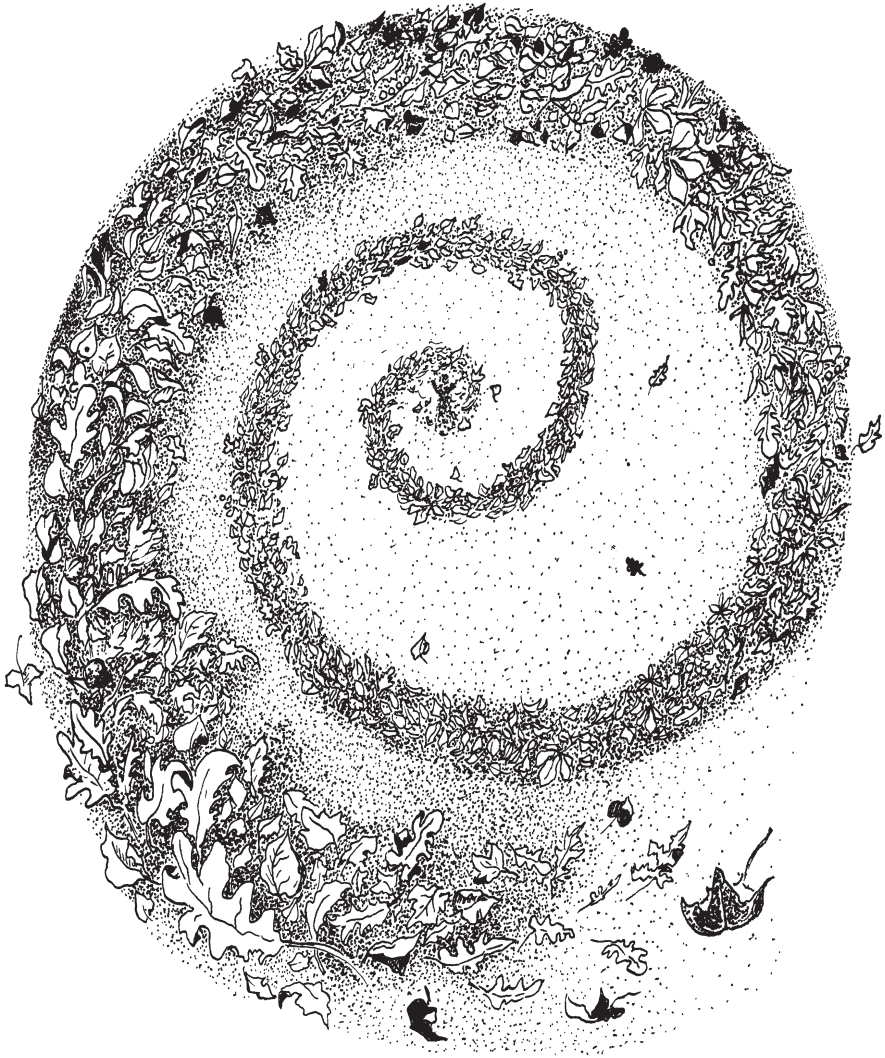
How can I know whether, as he insists,
I really *was* here before? Because life
seems indeed to be
lighter than a floating feather,
in a forgetfulness so infinitely absolute
that nothing of me could have been transferred
across that unimaginably empty void.

Yet here I am now, flying, flying away
over a landscape dusted with snow,
and over my never-ending wonder
at how *everything* simultaneously is and is not,
and yet—inexplicably, mysteriously—
how everything is full of love within me,
and how that love is coursing through me,
so strong it can even arrest
the current of time itself, to dazzle me
with its fiery golden face!

So, indeed,
on all sides, inwards and outwards,
all is everywhere mystery, mystery ...



THE THRESHOLD



*Temps gris, temps clair, aurore, crépuscule, changement incessant:
Au grand Vide j'ai appris à confier mon corps.
Nés de l'Origine sans dessein, y retournant sans regret,
Les nuages ressemblent à l'homme qui les contemple.*

Su Shi (12th century CE)

How to hold on to that motionlessness,
in which I dwelled for so long, so long,
when, standing at the castle's parapet,
I gazed upon, as if dusting with my eyes,
gently, snowily, the city below me ...

O mysterious and silent threshold
into a scarcely foreseen eternal home!
The threshold between now—and nevermore;
between here—and nowhere forever. Yes,
from so many different viewpoints
you revealed to me your patient waiting
for the day I too would cross your doorway
and enter, irrevocably—but where?

Your entrance to *there* seemed to me always
much darker than the darkest night.
Yet once I discovered you in all those places
your magic had so richly filled,
you became surprisingly transparent to me,
and my usual crippling horror
of that unavoidable step into the last unknown
changed imperceptibly inside me
into an almost joyful impatience!

And now I am not certain where my *real* home is.
Surely not in this city of shallow days,
where it feels so hard to wake in the morning,

so heavy to order a body around
that only wants to prolong its enjoyment
of hugging a blanket, a lover, a dream,
and, full of dimness and resistance,
rebounds like a ball off every object
not tidied away from the night before.
And then to wash it and feed it and dress it,
and go out to the sleet and winter darkness
and everywhere meet the same stray shadows
which, somewhere to somewhere, wander about,
every day dragging the load of themselves, somewhere ...
Where? ...

And there comes a time on a Sunday morning
—a morning after a night of rain—
when, without notice, as if by a miracle,
kings long dead might begin to awake.

82

And it happens to me here, and to him there.
Just yesterday, though, he wrote to me:
“... the ribbon of road, almost imperceptible,
having been trodden by centuries into deadness,
has unexpectedly unrolled as if freshly washed,
from the castle down to the Charles Bridge,
and gleaming smoothly beyond—to disappear
somewhere in the labyrinth alleys of the Old Town.
Then, suddenly, almost forgotten,
it appears unexpectedly again
in the square in front of the magic church of Týn ...”

And as if by a miracle, the sun here too
has just begun to pour its molten gold
onto the grizzled manes of smoking chimneys
and with a slowly-rising grandeur has set swinging
not only the bells in the towers of churches

but the festive spirit in each one of us,
waiting eagerly for the royal procession.

It is so. Truly. That's just how it happens;
but this mindless shifting to and fro
—from the commonplace into elation,
from elation back to the commonplace—
it is killing me. Oh, how depressing
is this uncontrollable back-and-forth swinging!
No wonder so many of us end up as cynics,
scraped to the rind of spirituality
and wasted by drink and gluttony and lust,
anything just to forget for a while
the cloaked one, waiting, forever patient,
in the corners of our eyes.
In so many dying eyes I've spotted him!
So easily had he entered through that blind spot
where nothing could stand in his way ...

83

O darkness of despair!
You, the sediment that remains!
The more we boil within us
the extracts of profit-loving plans,
the thicker you accrue.

What builds up most in me
is the dying all around.
Those closest to me, especially those,
move me for days, again and again, to mourning,
make me shiver with sorrow and diminish me
a little more each time, as though
the sight of their collapse had broken off
another useless piece of my substance.
Confused, I begin to unlace from myself
all the bonds of my worldly interests

and, little by little, tear off every finery
that for years and with such thoroughness
I stitched and sewed onto myself.

I simplify more and more.

I turn transparent. And I start to see
through all my worn-out garments.

To see where? Elsewhere, closer or farther,
where memories and dreams have dissolved
into what they always were and are: nothing.

How naive I was until lately,
when, often and so eagerly, I indulged
in believing that this alone was the way
to become real,

and that only these indulgences
could fill a life with real significance.

84

Oh, how all-surpassing is the joy
of my transparent existence now!

To let time be time, let it drift away,
carried on the web of an Indian summer,
like autumnal leaves to have no further use
than to fall off and settle at last
into the white immobility of winter.

To be fully satisfied with the season
and let oneself be iced in, and need no hope
of another spring.

To have had enough of change and rush
and the whirling of spring waters,
which, every year, would tumble down,
down from the awakening mountains
to fill and to flood the broad valley
of my life-hungry youth.

Yes, to blend with the snows of winter, and then,
early in spring, to melt, soak and disappear.

I am not there yet.
I still think back, I still recall
how motionless I remained while standing
for so long, so long above that city—
where from so many vantage-points of mystery
I caught sight of that waiting threshold,
which is now all that's left for me to cross.
To where?

*To there—where to be will surely mean
neither memory nor dream ...*

Epigraph

The remark by King Wenceslaus from his letter to Pope Gregory, loosely translated, reads: "... therefore, to tell the truth, I esteem her as I do my wife, my children and the common good, and in affection I value her above all that is mortal." It is quoted by František Palacký in his *History of the Czech Nation* (B. Kočí, Prague, 1926, p. 142).

THE CONVENT

Latin inscription: WENCESLAUS I. THE FOURTH KING OF BOHEMIA.
1205-1253.

THE STREET

Memento mori! Latin: "Remember death!"

THE CASTLE

Miluju tie viece nez sie: Old Czech, "I love you more than myself."

THE CHURCH

that beauty that doth cover thee: Shakespeare, Sonnet 22.
sursum corda: Latin, "lift up your hearts".

THE CITY

The *great Czech poet* is Vladimír Holan. The nine lines quoted are from his *Toscana* (the two Latin lines read: "Agnes, virgin, founder of the Order of the Cross / with the Star and of the monastery of St Francis").

The line *when murderers were hanged by murderers* alludes to events in Czechoslovakia after the Communist coup of February 1948, which was followed by a series of public and secret trials. Between 1948 and 1956, 244 people were executed on political charges and a further 8500 died as a result of torture or in prison. At least 100,000 people were imprisoned for acts against the Communist state. In 1950, there were 422 concentration camps in Czechoslovakia in which prisoners were held under gruesome conditions. That year, the number of prisoners in such camps amounted to 32,638 men and women. (Adapted from <http://www.comunistcrimes.org/en/Database/Slovakia/Historical-Overview>)

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THE STATUE

The lines from Monteverdi's *Song of Songs* translate: "I am black, but comely, / O daughters of Jerusalem. / Therefore the king delighted in me / and led me into his chamber ..."

the cruellest of years, nineteen fifty-two: This refers to the show trial in Prague during November 1952, whose main accused was Rudolf Slansky, first secretary of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party. Slansky and eleven other high-ranking party officials were sentenced to death. (See also note for The City, above.)

That sainted duke was St Wenceslaus, Duke of Bohemia (907-935), murdered by his younger brother, Boleslav. The grandmother of Wenceslaus was St Ludmila, whose murder (by strangulation) was arranged by his mother Drahomira.

the holy monk was St Procopius (Prokop) of Sázava (c. 970-1053). He studied in Prague, became a canon, and later a hermit; and was founding abbot of the Sázava Benedictine monastery near Prague.

the bishop-saint was St Adalbert of Prague (956-997), the first Bohemian-born bishop of Prague and later a martyred missionary. He was eventually made the patron saint of Bohemia.

The four lines beginning *For on whomsoever one thinks* are from *Bhagavad Gita*, 8.6 (Penguin, 1962, trans. Juan Mascaró).

THE THRESHOLD

A note about the term *threshold*. The origins of Prague go back to the seventh century and the Slavic princess Libuše, a woman of great beauty and wisdom who possessed prophetic powers. Libuše and her husband, Prince Přemysl, ruled peacefully over the Czech lands from Vyšehrad Hill. According to one of many legends, as recorded by the chronicler Cosmas in his *Chronica Boemorum* (1119–25), one day Libuše had a vision. She stood on a cliff overlooking the Vltava, pointed to a forested hill across the river, and proclaimed: “I see a great city whose glory will touch the stars.” She instructed her people to build a castle there, where a man was building the threshold (Czech *práh*) of a house. “And because even great noblemen must bow low before a threshold,” she declared, “you shall give it the name Praha.” Her words were obeyed, and some two hundred years later the city of Prague became the seat of the Premyslide dynasty.

Translation of the poem by Su Shi

(quoted in the French as translated by François Cheng):

Cloudy weather, fair weather, dawn, twilight, incessant change:
To the great Void I have learned to commit my humble body.
Sprung from their Origin without a plan, and returning there without regret,
The clouds resemble the man who contemplates them.

The *Return of Agnes Przemyslide* was written by Josef Tomáš between 1996 and 1999, in Melbourne, Australia, under the influence of one of his visits to Prague, where—as he himself has implied—the sight of the city evoked in him its still-living historical continuity with all the horrors and beauties of its past. The canonization of Agnes Przemyslide, also called Agnes of Bohemia, which had occurred a few years earlier (on 12 November 1989), may have served as an additional impulse towards the book's creation.

Agnes Przemyslide, a sister of Wenceslaus I (1205–1253), the fourth king of Bohemia, lived from 1211 to 1282. After the dissolution of her engagement to Henry of Hohenstaufen, the son of Emperor Frederick II, she remained unmarried and devoted to activity in the Church. She introduced in Bohemia the Order of St Clare and became the first abbess of the monastery, which she founded in Prague together with the monastery of the Franciscan Order and a hospital. She was also the founder of the Czech Order of the Knights of the Cross with the Red Star. The monastery and hospital were renowned for helping the poor and the suffering. Agnes was buried in the precinct of the monastery, but her grave has never been found.

In the Czech lands, Agnes of Bohemia was worshipped, after her death, as a saint—a symbol of goodness, mercy and love. Her statue is now part of the monument to St Wenceslaus (907–935) in Prague. Her character became the subject of Czech prose and poetry, from the pens (to name just a few writers) of novelist František Křelina and the poets Jaroslav Seifert, Jan Zahradníček, Jaromir Hořec and Vladimír Holan; the last is quoted briefly in the present work.

The dual storyline of *The Return of Agnes Przemyslide*—if it is possible, in this poetic allegory, to talk about a storyline—concerns a man, and a woman who has come from abroad at the man's invitation. Together they walk through Prague. They are human beings of the present, but it is as if they were at the same time the Czech king Wenceslaus I and his sister Agnes, meeting each other again after many centuries. As is well known, the relationship between Agnes and Wenceslaus was very warm and Agnes was often a mentor to her brother.

In these thirteen poems, the author allows both of the two protagonists to speak. In the process, he offers reflections, questions and possible answers in his ongoing effort to understand the meaning of existence, and its relationship to the present and to eternity. Central to the relationship between the king and Agnes is his longing to "...Take me *there*, / where I can feel constancy unchanging.' / You found that place, you resided there ..." This goal the king-author has endeavoured to approach throughout his life, if not to attain it; but—as he himself acknowledges—his effort was always short-lived, and amounted to "a quick glimpse, little more than a glance". For a long time he could not even grasp the sense of Agnes's message, "*That to possess here, / means to lose forever there, / while to deny oneself here / promises unimagined delights without end!*"

The man and the woman are visiting, in Prague, those places that are somehow associated with Agnes, and the woman is constantly trying to find any evidence that she, in the distant past, was indeed Agnes. She is also seeking an answer to the question of why she has returned. Was it really because she had to come back to what she loved more than anything else? At one point, when she becomes

aware of her strong feelings for the man who is supposed to have been her brother, she asks whether he thinks “that I had to return to this world / only to learn about carnal love for a man”. But then, how was she “to become worthy / of loving in the flesh without attachment”? How could she “learn not to succumb / to that ravishment of imagination”? His answer echoes what Agnes herself used to tell her brother by way of advice—and can also be considered as the personal conviction of the author—that:

“One must learn to love everything
without distinction. That means to love
all living creatures, and plants, and trees,
and even stones. Yes, to love every single,
solitary, insignificant little piece
of this omnipresent mystery all around us,
until we too become a part of it.”

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Hana Tomková, 2014

Acknowledgments

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I am indebted to many people for their guidance and support, and in particular to the following:

The late Australian poet Philip Martin, who in 1985 encouraged me to start writing poems in English. Without his help I would never have dared to do so.

Betty Boyd, a student of Philip's, who continued to assist me after his untimely death.

Hana Tomková, the editor of all my Czech poetry, who persuaded me that the original Czech version of my *Agnes Przemyslide* was worth publishing and even translating into several other languages.

Clia and Paul Goodwin from the University of New Hampshire, who were the first readers of my English translation of *Agnes*, spent many hours guiding me through the labyrinth of English grammar and syntax, and finally suggested that I should find an English-language poet to work with me at refining my translation.

Australian poet and editor Alex Skovron, who helped lift the level of the translation, and even contributed to some improvements in the Czech original by discovering various ambiguities and inconsistencies.

And, as always, my warmest thanks go to my dear and infinitely patient wife, Kamila.

J. T.



