

## Day X

### *I saw the pines grow*

Jaka Gerčar and Marko Uršič

*This dialogue is a recounting of a day-long conversation which took place on August 10th, 2019, between the philosopher and writer Marko Uršič and the post-graduate student of philosophy Jaka Gerčar, who is also the editor of these lines. As any memory, it is both a congestion and an expansion of lived events. This text, together with the photographs by Ana Zibelnik, was published in 2021 by Paper Tigers Books: the series “Day X” was conceived and edited by Laura Braun and Eva Eicker.*

*Like old men, the hills  
leaned their heads onto their white pillows  
and kept silent.*

*The pines are rustling.  
(Who are they talking to?)*

Srečko Kosovel, “I saw the pines grow”\*

✚ [Marko] The carriageway among these fields and vineyards we’re following *en route* from Kazlje to Tomaj is one of the countless paths I’ve walked in my life. Of course, it’s near to where I reside, so my affection for it may be the result of insignificant factors. Anyway, this hardly undermines my love for carriageways and what they represent... They’re actually not one but two parallel paths. We walk side-by-side, each with his own thoughts, memories and desires... yet today we are heading in the same direction, which we chose together, even though the goal itself is probably irrelevant: a minuscule speck both in your life and in mine. Be that as it may, for an hour or two our worldlines will be aligned like the wheels of carriages transporting wheat and grapes that used to make these ruts in the ground.

◆ [Jaka] The rut doesn’t appear until the road has been traversed many times; in fact, it had to be driven and walked upon so many times to ram and scar the soil, so the grass ceases to grow and that even long after man has stepped onto it, the rut is filled with puddles. A path which is walked upon for the first time, is characterized by the lightness of discovery. On the other hand, a path that leaves behind long-lasting traces doesn’t bear witness to discovery nor does it speak of lightness. Quite the opposite, in fact. Deviations turn insignificant; any improvisation is obliterated. Entrenched routes are much like wrinkles on a face! To me, ruts speak of necessity. Necessity, however, has to be learned. Walking step-by-step towards Tomaj, it occurs to me that I am following a path you’ve travelled over and over again. I, on the other hand, am only getting

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\* From *The Golden Boat: Selected Poems of Srečko Kosovel*, translated by Bert Pribac and David Brooks, Cambridge Salt Publishing, 2008.

to know it. Perhaps you first encountered this carriageway many years ago almost exactly as it is today: even if the grass grows back, the habits of those who walk here will form a very similar path soon after. To venture off the path seems presumptuous – but perhaps the freedom of walking lies precisely in the fact that we do it anyway. You've been living in this place for, what, three decades now? Do you ever get bored by familiar sights?

✦ Fortunately enough, I don't know boredom. And as far as spleen goes, the countryside isn't the most appropriate environment for it anyway. Boredom in some languages literally signifies a long time. Take the German *Langeweile* as an example. In some strange, best possible sense, I do get bored, for I often wonder about the remarkably long period of time that has passed from the beginning of time to this very moment. Landscape like the one I have the pleasure of experiencing day after day, seems absolutely crucial in allowing me to feel the elusive passage of time. Wrinkles of the earth, as you've called them, inspire this wondering. In every landscape, no matter how young or how ancient, the past comes in layers... Every painting of a field, even the dullest exercise in style *en plein air*, is a metaphor of the country it supposedly depicts: different layers of colour stand in for layers of time. The first, youngest layer are the clouds and shadows of the trees, all these ephemeral metamorphoses of light... In the second layer we find flowers that sprung up just a few months ago; flies; molehills; thin branches of trees, vines that are still getting to know the soil they were planted in... The third layer could be said to include stone fences lining our walk, little houses we see in the distance, the belfry of the St. Lawrence's church and sinkholes around us. A yet older layer: the blueness of the horizon, the sun, the moon's crescent... and then, the invisible, buried so deep in the past... molecules, atoms, quarks, photons... at last, space and time, the cosmic stage of creation – if there ever was creation.

◆ Humans have only been around for a brief snippet of cosmic time and yet we've managed to ravage and wreck the earth. The previous century was especially cruel and not just because of all the human deaths and the wars it had to witness: more than anything it was marked by the impudence of man *vis-a-vis* nature. Heidegger, who spent most of his time in the first half of the 20th century, often alerted to the precariousness of man's attitude towards technology. The Karst appears to defy this human conceitedness rather well. There's not a single vehicle within my sight and we are surrounded by infinitely tranquil nature from all sides. Trieste, admittedly, is only a stone's throw away, a noisy port, less than an hour from Ljubljana... Yet, when I read Srečko Kosovel's verses about pine trees and the smells of a summer's eve in the Karst, it seems barely anything has changed. In fact, I can easily imagine Kosovel as my contemporary, even though he died nearly a century ago. I consider his description of the region meticulously accurate. In those days, Kosovel wasn't the only writer attracted by this place. Duino, where Rilke set to work on his *Duino Elegies*, is a few kilometres away, just across the border. In Trieste, Joyce wrote part of his *Ulysses*. Trieste was also the hometown of the great Italian writers Italo Svevo and Umberto Saba... There was never a lack of poets coming from the Eastern wing of the Adriatic either: a while ago, Josip Osti, the prolific Bosnian poet moved to Tomaj, Taras Kermauner lived two, three villages down the road, as did Ciril Zlobec... And you,

who originally hail from elsewhere, found your second – or is it now first? – home here and turned it into your writer’s retreat. No one would object to the fact that this is indeed a very charming scenery, but there’s another side to it, too, isn’t there? The bora, the rocky terrain... Tell me, professor, what is it about this land that makes it so welcoming to contemplation?

✦ You are right, the landscape hasn’t changed much – except for the villages, which mostly took a turn for the worse. Trieste is geographically close to the Karst, but simultaneously rather remote with its cosmopolitan spirit... a somewhat obsolete cosmopolitanism, that is, from the era when it was still a Habsburg port with a worldly charisma. The fact that the Karst remains fairly untouched owes much to the scarcity of water here – mind that water used to be more precious than wine. Consequently, large-scale farming or industry never stood a chance. But it’s no pre-civilized idyll either! Did you notice the power line that’s been running along our path all the way from Kazlje? I mentioned the “invisible structures” in that oldest layer of time... In a sense, the energy that passes through these cables is metaphysical as much as anything, if we take metaphysics to be the knowledge of the invisible. You might object that metaphysics, in fact, does not regard the invisible but rather that which is beyond physics. That is certainly true, but don’t forget that two centuries ago electricity was not only invisible (with the exception of lightning), but also supra- or even non-physical, as the physics of the day did not yet have a clue that there exist such particles as electrons, let alone the electromagnetic field. I don’t mean to digress too off topic, so please excuse my wanderings. My point is that the Karst is a metaphysical landscape as much as it is poetical: solid and soft, both a strict father and a gentle mother, rocks touch the vines as earth touches the sky on the distant horizon.

◆ You speak of metaphysics that has little in common with musty concepts of Christian philosophy that seemingly pervade the western thought through and through. If I adopt your parallel, could we say that the visible is that which attunes us to the invisible? This landscape – the *phýsis* – appears hospitable to thinking about the natural phenomena but also that which transcends them.

✦ It’s my philosophical conviction that real metaphysics cannot and, above all, must not contradict the *phýsis*, even if it was, throughout the history of philosophy, often understood in this dualistic sense. To the contrary, I am convinced that metaphysics should transcend the physical world while, paradoxically, remaining immanent to it. In this sense, contemplative walking attunes us to what is not present.

◆ Yet people contemplate nature in vastly different ways. Accordingly, walking in the history of philosophy figures in distinct, perhaps incompatible roles. Some thinkers regarded walking foremost as respite; not unlike a busy banker who swims a few lengths after work or plays a game of tennis. They say Kant was like this and thought of his ambulation as a minimal hygiene, as a repose from sitting hunched above his desk all day. Then, there are at least two types of walkers among those who considered it a constitutive part of their philosophy. First, those who

appreciated the physiological and psychological effects of walking: rhythm, slowness, roaming, the tranquillity of the surroundings that in turn calms the body and the spirit... Perhaps thoughts, like wine, could be said to belong to their proper *terroir*? Certainly, the role of walking is bifold: it helps us think and, based on our experience today, it definitely helps to fuel the dialogue.

✦ Although I am more accustomed to this rustic environment, even walking through a modern metropolis can nurture philosophical thought. The rhythm of walking, of course, depends mostly on the person walking, and that may give rise to philosophies of distinct velocities: physical moving quite literally also moves the mind, which can venture on unknown paths and react in unexpected ways, sometimes opening itself to being led astray by most contingent curiosities, leaving a thought behind only to be or not to be revisited on another occasion. However, moments of stillness are equally important, either on a silent hilltop or in the privacy of your home.

◆ Stillness is indeed equally – if not more – necessary than movement, just as silence is necessary to distinguish music from noise. Daoistic sages would doubtless agree that we can travel by moving as much as by being still. I have a very dear memory that seems appropriate to share on this occasion. Of all my friends there is one to whom I have a special bond, for I've known the longest. His name, like yours, is M. and while we've grown apart in recent years, we were each others confidants in the time when we experienced first unrequited loves, had the first taste of requited love, or when we were confronted with consequential life decisions. Besides, everything appears to be more consequential at that age. Well, there was a period of time when we would meet regularly. I would usually ring at his doorstep in a suburb of Ljubljana after lunch and we'd set off for the centre, not that we'd have any particular place that we wanted to visit or be. We would just walk – for hours at times – stopping only to have a cigarette on a bench or simply sit on the pavement... I miss the simplicity of those walks. No time limits, walking for walking's sake, walking for talking's sake, smoking for the sake of stopping. The point of those breaks lay in the fact that they broke the continuity of our ramblings. It was our time to be silent. The city streets filled the void, but if we'd live here, among the pines, I imagine we could have heard the tobacco burning. Monologues, which indeed help us recognise our own thoughts, are prone to digressions and can risk quickly losing the attention of the person we're speaking to... Walking with you today I think I can understand how M. and I managed to keep the dialogue very much alive and relevant, even while letting each other ramble on for a kilometre, two, or three.

✦ As a senior myself, I can tell you that the walking for walking's sake returns in old age – perhaps in another form and with different motives, but with essentially similar results and feelings. There are various walks in life: those at daybreak, which serve to put down and order eluding thoughts – these can often turn into deep reflections on the self –, then strolls in the

afternoon heat and, lastly, promenades when the heat subsides and gives way to the evening's cool.

◆ Of course, walking is also much more than a way to order our thought. In its own way, it is becoming more and more a subversive activity, due to its ability to spite the imperatives of the world around us. It's a complete waste of time, if we spend our lives thinking how to *gain* time – ha! I like to remind myself of how petrified Nikos Kazantzakis was in the face of contemporary means of transportation, which he considered presumptuous. Mortals can walk the earth and sail the seas, he said; driving and flying are kept for those who like to imagine they are not part of nature but rise above it – that they are, in fact, supernatural. This is lunacy to our ears, but Kazantzakis simply provided a plain answer to a common-sense question: will you adhere to the time that surrounds you or will you ignore it and rather enforce your own sense of time?

✦ The asphalt road we've just crossed could have taken us from Kazlje to Tomaj in a ten minute drive, but I think we agree that would defeat the purpose. We have to be careful to keep left now, when we enter the forest. Until this point, I'm sure you'd find your way even without my guidance, but the path will soon split and then split again and we could easily get lost. These are true wood-ways, *Holzwege* as Heidegger would have called them... I could hardly think of a more ironic metaphor for his philosophy than this title he gave to one of his later works. Upon his famous philosophical uncovering of the *Dasein*, which was initially a brilliant, even genius idea, Heidegger quickly lost his way, finding himself in an obscure place, almost impenetrable... It's less pleasurable to walk here than it was through the fields, isn't it? It makes me think of something you've mentioned earlier: that the freedom of walking lies in our ability to counter the necessity of the path, in other words, to divert. I agree, of course, that without this liberty we could hardly call ourselves free beings, but then again, freedom is also much more than this *clinamen*, as old Lucretius would put it. About a week ago I took an evening stroll. It was a dry summer evening, just like today, and I deflected from the carriageway and set out through the grass and across the fields. I used my cane to poke at the grass and look for mushrooms... Now, you won't believe what I found hiding in the grass: a skull. When I got closer, a snake dashed out of it. I picked up the little, fragile skull with my cane and brought it home to clean it of the dirt, so it is now white like snow... It turned out to be the skull of a fox. Remind me to show it to you when we get back to the house.

◆ Wait, what has the skull got to do with freedom?

✦ Nothing and everything. I'm not free just because I can deflect from the path, but foremost because I can see and understand that this is the skull of a being that was once alive. Simultaneously with this awareness I long for eternity. To the right you can see Štanjel: as if in some near distance, "Saint Daniel" glows like heavenly Jerusalem, a place of longing. Can longing ever be fulfilled or are we mortals compelled to yearn for the impossible, the eternally

unattainable? Anyway, I often think these meagre peasant churches have much more holiness left in them than big cathedrals, don't you?

◆ Absolutely. In my view, there's little doubt that profanation goes hand in hand with urbanisation. If longing for eternity is truly born out of awareness of the passing of time, it's not surprising that these sentiments are difficult if not impossible to nurture in concrete cathedrals of modern cities. That fox's skull you picked up may be a perfect example of *memento mori*, but it's certainly not the only one. Grass, trees, after all, this very summer day, which is now slowly waning, thus announcing a milder night, all speak of dying and of being born. Whenever I visit the Karst, I like to order a glass of *vitovska grgonja* – an indigenous grape variety one can rarely find in a supermarket. More often than not vitovska wine is made using traditional, low-intervention methods: macerating the grapes' skins for a prolonged period of time to express the maximum character of the fruit, without the use of chemicals, temperature control, added sulphur or industrial yeasts. These wines are not to everybody's liking; they can taste of vinegar or rotten fruits – but this is precisely why I appreciate them! What is decay if not an indicator of being alive... I would be surprised if Silicon Valley gurus would not find vitovska repulsive, for it is incompatible and, in fact, contrary to their endeavours. Google and similar corporations are investing outrageous amounts of money in finding ways to artificially prolong, control, maintain and even create life! Even everyday activity there appears to have its own chosen tempo, very different from the one in place here, flowing in the opposite direction, flowing away from death, and so never having the slightest chance of crossing paths with eternity.

✦ In the Karst we also drink teran, not red but black wine, as dense as blood. Old vines absorb the *rubedo terrae* and keep it in their ripe grapes. Like vitovska is no ordinary white wine – it is actually quite often made into an amber wine – teran is too sour for those who spend their days in postmodern or transmodern valleys not just in America but anywhere in this technological anthropocene, in Ljubljana, Sežana, possibly even here, in this very village. Be that as it may, I would like to add to your considerations that death is not ephemeral, life is. I'm not afraid of it, death, or what you would call it – *das Nichts*, the void, nothing. I know nothing about nothing, nor can I ever learn anything about it. I am terrified, however, of saying goodbye, and of the suffering that so often accompanies our final breaths. I take instruction from my philosophical mentor, Michel de Montaigne, who was frightened yet so joyful in the face of death. If death cannot be beat, perhaps the only eternity we have access to is the eternity of the moment, the *hic et nunc*. Ciril Zlobec, a great poet of the Karst, once called it “my own little eternity”. Kosovel, whose childhood home we can already make out down the road, wrote “I'm a red rocket, I flare up, burn and fade out.” Truth is paradoxical. Poetical.

◆ As inevitable as it is, I feel I don't appreciate “my little eternities” enough. Not moments of momentary ecstasy that are in most instances very brief, but moments that can expand and spill over the following minutes and hours, usurping the everyday, offering extreme moments of clarity and bliss. Poetry cannot freeze time but I admire its capability to take an ordinary day

from its continuum and make it somehow eternal. That is to say that poetry can actually tear out occurrences from time. We are not masters of our memories. Like poets cannot force their memories to become the stuff of poetry, we cannot decide which moments will pass by unnoticed and which will rise above the fleetingness of time.