

RICHARD BERENGARTEN

A Synchronistic Experience in Serbia

I was saying that only I could reach to the other's (inner) life. My condition is not exactly that I have to put the other's life there; and not exactly that I have to leave it there either. I (have to) respond to it, or refuse to respond. It calls upon me; it calls me out.

Stanley Cavell (84)

In May 1985, I visited Serbia from my home in Cambridge, England, to run a series of poetry writing workshops for pupils in Serbian schools, mostly in their early teens. With my daughter Lara, who was then seventeen years old, I travelled to Belgrade and some smaller towns and villages in the central and western region of the republic, known as Šumadija (*šuma*, 'wood', 'forest'). The project, which included a group of local teachers of English, was set up and led by my friend and colleague Branka Panić, director of a language teaching centre in Belgrade, in collaboration with a Serbian publisher of children's books and magazines.¹ As I didn't know Serbian at that time, when conducting these workshops, I spoke in English and the teachers translated for me. The boys and girls wrote their poems in Serbian. Our group travelled from town to town in a minibus.

One of these poetry workshops took place on a sunny morning on May 25 in a school in the city of [Kragujevac](#) (*kraguj*, 'vulture'). A large number of pupils were involved in several sessions, and the events filled the school hall. There was a bright, enthusiastic and expansive atmosphere and a sense of novelty and pleasure about these workshops. Afterwards, with Branka and Lara, I visited the city's memorial museum in [Šumarice](#) ('woodland, 'spinneys'), a hilly park of 350 hectares just outside the town.²



¹ We ran poetry workshops in Belgrade, Čačak, Šabac, Kragujevac, and in the village of Tršić, birthplace of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. See also ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS below.

² See [The Blue Butterfly](#) (RB 2011a): 123-125.

Nothing could have contrasted more strongly with the mood of these poetry workshops than the history of Šumarice. Here, on October 21, 1941, 2,272 people were [massacred](#). Most of these victims were male Serbs, including boys pulled directly out of classes from one of the main schools.³ Victims included forty local Jews, an unregistered number of Roma, as well as prisoners from local jails, and some Serbian women and girls.⁴

Following their whirlwind invasion in April 1941, the Nazis had fully occupied Serbia by the beginning of May. The massacre was a punitive reprisal for a night-time ambush by a Serbian resistance group, near the village of Ljuljaci, on the narrow hilly road between Kragujevac and Gornji Milanovac, at a spot lined by woodland on both sides, on October 16. Nine German soldiers were shot and twenty-seven wounded, of whom one died later. A ruthless edict had been published by the occupiers, stating that in the event of a single German being killed, one hundred members of the Serbian population would be executed. For a single wounded German soldier, the toll would be fifty executed.⁵

Three days after the ambush, the reprisals were swift and merciless. On 19, 20 and 21 October 1941, 2,797 people were massacred at Šumarice, in Kragujevac itself, and in the four nearby villages of Maršić, Mečkovac (*aka* Ilićevo), Grošnica and Beloševac. Those killed included at least 27 women, 217 children of secondary school age, and 25 children aged between twelve and fifteen. The largest killing site was at Šumarice.⁶



Our visit to Kragujevac coincided with a national holiday linked to the birthday of the former Yugoslav president, Josip Broz Tito. Five years after his death, May 25 was still being observed as *Dan mladosti* ('Youth Day'). But because our entire focus had been on the poetry writing

³*Prva kragujevačka gimnazija* ['The First Kragujevac Grammar School']. Several years later, around 1988–1989, I taught a poetry workshop in this school.

⁴ See: Brkić undated, 2007, and 2011; and RB, *The Blue Butterfly*: 125-128; and 2011b.

⁵ See RB, *The Blue Butterfly*: 4, 127.

⁶ Brkić op. cit.; Brkić 2007; and RB, *The Blue Butterfly*: 4, 5 and 125-135.

workshops, Lara and I had been given no advance knowledge by my Serbian colleagues either of this event or of the wartime massacre, so we had no idea at all of what to expect. Our friends had told us after the workshops that we really ought to visit the museum, but excused themselves from coming with us. They had already been there; and a repeat visit would be “too upsetting”. But Branka Panić kindly agreed to accompany us. I had never visited the site of a massacre, and nor had Lara. I was curious to visit Šumarice, even though I knew nothing about it and the visit hadn’t been envisaged in any way, let alone prepared.

As we arrived, the memorial park presented a curious and completely unexpected scene. The place was thronging with people on special outings. Groups were arriving from many other Serbian towns and villages. Children and teenagers poured out of various hired buses, and pensioners out of others. Many families were coming in by car. Hundreds of people milled around us, and in the queue outside the museum there was a good deal of noisy chatter and friendly jostling. The weather was balmy, and the area around the museum brimmed with youthful energy. In extreme contrast, the memorial park itself, a green area of 350 hectares expressly dedicated to the commemoration of the massacre, retained its own underlying, passive calm. It would be hard to visit this place at any time and not be reminded of the events that had taken place there in 1941.

On both sides of the straight road leading from the town to the museum, large banners had been strung up, on which fluttered phrases inscribed in Cyrillic script. Branka explained to us that these were blow-ups of short messages that had originally been scribbled on scraps of paper by some of the men and boys who had been selected by the Germans for execution. They had been interned overnight in a disused barracks before being marched out to be shot the next morning. They had known or at least expected the fate that was awaiting them. These short messages, written out of communal and individual terror, overwhelming panic, utter helplessness, and extraordinary bravery, were remarkable documents. Much later, when I tried to render some of them into English, I discovered that they had

a heartrending, tragic poignancy and dignity that utterly defied adequate translation.⁷

Eventually, Lara, Branka and I found ourselves in a queue of people waiting to get into the museum. The building was quite small and, once a hundred or so people had entered, the keepers closed the glass doors to prevent overcrowding inside. The previous group needed to be allowed to percolate through the building to the exit on the floor below, before we could be admitted. We stood outside, in a crowd of strangers, waiting our turn.



Thirty-three years later, I still have a crystal-clear memory of what happened next, in all its detail. Lara and I were standing close to the glass doors of the museum, slightly bemused by the chatter and bustle around us. I had my arms folded in front of me, so that my right hand cradled my left elbow and my left hand was slightly raised. Lara stood to my right, holding our camera. My eyes were focused on the statement printed in large letters on the partition wall inside the museum, facing through its glass doors so that it could be read from outside: *Machen si mir dieses Land Deutsch* ("Make this land German for me"). Beneath it was attached the name *Adolf Hitler*. At that moment, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a small movement on my left hand.

Looking down, I saw that a small blue butterfly was perched on my left forefinger, its wingspan hardly more than the size of my thumbnail. I gazed at it in disbelief for a second and nudged Lara with my right elbow. "Look," I said. "Quick, take a photo."

Lara pulled out our camera and took the first of two photos. In my astonishment, a vast number of impressions and ideas flashed (flooded) across my mind at once, as the horizons and boundaries of 'normal' perception, thought, and observation suddenly opened wide. Then the tiny butterfly lifted off my finger but, rather than flying away, fluttered before my face and just above it. It seemed to be performing a little aerial dance. Then, it settled back down on my finger again, the same finger as before. "It must *like* me," I thought. I asked Lara to pass me the camera, slowly stretched my left arm out in front of me and,

⁷ 'Don't send bread tomorrow', RB, *The Blue Butterfly*:6-7.

using only my right hand, managed to focus the apparatus so that I could take a slightly better close-up shot. I had to manipulate the camera carefully because I'm left-handed, and my right hand isn't as flexible as my left.

In terms of clock-time, although all this must have happened in a few seconds, I remember it as a moment in and through which the here-and-now expanded into a kind of timelessness, and time and space either stopped, or stopped being relevant. Time itself seemed to expand (disperse) and collapse (implode) simultaneously, and while 'things' were transformed because of this – somehow (and paradoxically) they also remained entirely 'normal': that is, exactly as they had been previously. I've captured, or at least suggested, some of these complexities of response in '[The telling, first attempt](#)',⁸ although the word *attempt* in the title clearly indicates my sense at that time that language itself – even language, the richest, finest, clearest of our communicative gifts – wasn't adequate to expressing the fulness and subtlety (essence?) of such an experience, which leaks away, as it were, through minute cracks in language's jar.

I don't remember much, if anything, of what happened immediately after that. I know that I retained some immediate visual and spatial impressions of the museum's interior, because I remembered them later on, when they became relevant to me as triggers for research. But the incident itself, of the butterfly perching on my finger – and then returning, and then flying away again – together with everything that had led up to it, has been engraved into my memory ever since, with a cut-glass clarity, scattering multiple refractions.



Our tour of Serbia continued and we moved on to other towns. As soon as Lara and I returned home to Cambridge, I had both our photos developed. Although these were of nowhere-near-professional standard, especially by comparison with the extraordinarily fine detail of modern digital photography, the first shot that Lara had snapped and the second that I had taken both yielded quite clear images of the little blue creature astride my finger, almost as if it had been posing

⁸ See also RB, *The Blue Butterfly*: 10-11.

there, sunning itself, waiting – even somehow wanting (?) – to be photographed. Our camera had contained a colour film, so the butterfly's delicate blueness came out clearly enough: wings edged in lacy whiteness, and a black contoured band, a kind of wavering border, between wingtips and the inner dominant blue.

Around that time, I wrote two poems to record the experience. They arrived spontaneously and effortlessly: first, '[The blue butterfly](#)' followed by '[Nada: hope or nothing](#)'.⁹ The second poem contains two lines ("A blue butterfly takes my hand and writes / in invisible ink across its page of air..."), which express my acute sense at that time that, rather than *my* writing them, both of these poems were being written *through and out of me*. That is to say, rather than my own will, intention (ego) being in control, the butterfly had somehow entered my imagination (psyche), and was guiding and guarding my hand in, through and along the entire compositional pathway.

It was hardly surprising that after the arrival (delivery) of these two poems, I realised that there was considerably more to be said – and done. As it turned out, these two poems eventually became the core of a book, entitled [The Blue Butterfly](#).¹⁰

Thanks to the resources of Cambridge University Library, one of the great libraries of England, I was able to do some preliminary research into the Second World War in Yugoslavia. I began to delve into this subject from as many angles as possible, including records of German war documents. During this period, I also received and accepted several further invitations to various parts of the then-Federation of Yugoslavia, including Croatia and Slovenia as well as Serbia. These visits were short, usually lasting no more than one or two weeks: I went either to train English teachers on residential courses sponsored and planned by the British Council, or to attend literary events organised by the Serbian Writers' Association [Udruženje književnika Srbije]. As a result, by 1986 I had a good number of friends among both teaching and literary communities in Belgrade and in Split.

⁹ See also RB, *The Blue Butterfly*: 7-9; and the interview with Sean Rys, 'I Must Try This Telling' (in RB 2017): 110ff. For critical analysis and discussion, see [Petrov](#) and [Wilson](#).

¹⁰ See RB, *The Blue Butterfly*: 2006, 2008, 2011, and, for the bilingual English and Serbian edn., 2007.

In my early twenties, I'd lived in Italy and then in Greece, and knew both countries well. Now, in my mid-forties, I was discovering that the more I learned about Yugoslavia – which, at that time, I first thought of as the 'space between' Italy and Greece – the more curious I became, the more attracted, and the more I wanted to discover about it as an entity in its own right.



Then a new possibility emerged. Branka Panić's language centre in Belgrade needed a qualified native-speaker to teach English, and a job was to be advertised in the UK through the British Council. By this time, I had already given poetry readings and run several poetry workshops at this centre, and had several friends there. If I went to live in Belgrade, I would have the chance to experience Yugoslav – and more specifically, Serbian – culture first-hand, learn some Serbo-Croatian,¹¹ and work on [The Blue Butterfly](#). I decided to apply for the post, and was interviewed by a laconic mandarin at the British Council's head office in Davies Street, London. "I see no reason," he drawled, "why we can't accept you". In this way, a new phase in my life was set in motion.

In 1987, Yugoslavia didn't figure especially prominently in the consciousness of most of my English literary acquaintances. I found myself being asked sceptical questions: "Yugoslavia? Why on earth are you going to live in *Yugoslavia*?" But I didn't feel like arguing, and in any case, had always been attracted by edges, borders, and zones of intersection and crossover, rather than self-appointed, self-important, big-time 'centres'. So, I took the easy way out and answered, "I'm going to chase butterflies," thinking of Georges Brassens's song, '[La chasse aux papillons](#)'.

I lived in Yugoslavia from 1987 to 1990. I was 44 when I arrived and 47 when I left. During that time, I wrote many poems that would

¹¹ The expressions *Serbo-Croatian* and *Serbo-Croat* are no longer politically correct either literally or in terms of taste. I use *Serbo-Croatian* here non-controversially in accurate historical context. Since the demise of Yugoslavia, the term has been systematically suspended and superseded by the separate linguistic designations *Serbian*, *Bosnian* and *Croatian*, each of which claims and has its own separate identity, despite almost total mutual comprehension and, in terms of both grammar and vocabulary, many more points in common than differences.

eventually find their way into [The Blue Butterfly](#). Following my return to Cambridge in June 1990, I worked sporadically on the book, doing more research, following up various themes, and writing more poems as and when they appeared. I wasn't in a hurry. I knew that this book, with its inception in the synchronistic event of 1985, needed to gestate, emerge, and ripen in its own way and its own time. I thought of this book as a single composite poem, an organic whole, rather than as a collection of disparate shorter pieces. As things turned out, it took me twenty years to complete. (Another way of putting this is that my butterfly turned out to be a particularly heavy specimen, and that it took me twenty years to free myself from the almost weightless weight of its momentary touch on my finger.) The first English edition was followed by the Serbian,¹² and the translation by [Vera. V. Radojević](#) was utilised as the oratorio for the open-air choral and dramatic commemoration at Šumarice in the same year.¹³



After writing 'The blue butterfly' and 'Nada: hope or nothing' in 1985, very soon after my return to Cambridge from Serbia, I began to realise that something larger was gestating in me (gesturing to me), of which these two small poems were only indications (forerunners, harbingers). What this something was, or where it came from, I didn't at first understand at all. Even so, I did trust its source and its impetus and did so instinctively. I also fully recognised what it was *doing* – which was *calling me* (*calling on me, calling me out*): to write. And while I could scarcely help recognise that these two small poems possessed their own intrinsic qualities of authenticity and depth, it dawned on me that they were also glimpses of a vastly larger and more extensive inner seam, which, so long as I was attentive and patient, I might possibly be capable of exploring and mining. This seam, I realised at the time, and expressed later, ran deep into and through my own personal psyche, both as a Jew and as a poet. And from responses to these poems in Serbia, later on I also realised how deeply it runs through the intersubjective identity and history of the Serbian people too. This set

¹² RB 2006; and RB 2007, *The Blue Butterfly*.

¹³ *Veliki školski čas* [the 'Great School Lesson'], an event commemorating the massacre, held at Šumarice each October since the 1950s. See RB, *The Blue Butterfly*: 136-138 and 140.

of discoveries surfaced very slowly and gradually: it assembled itself piecemeal, during and along with the composition of the book itself, evidently incorporating (embodying) my full volition, while somehow appearing of its own accord and only revealing the whole of itself in its own good time.

Evidently, my job was to listen, watch, scry, follow, delve – and keep listening and watching for the deeper sources of these two initial poems. Eventually, my butterfly-experience and the poems that flowed out of it would touch and activate (resonate) an archetypal chord not only in myself but in others.



In the Greek tradition, the paradigmatic call to the poet to compose and to sing is delivered, mysteriously, by one of the Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne, goddess of Memory, and of Zeus, king of the Gods. The nine daughters of Memory are the nurses, guides, and guardians of poetic inspiration. In the opening of his epic masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, John Milton calls on his Muse, Urania: “Sing heavenly muse.”¹⁴ Urania, highest of the Muses and patroness of astronomy, is named after the heavenly god Uranus, or Ouranos. Even in Modern Greek, the word ουρανός means ‘sky’.

Who, then, was calling me, on me, calling me out? Certainly, not Urania.

I had felt, even during or immediately after the event, that the butterfly landing on my hand was a message that involved *the soul*. I knew, too, that in ancient Greek the single word ψυχή (ancestor of our word *psyche*) meant *both* ‘butterfly’ *and* ‘soul’. What’s more, in my mind, as I stood outside the museum gate at Šumarice, it wasn’t so much that the butterfly *symbolised* the soul in any conventional modern sense, but that *butterfly and soul were one*. And this integral cognitive and linguistic connection between *butterfly* and *soul*, through the word ψυχή, occurred to me *at that time*. Whether this recognition happened simultaneously with the butterfly landing on my finger or in the nano-seconds after it, I can’t be sure; but, certainly, this meaning (meaningfulness) was key to both the core-event and the entire experience. And as for this *particular* butterfly, I was now coming to

¹⁴*Paradise Lost*, Book 1: l. 6.

think of it as ‘my’ butterfly, sensing that I had a special bond with it. And I began to have extensive discussions with myself about the creature; and in some of these I found myself addressing the creature as *part of myself*.

Clearly, then, my Muse was *ψυχή*, the butterfly-soul. And this entity or being had already chosen me, simply by sitting on the forefinger of my writing hand. Equally clearly, this Muse of mine scarcely belonged to the Empyrean (aetherial) heights, but rather to the lower air, and to the gates between life and death. I recognised, too, that these gates had been opened up to me –in me, and through me – gradually and progressively, ever since 1957, when as an Anglo-Jewish boy of thirteen growing up in London, I had first learned about the Nazi Holocaust.

Nor did I need anyone to explain to me that, in Greek mythology, the gates between life and death are those between this world and the Underworld, ruled over by Hades and his queen, Persephone, daughter of Demeter. I knew too, that the myth of Persephone enacts (re-enacts, embodies, encapsulates) the natural annual cycle and the theme (motif, imagem, symbol – and also archetype) of *rebirth*, even though it did not occur to me *consciously* at that time to connect this intellectual (bookish, theoretical) knowledge with the fulness of the emotional (heuristic, transformational) experience that I was undergoing in the wake of this synchronistic event.

Thinking of this (and thinking it through) in retrospect, as I write this account in 2018, thirty-three years later, it’s clear to me that the meaning of the proximity of the massacre and the butterfly-soul or soul-butterfly in the synchronistic event, involves *rebirth*. And at the time, to me at least, an immediate, direct coincidence (connection, link, mesh, merging, bind, bond) was established between the butterfly and the massacre. This involved a *metamorphosis* – perhaps even a *metempsychosis*.



Even so, if I were to interpret the creature as a perfectly articulated materialisation (embodiment, incarnation, appearance, epiphany) of the soul, the question was, *whose?* At some point in this inner debate with myself, now indiscernible and unrecapturable, I developed the sense that the butterfly’s message to me wasn’t only personally

directed *at* me – *to* me, *for* me – but that it was entirely clear and very simple. After all, the creature had come, whether by chance, accident, or ‘of its own accord’, to sit on the forefinger of my writing hand, no-one else’s. Wasn’t there, then, at least according to the mode of thinking that I was applying then – and am also and still applying here – that is, the ancient, neolithic, symbolic, mythical, mythopoeic mode of poetry, rooted in correspondences and their accretions – wasn’t there at the very least a kind of *elective affinity* between my writing hand and this soul-butterfly or butterfly-soul?

As for the inner meaning of my butterfly’s message, my sense developed that I was being directed (asked, tasked), *called* (*called on*, *called out*), told (and even *tolled* – almost as if I were some kind of bell) – to write about (and to *write out*) the massacre. This calling to me at least was as clear as any call (or call-out or call-up) possibly could be, delivered in the soul’s own code-language,¹⁵ a code that had no need of human words. Its meaning and meaningfulness were self-evident, in the blue butterfly’s arrival on my writing hand.

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This essay will also appear in two further publications: Christian McMillan, Roderick Main, and David Henderson (eds.), *Holism: Possibilities and Problems* (London: Routledge); and RB, *Balkan Spaces: Essays and Prose-Pieces (1) 1984–2019* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2019-2020).

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¹⁵ See Hillman 1975 and 1979.

¹⁶ There is a vast literature on synchronicity. See especially Jung 1955: 27, 144; and 1960:417, 485; and Main 2007 and 2014.

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