CAFÉ EUROPA

LIFE AFTER COMMUNISM

"DRAKULIĆ IS
A PERCEPTIVE
AND AMUSING
SOCIAL CRITIC,
WITH A
WONDERFUL EYE
FOR DETAIL."

—*THE WASHINGTON POST*

SLAVENKA DRAKULIĆ

AUTHOR OF *THE TASTE OF A MAN*

Introduction: First-Person Singular

The pieces in this book were written between 1992 and 1996. As I reread them, I noticed that, to my surprise, I constantly use the pronouns 'we' and 'us'. When I am speaking in my everyday life I rarely do so – quite the contrary. I can see that they come to me naturally in the context of this book, but they trouble me nonetheless.

Why do they come naturally? Am I representing someone – a group, a party, a state? No, I am not. Am I appointed by someone? Not that I know of. Am I aware that other people think like me, and subconsciously identifying with them, even though I don't know them? No. So where do these pronouns come from, and whom do they represent? Clearly, in the context of this book, 'we' and 'us' mean the people of ex-communist countries, and as I am one of them I believe that I can justify using the first-person plural to describe our common experience. Yet, at the same time, I am annoyed by this first-person plural; I feel uneasy using it, as if I had something personal against it.

And I do. I hate the first-person plural. But it is only now, seeing it in my own writing, that I realise how much I hate it. My resistance to it is almost physical, because more than anything else, to me it represents a physical experience. I can smell the scent of bodies pressed against me in a 1 May parade, or at the celebration of Tito's birthday on 25 May, the sweaty armpits of a man in front of me, my own perspiration; I can feel the crowd pushing me forward, all of us moving as one, a single body – a sort of automatic puppet-like motion because no one is capable of anything else. I can feel the nausea; there is no air to breathe and I want to get out of the crowd, but my movements are restricted to a step forward or backwards in a strange ballet choreographed from a podium up above. Exhausted, I can't do anything but allow myself to be carried along until it is all over.

I grew up with 'we' and 'us': in the kindergarten, at school, in the pioneer and youth organisations, in the community, at work. I grew up listening to the speeches of politicians saying, 'Comrades, we must . . .' and with these comrades, we did what we were told, because we did not exist in any other grammatical form. Later on, I experienced the same phenomenon in journalism. It was the journalism of endless editorials, in which 'we' explained to 'us' what 'we' all needed to understand. More neutral forms of language, not as direct as 'we', were used later on, but still in the plural. It was hard to escape that plural, as if it were an iron mould, a shirt, a suit – a uniform. First-person eye-witness reports were not a popular genre of journalism precisely for this reason. In such pieces, the reporter can't claim that 'we saw it', only that 'I saw it'. He can avoid referring to himself altogether, but he is still by definition present in his story. Writing meant testing out

the borders of both language and genres, pushing them away from editorials and first-person plural and towards the first-person singular. The consequences of using the first-person singular were often unpleasant. You stuck out; you risked being labelled an 'anarchic element' (not even a person), perhaps even a dissident. For that you would be sacked, so you used it sparingly, and at your own risk. This was called self-censorship.

That hideous first-person plural troubles me for another reason, too. I saw at first hand how dangerous it can be, how easily it can become infected by the deadly diseases of nationalism and war. The war in the Balkans is the product of that 'us', of that huge, 20 million-bodied mass swinging back and forth in waves, then following their leaders into mass hysteria. Individuals who were against that war, who saw it coming, where could they turn? To what organisation or institution? There was no organised political alternative. The individual citizen had no chance to voice his protest or his opinion, not even his fear. He could only leave the country – and so people did. Those who used 'I' instead of 'we' in their language had to escape. It was this fatal difference in grammar that divided them from the rest of their compatriots. As a consequence of this 'us', no civic society developed. The little there was, in the form of small, isolated and marginalised groups, was soon swallowed up by the national homogenisation that did not permit any differences, any individualism. As under communism, individualism was punished – individuals speaking out against the war, or against nationalism, were singled out as 'traitors'.

How does a person who is a product of a totalitarian society learn responsibility, individuality, initiative? By saying 'no'. But this begins with saying 'I', thinking 'I' and

doing 'I' – and in public as well as in private. Individuality, the first-person singular, always existed under communism, it was just exiled from public and political life and exercised in private. Thus the terrible hypocrisy with which we learned to live in order to survive is having its backlash now: it is very difficult to connect the private and public 'I'; to start believing that an individual opinion, initiative or vote really could make a difference. There is still too big a danger that the citizen will withdraw into an anonymous, safe 'us'. But now attitudes differ from country to country. With the collapse of communism, the individual countries started to emancipate themselves from their collective status and to distinguish themselves from their neighbours.

So in Eastern European countries, the difference between 'we' and 'I' is to me far more important than mere grammar. 'We' means fear, resignation, submissiveness, a warm crowd and somebody else deciding your destiny. 'I' means giving individuality and democracy a chance.

Individualism is flourishing in one respect in Eastern Europe. It is visible only in the ruthless accumulation of capital. Perhaps a chance to make money, a chance those people never had before, is indeed a condition to developing the first-person singular. Why, then, have I used 'we' and 'us' so frequently in this book? Because a common denominator is still discernible, and still connects us all, often against our will. It is not only our communist past, but also the way we would like to escape from it, the direction in which we want to go. It's our longing for Europe and all that it stands for. Or, rather, what we imagine Europe stands for. I believe you can see this common denominator if you take a close look at the price of bananas, at our bad teeth and public toilets, or at our yards on the outskirts of big cities. Indeed, you can see it

merely by taking a walk on any boulevard in any capital, be it Tirana or Budapest, Prague or Warsaw. Somewhere there will be a hotel, a cinema, a bar, a restaurant, a café or a simple hole in the wall, named, for our desire, Europa.