

## Under Balkan Light

Selected Writings 5: Part 3, The Balkan Trilogy

RICHARD BERENGARTEN was born in London in 1943, into a family of musicians. He has lived in Italy, Greece, the USA and former Yugoslavia. His perspectives as a poet combine English, French, Mediterranean, Jewish, Slavic, American and Oriental influences.

Under the name RICHARD BURNS, he has published more than 25 books. In the 1970s, he founded and ran the international Cambridge Poetry Festival. He has received the Eric Gregory Award, the Wingate-Jewish Quarterly Award for Poetry, the Keats Poetry Prize, the Yeats Club Prize, the international Morava Charter Poetry Prize and the Great Lesson Award (Serbia). He has been Writer-in-Residence at the international Eliot-Dante Colloquium in Florence, Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at the Victoria Centre in Gravesend, Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge, and a Royal Literary Fund Project Fellow. He has been Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame and British Council Lecturer in Belgrade, first at the Centre for Foreign Languages and then at the Philological Faculty. He is currently a Bye-Fellow at Downing College, Cambridge, and Praeceptor at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. His poems have been translated into more than 90 languages.

*By Richard Berengarten*

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- Vol. 4 *In a Time of Drought* (Part 2, *The Balkan Trilogy*)
- Vol. 5 *Under Balkan Light* (Part 3, *The Balkan Trilogy*)

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# Under Balkan Light

SELECTED WRITINGS

*Volume 5*

*The Balkan Trilogy: Part 3*

RICHARD BERENGARTEN

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*In memory of Ivan V. Lalić*



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## Editorial Note

*Under Balkan Light* is the fifth volume published in the ongoing series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings*. It is also the last part of his *Balkan Trilogy*, following *The Blue Butterfly* and *In a Time of Drought*. For more than twenty-five years, the author has maintained a close involvement with the life, culture and politics of the Balkans. Between 1987 and 1991, he spent three years living and working in Yugoslavia. This stay coincided with the years in which the Yugoslav Federation was beginning to break apart in a series of violent conflicts. The author lived in Croatia and Serbia, and travelled in Macedonia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Vojvodina and Kosovo. Since then he has repeatedly returned to Serbia and Slovenia.

*Under Balkan Light* collects the varied poems that Richard Berengarten has written out of this knot of experiences over a twenty-one year period between September 1987 and August 2008.



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The cover reproduces part of the fresco of the Angel at Christ's Tomb in Mileševa Monastery in southwest Serbia. The source for the photographs on pp. 19–26 and 44–45 is *The Crimes of the Fascist Occupants and their Collaborators Against Jews in Yugoslavia* (Federation of Jewish Communities of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, 1957), pp. 225–245. The drawing of the Neretva Bridge at Mostar on p. 145 comes from Arthur Evans' *Through Bosnia and the Herzegovina on Foot During the Insurrection, August and September, 1873, with an Historical Review of Bosnia and a Glimpse of the Croats, Slavonians and the Ancient Republic of Ragusa* (Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1876, p. 344).

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RB

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### 3 Under Balkan Light





## *mi dva*

Language doesn't, languages don't cope with this kind of thing all that often or well. So what this really is about and after is to do with what tends to fall out of and away from words and fails to get trapped in their nets. In Slovenian there exists a 'fourth person singular' that opposes the deathful *He* and means the intimate small case *you* plus *I*, you and me, as if we were one, as one: *mi dva*, us two, the-two-of-us-as-one. Even though that condition can't be expressed or even intimated in *this* grammar, aren't all languages, all of us (*nous autres, noi altri*), ready for *mi dva*? What this is about and after again and always is standing on tiptoe right on top of whatever grounds and constructs may be available for support, and stretching and reaching up and out for a touch and possibly, hopefully, even for a hold and grasp that have not quite yet happened to or in *any* language. This is what being under Balkan light continuously is and is about and again and again keeps provoking and calling and making flickeringly present.

## Seagull's wings

For an instant  
beating  
seagull's wings

take up the whole  
sky. This heaven-  
filling happens

both at zenith and nadir  
of their pulsing and  
drumming on wind.

Time, unstitched  
from history, goes  
into reverse. At the

ferry's stern we stand,  
so wholly held by this  
watching, that distances

slip into haze. Everything  
broken is mended. Where we  
are is the horizon.

## Notes from three cities

### A WALLET

I left the cab on Vašintonova Street, not knowing my wallet had fallen from my pocket on the seat next to the driver, just after I had paid him. Ten minutes later, by cruising, he found me walking the spaces of his city, map in hand, half dreaming. He hooted me, rolled down his window, and with scarcely grin or wink, leaned out to hand back my worn leather holder of notes, snaps, mementoes – my precious personal scraps of history and identity. *Here*, he said, *take it*. And he thrust it into my hands, changed gears and revved away. In the ensuing silence, the light became crystal, and I recalled his eyes, momentarily blazing, *I recognise you*.

## WHITE CHERRIES

The woman was heavily pregnant and should have taken a cab. The tower block they lived in was three kilometres from Zemun. *I'm going out*, she called to her partner, *to the market to buy white cherries*. She returned three hours later carrying several kilos. *You might have had an accident*, he said. *I walked*, she said, and laughed, *There weren't any cabs anyway*.

## FISH SOUP

Rainy Sunday, on the uncertain border of Spring. My old friend was visiting me from England with his new wife. He wanted to take her to Smederevo, to show her a restaurant famous for fish soup, which he'd stopped at on his way to Greece, twenty years or more before. So we drove off from Belgrade, found the place without difficulty, and ordered, just as it was getting dark. We were the first customers to arrive. A gypsy fiddler sat smoking, waiting for the clientele. Over our *šljivovice*, I mentioned to my friends some lines of an Old Town Song, and hummed them. The gypsy overheard, stubbed out his cigarette, came over to our table and, without any comment or by-your-leave, played and sang it for us, verse by haunting verse . . . *Ima dana kada ne znam šta da radim* . . . The fiddle and his voice re-opened separate wounds stored in each of our memories, took them out, re-examined them, and bound them back tight inside us on the instrument's chords. The constant reiteration of this kind of sudden invasive intervention from totally unexpected quarters constitutes the specific quality of light in the Balkans.

## On the qualities of light in the Balkans

### *Smederevo*

Between skin and core of apple  
lies the secret. And in the taste of grape  
before its flesh is broken. At the shore  
of daylight pounded by waves of evening  
darts the unseen arrow, and on the slope of first or last light  
against a doorframe or window rests the cutting edge,  
as if honed on a millstone high above the clouds  
to stab directly down through silver rivers of sky.

In the window, as if etched, the reflection of a face  
I have not seen before, glances back familiarly.  
It is neither yours nor mine. It is neither  
living nor dead. It corresponds to neither zone.  
It belongs alone to this light it is intimately part of.  
And the smile on this face, which is not exactly a smile,  
belongs to a white angel, with darkening, bluetipped wings.

Entry is not so difficult, although always unexpected.  
Here is a blue butterfly, arrested on your finger  
at the gate to the site of a massacre. Here is a spider's web  
dewflecked in a morning garden. And here  
a hint of incense suspended among dust  
in a deserted building. Its silence is a song  
launched on the space between separated trays  
of candles lit for the living and the dead.  
And here, the frayed hem fringed around a shadow  
that penetrates deep into it across the porous borders  
drilled into time by ancestors and survivors.

And there, under the shadow of the ruined fortress  
where we stood one evening beside a windless river  
between the pearled moon and its hollowed reflection  
is the poor death of stillness, pierced by nothing more  
than a pebble skimmed across water by a casual boy.  
And here, after all is said, is the certain chime of light  
from eye to eye, as glass rings against glass.  
So take this wine and drink it.

## Poem at the Autumn Equinox

Returning dreams. The one about falling  
and the one about a house  
owned and lived in but never fully explored  
and the one containing a word  
clearly heard and recognised  
from a language unknown,  
which I can never pronounce. Now you have gone  
let them take me over. I am their island  
willing to be drowned.

After the end of falling, you will come to a river  
and walk beside it along a worn footpath  
bordered by nettles and willows.  
In the house you will find a room  
and in the room a mirror,  
and in the mirror a portrait of a girl dressed in leaves,  
golden and green, and in her hand a wand.  
After the word and the deaths of its many echoes  
first you will hear a silence strike like a gong  
and then from the silence another voice emerge,  
and that is the voice to listen to,  
that is the voice to follow. The girl  
who enters the room and looks out of her mirror  
stands on the tide and her wand is the rainbow.

The voice arrives on the tide but is no part of it  
and if it seems to belong wholly to the sea  
or if it seems to belong wholly to the wind  
or if its substance seems partially made of cloud,  
reflections, falling leaves, or invisible splinters of light,  
do not be mistaken by the sweetness of appearances.



The path leads to cliffs where butterflies and bees  
play all summer long, and night is full of stars.  
The girl who stands on the tide against a white horizon.  
has turned into a willow framed against the sky,  
and her wand which was the rainbow has spiralled away

on wings, migrating south for winter. Nothing is left  
but emptiness – except for the voice. And the voice  
cannot stop singing now, and all you have to do  
is burn its sound in your heart and treasure it there forever.

## Fragment: on *The Sepharad*

‘And as Obadiah had foretold, the Jews who had been exiled from the Holy City of Jerusalem would find refuge in the *Sepharad*. And it came to pass that in the golden peninsula of Iberia, to the far west of the Great Middle Sea, which later came to be known as Spain and Portugal, they received due and fitting welcome. And there they settled and prospered for hundreds of years, dwelling in peace with their neighbours and excelling not only in all branches of learning, scholarship and healing, but also in the civil arts of counselling, negotiation and diplomacy, the higher metaphysical arts of mathematics, astronomy and music, and those hidden arts enshrined in the *Zohar*, whereof it behoves not to speak in this account. And there they built temples of a splendour matched only by the ancient Temple of Solomon, and became proficient in strange tongues, of a beauty unparalleled by any other than the language of Hebrew itself. And some, alas, forgot the divinely ordained language of their origins among those alien melodies. Yet, in generation after generation, the lot of this people is Exile, and there came a day when the rulers of the golden land, as in Egypt of old, sought lambs to appease the wrath of the Almighty, and issued new decrees against the Jews, forcing them either outwardly to embrace the official faith and doctrines of that land, or to be expelled.

### §

And thus, from the *Sepharad* itself, once more they set out on their wanderings, to the east and the north and the northeast, back along the shores of the Great Middle Sea, and deep into the dark heart of the continent of Europe, even as far as the Northern ocean, and beyond. And with them they took as a comfort and an inheritance the sweet and melodic language which their centuries of prosperity, peace and fortune in the *Sepharad* had engrafted so firmly upon their spirits, and its sap flowed through their very souls and ripened on their tongues in speech and

in songs. And in their new exile, whether among adherents of Jesus or Mohammed, they became known to the world as the *Sephardim*, and the name of that language was Ladino.'

SALAMON RUBEN BEN ISRAEL OF SALONIKA, 1688