Ilja Kostovski (1933-2017) was a true anti-Babylonian poet, who in the realm of his creative horizon had the ability to lift his voice in all the 6346 languages spoken on this planet Earth and yet, at the same time, to merge his verses into one unique and timeless tongue.

I met Ilja for the first time just after The New York Times published an article about the US-French production of my play, Happiness is a New Idea in Europe. It was in the medieval palace of Kursumli An in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. He was reading one of his most famous verses, which I have quoted to many thirsty wordmongers all over the world:

*In the Black Churches of Saint Louis
A last kiss hanged itself last night*

I wrote about my friend during my literary youth in the oldest existing Macedonian newspaper, Nova Makedonija: “He is a poet who has learned all the languages of the world but was banned from speaking his own mother tongue.” Our friendship has crossed over several decades, two centuries,
and two millennia.

When you read the poetry of Ilja Kostovski, you cannot help but feel that he was an ancient poet like those of the rhapsodies recited in the era of great epics long sprung somewhere between the Balkans and Asia.

When you read the poetry of Ilja Kostovski, you cannot help but feel that the words of Aeschylus—“We are just fragments from the great banquet of Homer”—appear before our eyes and hearts, and suddenly we can’t tell whether we’ve been hit by the waves of the Aegean shore in Kostovski’s birthplace; or we’ve just landed in a library stacked with the entire collection of Europe’s poetic memories; or we are traveling with him to the New World, and all the ancient scrolls of poetry are scattered among the meridians.

When you read the poetry of Ilja Kostovski, you can’t help but feel that within a single hour, 3000 years suddenly passed, and you don’t know where you are because he takes you among the 30,000 refugees counted by Herodotus during the Greco-Persian wars, and at the same time among the modern-day refugees migrating in directions unknown, that according to the UN have reached over 273 million.

When you read the poetry of Ilja Kostovski, you ask fundamental questions of civilization: What did God do before He created the Earth? From the brick and mortar of his life, Ilja Kostovski erected an unprecedented temple of words that sheltered all the languages he studied and spoke, and his verses resemble those minuscule churches of his native Macedonia with their tiny medieval angels, where a European renaissance was born amidst structures that housed all the religions of the world.

And this is what makes Ilja Kostovski a global phenomenon with a Macedonian soul. This soul is engraved in the encyclopedia of Kostovski’s heart. It is found in the letters between Vincent Van Gogh and his brother, Theo, where the famous painter of Sunflowers once wrote: “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia who told us that without love we have nothing.”

*What good is a Hallelujah without sweet kisses?*
Even today, in the modern and post-modern world of literary expression, love remains central to the world, irrespective of whether you write in Washington DC, Moscow, Beijing, Berlin, or Tokyo—or in a lost village somewhere in the Andes Mountains of Latin America.

I would meet up randomly with Ilja Kostovski in various cities throughout Europe and the world. One time, we were at an ancient poetry festival, the Struga Poetry Evenings, where he had once defiantly proclaimed: “Poetry’s arsenal of words will always be more powerful than all the nuclear weapons aimed to destroy human hope.”

When you read the poetry of Ilja Kostovski, you understand that the history of Sisyphus is the history of each individual—and at the same time, of the collective world. You understand that the individual cross you bear is transformed into a different burden when the destiny of one is cast into the destiny of millions.

That is why Ilja Kostovski was a global phenomenon of the Macedonian soul and of universal love, because Macedonia and the universe have one thing in common: they share the same border.

_May 1, 2018—Paris_
Sisyphus and I

Ilja Kostovski
Sisyphus and I
To Ruli, Tashuna, Talina, Tatsuna, Luka, Nikola, and Ella