

Ilija Trojanow

BEGIN THE BEGUINE

Or how all beginnings begin,
in other words: in which it's about, what it's really about

Recording: Begin the Beguine - Artie Shaw

A man on a ship.

Another man. His wife.

One man is a librettist, the other a composer.

They are on a world tour.

When the cruise liner docks in New York, they must have completed a musical.

They had all the time of a world tour.

There are a few days at sea left to them.

They still need a final number, a hit, a song that can go round the world.

The start has been made. The eyes open, the story begins. The most beautiful dream is lodged in the vision with which one awakens. Afterwards the step over the threshold is usually forgotten. A hunch, a constellation, a seduction, even one only scribbled down, on a cuff, a cigarette packet, a receipt, or the back of a train ticket. Or kept it in mind, this idea, this first proposition, which is still far from being the beginning of the story. Beyond the waves the ocean appears endless and eternally the same.

The composer has fallen in love with the librettist.

He imagines his wife suspects nothing.

Until now they have spent a happy world tour together.

Yearnings are raging on the cruise liner.

He has fallen in love with delicate fingers.

The librettist goes on drafting outlines.

His fountain pen glides over the paper in green ink.

When the three of them sit in the saloon, the composer feels a desire to invite the librettist to dance.

We're still at A. As we know the beginning is half of the whole. Pythagoras drummed this epigram into his students. Aristotle repeated the piece of wisdom. Plato tried to vary it: The beginning is the most important part of the work. Horace recut the jewel: Whoever begins, is already half-finished. Across the

epochs poets and thinkers are agreed, irrespective of their philosophy of life: The first step is always the most difficult, but once one has taken it, the rest is nothing but perseverance. Only Privy Councillor von Goethe offered opposition: The first step is always easy and the final steps are rarely climbed.

Recording: Begin the Beguine - Django Reinhardt

Once again the excitement is perceptible. Waves roll up, all water is in motion. The foam sprays high, right up to the bridge. The ship descends into deep valleys, rights itself groaning. Descent after descent. On the slippy promenade deck stand two lonely figures. One is a librettist, the other a composer. They come into contact at the shoulders, at the hips, the piercing wind justifies it. The composer has buried his hands in the side pockets of his sheepskin jacket. What about this, says the librettist and pushes a written-on napkin into his hand.

“Far is the way to Montevideo
I’d never have stopped there
if a girl in Rio
or even Santiago
hadn’t promised me
a second kiss.”

The ship plunges into the next abyss and labouriously works its way up again. The composer lights a cigarette and throws the swiftly extinguished match towards the water. A sentence is going through his head, which he can’t place: There’s eternity in every beginning. He says it out loud, twice, so that he can be understood against the wind. That’s all we can do, responds the librettist, start from the beginning again, again and again.

Recording: Begin the Beguine - Ella Fitzgerald

Every beginning is set by chance. One could spend a lifetime pondering the question, whether one has found the right beginning. Would a day earlier not have been better? In the cabin instead of the promenade deck? And why isn’t an albatross flying past? Anyone who looks at his own beginning too closely under the magnifying glass, will make himself incurably uncertain. Like a child, who cannot decide with which leg he will kick off the rockfall.

The next evening the band leader introduces an unknown dance to the

passengers, a 4/4 time that swings, but doesn't rush along. The bassoonist demonstrates the dance with the orchestra's singer. The audience applauds as if the horse which they had all backed has just been first past the finishing post. This dance comes from the Lesser Antilles, explains the band leader. They must imagine Africa whirling across the dance floor with France. A big hit in Paris recently, at the Colonial Exhibition. And the name, where does the strange name come from, asks the composer, so that everyone at the table can hear him. From the French s'embéguiner, replies the librettist. Which means? To flirt, to court someone. My dear friend, the composer places his hand conspicuously on the elegant hand of the librettist, you are so fantastically knowledgeable. And now, calls the band leader, let us begin the beguine. I think I am fired with enthusiasm for this beguine, says the composer, without withdrawing his hand. And I fear, says the librettist, pushing back his chair, that you will have to write the text of this song yourself. The orchestra plays a second beguine, as the composer's wife bends over the table: I would prefer not to be present, if you're falling in love.

Recording: Begin the Beguine - Art Tatum

The beginning is the idea, the beginning is the first sentence, the beginning is the first verse, the first chapter, the first story. And that is followed by the beginnings which only a provisional completion has made possible: Premieres, first performances, gallery openings; the first audience, the first readers, the first critics; the first competition, the first time on TV, the first public attack; the first reprinting, the first revival, the first translation. At some point the distance from one's own creation is greater than the memory of creating it.

Recording: Begin the Beguine - Salif Keita

A few weeks later, on Broadway, rehearsals conducted under pressure. The librettist is slumped in a seat in the eighth row of the empty theatre, incessantly chewing gum: he can't get the better of his worries. He has lost more than 20 pounds. The dance number is next. The song that is supposed to go round the world. 108 melancholy-cheerful bars. It has to be in a major key, the composer explained without being asked, despite the yearning text. The structure is complicated - AA'BA'CC with an eight bar coda. The words are a success, a small story of light and shade. But it's the baffling title, that the librettist likes best. Certainly better than the uninspiring name of their musical: Jubilee. The result is as he had feared: The critics turn up their noses. The lobster with

glasses in TIME magazine writes: “Whenever ‘Jubilee’ makes an effort to please the ear or even raise a laugh, it is unable to convince.” These and other witty reviews keep the composer, the librettist and the producer company on the Sunday morning. You think its simple, but nothing is simple, remarks the producer, and they have no idea what he’s talking about.

*Never mind, the librettist quotes an Irish friend,
try again,
fail again,
fail better.*

And the composer? He pours himself more orange juice.

As if he knew that three years later Artie Shaw will have his biggest hit with ‘Begin the Beguine’. To his own regret: “The audience doesn’t want to hear anything except ‘Begin the Beguine’.” Thirty years after the song went under at the first night, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers votes ‘Begin the Beguine’ one of the 16 most important songs of all time. With over a thousand cover versions it’s one of the most frequently played evergreens. It inspired a painting by Max Beckmann as well as the theme tune of *Star Trek*. And here in Klagenfurt, too, on this weekend of beginnings and exits, of swaying and shuffling steps, on this lively ballroom dance floor, there now sound the music and words, which once on the high seas were drawn from an unexhausted source. Reminding us, that no beginning is like any other and that recognition seldom takes place as one dreams it will.

Recording: Volver A Empezar (Begin the Beguine) - Julio Iglesias

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)