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## THE DANUBE AS A *LIEU DE POSTMÉMOIRE* IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN PROSE

**Abstract:** This essay explores the memory discourses associated with the Danube in Serbian literature with a particular focus on the river's status as the locus of postmemory. In particular, the essay explains why in the context of Serbian literature Aleida Assmann's quadripartite categorisation of memory needs to be expanded with Hirsch's concept of postmemory as an intergenerational transfer from ancestors to successors. The essay analyses three prose writers and their different yet complementary case studies of postmemory: Danilo Kiš's family trilogy, Dušan Kovačević's *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* and David Albahari's *Leeches*. These texts epitomise the longstanding concern of Serbian writers with the sources, contents and effects of postmemory as well as their attempt to articulate their answers to these quandaries with reference to the Danube as both the site of trauma and the trope of postmemory.

**Keywords:** neuronal memory, communicative memory, cultural memory, political memory, postmemory, lieu de mémoire, the Danube

There is a broad consensus around the assumption that big rivers do not shape only the surrounding landscape but also the political and artistic discourses that evolve in their basins (see Zimmermann 2019: 230). This essay will explore a very specific segment of this geopolitical and geopoetic interaction, namely the postmemory discourses associated with the Danube in the Serbian literature. Postmemory is a technical term for inherited memories of traumatic events (see Hirsch 2012) and its different structures will be analysed with reference to three prose works of the

recent Serbian literature which thematise the Danube in one or another way: the family trilogy of Danilo Kiš (*Early Sorrows* [*Rani jadi*], *Garden, Ashes* [*Bašta, Pepeo*], *Hourglass* [*Peščanik*]), Dušan Kovačević's novel *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* [*Bila jednom jedna zemlja*], and David Albahari's novel *Leeches* [*Pijavice*]. The essay will seek to understand how these texts configure the sources of postmemory, its content and its impact. Above all, the analysis will identify complementarities and continuities between those different configurations and link them to the dual role of the Danube as both a site of trauma and a metaphor of postmemory which aims to overcome that trauma.

## The Danube and the Figures of Memory in Serbian Literature

It is something of a truism to claim that the Danube separates but also connects the communities in its basin, much more so than other major rivers. In antiquity, the Danube was part of the Roman *limes* system; in the early modern period, it was part of the Austrian Military Frontier; in the twentieth century, it was part of the Iron Curtain; much of its course forms a state border up to the present day. As a major traffic artery, however, the Danube has been, since times immemorial, a vector of imperial ambitions to conquer or annex territories and more recently it turned into a nexus of the sundry transnational discourses of togetherness in Central Europe and further afield.

It is probably this predominance of spatial and geopolitical considerations that has obscured the fact that the Danube separates and connects in time as well and that it consequently has a special link to memory discourses. On the one side, this link works at the metaphysical level because in the Baroque period the Danube was considered as one of the four rivers of Paradise so its source watered the birthplace of the entire humanity. Bernini represents the Danube as an old man in his sculptural fountain *Four Rivers* in Rome, and Vasko Popa, in his poem "Great Lord Danube" ["Veliki gospodin Dunav"] (1972), calls on it to "Mount the biggest carp / Spear the leaden clouds / And visit your heavenly birthplace" ["Uzjaši najvećeg šarana / Probi olovne oblake / I pohodi svoje nebesko

rodno mesto”] (Пона 1997: 56). On the other side, the Danube’s link with memory is also a geohistorical one as this river represents a residual stream of the vanished Pannonian sea, connecting anthropocene with prehistory. In his poem “Memory” [“Sećanje”], from the Danubian canto *Vortices* [Virovi, 1976], Miodrag Pavlović probes the philogenetic memory of the mankind: “They say / it used to be better / there was food for everyone / in winter and in summer / a sea was all around us / we lived in it / happy and full / we are now clutching its sleeve / to stop it from it leaving” [“Priča se / da je nekad bilo bolje / znao se red / hrane je bilo za svakog / zimi i leti / more je bilo posvuda / živeli smo u njemu / srećni i siti / sad jedan njegov rukav držimo / da ne ode”] (Павловић 1996: 100).

Notwithstanding those metaphysical and geohistorical connotations, the Danube has been an indispensable feature of the miscellaneous memory narratives and commemorative rituals of individuals and communities settled along its course. This immanence of the river in the structures of human remembrance can be illustrated with reference to the quadripartite scheme formulated by German cultural historian Aleida Assmann in her study *The Long Shadow of the Past* [*Der Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*] (2006). Assmann argues that the human capacity to remember is based in the neuronal structures of the human brain. This individual mode of remembering feeds into what Assmann calls communicative memory, which takes shape in the same generational group. This form of memory is sustained, modified and reinvigorated in live interpersonal contacts between the individual members of those groups. Assmann’s next level, cultural memory, emerges in a process of the dissociation of memory from its biological holders (individuals and generational groups) and its transfer to institutions. Those institutions are authorised to convert memories, that reach them in different media, into cultural artefacts which are preserved, selected and presented to the public in future generations. The final element in Assmann’s scheme is political memory which articulates historical myths about the origin, evolution and goals of particular political communities. This form of memory is reflected in legendry but also in rituals, such as public holidays and awards, and in bespoke configurations of space, such as monuments and street names (Assmann 2006: 21-37).

The Danube clearly accommodates, and actively shapes, each of the four forms of memory from Assmann’s scheme. This river is a point of

anchorage for personal memories of travellers: in their travelogues they simply apply in practice Heidegger's thesis that the Danube teaches us to travel spatially from the source to the delta and then travel back existentially, into the very roots of our being (and memory). The Danube is also a diffuse locale of the initiation rites of generations who come of age on it. Some of this generational experience is preserved in the sentimental lyrics of Strauss's waltz "The Blue Danube" ["An der schönen blauen Donau"]: "cheerful hearts / Beat on your beautiful shore" ["fröhliche Herzen / Schlagen an deinem schönen Strand"]. The Danube can also be seen as a repository of cultural memory, in its synchronic as well as in its diachronic sense. The archaeological site of Vinča, with its 9m-thick layer of cultural deposits displaying 6 millennia of the Danubian civilisation, is an emblematic image of the musealization of a riverscape. The most striking example of the Danube's intertwinement with political memory is Walhalla, a Classicist temple on a slope near Regensburg, which the Bavarian king Ludwig I built to house the busts of historical coryphaei of the German culture. The selection of location for this national shrine reflects the historical notions of the Danube as the river of destiny of the German people, which after Bavaria's final split with Austria, and its subsequent alliance with Prussia, would move to the north and focus on the Rhine.

From the sociological perspective, literature is part of a wider range of media available to individuals and communities in their construction and perpetuation of memory structures, including those concerning the Danube. Literature may not be the most prevalent let alone the most dominant form of memory discourse, especially nowadays, but in an important respect it is more *illuminating* than other media. Namely, literature is able to give those memory structures more symbolic resonance and at the same time to undermine them by various strategies of verbal irony. The most comprehensive, almost programmatic expression of the Danube's connection with memory is the celebrated essayistic travelogue *The Danube* [*Danubio*, 1986] by Triestine literary scholar and writer Claudio Magris. Magris embarks on a big journey from the source of the Danube in the Black Forest in South Germany to its Delta in the Black Sea. His travelogue rests on the notion of the Danube as a big treasure-chest of cultural memory, a kind of open-air museum and a site of cultural pilgrimage. However, the travelogue also includes the other three forms of memory. For a start, Magris does not travel alone but with two friends, members

of his generational circle. As part of what Assmann calls communicative memory, this middle-aged group conduct a sustained dialogue about the broader meaning of such a journey for their formerly rebellious generation who are now edging closer to a conciliation with the existing order. Furthermore, by interviewing local people in different places *en route*, Magris stimulates in his collocutors the neuronal process of personal recollection which otherwise would not have been activated or at least not in that form. Finally, Magris explores the various monument ensembles along the Danube and exposes their imperial and nationalist drivers and aspirations. Thereby, he includes political memory as distinct theme of his travelogue. Differently from other discourses – verbal and nonverbal alike – a literary text is capable of presenting those forms of memory in a strong interaction, often with ironic turns. Thus, for example, Magris observes that the Third Reich, dubbed a Thousand-Year-Reich of the German people, actually lasted shorter than the wind jacket of his travel companion (Magris 1989).

Over centuries, Serbian literature developed on both sides of the Danube but special circumstances led to a dual semantic articulation of this river. In Branko Radičević's poem "Students' Farewell" ["Dački rastanak"] (1847) the Danube is, on the one side, a personal and generational remembrance of youth: "Oh, the Danube, you mighty river / how darling you are / many times in bliss / did I sit with mates in a boat / grasped with oar and my right hand / and cast off with the stream" ["Oj Dunavo, o ti reko silna / ala si umilna / koliko sam puta preveseo / sa drugovim' u ladicu seo / zavatio veslom i desnicom / otisnuo s' maticom"] (Радичевић 1978: 25) On the other side, however, the Danube is clearly a political vector that points towards a shared future of the South Slavs: "and ye others along the Danube / and ye others by the Drava / And ye others hither, thither / Let us play a bit" ["I vi drugi duž Dunava / I vi drugi gde je Drava / I vi drugi tamo, amo / Amo da se poigramo!"] (Радичевић 1978: 35). Similarly to Branko Radičević, other Serbian poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century got into the habit of joining a larger, national ring dance (*kolo*), whereby the intimate remembrance of the Danube is subordinated to the public imperative (see Илић 1922: 231; Петковић Дис 2003: 116). However, the end of the First World War irreversibly shifted the centre of this Danubian ring dance from Vienna and Budapest to Belgrade. With the formation of Yugoslavia, the Danube

ceased to be a border and became an internal artery of the Yugoslav body politic. That led to a symbolic depoliticisation of this river which for its part opened up a wider space for memory discourses. This process of the literary depoliticisation and the concomitant embracing of memory is very prominent in Miloš Crnjanski's "The Explanation of Sumatra" ["Objašnjenje Sumatre"] (1920), where the Danube is "grey and misty" ["siv i maglovit"] (Crnjanski 1983: 213), in the *Migrations* [*Seobe*] (1929), where it is represented as "a sea of mud" ["more blata"] with "an antediluvian ark" ["prepotopska lađa"] sailing over it (Crnjanski 1983: 41) and especially in "Stražilovo" [*Stražilovo*] (1920) where it comes across as an oneiric memory, accompanied by an existential shiver, in the midst of the sun-lit Tuscany: "Here, too, a spring evening / feels chilly to me / as if the Danube flew secretly down the valley" ["I ovde, proletnje večer / za mene je hladno, / kao da, dolinom, tajno, Dunav teče"] (Crnjanski 1983: 237).

More recently, the distinctive feature of the Serbian writers' engagement with the Danube is the fact that this river is not only an object of remembrance but also a metaphor of remembrance. Here again, Assmann's scheme provides a useful point of access. A fine metaphor of individual (neuronal) memory was articulated by Svetlana Velmar-Janković who entitled her articles in *NIN*, dedicated to her recollections of Belgrade and its people, *Notes From the Danubian Sand* [*Zapisi sa dunavskog peska*] (2016). In this metaphor, the Danube comes across as life itself: an object of memories but also of forces that erase those memories once their biological holders die. In her text about the poet Ivan V Lalić, who was also her personal friend, Velmar-Janković recalls his remarkable mnemonic powers: "With his awesome power of recollection, pressing the incredible buttons of his memory, he was always able to force us to doubt our own knowledge" ["On, sa svojom zastrašujućom moći pamćenja, uvek je mogao, pritiskujući neverovatnu dugmad svoje memorije, da nas natera da posumnjamo u svoja znanja"] (Velmar-Janković 2016: 188). Miodrag Maticki's novel *Delta* [*Delta*] (2011) is an epistolary novel-cum-travelogue-cum-essay in which three elderly friends, who after their youth have gone their own ways, embark on an imaginative journey through space, towards the Danube delta, but also through time, into their own, interwoven memories. Trembling like aspens in the breeze, contemplating the waves of the Danube, they, too, turn into a generational wave which slowly and quietly moves towards its existential estuary, which is death and

eternity: “Rara, we are going to sail down the Danube only once, anticipating the moment of sailing into the Black Sea as a moment of consecration [...] It is only by braving the agitated waves of memory that we will, Rara, reach the delta where ebbs and flows exists” [“Mi ćemo, Rara, ploviti samo jednom, niz Dunav, iščekujući trenutak uplovljavanja u Crno more kao trenutak posvećenja [...] Samo ako sebe ne štedimo u nemirnim talasima sećanja, stići ćemo, Rara, do delte u kojoj postoje plime i oseke.”] (Матицки 2011: 26).

In his short story “The Inundation of the Great War Island” [“Potapanje Velikog ratnog ostrva”] (2009), Dušan Miklja articulates a polemical counter-narrative based on the unproven rumour that the Četnik commander Dragoljub (Draža) Mihailović was executed at the Lisičji potok near Dedinje and secretly buried on the Sava river island Ada Ciganlija. Miklja transposes the assumed site of his burial to an even less likely space, the Great War Island on the Danube, and stages a veritable ecopolitical dystopia. Namely, in an attempt to conceal the truth about the secret grave, the municipal authorities proceed to inundate the entire island. Nevertheless, the plan falls through because the river island, a deeply rooted symbol of an alternative, suppressed memory, stands on, refusing to be dissolved and inundated in the mainstream of the official political memory: “The island simply did not want to sail into the Black Sea. To the contrary, with its dense, green shrubbery, which grew into soil ever more deeply, it stubbornly made it clear that it did not intend to budge” [“Ostrvo jednostavno nije htelo da otplovi u Crno more. Sa gustim, zelenim rastinjem, koje se sve dublje ukopavalo u tlo, jogunasto je, naprotiv, stavljalo do znanja da ne namerava da se pomera”] (Miklja 2009: 98). In his essay *The Danube: The River of the European Unity* [Dunav, reka jedinstva Evrope] (2002), Dejan Medaković approached the Danubian basin as a grand European archive where each artefact – be it archaeological or artistic – testifies to a shatterproof community of spirits: “All those cultural layers accumulated along the Danube’s course fuse into a magnificent European embroidery whose individual patterns represent fragments of a wider whole and reveal their true sense only within that whole” [“Jer svi ti kulturni slojevi nanizani uz obale Dunava slivaju se u veličanstveno evropsko pletivo, čije pojedinačne šare predstavljaju deliće koji pripadaju celini i tek tako otkrivaju svoj pravi smisao”] (Медаковић 2002: 124). Thus, for example, the Vinča statuettes, subtle figures with hands widely

spread or otherwise embracing an infant form, anticipate crucifixion and Theotokos, the two big themes of the European religious art, forming a rich mosaic to which each nation contributes own tessera (14).

## The Danube and Postmemory

Assmann argues that the transfer of memory from the biological base (neuronal and communicative memory) into an institutional base is the prerequisite for its institutionalization. Over much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Serbian/Yugoslav section of the Danube was a diffuse locale of traumatic events which disturbed this usual process of the institutionalization of memory. The central cultural archive of the Serbs, the National Library of Serbia, was destroyed in the German bombardment of Belgrade on 6 April 1941, and the fact that the event has not been appropriately acknowledged in the public space and calendar up to the present day makes it even more insidiously traumatic. In January 1942, in retaliation for a Partisan action, the Hungarian occupying authorities organized a police raid in which c. 2,800 Serbian and Jewish citizens of Novi Sad were arrested and dragooned to the embankment where they were executed and thrown into the Danube underneath a layer of ice. In late 1960s and early 1970s, the massive hydroelectric plant Đerdap I, a joint venture of Yugoslavia and Romania, raised the water level in the Đerdap gorge by 35 meters, flooding numerous settlements, an Ancient Roman military road, and the picturesque, historically significant Danubian river island, Adakale. The wars of the 1990s brought a new wave of destruction: in 1991, the Baroque town of Vukovar was obliterated by artillery and NATO's bombardment of bridges on the Danube turned vestiges into new, technogenic islands, much of which passed again without an adequate commemorative response (Zorić 2019).

In a situation where the nature of the trauma is such as to stymie the official conduits of memory, making them inaccessible or otherwise inefficient, memory discourses turn to lateral channels. Possibly the most important of these lateral channels is postmemory, an intergenerational transfer of memory from the elder to the younger. In a defining paragraph in her study *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory in the following way:

Postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch 2012: 5)

It is important, however, that postmemory needs to be not only mediated (e.g., through photographs, recordings, mementos, souvenirs) but also localized in one or another way. In his project on memorialisation in France, Pierre Nora showed that the culture of memory consists of places (*lieux de mémoire*) which have both a material and a cultural (historical, ethnographic, psychological, political) aspect. This culture of memory transposes specific items from the real space into a symbolic network of national remembrance. Within this network, they are granted a due “commemorative vigilance” (Nora 1984: xxiv). In a slightly different way, I would suggest, it is possible to talk of *lieux de postmémoire*: where memory cannot be included in the public network of commemoration, ancestors revisit specific locales and show them to their descendants.

An epitomic visual example of the spatial anchorage of postmemory is Jelena Jovčić’s documentary film *Flood [Potop]* (2016), dedicated to the precarious memories of the old town of Donji Milanovac. This town disappeared in a controlled flooding during the construction works on the hydroelectric plant *Đerdap I* and its residents were moved to a new town of the same name which was built at a safe location higher up in the Danube gorge. At the time of the production of this film, the people who in their youth were confronted with a technogenic cataclysm and forced to move homes and ancestral graves had themselves become old and sensed the proximity of their own grave. All they want at this late stage is to communicate to their descendants the scale of the disaster that befell

them, namely their vanished city and the inundated youth, which could not be replaced either by material compensation in the form of new flats nor by the Socialist ideology of progress towards a brighter, electrified future. In the introductory scene of the film, an elderly man accompanied by a grandson, points his index finger at the gently undulating surface of the Danube: "This is where my old school was." The grandson initially observes the empty space with a contemplative expression and then himself points his index finger in the same direction. This corporeal gesture epitomises his acceptance of the grandfather's memory as his own. The indexative act turns into a memory figure: by pointing his index finger towards something empty, invisible and inexpressible, the old man actually points his finger at the grandson as a future bearer of his memory (Jovčić 2016).

Now the visual frontality of the film language may well be suitable for an illustration of postmemory but it is not necessarily postmemory's deepest expression. Literature, namely, configures the same tropological structure but usually does so in a more mediated and complex way. In the next, interpretive stage of my argument, I will take a closer look at the patterns of postmemory in three prose works by contemporary Serbian authors: the family cycle of Danilo Kiš, consisting of *Garden*, *Ashes* [*Bašta, pepeo*] (1965), *Early Sorrows* [*Rani jadi*] (1970), *Hourglass* [*Peščanik*] (1972); Dušan Kovačević's novel *Once Upon a Time There Was* [*Bila jednom jedna zemlja*] (1995); David Albahari's novel *Leeches* [*Pijavice*] (2006). This selection may appear somewhat unusual as the texts evince significant differences, notwithstanding their canonical status. Kiš's prose is a stylistically sophisticated late Modernist response to the Holocaust in the Pannonian region; Kovačević's novel, written in a narrative mode to meet the exigences of a film script, Emir Kusturica's *Underground* [*Podzemlje*] (1995) is a political allegory of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s; Albahari's novel is a dark postmodernist fantasy whose main narrative level is embedded in the period after the Yugoslav wars yet which harks back to, and fuses with, the Austro-Ottoman wars in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, not only do these works belong to the different periods, in a chronological as well as in a thematic sense, they also take different poetic directions. Unsurprisingly, they are usually not considered in the same comparative perspective, with only rare exceptions (Beganović 2019). Nevertheless, I will seek to show that it is precisely in such a synoptical perspective that those three works emerge as a continuum of different yet complementary approaches to the Danube as a *lieu de postmémoire*.

## The Family Framework of Postmemory: The Autobiographic Cycle of Danilo Kiš

In Kiš's family cycle, which itself forms a continuum, the problem of inherited memory is articulated through the relationship between parents and their son. The biographical and historical background of this trilogy is well known and largely anchored in the Danubian basin. Kiš's father, Eduard Kiš (in Kiš's prose fictionalised to Eduard Sam [Scham] or E. S.), was a Hungarian Jew, whose career of a railway superintendent in Yugoslavia stalled due to alcoholism and mental illness. In January 1942, during the notorious Novi Sad raid, he was arrested and taken to the Danube quay for execution but the action was called off before it was his turn to die. Thereupon, the family moved to his native village Kerkabarabás, Western Hungary, where they spent two relatively calm, if penurious years. Ultimately, this place, too, failed to provide a lasting sanctuary: in the last wave of the Holocaust, which targeted the Jews in Hungary, Eduard Kiš was taken, along with a number of his relatives, to Auschwitz and never returned from there. While during their precarious asylum in Hungary the boy-narrator (fictionalised as Andreas "Andi" Sam [Scham]) was under the sway of his elusive father, in the period after the latter's arrest, and final disappearance, he was under the influence of his mother (in Kiš's prose named Marija). Kiš's autobiographical prose can, therefore, be interpreted as the narrator's protracted and painstaking process of the internalisation, and the concomitant aesthetic overcoming, of a traumatic memory inherited from his parents.

The first part of Kiš's trilogy, the novel *Garden, Ashes*, can be approached from multiple angles one of which is the notion that it stages the conflict of two parental temperaments who fight over controlling the narrator. The boy is exposed, on the one side, to his father's irony and the Jewish spirit of self-deprecation, and on the other, to his mother's sentimentality and the Montenegrin spirit of the epic magnification of own ancestry. However, what matters even more than this contest of temperaments is a conflict of two forms of memory which the parents seek to inculcate into their son. The father, who himself broke the relations with most of his family in Hungary and refused to inherit their ancestral memories, strives to control the memory of his own son and largely succeeds

in doing so. Paradoxically, his impact on the boy is particularly forceful precisely at the point of his greatest humiliation: “His mighty figure, his authority, even his very name, were sufficient to hold the plot within fixed limits, the story that ferments like grapes in barrels, the story in which fruit slowly rots, trampled underfoot, crushed by the press of memories, weighted down by its own juices and by the sun” [“Njegova moćna pojava, njegov autoritet, pa čak i njegovo ime, njegovi slavni rekviziti, bili su dovoljni da drže potku priče u čvrstim okvirima, tu priču koja vri kao grožđe u bačvama, tu priču u kojoj voće polako gnije, izgaženo nogama, smrvljeno presom uspomena, opterećeno svojim sokovima i suncem”] (Kiš 1985: 147 [1993: 231]). In no less contradictory a manner, the mother seeks to tear the boy away from his father’s influence and to bind him to her own lineage and the heroic deeds of her Montenegrin ancestors: “And so, gradually and quite unconsciously, my mother poisoned me with her reminiscences, nurturing in me a passion for old photographs and mementos, for soot and patina. A victim of this sentimental education, I yearned along with her for the days that would never come back, for ethereal journeys and faded landscapes” [“Tako, polako i sasvim nesvesno, majka me trovala uspomenama, navikavajući me da volim stare fotografije i suvenire. A ja sam, žrtva tog sentimentalnog vaspitanja, uzdisao zajedno s njom za danima koji se više nikad neće vratiti, za nekim skoro već sasvim zaboravljenim pejzažima”] (154 [237-8]). While the boy sways like a reed in the wind, his older self, the narrator, reaches to aesthetic mastery over those conflicting postmemory impulses: he avoids submission by resorting to an ironic detachment. The poetic content of his postmemory is postmemory itself, namely how his father, and then his mother, try to impart memories to him, by way of metaphoric trampling and intoxication, and how a combined impact of this experience produces the wine of story.

The second part of Kiš’s family trilogy, the collection of short stories *Early Sorrows*, places the child in the centre of a postmemory conflict, much like in Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. In one of the short stories, entitled “Game” [“Igra”], the father secretly observes an innocuous game in which his son gets into the persona of his Jewish grandfather and plays a feather dealer. Full of vindictive pride, the father calls his wife to show her the scene: “I have to show her how blood finds its way underground, show her that Andreas is not her little ‘Fair-Haired Boy’ (as she believes), but his flesh and blood, a grandson of Max the Wanderer” [“Treba da

joj pokažem kako teku ponornice krvi. Kako Andreas nije zapravo njen Plavi Dečko (kako ona misli), nego njegova krv, unuk Maksa Lutajućeg”] (Kiš 1998: 22 [1993: 15]). In response to her husband’s little triumph, the mother tells the boy a story of an emperor who got married to “a Gypsy woman” (“jednom Cigankom”) but decided to kill her after she gave birth to a son. The mother’s story then frames the boy who she says soon started to behave like a vagabond in spite of his courtly environment (19 [28]). Nevertheless, this particular story is something of an exception in *Early Sorrows*. The collection as a whole is an example of an entirely different response to the siren call of postmemory. In other short stories, namely, the narrator emancipates himself from such inherited memories through his own recollections, presented from his emotional and intellectual perspective as a child.

The third part of Kiš’s family cycle, the novel *Hourglass*, illustrates yet another (and final) form of dissociation from the hegemonic aspirations of postmemory. In this novel, inherited memory is not an object of ironic transposition, nor is it cast aside as in most stories of *Early Sorrows*. It is rather reconstructed, not as an inherited memory of the Other, but as a memory by that Other, namely the vanished father, based on the only sensible document he left behind, a letter to his sister from April 1942, shortly after their evasion to Hungary. This letter, otherwise full of mundane details, does not reference the massacre in Novi Sad in any way. In this respect, Kiš’s dilemma was an ethical as well as an aesthetical one. On the one side, he was convinced that those who did not witness traumatic events directly should refrain from speculating about their most painful aspects as such speculation could easily turn into a vacuous, ethically irresponsible confabulation. On the other side, he believed that the massacres at an industrial scale, such as the Holocaust, deprive victims of their individuality, and that any piece of narrative fiction that translates this harrowing experience into a poetic matrix is devoid of aesthetic value. Consequently, *Hourglass* does not relate in much detail the massacre in Novi Sad, which claimed 2,800 lives, let alone the gas chambers of Auschwitz, where up to 1 Million people disappeared.

In spite of the fact that the novel stages the trauma-ridden recollections of Eduard Sam, the crucial traumatic event on the Danube embankment is referenced only indirectly and cryptically. On one occasion, the traumatic memory takes the form of a lacuna in the manuscript, with an

asterisk marking a missing line/memory: “this confrontation with me as a stranger \* while I stood in line on the bank of the Danube” [“taj odnos ka sebi kao strancu \* na Dunavu dok sam stajao u redu”] (Kiš 1990: 145 [1993]). On another occasion, E. S. recalls the abscised brain of surgeon Freud lying on “a small snowy island, between paths trampled into the snow” (“na maloj snežnoj adi, između dve staze utabane u snegu”), which reminds him of a lamb’s brain which on one occasion before the war had been served to him in the Viennese restaurant Danubius (Kiš 57-8 [308]). This is a highly symbolic name that links, in an ambivalent way, to the seat of psychoanalysis and to the primal scene of massacre. Just as E. S. finds it impossible to penetrate the frozen cortex of surgeon Freud’s brain on an *ada* so, too, the narrator is unable, for all his cerebral analyses, to reconstruct the traumatic core of E. S.’s memory on the Danube.

### The National Framework of Postmemory: Once Upon a Time There Was a Country by Dušan Kovačević

In Dušan Kovačević’s novel *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country*, the problem of inherited memory is explored higher up on the sociopolitical scale. It is projected from the family level onto the level of the body politic, a significantly larger commemorative community whose members do not necessarily know each other. Thereby, the novel foregrounds the problem of the relationship between ancestors and descendants within a nation as an imagined community (Anderson 1991). It is important to note that throughout his career as a playwright, especially in his plays *The Marathon Family* [*Maratonci trče počasni krug*] (1972) and *Radovan III* [*Radovan III*] (1973), Kovačević focused on how the patriarchal cultural codes of ancestors may distort the intergenerational memories of their descendants, with tragicomic effects. In fact, *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* was a retrospective prose reworking of another early play by Kovačević, *A Spring in January* [*Proleće u januaru*] (1975) which also explored the grotesque world of latterday cultural troglodytes.

The basic plot of Kovačević’s novel is fairly well known from Kusturica’s acclaimed film. After the German bombardment of Belgrade on 6

April 1941, a group of survivors of different ages and social status escape through a tunnel underneath the Kalemegdan fortress, which overlooks the Danube, and take refuge in a secret chamber built during the Austro-Ottoman wars in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this sanctuary they organise an underground, and largely imaginary, resistance to the German occupying forces. At the centre of this group is Kovačević's favourite comical duo: a cockish father (Crni) in the role the *alazon* and an immature son (Jovan) in the role of the *buffoon*. The father's comical tutorship over the son is extended to the entire group in hiding. In keeping with an earlier conspiratorial arrangement, the underground men are supplied with food by trusted people led by Crni's comrade Marko. Marko, who in the meantime becomes a Communist strongman, deceives Crni and the underground men into believing that the war was not over in 1945. Motivated by erotic rivalry with Crni, he nourishes their belief that they need to remain in their underground-prison and to keep fighting for freedom. After a decades-long deception, Marko destroys the underground with a powerful explosion. A handful of survivors get out into daylight just as the Yugoslav wars start and die fighting their fellow Yugoslavs of a different nationality in a misguided belief that they are German invaders.

The political moral of Kovačević's novel is only accessed on an allegorical level: the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s arose from a distorted, bellicose memory of the Second World War which the communist elites inculcated into Yugoslav citizenry. The underground men are not forced to live through the Other's memory; they are trapped in their own, personal memory which the Other has imposed on them as an eternal, static present. While postmemory represents a traumatic memory inherited from the others that becomes so intensive that it is experienced as own, Kovačević's novel shows how our own memories, if they become too intensive, can be instrumentalised by others to become our dungeon. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this constellation that at the very end of the novel becomes a prelude for an equally manipulative postmemory transfer onto the next generation.

After their joint demise, the cellar dwellers gather on a Danubian river island, reconcile with one another and, in a pagan vision of the netherworld, indulge in an orgiastic celebration. Simultaneously, one of their number, a former zookeeper, accompanied by his loyal chimpanzee, pronounces the final monologue about their bright new future on the island:

Here, we are going to build new homes with red roofs and chimney which will be inhabited by storks and with gates widely open for cherished guests. And we will be grateful to the new country which will remind us of the carpets of our native realm. With sadness, pain and joy, we will keep mentioning our old country when telling stories to our children which will begin like fairytales: ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A COUNTRY.

[Ovde ćemo podići nove kuće sa crvenim krovovima i dimnjacima koje će naseljavati rode, i kapijama širom otvorenim za drage goste. I bićemo zahvalni novoj zemlji koja će nas podsećati na ćilime starog zavičaja. Sa tugom, bolom i radošću pominjaćemo našu zemlju kada budemo pričali priče našoj deci, koje će počinjati kao bajke: BILA JEDNOM JEDNA ZEMLJA.] (Kovačević 1995: 347)

The fairytale ending to the novel—which simultaneously initiates a new story—can be interpreted in two fundamentally different ways. The first way of interpreting the episode on the river island, which can be described as Yugonostalgic, would be to suggest that the cellar people belatedly realise the beauty of Yugoslavia, the country they destroyed. *Post festum*, as they move to form new, successor countries, all they can do is to impart to their offspring their fond memories of that country. A second way of interpreting the novel's end could be described as Yugosceptic in that it suggests that the underground dwellers did not understand anything at all about the country they lived in and that they convey their illusions to the future generations. In the latter interpretation, the father and the son, the zookeeper and the chimpanzee, the ancestors and the descendants emerge as a triple reflection of the same deception. Those who were deceived by their own memories now use those memories to deceive the next generation in their turn. Inherited memory, thus, comes across as a manipulative memory which leads to infantilisation: just as the politicians treated the people from the underground as children, so, too, those underground people want to maintain their own offspring in a perpetual childhood and tell them sugar-coated nostalgic stories about a country which never lived up to those ideals. A Yugonostalgic or a Yugosceptic memory? Kovačević's novel wisely refrains from resolving this dilemma and it is precisely this ambiguity that contributes to its aesthetic complexity and effectiveness.

Regardless of whether the underground people's rose-tinted view of Yugoslavia is true or false, genuine or hypocritical, their children are likely to remain entirely reliant on the inherited memory, and isolated in that memory like on a river island. It is precisely the Danube that turns into a supreme metaphor of such deterministic postmemory: at the very moment when the zookeeper finishes his ambiguous monologue, the Danubian river island, with the jubilant underground people on it, sails off into a misty distance, carrying the inherited memory through centuries like a haunted boat, or perhaps like a message in the bottle.

### The Transnational Framework of Postmemory: David Albahari's *Leeches*

David Albahari made the problem of inherited memory his central theme and a constituent aspect of his postmodernist poetics. Thus, his novels *Zinc* [*Cink*] (1988) and *Bait* [*Mamac*] (1996) follow up on Kiš's family trilogy in that they explore the narrator's internal overcoming of the memories imparted by his father in the earlier novel and by his mother in the latter novel. His novel *Snow Man* [*Snežni čovek*] (1995), published in the same year as Kovačević's *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* shifts the problem of inherited memory to the experience of an entire generation and traces the collapse of an emigrant who cannot cope, even from a very long distance, with the legacy of the country he escaped from. His late novel *Leeches*, however, expands the circle of postmemory further than all of his earlier novels. It hones in on the transfer of memory from an ancestor in one nation to a descendant in another nation.

In the opening scene of the novel, the narrator witnesses a curious incident on the Danube: on the Zemun quay, a young man slaps a woman, who falters, steps into the water and then finally moves away. Intrigued by her eerie composure, the narrator initially tries to follow her but she quickly disappears out of his sight. In the following days, he explores the Danube embankment again and then expands his search to the entire riverside district which eventually brings him to the Jewish community in Zemun. The abstract spectacle which he witnessed on the bank of the Danube gradually gains a particular historical interpretation: the victims

are Jews, and the perpetrators are *gentiles*, non-Jews of different nationalities in different times. Following this discovery, the narrator, who turns out to be a Serb, gets involved as a columnist in a local weekly with a series of articles against Serbian nationalism. Thereby he incurs the wrath of the sundry anti-Semite groups but he also gains the respect of local Jewish artists and intellectuals, and even the young woman from the Danube quay whom he is finally able to trace and befriend. In the next phase of his research into the past of the Zemun Jewry the narrator explores a mysterious document sent from an unknown address. In this document, he finds out about, and quickly identifies with, an elusive leech trader known as Eleazar whose activity, under the different guises, was recorded at various Pannonian places in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his disentanglement of the esoteric net, the narrator realises that the entire spectacle on the Danube, as well as his subsequent research, had been staged as part of the eschatological plan, or more precisely conspiracy, of Belgrade Jews to escape from history. Following the instructions from the Kaballah, they awaited, and arranged for, a non-Jewish messianic figure to lead their community out of a traumatic reality into a different ontological status, and a different story. Ultimately, the conspiracy falls through in an unceremonious way, the Jews remain in Belgrade, and in an ironic twist, it is the narrator who ends up out of history, writing in exile his postmodernist story about the slap on the Danube.

This brief summary of *Leeches* clearly indicates that this novel goes further in its critical examination of postmemory's ethical status than earlier examples. *Leeches* differ from postmemory plots, be they conventional or nonconventional, in three key areas. Firstly, in this novel, traumatic memory is not inherited within traditional communities such as family (Kiš) and nation (Kovačević). On the contrary, in *Leeches* postmemory gains a distinctly transnational character: Jews impart their accrued memories to a Serb who identifies with those memories to such an extent that he allows them to "evacuate" not only his personal memories but also the memories he inherited from his family and his nation. Not only does he give up on that Serbian inherited memory, he also actively confronts it in the public discourse. Secondly, differently from the basic model of postmemory laid out by Hirsch, the transnational memory in *Leeches* is not conveyed by spontaneous channels, whereby people know each other—and their shared culture—so well that their emotional and

intellectual proximity enables a seamless transfer of memory. Quite the opposite, the Jewish conspirators carefully select the narrator among numerous possible candidates and impart their traumatic memory to him—or more precisely goad him into adopting that memory—well before they meet him in person. In this highly artificial process, the narrator's personal qualities have merely a practical, utilitarian value to the conspirators. Thirdly, *Leeches* also differ from the standard narrative pattern in that postmemory does not seek merely to reformat its bearer, whereby he retains his basic identity but grafts on to it memories which belong, partially or entirely, to other people. In contrast, the narrator internalises the inherited memories to such an extent that he literally identifies with their focal point, the leech dealer Eleazar. In *Leeches*, thus, inheriting the memory of the Other also means surrendering own self and adopting the Other's identity.

In this radically postmodernist reconfiguration of postmemory, the Danube has a particularly complex and versatile role to play. Taken at its face value, the Danube provides the narrative with a geographical setting: most of the heroes live in the vicinity of the Danube and much of the plot unfolds by the riverside or near it. On closer inspection, however, the Danube also comes across as a symbolic backbone of that narrative. On the one side, it *initiates* the postmemory plot. The slap on the riverbank literally pushes the young woman to step into the river: “One could clearly see how the water splashed her ankle, how her sock soaked up the wetness, how her leg sank into the muck” [“Lepo se videlo kako joj voda zapljuskuje članak, kako čarapa upija vlagu, kako joj noga tone u blato.”] (Albahari 2011: 2 [2009: 6]), This is replicated at the symbolic level as the incident forces the narrator to step into the strong current of others' memories which increasingly engulfs him and eventually bears him away. On the other side, the Danube also *consolidates* the postmemory plot. Investigating the background of the incident, the narrator tends to get lost in intertextual meandering and narrative digressions. In this continuous rambling, the Danube provides a firm point of reference that repeatedly brings him back to the main current of the memory plot: “I walked cautiously, as if wading through shallow water, and when I saw that the big wooden gate was ajar, I thought it would be better to keep going until I got to the riverbank where all this had started and where the water, I thought, would be deeper.” [“Hodao sam oprezno, kao da gazim po plitkoj vodi, i

kada sam video da je velika drvena kapija odškrinuta, pomislio sam da bi bilo bolje da produžim, bez zastajkivanja, sve dok ne stignem do obale Dunava, tamo gde je sve počelo i gde je voda kudikamo dublja.”] (Albahari 2011: 109 [2009: 103]).

Finally, and most importantly, the organic muck of the Danubian shore engenders the key image of Albahari’s novel: leeches, an ambivalent symbol of the ethical fallout of postmemory. The narrator is surprised to find out that back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the only merchandise the Jews were allowed to trade were leeches, a business deemed so base that no other social group wanted to get involved. Leeches, thus, initially appear as a metonymy of the Jewish presence in the Danubian basin, their hallmark. Nevertheless, the metonymy becomes perforce a metaphor of that presence as, Jewish traders, like leeches, are able to stick to the host community which rejects them in every other sense: “Since Jews were not allowed to reside permanently on the Military Frontier, [...] they used every opportunity, even the smallest, the size of a leech, for instance, to find a way to rest with at least one foot on solid ground. In the case of leeches, of course, it would be better to say mud than solid ground” [“S obzirom na to da Jevrejima nije bio dozvoljen stalni boravak u Vojnoj granici [...] oni su koristili svaku mogućnost, pa i najmanju, veličine pijavice, da se makar jednom nogom oslone na čvrsto tlo. U slučaju pijavica, doduše, bolje bi bilo govoriti o mulju nego o čvrstom tlu.”] (Albahari 2011: 105 [2009: 99]). It is this historical and symbolical ambivalence of the premodern Jewish leech-dealing that colours the narrator’s inherited memory in the post-modern age. On the one side, leeches heal because they suck ‘sick’ blood out of the body: in other words, the memories of other religious and national groups, whose past is connected with ours in a particularly difficult and traumatic way, can adhere to us and this can have a curative effect for the body politic. They can make us more conscious of our own memory plot through its connectedness, as burdensome and upsetting as it may be, with those other groups. On the other side, leeches can also suck out ‘good’ blood: in other words, memories inherited from others, even when those others are discriminated and persecuted groups, can turn into a resentful exploitation. This can suppress not only individual memories of lived experiences but also all alternative forms of inherited memory. Convalescence or escapistic obsession: Albahari’s *Leeches* leave this foundational dilemma of postmemory unresolved.

It is apposite to formulate some caveats concerning the range and reach of the argument. Clearly enough, postmemory is not the only form of memory but part of a wider interactive structure which encompasses personal and institutional memories, but also downplaying, suppression, and oblivion. Postmemory arises forcefully in the endemic contexts where those other memory channels are dysfunctional or even completely foreclosed. It is axiologically and pragmatically neutral, i.e., it can bring its bearers both benefit and harm. What is more, honing in on postmemory, rivers are not the only site of postmemory (*lieu de postmémoire*); in Serbian literature, at least equally important is the trope of the pit, as in Jovan Radulović's *Dove-pit* [*Golubnjača*] (1980) which can create a semi-otic whole with the river in the form of an underwater tunnel as in Svetlana Velmar-Janković's *Dungeon* [*Lagum*] (1990) [2016]. Even in those cases where postmemory broods upon a river, that river will not necessarily be the Danube. It suffices to recall the legends of the Drina from the first chapter of Andrić's novel *The Bridge on the Drina* [*Na Drini ćuprija*] (1945) where the Višegrad children of different faiths simply 'know' that only their story can be true because they heard it from their parents, in their own community (Андрић 1971: 10-14). Last but not least, inherited memories can go beyond other rivers to also include other languages, as is the case with the recent transposition of Andrić's Drina legends in the autobiographic prose of Saša Stanišić in the German language (Stanišić 2006, 2019).

Notwithstanding the above caveats, the Danube has been a key geopolitical artery in Central Europe and this strategic position made it a stage of particularly intensive conflicts. Consequently, the spectrum of the traumatic events in its river course has been particularly broad, in terms of the different kinds of trauma and also in terms of locality and the historical period(s) of such events. This makes the postmemory plots on/about the Danube representative of a wider group of analogous plots.

## Conclusion

The three prose works explored in this essay testify to their authors' willingness to come to grips with the ethical and aesthetic challenges that come with inherited memories of traumatic events. Despite their

numerous contextual, thematic and stylistic differences those works form a continuum in which the different narrative possibilities of postmemory are developed in complementary ways. In Kiš's family trilogy, postmemory approximates Hirsch's original definition: the transfer of parental memories to a child. In Kovačević's novel *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country*, postmemory is configured through a personal relationship between the father and the son; it is then parodically represented as the relationship between a zookeeper and a chimpanzee; finally, it expands to include intergenerational relationship between ancestors and descendants within the nation as an imagined community. Albahari's *Leeches* take this expansion a step further by making predecessors in one nation impart their memories to successors in another nation. In all three works, postmemory is configured in a fundamentally ambivalent way which leaves space for very different evaluations of inherited memory. In Kiš's family trilogy, the ambivalence affects the *sources* of inherited memory: the boy is exposed to competitive memories of his father and his mother which he seeks to reconcile through lyrical irony. In Kovačević's *Once Upon Time There Was a Country*, the ambivalence affects the *object* of inherited memory: the fairytale ending to the story about the cellar people does not clarify the nature of Yugoslavia, the country the future generations are called upon to remember. Albahari's *Leeches* rest on the ambivalence of the *effect* of inherited memory: postmemory, like leeches, can both heal and intoxicate, reinvigorate and suck out energy.

These complementarities and ambivalences are accompanied by a special role of the Danube as a locus of multiple historical fractures and of postmemory which processes those fractures. At the surface level, this role is a purely narrative one as the key traumatic events happen on the banks of the Danube. At a somewhat deeper level, the Danube's role is a symbolical one because this river comes across as an apt metaphor of postmemory which imparts memories of those traumatic events to future generations. In Kiš's trilogy, the Danube underneath the ice, a human brain on a river island of snow, and a letter written by a vanished person, are the facets of the same frozen traumatic memory that cannot be expressed nor for that matter communicated to others. In the final episode of Kovačević's novel, postmemory comes across as a Danubian river island that sails away from a live dialogic reality within the same generation into a perpetual autoreproduction from one generation to the other.

In Albahari's novel, the river leeches are an ominous symbol of both the exclusion of the Jews from the Danubian cultures and of their paradoxical adherence to, and afterlife in, those cultures.

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