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WARS, TRAUMAS AND IDENTITIES IN THE SERBIAN NOVEL 1991-2021

Abstract: The introductory part of this paper is concerned with the general perspectives of contemporary Serbian writers on war and literature, as well as their relationship with national and supranational self-understanding during the Yugoslavian crisis and the country's collapse. Based on a the framework of about twenty novels by writers from different generations and of different poetic profiles, the second and third part are dedicated to a theoretically based and interpretively substantiated approach to circularity-evoking and testimonially-represented paradigms as primary orientations in the treatment of individual and/or collective trauma, and in the literary articulation of concepts of identity.

Keywords: Serbian literature, novel, war, trauma, nation, poetics, paradigm, history, culture

A century ago, in the final year of the First World War and the year when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was formed, the future laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature Ivo Andrić wrote that "the influence of war on our literature was [...] entirely destructive" (Andrić 1978: 169), referring to the unique "sentence to silence" under the pressure of the crushing state of war, with a culturally attuned "diagnosis" that admonishes: "*We are still ailing* [emph. T.B.] and are far from being able to assume and theorize about our illness" (Andrić 1978: 172).

Eight decades later, after the split of the unified Yugoslav state, recalling the turbulent times from the start of the Yugoslav crisis, one of the most influential Serbian writers of our age, David Albahari stated

that “the entity known as Yugoslavia has ceased to exist, and the brutal ethnic war that raged in Croatia and Bosnia demonstrated that none of us could return to our homes anymore, wherever they might be” (Albahari 2001: 39). In his novel *Globetrotter* [*Svetski putnik*], a loquacious character that suffers prolonged consequences of the Western-Balkan historical agony, in a way shares a conviction with Andrić that “From some illnesses [...] we are never cured, they stay within us,” while adding that “he was carrying within him his former country like a kind of troth, *like a disease that kept returning* [emph. T.B.]” (Albahari 2001: 31, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać)

Coincidentally or not, Andrić’s and Albahari’s observations, in a way, diagnostically frame the intergenerational literary visions that encompass a good part of the twentieth century in the modern Serbian culture, from the Great War and the forming of Yugoslavia, up to its collapse through several smaller wars, as well as in the decades after the split. These understandings represent a mindset in literature that acquires a symbolic quality, evoking the transhistorical concept of *bellum morbus*, the symptoms of which include being overwhelmed by violence and war or, rather, their permanently destructive consequences in the form of an inability to properly understand one’s self.

War is, of course, always a brutal interlude from peace-time, which inevitably leads to violence and the experiences of destruction, suffering and discontinuity that go along with it. This entails the inexorable (re)defining of both individual identity and that of entire communities. Literature is, on the other hand, one of those culturally symbolic “mechanisms” which traditionally play an important role in this induced revision and “tidying up” of concepts related to identity. That is why writing about war unavoidably also means tackling issues of identity.

A Circularity-Evoking Paradigm: *Trauma est magistra repetitionis*

If we consider that the novelist’s creative process has a generic origin in storytelling (*diegesis*, *narratio*) as the Aristotelian mimicking of human actions in an event-bound and planar timeline, then there is no doubt that the presence of war marks one of the most important factors

in self-identification as a (trans)historical trauma/disease and a negative developmental factor in Serbian literature. In addition, war often has a decisive role because “the importance of the dynamics of conflict lies in the fact that at the root of a conflict between different groups, there is always an awareness of identity (nationality, race, etc.) through which we create a conception of ourselves” (Fabietti et al. 2002: 23). That is why experiencing war and suffering so often becomes a kind of a focal point of *narrative identity*, understood in an anthropological sense of discursively shaped “identity construction as a flexible set of choices [...] [by which – T. B.] communities define themselves as the result of a sequence of (mostly atrocious) precedents” (During 2011: 24).

It is also a cornerstone of the modern and extensively developed research on war trauma, which, in the global context, demonstrates that “literature has provided countless examples of how soldiers cope with war experience” and, additionally, that “trauma research has demonstrated the importance of developing a narrative or story about the traumatic event” (Hunt 2010: 161–162, *passim*). As a teleologically organized structure, narration aims to provide trauma with a recognizable framework, which typically tends to elude attempts at understanding it due to the paralyzing effects traumatic events have on memory. That is why narrativization often serves as a sort of stabilizer for the amorphously present individual and/or collective self-understanding, or rather, the re(construction) of identity, in the poststructuralist-verified meaning of human “made” and shaped, and not merely “naturally” given and fixed belonging.

The influence of war trauma on identity in our age—which has already been many times labelled as the “age of trauma,” with trauma acting as its “all-inclusive” phenomenon and cultural paradigm (see Nadal and Calvo 2014: 1)—in a way competes with memories, which are generally considered to be the key formative factor in the modern (self-)understanding of identity. Therefore, one can argue that the transgenerational *bellum morbus*, the war “disease” or “disease” from war, which always seems to come back in Serbian literature and culture as well, carries the seal of ever-present trauma.

One of the more important characteristics of Serbian literary prose (above all in the novel, in the sense where, in the modern era, the “rise of European nationalism coincides especially with one form of literature – the novel” (Brennan 2009: 49)), during the transitional, crisis period

before and after the collapse of Yugoslavia, was the repeated evoking of traumatic experiences as a poetic, and in a way a (quasi)therapeutic mechanism for comprehending the individual and collective experiences of the time. In part, undoubtedly sourcing from the reservoir of collective (self)understanding, this exceptional, permanently recurring instrument of cultural memory has become, in the turbulent interval of new wars and suffering, a kind of marker and simultaneously a driving force for the discursive recuperation of a community overwhelmed by crisis.

It is well-known in modern theory that “narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake the self” (Brison 1999: 40), because “the past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory” (Brison 1999: 42). Understanding that which has happened, or is yet to happen as a *reoccurrence of the already experienced*, in this context, represents a sort of symbolic stabilizing factor.

The fact that in the literary memory of a nation—a socially privileged and influential form of expressing the collective memory as one of the crucial moments of self-identification—before and during the so-called Yugoslav wars, emerges as a relevant an artistically filtered recollection of the past, with the recollection primarily being focused on the half-century-old trauma from the Second World War, overtly pointing to their identity-defining importance. The matter at hand is, in fact, a certain *compulsive memory* as an internalized compulsion to remember (see Brajović 2012: 248), in the sense of an obsessively repeating and publicly promoted reviving (and/or reliving) of a symbolically circular and emotionally unfinished collective past, based on its—still relevant—disturbing recognizability. The reenactment of these past traumatic events serves as a cognitive pattern or a framework for comprehending the collective past.

From an epistemic point of view, this cultural phenomenon can be understood as a sublimation of a shift in the cognitive paradigm, and a transition from a suppressive-nonconflictual memory pattern—in the spirit of “brotherhood and unity” as the official formula of Yugoslav socialism in the sphere of ethnic-identity policy—to an expressive-conflictual memory pattern, in the spirit of revising the previous paradigm, serving

as the unofficial formula or late/post-Yugoslav transitional interval in Serbian literature. The perspective on the production that was marked by this thematically-oriented complex indicates that, in this case, two factors are decisive: the understanding that the knowledge of the Second World War is not properly articulated, and the belief that revising such profiled knowledge can contribute to the (re)construction of identity in newly established circumstances.

If the famous Latin proverb *Historia est magistra vitae* suggests that history is the teacher of life then it can be paraphrased to state that the Serbian novel, on the crossroads of contemporary social and historical structures, bears witness to the possibility of traumatic experiences becoming the “teacher” of historic recurrence: *Trauma est magistra repetitionis*. It is well known in trauma theory that every trauma, be it individual or collective, instantaneous or history-spanning, can bring about utter disorientation, confusion, and fixation on past experiences. Therefore, as a methodologically and therapeutically instructive recommendation, it is suggested that “working through trauma involves gaining critical distance on those experiences and re-contextualizing them in ways that permit a re-engagement with ongoing concerns and future possibilities” (LaCapra 2006: 233).

It is not difficult to notice that the re-contextualization and criticism of the Serbian novel with themes from the Second World War, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was primarily focused on the official identity narratives of Yugoslav socialism, and their political equidistance in the sphere of cultural and public treatment of ideological conflicts and/or ethnic/national animosity.¹ In the mid-1990s and 2000s, this trend evolved into a syndrome of *circular evocation*. It involved the memory-shaping invocation of the past, or, rather, the reintroduction of historical trauma and conflicts to the narrative staging of contemporary wartime reality and its consequences, as an expression of the endlessly repeating, or re/constructed and admonitory experience. Consequently, the trauma in the novel

¹ The following are the titles of some of the most famous novels of that period: Antonije Isaković, *Moment 2* [*Tren 2*] (1982), *Silent Crime* [*Miran zločin*] (1992); Vuk Drašković, *Knife* [*Nož*] (1982); Danko Popović, *The Book of Milutin* [*Knjiga o Milutinu*] (1985); Dobrica Ćosić, *Sinner* [*Grešnik*] (1985), *Renegade* [*Otpadnik*] (1986), *Believer* [*Vernik*] (1990); Vojislav Lubarda, *Ascension* [*Vaznesenje*] (1989); Slobodan Selenić, *Timor mortis* (1989).

often takes on a *parabolic dimension*, implying a cognitive equivalence between past and current situations/conditions and presenting specific structural and compositional demands on the narrative.

In this sense, it becomes possible to say that “the narration of current and past events is merged into one telling of an event outside of time [...] the distinction between *us then and now*, *between ancestors and descendants*, has disappeared [emph. T.B.], so that the actions of descendants can be described as something done ‘again’, repeating something they had already done” (Čolović 2008: 50–51). A “circular” return of traumatic experiences, in other words, serves here to recognize the wartime suffering and anguish as a sort of “common denominator” of collective identity. That which has happened and is re-experienced as such becomes more than an instance; it becomes a regularity that holds the status of a distinct cultural or literary hallmark.

Thematizing the collective *déjà vu* in the accompanying note to the novel *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* [*Bila jednom jedna zemlja*] (1995), playwright Dušan Kovačević recalled his old play *Spring in January* [*Proleće u januaru*] (1977), which served as the nucleus of the novel, as well as the screenplay for the movie *Underground* (1995) by Emir Kusturica, “about people who live, work, are born and die [...] deceived into thinking that the Second World War hadn’t ended,” adding, “Just twenty years later, what remains of that incredible story is a sad, woeful, devastating truth that it is virtually a documentary drama. In the Balkans, the Second World War did not end” (Kovačević 1995: 335). Hence, the novelistic narrative about the revival of animosities and the repetition of traumatic experiences in the former Yugoslav territory at the end of the twentieth century ends with a laconic, more than symptomatic, authorial remark “(This story has no) END” (Kovačević 1995: 332).

However, the parabolically structured narrative from Dušan Kovačević—in which the filming of a movie about the Second World War evokes trauma, and simultaneously “foretells” its culturally induced repetition in the future—hides a double meaning, as it offers a novelistic plot in which political manipulation (the communist elite, which by all means maintains a war psychosis of the community for its own interests) stands between two temporally distant traumas, along with its (auto)suggestive perpetuating effect, which fosters an affinity for a circular understanding of history and its detrimental consequences.

A similar set of circumstances can be found in *Premeditated Murder* [*Ubistvo s predumišljajem*] by Slobodan Selenić, in which instead of a cinematographically constructed parabola, we find a scriptographic one. The (meta)fictional “Publisher’s Note” at the end of the novel—related to what precedes it, in the form of the so-called edited manuscript of a parallel narrative, bearing the same title as the novel—points out the fact that “[it] began as a book about [...] the distant year of 1945, in the course of its composition it became in great part a book about [...] the not-so-distant 1992” (Selenić 1995: 234, trans. Jelena Petrović). As with Kovačević, here too the *circularly evocative* nature of the novelistic structure carries a shadow of political criticism, pointed towards the ideological rigidity of communism in its emergence/decay as the cause of transgressional trauma for members of the same family, as well as the nation, in the renewal of ethnic intolerance and conflicts dating back to the Second World War.

In the genre framework of the Serbian novel, in the period following 1991, this approach also has hybrid aspects that mark a transition toward a personally representative paradigm. The most prominent example of this can be found in the novelistic *Trilogy on Snow and Dogs* [*Trilogija o snegu i psima*] by Vidosav Stevanović (*Snow in Athens* [*Sneg u Atini*], 1992; *Balkan Island* [*Ostrvo Balkan*], 1993; *Christ and Dogs* [*Hristos i psi*], 1994). The main protagonists of this novelistic saga about the new Balkan wars are the so-called “dogs of war,” seven members of a volunteer armed group stationed in Athens, yet willing to take part in conflicts on the former Yugoslav territory. They carry with them “baggage” of a problematic past and an archaically ecstatic understanding of war: “War is the pinnacle of life [...] In war, all become who they are [...] All lies fall away [...] War is just” (Stevanović 1993: 87); “War is a collective expression of emotions through killing, robbing and violence [...] an ecstatic expression of hatred and love, fear and pleasure” (Stevanović 1994: 99).

Therefore, these novels possess characteristics that undoubtedly bring them closer to the *circularity-evoking paradigm*. “Here, we are all the same; those who do not remember one war will live to see another. It is as if there is one war that stops and starts again...” (Stevanović 1993: 31)—written by one of the leading narrative characters of the *Balkan Island*. “If we exclude everything modern, it was the same as in earlier wars,” he added later in the same vein, in a section that likely alludes to the beginning of the siege of Sarajevo, “As if all of our ancestors [...] rose

up and joined us, carrying their wounds, sufferings and vengeance, and their centuries-old experiences" (Stevanović 1993: 127). In Vidosav Stevanović's work, there is a case of *alternative figuration of identity* since the perspectives of social and partially existential outsiders ultimately appear as discursively "distorted mirrors" of official politics and/or public opinion contaminated by martial psychology.

A differently profiled circular evocation with prominent elements of a personal perspective can be found in *Bait* [Mamac] (1996) and *Globetrotter* [Svetski putnik] (2001), novels that, together with *A Short Book* [Kratka knjiga] (1993) and *Snow Man* [Snežni čovek] (1995), make up an unofficial emigrant tetralogy from the turn of the century written by a prominent Serbian author David Albahari. What appears as a cinematographic parabola in Kovačević's work and as a scriptographic one in Selenić's takes the shape of an audiographic parabola in Albahari's *Bait*. It is thematized through the form of a tape-recorded testimony from the narrator's mother about the traumatic experience of living in and fleeing from the NDH (Independent State of Croatia), and its narrative placement in the current context of the new Balkan wars of the 1990s ("At that time she lived [...] as someone else, no, of course, not under a different name, but as if she were living in two places at once..." (Albahari 1996: 56–57, trans. Peter Agnone)).

Similarly to *Bait*, *Globetrotter* problematizes the relationship between testimony, memory, and the retrospective understanding of trauma from the Second World War. However, the latter novel does not address the idea of "circular" repetition of the past through the voice of the victims; rather, it addresses it oppositely, through the clash of the prolonged effects of trauma in contemporary interpretations by descendants and heirs. The novelistic narrative of the encounter between Croatian and Serbian/Jewish participants in distant traumatic events in the New World, in far off "places where there is a lack of history," their "Rashomon-like" disputes over historical truth, "for history can never be completely blunted. Even when it grows dull, it goes right on slicing and dicing the same as ever" (Albahari 2001: 126, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać). This novelistic narrative is accompanied by the continued destructive impact of history on those who become "a culprit with no guilt, a criminal without a crime." Over time, however, it turns into a sobering realization that in societies that have not fully confronted the past, there is a sort of simulation of

reality, and “[t]he false reality, or rather insight into its perverted structure, inevitably requires a reexamination of the historical perspective, the historical bases on which reality rests.” (Albahari 2001:175, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać)

From that which has been stated above, it is possible to conclude that in the works of David Albahari, the narrative-evocative conceptualization of trauma reaches what is perhaps its ultimate form in the contemporary Serbian novel. This is a result of the initial ideological critique of communism—which typically has political consequences in the discursive re-affirmation of identity politics of the new-old nation—evolving into an epistemological critique of inert understandings of history and reality as identity-defining, but also identity-distorting, depending on the perspective of the understanding and its contextualization in current cultural and civilizational relations.

A Testimonially-Represented Paradigm: *The deaths ye died I have watched beside*

Most frequently realized in the form of a parabolic repetition of wartime suffering, the circular conceptualization of trauma in Serbian literature of the late Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav period primarily served the purpose of reader identification as a text-induced expression of implied understandings of identity. In a sense, and to a certain degree, this state of affairs coincides with the continental trend, within which “the increasing interest in trauma was a response to concerns about memory, politics, representation and ethics that became prominent at the turn of the twentieth century, and which have mainly focused on the extreme forms of violence and victimization that came to light after World War II” (Nadal and Calvo 2014: 1).

From that perspective, we can read Albahari’s short novel *Götz and Meyer* [*Gec i Majer*] (1998), in which the antiheroes are drivers of the infamous gas vans from the Second World War, the archetypal figures of the “technology of mass killing” in wartime Belgrade. “I never saw them, Götz or Meyer, so I can only imagine them” (Albahari 2008: 5, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać), says the author-narrator at the beginning of his story,

while adding, aware of the conceptual inertia of his position, that “[i]t is simplest, of course, to fall back on stereotypes” (Albahari 2008: 6, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać). Fluctuating throughout between the parabolic and the concrete, the narrator of this suggestive work, which attempts to evoke the horrific and unimaginable, ultimately arrives at the cathartic realization that “as long as there is remembering [...] there is a chance, no matter how slim, *that someone, once, somewhere, will look at the real faces of Götz and Meyer* [emph. T.B.] [...] And as long as their faces are nothing but a stand-in for any face, Götz and Meyer will return and repeat the meaninglessness of history” (Albahari 2008: 180, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać).

Clearly framed by the historical fate of Judaism as its thematic and problem-centered core, this realization can be instructive in a wider context, serving as a kind of a poetic and ethical guidepost. *A personally delivered testimony is a tool for empirically grounded understanding, or catharsis, and an escape from the endless cycle of superpersonally evocative repetition* – this represents, in the novels belonging to the second paradigm, a possible mechanism for the culturally symbolic overcoming of trauma, for both the victims and perpetrators, but also for the recuperation of identity in an individual sense and, possibly, in a collective sense of the term.

“From the same soul, both the executioner and the victim. Only the crowns and flags change,” succinctly stated by the narrator of Dragan Velikić’s *Astrakhan* [*Astragan*] (Velikić 1991: 93–94), a novel that was published in the year of the collapse of Yugoslavia, expressing, through the same rhetorical technique, the inextricable tie between ethics, politics, and poetics, in the literature that thematizes the trauma of modern wars and identity-centered controversies. Sententially concise, this position does not imply relativization but rather a contextual distinction, in the sense of emancipation from the historically (pre)given and recurring positions of the victim and perpetrator, in favor of an epistemologically open approach that each time directly presents and represents the positions of both.

Much like in Albahari’s works, in Velikić’s works, too, “the past is clay that offers everyone the desired shape” (Velikić 1993: 88). At the same time, as one of the characters from his novel *Khamsin 51* [*Hamsin 51*] notes, “The fate of us all is: a palimpsest” (Velikić 1993: 113). The characters from *Khamsin 51*, much like those from *Astrakhan*, are overwhelmed by a “palimpsestic” remembrance of their ancestors. Consequently, they

unwillingly listen to “the roar of hundreds of voices from the dark architecture of the family tree” (Velikić 1991: 86), since “Everything is written in the ‘knots’, there lies the memory of the ancestors. The descendants add a few more drops to the lump of resin, and the ‘knot’ becomes ‘cassato’” (Velikić 1993: 38).

By recognizing the presence of the collectively reiterated principle, this understanding of identity, it should be emphasized, implies the dynamic, ever-changing actions of immediate participants in the existential/historical events and processes. Instead of a “circular” movement of the individual and collective traumatic experiences as a unique historical parabola, this paradigm implies a narratively mediated evocation of a unique, primarily personal, experience of war trauma, which, with the multiplication of actors/witnesses, conveys inclusively diverse experiences that are the same or similar, and in this manner, the second paradigm strives for existential immediateness and the heterogeneity of what is narrated. In this way, the action of cultural creation is marked as a space for self-identification, in which there is a hint of distancing from the mono-circular perspective of community-determined memory into multiperspectivity, wherein, alongside collective memory, there are numerous, competing formative personal experiences, memories and understandings.

Precisely this possibility of changing cognitive and artistic perspective is expressed symbolically in the novel *The Sin of Heracles* [*Heraklov Greh*] (1999) by Goran Milašinović, which, at the level of composition, adopts a parabolic approach through alternating chapters that tell of Heracles’ feats and those that retrospectively narrate the traumatic episodes from the Serbo-Croatian war of the 1990s. Beyond the nominal connection, which places certain contemporary characters in the homeland of the Greek mythical hero, this narrative structure is fully explained at the end of the novel. In the form of an informal epilogue, the thirtieth and last chapter presents a theory by one of the characters on the “Herculian complex” based on his experience in treating war neurosis.

The theory was conceived as a sort of a response to Freud’s concept of the Oedipus complex and was based on the motif of Heracles’ slaying of his own offspring. Instead of the phantasm of patricide as the core of the mythically fatal, hereditary destiny, this fictitious theory is based on the idea that “*aggression in humans is not inherent [...] but transferred* [emph. T. B.] through the collective unconsciousness,” and that

“malicious aggression and pathological destructiveness towards another human being [are] conditioned by the subconsciously present sin of imaginary infanticide.” Since, within the subtext of the myth “exists, following the act of infanticide, a series of events that supposedly eradicate evil, when in fact they perpetuate it” (Milašinović 1999: 167), and consequently “sadism is, responsible for aggression, always directed towards the weaker and the helpless, and what is weaker and more helpless than a child” (Milašinović 1999: 169).

The two Hellenic and civilization-defining models are juxtaposed through their culturally and literarily conceptualized meanings. This is done by emphasizing the mythically predisposed responsibility of descendants (Oedipus)—who are integrated into the patriarchal, repetitive model of “inheriting” sins—and the autonomous guilt of ancestors (Hercules), who thereby become personally responsible for their own sins and the consequences they bear, which is, in many ways, an expression of hegemonic position of physical and social (over)power. Thus, the second model implies the possibility of a break from the first, circularity-evoking, infinitely perpetuating paradigm—within which exists an inextricable, renewing cycle of perpetrator-victim (sons-victims as a rule become fathers-perpetrators)—and the shift towards a testimonially-represented paradigm of the finite, concretely illustrated and narratively embodied differentiation of the perpetrator-victim relationship (fathers-perpetrators vs. sons-victims).

As already explained, *the circularity-evoking paradigm* affirms the superiority of the transpersonal, communitarian principle that rests upon the attributed repetitiveness of position and/or the functional replicability of actors as the only consistent landmark and “anchor” of culturally implied identity politics. *The testimonially-represented paradigm*, on the other hand, typically denotes a subjectively concretized experience, namely, the position of the actors or the narrative witness to pivotal experiences, widely contextualized identity perspectives, and advocacy practices.

Such an identity alternative is thematized in novels such as *Rain and Paper* [*Kiša i Hartija*] (2004) by Vladimir Tasić, and *Berliner Fenster* [*Berlinsko okno*] (2005) by Saša Ilić. These works —marked by epigraphs from the works of Rudyard Kipling (“The deaths ye died I have watched beside / And lives ye led – were mine) and Emmanuel Levinas (“The past of the other [...] is my past”)—explicitly affirm the *empathy ethos*

of identifying with the Other, who isn't necessarily communally close, as a possible answer for the collectively evocative, culturally centripetal paradigm that prioritizes the evocation of empathy with the domiciliary/vernacular "other". Narratively shaped into the form of centrifugal narratives—whose protagonist-narrators journey into the wider world (North America, Germany) to, as emigrants or researchers on assignment, understand at least a part of the inclusively verifiable truth about themselves and their homeland—these novels are also not devoid of conceptual affinity. However, this affinity is always, and this is of particular importance, in conjunction with empirically unique histories/cases.

This is precisely what brings the aforementioned works closer together, as well as the mental position of the narrators who embrace the identification position of approaching the Other as a unique substitute testimony and, at the same time, the best possibility for an inclusively established (self)understanding. "I have no patience for those who place too much value on pedigree" (Tasić 2005: 20), states the narrator of *Rain and Paper*, denying the determinism of social standing or background. Thereby, he invokes—much like her generational peers in the novel, and in spite the conflicts in the old Balkan homeland and the awareness of the current paradoxical nature of that impulse—"the possibility of universal understanding, the end of 'religious' conflicts and senseless war [...] which will claim three hundred thousand lives, displace and rob millions, burn cities, ravage arable land, rape countless women and girls" (Tasić 2005: 94).

Similarly, the protagonist of *Berliner Fenster*, after his stay in the German capital, comes to a symbolic realization that "the German story of the 1930s is [our – T.B.] story from the 1990s," because "people who have just emerged from the dark times can only be recognized by those who themselves left a part of their lives in those dark times" (Ilić 2005: 10), in addition to a sobering insight that "the questions we ask about the missing and dead, and about the camps [...] do not bring anyone back to life, they only recover some humanity to those of us who posed them" (Ilić 2005: 301), which stems from the supranationally colored parallelism of the past and present. Narratively supported by an interest in the war-time experiences and trauma of people of other denominations/cultures in a domiciliary environment, this insight becomes a worldview that is locally anchored and concerned with the relations of repercussion in the

immediate surroundings but is shaped by a wider civilizational context. Consequently, it reaches a possibility of escaping the repetitive circle of communally framed experiences and a form of liberation through a contrastive comparison with others.

The novelistic proponents of this possibility thus become credible *moral witnesses*, “individuals with a terrible tale to tell, people whose very lives are defined by that story. What sets aside the narrative moral witnesses have to tell is that it is based on the individual’s direct and personal experience [...] Witnesses have special standing as spokesmen for the injured and the dead” (Winter 2006: 238–239). This form of testimony is interpersonal in the full sense of the word, in the sense of transcending narcissistic personal or communitarian ethos as a self-contained set of values and openness for directly experienced/represented personal suffering of others, regardless of their identity habitus.

Testimonial representativeness, or discursive advocacy, and the narratively empathetic representation of one’s own/others’ traumatic experiences as the most significant characteristics of *moral witnesses*, affirming *inclusive*, universally humanistic perspectives in contrast to the *exclusive* equation of the personal and communal/vernacular principles. This serves the purpose of finding an escape from historical circularity, which turns the recurrence of war and the trauma it causes into memory baggage, which simultaneously becomes an identity burden.

It should be said that this understanding does not imply a neglect of national or cultural identities, but rather their much-needed *re-contextualization* from a subjectively emancipated and symbolically shaped perspective, because

Collective cultural identity refers not to uniformity of elements over generations but to a sense of continuity on the part of successive generations [...] Changes in cultural identities therefore refer to the degree to which traumatic developments disturb the basic patterning of the cultural elements that make up the sense of continuity, shared memories and notions of collective destiny of given cultural units of population. (Smith 1991: 25)

It is a common view in modern anthropological and sociological theories that “the construction of an individual’s identity is realized through the relationship of affiliation or rejection that they establish with their

groups of belonging,” and that “within all groups [...] there is a strong tension between the desire for complete belonging and independence” (Ruano-Borbolan 2009: 10). Both the theoretical and empirical research of our time shows that under the given circumstances, “to avoid citizenship and national identity is extremely difficult – so difficult, in fact, that in the contemporary world, to be without nationality is to be perceived as almost without identity” (Bloom 1990: 74).

The contemporary Serbian novel offers intriguing examples of testing of identity persistence in light of the discursively expressed qualities of *moral witnesses* amidst the turmoil of new-old traumatic experiences that encompass both individuals and whole groups. In trying to understand themselves amid conflict and the breakdown of values, ethically sensitive actors, and often also the narrators of contemporary novels, simultaneously articulate and reevaluate their own identity dilemmas. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that these actors and/or narrators are most often characterized as young protagonists who are, directly or indirectly, shaped by wartime reality, serving as the representative actors (characters) of a generation, era or region.

Accordingly, the narrator and main protagonist of the novel *In the Hold* [*U potpalublju*] (1994) by Vladimir Arsenijević belongs to a generation that still practices youthful manners, simultaneously expressing an aversion towards the rituals of their fathers and their generations. From the very beginning, he is aware of his formative incompleteness, and therefore, the narrative about the reflexes of war and social erosion has a parodical self-ironic undertone with the subtitle “Soap Opera”. “Anyway, there’s no punishment, or reward either. [...] [M]an settles for one or the other of the two eternal kingdoms, since he is the bearer of his own Good or Evil” (Arsenijević 1994: 23, trans. Celia Hawkesworth), observes he as the main protagonist and a secular child of his time, revolted by the dogmatic worldview, which fits into the outdated belief that “The essence of our whole predilection is established in us, despite us, before we are born. Choice does not actually exist” (Arsenijević 1994: 24, trans. Celia Hawkesworth).

Although the protagonist-narrator knows that he is speaking from “that small height that is the privilege of the storyteller,” that he is informationally privileged, at the end of his story he arrives at a problematic, symbolically ambivalent realization: “Something swung above us, some

kind of finger no doubt [...] Perhaps we were in the hold, perhaps we would never get out of it" (Arsenijević 1994: 98, trans. Celia Hawkesworth). Between these boundary moments lies a personally profiled chronicle of muffled urban echoes of the first autumn of the Yugoslav war, accompanied by news of deaths of acquaintances, and the phantasms of all-encompassing trauma that current reality is morphing into:

In the glare of a sudden and all-pervasive vision [...] I caught sight of *all of us* [emph. T.B.], running, while the ground beneath our feet was breaking up and opening with a terrible cracking sound, and out of those depths came *the unbearable stench of the centuries, which, in our inertia, we had failed to use in a dignified way* [emph. T.B.] [...] into the depths of that well of flesh. There were many of them (Arsenijević 1994: 54, Celia Hawkesworth).

Oscillating between personal experience and collective memory, this somber, almost apocalyptic vision is an expression of stepping out of the circular repetition of history while simultaneously embodying the ethical co-responsibility for its dire consequences, regardless of the will or actions of the narrator. Although imaginary, this vision lacks empirical, but possesses cultural-testimonial validity as an expression of a generationally symbolic understanding of the general collapse within the vortex of war and the feeling of claustrophobic captivity in the inescapable "hold", from which the (non)existent community cannot perceive the direction in which they are "sailing".

This symbolism is likely referenced in one fragmentedly structured episode in *And Then the Mild Days Are Gone* [*Blagi dani zatim prođu*] by Vule Žurić, in which a hospital during a war resembles an abandoned and stifling hold of a ship ("He sluggishly descended into the hold, from where he must go ashore" (Žurić 2001: 98). The novel is imbued with a *breath-taking* generational experience of collective trauma that brings into question the understanding of personal and/or collective identity as a compact and enduring category. Narratively testifying to the extent of trauma—through the functional alteration of first- and third-person narration as an expression of the fluctuating personal and impersonal-alienating identity experience—the main protagonist of the novel undergoes a journey from war-torn Sarajevo to Belgrade and Pančevo under NATO bombs, concluding his account of broken and syncopated lives across various locations

in the former state, symbolically, “in the darkness that, like a shroud, hides the endless circle” (Žurić 2001: 149). This can be viewed as parodical allusion to the iconically recognizable ending of Miloš Crnjanski’s epic novel *Migrations* [*Seobe*], with its portrayal of the historically circular fate of a nation and its permanently “displaced people.”

The rationally employed narrative syncopation, often brought to the edge of ellipticity, characterizes another novel, *The Cannon was Red Hot* [*Top je bio vreo*] (2008) by Vladimir Kecmanović, which tells the story of wartime Sarajevo, this time in its entirety. The choice of an infantile narrator who cannot understand much but can feel and experience opens a wide space, familiar in literature, for the reader’s suggestibility regarding child psychology. Simultaneously a witness and an unprotected victim—a victim in multiple ways due to the nature of his very existence, susceptible to the (over)power of adult actors—the young narrator of Serbian nationality, in this controversial work, becomes a sort of a mentally and psychologically pulsating focal point of the novel.

Exposed to the war actions of the invisible “friendlies” in besieged Sarajevo, and the everyday influence of the “other” neighbours, predominantly Muslims, whom he does not perceive as foreign and who enable his survival after the death of his parents, this seemingly “cold” spectator with limited insight is, in fact, a functionally “dramatized” narrator, capable of evoking empathy and almost imperceptibly suspending prejudice, thereby providing insight into that which is otherwise inaccessible. At the same time, through his intellectual and/or ideological neutrality, i.e. his limitations concerning the adult world, he acts as a sort of narrative “litmus test.” In that sense, his final words after exiting the siege, and before making, from an elevated position, the controversial move of pulling the trigger of a cannon pointed towards the city (“Below, there was a city. A city in which the walls have ears. In which death comes through the window. Through the wall. And through the door. And below, my parents’ grave lay” (Kecmanović 2008: 225), represent a sort of a testimonially “distorted” reflex of the ancestral “Herculean” sins that led to such an outcome.

“To those of us who learned our mother tongue during the war, often without a mother, and shuddered,” so reads the dedication by the author Vladimir Tabašević, and “All the family has are doors, on which from the beginning there knock diabolical powers that rejoice from the fact

that they will arrive soon,” such is the motto that he adopted from Félix Guattari’s study of Kafka, and placed it at the beginning of *The Delusion of Saint Sebastion* [*Zabluda Svetog Sebastijana*]. The novel’s testimonial “voice,” with third-person narration mixed in, also belongs to the child-adolescent perspective, and in that sense, brings an inevitable change in perspective from official cultural narratives and standard treatments of trauma-identity relations.

“People constantly say that they do not understand me, that I am a boy who never grew up, contemplating deeply, evil, unapologetically talkative” (Tabašević 2018: 12), observed retrospectively by the narrative witness, legitimizing his ambivalent position, while adding: “I am a child for moment [...] a bell whose insides are empty, and I ring with that emptiness [...] when you can say that the world around you is falling apart, that you are surrounded by utter chaos” (Tabašević 2018: 13). Hence, the testimonial quality of his narration about leaving war-torn Mostar, has a certain expressiveness to it, in contrast to the seemingly “cold,” restrained tone of the narrator in Kecmanović’s novel about the wartime trauma in Sarajevo. However, Tabašević’s narrator is somewhat akin to the narratively complementary “biphony” of Žurić’s narrative about leaving Sarajevo in order to confront trauma in the space of a new domicile.

“The year: nineteen ninety-dead, approximately, but exactly” (Tabašević 2018: 29), a linguistically weighty sentence, testifying to the lasting existential wound left by the experiences of the powerless and humiliation, because “in war, there is always a force pulling you back, as if [...] you are dragging your soul into it” (Tabašević 2018: 50). The painful experience of early loss of homeland and loved ones led, as the protagonist observes, to the fact that “from the wound at the very core of my soul, left by the fact that I never truly belonged anywhere” (Tabašević 2018: 120), grows a culturally subversive realization that “the fatherland is a world where our fathers are, fallen, underground, dead, who charged head-first somewhere, something, perished, while above, the living remain [...] to collect, with a song of success, a political rallying cry, to celebrate the deaths of others in the name of future deaths they pretend to prevent” (Tabašević 2018: 132–133).

Striking at the core of the circularity-evoking paradigm and its foundation in the *ethos of sacrifice* as a transhistorical mutual acknowledgement of those who have suffered, this critique reveals its susceptibility

to political and ideological manipulation hidden behind a ritualistically mediated pathos. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the understandings of identity emanating from the testimonially represented paradigm rests upon the *ethos of catharsis* as a contemporary-historical understanding, induced by an immediate emotional and physical pathos, yet open to change and a potential shift in cognition.

“In those who have killed, like in rooms no one knocks on, dampness builds up” (Cvijetić 2018: 7), notes the narrator at the beginning of *Schindler's Lift* [*Šindlerov lift*] (2018), a semi-autobiographical novel by Darko Cvijetić, which tests the sustainability of identity templates and their existential vectors, through the wartime fates of residents of the “Red Skyscraper” in the Bosnian town of Prijedor, regardless of which warring side they belong to, and through the depiction of suffering and villainy. A confession by a character from the other Cvijetić’s novel *Why are you sleeping on the floor* [*Što na podu spavaš*] (2020), testimonially represents the ethical dilemmas of all-encompassing traumatic experiences that, in war, do not spare neither the perpetrators nor victims: “Brother, I have killed; because they were killing children. A granny for a boy. Let the one above add up all that flesh and age” (Cvijetić 2020: 25).

Cvijetić’s novels perhaps represent the most detailed catalogue of war crimes in literature from all across the former Yugoslavia. As in some previously analyzed works, in these creations the multiperspectivity of novelistic testimonies, or rather authorially stylized life stories of numerous characters—combined with the almost cinematic “framing” of situations and the rarely seen interplay of lyrical and ironic-sarcastic tones—are one of the most important tools for establishing narrative dynamism and literary suggestiveness. At the same time, the narrative is not devoid of criticism, which casts a light of political heterogeneity of the post-war period on the ideological rigidity of the past. “There are no more workers,” thus testifies the authorial “voice” in *Schindler's Lift* about the consequences of war, “there are only Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, and others. There are no workers. The workers have sunk into the nation and remain, with lungs full of water, at the bottom” (Cvijetić 2018: 37).

Overall, in Cvijetić’s novels, differently toned narratives told through fragments constitute the same confessions about destruction and the search for class, national, and personal identities amidst the complete disintegration of values. Consistent with the overall narrative disposition,

the reader is offered a series of small catharses that, alongside the horrors of suffering, present sobering testimonies about the traumatic experiences of both perpetrators and victims, as well as the possible cognitive response to destruction and vanishing. This response is fundamentally counter-ideological, both personal and transpersonal, but not communal in the sense of ethnic/national compactness, due to self-identification being placed in memory and a utopian space of a small urban enclave.

Thus, the imperative of viewing identity as a (pre)given and of unyielding permanence, under the waves of wartime reality, transforms, in generationally emancipated literature, into a defense of the identity utopia. "How many years had gone by since then? [...] People died every day. [...] Whole lives were terminated while she and I weren't talking (Bastašić 2018: 24, trans. Bastašić), says the narrator of Lana Bastašić's novel *Catch the Rabbit* [*Uhvati zeca*], awakened by the voice of her Muslim friend from the past. The friend invites her to tread the path of the years lost to war, in search for a foundation in life, scattered between a lost Bosnian homeland, Dublin, and Vienna as an accidental discovery along the course of the search.

This female *on the road* narrative, which ultimately evolves into a paradoxical search for the irretrievable, is even more intangible and illusory than what is exemplarily portrayed by Cvijetić's "Red Skyscraper," because it is not located in space but in time, as a restorative memory of a friendship, a platonic love, and many other utopian moments that resist the entropy of the present. "There's no finish line in Bosnia, all roads seem to be equally languid and pointless [...] Driving through Bosnia requires a different dimension: a twisted, cosmic wormhole that doesn't take you to a real, external goal, but into the gloomy, barely traversable depths of your own being" (Bastašić 2018: 73–74, trans. Bastašić), the narrator observed, highlighting the self-evident symbolism of the novelistic journey.

The journey is accompanied by the muffled maturation of people's nature in wartime, changes in life views and the manners of the narrator's close ones, changes of names and surnames under the pressure of new and ominous circumstances, as well as the inexplicable disappearance of some of the bearers of those names. As a result, eventually it becomes clear to the reader that this is, in fact, a personal quest for identity, framed within the crisis and/or traumatic experiences of others, thus evolving

into a narrative of identity fracture of a society and a region that will never again be the same.

As in some previous examples, this demonstrates that novels in the register of a *testimonially-represented paradigm*, even when they suggest or imply more than they explicitly state, thanks to narrative inventions and their symbolic potential can reach the other, group/collective forms of literary representation of the identity problem, which dominate in the realm of the *circularity-evoking paradigm*. Of course, the same can also be true the other way around, in the cases in which parabolic-parallelistic tendencies don't prevail over immediate shaping vocation.

If we were to reflect on everything previously presented, we would come to the conclusion that the collective figuration of identity in literature requires a suggestively executed personal representation, just as its personal articulation mirrors and differentiates itself in the collective aspect of existence and self-understanding. The implicit and explicit quality of identity representation, or rather the epistemologically, culturally and historically productive outcome of the contemporary literary quest for related existential or epochally valid answers to this ever-relevant question(s), largely depends on which of these two expressive forms the narrative and thematic focus is placed.

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