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Transcultural Memory as Agency against Nationalistic Imaginary in Post-Yugoslav War Literature

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The Agency of War Literature: Social Imaginary, Performance and Mimesis

The concept of a *literary agency* is one that I have theorised by integrating the notions of agency, social imaginary, performance, and mimesis. Kögler, Pechriggl, and Winter (2019: 7) define **agency** as “the attempt to understand how exactly the socially situated self, which is placed within social structures of power and domination, can act creatively and reflexively”.¹ Winter (2019: 173) defines agency as the competence of human beings, “to shape their live under [...] conditions that they could not choose and that are shaped by relations of domination and power”.² Agency is located at the crossroad of unconscious “Agieren” (to act out) and deliberative, intentional “Handeln” (to act).³

To make the concept of agency fruitful for literary analysis I will draw upon the concept of the **social imaginary** as developed by Castoriadis in *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (1975). The social imaginary is *poiesis*, i.e. creation; it is the “continuous and (socio-historically and psychically) basically indeterminate creation of figures/forms/images, which underlie every speech about ‘something’. What we call ‘reality’ as well as ‘rationality’ are in fact based upon

1 „[...] der Versuch zu verstehen, wie genau das sozial situierte Selbst innerhalb sozialer Macht und Herrschaftsstrukturen platziert ist und dennoch kreativ agieren und reflexiv handeln kann“. – Unless indicated otherwise, all the English translations are my own, with assistance provided by deepl.com. – C. B.

2 „[...] wie Subjekte ihr Leben unter sozialen Bedingungen gestalten, sie selbst nicht wählen konnten und die durch Herrschafts- und Machtverhältnisse geprägt sind“.

3 These concepts are developed by Pechriggl (2018).

them” (Castoriadis 1990: 12⁴). The term “imaginary” does not mean fancied or invented. In fact, the social imaginary is all the imagining, visualizing, telling, and doing of a society, which embodies the answers to basic questions such as “Who are we, as a community?”, “What do we want?”, “What do we lack?” (ibid.: 252). One of the examples Castoriadis uses to illustrate the powerful and far-reaching impact of the imaginary is that of nation and nationalism:

The nation fulfils the [...] task of identification by referring to a ‘common history’ – a reference is imaginary in three senses, because firstly this history belongs to the past, secondly the commonalities do not extend very far, and finally what is known of this past and serves as a carrier of community-building identifications in the consciousness of the people is largely mythical. However, two world wars and the persistence of nationalism have proved that this imaginary of the nation is more enduring than any reality.

(Castoriadis 1990: 254–255)

The concept of the “social imaginary” can be applied to the domain of literature as such: as with other cultural products and artistic forms, literature is also an actualisation of the human capacity to intervene upon and transform the social imaginary existing to a certain time within a certain social context. This is even more so as literature, as a creative process, eludes a mere rationalising representation of what exists and of what is planned. The process of writing, reading, and interpreting literature can therefore be considered a form of transformative intervention on the existing imaginary – a form of agency.

Mondzain’s notion of *performance* is useful to illustrate this process of transforming the imaginary. In her lecture *De l’acte guerrier à la performance de l’acteur* (2014) on war-related ritual performances, Mondzain starts from the semantic-etymological root of the word and uses the French verb “per-former” with the meaning of “to form, to shape”. War is essentially the destruction of the bodies of the enemies, i.e. it is the destruction of forms and shapes. A performance of war gives form to that which has no form (any longer), to war destruction itself. When applied to the domain of literature, this concept can be elucidated as such: the act of “performing”, i.e. of shaping war through literature results in the formation of narratives that extend beyond the scope of

4 Here and in the following, translated quotations are taken from the German edition.

destruction associated with warfare. By reflecting on the past event, literature has the capacity to elaborate narratives that can exert a substantial influence on the present or the future through creative reflection, even without explicitly sketching out ideas about a possible future in their works or arguing them conceptually.

The literary transformation of the imaginary can affect the extra-literary world through *circular mimesis*. I propose this term, coined by Pechriggl in her reflections on ontology (2006: 61–63), to combine the prevailing direction of thinking about mimesis in the wake of Plato, Aristotle and Erich Auerbach (art imitates life) with Oscar Wilde's opposite perspective, as outlined in his 1891 essay "The Decay of Lying" (life imitates art).⁵ The idea is as follows: art imitates life, which in turn imitates art, and so on. Literature has the capacity to intervene in the social imaginary of war and the ideology fuelling a particular war, thus displaying agency. In this way, it participates in the social and cultural interpretation of war, which in turn determines a community's political and social development after a war.⁶ The empirical effect of literature is to be investigated, for instance, by means of literary sociology. In my study, I analyse the agency potential of literature.

Post-Yugoslav War Literature's Transcultural Memory as Agency against Nationalism

As I was anticipating above, Post-Yugoslav war literature does not only represent warfare, but it also investigates the nationalistic ideology that underlies the Yugoslav wars of the 1990's. The nationalist imaginary is based on an irrational promise of salvation through totalitarian unity thinking, which means the standardisation and subordination of individuals and groups to a national collective that is imagined as uniform. This entails an extremely reduced economy of thought and affect, which can be summarised in the binarism friend vs. foe, us vs. the others.⁷ A foundational principle of nationalism is also the concept of a mono-national past, which is commonly interpreted as the 'golden

5 This concept has been further developed for literary studies by Enver Kazaz (2012: 97).

6 See on this issue for instance Höpken 2007, Vlasisavljević 2007, Demiragić 2015, Wachtel 1998.

7 In my habilitation thesis, I provide a comprehensive analysis of the nationalist imaginary (see Beretta 2020).

age' of a nation. This perspective is often juxtaposed with the negative interpretation of a multinational or multicultural past as a period characterised by unredeemable conflicts, pervasive discrimination, and injustice. The central proposition of this extended abstract I would put forth is: some texts of Post-Yugoslav war literature display literary agency by shaping artistically and thus conceptualizing a multicultural, hybrid or transcultural past thus making a social imaginary thinkable that is not a nationalist one.

One text of Post-Yugoslav war literature that shapes memory in a manner that transcends aggressive nationalism is Dževad Karahasan's story "Pisma iz 1993. godine" ("Letters from the Year 1993") from the narrative cycle *Izvjestaji iz tamnog vilajeta* (2007; *Reports from The Dark World*). Though it appears to favour a multicultural concept of distinct differences rather than a transcultural, hybrid concept, the text is a plea for diversity. Karahasan's story is an explicit reply to Ivo Andrić's *Pismo iz 1920. godine* (1946; *Letter from the Year 1920*) and is characterised by a complex plot, which is based on a series of letters written by different characters across time periods. In Andrić's text, which was largely instrumentalised during the 1990s, the protagonist Max Löwenfeld leaves Sarajevo in the aftermath of World War I, driven by his profound aversion to the prevailing attitude of uncritical insistence on religious difference among the city's four religious groups (Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Jews and Muslims). In a letter, the protagonist repeatedly refers to this attitude as "hatred".

In contrast, in Karahasan's story, three characters return or go on purpose to Sarajevo, even during the siege of the town in the 1990s. What is even more crucial: while Andrić's Max Löwenfeld draws upon the central episode of a sleepless night in Sarajevo, where the religious groups make themselves audible by different sounds,⁸ to document the alleged animosity among religious groups in Bosnia, Karahasan's Max Löwenfeld later references this episode in an affirmative manner as a celebration of diversity. Furthermore, the text contextualises the siege of Sarajevo within the broader context of European history, encompassing not only the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, but also World War I, World War II and the Holocaust, the Spanish Civil War, and the Algerian War. This perspective dispels the widespread, balkanising notion that bloody

8 The Jews are explicitly mentioned by the letter's author, an atheist Jew, in a somewhat ironic manner as the religious group that does not make itself audible.

(nationalist and genocidal) wars are a distinctive feature of the Balkans. By means of intertextuality, intertwined storylines and multiperspectivity, Karahasan's text displays a *multicultural* approach to Bosnia that makes the case for cultural and religious diversity.

A text which conceptualizes *transcultural* memory is Alma Lazarevska's *U znaku ruže* (1996; *The Sign of the Rose*). This poeticized century novel sui generis is extraordinary in its capacity to address numerous issues in an exceedingly dense form. The 141-page text encompasses the history of a century, from the Austro-Hungarian period to the Weimar Republic and the siege of Sarajevo in the 1990's, as well as the geography of Central and South-Eastern Europe, with Mostar, Prague, Berlin, Belgrade, and Sarajevo serving as its geographical coordinates. The narrative is intricately woven, incorporating a range of themes and motifs, including a re-examination of seminal moments in the life of the social revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, alongside fictional characters that are all connected to her. The book explores both the phenomenon of revolution and its subsequent repression, evoking historical instances such as the Spartacus uprising in Berlin during 1919 and the Prague Spring of 1968. Finally, it delves into periods characterised by repression and darkness, such as the period leading up to the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990's and the siege of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1995.

In the context of this paper, the following point is of specific relevance: Lazarevska's postmodern novel positions the siege of Sarajevo within the broader geographical area of *Mitteleuropa*, thereby eluding a narration through the prism of its supposedly distinct national histories. The region is instead conceptualised as a highly interconnected geographical, cultural, and historical entity that is characterised by past periods of repression and revolution that exhibit distinct characteristics yet evince structural parallels. The concept of "transculturality", as proposed by Welsch (2020), can be combined with the concept of "cultural memory" by Assmann (1992) to describe the form of memory performed by Lazarevska's novel as *transcultural memory*. Transculturality conceptualises the borders of cultures as permeable, dynamic, and open and underscores the significance of connections across and through borders rather than accentuating divisions (Welsch 2020). I propose the term "transcultural memory" to denote a form of memory that transcends artificial national and allegedly cultural borders and encompasses individual and collective historical interconnectedness within a broader region. Thus, Laza-

revska intervenes in the social imaginary of the siege of Sarajevo, liberating it from narrow ethnonational signifiers.

There are other literary texts of Post-Yugoslav war literature that shape various degrees and forms of transcultural memory. Lejla Kalamujić's short story "Dobri, loši i Kafka" ("The good, the bad, and Kafka") from the narrative cycle *Zovite me Esteban* (2015; *Call me Esteban*) draws on Central European cultural memory and chiasmatic thinking⁹ as an antidote to nationalist binarism, the denial of national diversity and the persecution of the national other. Maša Kolanović's novel *Sloboština Barbie* (2008; *Barbie Underground*) on the Croatian war is, among other things, an archive of Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav cultural heritage and pop-culture, documenting the latter's connection to Western, especially American (pop) culture.¹⁰ Slavenka Drakulić's novel *Kao da me nema* (1999; *As If I Were Not There*) can be mentioned here, too; by using quotations from central texts of "Lagerliteratur" of the twentieth century, from Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1947; *This Is a Man*), Eva Grlić's *Sjećanja* (1997; *Memories*) and Varlam Šalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy* (1978; *Tales from Kolyma*) as epigraphs, the novel expands the cultural memory of "Lager-literature" on the issue of the systematic mass rape of women in war, which has been generally neglected before.¹¹ Dubravka Ugrešić's *Ministarstvo boli* (2004; *The Ministry of Pain*) is a comprehensive archive of Yugoslav memory that also challenges narrow nationalistic narrations.

It is observable that the examined corpus of Post-Yugoslav war literature exhibits a range of approaches to cultural memory, from a multicultural to a transcultural orientation. A salient feature that these texts have in common is that they challenge the nationalistic imaginary by performing affirmatively counter-nationalist cultures of remembrance, either as an addition of rather distinct cultures (Karahasan) or as a highly interconnected cultural heritage (Lazarevska, Kalamujić, Kolanović, Drakulić and Ugrešić). It is perhaps somewhat coincidental that this extended abstract proposes only female authors with a transcultural approach, but it would be worthwhile to investigate this further in the future.

9 In my habilitation thesis, I have conducted a comprehensive analysis of the chiasmatic aspect of Kalamujić's text, see Beretta 2020.

10 See also Beretta 2013a.

11 See also Beretta 2013b.

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