Andrea Lešić

Constructions of Hope and Hopelessness:

War and Traumatic Memories in Contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian Literature and Culture

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS: WAR AND TRAUMATIC MEMORIES IN CONTEMPORARY BOSNIAN-HERZEGOVINIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Izdavač

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(An Essay)

Sarajevo, 2024.

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Foreword

> NEŠTO O PAMĆENJU UOPŠTE: Ljudsko pamćenje. Najveća kurva je ljudsko pamćenje. Moja sjećanja nestaju. To je onaj podmukli proces koji će našu tragediju reducirati do granica podnošljivog, iako svi znamo da je bilo nepodnošljivo.
>
> Cio rat, sve ono što smo prošli, zgusnulo se u par slika: malo granata, malo gladi, malo izložbi, malo reda za vodu, malo masakra i to je sve.[1]
>
> Kebo 2000: 132

I never wanted to write this book.
I have been thinking and writing and teaching about traumatic memories, artistic representation of trauma, the importance and difficulty of remembering complex pasts, and the problem of the authenticity and reliability of traumatic memories as represented in literary texts for nearly a quarter of a century. In that time, I, along with most of my colleagues, watched contemporary Bosnian films and plays, read fiction and poetry, talked to students and friends and fellow academics, and a sense of growing unease seemed to start permeating the entire project. What started as an investigation into the fractured identities and life stories in the context of the post-Yugoslav, post-war world as portrayed in literature and culture of contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, gradually became an increasingly bewildered inventory of the ever-growing proliferation of narratives about the war, along with a frustrating sense that nothing substantially new or liberating or healing was being accomplished in this collective meditation on

[1] "A NOTE ABOUT MEMORY IN GENERAL: Human memory. Human memory is the greatest whore there is. My memories are disappearing. It is that insidious process which will reduce our tragedy to the limits of the bearable, even though we all know that it was unbearable.

The whole war, all we went through, condensed into a few images: some mortar shells, some hunger, a few exhibitions, some queues for water, a bit of a massacre, and that is all."

historical suffering. Our contemporary literature and culture are obsessed with the war, but they do not seem to offer any noticeably new ways of framing it, nor do they seem to offer any useful pathways out of the frame of mind or political ideologies that had led to it. Instead, they provide easily recognisable cognitive structures that allow the never-healed individuals within our traumatised communities to pour their individual traumatic experiences into a clichéd vessel, triggering an emotional response which is a testament to a pent-up and continually thwarted desire for new meanings. And art, and even good art, seems to narrow itself down to a set of such triggers, playing on the edges of a hopeless, futureless void, and not really daring to look elsewhere.

So then I went back to my disreputable literary loves, fantasy and science fictions, to romances and fairy-tales and dystopias, and I rediscovered for myself that even the proper, real, full-blown end of the world can be represented with intellectual vigour and artistic passion that leaves us ready to rethink the world as we find it.[2] So can we not do that? Do we really have to think within the framing of our depressing political reality and its horrific and constantly re-awoken past in order to make sure that we understand what is possible and what is not?

And so I decided to cut my losses on the traumatic memories and war literature project, by wrapping up my existing thoughts, and by narrowing down my corpus to the texts whose analysis can lead me to some interesting or provocative broader points. This, as you can probably already tell from the page count, is not a *magnum opus* on contemporary Bosnian and Herzegovinian literature. This is a bewildered and frustrated little book that says only what I feel has not been said enough until now, while using several different theoretical frameworks from which it tries to illuminate what seems to be going on in individual examples. And it is written in English, the language in which flippancy comes to me with greater ease, as a useful mental counterbalance to the profound sadness in which this whole topic is saturated.

Also, the title is somewhat misleading: the writers discussed in this book are mostly writing about the war from the perspective of the besieged Sarajevo, and almost exclusively from a civilian, and non-nationalist, point of view. The only novel not about Sarajevo is Selvedin Avdić's *Sedam strahova*, and the only one that is about Sarajevo but not about the siege in

[2] Feminist science fiction dealing with the nuclear holocaust is what really gets me fired up intellectually these days; a paper on this topic is slowly being plotted.

Damir Ovčina's *Kad sam bio hodža*. They are all about family relations, and none of them are about combat. Therefore, there are immense worlds of historical experience that are not included in this book. As Ozren Kebo pointed out in *Sarajevo za početnike*, there are enormous differences in the civilian experience of the war just between Sarajevo and Mostar (Kebo 2000: 36–37), and this study reflects none of that, and none of the diversity of the war experience in general. So I am not really writing about Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole, or the war as a whole; but since Sarajevo tends to see itself as both representative and central for our collective Bosnian sense of self, let that designation remain, even though I know fully well that it is too broad (and besides, I do want to discuss Avdić's novel, set in Zenica, as well).

Several of the chapters included in this book were published previously (the bibliography includes them all), and have now been revised and rethought in the context of the entire study. After some internal debate, I have decided to include the chapter on Milomir Kovačević's photographs, as well, as thinking about his work has provided me with insights that are not, at least for me, available elsewhere.

As for those who have helped me on this path, they are too many to mention all by name, so I shall just mention a few. Celia Hawkesworth was there at the very beginning of my journey into memory studies, and has always been a source of support, inspiration and warmth. Tanja Zimmerman and Jurij Murašov's DAAD project *Media and Memoria* (2010–2013) provided a crucial platform and community in which to test out ideas, and several chapters of this book have been initially conceived in the framework of that regional and multidisciplinary project. Ajla Demiragić and her study of women writers' counter-narratives of war was instrumental in formulating some of the frustrations this book is about; I have shamelessly leaned on her firm theoretical foundations and inspiring analysis. Enver Kazaz and Stijn Vervaet have always been excellent interlocutors and springboards for ideas, and I am grateful for their scholarly work and insights over the years. Adisa Bašić's creative journey provided me with flashes of clarity; the moment some ten years ago when she told me that I would like her new poetry collection (Bašić 2014) because it was mostly about love, and my realisation that it was mostly about concentration camps, was the point when I really started to be bothered by the fact that twenty years after the war had ended, the war was still ever-present (I am not sure I should be thanking her for that!) Namir Karahalilović has been a reliable source of literary and pop-cultural insights and references

for as long as I've known him; one of the most recent examples was the moment he alerted me to Zlatan Fazlić's song "1425 dana", with its meditation on solidified war trauma and desire for some fresh air; that song prompted me to stop looking for additional material and just finish this project. My father's own two novels, *Sarajevski tabloid* and *Knjiga o Tari*, and the journey between them, have provided me with an alternative model of healing after immense suffering; they are, however, too personal for me to be able to write about them here.

To all the students and colleagues, conference organisers and participants, as well as to the patient listeners of my rants (Stacy Mattingly in particular, in the final stages of writing this up), I owe my gratitude. And to my mother as well, for her theatre work and merriment, as well for her barely controlled impatience to see this work finally done.

And I dedicate this book to my daughter Lara, with deep gratitude for both her support and for her refusal to take me seriously; without that, this book would never have been finished.

Introduction
Memory, Narratology and the Problem of Authenticity: A Story of Pain

> One must be silent, if one can't give any help. No one, through his own lack of hope, should make the condition of the patient worse. For that reason, all my scribbling is to be destroyed. I am no light. I have merely lost my way among my own thorns. I'm a dead end.
>
> Franz Kafka[3]

> […] distinctions that will follow in due course will depend upon some basic premises that had best be explicit – that narrative form is a way of seeing, transforming, and to some extent re-experiencing reality; that basic as it is, narrative is quite extraordinary in its construction of integral worlds; that when we back away from these worlds and think of them by contrast to the worlds of the lyric or the essay or the picture show we can see how vulnerable we are to the silent epistemological principles of our fictions.
>
> Toliver 1974: 4

In the beginning, authenticity was meant to be the central problem of my proposed application of the research on memory and narratives in the human and social sciences to the study of literary texts. What I had in mind was some kind of play on words to the effect that memories cannot be seen as reliably representative of the authentic, true past; that authentic memories are, by the force of the narrative logic that shapes them, always inaccurate; and that the past they hold is largely constructed by the remembering mind eager for meaning and coherence. My starting hypothesis was that, simply put, literary representation of memory had to be tolerant of inaccuracy and confabulation in order to capture the authenticity of what memory is.

[3] Quoted from Olney 1998: 334.

However, in the process of research and writing (and not even long after I had begun), my ideas decided to change direction from my initial course of investigation. The postmodern tolerance with which I had first proposed to treat the unreliable nature of memory, and the unreformed structuralist's glee at finding that narrative structures identified by the high narratologists of the 1960s (and, before them, by Propp) could well be the cause of that unreliability, were swept aside by the realisation that something else was at stake. And that, from what I could gather from my cursory survey of some of the vast research on memory and narratives of the last two or three decades, was trauma. The narrative constructions of memory appeared as crucial not just because they showed that we are storytelling apes who prefer the satisfaction of a well-crafted narrative to the mere truth, but because they showed that unity and coherence that narrative logic brings to autobiographical remembering are the main mechanisms for overcoming the unintelligibility of pain, suffering and trauma. In addition, what also became transparent was that culturally sanctioned scripts for life stories could be blamed for frequent failure of our life stories to overcome trauma effectively. When the cognitive drive for narrative coherence meets the seductiveness of cultural stereotype and narrative cliché, autobiographical narratives can become harmful, and potentially as distressing as the non-sense they were trying to replace.

So, the initial proposals of my research were these:

Firstly, briefly explore the significance of rules for narrative structuring in the construction or organisation of memories in relation to accuracy, reliability and authenticity of those memories.

Secondly, examine the effects of different types of narrative coherence in the strategies for dealing with pain, looking in particular at issues such as cultural prevalence of certain types of narratives, their capacity to process complexity, and their effect on the subject's ability to engage with the world in a satisfying and productive way.

All these issues were to be examined in relation to literary memory texts, although the latter concern (stories as a tool for a satisfying engagement with the world), as I predicted with depressing accuracy, would not be so visible. I thought then that the reason for this would be simple: as Tolstoy remarked (loosely paraphrased) there is not that much interesting to be said about happiness, whilst the world of suffering holds endless fascination. The real problem in the context of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian war and post-war literature and culture, as shall be explored in the chapters

that follow, turned out to be more specific, and a lot more troubling than a generalised tendency for fascination with pain.

Narrative Logic in Cognition and Memory

Let us start from where it all began with this literary theorist at the beginning of her fascination with memory studies: with narratives and their role in memory research.

A large part of what Martin Kreiswirth (1992, 2000) has called the 'narrativist turn' in the humanities and social sciences, lasting probably since the early 1980s, has been predicated on the concept of stories as a particular type of knowledge, or a mechanism for organising knowledge, a cognitive tool with its own rules and logic (Ricoeur 1984; Fireman and Flanagan 2003; Nash 1990; McAdams 1988; White 1996/1980). Of course, as Kreiswirth notes, the concept of narrative has long had an implicit cognitive aspect to it, coming "from the Sanskrit *gna* vie the Latin *gnarus*, signifiers associated with the passing on of knowledge by one who knows" (2000: 304). Moreover, the understanding of narratives which underlines the cognitive function is in some ways reminiscent of narratological theories in high structuralist days, which noted the all-pervasiveness of stories in all human cultures (Barthes 1993/1966; Lévi-Strauss 1958) and pointed out that even systems of ideas (such as Marxism) share the basic deep structure with, say, the fairy-tale (Greimas 1966). However, structuralist narratology's basic premise was that language, and sentence structure in particular, was the central, basic, original concept which needed to determine our understanding and study of narrative (Barthes 1993/1966; Genette 1972; Culler 1975; Hawkes 1977; Scholes 1974; Kreiswirth 2000). The narrativist turn reversed this proposition, and narrative became the crucial, illuminating concept, both in understanding some of the central problems of human cognition, as well as in understanding the origin of language (Bickerton 1990; Abbott 2000; Kreiswirth 2000).[4]

So what of memory, then? Both the theoretical implication and the findings of much of empirical research are that most of our memories, along with other higher mental processes (such as understanding and judgement), are structured according to the rules of story-building, both in our own internal processing of who we are and how our lives are going, and

[4] This is not to say that the suggestion that narrative may come before and not after language was not advanced in the structuralist hayday (see Todorov 1971: 128). Also, for a pre-1980 cognitive study of literary narratives, see Toliver 1974.

even more so whenever we talk of our memories to others. Even though memory itself does not take only narrative form (as the existence and importance of memories of vivid sensory images testifies to),[5] most recollection that acts as sense-making does seem to assume narrative form (see, for example: King 2000; Fireman and Flanagan 2003; Hardcastle 2003; Giddens 1991).

The form itself is perhaps not really a problem; as Lamarque (2004) argues, many of the theories that insist on the importance of narratives as a cognitive tool propose a rather minimal definition of what narrative is: as long as two events are linked in a causal chain, we have a story. This, he suggests, is rather unpromising as a premise on which to problematize human knowledge; instead, Lamarque's argument is that the problem starts when the concept of narrativity is collapsed together with the concepts of fictionality and invention, and divorced from intentionality and referentiality. I would agree with him on this, but would argue that there are good reasons as to why the collapse occurs so frequently in our critical discourse on memory, and that is because much memory research has shown that the collapse occurs not just in the mind of the theorists, but also in the minds of the reminiscing subject. And, as I shall argue later, it becomes hard to get too judgemental about this when we realise that the reminiscing subject in question is also a traumatised subject.

I shall illustrate my point through a quick review of the findings some oral historians and cultural anthropologists have reached, and link it to the concerns of literary studies through a brief analysis of Dubravka Ugrešić's and Miljenko Jergović's novels and essays that deal with the problem of memory.

The Problem with Memory

The underlying notion present in many of the approaches to cognition and memory from various disciplines for some time now has been what we might call the neo-Kantian assumption, which rests on the basic premise that the world only becomes intelligible through the mind's active engagement which transforms the chaos of raw experience into a structured,

[5] Rubin and Greenberg argue that "visual imagery system, at least as measured by its loss with a visual memory deficit, is necessary for autobiographical memory" (2003: 66). Nevertheless, they also argue that narrative "establishes a major form of organisation in autobiographical memory, providing temporal and goal structure. […] Inclusions and exclusions depend in part on the narrative structures used" (2003: 61).

meaningful shape (Toliver 1974: 9, 66; White 1996; Kreiswirth 2000: 299). At which point in the cognitive process this first starts happening[6] is beside the scope of this study; however, by the time we get to the level of memory, it becomes quite clear that the sense-making processes, particularly those which turn experience into a story, are already well under way.[7] Nevertheless, the extent to which this is seen to be the case varies within this broad assessment. Freeman (1998: 27–28), for example, disagrees with the view that "narrative, rather than being woven into the fabric of life itself, is better understood as an imposition upon it, a construction or fiction, an attempt to give form to what is essentially formless and, perhaps, meaningless". He argues instead that the concept of intelligible human reality can be reclaimed if we see it as always already a part of the subject's hermeneutic engagement with the world, not as something essentially meaningless outside of it which only later becomes significant through the subject's interpretation (Freeman 1998 and 2003; see also Hardcastle 2003).[8] In this, he might be said to be close to Ricoeur's (1984: 57) argument that "if, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules and norms",[9] except that Ricoeur places human behaviour's signification in the cultural domain, whereas Freeman retains it within the signifying power of the subject itself. I would also argue that the

[6] Psychologists, much like Kant, would argue that filtering and editing starts at the level of basic sense perceptions (see Reed 1972 for an overview of what happens when this starts getting wrong).

[7] Also, as Rubin and Greenberg's (2003) survey of literature on links between different types of brain damage and memory loss attests to, memory can be lost in many different ways, but narrative reasoning (ability to understand narratives, as well as to produce them) is much more difficult to damage (as well as being hard to locate in the brain).

[8] As Olney (1998: 20) shows, the hermeneutic model of memory could as old as the history of literature of remembrance, since St. Augustine's concepts of memory in *Confessions* include both an archeological model (memory as a store-room) and a weaving model, the latter being "processual, [bringing forth] ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self".

[9] These two views, the one which takes narrative to be an imposition on the chaos of raw experience and the one which sees it as actively shaping experince from the beginning, and the fairly subtle difference between them, can also be seen to belong to Kantian legacy, in that they reflect what Gardner (in his presentation of different interpretative tendencies in critical literature on Kant) identifies as problematic ambiguity in transcendental idealism, in that, according to some critics, it fails to prove that there is a world outside of the world of appearances, and making it less than convincing a refutation of Berkeleyan idealism than Kant would have liked or originally intended (Gardner 1999: 184–185, 194–195).

differences of opinion as to the extent of the narrative's intervention into the intelligibility and structuring of reality depend as well on the concept of "chaos" that underlies the argument. If "chaos" is initially defined as completely shapeless and unruly,[10] then, yes, the structuring intervention of narrative becomes quite substantial (we could refer to this as the radical postmodernist stance); if, however, "chaos" is understood in the sense used by the "chaos theory", which is as complexity that is difficult to predict, then narrative's role is restricted to editing out of the significant events and finding their significant causes. I would personally agree with the second notion; as Freeman's (2003) argument implies, we cannot really claim that the stories we tell ourselves about our lives are completely fictional if they contain crucial events such as births and deaths of loved ones, marriages and divorces, and decisions about schooling and jobs.[11] However, as we shall see later, very often at least some of these events are reshaped in memory to conform to certain patterns of both narrative coherence and cultural expectations, as well in order to help us handle pain that may be associated with them; and occasionally the event can be so traumatic that the mind cannot get a grip on it at all. But I shall return to those points later.

In addition to the distinction to be made between the different concepts of the relation between reality and stories we tell about it, there is a distinction to be made between the concept of narratives as a cognitive tool hardwired in the brain (Abbott 2000; Herman 2003a and 2003b) and the concept of narrativity as a largely culturally learned cognitive process (Nelson 1998 and 2003; King 2000: 5; Fireman and Flanagan 2003: 5; Emerson and Frosh 2004; Reynolds and Taylor 2005; Carlson 1988; Mattingly and Garro 2000). Even though I have no particular quarrel with the general usefulness of the first concept, which assumes that the narrative form is a kind of Gestalt for understanding events in time,[12] I find that the difficulties

[10] As in, for example, Peneff (1990: 36): "The mythical element in life stories is the pre-established frame-work within which individuals explain their personal history: the mental construct which, starting from the memory of individual facts which would otherwise appear incoherent and arbitrary, goes on to arrange and interpret them and so turn them into biographical events." Or, more directly, Toliver 1974: "Chaos is inimitable; one cannot even make a statement about it without violating its nature" (1974: 66). In addition, Toliver makes a direct link between this view and Neo-Kantianism (1974: 37–66).

[11] This conforms to Giddens' concept of the 'fateful moment' (Giddens 1991: 114).

[12] On Gestalt see Ash 1998, Lehar 2003 and Crossley 2003. For a different assessment of the usefulness of the naturalist 'narrative as tool for thinking' concept, see Kreiswirth 2000.

thrown up by narrative memory seem to be largely created by an interplay between culturally learned narrative models and trauma. I shall explain this shortly, but first need to turn to a brief survey of the memory research which explores the consequences of the connection between narrative and memory.

In those disciplines, such as historiography, developmental and cognitive psychology, psychobiography, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, which deal with and are reliant on the processes of memory and examine representations of past events, the narrativist turn has brought its own additional problematic. One particularly salient example is that of oral history, whose encounter with narrative mechanisms in the process of creation, recall and interpretation of memories of past events led to what is a thorough revision of the discipline's initial core commitments. The example of oral history shows how the phenomenon of narrated memories, as arguably the principal form of organising the past, radically problematizes any claims to authenticity that such memories might have. In addition to this, it also shows another underlying current in memory and narrative research in the social sciences: that of linking the coherence of narrated memory to healing in the broad sense of the term, its specific meaning ranging from actual recovery from an illness to psychological healing to restored historical justice. With the two issues connected, that of authenticity and that of healing, the problem of narrated memory grows, as we are faced with the question of whether the two should be perceived together or separately.

So how are we to tackle this particular problem? Postmodernism's answer has been to effectively dismiss the problem of authenticity as nonexistent, and to equate fiction and reality to the shared level of simulacra. In addition, structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodern dismantling of the notion of the subject and the self and the suspicion towards the notion of experience has precluded any possible interest in the suffering experienced by the self (on this, see Frie 2003). But such a solution does not really help us in interpreting literary texts which actively engage with the problem of authenticity of memories and examine the link between memory and trauma, the pain of facing both truth and lies.[13] Moreover, authenticity, regardless of what has been happening in literary theory, has remained an active concern in a broad range of social sciences, and I shall

[13] Not to mention that it is not really helpful overall, full stop. For a more subtly argued and scholarly version of this assessment, see Eagleton 1996 and 2004 (2003), and Norris 1990.

illustrate some of the possible implications in a brief overview of research findings in oral history and memory studies.

Oral historians, in particular, are interested in matters such as authenticity, concrete historical experience and life stories, which had been largely swept aside by postmodern literary and cultural theory. Moreover, if the saying that history is written by the victors and literature by the defeated is to be believed, oral history's ethical involvement and the subject matter place it together with literary memory texts on the same side of that divide: both speak for the defeated. Discussing the differences between traditional historical approaches and those of oral history, historian Paul Thompson wrote that if official historical records reflect "the standpoint of authority", often vindicating "the wisdom of the powers that be", then oral history "makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated" (Thompson 1988: 6).[14]

However, given the initial intention of oral history, its actual findings turned out to be somewhat different. Oral historians very soon realised that their informants' life stories were subject to processes not wholly dissimilar to that of official historical accounts. Whatever the different methodological and institutional permutations of the evolving relationship between history and memory (Samuel 1996, ix; Radstone 2000a) since the late 1980s, in discussions of both traditional and oral history, myth, self-justification and a desire for the story to make over-all sense are seen as extremely important factors in how the story of the past is constructed. So, for example, Raphael Samuel suggests that "[m]emory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force; […] it is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers – and […] it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather than being some kind of negative to it. […] Memory is historically conditioned, changing colour and shape according to the emergencies of the moment" (Samuel 1996: x). Furthermore, Feuchtwang, talking about the interpersonal transmission of memories, argues that it is enacted "situationally, and in genres ranging from those established in a family mythology to the standard repertoires of recording and transmitting events, remembering what to respect and what to deplore. However formulaic, each inscription varies what it re-inscribes" (Feuchtwang 2000: 65). This genre-bound and genre-dependent nature of

[14] The quote is from the first edition of 1978, and representative of the early intentions of oral historians.

the memory text (with the proviso that the situation of the telling shapes some of the outcome) is further highlighted by Radstone, who notes that studies of memory have "been marked by an acute awareness of memory's status as *representation*", making it necessary for oral historians to analyse "the emplotments, genres and tropes of particular memories, producing analyses that contest the notion that either history or memory can deliver 'truth', but foregrounding, rather, analytic methods that focus on how memory produces its representations of the past" (Radstone 2000b: 84–85).

The realisation of memory's status as representation, as genre-bound type of storytelling, even lead some memory researchers, such as Frigga Haug, to distrust the life-stories of their informants to the point where those stories were not even allowed to be told. Instead, short scenes and episodes would be prompted to surface and be written down as timed exercises, and would then be analysed as anonymous pieces of text with no integration into to the full life-story of the informants, neither in the mind of the researcher, nor (as the method tries to accomplish), in the minds of the subjects themselves. Haug explains this method with the following argument:

> [T]he question of experience implies that we are dealing with matters that are ideologically determined, with products that have been integrated into dominant structures; a process that has been endowed with meaning, smoothed over, free of contradictions and made liveable. It follows, therefore, that as a source of knowledge experiences are highly deceptive. They are themselves a product, a botched job, nothing 'authentic' or valid in themselves. On the other hand, there is no alternative reliable source of that production process that constitutes the historical self, identity, apart from the experiences of the individual. Experiences are both the quicksand on which we cannot build and the material with which we build. (Haug 2000: 156)

In their introduction to the volume tellingly entitled *The Myths We Live By*, Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel moved away from oral history as a pathway into the understanding of the historical experience of history's losers, to oral history as a study of mythical thought and its influence on life stories and the representation of experience (Samuel and Thompson 1990: 4–5). This also meant that oral historians found themselves sharing the field with folklorists and anthropologists:

> Any life story, written or oral, more or less dramatically, is in one sense a personal mythology, a self-justification. And all embody and illustrate character ideals […]. In oral narrative in particular we come closer to traditional

> popular mythology in the conveying of moral values through the recounting of events. […] We are continually hearing the same story – or recognizable local variants of it – told by different people in different parts of the country and referring to different points of time: stock incidents that might be better understood in relation to narrativity than to some empiricist notion of truth. (Samuel and Thompson 1990: 10)

If we also take into account Tonkin's argument for a narrativist approach to the study of both memory and history proper, which assumes that both are "representations of pastness", "chains of words, either spoken or written, ordered in patterns of discourse that represent events" (Tonkin 1990: 27), then what we are looking at is an extraordinary methodological turn. From a desire to grasp the authenticity of historical experience, oral historians moved to a narratological study of "representations of pastness" and of mythical thought, all within a space of a decade.

Stories of Destruction and Stories of Distortion

So what prompted this extraordinary change of direction? At the beginning, oral history was going to use life stories of history's minor players to attain a fuller picture of a historical era, and then it soon discovered that "life stories" are narrative constructs that have far more connection with the latter part of the term ("stories") than with the former ("life"). Partly, this is to do with the influence of narrative as temporal Gestalt, and there is a definitive buzz of scholarly satisfaction to be detected at this discovery. However, what is also an extremely important issue in nearly all of the oral history research is that it deals with subjects who are, as originally defined by that research ("the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated"), traumatised by their historical experience. I would argue that oral history, faced with so many first-person narratives of trauma, shifted from the desire to know more about the historical truth to the desire to understand how human beings can cope with the pain of it.[15] In the light of this, it is no particular surprise that the Samuel and Thompson volume of essays on myth in oral history included an interview with a family therapist, who, in relation to what he termed "disabling legends" that adversely affected

[15] As Loewenberg argues: "Social trauma is the crucial bridge to history. We are no longer speaking of singular cases or a unique psychogenesis. Our history as humans is the story of large-scale traumas of war disease and epidemics, famine, dislocation and migration, economic crises, droughts, and pestilence. Trauma is the theoretical link from individual to group, cohort, population, nation, the world" (1995: 159).

human relations made the explicit distinction that he in his work needed "to have a much more active relationship to these family stories than you would as an historian" (Byng-Hall 1990: 224).

The concept of a "disabling legend" is a crucial one for my purposes, and requires careful unpacking. Byng-Hall defines it through contrast with stories people tell at the end of therapy, which are "less moralizing, less rigid, less splitting into good and bad. [It becomes] a more real picture of people with both strengths and weaknesses. In a way, the legend becomes less mythical" (Byng-Hall 1990: 224). So what is required for overcoming trauma, it seems, is still a coherent story, but one which allows for more complexity in modelling the world of human relationships. This view concurs with that of Bernstein, who argues that "[t]herapy is […] the making of a generalized biography into a specific autobiographical tale" (Bernstein 1990: 56), which presupposes a willingness to create an interrelated whole not just of events in one's life, but also of one's goals, desires and values, as checked against the demands of the outside world (Bernstein 1990: 68).

So there are two issues here which are interrelated but can often come into conflict with each other: one is that we humans need coherence and meaning in our lives, and if our life story so far is disrupted through traumatic experiences, the self will seek to re-establish some sort of balance and find new stories to tell. According to some researchers, traumatic memories are potentially non-linguistic in nature (Scott 1996); as they elude understanding by being difficult to put into words, they can be overcome if words are made to come and the story gets to be told (Klein 2003; Kirmayer 2000; Haidt 2006). The mere process of telling a story of the past and creating coherence between one's life and one's self can be beneficial.

We can see this process in the work of Miljenko Jergović's essays in *Historijska čitanka* (and I shall return to this in more detail later in the study). Faced with the physical destruction of the place which provided the setting for their childhood memories, the subject in Jergović's memory essays battles against the fading of those memories by shaping them into stories, with the full knowledge that the stories may not represent the authentic past. Nevertheless, the stories preserve the endangered sense of self, and it is the hard battle for coherence and the preservation of whatever can be preserved of a disappearing world and the memories it created that matters here, not veracity (Jergović 2000: 5). The process of story-telling in Jergović is palliative: it does not restore the past, but it creates a seductive simulacrum of it which masks the pain of the loss.

On the other hand, sometimes, as Langer's (2003) research on Holocaust narratives shows, words fail (or are constantly under the threat of failing) and reconstruction of the functioning self becomes impossible; but this impossibility is the mark of a desperate, almost involuntary solidarity with the dead. This also finds its echo in Jergović, as the phenomenally, unbelievably detailed story of a childhood in the first part of his novel *Mama Leone* gives way to the disconnected stories of war and exile of the second part (which share none of the characters with the first part). Here, the doubt is cast about the palliative effectiveness of the childhood memory simulacrum, for the stories of the war and post-war present are those of desperate, broken and meaningless lives, suffering from the loss of the connection between past and present identities, between memories and present lives. The disconnectedness between memories and the present sense of self does not allow for the possibility of overcoming of trauma; it solidifies the past as an (admittedly, far from perfect) Golden Age, and fixes the present self in the identity of the one fallen from grace, surrounded by others suffering the same fate.

The second issue is that when we do manage to achieve narrative coherence in the face of historical trauma, we often reach for autobiographical scripts offered by our culture to provide us with the basic framework. This is what many of oral history's subjects would do: tell, perhaps for the first time as a coherent narrative, the tale of their own victimhood, disappointment and puzzlement at the injustices of history, shaped as easily recognisable myths and legends. This in itself should have been beneficial for many of them; however, as some of the more drastic examples offered by oral history might show, not all cultural scripts are beneficial, and some can be harmful if misapplied. The same objection, as I shall show in the chapters that follow, can be directed at some of the culturally significant literary texts as well.

At this point I shall give just one example, coming from oral history research: that of the good people of Vladimir in the Khubova, Ivankiev and Sharova's study of life stories post-Glasnost Russia. Khubova and her colleagues, having interviewed the same local inhabitants both before and after Glasnost about the notorious prison in their town, on the second, post-Glasnost, occasion found that their "their whole historical consciousness seemed to have changed". As they put it, "a good many of them – although fortunately others were more consistent and reliable – now included recollections of real personal experiences as well as 'memories' which they had clearly picked up from the media […]. Thus some, who previously had

apparently not known of the prison's existence, now spoke of themselves as victims of the repression" (Khubova, Ivankiev and Sharova 1992: 95). Although Khubova and her colleagues explained this by the inhabitants' desire to make sense of lives made incoherent after the late Soviet political changes (Khubova, Ivankiev and Sharova 1992: 95–96), it would be difficult to see what long-term beneficial results, both psychological and political, such imaginary victimhood might bring.[16] The researchers' remark that the stories came from the media, and were thus a part of the new cultural set of possible life scripts, is crucial. As others have shown regarding potentially harmful yet culturally sanctioned scripts for life stories,[17] not all coherence is good, and oversimplifying unity is often almost as hurtful as nonsense, as it provides a facile semantic framing that masks persistent inner conflict.

Dubravka Ugrešić's essays in *The Culture of Lies* provide us with the wealth of examples of this. Moreover, her novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, which shares many of the concerns of the essays, shows a strategy for disrupting the process of harmful cultural reshaping of the past. The narrating subject in the novel, faced with the political violence acted out by those whose personal lives assumed the shape of heroic narratives of victimhood and overcoming (such as the character of Doti), refuses to tell a coherent story at all. Much of the novel consists of disjointed fragments of memories and other people's stories about the past; the parts that do tell a story are often told either with a fantasy element to it which makes literal authenticity impossible (such as the angel episode), or are marked by an acute awareness that characters act out lies and fantasies (the con-man in the Lisbon episode). Rather than give in to the story-telling urge which might lead her astray, Ugrešić's non-narrator refuses to tell a story of her life, keeping the self fragmented and its memories disjointed in the desire to preserve their authenticity. The new culture of lies is not allowed to put its stamp of heroic coherence onto the text woven from memory fragments, a procedure which is similar to the technique practiced by Haug in her memory work. That both work with specifically female memories is a whole new issue; one I shall return to later.

[16] And if the state of present-day Russia holds any clues, then none.

[17] Wiersma 1988 on the "distorted language" and "broken symbols" of women's language about their careers, and Ochberg 1988 on stories told by career men who buy into the capitalist dream and sacrifice their personal lives to it; on life scripts see also Carlson 1988. Erich Fromm seems to have been something of a pioneer in this field of research (Burston 2003).

Conclusion, for Now: Coherence, Complexity and Posttraumatic Growth

In psychological literature, posttraumatic stress syndrome has been defined by the subject's inability to face future conflict and stress without panic and with the faith in its own ability to overcome adversity. In contrast, the fairly new concept of posttraumatic growth is defined by the subject's positive re-assessment of their own capabilities and the realisation that "I can get through this" (Haidt 2006: 135–149). We can perhaps link the two reactions to trauma to my two basic issues: that of the need for coherence and that of the possibility that culturally sanctioned autobiographical scripts can sometimes foreclose the process by providing deceptive explanations which disable authentic integration of the self.

Genre-bound, script-bound, and culturally determined on the one hand, and faced with horrible silences of historical and personal trauma on the other, memories can now be seen as fragile beyond compare, and not simply because our minds find satisfaction in narrative coherence. Even more fragile is the remembering subject, split as it is between the history that harms it and the culture that bandages the wounds without curing them, whilst needing sense and coherence and meaning to keep it sane.

The self needs coherence, and in peaceful times, in times of humdrum existence or times of ordinary low-grade happiness or stable low grade unhappiness, this coherence is easy to maintain, and the cultural models that support it, at least seemingly, fit well. In times of trauma and suffering, either personal or historical, not only is the subject's sense of self shaken, but often, as is the case in times of historical and cultural change, the cultural models do not fit any more, and the subject reacts to this either by misapplying them to their present situation, or having to break out of them to recreate a new sense of self. This radical departure from the easy comfort of the cultural script into the more authentic, better integrated because more complex, and constantly hermeneutically engaged sense of life and self is curiously similar to Viktor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie* (1990/1917), later reworked as "energy of delusion" (2007/1985), defined as the constantly evolving search for truth in life's movement. In the later work, Shklovsky spoke of "the usual paths, the paths of inevitability" on which "real people" get lost, and he said further:

> It is necessary to tear yourself away from home, from the anticipation of tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, and to fly away, for yourself, urged by some inner need, not as a bird, though, they fly through old routes, but only

> as a working man can fly away, someone who knows the rhythm of possibilities. (Shklovsky 2007: 64)

Shklovsky's view of literature as the vehicle of the search for meaning rests on his belief that literature and art are almost uniquely capable of liberating our thought from the shackles of stereotype and cliché, from the limits habitual thoughts impose upon our grasp of ourselves, of others and of the world we share.

I do not mean to imply that Kafka was right about his own writing in that paragraph with which I started this essay. The principle that literature should be free and should be our mode of finding freedom from cultural constrictions, should also apply to counteract the potential suggestion that literature *must* free us in the sense of *having to* make us better or happier or to help us overcome trauma. But what the example of literature shows is a model of finding authenticity and freedom, which we could try to replicate in our self-construction, and in the use to which we put our memories, if we are to grow from adversity and overcome historical trauma.

Or not. The study that follows aims to show how this process can turn sour, and how that sourness can be avoided.

Chapter 1: War and Post-War Literature, Doxa, Open Experience, and Closed Gestalt

> But the benefit of richness cannot hide a sense that the term "memory" is depreciated by surplus use, while memory studies lacks a clear focus and, perhaps, has become predictable. It has a number of critical articles on method and theory, but not a systematic evaluation of the field's problems, approaches, and objects of study. It often follows a familiar and routine formula, as yet another event, its memory, and appropriation is investigated. Memories are described, following the interpretative zeitgeist of the humanities, as "contested", "multiple", and "negotiated". It is correct, of course, but it also sounds trite by now.
>
> Confino 2010: 80

> We can thus say that events which happen *contrary to common opinion* – that is virtually the literal translation of *para ten doxan* – are particularly suited for tragedy.
>
> Eggs 2002: 397

The main question of this chapter would be: does a wartime literature, born out of an immediate war experience and expressive of such an experience, differ from a literature of a protracted post-war period, and if yes, in what manner? My hypothesis is that the Bosnian-Herzegovinian literary texts (although, to be fair, in order to narrow down an unwieldy corpus, I shall here focus on the texts about the siege of Sarajevo) which were written during the war or immediately afterwards were forced, through their immersion in the chaos of history, to grapple with ideological, political and narrative complexities of that traumatic experience. The cultural and ideological shaping of that experience in the post-war period which largely cemented wartime political divisions (mainly ethnic ones) in the state of a frozen ceasefire that is post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina presents, on the other hand, as I hope to show, different kinds of challenges and require a different set of cognitive and literary tools. Arguably, complexities of the

direct war experience have with time, and through cultural and ideological shaping, become reduced to a narrow set of simplified images, stereotypical utterances and clichéd collective narratives, creating a kind of trauma Gestalt, which owes more to the collective repertoire of formulaic stories of the war, and less to the authentic war (as well as post-war transition) experience. In that sense, if wartime literature aimed to wrest meaning out of meaninglessness (even if that meaning confirmed the meaninglessness), the post-war literature faces the challenge of an active struggle with an over-structured meaning of stereotype and cliché, even when all that can be confirmed is that stereotypes and clichés are all that is left as an echo of the authentic traumatic experience of historical change.

Hunger and after hunger

In the preface to *Sarajevski gastronauti* (*Sarajevo Gastronauts*), his book of comical essays about food that came to wartime Sarajevo in the parcels of humanitarian aid, Nenad Veličković tells the story of how, in the first month of the war, once the siege of Sarajevo was in place and food became scarce, he used to bring sorrel, dandelions and young nettles to his pregnant wife Tanja; until one day she said: "Why don't you just take me out to let me graze myself?"

The full paragraph reads as follows:

> Mladi bračni parovi nemaju naviku da gomilaju zalihe hrane. Nas je rat zatekao sa dva litra ulja, malo šećera i kafe, desetak boca alkohola (poklona za vjenčanje) i gomilom kesica najraznovrsnijih začina. Tanja je bila na pola puta kroz rizičnu trudnoću, i neveliku uštеđevinu počeli smo trošiti na mlijeko u prahu, i vitamine u tabletama. Hranu smo dobijali ispočetka od mojih roditelja i Slavice, potom se pojavio Jasa sa punom kesom onoga što je uspio sakriti od lopova, a onda je nestalo struje i proljeće je zamirisalo na prerano odmrznute šnicle.
>
> Polovinom maja imali smo samo brašno. Ja sam počeo brati ponegdje zakašnjeli maslačak i koprivu, i mladu lobodu. Dok Tanja jednog dana nije rekla: zašto gubiš vrijeme, zašto me ne izvedeš i pustiš da sama pasem. (Veličković 1998b: 5)[18]

[18] "Young married couples don't habitually stockpile food. When the war started, we had two litters of oil, some sugar and coffee, a dozen bottles of alcohol (wedding gifts) and a pile of packets of various spices. Tanja was half way into a risky pregnancy, and the little savings we had was now being spent on powdered milk and vitamin pills. At first we were getting food from my parents and Slavica, then Jasa appered with a bag full of stuff he

The book consists of essays which were originally published in magazine *Dani* from 1994 to 1996, therefore, during the wartime famine in the besieged city which served as its contextual background. Even though the anecdote with the grazing was, presumably, written afterwards, in preparation for the book version of the essays, it perfectly sets the tone of the essays themselves: light, humorous, and utterly divorced from the anguish which must have accompanied the hunger which inspired them and which they casually mention throughout. This lightness of touch is also present in the structure of the essays themselves. Each starts with an (invented, and mostly playfully and outrageously anachronistic, making light of the Bosnian patriotic investment in his figure) anecdote about the Bosnian medieval King Tvrtko involving one of the foodstuffs which came as wartime humanitarian aid. Each essay then continues with a mixture of stories about how that foodstuff was made use of and eaten during the war, about how its value was perceived both in the street markets and in the symbolic system of values for the inhabitants of wartime Sarajevo, as well as with stories of where that food originally comes from, and how it is produced and eaten elsewhere in the world. The essays in their chattiness and humour almost manage to conceal what a complex intermeshing of various themes and emotional responses they are: a fascinated lingering over food as an object of scarcity and desire, a cheerful recognition that most of that food would be inedible under normal circumstances, a desire to have a window onto the rest of the world (beyond the enclosure of the siege) via the food that came from outside, and a fantasy about future consumption of food in the peacetime to come; and, above all else, they are essays about famine.

Veličković's wartime text in its comical and playful treatment of hunger and food scarcity, some twenty years later finds its post-war response in a poem by Adisa Bašić:

Potrošačka groznica
kupujem previše preskupe hrane
nikad ništa ne bacam

managed to hide from thieves, and then electricity was gone and spring started smelling of prematurely defrosted steaks.
By mid-May all we had left was flour. I started picking what was left of late dandelions and young nettles, and sorrel. Until Tanja one day said: why are you wasting time, why don't you just take me out to let me graze myself." (Unfortunately, this preface was omitted from the 2018 Buybook edition of the book.)

stalno jedem bajate stvari
hranim njima, mrvu po mrvu
onu djevojčicu
koja krišom sluša
majčin šapat ocu:
brašna imamo za još možda
dva-tri dana

(Bašić 2014: 48) [19]

If Veličković's essays in *Gastronauti* are a playful meditation on food in wartime, Bašić's poem is a tightening of remembered hunger (and moreover: fear of hunger) into a trauma that still affects behaviour in a long since established peacetime. The hungry girlhood self of the past still needs to be fed; she never learned to eat with freedom and joy that Veličković's essays predicted for the peacetime future. What was a lived experience open to the possibility of a happy ending (in the sense that: one day there will be enough food, and we shall enjoy eating it) has turned into a fixed Gestalt of a perpetual possibility of famine. If the basic definition of Gestalt is that of the "dynamic, self-organising principle" of understanding and memory that can be "likened to the tendency of physical systems to approach maximum order, or equilibrium, with minimum expenditure of energy" (Ash 1995: 1), what seems to have happened in this case is a kind of traumatic cultural economy which finds fixation on past suffering less demanding than the effort of a leap of faith into the possibilities of a better future, or even of a better present, would be.

The relationship between the two texts, Veličković's essays about food and Bašić's poem about hunger, pretty much encapsulate the relationship I see between wartime and post-wartime literature, particularly when it comes to the narratives about the siege of Sarajevo.

At this point, before I move onto the discussion of the basic differences I see between the two, I need to clarify something I am going to leave purposefully ill-defined: the difference between war and post-war literary texts in terms of time periods. I do not think it is necessarily helpful to turn that distinction into a problem of periodisation of Bosnian-Herzegovinian

[19] "Consumer Fever"
"I buy too much pricy food / I never throw anything away / I keep eating mouldy stuff / I feed it, crumb by crumb / to that little girl / who furtively listens in / on her mother's whispers to her father: / We have flour maybe for another / two or three days"

literature, with year spans and generalised tendencies attached to each. Obviously, the war in Bosnian ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement (formally signed in Paris on the 14th of December 1995);[20] however, many of the texts written during the war were published a few years later, and the wartime frame of mind, deprivations, and visible signs of destruction did not suddenly disappear or become less visible because the fighting had stopped. Literary creation, understanding of the changing world, hope or lack thereof, are personal journeys for each individual author, and the more talented they are, the less inclined they are, I believe, to follow general trends of emotional attitude and understanding.[21] For each, the artistic shaping of the lived experience of war and its aftereffects comes at different points in time; and besides, the nature of trauma, as Freud recognised long ago,[22] is to return in all its vividness and affect us when we least expect it. Furthermore, even when viewed collectively, these processes take time and they do not necessarily suddenly flip from one stage to the next in a clearly perceptible way. But there are points when it is, I believe, possible to identify a convergence of institutional forces in the space of artistic creation that allow us to see how the fixed Gestalt of past trauma, shaped further by the emerging *doxa* of what the past meant, disables the possibility of imagining a different, and possibly happier, ending than what is offered by the present. I shall return to this later in this chapter in my discussion of the 2012 production of Almir Imširević's play *Kad bi ovo bio film...* (*If This Were a Film...*) for Sarajevo's National Theatre.

But first, a brief generalised discussion on the nature of war narratives.

Poetics of testimony and diversity of wartime narratives

Thanks to the theoretical and interpretative work of Enver Kazaz, the phrase "poetics of testimony" has remained in many ways one of the most influential framings of Bosnian-Herzegovian wartime literature (as well

[20] For more, see here: https://www.osce.org/bih/126173.

[21] I am grateful to Edin Radušić for his (innocently formulated, during an informal chat) historian's interest in this question of periodisation, which made me suddenly aware of my complete lack of interest in it. I am happy for a colleague to become enraged by my lack of scholarly rigour on this point, and I look forward to their beautifully delineated periodisation of war and post-war Bosnian art, literature and culture. I shall, however, leave that aside for now.

[22] Here I particularly have in mind his 1920 essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (Freud 2003).

as art in general). Kazaz himself summarises the main thrust of his argument as follows:

> Ratna književnost u tom pogledu, naspram nakazne fašističke ideologije, promovira golo ljudsko stajalište, onaj minimalistički pogled odozdo, vizuru ljudske supstance što trpi ratno nasilje i iz svoje užasne pozicije motri i dekonstruira hijerarhiju i brutalnu moć političkih institucija zasnovanih na sili i nasilju. (Kazaz 2008: 50)[23]

For him, an ethically engaged war literature necessarily removes the questions of heroism or of a greater military or political purpose from war narratives, bringing them "down" to the problems of everyday life (such as the challenges of obtaining food, organising home life, and redefining interpersonal relations). As he notes about Tvrtko Kulenović's 1994 novel *Istorija bolesti* (*A History of Present Illness*), war writing is "a document of horror":

> Njoj nisu potrebne nikakve fiktivne igre, ni društvena stvarnost kao građa na osnovu koje se razvija fiktivna priča. Književnost bilježi fragmente ratnog iskustva i bez bitnije izraženog fikcionaliziranja ulančava ih u književni tekst-dnevnik kao svjedočanstvo o povijesnom kaosu. (Kazaz 2008: 52)[24]

For Kazaz, this method of fragmentary textual testimony (which is present in some other significant wartime books, such as Semezdin Mehmedinović's *Sarajevo Blues*,[25] Ozren Kebo's *Sarajevo za početnike* (*Sarajevo for Beginners*), and even in Marko Vešović's polyphonic poetry collection *Poljska konjica* (*Polish Cavalry*)) opens up literary texts outwards, towards non-literary genres such as journalistic reportage or court testimony, and further out still towards the non-literary arts, such as photography, making it intensely intertextual and intermedial (Kazaz 2008: 52–53). For him, the *poetics of testimony* does not reduce the possibilities of literature, but broadens them, opening literary texts for possibilities of a wider immersion in non-literary artistic textures.

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[23] "War literature in this sense, set against a monstrous Fascist ideology, promotes purely human point of view, that minimalist view from below, the view of a human substance suffering the violence of war, as well as observing and deconstructing, from its horrifying position, hierarchy and brutal power of political institutions based on might and violence."

[24] "It has no need of fictional games, nor of social reality as material for developing fictional stories. Literature notes down fragments of war experience, and without any particularly noticeable fictionalization threads them into a literary text-diary as a testimony of the chaos of history."

[25] On this book, see Beganović 2009: 190–217, as well as Kazaz 2008: 66–68.

As persuasive and interesting this argument is, and as much as Kazaz's analysis takes into account a fairly wide range of literary texts about the war, it fails to notice something that also reflects the immediacy of the experience of the chaos of history: the vast range of literary devices, attitudes and genres, the sheer diversity of possibilities of thinking about the war.

This diversity is visible even in single books by single authors. Marko Vešović's aforementioned *Polish Cavalry*, for example, contains the darkly funny poem "Arif iz Bugojna" ("Arif from Bugojno"; Vešović 2004: 51), which satirises the relationship between military aims and private human grief from the position of a man who, almost giddy with joy because of a "historical moment" of victory, fails to understand how his news of dead relatives and burnt houses can be perceived as anything other than an insignificant detail of a wider historical narrative. Even though this poem stages the same relationship between the suffering of victims of war and the cruel logic of a military operation to which Kazaz draws attention in his analyses, the relationship between them is more complex here: Arif is "ours", the victory he celebrates is one in which "our guys demolished Ustashas", the broader news he brings are both to him and his listeners the good news of defeat of those who victimised others. And yet, for the people he talks to, private losses still take emotional precedence over collective victories. The poem is irresistibly funny because Arif's frustration over this is presented not as a monstrous lack of feeling for the suffering of his fellow human beings (or not just as that), but also as a human reaction to the defeat of those who victimised him as well; he was, as the poet tells, genuinely "infinitely happy" ("beskrajno srećan") that those who shelled and expelled and attacked him and his fellow Bosniaks were not doing it any more. An identification with a military operation is not always just a sign of an ideological blindness and surrender to the logic of military might, but an expression of a human desire to be protected from attack and delivered from suffering. Adding to the complexity, the poem leaves open the question of whether Arif himself was a participant in combat, emphasising his own victimhood: "Isprva mi se činilo da je pameću / pomjerio od granata i svega što ga je tamo zadesilo." ("At first I thought that he had gone / mad from the shelling and all that had happened to him there.") His lack of understanding for the losses of others comes not from a position of a hardened soldier, but from the position of a victim who finally reached a place of safety; as such, as absurd as it is, it calls for our own sympathy; and the comedic tone further heightens the complexity of the poem.

The rest of the collection contains a multitude of voices, each calling for a similarly complex emotional response, ranging from grief, to tenderness, to rage, and anything in between. The poems also often tell stories which are, just like the one about Arif, unpredictable and fall outside of a simple story of victimhood, not to mention outside of a simple story of a stable national identity and ideological position, or the simple story of heroism.

Vešović's poetry can be added, I would argue, to the canon of what Ajla Demiragić (whilst writing about Bosnian women writers), has termed war counter-narratives, the type of literature which, as she puts it:

> […] pružaju otpor vladajućim ideološkim i legitimirajućim diskursima rata. Riječ je o kontranarativima koji, s jedne strane, podrivaju i dovode u pitanje (meta)priče rata i epske (ratničke) diskurzivne matrice, dok, s druge strane, nude emancipatorna znanja o ratu koja mogu biti iskorištena u svrhu kreiranja politika nade u aktualnom trenutku. (Demiragić 2018: 48)[26]

Kazaz and Demiragić would agree that all properly anti-war literature (for that is, ultimately, what is the issue here) needs to question and subvert ideological and narrative structures that make war possible, which naturalise it and universalise it, which legitimise violence and aggression. Demiragić, starting from that common baseline, strengthens her demands, requiring such narratives to provide alternative possibilities for hope. And I would add that the possibility for that hope rests in maintaining the open-ended sense of the disarray of live historical experience in which all outcomes are still possible, and in which future is open and unfinished; in other words, the kind of novelistic experience Mikhail Bakhtin described when contrasting the novel against the epic (Bakhtin 1996: 3–40). All of the best books about the Bosnian war which were written during or just after the war, it seems to me, if they follow any pattern, follow the pattern of being unpredictable in the stories they tell and the emotional responses they describe and inspire; they are open and unruly in their search for knowledge and willingness to see the absurdities of war. Some of the ones I find most interesting will be discussed in the chapters that follow, but let me here just briefly mention one that I will not be returning to in this book, one that was written during the war, whose young author was killed

[26] "[…] resist ruling ideological and legitimizing discourses of war. We are talking about counter-narratives which, on the one hand, subvert and question (meta)stories about the war and epic (martial) discursive matrices, while, on the other hand, offering emancipatory knowledge about the war which can be used to create politics of hope in the present moment."

in its last year, and which completely departs from even those narratives analysed by Demiragić and Kazaz in their studies discussed above: Karim Zaimović and his short stories published under the title *Tajna džema od malina* (*The Secret of Raspberry Jam*).

Zaimović's short stories, broadcast on wartime *Radio Zid* in a weekly programme entitled "Joseph and his Brothers", are an exuberantly playful mixture of flamboyantly comical conspiracy theories, Borges's short stories, comic book characters, and science fiction (Semezdin Mehmedinović lists Philip K. Dick as a particular influence; Mehmedinović 2022: 203). They insert a hidden network of medieval tunnels in Sarajevo's topography, imagine a vampire broken out of a sealed chamber by a mortar shell, investigate fictitious Nazi experiments on rats in Sarajevo during World War II, and, overall, transform the city of Sarajevo into a magical place which is firmly embedded in world history as its central node, and which offers insight into humanity's deepest secrets. The eponymous story on the secret of raspberry jam rewrites the entire human history as a tale of a conflict between those who wish to free humanity's spirit through the magical jam of sacred raspberries and those who wish to deny mankind the full potential such jam provides. Quite apart from the fact that raspberries were not on the wartime menu Veličković wrote about in *Sarajevski gastronauti* (and so we could potentially read that story as yet another starvation-inspired love letter to a beloved and unobtainable fruit – unless, of course, Zaimović had access to raspberry bushes in somebody's garden), the sheer flight of fancy needed to see the war he witnessed himself as a continuation of such a whimsical and patently silly eternal struggle over raspberries shows the possibilities of what a truly cognitively liberated wartime writer could accomplish. As he puts it in the penultimate two paragraphs of the story:

> Boj se još uvijek bije. Svuda oko nas su malinaši, antimalinaši, jagodičari, moderni sljedbenici templara, rozenkrojcera, pankera, nacista, komunista, rojalista, demokrata, ljevičara, desničara, socijalista, fašista, hegemonista, altruista, poklonici modernog baleta ili ikebane, agenti tajnih službi, humanitarni radnici, vatrogasci, fakiri, fakini i mnogi, mnogi drugi. Svi oni, a i mi s njima samo smo pijuni u drevnoj igri spravljanja džema od malina, koja datira još iz praskozorja ljudskog postanka.
>
> Stoga, budite na oprezu. Ne vjerujte nikom, pa makar vas on htio počastiti baš ničim drugim do džemom od malina. (Zaimović 2022: 117)[27]

[27] "The battle continues. All around us are raspberrians, antiraspberrians, strawberrians, contemporary followers of the Templars, Rosicrucians, punkers, Nazis, communists,

This is so patently and hilariously silly and over the top, and its main effect (and, I suspect, purpose) is to completely invalidate any attempts at rationalising war and violence, as well as to make the lack of trust towards fellow human beings seem like an entirely ridiculous attitude. It says: sure, trust no one, everyone is just taking part in an eternal struggle to enslave you by means of a spiritually unsatisfactory raspberry jam. As parody conspiracy theories go, this one does a pretty good job of delegitimising conflict and mistrust; and, with that as a starting point, we can imagine a different present, and, potentially, one in which humane, playful and trusting souls might not feel despair.

Zaimović's stories are far from perfect; they were, after all, written by a very young man, and under abnormal circumstances. In some, silliness morphs into nonsense, and the pose of exceptional (Borgesian) erudition occasionally produces absurdity;[28] and not all of them would invite a second reading without the knowledge of the context in which they were created. But Zaimović's main impulse of creating urban fantasy stories set in a real city during a real war, his willingness to be open to the accusation of silliness and absurdity, his playful exaggeration of the themes of both human and supernatural evil, all ultimately serve to rob the wartime reality of its ontological solidity and inevitability. His stories take the real and rip it open, imaging a different world, full of hidden magic and potential for transformation. And the last thing we need to do to these stories is to canonise them, and bury that transformative potential in reverence and sadness for a lost writer. Perhaps we should take up his youthful, flamboyant, imperfect and popular genre-based challenge, and keep dismantling our concepts of the reality which is not really serving us all that well.

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royalists, democrats, leftists, conservatives, socialists, fascists, hegemonists, altruists, the admirers of modern ballet or of ikebana, secret service agents, humanitarian workers, firefighters, fakirs, rascals, and many, many others. All of them, together with us, are just pawns in the ancient game of the creation of raspberry jam, which dates from the dawn of human origin.

So, be vigilant. Trust no one, even if all they want to do is treat you to some raspberry jam."

[28] An account of inscriptions on an Ottoman map of Sarajevo's secret tunnels (on p. 128) produced some hilarity among some of my Oriental philologist colleagues when I asked them if the narrator's philological discussion of those inscriptions made sense.

Post-war Literature and the Institutionalization of Suffering as Emptiness

So if the wartime narratives offered both testimonies of the horrors of war from the viewpoint of its victims, as well as the playful and irreverent genre experiments which question not just the legitimacy of war violence, but also the baseline logic of the world which makes such violence possible, what has Bosnian literature and culture done with this complex legacy?

This part of the chapter proposes the following hypothesis: that the clichés and stereotypes of Bosnian testimonial war stories, sponsored by *doxa* (the common-sense, common knowledge, commonly held set of social beliefs which serves as the arbiter of verisimilitude) have grown to represent, on the plane of social symbolism, a kind of indefinitely postponed promise of cognitive payment, of knowledge and meaning, based on a continual reiteration of the need to remember the past and the compulsion to keep testifying to its horrors. The two examples I shall use to illustrate the fundamental emptiness of that promise are Haris Pašović's art installation *Sarajevo Red Line 11,541* and Almir Imširević's theatre play *Kad bi ovo bio film...* (*If This Were a Film...*), directed by Dino Mustafić for Sarajevo's National Theatre. Both were produced in the spring of 2012, marking the twentieth anniversary of the start of the siege of Sarajevo and of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and both represented what the highest cultural institutions in the city (if not the country) felt should be the most appropriate, moving and striking way to mark that grim anniversary.

Pašović's art installation,[29] which was placed on Sarajevo's central Tito's street on the 6th of April 2012 (marking at the same time the anniversary of the liberation of Sarajevo from Nazi occupation in World War II, the date which is used as the Day of the City of Sarajevo) consisted of 11,541 red plastic chairs, representing the official death toll during the 1992–1996 siege of Sarajevo, including 643 smaller chairs, representing dead children. The chairs were placed in symmetrical, neat rows facing the concert stage which was set up in front of the Eternal Flame at one end of the street; the idea was, in Pašović's own words, to stage a "concert dedicated to an audience of 11,541 killed persons" (Pašović 2012). The street (and most of the centre of Sarajevo) was closed off for traffic for the day; the chairs were placed on the morning of the 6th, and were initially heavily guarded, not allowing the passers-by any interaction with the installation, and severely

[29] For information and photographs, go to: http://eastwest.ba/sarajevo-red-line.

curtailing even pedestrian movement along the street, as it was not possible to cross it by walking between the chairs. They were phenomenally visually arresting, but also profoundly sterile and regimented, removing all individuality from those to whom they were dedicated, reducing them to a bloody number of, as Pašović put it, "silent heroes".

The strength of the concept and the monumental nature of it began to shift as the day progressed, however, as more and more people began to ignore the presence of security guards, and started to interact with the chairs, placing on them flowers, as well as personal items such as clothes and toys, thus filling the anonymous emptiness of each chair with the presence of individual memories for a specific lost person. It is to Pašović's credit that he realized the importance of what was going on, and his fellow Sarajevans' spontaneous interventions into the pure concept of the "Red Line" was as the day progressed incorporated into the installation itself, to the extent that the official photographs of the event include images of objects placed on the chairs and of the people interacting with them. What was meant to be a strongly conceptualized and cognitively streamlined artistic event, became a site of a mild popular rebellion which inserted individuality and personal stories into an abstract demand for collectivized remembrance. And at the end of that one specific day, a kind of compromise was reached: let the city have its big commemorative happening with a focus on symbolism and death tolls, but let us also remember our individual loved ones; let us start looking for a new balance between collective memorialization and individual healing.

Imširević's play seemed also to point to a similar contrast between the collective memory and institutionalised memorialisation on the one hand, and a private sense of frustration with the continual repetition of well-worn signifiers of collective trauma on the other. *Kad bi ovo bio film…* consciously plays with stereotypes of representation of war in Bosnian films, as well as with references to doxical narratives of war, and ends, I would argue, with an ambiguous surrender to cliché which points to a need for some new narratives and modes of feeling.

The play is intertextual in two basic meanings of that term; firstly, in the narrower sense given to it by Genette, as a "relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts", as "the actual presence of one text within another" (Genette's formulations, quoted in: Allen 2000: 101); and secondly, in the broader sense given to it originally by Julia Kristeva

when she coined the term,[30] describing every literary text as "woven out of numerous discourses and spun from already existent meaning" (Allen 2000: 67). The second (Kristevan) concept of intertextuality can be connected to the Barthesian (and, arguably, originally Aristotelian)[31] concept of *doxa*, which denotes a system of commonly held opinions which provides legitimation for the existing social reality. The weaving in of existing social beliefs into one artistic structure can result in a text which relies heavily on cliché, and I am going to show how this can be applied to Imširević's play.

However, I must first make it clear that I do not fully subscribe to the idea that *doxa* is always pernicious in its ability to project ready-made meanings onto the complexity of life. Even though literary theory, as Amossy points out, "as developed from the sixties on, has generally adopted and enhanced the idea of literary writing as a subversive practice twisting and violating doxa", the idea has nevertheless persisted that "what seems plausible and reasonable, what is considered true to life, is the foundation on which most literary works are built" (Amossy 2002: 468). Verisimilitude thus depends not on a direct connection between the literary text and the world outside it, but on the "common opinion" which sanctions plausibility, reasonableness and realism of literary texts; it depends on *doxa*. Amossy explains that the "unfavourable twist to this thesis" comes from the "pervasive presence and peculiar function of doxa". She continues:

> Stressing the illusory nature of verisimilar effects, critics have pointed not only to its conventional, but also to its ideological dimension. What is perceived as true is what bourgeois ideology presents as natural and self-evident, and this naturalization is nothing but a veiled cultural construction at the service of dominant ideology. Verisimilitude based on doxa is ideology at work and, as such, a hidden instrument of power. (Amossy 2002: 468)

However, according to her:

> For the new rhetoric and discourse analysis, doxa as a cultural construct is, on the contrary, the very condition of intersubjectivity and thus the source of discursive efficacy. In order to enable a fruitful exchange and convincingly present their case, the writer and the orator have to draw on accepted views. It is not the originality or dullness of the subject speaking that is at stake: it is

[30] Roland Barthes in his book *S/Z* (1994/1970) probably comes closest to employing Kristevan notion of intertextuality in his analysis of Balzac's novella "Sarrasine".

[31] When Aristotle described ways to explain falsehood in poetry, and suggested that "[i]f it is neither true nor as it should be, one can reply, 'But it is what people say'", he was making an appeal to *doxa* (Aristotle 1991: 85).

> the power of speech and its capacity to act upon an audience. [...] The reevaluation of doxa by neorhetorical and argumentative analysis thus goes counter to some authorized truths on Literature insofar as it locates the so-called literary text among multiple kinds of discourses partaking in the communication process between speaker (writer) and audience (whether present or merely virtual). [...] The ability of discourse to orient the reader's views and judgments heavily depends on shared opinions, beliefs, and values. Literary texts are no exception to this general rule. (Amossy 2002: 469)

This neorethorical usage of the term *doxa* appears to some extent to go back to the non-judgemental and constructivist meaning it originally had in Aristotle's usage; however, as Eggs' analysis of that usage shows, even that original meaning was far from simple:

> [T]he Greek word *doxa* covers the entire semantic field from *opinion* through *belief* to *expectation*. The semantic relationships among these words become evident when we realize, first of all, that *opinions* are of necessity *generic* in nature, and this can be expressed as follows: *given a certain situation X, then events of type Y are necessary, probable or possible*. From this it follows that, given situation X, events of type Y are to be expected. Having a particular *opinion* thus also means having the *expectation* that in certain situations certain events necessarily occur or probably occur or just possibly occur. (Eggs 2002: 396)

Eggs stresses that "the Greek word *doxa* does not express a *private belief* but is always the common opinion of a community" (Eggs 2002: 397), and that "Aristotelian mimesis may certainly be understood as imitation as long as we understand by it the *rendition of social and societal reality in its typicality*"; that is to say, less as straightforward imitation, and more as "poetic construction", a "reflective demonstration of the contingency of human existence" which allows "literature and poetic practice, as well as philosophy" to be" freed from the compulsion and necessity of everyday praxis", and thus to "yield a deeper insight into societal reality" (Eggs 2002: 413–414).

It is precisely the link between *mimesis* and *doxa* which, in Barthes' interpretation, disables the cognitive function of literature; in representing what the common reader recognises as "reality", mimetic (or realist) literature only confirms what the community commonly holds to be true, and this by definition hinders any reflexivity, rather than enabling it.[32] In her article on the conceptual constellations with which Roland Barthes formulates his meaning of the term *doxa*, Herschberg Pierrot points out that one

[32] For a more detailed dicussion on this, see: Lešić 2011: 241–244.

of the metaphors that Barthes uses in relation to it is "the castrating figure of Medusa", who "petrifies those who look at her". Herschberg Pierrot quotes Barthes (in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*) as he states that doxa is "*evident*. Is it seen? Not even that: a gelatinous mass which sticks onto the retina." This, if not exactly blinding then certainly vision-clouding, property of *doxa*, nevertheless still contains the remnants of her former glory (and the quotes here are from Roland Barthes):

> Yet Medusa, before Minerva made her horrible, "was of a rare beauty" due to the lustre of her hair. Similarly, "it is true that in the *Doxa*'s discourse there are former beauties sleeping, the memory of a once sumptuous and fresh wisdom; and it is indeed Athena, the wise deity, who takes her revenge by making the *Doxa* into a caricature of wisdom". (Herschberg Pierrot 2002: 430)

Doxa is thus seen as a form of false knowledge, as a "repetitive form and force" which "states that which has already been said, and it is in this that it intersects with the stereotype" (Herschberg Pierrot 2002: 434). She clarifies further that "doxa, in the Barthesian sense of an omnipresence of accepted discourse in everyday speech […] is a reference point for work on clichés, stereotypes, and received ideas in literature and the media" (Herschberg Pierrot 2002: 440).

Dufays, in his article which discusses this link, offers a further clarification that:

> Doxa, as an utterance, may thus be considered as an *ideological stereotype* (to be distinguished from verbal stereotypes and thematic-narrative stereotypes, which are automatisms of language or discourse), and it may affect any domain of thought. (Dufays 2002: 447)

And Amossy confirms this connection between *doxa* and stereotype, highlighting further their problematic nature:

> Often used as a synonym of *cliché*, the term *stereotype* mainly refers to a frozen collective representation, a widely circulated image of the self, the other, and the surrounding world. Adopted by social sciences and related to prejudice but also to social cognition, the stereotype is a reading construction [...]: it shows itself only to those who recognize an already familiar model by connecting constant attributes to a central theme. As a representation shared by a group, stereotype is part of a social imaginary and pertains by definition to doxa. (Amossy 2002: 481)

So, how does all this apply to Imširević's play? *Kad bi ovo bio film...* tells the story of the of the Bosnian war and of the siege of Sarajevo, told

from the perspective of a relatively ordinary urban (Bosniak, as it becomes clear in the course of the play; I shall, however, in the rest of the chapter use the term "Muslim", which was still at the time used for the ethnic group) family who do not identify with the nationalist ideology which led to the war, and who, as the war unfolds, struggle to maintain both their coherence as a family unit, as well as their pre-war identity. The main characters, who, although they do have proper names in the play itself, are referred to in the *Dramatis Personae* as Father, Mother, Brother and Aunt (the two secondary characters are Neighbour and Territorial Army Soldier), are drawn with a simple and clear characterisation which relies heavily both on stereotypes from Bosnian films and on commonly received ideas.

So the Father is, predictably, gruff, impatient, of quick temper and with a mean streak, cynical towards the world in general and critical of his family in particular; a railways employee (calling back to the figure of a railway worker, played by Abdulah Sidran, in Ademir Kenović's 1989 *Kuduz*), he is also a dedicated chess-player and an amateur photographer who develops his own photographs. For him, railways are the main sign of a properly organised country, and the disappearance of the sound of trains at the beginning of the war causes him real, and sympathetically portrayed, distress. He demands obedience from his family, treats his sons as if any nonsense from them is to be both expected and sanctioned, and considers any personal business (from a first shave, to first sexual relations, to where they go and what they believe in) as a thing to be criticised, or at least tactlessly and impatiently commented. As an aging *pater familias*, he appears to be largely modelled on Slobodan Aligrudić's role as the Father in Emir Kusturica's first film *Sjećaš li se, Dolly Bell?* (1981), along with later incarnations of a similar figure (such as Mustafa Nadarević's Hamza in Ademir Kenović's 1997 film *Savršeni krug*). The Mother is kind, conciliatory, warm, and clearly long-suffering, but with a cheerfulness about her which indicates that she bears her husband's temper with good grace; she is as automatically accepting of the people around her as her husband is automatically critical; she is good with the sewing machine, has an interest in clothes, and tends to offer coffee to anyone who comes to the house, including Territorial Army soldiers who've come to harass her family. Her skill with the sewing machine is reminiscent of Mirjana Karanović's Sena in another Kusturica and Abdulah Sidran classic, *Otac na službenom putu* (1985). Her pacifying tendencies, particularly when it comes to calming down any heated relations in the household (in particular between the father and the sons), as well as her stoicism in the face of her husband's

gruffness, are both culturally stereotypical and a cinematic quotation: Mira Banjac played a similar role as the Mother in *Sjećaš li se, Dolly Bell?*. The Aunt is the unmarried sister of one of the parents (it is not exactly clear whose, as she has obviously been a part of the household for as long there has been the family, and is treated accordingly), and a stereotypical maiden aunt: eccentric (her name is Indira, and she has an obsession with Indira Ghandi, and with India), slightly nosy, emotionally unflappable, and competent beyond stereotypical feminine knowledge (she does not sew, but she knows how to operate a fax machine) – at least some of these qualities, one supposes, are bestowed upon her as a correlative of her unmarried status. I haven't been able to locate her prototype in any particular film, but she still seems a very familiar figure, possibly because she is woven from stereotypes about eccentric old maids who develop exotic interests and unusual ambitions as a supposed compensation for a lack of a family life of their own, from narratives about patriarchal closeness with extended family members, and because she functions as a rather refreshing, but still largely predictable (once her character has been laid down in the opening scenes), counterpoint to the otherwise stiflingly male-centred family relations. In the original theatre production, she was played by Jasna Žalica, a fairly ubiquitous presence in post-war Bosnian films and television series,[33] often playing eccentric characters in the latter, which may have contributed to the dissolving effect of the predictability of her character's eccentricity on its potential anti-patriarchal subversiveness. Also, her attempts to go against the grain of what women are expected to do in a patriarchal Balkan family are largely frustrated throughout the play: she doesn't get to go to India, she is never allowed to quote what Indira Gandhi said about anything (except in the narrated prologue, where she is reported as having ended her economics BA thesis, completed after the war, with a rather underwhelming quote from Indira Gandhi), and the closest she comes to mimicking her is by dying her hair. The Brother, a boy who during the four years of the war goes from being a naive young teenager who at the start of the play had just had his first shave (a stereotypical sign of approaching manhood), to being a seasoned soldier who takes care of his family, and, to his atheist father's dismay, a mosque-attending ethnically-aware young Muslim. His turning to Islam references both the common story of people discovering their ancestral faith amidst the horrors of the war, and the

[33] Apart from her, the original cast included the following actors, most well known from films and television, apart from the stage: Miralem Zupčević, Nada Đurevska, Aleksandar Seksan, Aldin Omerović, Izudin Bajrović and Ermin Sijamija.

story of the gradual turning of largely atheist and socialist Bosnia into an ethnically and religiously divided country. Furthermore, the intertextual references include at least two recent films which feature characters who turn to religion in times of trouble: Jasmila Žbanić's *Na putu* (2010), and Aida Begić's *Djeca* (2012; it was being made roughly about the same time as Mustafić's staging of Imširević's play). The two side characters, the Neighbour and the Territorial Army Soldier represent more specifically stereotypical Sarajevan war figures: the Neighbour is (of course) a Serb, who (naturally) leaves Sarajevo for his wife's home town in Serbia, leaving behind his late father's Bible (and giving it to the younger son for safekeeping) and the keys to their flat (with the plea that it be looked after and the plants watered). He is represented with an eerily familiar mixture of naiveté and generosity, and with just a hint of potential shiftiness: he clearly knows when he should leave, and is dubious when told that the troubles will blow over in a few days, but plays along to mollify his Muslim neighbours. The Territorial Army Soldier, on the other hand is (of course) an ethnically aware Muslim, young, macho, uneducated, vulgar, and prone to outbursts of rage and casual looting. When he tells the story of how his unit was taken to see a play in the theatre (which for him was the first time he'd been to the theatre, so he refers to the play as a "film"), the play he saw was (of course) Susan Sontag's staging of *Waiting for Godot*, a production that holds mythical significance for Sarajevo's post-war cultural elite, even though it was not the best or most beloved or most widely seen theatre production during the war itself.[34] The way he tells the story of *Waiting for Godot* (except that he didn't get to see the performance to the end, so can't tell "what happens when the Godot guy finally appears") is in itself reminiscent of another iconic comedy scene: that of a peasant in Brešan's *Predstava "Hamleta" u Mrduši Donjoj* (directed as a film by Krsto Papić in 1974) telling the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through his own limited understanding of both the conventions of the theatre and of the tragedy itself. Even the punishment the soldier inflicts on the Father (for commenting on his incoherence) has the status of a Sarajevo wartime commonplace: he takes him out to dig the trenches on the frontline, which was both hard and dangerous work, and yet also a menial and unheroic task often reserved for those who were deemed unworthy of a soldier's status, and whose uselessness for the war effort needed to be rubbed into their faces. Aladin, the main character

[34] Haris Pašović as his opening line to the text on the *Sarajevo Red Line* quotes Susan Sontag; he was effectively the producer of her wartime staging of Beckett.

and narrator (his monologues on the nature of photography and on the overarching progress of the war and parallel world events tie the story together), appears in person only at the very end, revealing himself to be in a wheelchair, as he had lost (the use of) his legs in a (sniper or mortar shell) attack in the last year of the war. Just before his appearance, he describes the moment he was wounded in the following monologue:

> ALADIN *off*
>
> Ranjen sam 1995. godine. Blizu hotela Holiday Inn... desetak metara od tramvaja koji nije radio. Dok sam čekao pomoć, prišla je stara gospođa sa kišobranom i otvorila ga iznad moje glave... da me zakloni od sunca. Zažmirio sam... dalje pamtim mirise... drvo... limun... dim cigarete... papir..... lavanda... petrolej... dunje.... Kasnije, mnogo kasnije, gledao sam predstavu... o momku koji je pogođen snajperskim metkom... u sarajevskom tramvaju. Ne sjećam se kraja... zatvorio sam oči. Ja ne mogu gledati dramu o ratu. Sjetio sam se Capinog vojnika... njegovog zaustavljenog pokreta. U mislima izbrisao sam pušku sa fotografije... docrtao kauč... Učinio sam da vojnik spava... Ja ne mogu gledati dramu o ratu![35]

This monologue, with its mention of Robert Capa's famous photograph of the soldier shot in the Spanish Civil War, and its use of probably the most famous Sarajevo wartime location (so, again, more predictable signifiers of war narratives in general and of Sarajevo's war in particular), was in Dino Mustafić's theatre production followed by a scene that is in the play itself described with a simple stage direction:

> *Otac, Majka, Brat i Tetka sjede za stolom. Jedu u tišini. Svaki zalogaj prijeti da se pretvori u plač. U pozadini se čuje muzika sa radija, a nakon džingla za vijesti i glas spikera...*[36]

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[35] "I was wounded in 1995. Close to the Holiday Inn hotel... some ten meters from a tram that wasn't going anywhere. While I waited for help, an elderly lady approached me with an umbrella and opened it above my head… to shield me from the sun. I closed my eyes… then I remember scents… tree… lemon… cigarette smoke… paper… lavender… petroleum… quince… Later, much later, I watched a play… about a young man who was shot by a sniper… in a Sarajevo tram. I don't remember the ending… I closed my eyes. I can't watch plays about the war. I remembered Capa's soldier… his arrested movement. In my thoughts, I erased the riffle from the photograph… added a drawing of a couch… Made the soldier asleep… I can't watch a play about the war!"

[36] "Father, Mother, Brother and Aunt sit at the table. They are eating in silence. Each mouthful threatens to turn into weeping. In the background music from the radio can be heard, followed by a news jingle and the presenter's voice..."

Dino Mustafić turned this into a scene in which the four characters are "eating" with metal spoons from empty soup bowls, the clicking of their spoons gradually picking up a rhythm of a train picking up steam. After all the doxically familiar characters played by well-known actors, predictable plot points, film references, inevitable Susan Sontag mentions (referenced also through discussions on the history of photography in Aladin's monologues, Sontag being one of the most famous theorists of war photography[37]), the whole production suddenly comes together in that one scene depicting pure emptiness; and with it, pure longing. Empty bowls, representing wartime starvation; the rhythm of the train, representing a yearning for a past life, for a normal life, and, possibly, for escape – a scene so delicate and fragile and dependent on performance, that a friend who saw the play on a different night thought that the sound of clicking spoons represented that of a sewing machine.

And the theme of emptiness, either devoid of or waiting to be filled with meaning, it becomes clear towards the end, frames the entire play. It opens with a scene in which the Father, whilst developing photographs, discovers that "an image has disappeared", that it was simply gone, that there is no photograph to be had. And it ends with a following monologue from Aladin (I have redacted the stage directions, but they also at one point include the sound of the train):

> Ja čuvam foto-aparat i ponekad mi se, samo ponekad, učini da čujem voz.
>
> U životu istina je ono što jeste, što postoji, što pouzdano čovjek zna. Na pozornici, istinom se naziva ono čega nema u stvarnosti, ali što bi se moglo desiti.
>
> Odlučite se šta je za vas zanimljivije i važnije, čemu vi hoćete da vjerujete.
>
> Kad bih ja bio Aladin... kad bih imao čarobnu lampu... i kad bi ovo bio film... kad bi ovo bio film...[38]

The word "film" here has a double meaning. On the one hand, in a play entitled *If This were a Film…*, written by a playwright whose beloved breakthrough play was entitled *Kad bi ovo bila predstava* (*If this were a Theatre*

[37] See Sontag 1977 and 2003; I am going to return to her in the chapter on Milomir Kovačević's war photographs.

[38] "I still keep the camera, and sometimes, only sometimes, it seems to me that I can hear a train. In life, the truth is what is, what exists, that which a man knows for certain. On the stage, the truth is what does not exist in reality, but which could happen. You decide what is more interesting and important to you, what you want to believe in. If I were Aladdin… If I had a magic lamp… And if this were a film… if this were a film…"

Performance)[39], its open ending reveals an inability to imagine a satisfying future. On the other hand, if we tie it in with the opening scene and the missing image on the photo-film, it indicates a desire to erase the past, in the same way the image got mysteriously erased from the Father's film. Whichever interpretation we adopt, Aladin's final monologue exposes the inner emptiness of the play; its plot's clichés reveal the commonly held ideas about the war, the stereotypes of our collective memory, its, in Aleida Assmann's terminology (2010), the *canon* of what we believe to have been true. Imširević's play in its mixture of movie quotes and *doxa*, with the full institutional support of its staging at the most prestigious theatre house and by the most well-known theatre creatives, exposes the sterility of our collective imagination about the war. A couple of decades after its start, and after all the unusual and unpredictable and complex narratives told about it, we are institutionally unable to say anything authentically new, other than to wish it never had happened. If we then also take into account that the music for the stage production was an original song by Damir Imamović, whose rhythmic introduction built gradually during the performance, only to be revealed in the end to contain the crucial line: "Kad bi ovo bio kraj…" ("If this were the end…"), the sense of futility and hopelessness seemed to me palpable as I watched the actors and the production team take a triumphant bow on the play's opening night.

That the emptiness was the central theme of both Pašović's *Sarajevo Red Line* and Imširević's *If This were a Film…* on the twentieth anniversary of the start of the siege of Sarajevo tells us, I believe, a great deal about where we were at that stage in terms of our collective healing. And it does not seem to me that the situation has improved in the years that followed.

Can we imagine a different ending, a more meaningful present, and a more promising future?

[39] That play was staged in 1998 in Sarajevo's Youth Theatre, directed by Aleš Kurt; apart from winning several awards, it is still fondly remembered by those who saw it at the time.

Chapter 2: Memory and Conceptual Tropes: Museums, Trade and Documents in Veličković's *Konačari*

> Zvoni telefon. Sašina mama. Zvala je prijateljicu čiji muž ima sestru koja je frizerka sekretarice pomoćnika komandanta za bezbjednost. Potpuno je sigurno da u narednih nekoliko dana neće biti nikakvih akcija. Ovaj poziv me malo smiruje. Dosadašnji tok rata naučio me da se više može vjerovati frizerkama nego predsjednicima.
>
> Veličković 1998: 67[40]

This chapter will attempt to find ways of imagining a different future by keeping the interpretations of the past and present truly open-ended, flexible and unpredictable. In practical terms, it will explore the possibilities of using the insights of cognitive poetics in the study of literary memory texts, and, from there, in the study of the formation and regulation of cultural memory through conceptual tropes. Its theoretical underpinning will be the argument of some cognitive scientists (Hernadi, Turner, Fauconnier, and Zeki) that literature offers a unique insight into human cognitive processes. My intervention into their debate will be my belief that that this notion can be successfully carried over into memory studies, and that a cognitivist perspective can open up new avenues for questioning how and why we remember what we do, and what those memories do to our ability to understand the world and heal from trauma.

In the previous chapters, I have defined memory not as a reliable mental record of past events, but as a process of meaning-creation which is highly context-dependent, goal-oriented and, in many cases, and preferably, future-oriented. I have also argued that the problems of memory start when it falls prey to rigid patterns of cultural stereotype and cliché, which

[40] "The phone is ringing. Saša's mum. She has spoken to a friend whose husband's sister is the hairdresser to the secretary of the security commander's deputy. It is absolutely certain there are not going to be any actions in the next few days. This call calms me down somewhat. The course of the war so far has taught me that you can trust hairdressers more than presidents."

restrict its ability to produce new meanings and adapt to new contextual circumstances. In addition to this, the conceptual tropes we use for imagining and regulating memory processes within our culture could greatly influence the levels of flexibility and inclusiveness of meaning and identity generated by such memory processes.

And the writer I shall focus on here is one whose wartime collection of short stories *Đavo u Sarajevu* contains a particularly strong example of the kind of strange and unpredictable war narratives I've discussed in the previous chapter. "Moji muškarci" ("My Men"; Veličković 1998a: 63–77), the story which includes the sentences at the start of this chapter, is a wickedly funny tale of a young woman with a small baby, a freezing flat, a husband in the army, and an amorous dog called Lord; it is a tale whose main plot revolves around the question of whether the dog will get his girl. He does, then goes missing, and is then found; and everyone is alive at the end, with the narrator concluding that "life is yet again bearably horrible" (Veličković 1998a: 77). And that flippant and irreverent tone is the one with which I wish us to enter the analysis that follows.

Veličković's *Lodgers* and Mnemonic Cognitive Tropes

Nenad Veličković's novel *Konačari* (*Lodgers*) was written during the war, and initially published in its final year. It treads a similar ground to Imširević's play, in that it offers a chronicle of war experience by a Sarajevan family. Unlike the Bosniak and working class family in Imširević's play, however, the family in Veličković's novel is a blended, extended and mixed one, consisting of Greta, a Jewish grandmother, her yoga-practicing and vegan daughter, the daughter's second husband, who is a Muslim (and the director of the museum they all move into once the war starts), their teenage daughter Maja (who is also the novel's narrator), Maja's step-brother and young radio director Davor (her mother's son from her first marriage to a man who now lives in Belgrade), Davor's pregnant wife Sanja, and their dog Snifi; and then there are also the museum guard Brkić and his friend Julio who share the museum with the principal family and who practically become extended family members. So, from the start, Veličković's wartime narrative already in its *Dramatis Personae* allows for substantially greater complexity of the world it depicts than what was shown in Imširević's play. In contrast to *Lodgers*, to name just one aspect of world-building, ethnic identities of the characters in *If This were a Film…* are noticeably simpler and streamlined, and divided along household lines, allowing for a clear

demarcation between those who stayed in and those who left (or attacked) the besieged city; the question of sides is posed in the play, and clearly answered: those Serbs who did not attack, left. This is much more complex in Veličković's war writing, including the stories in the collection *Đavo u Sarajevu* (1998; originally published in 1996).

Overall, I would argue, the process of understanding the war is a lot more complex in Veličković's novel, and I shall use it as an example of how a successful (i. e., flexible and context-aware) coding of memory can be seen as following the logic of conceptual tropes, allowing for the possibility of greater semantic flexibility and openness by creating moments of distortion, disruption, displacement and give. Literary texts can provide us with models for how meaningful flexibility of memory can be achieved, as well as show us, with great clarity, what happens to meaning and identity when cultural procedures for remembering and forgetting fail to allow for such flexibility. As it happens, Veličković's novel offers examples of both of these processes, as well as creating an open and unpredictable blend of both.

But let me first offer a brief theoretical introduction to what I shall attempt to do here.

In the last two or three decades, cognitive poetics, which has brought insights of cognitive sciences (and of cognitive linguistics in particular) into the study of literature, has opened the space where it is possible, yet again, to return to and reformulate the old Aristotelian view: that literature is a privileged cognitive tool (so, not only or not just a language construct), capable of both organising our knowledge of the world in uniquely insightful ways and of offering us a unique insight into how our mind organises its knowledge of both itself and the world.

This view of the special cognitive status of literature is explicit or implicit in many of the major theories by various cognitive scientists; but for my purposes here I shall quote only Hernadi's suggestion that

> […] from their earliest occurrences on, literary transactions could be serving both sets of functions: to expand the cognitive, emotive, and volitional horizons of human awareness […] and to integrate our beliefs, feelings and desires within the fluid mentality required for survival in the increasingly complex social and cultural environments of human organisms. (Hernadi 2002: 39)

With that in mind, the two questions I am asking here are these: how does the use of conceptual tropes of memory contribute to the organisation of memories, both as methods of coding and decoding memories, and

as conceptual tools for thinking about the processes of memory; and how does that conceptualisation impact the "beliefs, feelings and desires" which guide our behaviour in the complex world? The concept of the conceptual trope is adapted from Lakoff's and Johnson's notion of the conceptual metaphor, which structures "what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people," and "thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 454). They clarify further:

> The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 454)

Furthermore (and, in the context of this study, in a kind of sublime cosmic alignment), they illustrated their idea of conceptual metaphors with the following contrasting example (and this is worth quoting at length):

> To give some idea of what it could mean for a concept to be metaphorical and for such a concept to structure an everyday activity, let us start with the concept of an ARGUMENT, and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. […] It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument – attack, defense, counterattack, etc. – reflects this. It is in this sense that we live by the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing.
>
> Try to imagine a culture where arguments were not viewed in terms of war, where no one won or lost, where there was no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing ground. Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, with the participants as performers, and the goal being to perform in a balanced and aesthetic way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But we would probably not view them as

> arguing at all. It would be strange even to call what they were doing "arguing." Perhaps the most neutral way of describing this difference between their culture and ours would be to say that we have a discourse form structured in terms of battle and they have one structured in terms of dance. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 454–455)

So those are the stakes where conceptual metaphors are concerned. I propose to extend the concept to tropes in general, and the main conceptual tropes for handling and understanding memory that Veličković's novel throws into relief are (at least in my analysis): MUSEUM, TRADE and DOCUMENT.

In this scheme, the MUSEUM functions, effectively, as a conceptual metonymy; it is a conceptualisation of how memory functions which is metonymically based on the tools we have of capturing and preserving the past. As such, it provides an opportunity to explore our relationship to official histories and collective pasts, through our relationship to the institution which serves to record and preserve that official history and that collective past. However, what is unusual in *Lodgers* is that the particular museum in question is in itself a kind of remnant of the past era. The (now displaced) Sarajevo City Museum which provided Veličković with a real life model for his fictional institution was, as he explicitly states in his commentary at the end of the novel, very different from the stuffy and official National Museum, and afforded an opportunity for the frequent visitor to create an affectionate and personal attachment to it (Veličković 2008: 255). That quirkiness of the original museum is in the novel amplified further as the museum director's family moves into it after their own flat is destroyed. Moreover, the museum director, whilst moving into the museum and turning it into a private home, is at the same time trying to preserve its integrity as a museum (i. e., the official space for preserving history and collective memory), by refusing to succumb to the pressure to let the Army take it over as their headquarters and by trying to prevent any of the collection from being stolen, traded or sold.

The main points of conflict regarding this particular issue in the novel centre round the battle for both the museum and its meaning between two of the museum inhabitants: its director, and Julio, the charming, scheming, opportunistic, ex-diplomat friend of Brkić, the museum porter. Whereas the museum director holds onto his role and duty to the museum with integrity and a certain rigidity of purpose, Julio insinuates himself into both the museum and the local power-structures, playing a game which is meant to satisfy all, but which seems to consist of an endless circling of goods

and good-will in which nobody ever seems to profit anything tangible. So he infuriates the dutiful director by donating vintage embroidered shirts to the maternity ward to the hospital, to be used as nappies for new-born babies, only to have them promptly returned as unsuited to that purpose, and accompanied by worthless paintings which the hospital donates to the museum as a sign of gratitude for the worthless donation of vintage shirts (Veličković 2008: 44–48, 52–54). Throughout of the novel, Julio acquires supplies which he trades for something else which is then donated to the third party, who then express their gratitude by sending something else, and yet nobody ever appears to profit from any of the goods which are circulating in this manner. However, that is just the way that Julio seems to function; as a background to this, obvious black market operations are taking place and sizeable profits are being made, but, it would appear, not by Julio, who appears to be mostly accumulating good will. His deals and trades and donations and acquisitions seem to serve some kind of phatic function, much as his impossible, meandering, fairy-tale like war stories do. In fact, the purpose of Julio's transactions, both verbal and material, seems to suggest precisely that: the function of memory as pure contentless communication, a largely phatic circulation of stories and goods whose goal is to bind the community together rather than to exchange any meaningful information or to make use of the goods in any meaningful way. At one point, Maja, the novel's teenage narrator, quotes her mother's assessment of Julio as somebody whose true nature is that of a water fountain by the roadside; in other words, a source of pure joy for weary travellers (Veličković 2008: 134).

And here we have the appearance of memory through the conceptual metaphor of TRADE, as Julio's attitude to the past acts in sharp opposition to how the museum director treats both the museum and the flow of information about the war. While the director is fighting to keep the museum collection intact, and refusing to engage in gossip, ideological speculation, or attempts to relativize the meaning of the siege, Julio merrily and playfully trades in tall tales and silly exchanges.

To be fair, the director's determination to preserve the purity of the past through the preservation of the museum does have its limits, and he does occasionally allow for instances of laxity, or reshuffling of priorities, such as when a museum courtyard is dug up in search of an old well (Veličković 2008: 65), or when flags from the museum collection are cut up and sewed into an air balloon meant to help Brkić leave the besieged city (Veličković 2008: 84). In both cases the museum and its collection

are tampered with through attempts to either restore the material past, or to rearrange and reuse the symbolic past, with the purpose – and this is crucial – to help the living. Furthermore, in both instances the attempt fails: the well is never found, and the air balloon flies away without Brkić (Veličković 2008: 188–189). And besides, the director's greatest intervention into the purity of the museum as a space of preservation of the past is made when the museum building becomes his family's new home, with the museum's collection of precious rugs used to secure the windows against mortar shells. Thus, the new function of the museum, no longer purely a memory site but now also a home and a bomb shelter combined, does serve the living and helps preserve them.

Just as his desire to preserve the purity of the museum finds its greatest opponent in the reality of the war situation, so does his pedantic micromanagement of war information often prove somewhat ineffectual. This happens, for example, when he tries to present his very carefully formulated thoughts on the war to Davor, his stepson, who is making a radio documentary, only to get his contribution rejected because Davor interprets it as propaganda (Julio's got rejected because he meandered in his story so much he never got to the point of it) (Veličković 2008: 16, 25–28). He also misinterprets Davor's wife's chart of her pregnancy weight gain and stool frequency as some sort of enemy signalling code (Veličković 2008: 107), causing embarrassment all around. And yet, his refusal to participate in gossip, speculation and phrase-mongering is in the world of the novel presented as a highly honourable attitude to the information chaos of the war.

And, so, the attitude of the two men, Julio and the director, to both the museum (as a site for preserving the past) and to the circulation of information during the war (as a means of creating a story about that war and setting up a framework in which memories of it can later be formulated), are analogous: the director's careful preservation and refusal to speculate on the one hand, and Julio's phatic exchange of dubious goods and stories on the other. And yet in the world of the novel, their two ways of interpreting the conceptual metaphor of memory as trade function together in a tenuous yet ultimately well-matched tandem: the honesty and honour of the former limiting the damage of the latter, the charm and flexibility of the latter allowing the former to formulate achievable moral goals. Thus the two approaches are combined in two crucial symbolic moments towards the end, which both happen as the family are all waiting for Sanja, Davor's wife, to give birth. As everybody is suspended in nervous anticipation of the new-born's arrival, the director pulls out an old cradle (presumably

from the museum collection), and cleans it to receive the baby, breaking the circle of scrupulous preservation to reuse the past in the name of the future (Veličković 2008: 250); while Julio, who spent the novel itching to discover the treasures contained in a sealed box which belonged to Greta, his past love and Maja's grandmother (the box spends the novel being carried around, repeatedly stolen, hidden, found and is never opened until the very end), finally opens it only to find that the treasure are baby clothes, family hand-me-downs to be passed to Sanja's and Davor's child, thus breaking the circle of phatic circulation of goods in other to put them to good use (Veličković 2008: 253). The MUSEUM as a conceptual metonymy for the preservation of the past and TRADE as a conceptual metaphor for the circulation of the information of that past, seen through the comparison of how the museum director and Julio treat both the museum collection and the flow of information during the war, points to the need for a marriage between preservation and communication in our handling of memory, as well as questioning its link with the future.

Together, along with other characters, the director and Julio also participate in the formulation and circulation of documents. The DOCUMENT as a conceptual trope in this novel functions largely as a synecdoche, and I shall limit my discussion of it to that meaning. By "document" I mean here any official or officially approved text which offers an authoritative formulation of the war experience from the position of political, administrative or military power, and in that sense I include in its corpus not just official proclamations and documents (such as military summons, press and military accreditations, political and propaganda leaflets and suchlike), but also media texts which are written from that position. Its function as a synecdoche is revealed by its ability to take a fairly limited section of the war experience (that of the point of view of the city administration or of the army) and turn it into a universally applicable formulation of that experience, including individual and private sides of it (hence my treatment of it as a synecdoche: a part representing the whole). Both the museum director (in his respectful treatment of newspaper articles as documents charting the progress of the war, and in his scrupulous keeping of records for the functioning of the museum, up and including the logs for toilet use) and Julio (in his ability to acquire accreditations for himself and others, and to charm and manipulate officialdom to suit his own needs) in their attitudes to the creation and circulation of official documents behave true to their form. But the characters who are particularly interesting in this respect are Fata (or, as the narrator mockingly nick-names her, Mrs. Flintstone; a

neighbour and the representative of the new, war-time elite) and Davor, the director's stepson. Davor resolutely refuses to accept the authority of any of the official documents (be they military summons, newspaper reports or military vows), and does his best to undermine them whenever he can, challenging their ability to offer an expression for any part of his experience. Fata, on the other hand, absolutely embraces the documents' ability to shape her understanding of her own experience, even though (or especially because) that experience is largely created through the dubious privileges her military commander and black marketeer husband Junuz bestows upon her and her children, rather than through the suffering and deprivation that the official documents insist on. Fata's normal speech and manner of behaviour is fairly well exemplified by the following quote:

> Ona je sa djecom išla da obiđe njihov drugi stan. U neboderu, trosobna garsonjera, i tamo u sebe na vratima našla tuđ katanac. Lupaj, niko ne izlazi, zvoni, nema struje. Onda ona izvali katanac, i komad štoka pride, kad eto ti idu dvije, jedna sva onako, a ni drugoj nije mane. Jedna sa pola stepenica viče: Ha! Šta će nje u njen stan? A đe piše da je njen? Niđe ne piše, no je bio katanac. Bila je i prije katanac-brava. I tu je bravu neko nogom otvorio. Nije neko nego u nje Junuz. (Veličković 2008: 100)[41]

However, when she gets to formulate the war experience within a wider context, Fata's own lively, spicy speech, full of vulgarisms, ignorance, nosiness and bad grammar, suddenly disappears, her sentences become startlingly long and complex, and her narrative style and subject matter shifts from vivid descriptions of concrete events in her life to abstract generalities couched in the military/administrative-speak:

> Danas je po rubnim područjima djelovao PAM, a primijećeno je i pregrupisavanje agresorovih materijalnih sredstava i tehnike, kao i dovođenja svježeg ljudstva, ali naše su linije neprobojne i čvrste i agresoru neće poći za rukom da realizuje zločinačke ciljeve. (Veličković 2008: 89)[42]

[41] "She'd been with her children to check on their other apartment, in a tower block, a three-room attic apartment, and there on her own door she had found a foreign padlock. Bang on the door, no one comes out, ring, there is no power. Then she pries off the padlock, and a creature comes up, and then there are two, one all la-di-da, and the other just as bad. One yells from halfway up the stairs: Ha! What're they doing in her apartment? And where does it say that it's hers? It doesn't say anywhere, but there was a padlock. There'd been a padlock before, too. And someone had kicked that lock open. It wasn't someone, but her Junuz" (Veličković 2005: 72).

[42] "Anti-aircraft guns were now active in the marginal areas, and it had also been observed that the Aggressor was regrouping material and technical staff, as well as bringing in

Fata slips into this military-speak whenever she discusses the progress of the war, and she refuses to see that the language and the reality described through it have very little to do with her everyday experience of that war. This is also exemplified by her attitude to an official leaflet which, in Maya's paraphrase, requests for gold or money to be donated to the war effort, whilst evoking "sloboda, čast, agresija, ponos, sloboda, krv, odbrana, agresija, domovi, porodice, nezavisna, suverena, nedjeljiva, donatorstvo!" (Veličković 2008: 202). Fata distributes the leaflets through her neighbourhood in the firm belief that she is accomplishing a task of great importance, and completely oblivious to the fact that the leaflets that come from a legitimate source nevertheless become irrevocably tainted as corrupt by their association with her as their distributor. Maja notes that it looks as if she is equating the leaflet with the State that issued it; and so her reaction when the director hands her back the leaflet she had reverently left for him (and which he tore in two in protest at the open robbery legitimised by it) is one of profound, disbelieving shock. According to her logic, he who tears up the leaflet is tearing up the State (Veličković 2008: 205).

The director sees Fata as such an annoying presence (and is so outraged by the leaflet) precisely because of her loose synecdochal treatment of the official language and documents, which seems to mock his respectful and scrupulous treatment of those same documents and language. Effectively, Fata allows her position of relative power and privilege in the new political and economic structures of the besieged city to shape the official version of events (her Junuz has enough power to keep the dodgy deals he is involved with covered up), and then she appropriates that official language of honour and suffering to formulate her own experience which is, largely, very different from what the official version of events would like to depict. Thus the conceptual synecdoche of the DOCUMENT functions in both directions of the synecdochal displacement: out of the complex and chaotic experience of the siege a segment is lifted and formulated as an expression of the collective experience; thus, synecdochally, a part gets to represent the whole. And then that part formulated by the official document is again synecdochally employed in reverse to offer an expression of the private sphere of the war experience, the task for which it is ill suited, and which also allows for manipulation and ideological colouring.

fresh personnel, but our lines were impenetrable and firm, and the Aggressor would not succeed in realising his criminal aims" (Veličković 2005: 64).

And yet: out of all the other characters, seemingly more honourable and intelligent, the vulgar, nosy and greedy Fata is the one who comes out of the novel as its true heroine, by appearing with a doctor in tow during Sanja's labour, like a *deus ex machina*, shattering all mocking condescension Maja had heaped on her throughout the novel. The insight her gossipy, nosy self had into the lives and professions of the residents of their neighbourhood made her uniquely capable of coming to Sanja's rescue and producing a medical professional at the right moment.

The three conceptual tropes for memory discussed in this chapter offer different versions of both the processes of memory and of the way we treat those processes conceptually and behaviourally. MUSEUM stands, metonymically, for the concept of memory as a place of storage and preservation of the past. The TRADE metaphor, on the other hand, stresses the phatic aspect of collective memory as a means of keeping the community together. Employed together they act on balancing the demands of the past with the needs of the future. DOCUMENT as a conceptual synecdoche points to the possible dangers of treating the official version of the past as an expression of individual and private experiences, and thus both smothering those individual voices and creating the means of co-opting them ideologically; and yet, none of that negates the usefulness and necessity of such records.

Veličković's novel puts the three conceptual tropes into action through the interrelations of his lively cast of characters, and shows those concepts conflicting with each other until, at the end, amidst the chaos of the war, they create a perfect balance in which all the characters and their different natures, viewpoints, and modes of behaviour come together in the name of the future, incarnated in Sanja and Davor's newborn baby.

So, that was the novel: complex, playful, funny, and ending with the birth of a baby, with all the characters of very different backgrounds and ideological positions united around its birth and around the promise of the future. Its ending is, in spite of everything, profoundly optimistic.

Back to the Present: *Lodgers* on Stage

What has Sarajevo's National Theatre adaptation of the autumn of 2024 done with this novel?

Directed by Marko Misirača, a theatre director who specialises in subtly subversive theatre and film productions, and dramatized by Mirza Skenderagić, the adaptation of Veličković's novel was a labour of love for its

director; he has admired the novel and struggled to find a theatre home for it for years. And yet, I was struck by how dark their retelling was.

The adaptation sharpens some aspects of the story, toning down some of its playfulness. Julio is much more of a war profiteer, for example, and the political conflict between the half-Serb Davor and his Muslim stepfather is much more pronounced. Maja gains a school friend who was killed, and whose story and name are repeated at the beginning and end of the play, along with the message that all of us have a friend like that; this was not in the novel. What is in the novel, but not nearly as pronounced, are Davor's radio documentary, for which he interviews the museum's inhabitants, and the small bottles of scent that Greta has with her at all times, and which she opens before she dies. These two aspects of the story in the adaptation take on a much more central role, adding another conceptual metaphor to my previous list, along with a mnemonic device, and a much darker tone.

Davor's radio documentary, which he abandons fairly early on in the novel, becomes the organising principle of the play's dramaturgy, allowing the memories of the characters to be recorded and fixed through their own voices, rather than being woven into Maja's playful "diary in the form of a novel" and "novel in the form of a diary" (Veličković 2008: 11). The need to nail down the events of the story and the characters' pasts is thus made much more urgent, and the conceptual metaphor of MEMORY IS RECORDING enters the narrative as its organising principle. While the dairy form allowed the novel to follow the loose, chaotic and disconnected logic of events in Maja's life as they were happening, thus capturing the immediacy of live historical experience, the radio documentary has a structure which gives those events a much more structured shape. The solidification of the past is thus encoded in the structure of the play itself, and the recorded conflicts between characters lose the nature of spats between people who share the same living space, and become clearly defined political positions, reflecting political realities at the time.

The story of Greta's scents also becomes a lot more pronounced, as well as becoming much more closely linked with the mystery of her little suitcase (in the novel, she carries the scents in a handbag, not in the suitcase; Veličković 2008: 23). In the novel, Greta is presented as somebody who is able to combine scents to evoke certain memories of the past (Veličković 2008: 39–41, 131), as some kind of Proustian virtuoso fully in control of the mnemonic power of her *madeleine*. In the play, this is stressed further, particularly through Greta's death scene, which is made a lot more central

than it is in the novel, and fully focused on the longing for the past that her scents represent. Nostalgia, which is barely a feature in the novel, becomes the emotional anchor of the play. And because the mystery of the little suitcase is to the large extent exhausted by being linked to Greta's scents, the final revelation that the suitcase contained baby clothes for Sanja and Davor's child also means that the optimism of the narrative's final scene is to a large extent hollowed out in the play.

The novel that represented the hope for the post-war future at the time it was published, in its theatre adaptation nearly thirty years later seems to be stuck to the need for its story to be told; its overall tone is made a lot more subdued, as if the promised happy ending of a better future is yet to arrive. Or, as Mirza Skenderagić wrote in his programme note:

> U konačnici, prazna scena, sa glasovima i zvukovima je najbolji način za suočavanje sa sjećanjem, ali i za spoznaju, ne samo prošlosti, nego i sadašnjosti i budućnosti. Jer, za zadnjim premotavanjem magnetofona i pomjeranjem sata, ostaje još jedna istina koju je potrebno izgovoriti što glasnije: rat je gotov! rat je gotov! rat je gotov! A nismo ga prekonačili.[43]

Again, the emptiness and the sense the war is still not over in a way that would allow us to move into a satisfying past and a promising future; one of the funniest wartime novels turned into a tragedy.

As Marko Misirača responded to my comment that the play is much darker than the novel: "The fact that we still feel this story needs to be told is in itself dark enough".

[43] "At the end, an empty stage, with voices and sounds, is the best way to face our recollections, but also our knowledge, not just of the past, but also of the present and the future. As we wind back the magnetophone and change the clocks one last time, a truth remains that needs to be said as loudly as possible: the war is over! the war is over! the war is over! And we are still lodging in it." See here: https://nps.ba/predstave/konacari/224.

Chapter 3: Miljenko Jergović's Art of Traumatic Memory: Lying, Imagining and Forgetting in *Mama Leone* and *Historijska čitanka*

> Zaborav nimalo ne boli, ali je ipak lijepo sjećati se. U sjećanju su svi razlozi, i za radost i za tugu, a oni su često isti.
>
> Jergović 2000: 5[44]

As shown through the literary examples I've discussed so far in this study, this seemingly never-properly-ending Bosnian war can be seen as "cataclysmic", following Stephan Feuchtwang's definition of it as "a limit condition: the annihilation of history and the destruction of personality" (Feuchtwang 2000: 59). As Dubravka Ugrešić (1998b) argued about the Yugoslav wars (to name them loosely) of the 1990s, the last thirty or so years have brought about a sea change in the collective consciousness, new interpretations of both distant and recent history (and histories) of the country and the region, new institutions, habits and modes of thought. Life "before the war" and life "after the war" seem to be separated by an almost unbridgeable, deeply traumatic abyss of violence, betrayal of trust and, very often, of separation from one's home, family and friends. For many who have lost their homes, either in the literal sense, or in a broader sense of having lost the familiar surroundings in which they have grown up or built their lives, and in which they developed their mental habits and attitudes, the question of where to go next seems to be closely bound up with the question of identity and personal biography. Physical destruction of towns and villages has also meant the disappearance of what Raphael Samuel (1996: viii) calls the "mnemonic landscape"; both the physical destruction and political changes have brought about the disappearance of many "sites (or places) of memory" (Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*; see Carrier 2000 and Winter 2010) which helped create and maintain both collective historical memory and identity, and the more intimate, personal

[44] "Forgetting doesn't hurt at all, but, still, it is good to remember. Remembering contains all the reasons both for joy and for sorrow, and they are often the same."

ones. Just as the states have lost or changed their symbols and national monuments, so have individuals been faced with the destruction of their own private memory places, of objects and environments that marked their past lives and served as mnemonic devices of their personal biographies. Can we still remember our childhood as fully if the sensory stimulants for our memory are gone, if we can no longer recall the sights and sounds and smells of our past lives, and the physical objects which could remind us of them are no longer in existence (in other words, can we retrieve the personal past from the depths of our forgetful minds without the equivalent of Proust's *madeleine*)? What Susannah Radstone says about Richard Terdiman's view of the nineteenth-century "memory crisis", which, as she puts it, "erupted in response to a profound sense of cultural and historical dislocation" (Radstone 2000a: 4–5), can easily be applied to contemporary Bosnia (and the former Yugoslavia as a whole):

> [I]t was the perceived discontinuities between the past and the future which lay at the heart of the memory crisis. In part, this was a crisis prompted by fears that the past embodied in cultural memory was irretrievably lost; in part, it was a crisis prompted by anxieties about the unbidden eruption of that past in the present's shaping of the future. (Radstone 2000a: 7)

At the time Miljenko Jergović was writing the novel which is going to be the focus of this chapter, much scholarly attention had already been dedicated to changes in the national identities in the region; however, the problem of both the intimate, personal memory and of the unofficial, popular collective memory was mostly left within the realms of the personal (amongst friends and families) and the unofficial (playful newspaper and magazine columns and websites[45]) – and the literary. As Jergović's novel *Mama Leone* and his essay collection *Historijska čitanka* (*A History reader*) coincided with the flowering of memory studies around the millennium, their concerns can be neatly tied in with the theme of traumatic memory that I have already discussed. Furthermore, the millennial nature of their appearance may even be used to illustrate the crisis point between the openness of historical experience and the closing off of

[45] To give the example of just one magazine: Sarajevo weekly *Dani* at the turn of the millenium ran columns by Miljenko Jergović ("Historijska čitanka" – later published as a book), Aleksandar Hemon ("Hemonwood") and Marko Vešović ("Vlah bez voznog reda"), all of whom have used their columns to write about their memories of the pre-war everyday life in Sarajevo.

the post-war memory Gestalt, with its sense that the end of the war has not brought about a liveable future.

A History Reader

Miljenko Jergović's *Historijska čitanka* (*A History Reader*), whose first two sentences serve as an epigraph to this paper, and which first appeared as a regular column in the Sarajevo weekly *Dani*, is a collection of intimate and knowingly nostalgic recollections of the pre-war Sarajevo (and the former Yugoslavia as whole), treating a vast range of everyday habits, objects, public and semi-public personalities and character types that marked Sarajevo of the 1960s, '70s and '80s. It bases its title on a type of supplementary history textbooks used in schools in the same period, which complemented the historical narrative of the basic textbooks with their collections of excerpts from important historical documents (ranging from state documents to travel writing), photographs of historical monuments and the like. Jergović's *Historijska čitanka*, in its original form as a regular column in a weekly, by its evocative title seemed to suggest a project of producing an alternative history, a history of everyday life and the recent past (well within living memory) which would address such "insignificant" phenomena as children's games, neighbourhood gossip or what type of sandwich was taken on day trips. As such, it appeared as an antidote to the grand historical narratives that stood behind nationalist discourse, and that tended to view individuals' lives in the context of centuries (rather than life-spans) and collective identities such as a "people" or a "nation", rather than the more intimate and immediate communities such as family, neighbourhood or town. It is as if *Historijska čitanka* proposes a literary version of the early oral history programme, which was clearly voiced by Paul Thompson in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*:

> Since the nature of most existing records is to reflect the standpoint of authority, it is not surprising that the judgement of history has more often than not vindicated the wisdom of the powers that be. Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, and challenge to the established account. (Thompson 1988: 6)

In its newspaper column version, *Historijska čitanka* appeared as a project complementary to *The Lexicon of Yu-Mythology* (*Leksikon jugoslavenske mitologije*), a website founded at the time by Dubravka Ugrešić

and a couple of her students in Amsterdam (and since gone extinct as an evolving online phenomenon, having been in the meantime turned into a book). However, the final effect and the logic behind the two projects were rather different, and the contrast with Ugrešić's (then) website makes Jergović's "memory work" all the more interesting.

Based on the idea that the popular culture and the memories and habits of everyday life in pre-war ex-Yugoslavia were disappearing without trace in the post-war and post-disintegration period, *The Lexicon* website issued an invitation to post-Yugoslavs to help preserve those memories by submitting their own contributions in the form of lexicon entries. The result was a growing collection of notes on aspects of ex-Yugoslav life, ranging from memories of popular cartoons and brands of cheese and detergents to carefully phrased explanations of Communist Party terminology and procedures. The contributors' tone ranged from melancholy nostalgia to playful irony; some of them submitted a whole series of entries based around one topic, while others decided to participate in the project with a single, highly personal commentary. *The Lexicon*, with its open-for-all editorial policy (or wilful lack of it), its varied tone and type of entries, its fragmentary nature (to paraphrase Roland Barthes, there is a deep structural randomness in the alphabetic order and the kinds of books, like lexicons and dictionaries, which follow it; Barthes 1995/1975: 206–208), perfectly encapsulated the nature of popular memory as Dubravka Ugrešić has herself written about it. Unruly, untidy, woven from many voices and experiences, popular memory should be a messy, glorious celebration of everyday life, and yet it too easily falls into the trap of cliché and ideological (in the narrow sense of the word) re-interpretation. To paraphrase her thesis in "The Confiscation of Memory" (Ugrešić 1998b: 217–235),[46] the loss of immediate mnemonic props (the physical environment, objects, everyday rituals, sights, smells and sounds) as well as the ideological reinterpretation of the past, threatened the subject's hold on memory, his or her ability to recall the past with any degree of certainty, or at least to be convinced of its reality.

The sentiment is to a large extent echoed in *Historijska čitanka*,[47] as is the type of subject-matter covered and the tone of narration. Furthermore, both *The Lexicon* and *Historijska čitanka* (and their respective novelistic companion pieces: Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and

[46] This essay was published in *The Culture of Lies*, but it also appeared on *The Lexicon* website as an introduction.

[47] See "Uvod" in *Historijska čitanka* for an explicit exposition; but the same idea is repeated in many different contexts throughout the essay collection.

Jergović's *Mama Leone*) are structured as collections of fragments (lexicon entries, randomly ordered short essays, broken and disconnected narratives), which seems to respond to the realisation, reached by both oral historians and students of autobiographical genres, that life stories, if told as a single narrative, cannot escape the rules of emplotment and the influence of myth (Kuhn 2000, Peneff 1990, Anderson L. 2001). In choosing to tell the unofficial history of their former country in fragmented pieces without an over-arching story, Jergović and Ugrešić are providing a literary version of Frigga Haug's "memory work" which concentrates "on scenes, events, particular stories" with the hope that "by reproducing them in detail it will be possible to subvert the self-censorship that creates harmony in a whole-life story" (Haug 2000: 157). Narrative fragmentation appears here as defence against the logic of emplotment, which moulds the raw material of memory into a coherent story, and distances it even further from the real past.[48] Haug notes that as a source of knowledge experiences are 'highly deceptive':

> They are themselves a product, a botched job, nothing 'authentic' or valid in themselves. On the other hand, there is no alternative reliable source of that production process that constitutes the historical self, identity, apart from the experiences of the individual. Experiences are both the quicksand on which we cannot build and the material with which we build. (Haug 2000: 156)

Nevertheless, for Haug, as well as for Ugrešić, the deconstruction of fragmented memories is a cautious path into a (relatively) authentic past. In a playfully allegorical scene of her novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (which, as I have already mentioned, is a kind of novelistic companion piece to *The Lexicon*, as well as for *The Culture of Lies*), Ugrešić's authorial narrator is represented as blessed (or cursed) by an angel to remember the past her countrymen (friends and colleagues) have decided or allowed themselves to forget; as she puts it, while they were bequeathed "complete oblivion", she was given "tattered remembrance" (Ugrešić 1998a: 225). Tattered and fragmented, maybe, but remembrance, and an authentic one, nevertheless; for Jergović, however, matters are somewhat different.

In the book version of *Historijska čitanka*, framed as it is by the "Introduction" (subtitled "Why Remember") and the "Epilogue", there appears a significant difference in the manner in which the material is treated (and which becomes more visible in the collection as a whole than it was in the individually published pieces in the *Dani* column). "Neither

[48] On this, see also Middleton and Woods 2000: 9, 94.

history nor fiction", *Historijska čitanka* is, in Jergović's words, "an inventory of an utterly subjective history," in which "names and dates have been remembered wrongly, some towns have been confused with others," and what matters is, effectively, not the factual accuracy of memories but their inner truth for the remembering subject (Jergović 2000: 5). Whereas in her work Ugrešić does not radically problematize the authenticity or reliability of memory (she simply distinguishes between those who choose to remember their past lives as they lived them in their fragmented authenticity, and those who decide to adapt to the present by more or less opportunistically reconstructing their past), a very clear awareness of the "constructedness" of memory in general is present throughout Jergović's work, even in his most nostalgic moments.[49] He clearly states in the "Introduction" that his collection of short essays "does not talk about real events, but about memory of real events and about the strategy of forgetting" (Jergović 2000: 5). In its compulsion to tell stories about the past, while doubting their factual historical truth, *Historijska čitanka* is on the one hand a seductive mythologisation of the pre-war Sarajevo, and, on the other, its own doubting and self-conscious de-mythologiser, often talking with a sense of wonder or irony about things that in the past would have been considered as perfectly normal.[50] As such, it is closer to a later version of oral history, one which is fully aware that mythologisation and ideologically marked reconstructions of the past belong to both official and unofficial histories, and that neither is a door into the authenticity of the past. As Raphael Samuel says, "[m]emory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force; […] it is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers – and […] it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather than being some kind of negative to it" (Samuel 1996: x). Or, in the words of Susannah Radstone:

> [U]nder the impact of post-1960s cultural theory, it quickly became apparent that the memories transcribed by oral historians did not simply constitute the record of unheard histories of working-class, female or ethnic interviewees. Instead, what began to be recognised was the highly mediated nature of "memory". Memories were not simply counter-histories that could straight-

[49] Although he was at the time just as critical as Ugrešić of people who have opportunistically changed their biographies to fit into the present political circumstances (see Jergović 1998).

[50] An example of the tension between mythologisation and its gently ironic deconstruction can be found in almost every essay of *Historijska čitanka*.

> forwardly challenge the legitimising force of "H"istory. Instead, they were complex productions shaped by diverse narratives and genres and replete with absences, silences, condensations and displacements that were related, in complex ways, to the dialogic moment of their telling. (Radstone 2000a: 11)

In another essay Radstone adds:

> [M]uch of this memory work has been marked by an acute awareness of memory's status as *representation*. Thus, for instance, oral historians have analysed the emplotments, genres and tropes of particular memories (Passerini 1987, Chamberlain and Thompson 1998), producing analyses that contest the notion that either history or memory can deliver "truth", but foregrounding, rather, analytic methods that focus on how memory produces its representations of the past (Carter and Hirschkop 1997: vi). (Radstone 2000b: 84–85)

Jergović's *Historijska čitanka* (like Ugrešić's *Lexicon*) uses almost all of Samuel's pathways into popular memory: autobiography (ballads, songs, stories learned in childhood), local lore (place-names, legends and histories), the hidden curriculum in schools ("the whole spectrum of learning experiences which have no part in the official syllabus" or "the lore of the corridor and the playground"; Samuel 1996: x) – while at the same time doubting that such insights can give us a direct opening into the past, rather than providing us simply with a more intimate and humane version of it (since both personal memory and official history are defined as historically conditioned restructurings of the past).

Myth in this context appears not as the reviled corrupter of historical reality (as in Barthes 1993/1957) which would provoke the "instinct" to "devalue it, to rob its of its mysteries, to bring it down to earth," in the manner Samuel and Thompson describe. In their "Introduction" to *The Myths We Live By*, they comment that "[r]ecently spurred on by the revelations of Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), […] historians seem happiest at work puncturing legends, proving the modernity of much of what passes for old, showing the artificiality of myth and its manipulable, plastic character"; but then they add a sentence which is crucial for Jergović's treatment of Sarajevo's past: "Yet myth is a fundamental component of human thought" (Samuel and Thompson 1990: 4). It is as if Jergović took up Samuel's and Thompson's suggestion:

> We need as historians to consider myth and memory, not only as special clues to the past, but equally as windows on the making and remaking of individual and collective consciousness, in which both fact and fantasy, past and present, each has its part. (Samuel and Thompson 1990: 21)

Whether he is weaving his stories about football players or about adored and reviled teachers, about the parental habits of his parents' generation or about significant greengrocers, Jergović is aware of both why at the time there was a need to turn people and everyday phenomena into personalities and events of mythical significance, and in what ways these myths departed from what would have been realistically a more likely state of affairs (a football player could never be as good or as bad as he was seen by fans and opponents; and a strict teacher probably simply loved his subject a bit too much and couldn't understand why his pupils were too lazy to study). Jergović's stories about Sarajevo, often presented at their core from a child's or teenager's perspective, often told in the second person singular or first person plural when talking about everyday rituals (drawing the reader into a past that he or she may not have shared in the same way), are rich in detail and shameless in their emotional (and sentimental) nakedness, and yet they also repeatedly comment on the role of exaggerated emotion and naivete in the creation of the mythical elements of these stories. *Historijska čitanka* puts a spell on the reader and at the same time disrupts the very magic it itself wove. According to Jergović, this is characteristic of all childhood and youth memories; strong emotions, the need for magic and the belief that we are experiencing lives that are special and unique, are a part of childhood and youth, and they remain a part of our memories of those times even after we stop seeing the world through a child's eyes. Sarajevo is in *Historijska čitanka* deservedly granted the tenderness for its mythology and the intimate mythologies of its children that Roland Barthes refused to grant his native bourgeois France in his *Mythologies* (but to which he to a degree returned in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*).

Jergović is fully aware of the banality of many of the phenomena that his myths are based on; in the "Introduction" he likens the need for remembrance to the tenderness you (that implicating second person[51]) feel when you see the little black bag in the hands of a coach conductor and remember how you used to feel sick on the bus when going down to the coast as a child – and yet, how do you tell that story and how can you possibly explain to anyone why it is that you are so glad that you suddenly remembered your own childhood sickness which for years had never crossed your mind? (Jergović 2000: 6).

[51] Used to similar effect in the opening story ("Izlet") of Jergović's *Sarajevski Marlboro* (1996).

Jergović's writing about memory has a certain 'insinuating', shameless quality about it which prevents its readers from distancing themselves from it; it is difficult to not to sound just a little bit melodramatic when talking about Jergović's treatment of memory.

Mama Leone

As Jergović's novelistic companion to *Historijska čitanka*, *Mama Leone* displays a similar type of disarming emotional exposure. The book itself consists of two parts, the first ("Kad sam se rodio, zalajao je pas na hodniku rodilišta" / "When I Was Born a Dog Barked in the Corridor of the Maternity Hospital") being a self-enclosed novel-length tale of childhood, while the second ("Tog dana završavala je jedna dječja povijest" / "On That Day a Childhood Tale Ended") consists of individual short stories about war and exile, which share none of the characters or plot-lines with the first part or with each other. The first part could rightly be treated separately from the second (which in turn could be seen as a separate collection of short stories). However, the overall effect is unmistakable: although the first part ("When I Was Born…") ends with a wartime episode and thus clearly frames its own nostalgia for a less than perfect childhood in the context of a forever lost world, the mutually unconnected narratives about desperate, broken and meaningless lives contribute to a sense of loss of the connection between past and present identities, between memories and present lives of post-Yugoslavs.[52] With that note, I wish nevertheless to concentrate mainly on the first part, as its treatment of the subject of memory is rich enough to be considered on its own; however, let us for the purpose of the rest of this study bear in mind that the second part introduces a world in post-war disarray.

The title of the first part is at the same time the beginning of its first sentence, with the opening story of how, when the narrator (little Miljenko) was born and was screaming and hungrily gulping in air, horrified by the world and yet overwhelmingly attracted towards life, a dog barked in the corridor of the maternity hospital, and the doctor who delivered him angrily swore at a country where children are born in kennels. The narrator continues:

[52] Themes which are also explored in Jergović's 2000 play *Kažeš anđeo* and 2002 novel *Buick Rivera*.

> Kada sam kasnije prepričavao ovaj događaj, najprije majci, pa ocu, a čim sam porastao i prijateljima, odmahivali su i govorili da izmišljam, da se ničega ne mogu sjećati, a pogotovu da nije moguće kako sam s prvim plačem počeo donositi ontološke zaključke. (Jergović 1999: 7)[53]

The disbelief of his family and friends forces the narrator to realise that people will consider you a fool if you tell the truth, but will believe you as soon as you start telling conventional lies. The first two pages of the novel thus open up the problem of the relationship between memory, truth and fabrication, and the approach towards it is complex from the start. On the one hand, the narrator provides us with such fine detail for that first, improbable memory (and the narrator's listeners are quite right, such a clear memory of the first moments of one's life is indeed an impossibility), that one wants to believe him; but on the other, the apparent disarming honesty about his realisation of people's attitude to unconvincing truth and convincing lies (and the nature of his first memory claim would qualify it as either) makes us seriously question his reliability from the start.

And then the doubt disappears: the narrator starts weaving a rich tapestry of childhood stories told from the perspective of himself as a child, disclosing every painfully embarrassing moment, trauma, confusion and suffering that a child goes through, so that it is difficult to see how that type of exposure could be anything other than an honest representation of the past. Furthermore, once we find out that the narrator shares his first name with the author, thus suggesting that this text is of an autobiographical nature, the need to believe in its truth is heightened even further. The story, although clear in outline, does not have a chronology that can be easily reconstructed in its every detail. What is clear is that the boy's parents divorce when he is very small, he spends most of the first seven or eight years of his life with his maternal grandparents in Drvenik (a small town in Dalmatia), but after his grandfather dies he comes back to Sarajevo to live with his mother and grandmother. Individual episodes often have only a vague temporal setting (and it is often the spatial setting – Sarajevo or Drvenik – that gives us a better clue), and many are iterative (i.e. stories about habitual events). The first part of *Mama Leone* fits in perfectly with Annette Kuhn's description of what a 'memory text' usually looks like:

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[53] "When later I talked of this event, first to my mother, then to my father, and as soon as I grew up to friends as well, they waved it off, said I was making it up, that I couldn't possibly remember any of that, and they especially refused to believe that I started reaching ontological conclusions with my first screams."

> Literally, formally, or simply in terms of atmosphere created, the tenses of the memory text do not fix events to specific moments of time or temporal sequences. Events are repetitive or cyclical ("at one time…"); or seem to be set apart from fixed orders of time ("once upon a time…"). Relatedly, events narrated or portrayed in memory text often telescope or merge into one another in the telling; so that a single recounted memory might fuse together a series of possibly discrete events. Or events might follow one another in no apparent temporal sequence, or have no obvious logical connection with one another. The memory text is typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, "snapshots", flashes. (Kuhn 2000: 189–190)

The temporal "messiness" and fragmented chronology provide an additional authenticity effect where these childhood memories are concerned: they come into the narrative as if through a process of free association, and this, in combination with the embarrassing openness of the narrator, creates the impression that this "autobiography" is free from any self-censorship or memory-distorting emplotment.

A precocious child, Miljenko the narrator mostly spends his time with adults, and his grandparents and their friends in particular. His insistence on taking part in and listening to adult conversations is what drives the narrative forward, but, as a character, it also exposes him to traumatic experiences which are mostly connected with the partial and incompletely processed acquisition of knowledge about the adult world. Furthermore, this brings us to the problem of remembrance and forgetting as my main point of interest here, for most of such episodes are connected with stories about the past, as well as with the theme of death. The three topics (adult knowledge as seen by children, memory and death) are closely interrelated in *Mama Leone*, particularly through the recurrent idea that the death of somebody means not just the loss of a life but also the loss of a life-story and of a world of memories.

Constantly listening in on adult conversations, being intrigued and horrified in turn (or sometimes even at the same time) by the stories he overhears, the boy's curiosity and normal childish indiscretion often leave his parents and grandparents at a loss as to how much they should be telling him about things he only partly understands. "Do all grown-ups have conversations as terrifying as yours?", he asks his grandmother at one point, after his mother had had an operation everyone tried to conceal from him (Jergović 1999: 50). Nosy and precocious as he is, and hungry for fantasy and drama, Miljenko is eager to search the past and present lives of those around him in the hope that he will stumble upon some dark

secret or amusing scandal. The first time such an episode appears in the text is already in the first chapter, when the search for family secrets finds him at the age of sixteen rummaging through the family members' wardrobes when nobody is at home, when he discovers a box that reveals to him that his maternal uncle died in the Second World War as a soldier in the German Army (Jergović 1999: 9–16). What is important about the fact that such a late event in his childhood appears so early on in the text is that we come across his curiosity at a time when he is mature enough to recognise the trauma hiding behind the hidden little box with the German uniform buttons, so instead of asking his grandmother about her lost son, he asks his mother who is capable of coping with his questions about that part of the family history. This puts the rest of the narrative into perspective when it comes to the younger Miljenko's attempts at playing the family detective and provides a clearer context for his frustration when his painfully straightforward curiosity is left unsatisfied. Although often commenting on the lack of understanding or ineptitude of the adults around him to cope with his keen curiosity, that clear indication at the beginning of the text that he could cause his family some real pain by poking at their emotional wounds out of a sheer infantile desire for drama and adventure, keeps the reader from having an uncritical sympathy for his childish perspective. Moreover, the portraits of the adults around him are sympathetic throughout: his wise and understanding maternal grandparents (with whom he spends much of his early childhood on the Dalmatian coast, due to his grandfather's asthma) and of inept, perpetually worried divorced parents (both of whom are shrewdly seen by the child as too young and clumsy, and he is prepared to indulge their little eccentricities and weaknesses). Far from romanticising the innocence of a child's mind or creating the image of the child-narrator as a victim of uncomprehending adults, the text (through the narrator's adult self) works behind the child-narrator's back and keeps the reader aware that much of Miljenko's pain and embarrassment are due to his own (perfectly understandable and typically childish) mistrust and wilfulness than purely to what adults around him do or say. But the child-narrator's perspective is not there just to be disclosed as unreliable; on the contrary, it is essential to the text's treatment of trauma and memory.

The second theme closely interlinked with the theme of memory is the theme of death. Characters seem to do little else but appear in the narrative and then die or disappear before we get to know much about them. What we do find out only makes us desire to know more, but the narrative perspective mostly remains limited to what Miljenko is capable of

understanding and what the adults around him are prepared to explain. For example, the characters of Momčilo, a prematurely retired army officer and his wife Mirjana (there is a hint that he retired early because of some political intrigue, but this is never explained), Hans and his wife Staka (who met while she, as a fifteen year old partisan, was guarding him as a German prisoner after the Second World War, and whose story little Miljenko finds very amusing and tells it charmingly, but which nevertheless contains a deeper background we never learn anything about), Nikola (who dies of tuberculosis because his family considered the illness a family disgrace and he never sought treatment), Miljenko's great uncle Nano (who travels the world and brings Miljenko fascinating presents, and then one day falls into a coma and dies), are all portrayed with much warmth and interest, and yet their life stories do not go beyond the narrator's infantile (albeit intelligent) understanding. To a large extent, he takes their existence in his life for granted, and asks questions about their life-stories only after they are gone. This is true of almost every character who appears in the story, and is another part of the authenticity-effect of this childhood memoir. However, the story of "Auntie Doležal" provides us with one of the most explicit examples of this process of vanishing memories, as well as offering us one of its most powerful symbols.

Auntie Doležal, Miljenko's grandmother's friend whose husband died in a concentration camp in the Second World War, has (to Miljenko, a clearly fascinating) habit of speaking about her long dead husband as if he were still very much a part of her life and could at any point come back home. It seems as if the pain of his death is domesticated and tamed by her constant mention of his memory. And yet, the trauma, which she tries to keep bearable by treating it as an everyday, almost banal phenomenon, finally shows its true (unbearable) nature when one day she loses all her memory of her past life, apparently for no other reason than the desire to forget everyone she ever knew (Jergović 1999: 183–194). The pain of remembering the husband who will never return and the daughter who died young and suddenly, the pain of knowledge that she had no family and hardly any friends left, became insufferable to the point where oblivion was the only way out; as the narrator puts it: "there was nothing for her to forget, because all she now forgot had already been long dead" (Jergović 1999: 193).

The last time Miljenko sees her, just before she loses all her memory, he (probably for the first time) gets to spend some time alone with her in her flat; although curious about photographs and mementoes he sees

around him, he quickly realises that all of them carry sad memories for her, and he gives up asking any of the questions that truly interest him, and asks for a story instead. The "story" she tells him is about a little girl, called Zaboravka ("forgetful" or "oblivion") who always forgot everything she was ever told and anyone asked her to do. Auntie Doležal is clearly delighted (in a slightly strange, almost child-like manner) with her own story, but Miljenko is puzzled: there is no plot in it, nothing happens to Zaboravka but the fact that she forgets everything. Nevertheless, he decides that, although the story is strange (not really a story at all), Zaboravka needs help, and he suggests that the reason why she always forgot things was because nothing ever stayed the same; what she should have is a house with identical rooms where she could live on her own and never expose herself to any changes that might cause her to forget anything.

When Auntie Doležal loses her memory, he starts building Lego castles with identical rooms for Zaboravka, who becomes a queen of the kingdom of all the things forgotten, and he likens Auntie Doležal to her strange fictional creation:

> Ja vjerujem da je teta Doležal onoga ponedjeljka, na povratku iz trgovine, sve nas, žive i mrtve, namjerno zaboravila. Namjerno je zaboravila i gdje joj je stan i tko su svi ti ljudi na slikama i čije nalivpero na radnome stolu stoji već trideset godina i za koje je to goste kupila petit beurre kekse. Postala je Zaboravka, a sve čega se nekada sjećala ostavila je nama na čuvanje. (Jergović 1999: 193)[54]

And, indeed, although Miljenko's grandmother cannot bear to see her friend again after her memory loss, she suddenly starts talking about her life, each day telling new stories that Miljenko and his mother had never heard before and that would have probably been left untold had Auntie Doležal continued to remember them herself. As with all the other characters who come into *Mama Leone* only to captivate us and then disappear before we can hear their life stories, Auntie Doležal's memories are taken for granted for as long they can potentially, at some point when somebody shows an interest, be recalled and told by her. When she, as the narrator

[54] "I believe that on that Monday, returning from the shop, Auntie Doležal forgot all of us, dead and living, on purpose. She forgot where she lived on purpose, and who all those people in the pictures were, and whose pen had been sitting on the writing desk for the last thirty years and who were the guests for whom she had bought the biscuits. She became Zaboravka, and everything she once remembered she handed over to us to remember in her place."

of her own life, is gone, the need to tell the story of that life before it is lost forever is felt with acute urgency.

The leitmotiv of Miljenko's building a castle for Queen Oblivion keeps returning throughout the novel, the symbol of the need to hold on to memories, of the desperate desire to keep the world as it is not because it is good but simply so that it does not get forgotten. We only find out the meaning of the frequent mention of Zaboravka and her castle almost at the end of the novel, but their significance and link with trauma and forgetting are one of the most important elements of *Mama Leone*.

Why Remember?

Having a narrator who speaks from the perspective of a child, but nevertheless has his own adulthood and wartime experience behind him, perfectly supports the complex interconnectedness of the themes of the acquisition of adult knowledge, memory and death. The adult world in *Mama Leone* is saturated with pain and trauma, which have to be kept hidden or controlled in the presence of the child who is to tell us about them; but the child's own sensitivity and interest is what brings out these lives into such a strong relief. The adults around Miljenko are reluctant to tell him of the traumatic past of the people he loves or is interested in, but the result of that is often that, once the subjects of his interest are dead or gone, there is nobody left who could tell those stories, and a world of memories about the past is lost forever. The need to prevent past traumas from being passed on to the next generation, but also the awareness that most knowledge worth having is closely linked with the traumatic experiences of those who have lived rich lives, creates an almost impossible aporia at the heart of *Mama Leone*'s first part.

When Nikola, the unfortunate tuberculosis patient, finally dies of his shameful illness for which he never sought a cure, Miljenko is deeply frustrated with his grandparents for not letting him go out to see his dead body:

> Uvijek bude tako, čim se u Drveniku nešto zanimljivo događa, ja to ne mogu vidjeti i uvijek mi govore da ovo nije cirkus, da to nije za mene i da bi mi bilo pametnije da šutim i ne pitam ništa. Na kraju ću propustiti sve važne stvari, pa kad me u Sarajevu budu pitali šta ima u Drveniku moći ću reći da ne znam šta ima jer mi djed i baka nisu dali da vidim ima li išta. (Jergović 1999: 125)[55]

[55] "It's always like that; as soon as something interesting happens in Drvenik, I can't go and see it and I'm always told that it's not a circus, that it's not for me, and that it would be much better if I were to be quiet and not ask anything. In the end I'll miss all the

When his grandfather finally relents and takes him to see the place where Nikola died, Miljenko suddenly realises the full meaning of Nikola's death. He had expected to see something at the spot where the man died, but the perfect inconspicuousness of it shocked him into realisation that death leaves no trace behind it, no sign that a person once lived and was now gone:

> Ako nema toga, onda nema ni razloga za umiranje, a ako nema razloga za umiranje, tada je nesreća veća od jednoga plakanja. Takva je da nikada ne prestaneš plakati kad ti umre neko drag. (Jergović 1999: 127–128)[56]

He asks his grandfather why people die, and is told that this is because they grow old and because there would be no room left if people were only to come into the world and never die. When Miljenko suggests that it would then be much better if people were to stop both being born and dying so that only those we know and love would always be with us, and not die just to make room for some new ones we know nothing about, and who may never be as good as the ones we love. The grandfather replies:

> Puno je ljudi boljih od mene, ali ih nisi dosta upoznao. Vidjet ćeš kad odrasteš… […] Kad umrem, vidjet ćeš koliko je boljih ljudi. Bolji će biti prijatelji, bolja će biti žena koju oženiš i bolja će biti tvoja djeca. Svi će oni biti bolji od mene i jednom ti više neće biti žao što sam ja umro… (Jergović 1999: 128)[57]

The tragedy of the first part of *Mama Leone*, seen especially in the light of the second part (with its stories of broken lives and desperate people), is that the world in which Miljenko was growing up collapsed before it became possible to discover whether his grandfather was right. The feeling of loss that accompanied each character as their life stories and intimate worlds of memory slipped out of reach is all the more greater when a whole world of collective memories is being destroyed, as is the need to build a

important things, and when they ask me in Sarajevo if there's anything new in Drvenik, I'll only be able to say that I don't know because Granny and Granddad wouldn't let me go out and see if there was anything."

[56] "And without that, there is no reason for dying, and if there is no reason, then the sorrow is much greater than a single cry. It becomes so great that you would never stop crying when someone dear to you dies."

[57] "There are plenty of people who are better than me, but you haven't met them yet. You'll see when you grow up… […] When I die, you'll see how many people better than me there are. Your friends will be better, the woman you marry will be better and your children will be better. They'll all be better than me, and one day you won't be sad about my death any more..."

castle for Princess Oblivion, to preserve what is familiar before it disappears, no matter how traumatic those memories may be in themselves. For as long as they exist, someone could be found who will understand them and preserve them further; but once gone, a part of a world and its history is gone forever.

So desperate is this need in *Mama Leone* that it may well be that the narrator's carefully preserved authenticity of the past is just a carefully constructed fabrication, a simulacrum of childhood memories designed to cover up a memory loss similar to that of Zaboravka and Auntie Doležal. We have already looked at the opening paragraph of the novel, with its improbable memory of the narrator's own birth, and its suspicious stance on unbelievable truths and conventional, believable lies. At the end of the novel, the narrator remembers an incident when he was little, when he decided that he must remember a particular moment, the moment when he suddenly sensed the scents of the sea, of pine and olive oil at the same time; the story then moves fast forward to two scenes with his girlfriend (themselves separated by five years, the second set in the war), reflecting an earlier comment that "the older I got, the faster the flow of time was; […] and it seems to me that the largest part of my life happened then, when I was seven years old" (Jergović 1999: 33); and then ends with an unexpected reversal:

> Ne pamtim te važne trenutke, zaboravim čim kažem *ovoga se moraš sjećati*. Život bi bio dug kad bih se više sjećao. Zaboravio sam skoro sve. Osim ono kad trčim od obale do kampa ili ono kad pazim da mama ne kaže *labrnja*. Drugo je nestalo. Nestale stvari dijele se na one koje sam mogao sačuvati i one koje su se pretvorile u niz mojih malih smrti. (Jergović 1999: 214)[58]

It is here that the song "Mama Leone", heard by accident on the radio, is mentioned for the first time:

> Maloprije, uključim radio, bog te pita koja stanica, ali naša svakako nije, kad ono svira pjesma Mama Leone. Opet sam se sjetio mirisa mora, mirisa borovine i mirisa maslinova ulja u isto vrijeme. I svega što je iz mirisa nastalo. Ne

[58] "I don't remember those important moments, I forget them as soon as I say: 'You must remember this.' My life would be long if I could remember more. I've forgotten almost everything. Except the bit where I run from the shore to the camp or when I'm taking care not to get told off by Mum. Everything else is gone. Things that are gone are divided into those I could have preserved and those that have become a series of small deaths."

znam kakve veze ima ta pjesma, ali sigurno ima jer dolazi iz nečega što sam zaboravio, iz neke od onih malih smrti. (Jegović 1999: 215)[59]

This is the first time that the song "Mama Leone" is mentioned and it appears to have no concrete connection with the narrator's childhood memories. If its purpose is to be Jergović's *madeleine*, then it is a *madeleine* with no explicit relation to the past, and all it brings back is the awareness that something has been forgotten, and a vague sensory recollection that leaves us stranded with that unclear phrase: "everything that comes out of those scents". Everything? – the story of childhood we have just read, or just a vague sense that that childhood once existed but that even its protagonist cannot remember it anymore?

If we go back through the text, we then start noticing a few comments (not many, but just enough to rouse our suspicion) that indicate that the memory of Miljenko's childhood years could be just a fabrication: not only that suspicious first memory, but several moments when the narrator says things like: "She allegedly cried with happiness, but why I cried, that I don't know because I don't remember anything" (Jergović 1999: 104), or "that was rather stupid, so I don't remember what happened next" (Jergović 1999: 209). Furthermore, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the majority of those early childhood memories could only exist "second-hand", through the stories of the adults who were the observers of Miljenko's childhood; and one questions how accurate their memory was or how well the narrator himself remembered their stories.

The reader is faced with a choice: either to believe that the narrator possesses the real memory of his childhood and marvel at the detail of those early memories; or to take those little hints of the narrator's lack of memory and interpret the novel as a carefully constructed hyper-realist family fantasy, a tapestry of realistic screen memories (Freud 1991) designed to hide the non-existence of any real childhood memory. Whereas Freud defined screen memories as random childhood memories which screen off important, traumatic childhood events, there is a possibility that there are no repressed memories in the case of Jergović's Miljenko: just oblivion. This is far from being a blessing, for the world in which forgotten events would have happened has disappeared and the only place where it can be

[59] "A moment ago I turned on the radio, God knows which station, but it certainly isn't one of ours, and they were playing the song 'Mama Leone'. Once again I remembered the smell of the sea, of pine and of olive oil all at the same time. And everything that comes out of those scents. I don't know what significance that song has, but it must come from something that I've forgotten, from one of those small deaths."

preserved is in the memories of those who lived in it. Although the layers of trauma in the adult world of *Mama Leone* (including the second part) are deep, and although the danger of their transfer to the next generation is considerable, the horror of oblivion is even greater. Auntie Doležal could peacefully let go of her memories because she knew that Miljenko's grandmother still possessed them and that Miljenko had a solution for Zaboravka's forgetfulness. But how can Jergović's narrator let go of his scarce memories if not only all those other witnesses of his early childhood (his grandparents and their friends) are dead, but the world in which that childhood was lived out is gone as well? Moreover, how can he allow himself to forget, when his remembrance of his childhood contains the memory of the lost life stories of those he knew as a child?

The first part of *Mama Leone* could be interpreted as Jergović's castle for Princess Oblivion, an artifice designed to trap both memories and any narratives that might resemble them. With the world of the past falling apart and leaving no tangible traces of itself, other than a deep sense of loss, pain and confusion (as described in the second part of the book), the first part of *Mama Leone* is a desperate attempt to preserve the world which can only exist in the fragile, flawed memories of those who lived in it, even if that means filling in the gaps with fantasy and fabrication. One of the main impressions that *Mama Leone* leaves us with is the sense that the reality of the past is slipping through our fingers as experience is turned into memory, and memory is turned into stories and myth. This quality is shared with the essays in *Historijska čitanka*; both are permeated with a keen sense of loss and nostalgia, with a shameless and irresistible discourse of bare and raw emotionality, some of which could not but rub off on the tone of this chapter.

However, the question that this leaves us with is this: if memories are constructed out of mourning for the dead, and for lost worlds; if they are constructed out of emptiness those losses leave behind; if oblivion comes so easily and can seem like a safe haven amidst the pain of history – how do we hold onto those memories, as well as onto our own humanity?

Chapter 4: Milomir Kovačević's War Photographs: How to Avoid Dehumanising a Traumatised Subject

> To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.
>
> Sontag 2008: 14

> If, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas claims, it is the face of the other that demands from us an ethical response, then it would seem that the norms that would allocate who is and is not human arrive in visual form. These norms work to give face and to efface. Accordingly, our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames.
>
> Butler 2009: 77

> We want the photographer to be a spy in the house of love and of death, and those being photographed to be unaware of the camera, "off guard." No sophisticated sense of what photography is or can be will ever weaken the satisfactions of a picture of an unexpected event seized in mid-action by an alert photographer.
>
> Sontag 2003: 44

> Even though atrocity images invoked déjà vu – many photographs from the Balkan wars visually echoed Holocaust photographs – the reference to past atrocity merely "recycled" historical evidence. This may have inhibited moral responses precisely because the reference to the past placed contemporary events in the past as well – the past that is over, done with, that you can do nothing about.
>
> Crane 2008: 324

> I photographed people I knew. They trusted me. They looked into the camera. It was a conscious act.
>
> Milomir Kovačević Strašni,
> in conversation, taken down from memory

Milomir Kovačević Strašni is a Sarajevo photographer with an address in Paris, and with an almost uncanny ability to produce photographs which subtly underline the humanity and dignity of their subjects. Before the war of 1992–1995, Kovačević mostly earned his living as a photojournalist, but for his own artistic pleasure he served as a visual chronicler of Sarajevo's street life, taking pictures of street vendors, children playing in back alleys, postmen on their rounds, young men strutting down streets and playing guitars. These photographs have an exceptional documentary quality which could one day turn them into an inexhaustible source of material for a cultural historian of everyday life in Sarajevo of the 1970s and 1980s; if you want to know what kind of magical soap was sold on the streets of Sarajevo in this period, or what kind of games children played, or what was the relation between front yards and the street in Sarajevo *mahalas*, or what role the pictures of Tito played in the decorations of shop windows during the final years of communism, there is probably at least one Strašni photograph to point you in the right direction. But they also display something else: a lively sense of collaboration between the photographer and his subjects, and a strange sense of direct address of the photograph and its subject towards the immediate viewer.

It is not always easy to pinpoint where it is exactly that this sense of immediacy resides. Sometimes, as is often the case with good photographs, it is in the heart-breaking fleetingness of the moment captured (in one photograph, a boy is holding two doves just about to fly off, for example, or, in another, cigarette smoke is coiling around an old man's white beard, making it impossible to tell the smoke from the beard). At other times, more unusually, it is there in the autoironic knowingness of the person in front of the camera, who appears to communicate directly with the viewer (such is, for example, the joyous laughter of the vendor of the aforementioned magical soap, which is advertised as being capable of removing any kind of stain under the sun, including "blood, sweat, and petroleum derivatives": we laugh when we see the handwritten advertisement, and the vendor is laughing with us, sharing the joke; see Figure 1).

Figure 1: 1980s (pre-war)

And sometimes, the comment is there, directly in the photograph itself, as when a young man, stripped to the waist, is standing in the street, posing for the camera and showing off his muscles, and a middle-aged woman is looking at him from her front door, half ogling him and half wary, as if she'd seen him do this many times before, and is slightly embarrassed by his display; and we can, I think, easily sympathise with her (see Figure 2).

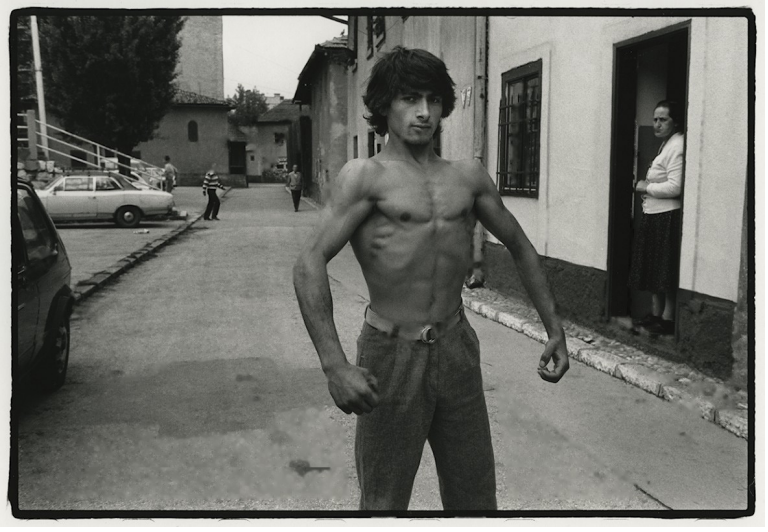

Figure 2: "Tarzan", 1984 (Kovačević 2012, photo 14)

To see the pre-war Sarajevo through Kovačević's camera often means observing a Felliniesque scene of bravado and self-aware mischief and of a strange low-key glamour of everyday life shared by the people who are self-confident in their own sense of belonging to that particular time and place, and who trust the photographer taking their picture to show that. And it also means being invited, by both the photographer and his subject, to take an active part in a knowing and affectionate act of collaboration in the creation of the photograph.

With such a photographic sensibility, Kovačević was faced with the inhumanity and the dehumanising effect of war and the extremes of human suffering it brought with it, and the dehumanising effects of war photography which by the very act of showing people in the extremes of pain and suffering, and, particularly, when faced with the dying, or already dead, does not allow for playful collaboration which ensured the humanity and lightness of his pre-war photographs.

We are all familiar with everyday media images of war, and, to at least some extent, with photographs that have recorded past wars: extremely important as information, as document, and, sometimes, as a call to political action, on the one hand, they on the other have a disturbing tendency to turn the people they show into unwatchable spectacles, into raw bodies we cannot bear to look at and yet the sight of whom is irresistible, into gaping mouths and gaping wounds from whom all individuality and particularity of their specific human situation has been drained. Even though, as Linke points out, "[s]ince the 1990s, beginning with the first Gulf War, [...] [i]mages of US soldiers killed in action and pictographic evidence of dead civilians have been barred from circulation in visual space" (Linke 2010: 80), Susan Sontag was quite right in observing that;

> Information about what is happening elsewhere, called "news", features conflict and violence – "If it bleeds, it leads" runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four-hour headline news shows – to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view. (Sontag 2003: 17)

Images of dead or wounded bodies of American (or, for that matter, European) soldiers, or civilians they happened to kill, may be, effectively, censored (and Sontag's essay points out the long history of the use and censorship and misuse of war and atrocity photographs), but the images of the distant dead and wounded, be they civilians or soldiers, are far from being absent from our screens and printed media alike. Sontag in

her essay explores the uncertain and often ambiguous effect of war (or atrocity) photographs, as disgust, moral outrage (which turn into a call to peace or a call to revenge), sympathy, voyeurism, and shame manifest themselves as the viewer's emotional or intellectual or political reaction; as well as – and this may be the most common and the most disturbing response – an indifference and "compassion fatigue" (Crane 2008: 323), "an increasing atrophy of empathy, a thinning of compassion for the suffering of others" (Linke 2010, 81). But whatever the reaction is, Sontag makes clear the link between the dehumanisation that wars bring on the human beings, soldiers and civilians alike, who live and die in them, and the objectification, the possession (Sontag 2003: 64) that camera brings to bear on the photographed subject. This issue of objectification, of the link between "'shooting' a subject and shooting a human being" (Sontag 2003: 53), was one of the reasons why Crane (2008), among others, has called for a limiting of the wide circulation of atrocity photographs, at least until we have taught ourselves and others how properly to caption and credit them, how to identify the people they show and acknowledge their personhood and agency in some way, how to interpret them, and how to draw from within ourselves an active moral and intellectual response from seeing them. Otherwise, we are, as, Sontag has said as well, just voyeurs, perpetuating the objectification and the dehumanisation that the war victims in front of the camera have suffered.

Sontag also underlines something else that has been mentioned in passing in this essay so far: the link between the geographical, political, cultural and economic distance of the atrocities, wars and suffering shown, and the willingness of the media to show the dehumanised, distressing and distressed face of it. She notes that, in the West, "grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic – that is, colonized – human beings" (Sontag 2003: 57), and inserts the images of the Balkan wars of the nineties into that same tradition of displaying the dehumanised face of the non-European as a spectacle:

> The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying. [...] (That there could be death camps and a siege and civilians slaughtered by the thousands and thrown into mass graves on European soil fifty years after the end of the Second World War gave the war in Bosnia and the Serb campaign of killing in Kosovo their special, anachronistic interest. But one of the main ways of understanding the war

> crimes committed in southeastern Europe in the 1990s has been to say that the Balkans, after all, were never really part of Europe.) (Sontag 2003: 56–57)

However, regardless of the reservations that many historians and critics and theorists of the photographic image have had towards the photograph's ability to represent the pain of others, those reservations come from an acute and frustrated awareness that it is important that we see those images, as an act of human solidarity and of responsibility towards the historical events for which our contemporaneity makes us witnesses. Roland Barthes has named those photographs that call for a calm application of a generalised human interest in the image and the information it conveys the photographs of *studium*, and most journalistic images should fulfill that kind of an information-bearing role. However, even when it comes to simply providing information, media war images are rather unreliable; the spectacle they show can be either too gruesome or too doctored or too clichéd. And when it comes to the erratic, unexpected photographic effect which Barthes has named *punctum*, and which he defined as a destruction of *studium* as the viewer of the photograph is pierced by a sudden, unexpected new knowledge (Barthes 1980: 1126), media war images' failure rate in that respect is rather dispiriting. And yet, this is precisely what the main goal of any war photograph should be: to make us look, and realise with directness and emotion and imagination the presentness of the moment captured and full humanity of those depicted.

So it is instructive to see what a photographer with such a talent and skill for creating photographs which strike one with their immediacy and humanity has done when photographing war, for it is precisely that dehumanising effect of displaying the suffering of others that Milomir Kovačević tried, and, I believe, achieved, in many of his photographs, to counteract. I wish to show ways in which he has done this, the specific methods of inserting the viewer into the picture, of working with the subject as an act of collaboration, of juxtaposing series of similar and contrasting images, of framing and filtering the image shown, and of presenting what is shown as an art-historical reference: all of these for Kovačević have been the means of slowing down the process of perception of what is shown, of preventing merely a shocked, knee-jerk reaction, of making sure that the viewer asks questions of the photograph that lead to a reaction not just of human sympathy, but also to an active understanding of the circumstances and of the broader context to which the depicted scene refers.

Some of Kovačević's photographs are of the kind that make us realise what it is we are seeing, and then quickly look away; or rather, they would, as in this picture of a man lying, dead, on the ground (see Figure 3), were it not for an additional element to the photo: the photographer's shadow.

Figure 3: Željko Ružičić, 1993 (Kovačević 2012, photo 76)

The shadow, its size and markedness equivalent to that of the man on the ground, contrasted by its darkness and lack of detail with the brightness of the man's suit and the fine detail of his image highlighted by the incongruously bright sunshine, can be read metaphorically as the shadow of death. But it can also be seen as the device which forces the viewer into the position of the photographer as a direct witness. Not only does the angle of the camera put us almost directly above the man, but that shadow puts our body in the position of the photographer, placing us, bodily, and not just our gaze, into the position where we have this man lying before our feet. And the question is posed: how would you feel, and what would you do, if it were you seeing this, with a man dead right in front of you? What if you knew who this was (the man is in Kovačević's monograph of his photographs of Sarajevo identified as the journalist Željko Ružičić)? What if he had been killed right in front of you, as Ružičić was in front of Kovačević?

The use of the shadow disables our desire to gaze away, or just to feel a generalised sympathy; we have to look, and imagine what if it were us in that situation. The photograph itself is asking the question Crane asks the students at the end of her course on the Holocaust: "what are you going to do with what you now know?" (Crane 2008: 323).

But there are not many such pictures of the dead amongst Kovačević's war photographs, even though he has used his own shadow on several other occasions. Far more frequent are photographs of the wounded, but they are of a very particular kind. Crane has identified the dehumanising effect of the Nazi atrocity photographs, amongst other things, in the lack of the returning gaze of the victims caught in the moment of pain or humiliation (Crane 2008, 318); but Kovačević's photographs of the wounded present a subject who is doing precisely that which is not expected of it: he or she is posing for the camera, looking at us looking at them, challenging us to see them and to take in what it is that we are seeing. The obvious awareness of the camera and the returning gaze (and in some cases, even a relaxed, friendly smile of a friend posing for a friend) make us face a person choosing to be photographed in this way, and not a generalised image of a victim caught in a moment of pain (see figures 4 and 5).

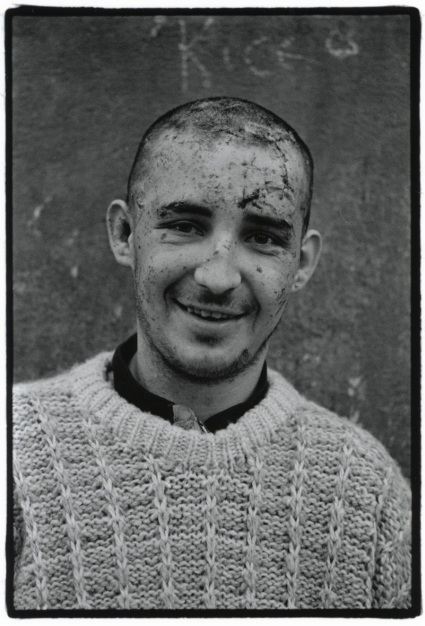

Figure 4: 1992–1995

Figure 5: 1992 (Kovačević 2012, photo 54)

The pose, the active involvement of the photographed subject, and his or her direct gaze to the camera disables both our tendency to look away and any morbid fascination that an image of a mutilated human body could elicit. We are looking at a person, not an injured body.

Photographs of this type are joined by an even more formally posed series of nearly identically staged photographs of mourners carrying a photograph of a dead relative, friend or lover (see figures 6 and 7).

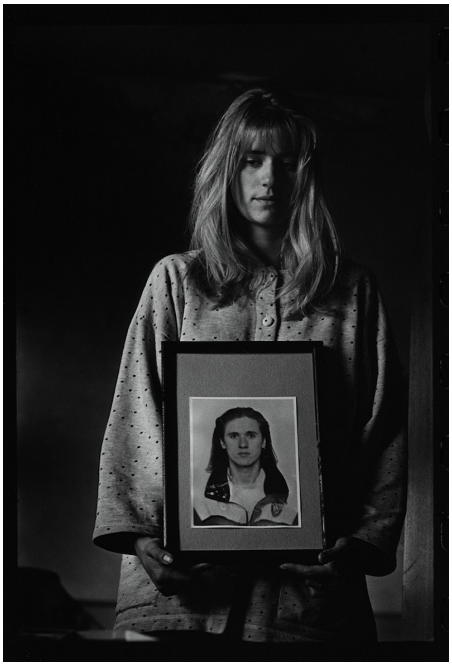

Figure 6: Mirela holding the picture of Igor (Kovačević 2012, photo 62)

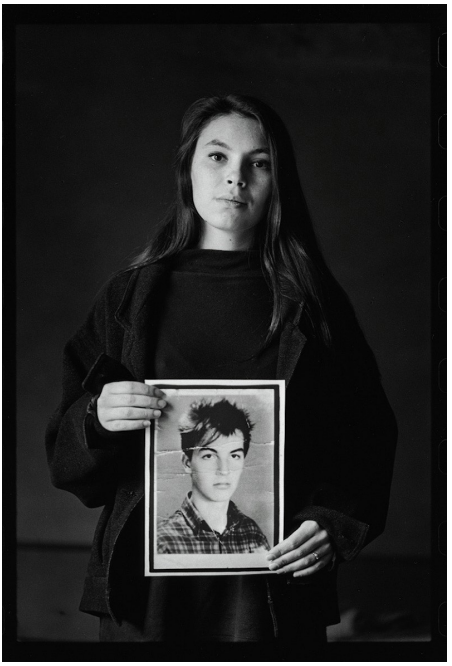

Figure 7: Sandra Gašić and her brother Roman (Kovačević 2012, photo 66)

The point that young die in war in disproportionate numbers is made, but the display of grief is restrained, the face of both the mourner and the mourned shown, and the calm and dignity of the pose invite us to linger on both, and, again, to imagine: what would it be like be this young and to lose somebody that young to a violent death? What would it be like to be surrounded by so many others in the same position?

Contrasted with the series of posed photographs of the wounded or of the mourning girls, there is another double series of photographs: soldiers and small boys with guns. Taken in isolation, some of the portraits of men

with guns look like stereotypical macho images, albeit slightly exaggerated, and hence somewhat ironic (see Figure 8).

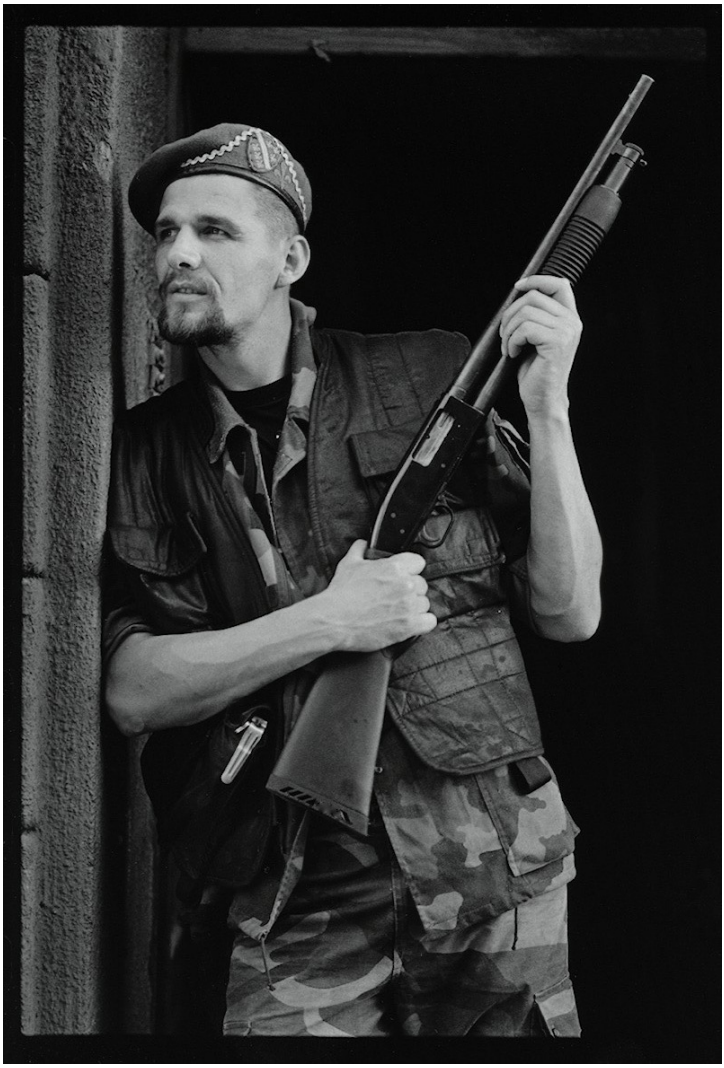

Figure 8: 1992–1995

But contrasted with an image of a small boy carrying something that looks alarmingly like a real part of a uniform (see Figure 9), or a real weapon, the self-satisfied posturing of the handsome soldier is revealed almost as a naive identification of a young man with a particular brand of glamorous martial masculinity, not very different from a small boy's.

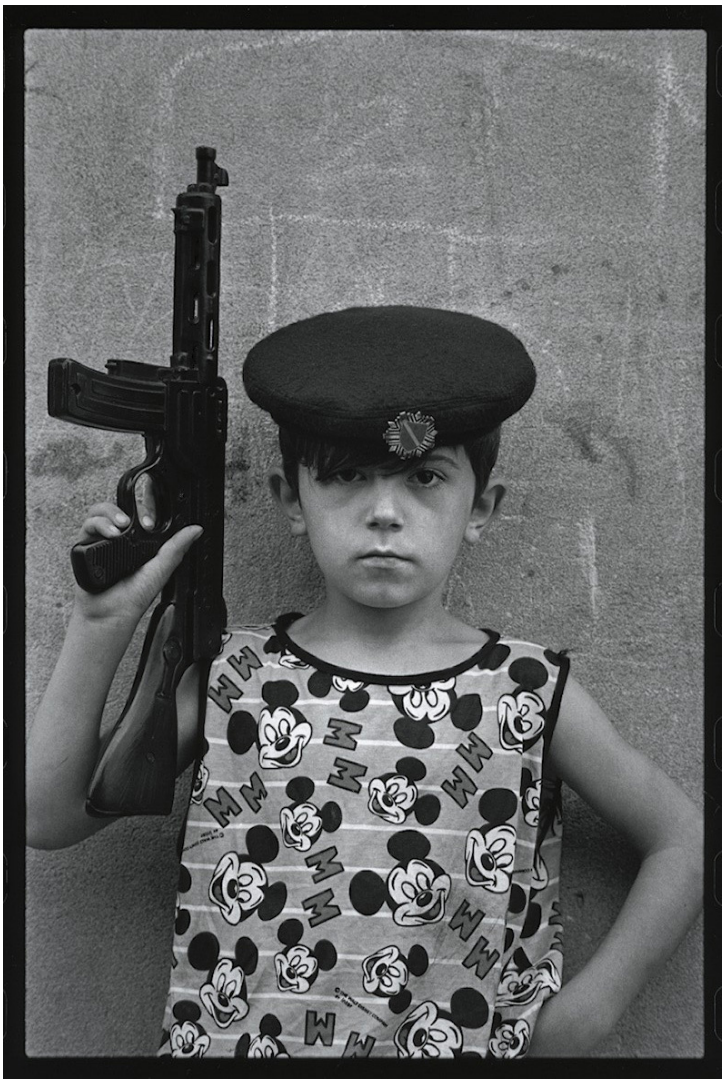

Figure 9: "Miki Maus", 1992 (Kovačević 2012, photo 1)

And when that photograph is contrasted yet again with an image of an older soldier holding something that looks less like a real weapon, and more like a makeshift boys' toy (and yet it is a real weapon, as the besieged city under the arms embargo had to make do with what it could improvise), the practical, entirely unglamorous, side of the Bosnian army life is brought to light (see Figure 10): this is not an image to put on an Army recruitment ad.

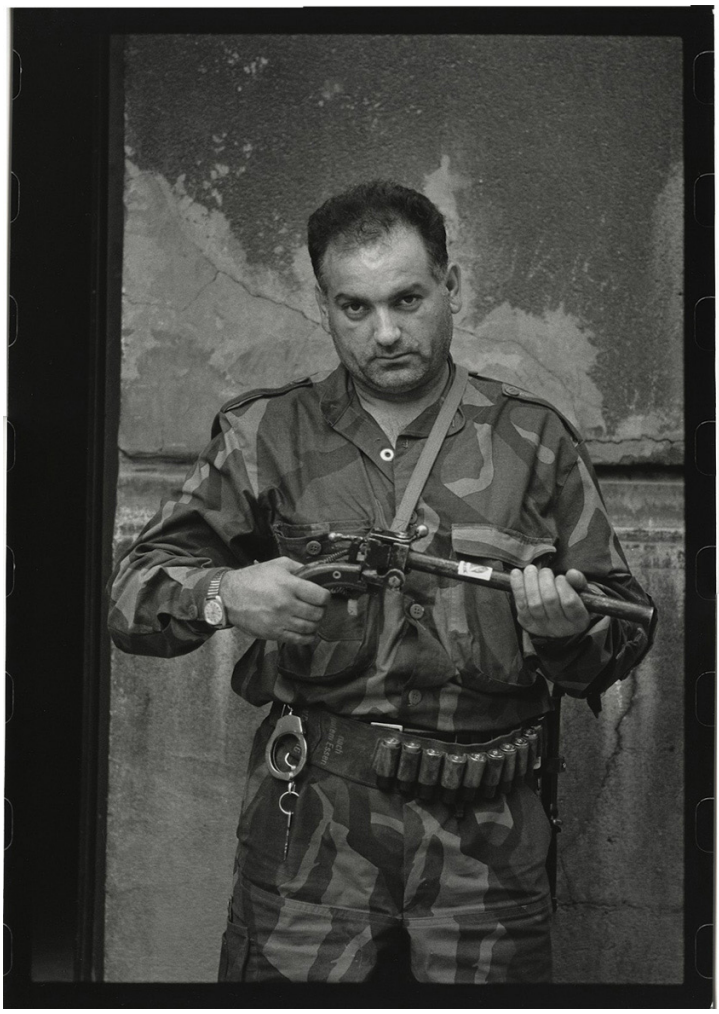

Figure 10: 1992–1995

The notion that war seeps over into children's play, normalises weapons, and from an early age shapes masculinity through identification with militancy and aggression, could be said to be represented by this image of small boys waving flags and weapons and victory signs in a display of macho patriotism, with a small girl standing to the side, as bemused by their naked chests (and a slightly less masculine naked tummy under an outgrown t-shirt) as the middle aged woman from that pre-war image of the young man showing off his muscles in the middle of the street (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: "Solčići", 1992 (Kovačević 2012, photo 63)

But, it could also be seen as an image of innocence that remains innocence: they are playing up, acting, some of them not quite sure how it is done, and their faces seem to be asking for confirmation that they are doing it right. The contrasts that the photograph presents to us (the boys and the girl, the confidence and the demand for reassurance, the seriousness of the business of war and the play into which it has been turned by these children) resist the formation of a single meaning of the overall image. It invites to be looked at, and pondered; and in that time, some understanding of the complexity of the situation to which it refers has the time to develop.

All of these posed series of photographs (and more besides, such as the photographs of children and their toys, which I am not going to discuss here), precisely because they come as series, open up a space of reflection, by presenting contrasts that invite comparison, or because they repeat a variation on a single theme which creates the need for a careful examination of the fine detail. Either way, they have a way slowing down the process of perception, which then allows for the creation of a more nuanced understanding of what is presented, and for an unfolding of a more complex emotional response than a simple: "Oh, this is awful."

Photographs which stand on their own, however, need to utilise other means of achieving this effect. A particularly striking one is the creation of an art-historical reference, or a creation of an image which is visually so strong in a purely aesthetic sense, that it lulls us into a false sense of security that what we are looking at is not a representation of real suffering. We look at these pictures because the portrait of a grieving woman at a funeral, her strong-featured face framed in a headscarf as crisp as drapery on a marble sculpture, could perfectly fit in on a Caravaggio canvas (see Figure 12).

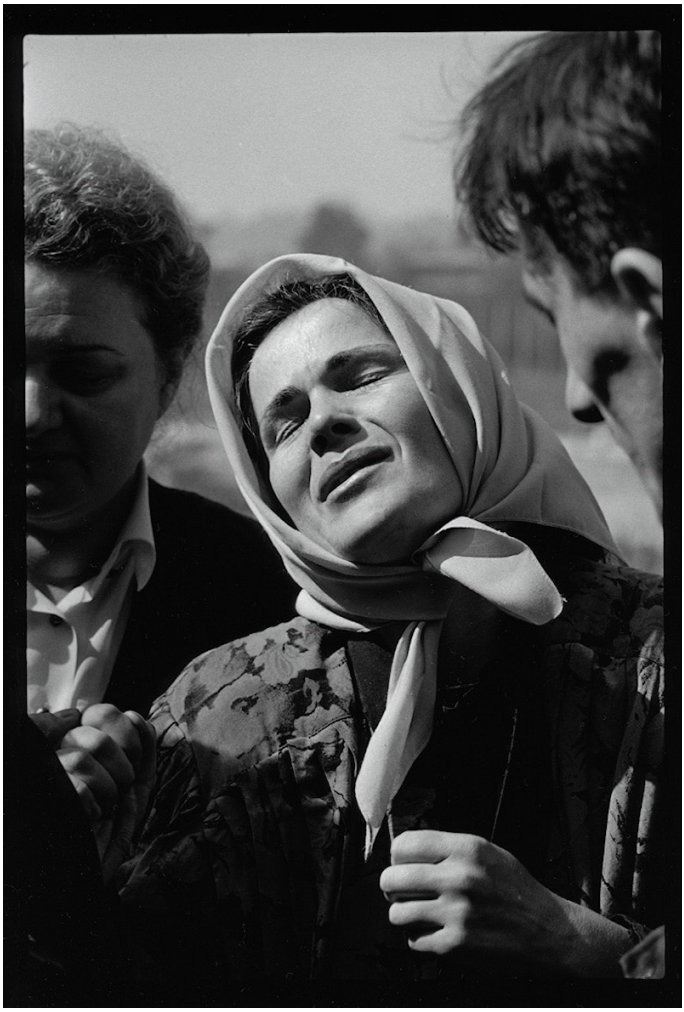

Figure 12: 1992 (Kovačević 2012, photo 51)

Or because the group portrait (possibly taken at a funeral) of a woman trying to restrain her tears, a man resting his head against hers in affection and support, and two children, who look numb with worry or grief, the arms of the woman and the man twined round each other and the children like a shield against the cruelties of pain and loss. Or, as my now colleague Matija Bošnjak noticed when we were discussing this image in class, these arms look like the snakes around Laocoon and his children on so many sculptures and paintings; this second interpretation invites comparisons with all those images of Laocoon trying, amidst the slaughter of his family, futilely, to protect them from the will of the gods (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: 1992 (Kovačević 2012, photo 64)

Or because the photograph of a young woman in a long dress, a child and a man carrying an open umbrella (possibly used as a parasol) to shield his family, could, by its composition, be a Renoir portrait of a family on an outing in a park, were it not for a huge rifle that the man holds in his other hand, almost in exactly the same position in which a man on a Renoir painting would carry a walking stick. The contrast, the incongruity, the familiarity of the composition and the utter strangeness of the casual presence of the rifle in this family scene, create that slowing down effect: we stop, and linger, and examine. And then we can try and imagine the circumstances in which a family would go out equipped in this way, and wonder what it is that they are all three looking at outside of the edge of the photograph, the little girl with such concern on her face (see Figure 14).

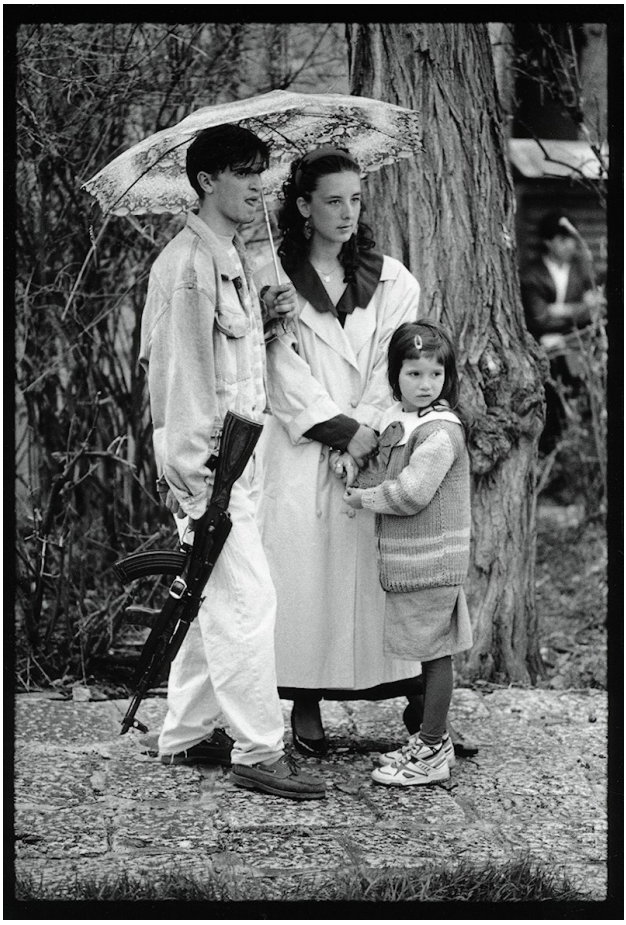

Figure 14: 1992–1995

Or because the image of a corpulent young man lying on the pavement, stretched out in a startlingly elegant and sensuous pose which, if he were a woman, and naked, would belong on a Rubens nude, at first puzzles; and then the realisation hits that he is sheltering from sniper fire (see Figure 15).

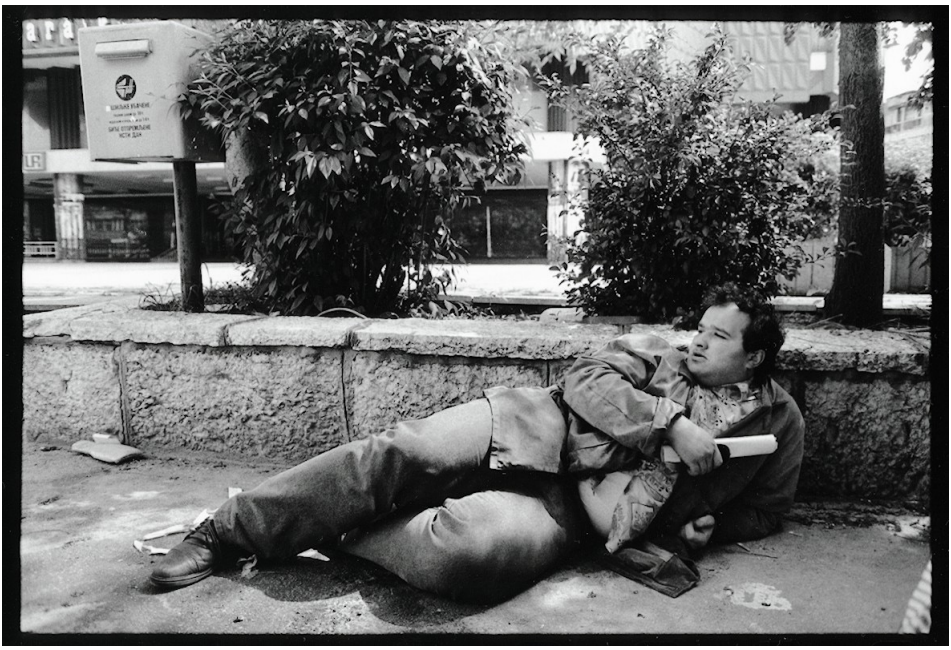

Figure 15: Senad Pećanin, 1992 (Kovačević 2012, photo 96)

All of these images, in their striking beauty of composition and reference to artistic masterpieces of the past, delay their own referentiality to the war situation, creating a space in which it is possible for imagination to play a part in the process of creation of a deeper understanding and a deeper sympathy.

Another series of unposed photographs of unwilling, or unaware, subjects, shows another manner of creating that effect of initial distancing of the viewer in order to pull them in close at a later stage: photographs of people leaving the besieged city on the bus convoys. Taken as portraits, they are framed by bus windows, and filtered through the dirt and rain on the glass. Not always easy to distinguish in detail, the faces of these people nevertheless show a deep distress bordering on numbness, an emotional heaviness which is matched by the oppressiveness of the dirt on the windows through which they have to look, for the last time, at the city

they are leaving and the uncertain and dangerous road that lies ahead. It surely says something that the doll which, bizarrely, seems to be waving good-bye, looks more alive than the woman holding it (for whom? Is there a child with her, or is she taking it with her as a present to a grandchild waiting at the end of her journey?) (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: 1992 (Kovačević 2012, photo 106)

This doll leads us to probably the most striking series of Kovačević's war photographs which achieve the activation of an imaginative understanding of pain, whilst avoiding to show a direct atrocity. It is the series which shows shop window mannequins, torn and damaged and broken, blown out into the street by grenade blasts. These replicas of the human body, fake arms and legs lying on the road, or a head and torso legless and armless (see Figure 17), provide a kind of puppet-show staging of a massacre, but they are also real, in that they were not placed to lie in this way by the photographer, but by the war itself. Their impact is, as with all the other photographs I've discussed here, slow and insidious; they seem safe to look at, non-traumatising to the viewer, until we realise that these could just as easily be real arms and legs and limbless bodies.

Figure 17: 1992–1995

And then, another twist: amidst these photographs, one finds a photo of a young soldier (see Figure 18), lying, bloodied, his skin smooth and his face perfect, like that of a mannequin; and we have to flip our gaze between the mannequin and the soldier, trying to figure out if this is really a dead human being, or just another mannequin, dressed in a military uniform.

But then, even if it were, that blood still came from somewhere; somewhere, this is real, even if he is just a doll; but then, he probably is a man, this death is a real death. The uncertainty, the unnerving, uncanny similarity between the dead man and the killed doll, not only actively engages us emotionally and intellectually in a way that, I believe, no direct image of an atrocity could, but also makes a subtle, and, at the same time, self-critical, self-aware point about the dehumanisation that war brings on those who have to fight and die in it. Here, it says: a dead man and a broken doll. Can you tell them apart? Can you resist the dehumanisation that the war brought, and that the dispassionate camera gaze brings? Can you look at this and keep in mind that these are real people, and not mere photographic images?

Figure 18: 1992–1995

I believe that Judith Butler is not quite right in criticising Sontag for not understanding the interpretative act contained within the framing that is performed by the photograph (Butler 2009, 69–71): of course that photographs do not just register what is "there", but frame and select what to show. After all, quite a large portion of Sontag's book deals precisely with the choices involved in what to show and what not to show. However, each image does need further elucidation if it is to be understood: is this real or is it staged? Where was it taken? Who took it and why? For whom was it intended? Photographs, as Crane suggests as well, do not speak for themselves any more than words taken out of context do. Butler is, it seems to me, arguing with Sontag over something they both agree on: a photograph, just like any other cultural text, always is and needs to be interpretatively framed. Kovačević's photographs show this very well; they, through the highly sophisticated techniques of framing and filtering the images of suffering they show, recasting them as art-historical references, putting them in the context of series of similar or contrasting pictures, insist on their slow perception, constant re-contextualisation and a subtle and complex patterning of meaning.

And at the end of this chapter, let us imagine another photograph, of a child holding a worried-looking puppy. If we didn't know this was a photograph taken in wartime, a whole very important layer of meaning would be stripped away from it. What that layer is would depend on each individual viewer and their choice of how to combine the sweetness of the image with the bitterness of its context, but my reading would be: human beings remain human beings even in wartime. Children remain children, and they need not just food and shelter, but affection and play and tenderness. They are not just bodies in pain, reduced to the objects we look at. They look back at us.

And what would our past selves think if they saw us reduce them to clichés we solemnly commemorate and memorialise and moralise over?

This is where I believe the importance of Kovačević's untiring insistence on bringing his vast photographic archives back to Sarajevo resides: he keeps showing us that unpredictability and whimsy and companionship and a simple desire for pleasure and not just for survival were a part of the war experience, inviting us to go back to the promise of Karim Zaimović's radical silliness and Nenad Veličković's humour and hope.

But then, I wasn't in Sarajevo during the war. What do I know?

Chapter 5: Gendering Memory: Anti-Fairy-Tales in Selvedin Avdić's novel *Sedam strahova*

In her discussion of Chilean author Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* (and the Roman Polanski film of the same title) and his novels, Amy Novak points to a discrepancy between their critical attitude towards the machismo of the Augusto Pinochet military regime and Dorfman's inability to write about women (or, rather, to "write women") as anything but desired objects – desired objects who occasionally hysterically rebel, but are otherwise mute and are a peg on which men can hang their trauma. Novak points to the troping of female characters, who function in Dorfman's novels not as subjects of their own traumatic experience, but as metaphors for male characters' suffering, as causes, or potential balms, or rhetorical wraps for the wounds that the horrors of history inflict on the male subject. And this, according to Novak, is not just Dorfman's problem, but is rather the general problem of literatures that arise from patriarchal cultures (of which the culture of the Balkans is another example). She points to Sigmund Freud's famous allegorical conceptualisation of the traumatic repetition in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in support of this thesis (and this example is so stunning in its clarity and obviousness, that I was thoroughly ashamed of myself as a feminist for not recognising it myself): referring to an episode in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* Freud gives the following explanation of what the repetition of trauma consists:

> The hero Tancred unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda, she having done battle with him in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he penetrates the strange charmed forest that so frightens the army of crusaders. There he smites a tall tree with his sword, but blood gushes from the wound, and the voice of Clorinda, whose spirit has magically entered into that very tree, accuses him of yet again doing harm to his beloved. (Freud 2003: 60–61)

Who is the traumatised subject here? Clorinda, who is killed twice, once literally, and then metaphorically the second time? No; according to

Freud, the suffering subject here is Tancred, who is traumatised by being the murderer of his beloved twice over (Novak 2007: 310). Trauma is defined as the pain of the man who is causing pain and who is having to witness the effects of pain on the woman he loves. Based on this, Novak points to what is effectively a blind spot in our thinking about trauma: historical trauma is primarily the trauma of the male subject; women figure in it as objects of trauma, its props, its symptoms, or as balms and a refuge for it. Men are afflicted by the pain of history; women are the womb which caused the trauma by expelling men into the cruel world, and the womb which can ease the pain by allowing the return to the safest place imaginable, the woman's embrace. In the patriarchal conceptualisation of historical suffering, men figure as subjects, and women as metaphors.[60]

A drastic recent example of this in the Balkan context is Bosnian film *Belvedere* (dir. Ahmed Imamović, 2010). Although this is a film which speaks powerfully and with great emotion of the tragedy of the survivors of the Srebrenica genocide (who are predominantly women), although its main character is a woman, although the members of the main organisation of the female survivors appear in the film playing themselves, nevertheless the two main visible examples of both suffering and hopelessness in this film are both male. One is the heroine's brother, who is represented as not only physically injured (Nermin Tulić, the actor who plays him, has no legs), but is also a diabetic (we see him injected with insulin, and the only blood shown in the film is his), an alcoholic, visibly desperately unhappy (in one scene he attempts suicide), and it is him we see overcome at the news that his young son might be killed. The other is the heroine's nephew, who makes an attempt to escape the hopeless conditions of life at the refugee camp, but is at the end of the film shown to go back to it, suddenly and cruelly, with the return to hopelessness visibly represented with a shift from colour to black-and-white film technique. Furthermore, his return brings him back to an even worse situation than the one he had left, as he's seen glimpses of another, different, potentially better life, and the circumstances he is going back to are even more desperate than before. In contrast to this visible male suffering, full of angst and rage and protest, the women are stoical, patient, long-suffering, and, even in the moments of

[60] The figure of Tea in Andrej Nikolaidis' novel *Mimesis* functions according to this model as well. The moment that novel fell apart for me was when the narrator uses the horrific description of Tea's rape by her brother as an occasion for saviour fantasies, political analysis, and quips about how incestuous rapists write bad poetry (Nikolaidis 2005: 91–96).

despair, full of consideration and poise. They are the bearable victims; their trauma is deep, but not traumatising to the film viewer; their life is meaningless, but they bear it with so much silent, still dignity, and so much need to console others that their pain is aesthetically pleasing to watch. They are the abstract representations of trauma, not its flesh and blood, not its immediate wounds. The film about the women of Srebrenica is a film that represents male suffering when confronted with female pain. It is a film with a blind spot at its heart; but in that, it is merely one of a long line of narratives about historical trauma which remains blind to the concreteness, specificity, subjectivity and agency of the female historical subject.

What is special about Selvedin Avdić's novel *Sedam* strahova (*Seven Fears*) is that it faces the problem of objectification of women and shows the difficulty of thinking it through, and changing both cognitive models and behaviour. The story told in the novel starts with a morning in March 2005 when the nameless hero (and narrator), a former journalist, wakes up from a lethargy caused by his wife's desertion, and leaves his bedroom for the first time after nine months and three days. This rebirth is caused not quite by a kiss from a princess, but is nevertheless, just like the lethargy that preceded it, caused by a woman. The day before he had received a phone-call from Mirna, the daughter of a journalist friend Aleksa Ranković, who returns from Sweden and asks the hero to help her look for her father, who disappeared during the war. And so our flawed hero awakens, to help a damsel in distress; this aspect of the situation is not something that he misses. The search for Mirna's father leads him to investigate the mining legend of pit spirits (and the intensely masculine world of mining) that Aleksa was obsessed by, as well as Pegaz (Pegasus) brothers, the town's omniscient and omnipotent crime lords who were in charge of the wartime prison and torture camp located in the Music School, and who might have had a role to play in Aleksa's disappearance. It is on the cluster of themes centered around the Pegaz brothers that I wish to focus in this chapter.

The Pegaz brothers are first mentioned (without being expressly named) in Aleksa's diary (which the hero-narrator reads as part of his investigation into Aleksa's disappearance) as two well-connected red-haired criminal brothers who would, for good money, show him the place in the mine where the mining spirit can be seen (Avdić 2009: 39–40). In that first mention, they are presented as resembling either Je'džudž and Me'džudž, the fruit of the first man Adem's seed (not of woman born, but of semen mixed with the soil) who will announce the End of Days, or Manul and Dagudin, the helpers of the king of mining spirits. Either way, they are

introduced into the story as intensely masculine and mythical figures, who belong entirely in the world of men and whose lack of connection with the female world is strongly underlined. The context in which Aleksa comes into contact with them serves to underline this disconnection further: their services are solicited not to help Aleksa leave town and join his wife and daughter (although it is clear he loved them dearly, and who were, as he knew perfectly well, worried sick about him), but, literally, to chase after ghosts who belong to the dark, terrifying, masculine world of mines and mining mythology.

The second mention of the red-haired brothers brings with it an explanation of who they are, which is introduced as a markedly separate narrative, headed by the title "Priča o braći Pegaz" ("The Story of the Pegasus Brothers"). Their story starts with a sentence which has more than a hint of a fairy-tale in it: "U malom naselju pored fabrike čelika živjeli su Adem i Badema Pegaz." ("In a small settlement near the steelworks factory there lived Adem and Badema Pegasus.") (Avdić 2009: 70). So we discover that the father of these two brothers is called Adem, and thus does bear the name of the first man of the religions of the Book; and his wife is presented as the quiet, impossibly, unbearably beautiful woman who produces intense envy in the local women, desire in the men, and pathological possessiveness and jealousy in her husband. The joyously awaited twin children of the dark-haired Adem cause his jealousy and suspicion to intensify acutely when the infants' hair starts to grow as light blond; and as it fails to darken with their first steps, Adem begins a daily ritual of beating Badema for her alleged unfaithfulness of which the two boys are the alleged result. The settlement (both the men and the women) tolerates the nightly screams of the battered Badema, as the beatings go on for years on a daily basis; but it refuses to tolerate the petty crimes (and proclivity for torturing animals) of her two sons, conspiring to beat them up nearly to a pulp. The boys are not seen for a year after that; and when they do re-emerge from their house (which is now quiet and empty, as their father is serving a long prison sentence for killing his wife) to face the sunlight and their neighbours, their hair has turned red, and they have become vicious. From then on, the two brothers, Albin and Aldin, become the crime lords of their town, feared and unopposed, unforgiving and surrounded by stories of their exceptional cruelty and skill in inflicting pain. They are sadistic power personified; and, when the war comes, they become the town's masters of life and death. And it is to them that the hero has to turn if he is to find out anything about Mirna's disappeared father.

The story of the Pegaz brothers is told in the unsurprised tone of the fairy-tale narration, which is capable of telling of the greatest wonders in the same way that it tells of the hero's donkey ride. It also has that kind of fabulative density, which condenses time and events to a strong, tightly packed structure. The rest of the novel, just like its hero, shows a meandering tendency, leaving loose ends and unexplained narrative strands (who is the man the hero's wife is now with? Who is the man with bulging, bloody eyes in Aleksa's flat? What is that crack in the wall of the hero's flat?); however, everything connected to the Pegaz brothers is crisply focused. Their story is like a perfectly structured whirlpool which sucks in surrounding meanings, leaving other narrative strands to orbit around it, unable to leave, and unable to find their own path to a narrative resolution.

And the centre around which the Pegaz brothers story revolves is the violence, both perpetrated and tolerated, towards their mother Badema, caused by the inability of both her husband and the community around them to see her as anything other than a beautiful body onto which fears and fantasies can be projected. In that, Badema's story is parallel to that of the hero's wife, who left him after she felt herself lost, depersonalised, robbed of her own self by her husband's insistence to continuously shape and mould her according to his evolving erotic fantasies (Avdić 2009: 91). The hero, although aware that he had brought his wife's desertion onto himself by his rapacious need to turn her into a multitude of sexual objects and pop-cultural sex symbols (from a fashion model to Patty Smith), nevertheless starts his story of the end of his marriage with a most telling sentence: "Odmah da kažem, za sve što se desilo, ja sam kriv, ali ona je počela." ("I'll say this straight away, all that happened, I am to blame, but she started it.") (Avdić 2009: 86). He refuses to accept fully his share of the blame for his inability to see her as anything other than a blank canvass, a beautiful body onto which he can project his fantasies; when she leaves, he continues to fantasize exclusively about her body as an object of sexual desire (Avdić 2009: 22–23). When she comes back to the flat to collect her things, bringing her new man along, she is portrayed as "even more beautiful than before" (Avdić 2009: 22), the new man strong and masculine. Later on in the novel, one of the Pegaz brothers taunts the hero with the same assessment of his wife's increased good looks, with the additional detail that her breasts are now bigger and her hips fuller (Avdić 2009: 101). The masculinity of her new companion only increases the effect of her increased femininity; and the fact that she is now out of reach only heightens her appeal. She might have escaped the marriage, but in the perception of

the men around her, particularly the hero, she does not escape the objectification and the depersonalisation. We know practically nothing about her; she is merely an occasion for both pain and desire, and even her undeniable agency in the novel does not lessen the sense of emptiness which stands in for concrete characterisation. Even when, towards the end of the novel, she telephones the hero to ask if he is well after the Pegaz brothers had called her to warn her that he is in danger, the hero refuses to see her as an active agent with a will of her own. Even though her call and the direct questions she asks indicate that she is offering help, the hero decides that he must abandon his plans of alerting the police to the dealings of the Pegaz brothers in order to protect her (Avdić 2009: 108–109). All of a sudden, from a fairly earthly woman who is blamed for his lethargy and helplessness, and who is obsessively lusted after, she becomes in his eyes a symbol of all that is good about the world (Avdić 2009: 109), a luminous, pure being who needs to be kept away from the darkness of the Pegaz brothers. She, in effect, simply continues being an alibi for cowardice, lethargy and non-action. It is just that the reasons for these have changed slightly: he is doing nothing not because she has left him, but because he must protect her from the Pegaz brothers. But he still remains inactive, a passive player in the game of blame and responsibility; and she remains a reason why this is so. To the fact that she is actually much more active than he is, and the potential moral consequences of that, he remains completely blind.

And the game of blame and responsibility is the key game in this novel. The question of who knew what, and who tolerated what aspects of what they knew, and what they did faced with what they knew, is revealed as the key of all that happens in the novel in the crucial scene of confrontation between the hero and the Pegaz brothers. The revelations unfold, tellingly, in two of the rooms in the brothel the Pegaz brothers own: the first room is a round, red, plush-covered chamber, where the two brothers are holding a staff meeting with several (at that moment, completely naked) girls who work for them, and the second in a white, nun's cell-like room of one of the nameless, faceless girls (all we find out about her is the size of her breasts and posterior). The highly sexed atmosphere of the settings (particularly the first one, as one of the girls is also pole-dancing as the conversation takes place) is contrasted with the nature of the meeting Albin is having with the girls: he is, effectively, giving them a lecture about how they need to educate themselves (by watching television, but that is beside the point). We get a strange sense of gruff protectiveness he feels towards them, and the strangeness is highlighted by Albin's insistence on the politeness of the

proceedings: he refuses to be addressed with any sort of presumed familiarity by the hero, and requests of him to kindly wait for him to finish his meeting (Avdić 2009: 96–97). Furthermore, the second setting is the place where the late Badema receives a belated moment of character revelation, from apparently the least likely source in the world of the novel. Her sons, the crime lords, brothel owners and mythical wartime torturers, when asked about Aleksa Ranković, declare him a "good man" whose warm and funny human interest radio shows were their mother's favourites; she used to say that he was the only man in their town who talked to her (Avdić 2009: 104). This little detail is far more telling about her character than anything that the hero tells us about his wife, even though he mentions her constantly. Through her love of Aleksa's radio shows Badema is presented as a warm, lonely woman, imprisoned in her own house by the jealousy and envy and desire that her beauty inspired in everyone around her. The remark that she was always alone (Avdić 2009: 71) in the Pegaz (anti-)fairy-tale, although it was meant to clarify that Adem had no real cause for his jealousy, now is given a far more concrete, intimate meaning: she had no friends, no one to talk to. So she constantly listened to Aleksa's human interest radio stories, in which each man and woman's life had a meaning, and whom he approached with real affection (Avdić 2009: 17). It was in memory of their mother, the lonely, battered, unhappy Badema, that the Pegaz brothers promised to help Aleksa when he asked them to see the surface pit, as part of his search for the mine's protector spirit. And this awkwardly affectionate gesture of tribute to their mother suddenly has the power to unlock the mystery and the horror surrounding the Pegaz brothers as well. The magic of the perverse Pegaz anti-fairy-tale, with its imprisoned beauties and cruel monsters and lack of saviour princes, at this point could well turn from a local legend, or even a myth of origin, into a heartbreakingly sad intimate human drama.

However, here it also becomes clear that it was not just Aleksa who received assistance in tribute to Badema, but the town as a whole. As the conversation unfolds, and revelations come, the brothers make it clear that Aleksa met them when he came to the Music School asking to see what went on there, and demanding that the brothers tell them if they were torturing and killing people there. It is with a deep sense of respect for Aleksa that the brothers tell the hero that they told him the truth: that they never killed anyone. As they explain it, the Music School was their "gift" to the town (Avdić 2009: 106); in effect, through it, and through their terrifying reputations, they created an opportunity for the casual sadism

which allowed their neighbours to tolerate their mother's nightly screams for years to reach its ultimate conclusion in the tortures and murders that took place in the wartime prison. They were just "an inspiration" (Avdić 2009: 118), enabling other people to kill; the ease with which this was done, according to them, left a bloody legacy which tainted the entire community. After the Music School tortures, the town, as one of the brothers puts it "više nije nevin niti će biti dok bude svijeta" ("is not innocent any more, nor will it be, to the end of time") (Avdić 2009: 106). All those who took part (and further revelations make it clear that everyone was involved, from the jovial taxi driver Ekrem to the scholarly librarian and Aleksa's friend Ahmed) were to blame, and all those who knew what went on but chose not to act on it were to blame; all those who pretended not to know are to blame, too. Our hero, as the brothers point out in a rare display of anger, is to blame: he was a journalist, he must have known, and he did not do anything (Avdić 2009: 106–107). It seems that Aleksa, the only man in town who spoke to their mother, even if just over the radio, was the only person who came to the prison doors demanding to know what went on there; for that, they rewarded him by granting his wish to see the surface pit. However (and this is the novel's final twist), their associates misinterpreted the order to take him there as a death warrant: so Aleksa was killed after all, on the landfill dump in the surface mine, because casual sadism which tolerates the violence towards women, and can orchestrate a mob beating of boys who sometimes steal pies and garden tools, can easily lead to casual murder of an innocent man (Avdić 2009: 117–118). With this, the intimate drama of domestic violence returns to its original status of a myth of origin, of a perverted fairy-tale.

According to André Jolles, fairy-tales function as an incarnation of a "naive morality" that expects of the world to reward the good and punish the bad, not as a direct consequence of their actions, but as matter of the structure of the world itself (Herman et al. 2005: 531). The Pegaz brothers are the force that allows the world to shape itself to make that happen: they are the demons, or dark divinities, that instil a moral force into the structure of the world. Except that they, as children of violence, can only unleash violence, make it universal, omnipotent; and as violence becomes the rule, and marks everybody as guilty, even the innocent suffer. Aleksa dies, because the violence as the universal law instituted by the brothers (and by the conditions of war) made his assigned guides misinterpret the order to show him the surface pit as an order to take him there and kill him. They were thus marked as guilty of the casual, easy, murderous

cruelty, and he died as a sacrificial lamb to prove the point that nobody is innocent. But he also died because he chased after ghosts, figures of male mining mythology, instead of making his way to join his wife and daughter. Mirna's seemingly heartless declaration halfway through the hero's search for her missing father that all she wants is to have her family's flat back so she can sell it and pay off her loans in Sweden (Avdić 2009: 85), in the light of his failure to look after them, may be simple revenge: you did not come to join us, I am giving up the search for you.

The Pegaz brothers, far from being Adem's demon children, are as of woman born as it is possible to be, and surrounded by women. The uncanny nature of the scene in the red plush sex chamber consists of the complete lack of any sexual threat towards the naked women that surround the two brothers; and the politeness on which they insist in their company (even though it is not something which comes to them naturally) forms a part of the bizarre sense of safety in that unlikeliest of places. The brothers are avengers of their mother's suffering, and their undeniable monstrosity is the result of male violence that they witnessed, and of which they were victims. That conclusion is fairly simple, and banal; but what is less banal is the determination with which the community around them refuses to see this. The hero (and the brothers are aware of this) does not believe them when they say that they've never killed anyone, and the story he tells, unlike the story I have told here, does not make the explicit link between Badema's death and the brother's determination to rob the town of any pretence at innocence. The hero simply reacts with violent disgust and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness at the extent of the involvement of townspeople in the Music School tortures, and is horrified by the idea that his former wife may come into contact with the brothers.

The fairly simple story of domestic violence is represented in the world of the novel as both something normal and acceptable, and as something of mythical significance, a founding myth which sets into motion all the other horrors that happen. The two brothers function as uncanny figures which combine in themselves the attributes of avenging angels, tempting demons, victims of domestic violence, pimps, protectors and torturers. The inability of the narrator-hero to separate the various strands, combined with his inability to see the women around him, both Mirna and his wife, as anything other than a possible source of gratification of his fantasies (erotic, romantic, fantasies of being the saviour and the saved), function as a kind of a knot at the heart of the novel: they disable the narrative's potential to confront fully the objectification of and violence towards women as

the foundation of all other cruelties. The dehumanisation of the "Other" starts with the dehumanisation of women which is always already a part of patriarchal culture, the novel seems to whisper. Yet it is incapable of saying it aloud, except with the voice of the men who represent its darkest, deepest truth: the demonic, angelic, otherworldly criminals, the Pegaz brothers.

And here we have it: a post-war narrative of exceptional complexity, which shows a remarkable willingness to play with the uncanny and the supernatural, which actively draws its inspiration from horror and detective fiction, which is profoundly unafraid to examine gender roles and their links to violence, and which provides a framing for the horrors of war which has very little to do with the prevailing political *doxa*.

Selvedin Avdić has written a novel which is the grown-up older brother to Karim Zaimović's short stories.

In Place of a Conclusion, or what Constitutes a Happy Ending: Alma Lazarevska and Damir Ovčina

> Žurim da ispričam priču. Ona mora imati srećan kraj. Otilija T. je to zaslužila.
>
> Samo kad bih ja znala šta je srećan kraj! Jesam li znala pa zaboravila? Kao Ana Karenjina kojoj je Tolstoj najzad dopustio da ne skoči pod voz. I sad ona stoji na peronu… stoji, stoji, stoji… i šta?
>
> Sunčano je poslijepodne i prizvat ću, kao u spiritualističkoj seansi, sličicu Majka i Dječak sa ružičastim balonom. Dvije crvenokose glave, ružičasti balon, ruka u ruci… ali šta dalje. Šta dalje!
>
> Lazarevska 1996: 38[61]

In this final chapter I wish to compare and contrast two narratives, one, Alma Lazarevska's short story "Greetings from a Besieged City" from her 1996 collection *Smrt u muzeju moderne umjetnost* (*Death in the Museum of Modern Art*) representing wartime writing, and the other, Damir Ovčina's novel *Kad sam bio hodža* (*When I was a Khoja*) representing contemporary post-war literature. I find both profoundly interesting, but I also find them completely different from each other in how they depict the war, how they frame it cognitively, and what they imagine hope and a happy ending might look like.

Let us start from the end: Damir Ovčina's novel *Kad sam bio hodža* (*When I was a Khoja*) is told in first person by its 18-year-old main character, and it consists of two parts. The novel starts in the winter before the beginning of the war in Bosnia, with the illness and death of the young hero's mother and the news of the war in Croatia playing in the

[61] "I am rushing to tell a story. It has to have a happy ending. Otilija T. has earned it.
If I only knew what a happy ending was! Did I know, and have since forgotten? Like Anna Karenina had Tolstoy finally allowed her not to jump under the train. So she is now standing on the platform… standing, standing, standing… and what?
It is a sunny afternoon and I shall recall, as in a spiritualist séance, the little image of *The Mother and a Child with a pink balloon.* Two readheds, pink balloon, hand holding hand… but what then. What then!"

background. At the start of the war he finds himself in his old family flat in Grbavica, a part of Sarajevo which was almost immediately occupied by Serb forces and cut off from the rest of the besieged city (effectively serving as a frontline); he has a Muslim name (never explicitly stated), is young and male, and is initially suspected of being a spy. With his ID card confiscated and unable to go back to his father in the suburb of Dobrinja, the hero is conscripted into a work unit composed of local non-Serbs, and required to empty abandoned or forcefully seized flats of their valuables, as well as to remove and bury dead bodies of those flats' more unfortunate inhabitants. His position in the unit, which is initially ran by an eerily idealistic Serb nationalist who, in spite of his ideological agreement with the Serb war effort, does have some sense of responsibility for the men who have been assigned to him, places him in the position of a witness to both atrocities and (albeit rare) moments of human solidarity and kindness. His presence in the building which is being gradually emptied of most of its inhabitants, also reveals him to be a vulnerable young man who needs female care, first kindly and then lovingly provided by a young neighbour (a school teacher of Russian) who lives with her grandmother. The domestic labour she offers (such as bringing him food and washing his clothes) functions almost as a form of flirtation, and the young man gradually abandons all thought of the girlfriend who remained on the other side of the frontline. Their playful courtship is presented through laconic exchanges in which all non-verbal interaction is implied, and those dialogues close most of the chapters, functioning as a counterbalance to the horrors described in the rest of the novel. We do not get the sense that she knows exactly what he does when he is with the work unit, but, still, she is conscious of the general danger in which he finds himself, and is willing to hide him, lie for him and look after him. Even though her name is not explicitly stated, the commander of the work unit traces her surname's etymology to the Turkish word for "bread" ("ekmek"), saying that a woman thus named is bound to look after him, as her first name evokes "soul", and her family name "bread"; we can therefore assume she is called Dušica (or Dušanka) Ekmečić, potentially linking her family to the historian Milorad Ekmečić, one of the ideologues of Serbian nationalist policies of the 1990s (or, as the commander phrases it: "Her namesake is one of our most brilliant minds", Ovčina 2021: 160).

The commander's willingness to protect both the men in his unit and to help the civilians of the occupied Grbavica brutalised by his own side in the war, as well as his habit of writing down names of missing people and

those who need help, gradually puts him in the crosshairs of those who have no interest in any records being kept. And so he makes his escape, leaving the men in his unit in the hands of a far more unscrupulous work unit leader. From that point on, the hero becomes a witness to a brutal rape of two captured Muslim women, and finally decides to fight back and try to make his escape, ending up hiding in his own flat, under his young neighbour's care, until the end of the war.

The second part of the novel, chronicling his survival as a wanted fugitive, is almost dream-like, consisting of reading, writing, day-dreaming, exercising, love-making, and listening to the radio. His movement becomes radically restricted to the confines of the apartment building and particularly to his own flat, as he cannot risk being seen outside. The disappearance of the initial commander, in spite of his very clear ideological alignment with the Serb war aims, as well as the fate of the two Muslim women, serve as a constant reminder of the precariousness of the heroine's position; she places herself in some serious peril by hiding and looking after, let alone loving, a Muslim boy. Her safety becomes a part of the dream-like nature of the second half of the novel, as she seems to function like some kind of a protective fairy, rather than a real-life woman, bringing comfort and food and books, while getting nothing but love and danger in return. Furthermore, as Ajla Demiragić and Edina Spahić write, the hero's imaginary walks along the streets of remembered pre-war Sarajevo as he is trying to keep up a step count by walking around the apartment building "illustrate another important paradox of the war: spaces that were separated by a few minutes' walk in peacetime, during wartime become infinitely remote from each other" (Demiragić and Spahić 2023: 371).

This novel has been written about in a similar manner as the initial wartime testimonial literature, with the focus on the ethical act of witnessing atrocities and trying to preserve the truth of what happened (Džiho-Šator and Žujo-Marić 2019). This is perfectly justified in that the theme of writing things down to preserve evidence is constant throughout the novel: the hero keeps secret notebooks, disguised as exercise books for learning Russian, a musician he shares duties with in the work unit keeps indicating to him that he should be writing down what is happening to them and what they are seeing, and the initial commander of his work unit gets into trouble precisely because he was writing things down. However, as Demiragić and Spahić note (2023: 372), this is not an autobiographical tale, as most wartime narratives were, but a careful novelistic incorporation and textual transformation of Grbavica survivors' witness accounts into an

autodiegetic fictional narrative. Moreover, the main points of interest for readers so far have been the novel's style, and the fact that, as Miljenko Jergović put it in his review, "the writer omits words such as Muslims, Serbs, Croats, Islam, Orthodox Christianity… He does not mention the names of people, either, except when they are needed" (Jergović 2016). I shall return to that latter aspect later; let us discuss the style first.

Most reviewers note that the narrator writes in short sentences which avoid the use of verbs whenever possible (Jergović 2016, Džiho-Šator and Žujo-Marić 2019: 141, Hasečić 2018: 402, Demiragić and Spahić 2023: 373). Demiragić and Spahić, however, also point out what else gets omitted:

> Naraciju cijelo vrijeme 'kontrolira' autodijegetski pripovjedač koji kazuje samo ono što vidi i čuje i koji ni u jednom trenutku naracije ne pokušava da preuzme na sebe teret 'govorenja u ime žrtava'. Sebe uglavnom prikazuje kao prisilnog sudionika akcija "čišćenja" i uništavanja tuđe imovine i svjedoka brutalnih zločina. Fokus je na prikazu događaja i opisu senzacija tijela. Narator ne komentira, tačnije ne pokušava da objasni prikazane događaje. Kao da o ratu odbija da misli jer bi mišljenje o ratu moglo da vodi ka pojašnjenju i razumijevanju, pa čak i opravdavanju ratnih dešavanja. Osim toga narator ne opisuje ni svoja osjećanja ili emocionalna stanja. Naracija se odvija između prikaza nužne ili prisilne akcije i činjenja kao nagona da se preživi te opisa stanja mirovanja ili neposrednog čulnog doživljaja ratne svakodnevnice. (Demiragić and Spahić 2023: 373)[62]

So, the novel is told in mostly short sentences, with no internal focalisation which would be expected of a first-person narrative, and with no verbs whenever that can be syntactically accomplished. The narrative voice describes only what can be seen, heard, tasted and smelled, while the sense of touch is mostly only left implied, like the rest of the hero's internal states. This combination of narrative devices replicates the hero's largely passive

[62] "Narration is throughout 'controlled' by an autodiegetic narrator who tells only what he can see and hear, and who at no point in the narration attempts to take onto himself the burden of 'speaking in the name of the victims'. He represents himself as a forced participant of the actions of 'clearing' and destruction of the property of others and as a witness of brutal crimes. The focus is on the events and on the descriptions of bodily sensations. The narrator does not comment, or rather he does not try to explain the events shown. It is as if he refuses to think about the war, since thinking about the war could lead to a clarification and understanding, and even justification of the events of the war. Moreover, the narrator does not describe his feelings or emotional states. The narration evolves between representations of necessary or forced actions, and action as a drive for survival, as well as descriptions of the state of inactivity or direct sensory impressions of the everyday aspects of the war."

position within the world in which he finds himself, while also maintaining a peculiar tension between tedium and horror, leaving any emotion of the two main characters unspoken and implied. This style continues throughout, and makes for an extremely difficult reading, as all emotion is delegated to the reader: in order to follow the events and understand what is going on, we have to be in tune with the emotions the narrator is refusing to talk about, both his and that of the other characters. We cannot follow character's action if we cannot understand their motivation, and we cannot understand their motivation without understanding their emotions as well as their rational thoughts and objective circumstances.[63]

This stylistic sameness can feel particularly jarring in the second half, as the hero undergoes a sort of a literary education, devouring books that the heroine brings to him from the library, and attempting to copy their style. The evidence of that stylistic education is not evident in the novel itself, though. The style remains unvaryingly laconic first person externally focalised narration, and even the heroine is not noticeably differentiated from the hero in her style of speech. The only difference between characters' voices exists in the first part when the hero notes the speech of other characters when he meets them, and even then that tends to be quite contained and discreet. *Skaz* as the device representing the speech of others when they report what they witnessed is the extent of stylistic variation. So what is the point of the hero's literary education in the second part of the novel, if we never get to see its fruits? Is it to imply that the wartime experience is reduced to a series of moments, observed through the senses, but ultimately nonsensical in their horror and banality? Is the novel, carefully constructed and stylistically determined as it is, attempting a kind of a Barthesian degree zero of writing (Barthes 1993/1953), cleansed of the *doxa* needed for a more comprehensive mimetic representation of the world, and determined not to give the horrors of war any aesthetic justification through an employment of more stylistically elaborate and recognisably literary writing devices?

A significant part of the avoidance of our Bosnian contemporary *doxa* would be the narrator's refusal to name characters and to assign ethnic identities to them; however, as Jergović casually noted, this is a novel in which those identities are perfectly clear (Jergović 2016). We would not be able to follow the story without the knowledge of who is a Serb and who

[63] I am not going to go into this problem any further here, but here is a potential theoretical framework for a new interpretative project: Zunshine 2006.

is not; just like the characters' internal emotional states, this is also something the novel delegates to its readers, with perfectly justified confidence that we will be able to tell who is who, and why that matters, in the house of horrors that was wartime Grbavica. And that deep emotional involvement then also leaves us with a possibility of a horrifying sense of satisfaction at the resolution of Ovčina's tale: the young man kills the rapist of the two women (Ovčina 2021: 573–574), and then calmly continues on to Dobrinja to try to find his father. He does, and life can now continue in peacetime, but his innocence is gone, and the logic of revenge has been put into place a foundation for the future. It is an absolutely chilling ending.

In contrast to this, Alma Lazarevska, writing during the war, crafted a whole series of stories where she did not tell us who was who in terms of their ethnic identity, knew we would not be able to guess, and a large part of the point is that those aspects of the real world are resolutely irrelevant for the world of her stories. In her 1996 book *Smrt u Muzeju moderne umjetnosti* (*Death in the Museum of Modern Art*), she represents the siege of Sarajevo (or, to be more precise and faithful to the language of the book, an unnamed city torn between Here and There) mostly through the eyes of a middle-class, highly educated family, consisting of an unnamed woman narrator (a Comparative Literature graduate, which is in the world of the story – and hilariously for the writer of this study – a somewhat problematic character trait), and her unnamed husband and son.

In the story "Pozdrav iz opkoljenog grada" ("Greetings from a Besieged City"), Lazarevska's urbane and sophisticated woman narrator weaves a complex tale of the siege in the present, memories of her student days and of Otilija T., a brilliant and fiery red-haired girl with a love of happy endings and an unhappy personal life, memories of a boy selling kitschy postcards on a square in Dubrovnik, and the story of how she tried to delay her son's knowledge of death by changing the unhappy ending of a book she was reading him (and which she herself had read as a child). The crisis point in the story comes when she discovers a set of postcards that her husband, unbeknownst to her, had bought in Dubrovnik one of the pre-war summers, and that the set has a missing, thirteenth postcard, sent to an unknown someone. She is immediately gripped with jealousy, suspecting, as she puts it, a gender-reversed Karenina and Vronsky story, only to find out that the husband sent the postcard to his parents, as they are not, unlike her, averse to clichéd gestures of affection and sentimental images on postcards (Lazarevska 1996: 36). It is not a very prolonged crisis point (the enigma of the missing postcard is resolved through a single brief conversation), but it

draws together the main themes of the story: the narrator's deep dislike of triteness and sentimentality, her friend Otilija's firm belief that every book should have a happy ending (supported, it would seem, by "an unhealthy fire in her eyes", which later develops into an unspecified mental illness; Lazarevska 1996: 27–29), and the conflict between the narrator's own deep interest in death as a philosophical problem and her desire to shield her little boy from the knowledge of death (both of that of Pablo in story, and of real people in the besieged city). As it turns out, unhappiness may be narratively interesting, and death may be philosophically fascinating, but they are not what you want to have in your own life, even as a Comparative Literature graduate. Far from being a boring literary theme, as Tolstoy's first sentence in *Anna Karenina* suggests, happiness, or, more specifically, the choice to choose happiness, emerges in Lazarevska's story as a radical act of rebellion in an unhappy, violent, war-torn world.

The Choice of an Ending

The final sentences of Lazarevska's story stand at the beginning of this final chapter of my study. They show a narrator reaching for a possibility of a happy ending, and leave us with an obligation to think that possibility through together with her. She believes she owes it to all the unhappy people who wanted happy endings, such as Otilija T., and maybe we also owe it to our past selves. To finally feed that starving little girl in Adisa Bašić's poem, to fulfil the promise of the future at the end of Veličković's *Konačari*, to refuse to be unhappy any longer, and to actively decide what comes next, even if we are not sure how to write happy endings any more.

SUMMARY

The study *Constructions of Hope and Hopelessness: War and Traumatic Memories in Contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian Literature and Culture (An Essay)* consists of five chapters, along with the Foreword, Introduction and Conclusion.

The Introduction discusses the problem of an authentic representation of traumatic memory in the context of the contrast between our tendency to understand the world as mediated through meaningful and structured stories, the nature of live historical experiences (especially traumatic ones) as profoundly chaotic ad meaningless, and the necessary balance between a meaningful story and a complex understanding of the world as foundational for individual and collective healing after great historical ruptures. Taking the prose works of Dubravka Ugrešić and Miljenko Jergović as literary examples, the introductory chapter establishes a broad theoretical framework for an analysis of war literature and the literature of historical trauma, by combining oral history, narratology and psychoanalysis. The first chapter discusses the differences between war and post-war Bosnian-Herzegovian literature, with the argument that the literature which was written during or just after the war was radically open to diverse understandings and representations of the realities of war, which came from live experience (such as the stories by Karim Zaimović in his collection *The Secret of Raspberry Jam*), while the later, post-war literature, as well as other types of art, such as the theatre, are prone to narrative and ideological closing off into a set of narrative and ideological schemas. Later post-war literature (as the example of Almir Imširević's 2012 play *If this were a Film...* and its staging at Sarajevo's National Theatre show) also points to an institutionalisation of the post-traumatic inability for the traumatic experience to be overcome, by promoting narratives that repeat clichéd representations of the war and close off cognitive possibilities for imagining hope and a happy end, and by surrendering to the post-war *doxa*

and a closed traumatic *Gestalt*. The second, third, fourth and fifth chapters discuss texts which envisage different possibilities for thinking about traumatic experience, through the game of conceptual tropes of memory in Nenad Veličković's novel *Konačari* (and its stage adaptation), the game of remembering, lying and forgetting in Miljenko Jergović's novel *Mama Leone*, in war photographs by Milomir Kovačević, and in the anti-fairytale in the novel *Sedam strahova* by Selvedin Avdić. The study ends with an analysis of the differences between Damir Ovčina's post-war novel *Kad sam bio hodža* and a war story by Alma Lazarevska, discussing their radically distinct stylistic and narrative devices, as well as the implications they have on the process of imagining the possibilities of hope and of a happy ending.

SAŽETAK

Knjiga *Konstrukcije nade i beznađa: rat i traumatsko pamćenje u bosanskohercegovačkoj književnosti (Esej)* sastoji se od pet poglavlja, uz predgovor, uvod i zaključno poglavlje.

Uvod razmatra problem autentičnog predstavljanja traumatskog pamćenja u kontekstu kontrasta između ljudske sklonosti ka smislenim i strukturiranim pričama, izvornog historijskog iskustva (naročito onog traumatskog) kao suštinski haotičnog i besmislenog, i neophodne ravnoteže između smislene priče i kompleksnog shvatanja svijeta kao postavljanja temelja za pojedinačno i kolektivno izlječenje nakon velikih historijskih lomova. Uzimajući prozu Dubravke Ugrešić i Miljenka Jergovića kao književne primjere, uvodno poglavlje postavlja široki teoretski okvir za analizu ratne književnosti i književnosti historijske traume, preko usmene historije, naratologije i psihoanalize. Prvo poglavlje govori o razlikama između ratne i poratne bosanskohercegovačke književnosti, uz tezu da je književnost koja je nastajala u ratu ili odmah nakon njega radikalno otvorena za različita razumijevanja i predstavljanja ratne stvarnosti koja su dolazila iz živog iskustva (kao što su to priče Karima Zaimovića u zbirci *Tajna džema od malina*), dok je kasnija, poratna književnost (ali i druge vrste umjetnosti, kao npr. pozorište) podložna narativnim i ideološkim zatvaranjima u opšteprihvaćene narativne i ideološke sheme. Kasnija poratna književnost i umjetnost (sa primjerom drame Almira Imširevića *Kad bi ovo bio film...* iz 2012. godine i njene scenske postavke u sarajevskom Narodnom pozorištu) pored toga ukazuje na institucionalizaciju posttraumatske nesposobnosti da se traumatsko iskustvo u potpunosti prevaziđe, kroz promoviranje narativa koji ponavljaju klišeizirane predstave rata i zatvaraju spoznajne mogućnosti za zamišljanje nade i sretnog kraja, predajući se u potpunosti postratnoj *doxi* i zatvorenom traumatskom *Gestaltu*. Drugo, treće, četvrto i peto poglavlje ukazuju na tekstove koji nude drugačije mogućnosti promišljanja traumatskog iskustva, kroz

igru konceptualnih tropa pamćenja kod Nenada Veličkovića u romanu *Konačari* (i scenskoj adaptaciji tog romana), igru pamćenja, laganja i zaborava kod Miljenka Jergovića u romanu *Mama Leone*, ratnim fotografijama Milomira Kovačevića i antibajci u romanu *Sedam strahova* Selvedina Avdića. Knjiga završava kontrastnom analizom poratnog romana Damira Ovčine *Kad sam bio hodža* i jedne ratne priče Alme Lazarevske, ukazujući na radikalno drugačije stilske i narativne postupke, te na implikacije koje oni imaju po zamišljanje mogućnosti nade i sretnog kraja.

АНОТАЦІЯ

Книга «Конструкції надії та безнадії: війна і травматична пам'ять у боснійсько-герцеговинській літературі (Есей)» містить п'ять розділів, а також передмову, вступ і заключний розділ.

У вступі розглянуто проблему автентичної репрезентації травматичної пам'яті в контексті контрастування між людською схильністю до раціональних і структурованих історій, оригінальним історичним досвідом (особливо травматичним) як власне хаотичним і безглуздим, та необхідним балансом між раціональною оповіддю та комплексним розумінням світу задля створення передумов до індивідуального й колективного зцілення після великих історичних зламів. На літературному прикладі прози Дубравки Угрешич і Мілєнка Єрговича у вступному розділі окреслено широку теоретичну основу для аналізу воєнної літератури та літератури історичної травми через теорію усної історії, наратологію і психоаналіз. У першому розділі йдеться про відмінності між воєнною та післявоєнною боснійсько-герцеговинською літературою, при чому формулюється теза, що література, створена під час війни або одразу після неї, була радикально відкритою для різного осмислення та зображення воєнної реальності, яка походила з життєвого досвіду (як, наприклад, в оповіданнях Каріма Заімовича у збірці «Таємниця малинового варення»), тоді як пізніша, повоєнна література (та й інші види мистецтва, як-от театр) піддається наративним та ідеологічним замкненням у загальноприйняті наративні та ідеологічні схеми. Крім того, пізніша повоєнна література і мистецтво (на прикладі драми Алміра Імширевича «Якби це був фільм...» 2012 року та її постановки в Національному театрі Сараєва) вказує на інституалізацію посттравматичної нездатності повністю подолати травматичний досвід, яка здійснюється через просування наративів, котрі повторюють шаблонні репрезентації війни і закривають когнітивні можливості щодо уявлення надії та щасливого кінця, повністю підпорядковуючись поствоєнній доксі та закритому травматичному гештальту. Другий, третій, четвертий і п'ятий розділи присвячено

текстам, у яких пропонуються інакші можливості для рефлексії травматичного досвіду – через гру концептуальних тропів пам'яті в романі «Квартир'єри» (і сценічній адаптації цього роману) Ненада Величковича, гру в пам'ять, брехню й забуття в романі «Мама Леоне» Мілєнка Єрговича, у воєнних фотографіях Міломира Ковачевича та в антиказці у романі «Сім страхів» Селведіна Авдича. Книга завершується зіставним аналізом повоєнного роману «Коли я був ходжею» Даміра Овчини та одного воєнного оповідання Альми Лазаревської, у яких простежено радикально інакші стилістичні й наративні прийоми, а також імплікації, які вони репрезентують при уявленні можливої надії та щасливого кінця.

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Andrea Lešić was born in Sarajevo in 1972. She began studying Yugoslav Literature and Comparative Literature at the Philology Faculty in Belgrade (Serbia), from 1991 to 1994, and then graduated in 1996 in French and Russian at Queen Mary and Westfield College (now Queen Mary University of London, in the United Kingdom). She completed her MA in European Literatures, Languages and Thought in 1997, and her PhD (with the thesis entitled: *Barthes, Bakhtin, Structuralism: A Reassessment*) in 2001 (both at Queen Mary University of London).

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She has written about comparative literature (focusing on French, Russian and literatures of South Eastern Europe), literary theory (in particular on structuralism, narratology and cognitive poetics), as well as on cultural memory, traumatic memory, romances, fantasy and science fiction, and vampires.

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