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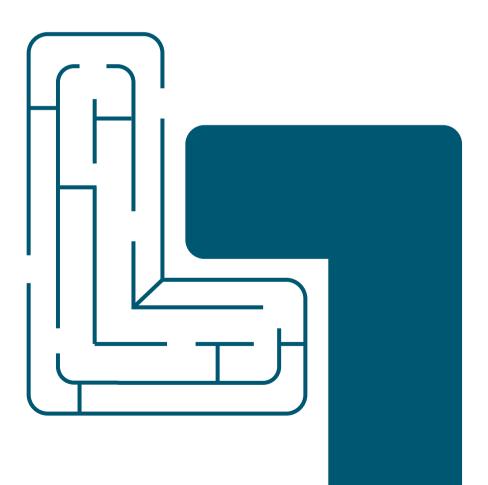
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NARRATIVE THEOLOGY IN THE EARLY FICTION OF SVETISLAV BASARA

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SADRŽAJ

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It is exceedingly rare to find mentors who promote freedom in philology. Most often, the opposite is the case: the model of applying available theoretical models to literary texts is strongly, systematically supported. Neat calculations are prized and deductive approach encouraged. This book, however, proceeds in the converse manner: returning to the text and its micro-structures. Considering the prevalent trends in the humanities, this might seem an obsolete method. Nonetheless, my mentors endorsed this approach, for which I am grateful. These professors, each in their own way, champion a return to the literary text. In this sense, I can say that this book would not exist had it not been for their support.

In addition to my mentors, Professors Dušan Marinković and Sava Damjanov, Professor Nenad Ivić played a highly important role in my post-graduate studies and the writing of my dissertation, upon which this book is based. I owe him great thanks for the support he showed me throughout my studies; his courses were designed as a group effort in creating strategies for reading literary texts, in which reading was perceived as a form of invention:

> The reader does not read if he is not a born adventurer and explorer. [...] The reading that finds in the text what it is looking for, repels. The explorable: current issues, ideology, colonialism, the greatness of great literature or the comparability of small literature, etc. [...] Pomposity, dryness, ugliness, a university career, these are strategies for destroying the possible. The possible is a debauch.[1]

I would like to thank Professor Zvonko Kovač for his help and counsel. When I was choosing my topic, his suggestion was to "choose a writer you love, because it will be difficult enough either way." His advice proved wise. Special thanks go to my colleague and friend, Professor Tomislav Brlek, for his constructive, lucid, and creative reading of my manuscript.

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[1] Nenad Ivić, *Grč Sirene: stihovi u Gordoganu 2003-2013* (Zagreb: Gordogan, 2014), 11.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleague and friend, Dr. Virna Karlić from the Serbian and Montenegrin Literature department, who read this work as it was being written (and rewritten), encouraged me, and inspired me to persevere.

For my father

GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE SUBJECT (1982–1985)

First of all, we can say that writing today has freed itself from the theme of expression: writing refers only to itself, yet it is not confined within its own interiority; it identifies with its own open exterior. This means that writing is a game of signs, not so much arranged according to the content of the signified as according to the very nature of the signifier; but it also means that this law of writing is always experimented with at its limits; writing constantly transcends and reverses that law which it accepts and with which it plays; writing dissolves like a game that necessarily transcends its own rules and thus goes beyond its own limits. Writing is not about showing or celebrating a gesture of writing; it is not a matter of fixing the subject in language, but of the question of opening the space in which the writing subject is constantly disappearing.
Foucault, "What is an Author?"

Critical Response

Svetislav Basara's early fiction is characterised by a tendency to search for alternative forms of text organisation: the predominance of the construction principle, metafictional discourse, fragmentariness. Dobrivoje Stanojević emphasizes the abolition of realistic motivation, metatextuality and intertextuality as elements of Basara's *narrative anarchy*[2] and Aleksandar Jerkov shows the development of Basara's fictional model from Beckett's nihilism, exhaustion and absurdity towards a postmodern strategy of *text editing*.[3] In Basara's fiction, we can recognise the topos of Ser-

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[2] Cf. Добривоје Станојевић, *Форма или не о љубави* (Београд: Књижевна омладина Србије, 1985).

[3] Cf. Aleksandar Jerkov, *Nova tekstualnost: ogledi o srpskoj prozi postmodernog doba* (Nikšić: Unireks / Beograd: Prosveta / Podgorica: Oktoih, 1992).

bian postmodernist literature: suspicion of great narratives, undermining the instance of the author, juxtaposing different discourses, regressive plot, undermining the existing hierarchy of values.[4] The distinct meta-textuality that characterises Basara's early works, *Vanishing Tales* (1982), *Chinese Letter* (1985), and *Peking by Night* (1985) is aimed at re-examining the system of causality, logic, and language.[5] In this sense, the process of deconstructing literary speech is a means of analyzing sign systems that are more comprehensive, and also a way to show their conditionality and instability.[6] Mihajlo Pantić points out that the change of narrative perspective in the collection of stories *Phenomena* (1989) and in the novels *The Cyclist Conspiracy* (1988) and *In Search of the Grail* (1990)[7] in the continuity of Basara's narrative process was already announced and prepared in the early fiction – moving from Beckett's impersonal subject to a suprahistorical insight into reality.[8] Basara's works could in this sense be divided into two groups. Ilić thus groups the story collections *Vanishing Tales*, *Peking by Night* and the novel *Chinese Letter* according to the criterion of focusing on narration itself, i.e. the deconstruction of narration, while seeing Basara's other books – *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* (1986), *On the Edge* (1987), *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, *Phenomena*, *In Search of the Grail*, *Mongolian Baedeker* (1992) – as characterised by a thematic shift towards non-literary content.[9] Radoman Kordić states that the foremost trait in *Peking by Night* and *Through the Looking-glass*

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[4] Cf. Маја Рогач, *Историја, псеудологија, фама: студија о прози Светислава Басаре* (Београд: Службени гласник, 2010).

[5] Svetislav Basara, *Приче у нестајању* (Београд: Књижевна омладина Србије, 1982); *Kinesko pismo* (Beograd: Vidici, 1985); *Peking by Night* (Београд: Просвета, 1985). The last title is in English in the original. The first two books have been translated into English as *Vanishing Tales* (in *Fata Morgana*, translated by Randall A. Major [Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015], pp. 85-124) and *Chinese Letter*, translated by Ana Lučić (Normal: Dalkey Archive, 2004).

[6] Cf. Дејан Илић, "Свет у распадању," *Књижевна реч*, год. 22, бр. 416 (10. мај 1993), p. 14.

[7] Svetislav Basara, *Fama o biciklistima* (Beograd: Prosveta / Zagreb: Globus, 1988); *Fenomeni: prepis spaljene knjige/Феномени: препис спаљене књиге* (Titovo Užice: Vesti, 1989); *Na Gralovom tragu* (Beograd: Akvarijus, 1990). The two novels have been translated by Randall A. Major, as *The Cyclist Conspiracy* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2011) and *In Search of the Grail: the Cyclist Conspiracy, Part Two* (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2017), respectively.

[8] Cf. Михајло Пантић, *Александријски синдром II* (Београд: Српска књижевна задруга, 1994), p. 164.

[9] Svetislav Basara, *Напукло огледало* (Београд: Филип Вишњић, 1986); *Na ivici* (Čačak: Dom kulture / Titovo užice: SIZ kulture, 1987); *Монголски бедекер*

Cracked is a deviation from the *narrative canon*. The deconstruction of the narrative model implies actions such as renunciation of the *logic of reality*, narration of the crisis of narration, non-fables, etc. Discussing literary influences (to which Basara himself points), he emphasises the similarity of Basara and Beckett's construction of the world.[10] The essential determinants of Basara's fiction are given in the text with an unusual title and an unconventional approach, "The Chinese Mirror Disappears by Night; or, How to Get an African Penguin" by Sava Damjanov.[11] Basara is defined here as a conceptual writer, and the provocation of his fiction in relation to the traditional model is explained as a phenomenon whose overriding features are elements that would be seen as shortcomings in traditional forms. Basara builds his text precisely on the potential shortcomings of traditional fiction. Damjanov points to the paradox on which Basara's critical approach to writing is based and argues that its value is difficult to argue with a traditional approach because it is predicated on establishing literary value through features traditionally defined as literary flaws. The procedures on which the inversion of the basic premises of the narrative text is based are, for example, character mutability (splitting into a set of speech acts), digressiveness, fragmentation, proving the inauthenticity of cause-and-effect relationships, and paradox as the constitutive value of the text.

The metatextual aspect of Basara's fiction is realised through autopoietic fragments, in which the author analyses his own text, puts literary techniques in doubt, comments on and defines what is narrated. Stanojević emphasises an important distinguishing feature of Basara's use of parody in storytelling: the centre of interest of parody has shifted from the literary template to the very act of storytelling, the instance of the narrator and the very act of reading.[12] Calling Basara a *preacher of prose* in the 1994 afterword to *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*, Predrag Marković states

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(Београд: Нолит, 1992). Randall A. Major translated the first novel as *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* (in Basara, *Fata Morgana*, pp. 7-83).

[10] Radoman Kordić, "Dekonstrukcija pripovedanja," *Književna kritika* 18(1987)1/2: 83-93.

[11] Сава Дамјанов, *Шта то беше млада српска проза?* (Нови Сад: Књижевна заједница Новог Сада, 1990), pp. 61-77.

[12] Dobrivoje Stanojević, "Postidilična slikovnica Svetislava Basare," *Polja* 34(1988)352, p. 280.

the fundamental aspects that this fiction calls into question: "*the identity of the narrator*, *the meaning of the text*, *and the indifference of the reader*."[13] In this context, the backbone of storytelling is the literary situation itself. *Vanishing Tales, Chinese Letter*, and *Peking by Night* are all characterised by differences in the choice of form and the degree of emphasis put on individual elements, but in certain variations and nuances each of these texts carries within itself an existential spasm of the subject facing emptiness. In that sense, writing appears as a defence against the end and finality. "I have to write so that I won't die and I have to keep repeating this so that I don't forget," in the words of the self-abolishing (Pantić) hero of *Chinese Letter*.[14] Writing is coercion, but it also postpones death. The starting point of narration, as well as its result, is disbelief in logic. We find the definition of this kind of narration in paradox, illogic, and relativism. The ingrained logocentric assumption that language has its referent in a reality that rests beyond its boundaries is here replaced by an anti-mimetic concept of writing that insists on the dialogue of the subject and nothingness, confronting emptiness, alienation, scepticism, contradiction, and relativism. We could agree with Pantić's statement that in these three works by Basara we can speak of the phenomenon of a *single* book: divided by titles and fragmented as it is, the central thread – "a continuous dispute between, not quasi-philosophical, but completely existent, notions I and Nothing"[15] – is clearly visible throughout.

The *I-nothing* dialogue has been tested and literalised in the writing of Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Peter Handke, and many other anti-traditionalist authors. We could say that such a dialogue is crucial for this type of fiction – the *I-nothing* conjunction achieves its own semantic density by virtue of questioning its poles. Basara emphasises his belonging to the spiritual circle formed by the aforementioned authors. The literary parallels that Pantić finds in his reading of Basara are interesting: *Vanishing Tales* arose, according to his view, from

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[13] Предраг Марковић, "Проповедник прозе," reprinted in *Басара*, ур: Маја Рогач и Зоран Јеремић, *Градац: часопис за књижевност, уметност и културу* 38(2010/11)178-179, p. 96. Further references to this special issue will be given as *Басара*.

[14] Basara, *Chinese Letter*, p. 34, cf. pp. 36 and 37.

[15] Cf. Mihajlo Pantić, *Aleksandrijski sindrom* (Beograd: Prosvjeta, 1987), p. 189.

Beckett's *Nothing*; *Chinese Letter* from the Kafkaesque view of the atmosphere of fear induced from without; and *Peking by Night* is directed into Handke's Nowhere, which we recognise by the coldness of the urban landscape, a loss of memory, and the skewness of the character, as well as, for the first time, resorting to narration in the third person. Basara's fiction entertains intertextual relations in almost all of its aspects. However, when all the topics are (already) spent, in the text that is thoroughly relativised, what remains is I and Nothing. The narrator plays with the way the text is performed by way of irony, abandoning it and returning to it, thus keeping it on the verge of self-abolition. His text vibrates between disappearing and emergence. In this context, Basara's character is not looking for a solution or a point, but for his own name, because naming confirms existence. That name is mutable and elusive. The difficulties with the name are a sign of the subject's disintegration – the character is just the remainder. In this sense, *Vanishing Tales, Chinese Letter*, and *Peking by Night* can also be seen as an escape from language; more precisely, an escape from the inability of language to describe the insecurity and anxiety of dispersed individuality. That is why it is no coincidence that Basara's heroes learn to speak, to accept conventions, to adapt themselves to space, time, and objects. At the heart of such writing is the effort to speak of the world as if language did not exist, leaving the narrator in with an aporia, for he tries to express this effort by the only means available — language itself.

Vanishing Tales

Svetislav Basara's first book, *Vanishing Tales*, was published in 1982 in Belgrade, as the first book in the ninth cycle of the Pegasus series published by the Literary Youth of Serbia. The book comprises mere 38 pages and is composed of eleven stories: "Introduction to Schizophrenia" (including "Verbal Transcendental Portrait"), "The Drawing," "Surroundings," "Language Class Essay on the Topic of 'Insomnia,'" "My Name is Tmu," "Departing," "Maxims," "Fin Who is Sitting," "A Sentence Torn From Context," "Letter to Skopje," and "Providence." In this part of the book, we will try to map the basic problems that these stories open in the context of the formation of Basara's narrative discourse, in

order to create a basis for further research of the early stage of his writing, taking into account the prevailing attitude of literary criticism on the existence of two separate and recognisable phases in Basara's narrative work. Provisionally speaking, the boundary between the two phases (or, more precisely, two different poetic orientations) appears after the narrative "trilogy" comprising *Vanishing Tales*, *Peking by Night*, and *Chinese Letter*, which opens the way to a thematic shift – from focusing on the narrative itself (and its decomposition) towards non-literary contents. The framework of our analysis will be the study *Form; or, Not of Love* by Dobrivoje Stanojević (1985), a contribution to the construction of a model of writing in the so-called *Young Serbian Fiction* of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The study deals with the artistic value of the works in question, as well as aiming to rethink the theoretical problems of the organisation of new kind of fiction. This interest was conditioned by an attempt to describe the stylistic formation of *formism*. The work on the form is foregrounded because the form represents a way by which the importance of the meaning of the story can be restored. According to Stanojević, the key constitutive features of the stylistic formation of formism are the following:

- ironic-parodic orientation (deflating the bathos of narration, predominance of the ironic viewpoint; establishing a parodic attitude towards both the traditional content and the material from the extra-literary world; the position of the narrator: emphasising narrative self-awareness and knowledge, conflict of the narrator and characters).
- rhythm and description (conflation of prose and poetry, repetition of select narrative sequences, depersonalization of description, testing the perception of the reader)
- fantastic observation (unobtrusively introduced; the impression of obscuring the phenomenal; deflating the bathos in the feelings of heroes – restlessness, intellectualistic doubt, paranoia, irrational behaviour, unreal reality)
- position of the plot (poetics of minimalism; observation of characters at the moment when they are affected by depression; rationalisation of the situation by changing the narrative process; form foregrounded; narrative search for new actions motivated

by typical states of heroes: hypersensitivity, paranoia, and schizophrenia)

- motivation (forgoing any kind of consistent motivational system; interrupting realistic motivation with fantastic details; emphasis on the irrational, concurrence of events; parody of the causal principle in observing things – of the latter, Stanojević states that it is the highlight of Basara's fiction)
- fragmentariness (compositional fragmentation; digressiveness)
- anti-generic orientation (search for genre; conflating various generic schemata)
- stylistic complexes (dominance of two stylistic complexes in formism: *civilizational* and *ironic-parodic*; the *civilisational* emphasises the narrator's belonging to contemporary urban civilisation and culture; cf. David Albahari, Mihajlo Pantić, Branislav Gudelj, Branko Anđić, etc.), while the *ironic-parodic* creates an ironic charge of intertextual connections with the literary canon even as it establishes intertextual connections with works of trivial literature, in an attempt to include, re-evaluate and artistically shape trivial patterns in order to rewrite the sense and meaning of so-called high literature in their image (cf. Gudelj, Petrinović, Pisarev, Damjanov, Mitrović, Marković, Pantić, Petković).

Stanojević emphasises the important role of metatextuality and intertextuality in formistic fiction. Metatextuality appears in these texts most often in the form of compositionally motivated thinking about literature. The thoughts of the main character/narrator, or the narrator himself, are not an end in themselves – they significantly affect the generic morphology of the texts, as well as the way artistic meanings are received. Formism is characterised by a heightened awareness of the conventions of literature and is well versed in the possibilities of developing those conventions, but this is not the key reason why formists question the sense of literature; formism tends to critically formulate questions about the reasons for agreeing to the *existing order* – of social norms, artistic conventions, interpersonal relations. Formists do not neglect to consider the relationship of literature to reality and the position of the individual in it, but renounce any sort of open engagement in accordance with the requirements of the "literary" in literature. The heroes of formist fiction often write for thera-

peutic reasons (most prominently, in the case of Basara and Gudelj), where experience and form are equally important:

Experience is form, and form is a new experience. The combination of experience and form brings about a new reflection on the new form. Both are subject to literary processing. It is only that experience gets a new form and together with form as a theme makes for a new content of experience. Thus form is, in fact, doubly present. Hence the impression of excessive insistence on form.[16]

Formistic texts are characterised by three levels of meaning: the first is the non-literal meaning of the text, the second is the construction of non-literal meaning, and the third is in the construction of a metatextual layer which comments on the first two.

The language of the metatextual layer is full of sudden rhetorical twists; it destroys the original meaning of the artistic text by placing it in a new context. The presence of the metatextual layer is most consistently compositionally motivated by the introduction of the author as protagonist: the hero has a certain literary education, and so the story he tells of necessity bears witness to this fact. As an example, Stanojević cites an excerpt from *Chinese Letter*, in which one can see the narrator's attitude towards the plot, which, with a purposeful irony, carries the truth that the story is impossible without the plot. Seemingly nothing happens, yet in fact something does happen – in the telling of the story.[17] The narrator formulates doubts during the writing process, doubts what is written, and defends and attacks his own poetic beliefs. The metatextual layer makes the position of the narrator problematic to such an extent that the narrator re-examines himself and his own function. At the metatextual level, the narrator considers the principle of construction, comments on literary conventions, examines the relevance of traditional styles, themes, procedures, and genres as regards the construction of new fictions. For formism, literature as a literary subject is crucial – in that sense, the metatextual level breaks the plot into its component parts, even as, in imposing a prefabricated plot, it draws attention to its various parts. In this way the form becomes a rich

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[16] Станојевић, *Форма или не о љубави*, p. 41.

[17] Cf. Basara, *Chinese Letter*, pp. 67-69.

subject as well as a functioning method. The goal of this process is to tell the story in a new way.

The intertextual level of formistic texts is designed to functionally expand the metatextual level. Formistic fiction seeks to establish a relationship with tradition *and* to constitute a new system. In most formistic works, one of the intertextual sublevels is constructed by mentioning the writer in relation to whose work a certain text proceeds. Thus, for example, in the fiction of George Pisarev and Predrag Marković one finds Borges' name, and in the fiction of Basara the names of Beckett, Ionesco, Aristotle and others. According to Stanojević, the metatextual and intertextual level in formism are the result of an attempt to solve the problems of the meaning of literary conventions. At the heart of their constitution is an attempt to point out the necessity of a new approach to literary conventions and the need to seek incentives for a new type of literary speech. In this context, Basara's *Vanishing Tales* can be read as an example of writing in which the reader's attention is consciously focused on the construction of the story "by insistence on reducing the role and wilting the identity of the narrator."[18] To illustrate this claim, we will list a few representative statements by which the narrator of *Vanishing Tales* legitimises/presents himself:

> I wrote a letter to the Swedish Academy in which I politely refused to accept the award, and suddenly irresistibly began to vanish uncintrollably, to disappea a a a a a a a a A A A A A A A A A A A A A ("Verbal Transcendental Portrait"[19])

> [...] that is the only thing i know about myself with certainty – the fact that i am imaginary fits in with something, that's just fine, i won't bear the responsibility, let Him think about that, I watch Him leaning over *this* piece of paper, his dull pencil torments me, i wonder if he always writes with a pencil, the son-of-a-bitch, why is he writing at all, perhaps he has a reason, anyway writing is only a little more stupid than living [...] ("My Name is Tmu"[20])

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[18] Илић, "Свет у распадању," p. 14.

[19] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, p. 97.

[20] Ibid., p. 108.

Soon, my name will be Fi, and then F, and then I will just be *named*, I will be anyone, no one will be able to blame me for anything. ("Fin Who is Sitting"[21])

[...] and it took a lot of time for me to comprehend the hopelessness of my position, to realize that the hallway has neither beginning nor end, that I was just an unindentified character in a fragment of a sentence whose meaning I could not determine, a sentence torn from the context of a portentous story that I knew nothing about... ("A Sentence Torn From Context"[22])

In order to trace the narrator conceptualised as a figure on the verge of disappearance, an attempt will be made to reconstruct the way he is conceptualised in the story "Surroundings," which I consider to be the pivotal story of the collection, its poetic stronghold. It is a story that, in my opinion, brings together the key points and concepts that this kind of narrative world is predicated upon. The title "Surroundings" is not fortuitous: the *surroundings* that the narrator of this *construction* takes for granted seem to be a precondition for its survival and a generator of its meanings. I will try to enumerate and describe these *surroundings* and examine how they condition the story, the constitution of its narrator, and the thematic obsessions mediated by his language games. The story opens by mapping the spatial-temporal circumstances of the narration, as well as the position of the narrator: "Alone, surrounded by nothingness, in a room without a past or a present."[23] The objects that are in the room (a window, books) stand out, but they are immediately shown as "assumptions" behind which there is nothing. The statement that interrupts the introductory exposition asserts that the world accessible to the narrator's perception is only "a completed projection" that he invented in order to have "a room in which to die." The attributions then pile up: the narrator exists "too little to pay attention to phantoms," and "too much to take into consideration that which really is;" it is enough for him to close his eyes "and the projection fades into the surrounding nothingness." The speaking subject is legitimised as "I, a personal

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[21] Ibid., p. 117.

[22] Ibid., p. 121.

[23] Ibid., pp. 101.

pronoun in the first person singular;"[24] narration reverts to self-reference, a process that I consider a fundamental feature of this type of fiction.

What does this procedure have to do with the notion of *surroundings*? In order to establish a relation, I will use the theoretical concept of *autopoiesis*, introduced by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to describe the general principle of organisation of all living beings. In the light of this revolutionary concept, Niklas Luhmann interpreted social, psychic, and nervous systems as autopoietic, introducing a radical reversal of traditional theories (his own included). Abstracting the biological connotations of the concept in order to introduce specifications into it when applied to different types of systems, Luhmann defined autopoietic systems as not only "self-organizing systems" that "produce and eventually change their own *structures*" but as, crucially, systems whose "self-reference applies to the production of other *components* as well."[25] In this conception, the basic self-reference, the complete orientation of the system towards itself, completely determines its exchange with the environment. In this context, the closedness of the system is interpreted as a precondition for its openness. The functioning of literary systems can also be interpreted in an autopoietic way and the concept was indeed introduced to literary theory by way of Luhmann's theory. Luhmann explains the autopoiesis of consciousness in this way: in any autopoietic process, one must single out the part which, as an observer (the result of the process), observes the other parts, that which is observed (the constituent parts of the process), in order to determine their specificity. Luhmann calls the observer *thought* and the observed parts *images*, but this difference is eliminated in the next stage of the process, in which thought becomes image after being subjected to observation by a new, impending thought. Thought discovers the code (guiding difference, *Leitdifferenz*) that enables previous thought to observe its predecessor in order to turn that thought into an image by separating the object (*Fremdreferenz* or hetero-reference) from the mode of observation (*Selbsreferenz* or self-reference). The difference between the object and the mode of observation, which forms the core of the image,

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Niklas Luhmann, "Autopoiesis of Social Systems," *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 3.

is the result of the unity of the so-called second order observation as an operation performed by thought. This unifying observational operation of thought, to which it owes its status, is itself the result of a certain guiding difference, but one which thought cannot realize because its observation is spent on previous thought. The process of consciousness is marked by the permanent decomposition of its events. This analysis was used by Dietrich Schwanitz to explain the relationship of storytelling as an observational element to the story as an observed element in the process at work in the narrative text.[26] Modern narration, according to Schwanitz, begins the moment when the story in the eyes of the reader ceases to coincide with reality and begins to refer to itself, i.e. to its generic affiliation.

> Let us consider the statements from Basara's story "Surroundings" in this context:
>
> I, a personal pronoun in the first person singular; raped before birth in the uterus of a mother, deceived, left to the mercy and cruelty of the unforeseeable flow of thoughts and reason which find a thousand justifications against suicide. And nothing happens. Two negations are an affirmation – I read that in one of the books – and *nothing* ultimately happens. What could possibly happen before death? and what can I say, at all, about myself? and am I saying THAT at all is THAT talking to me? and why am I talking at all? I have no other choice: I must speak. I must just say anything, because everything I say slips away and vanishes and – I must constantly think of huge blocks of marble, imagine vast steel plates so that in the all-encompassing chaos of inconstancy I might grasp a few straws of the illusion of solid and lasting objects, for which I can desperately grasp as I go under the surface.[27]

References to reality are here replaced by references to textual categories.[28] They take the place of reality. Since it is impossible to write about nothing, the denial of the subject of the story and its order becomes the subject of the story, which makes its own demands on the narrative. The story of nothingness and death is constantly being written. The obsessive

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[26] Cf. Dietrich Schwanitz, *Systemtheorie und Literatur. Ein neues Paradigma* (Opladen: Westdt. Verlag, 1990).

[27] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, pp. 101-102.

[28] Cf. Kordić, "Dekonstrukcija pripovedanja," p. 87.

topic is precisely the inscription of death into existence. Speech about death induces speech about the subject – grammatical, literary, incarnate. The reality of the text, however, is not only the speech of the narrative, but also the *actants* of the story; the actions of the text are always in some way correlated with the actions of reality. Such writing cannot completely abolish all elements of canonical narration, despite the fact that it is aimed at their systematic annulment. The real subject of these stories is the story over and over again, which emerges from the remnants of narrative models, in the function of deconstructing traditional narration.

According to Slobodan Vladušić, the basic poetic idea of Basara's narrator is confirmed by the paradox of the emptiness he narrates.[29] I am of the opinion that this constituted emptiness is the space from which the text emerges as a form of search. What makes the search possible is the thread, made up of circumstances:

> I didn't uncover all the *circumstances*. I was not even interested in them. Something like a thread! ("Departing"[30])

> In fact, I don't know what was left of me. And yet, something was. Better something than nothing. But all of that is still irrevocably vanishing. Not me! I am still here somewhere in some way. My surroundings! Reflecting on this and that, I had paid no attention to my surroundings – that was my fatal error – and then the bathroom and the bedroom and everything vanished. Only my self remained, in some sort of grey emptiness. I will have to be more careful, I will have to take better care of my self and try to get out of here. I have to learn as much as possible about the rules of the game that are in place here. Because, you live and learn. ("Maxims"[31])

A particularly interesting aspect of this fiction is the status of characters. In the stories "My Name is Tmu" and "Fin Who is Sitting," the characters lose their identity, as well as the ability to determine their own status in the text, while in the stories "Surroundings" and "Maxims" they simply disappear.[32] Especially important in this context is the story "My

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[29] Cf. Слободан Владушић, "Модели у нестајању," *Летопис Матице српске*, год. 173, књ. 459, св. 5(1997), pp. 697-703.

[30] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, p. 113.

[31] Ibid., p. 115.

[32] Cf. Илић, "Свет у распадању," p. 14.

Name is Tmu," which plays fast and loose with the hierarchy of the *author-narrator-character* Triad. The basic features that the narrator/character Tmu possesses are the following:

- proper name
- absence
- figment of someone else's imagination
- his own fiction
- being imaginary
- denial of responsibility
- awareness of the existence of an instance called *He*.

What is the relationship between the instances called *Tmu* and *He*? Tmu looks at Him, leaning over a piece of paper (which is assigned, in italics, the attribute *this*) and wonders why He writes at all. Tmu is suspicious of His existence, but concludes that He must exist, as he (Tmu) himself exists. Tmu claims that He is not such a bad writer, but the conditions in which He writes are unbearable. Again, therefore, the category of conditions/surroundings is invoked in the text. In the story "Fin Who is Sitting," the same procedure is at work: " That I can sit, be named Fin and speak – someone else takes care of that."[33]

It is notable that such an organisation of the hierarchy of speaking instances opens an implicit polemic with the notion of *mimesis*, which relies on referential properties of language, specifically demonstratives, deictics, and proper names. The pragmatic condition for the possibility of reference is the existence of something about which true or false judgments can be made. In narrative fiction, words seems to refer – they mimic the referential properties of ordinary language. J.L. Austin thus separates literature from speech acts.[34] In fiction, the same speech acts are performed as in the world, but they are fictitious; literature exploits the referential properties of language. Fictional texts use the same reference mechanisms as non-fictional uses of language, but in order to refer to fictional worlds that are considered possible. It is due to this conceptualisation that Basara's narrator can occasionally refer to the most bizarre nooks and crannies of the

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[33] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, p. 119.

[34] Cf. Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, translated by Carol Cosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 98.

real world. In "Introduction to Schizophrenia," the story that functions as a kind of prologue to *Vanishing Tales*, narration is generated from a buffet located in the frontal lobe of the cerebellum of the mother of the speaking subject, who claims to feel *terrible there*:

> My mom would never have crossed the threshold of such a dubious joint – even in her maddest state – and yet her memories dropped by regularly and I was also spending most of my time here in vain attempts to lose my own mind. If I felt terrible in my own thoughts, inside my mother's I felt *terrible* or even **TERRIBLE**. I simulated madness so that I wouldn't be distinguished from my surroundings, vacillating between reality and hallucinations, and when I grew bored of it all I would crawl through my mother's optical nerve to her center of vision and observe her reflections of the external world.[35]

The term *thread* – which, as already mentioned, plays an important role in structuring the narrative world of the book – appears already in the introductory story. A *thread* is characterised here as *something*, unnamed, indefinable, grammatically neuter: "That *something like a thread* was just a simile." It is "insignificant," but "IT" summons: "I followed IT."[36] The thread leads the narrator to an apartment where he is greeted by a woman from the previous pages of the story, disfigured by disappearance. He responds to the scene by drawing her "Verbal Transcendental Portrait."[37] Then he leaves and disappears.

Character

The variety of perspectives in which the concept of character has been designed is primarily apparent in the variety of names used for the same level of literary text in various languages and theoretical models: *character*, *personality*, *figure*, *hero*.[38] This differentiation arises most-

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[35] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, pp. 87-88.

[36] Ibid., p. 94.

[37] Ibid., pp. 96-97.

[38] Vladimir Biti, *Pojmovnik suvremene književne i kulturne teorije* (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, 2000), pp. 292-296.

ly from the diversity of literary genres, modes, and sub-genres within which character is recognised (dramatic; lyric; epic – within the epic mode: novels of various kinds, novellas, fairy tales, etc.). The way characters are named changed according to the alterations in their conceptualisation within the history of a given genre – for example, in novels, when they pass from the *psychological* into the *stream of consciousness* phase. The concept of the instance of character also changed considering how well literary thought fit into broader paradigms (philosophical and spiritual), within the framework of which the concepts of the subject, man, the individual, identity, etc. have been systematised. Taking these assumptions into account, current caution towards the treatment of character as a homogeneous, universal, category in literary theory becomes understandable. The interest in character waned in the 20th century both in literature and literary scholarship; after naturalism, man was no longer considered a protagonist of historical events, or even in charge of his own intentions. Instead, he is governed by forces out of his control. As a consequence, character loses stability and unity, dissolving into a collection of contradictory desires held loosely together by a proper name. In fact, even the name becomes reduced to fictive, arbitrary initial. In the semiotic paradigm of narrative theory, character is not observed in relation to its template in reality, but rather as a unit of the overall textual system; characters are observed from the perspective of the function they perform in the story. In Barthes' interpretation, characters become a component part of the overall naming process which the reader performs during the act of reading by summarising the increasingly semantically complex segments of the plot. According to Barthes, what is unique to narrative texts is not the plot, but character as a proper name. Considerations of character against the backdrop of communication replaces previous considerations of character in regard to the story; despite its importance for the semantic integration of the story, character proves to be no more than a road-sign pointing towards higher levels of communication – to the narrator, the implicit author, and the author-function. This is especially apparent in post-modern fiction that reveals character as a fictional construct, thus drawing attention to its own means.

In Philippe Hamon's study "Pour un statut sémiotique du personnage,"[39] character is defined as a semiotic concept – a kind of doubly articulated morpheme. This morpheme is migratory in nature and manifests itself as a discontinuous signifier, indicating a discontinuous signified. Character is thus defined by a combination of relationships of similarity, difference, hierarchy, and order, which successively or simultaneously conclude an agreement with the other characters and elements of the work, in both its immediate (other characters in the same novel) and remote context (other characters in the same genre). At the level of text, character represents, indicates, and defines a discontinuous signifier – a group of scattered signs. An important element in the coherence and legibility of the text is repetition, alongside the stability of proper names and versions of them: "Sorel ne peut devenir Rosel, ou Porel, à quelques lignes de distance," claims Hamon.[40] Modern fiction (e.g. Beckett's) relays character instability onto the finished text: the same character with various names, various characters with the same name, a lack of permanence, etc. In the semiotic perspective, character can be defined as a system of ordered equivalences that ensure the reader can parse the text. On the global level of the story, character is more a textual construct than a norm imposed externally on the text. The label of character is distributed among the perspectives or modalities in which the narrator views characters. Distribution of the signifier can itself become the subject of narration – the subject of the story is the search for a proper name. Semiotic mobility in naming characters ranges from onomatopoeia to allegory, passing through symbols, types, personifications, etc. The reader nearly always attempts to identify various roots, suffixes, prefixes, and morphemes within a proper name, analysing those retroactively with regard to the signified character; on the other hand, if the reader recognises them immediately, they will serve as a prospective piece of information, a horizon of expectation used to "predict" the character. The most interesting cases to analyse are those in which the character invents its own name or pseudonym. In view of its motivation, a proper name may be an element of semantic duplication – an indication of fate.

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[39] Philippe Hamon, "Pour un statut sémiotique du personnage," *Poétique du récit* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), pp.115-180.

[40] Ibid., p. 143.

In his study *Form; or, Not of Love*, Stanojević notes that the opening statement in *Chinese Letter* – "My name is Fritz. Yesterday I had a different name."[41] – does not arise from the need to replace the old plot-form of the novel with a new one and parody it; instead, it states a different view of literature represented by this new form of plot.[42] The main character in *Chinese Letter* has "nothing to say," he is sitting in his room, attempting to type "a hundred pages or so of my story."[43] This literary text thus presents itself as an endless monologue of consciousness examining and interpreting its own uncertainties. According to Stanojević, Basara's novel promotes a return to the previous state, during which the narrator floats between the world he examines and the world opened by the existence of the written text. *Chinese Letter* begins by presenting the main character – thus, in the manner of a traditional novel. However, as the story continues, the importance of this kind of beginning is consistently undercut. The book begins as a novel, and develops into, and ends with the narrator's anti-novel perspective. This hybrid structure is accentuated through a series of fragments. Systematic fragmentariness, as Stanojević calls this process, supports the instability of generic notions. Instability is motivated by the schizophrenic narrator's play on associations: *Chinese Letter* proceeds as a story about writing under coercion and supervision – the main character is constantly hurried on in his writing by two unknown visitors. The insufficiently developed characters in the story are the result of a desire to make a travesty of the seriousness of the traditional novel by schematising supporting characters. The basic feature of the main character in *Chinese Letter* is mutability[44] – he has no identity, nor a stable name: at first, his name is Fritz, but he claims his name was different the day before; a few days later, he is no longer Fritz, but Fin or Fi; after that, he is Salajdin Bejs, then Fritz again, and so on.[45] It is questionable whether he exists at all as a constant individual, and whether he even has a name. The novel lacks any kind of stable, consistent characterisation of its characters (Fritz, the mother, sister, and others), and so they function as an undefined mass of

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[41] Basara, *Chinese Letter*, p. 1.

[42] Cf. Станојевић, *Форма или не о љубави*, pp. 92-96.

[43] Basara, *Chinese Letter*, p. 1.

[44] Cf. Дамјанов, *Шта то беше млада српска проза?*, pp. 64-71.

[45] Cf. Basara, *Chinese Letter*, pp. 1, 49, 58, 63.

speech, thought, mostly futile actions, and absurd procedures, Sava Dam-janov concludes.

In his analysis of Basara's narrative discourse entitled "Postmodernist Paralogies," Radoman Kordić notes that the reality of the text does not consist only of speech about narration (to which postmodernism tends to reduce it), but of the story's characters as well.[46] They are given the role of subjects, actors; their actions in the text are in correlation with the actions of reality. As in a classical novel, in *Chinese Letter* Basara also provides his main character (narrator) with a family. The mother holds the central place in this family. She is, according to Kordić, "the cause of desire, which educates the hero; but she is also the embodiment of a lack – in the words of Lacan, she is not-whole." Kordić concludes that this is how Basara injects his writing with realism, which he also wish-es to banish from fiction. Kordić continues to state that Basara's main character is not only the grammatical subject of a sentence, but also the subject of a particular ideologeme. Language is thus charged with the role of ideologeme, of which there are two forms; the first is the product of the canon Basara is disassembling, while the second is found in Eastern philosophy. Basara uses ideologemes from Eastern philosophy as a tool by which to establish an alternate reality, i.e. to build a paralogical discourse (for example, he uses *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in this way). They are used as a means to create illusion, which holds for all instances when texts written by others are cited, but also, Kordić warns, perhaps Basara's speech as a whole: "In place of illusion, in place of the Lacanian analyst, we find the narrator."

> "You know, I have a very poor opinion of your fiction. I don't care for ficti-on generally, but I have an exceptionally poor opinion of yours because it's full of lies and cowardice. You've invented Finns and Tmus and put in their mouths words you wouldn't dare say yourself. So! That will be all. Don't forget, I forgive only those who forgive." God slammed down the receiver. He didn't leave his telephone number.[47]

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[46] Cf. Radoman Kordić, "Postmodernističke paralogije: proza Svetislava Basare," *Književna kritika* XXI (1990) 2, pp. 125-155.

[47] Basara, *Peking by Night*, p. 122.

The following analysis will show some of the principles by which Basara's early fiction creates its characters and establishes their basic functions through the example of characters that appear in *Vanishing Tales* and *Peking by night*.

"My Name is Tmu"[48] opens by repeating the statement in its title but the name of the character (who is also the narrator) is written in lowercase: "tmu." The entire story is told in one sentence that ends with a colon. The story playfully engages with the levels of author, narrator, and character. The narrator Tmu immediately claims at the beginning of the story that he is aware how stupid his own name is but that he cannot bear responsibility for it because others wanted him to have it. What he can claim is only his own non-existence: "i don't exist, capital letters don't either, i am half from the imagination of others, half from my own fiction."[49] According to his testimony, his mother died before birth "so that i would have a tough childhood,"[50] which establishes a bizarre reverse causality while also satirising psychoanalytical concepts – a frequent process in Basara's fiction – in which the family represents a caricatured set of functions which seem to have arisen from a purposely humorous reading of the works of Sigmund Freud, who himself is a frequent figure/character in Basara's fiction. Tmu claims that someone else is writing about him and that this fits perfectly with the statement that he is made up – what is more, the only thing he knows for certain about himself is that he is made up, " that is the only thing i know about myself with certainty – the fact that i am imaginary fits in with something, that's just fine, i won't bear the responsibility, let Him think about that, I watch Him leaning over *this* piece of paper, his dull pencil torments me, i wonder if he always writes with a pencil, the son-of-a-bitch, why is he writing at all, perhaps he has a reason, anyway writing is only a little more stupid than living."[51] This play on narrative instances becomes more serious with the narrator/character's question as to, "of the two of *us*, who is *i*," to which he answers: "i am not." The narrator of this story thus bears witness to his own non-existence, as well as the

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[48] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, pp. 108-111.

[49] Ibid., p. 108.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., pp. 108-109.

non-existence of the identity of the character. "does He exist at all, does writing exist, it must exist since i do"[52] – this is the conclusion Tmu draws, which could be read as a lesson on the supreme power of the Author. This inverts the standard account of how literature operates, and Basara certainly counts on this point for in the following fragment of his string of sentences, we read that "i can hardly wait for that fine day, the long-ago-announced death of literature, yes, people talk about the death of literature and literature is dead, the literary work dies at the moment the writer finishes the last sentence."[53] The story ends with a colon followed by a blank; before the colon is the statement "only one thing is certain."[54] Between the final colon and the initial statement "my name is tmu," we find a string of sentences listing uncertainties, such as the uncertain identity of the author, narrator, character, and reader, as well as the uncertainty of the text itself: "i don't know what his name, the son-of-a-bitch, he didn't sign his name, he will sign when he finishes the last sentence, then it will be too late, i will never learn who he is, who he is, a tautology, and he is an imaginary character, others gave him a name;" "he wants others to read about me, i wonder if those others exist, if they exist he wants to tell them something, i don't know what, he doesn't know what either, they won't know either."[55]

The character of Fin also appears for the first time in *Vanishing Tales* (in "Fin Who is Sitting"). He will later appear in *Peking by Night* (in "Five Notes on Fin's Stay in Peking" and "Eight Notes on Fin's Summer Holiday"), as well as in the novel *Chinese Letter*. The story "Fin Who is Sitting" is structured similarly to "My Name is Tmu," while the stories "Five Notes on Fin's Stay in Peking" and "Eight Notes on Fin's Summer Holiday" are additionally complicated through changes in the narrative perspective. In "Fin Who is Sitting," Fin is both character and narrator, and is placed in similar relation to the author as Tmu in "My Name is Tmu," with which an inter-textual relationship is established: Fin speaks of his own genesis (as does Tmu), but Tmu himself is included in it this time: "I was conceived from a splitting, once long ago, I don't know when, they didn't tell me.

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[52] Ibid., p. 109.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., p. 111.

[55] Ibid.

They told me something else, some kind of lie full of adjectives, something fitting filthy. *Something* preceded those events, something shapeless split him and me. His name was Tmu. He died soon after. We never met."[56] It is interesting to note the use of a capital letter in writing the name Tmu: in "My Name is Tmu," it is noted that "for Him there are capital letters,"[57] so the formula of author-narrator-character relations established there would demand that Fin be the author, narrator, and character in "Fin Who is Sitting." However, this is brought into question through the statement "That I can sit, be named Fin and speak – someone else takes care of that. [...] He brings food so that the story can be logical."[58] The only certainty in this story is the statement "I am sitting, leaning against the wall, and my name is Fin," which is repeated a few times, serving as a kind of refrain.[59] The position of Fin as a character is both challenged and universalised at the same time: "Aren't we all named Fin, aren't we all more or less dead, are we not sitting, leaning against the wall, helpless to do anything for ourselves or for others?"[60] The story establishes several intertextual relationships: the first is established through Fin, who figures in two stories in *Peking by Night* and in a part of the novel *Chinese Letter*; the second is established within the collection *Vanishing Tales*, with the stories "Fin Who is Sitting" and "Language Class Essay on the Topic of 'Insomnia.'" The relationship with this story arises from Fin's statement "When I'm asleep, my name is not Finn and I am not sitting, leaning against the wall."[61] In his recurring dream, Fin's name is different; he never remembers it later. The dream replays a memory of a dream he had as a child – awake, he cannot remember his past: "no matter how hard I struggle agaisnt oblivion just to learn how I used to be, I always see myself sitting, leaning against the wall, and my name is Fin."[62] "Five Notes on Fin's Stay in Peking"[63] is told in the first

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[56] Ibid., p. 116.

[57] Ibid., p. 110.

[58] Ibid., p. 119.

[59] Ibid., p. 118, cf. p. 120.

[60] Ibid., p. 117.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., p. 118.

[63] Basara, *Peking by Night*, 63-66. There are actually only four notes, numbered 1, 2, 3, 5.

person, but this time, the narrator is not Fin. The narrator observes Fin, comments on his appearance, and attempts to enter a dialogue with him: "'Fin, you son of a bitch' – I yell at the top of my lungs, making passers-by turn around – what are you doing in Peking? This isn't *Vanishing Tales*." Fin says nothing; he has even stopped breathing. "I would say he is no longer Fin"[64] the narrator concludes, noting that Fins disappearance has progressed, and that he is now called simply F (a process we also witness in the characterisation of the character Fritz/Fin/Fi-I in *Chinese Letter* – the obsessive subject of *disappearance* is also implemented at the morphological level of the text). In the first fragment of this story (or rather the first *note*), Fin does not speak directly. Instead, his words are conveyed by the narrator: Fin's eyes *seem to* say (although he emphasises that they likely do not exist) that he has been written, typed, published, and left alone on an impossible sea coast, leaning on a wall "built to become a ruin."[65] A parallelism is established with the motif of the wall from "Fin Who is Sitting" – the refrain "I am sitting, leaning against the wall, and my name is Finn" steps across the threshold of the text in which it first appeared and reappears in a story in Basara's second book. In the third fragment of the story, the refrain is further emphasised: "I can't do anything for Fin. He *has to* always be sitting, leaning against the wall, and be named Fin."[66] The narrator of "Eight Notes on Fin's Summer Holiday"[67] is once again Fin – he narrates in the first person. A significant difference between this story and the previous ones is the accumulation of characters and, consequently, humorous effects; it should thus be emphasised that this humour is absurd. As opposed to the other stories, in which Fin is a foremost figure (as the narrator and/or character), here we find a host of characters, including, among others, the Word of God, a group of archaeologists, professors of palaeontology, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, hawkers of ice cream, hamburgers, refreshments, cigarettes, and condoms, women, Carl G. Gustavson, Beckett, and Basara himself. However, this whole raft of characters serves only as an absurdist landscape, through which Finn moves as the only elabo-

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[64] Ibid., p. 63.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., p. 65.

[67] Ibid., pp. 88-95. The number is again inaccurate; there are in fact nine numbered sections.

rated figure. An especially interesting aspect of Fin's characterisation in this story is the degree of his self-awareness; by effectively playing with the concept of *description*, the narrator indicates Fin's developmental path, which takes orders from the Word of God and goes on a summer holiday, where he establishes that *Omnia est description.* [68] At the end of the story, he establishes that everything repeats itself, "and that's why everything should be subjected to deconstruction, of myself on the sand, in the genitive case."[69]

Chinese Letter

> Disons pour simplifier (et avec tous les risques qu'une telle simplification comporte) que l'écriture comporte trois déterminations sémantiques principales: Iº C'est un geste manuel, opposé au geste vocal (on pourrait appeler cette écriture-là scription, et son résultat scripture). 2º C'est un registre légal de marques indélébiles, destinées à triompher du temps, de l'oubli, de l'erreur, du mensonge. 3º C'est une pratique infinie, où s'engage tout le sujet, et cette pratique s'oppose dès lors à la simple transcription des messages; Écriture entre en opposition de la sorte tantôt avec Parole (dans les deux premiers cas) tantôt avec Écrivance (dans le troisième). Ou encore: c'est, selon les empois et selon les philosophies: un geste, une Loi, une jouissance.
>
> Roland Barthes, *Variations sur l'écriture*

An Angular Way of Looking at Things

In his text "Schizophrenia with an Aesthetic Purpose," writing in 1983 about Basara's first book *Vanishing Tales* Milivoj Srebro notes some of the basic poetic features that also comprise the background of his novel *Chinese Letter*.[70] By means of artistic transposition of a provisionally des-

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[68] Ibid., p. 89.

[69] Ibid., p. 94.

[70] Milivoj Srebro, "Estetski svrhovita shizofrenija," *Vidici* 4-5, 1983.

ignated "reality," as well as in the actual composition of his text, Basara makes use of a specific process of inverted logic, creating an unexpected, deviant projection of the narrative image, renders the narrative situation peculiar, and achieves a meta-reality. The outside world does not exist for Basara (or rather, as Srebro puts it, for his narrative equivalent) – it is just an assumption or hypothesis of the subject, his introverted reflection. To designate this reversal of perspective and the shift in focus in the perception of the world accounting for the peculiarity of the narrative image, the narrator/protagonist of *Chinese Letter* will come up with the term angularity, expounding how it renders relative, or even negates, the laws predicated upon principles of logic and causality: "*Angularity* – that's my philosophy. I'm trying to observe all things by looking at them askance." [71] The abolishment of logic conditioning in a world that is a projection of the subject are due to his deep scepticism and doubt in one's own ontological and existential status:

> Although *that* which doubts exists through this very doubt as a form of manifest activity, *that* is by the same token annulled, because it does not find its own resonance in the world outside itself. This is why Fritz, the main character in the novel, can conclude that "there never was anything except my vision, and the whole nightmare of existence is just a perfidious conspiracy of my senses." [72]

In this sense, the text is not endowed with the ability to render the world concrete, neither lexically nor graphically; instead, it is a world unto itself, outside of which there is nothing – a world reduced to the exclusive existence of the *letter*. At the level of (dis)organising the text of the novel, the "*angular* way of looking at things," [73] requires the disintegration of the narrative letter, and the text is thus broken into a string of fragments. Arbitrariness and contradiction are insisted upon in its composition, and the manuscript is an absolute subduing the narrative subject. Emphasising the relative autonomy of the fragments within the broader structure

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[71] Basara, *Chinese Letter*, p. 11.

[72] Миливој Сребро," Разарање 'писма романа'," *Летопис Матице српске* год. 161, књ. 435, св. 6 (1985), pp. 991-994. The quote is from *Chinese Letter*, p. 120.

[73] Basara, *Chinese Letter*, p. 11.

leads to the denial of the causal conditioning of plot development, and it invalidates the function of the context; this process suggests a vision of a disorganised world which the de(con)structed subject inhabits. Random composition and the reduction of the whole to fragments cause the destruction of the letter, which is subjected to semantisation – it comes across as a textual reflex of a world that is falling apart. In this sense, it can be claimed that Basara's fiction, despite having come about through the negation of the traditional concept of literature based on mimesis, affirms this very concept in a paradoxical manner: the text becomes a reflection of the narrated world by way of negative construction.

"The post-modern text disassembles itself naturally. In the end, we are faced with a carefully composed letter. It governs the story as the signifier that gives birth to that which is not here; it gives birth to the narrator, the fictive master of the story, in the words of Lacan, the letter is the subject of the narrator, the signifier-master, whose oration indicates what should be explained" – these are the words Radoman Kordić uses to open his discussion on the fiction of Svetislav Basara.[74] We will note some of the tenets of his research that are germane to our analysis, especially the reference to Lacan's concept of the subject who creates a new presence in the world through the act of naming. What is shown disappears from what is represented – Basara's fiction dramatises the master of the story, who tells the story somewhere *in the hole of the real*. Kordić's next significant insight is the differentiation between the eccentric subject and the narrator in Basara's writing. He notes that, from the psychoanalytical perspective, Basara's architectural undertakings can be clearly distinguished from the way the subject is inscribed in the text. In this sense, the narrator can be said to consistently invert the logic of narration in search for the real, while the eccentric subject follows the principles of building a schizoid discourse. In these cases, the narrator should be credited with the use of genres of speech and pragmatic linguistic formulas, which fall under the category of literary speech, while changes in syntax and meaning in pragmatic linguistic formulas (in other words, the creation of a schizoid text) should be attributed to the eccentric subject. The schizoid character of Basara's text, Kordić claims, can be derived from the nature of the

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[74] Kordić, "Postmodernističke paralogije," p. 125.

letter. In *Chinese Letter*, Basara takes a turn towards post-modernism by taking the status of the letter as his subject of narration and transforming the meanings that are impressed into the letter. The signifying function of the letter and its logic determine the logic of narrative reality in *Chinese Letter*. The novel also makes use of the process of post-modernist mystification: for example, of Kafka's and Beckett's discourse (and literary discourse in general). This is a mystification of reality that is built and discussed, as well as a mystification of speech, narration, discourse, and the graphic aspect of writing. The process of destroying the text of the novel is carried out parallel to the de(con)struction of narration and the establishment of a narrator – a subject who is a paranoid schizophrenic composing the text out of his own fantasies and hallucinations. The text is interrupted with marginal notes containing *situations of subjectivity* (Kordić). This series of processes functions, according to Kordić, as a string of ideologemes of the subject, who knows that he can no longer organise his past and future, that he cannot subjectivise himself: he has been made eccentric. Kordić concludes that post-modern fiction does not attempt to bring this kind of subject together; it does not accept "the potential summation of the subject at a non-existent point."[75]

The Subject Introduced

In her text "Postmodernist Representation," Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as a re-examination of what reality means and how we can know this.[76] It is not a matter of representation dominating or erasing the signified. In postmodernist fiction, representation consciously acknowledges that signification *is* representation, that is, as an interpretation and creation of its signified, and not as an offer to approach it directly and instantaneously. Hutcheon notes that in postmodernist representation the centre is not empty, but put in question, questioned in the aspects of its own power and politics. The question arises: if the notion

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[75] Ibid., p. 155.

[76] Cf. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 29-58.

of centre is challenged in postmodernism, what happens to the idea of centralised subjectivity – the represented subject?

> But there is also one question: Would I have hanged the right man if I had hanged myself? What am I? It's impossible to say anything about me. Whatever I say, it's not me anymore. In the past I used to think, I used to convince myself that *I* is not I; I have to admit that I got rid (although for just a little bit) of the unbearable burden of the reflexive pronoun *myself*, but the pronoun (as its name suggests) always returned to me each time, even more perfidious, more malicious than before. I couldn't get used to *I*. What *I* want I does not want. It feels disgusted. As if I had somebody in my body working to destroy it. To make it go insane. This *I* is a parasite. It feels comfortable. My *I* is on the edge of a nervous breakdown. It happens that I find myself standing on the corner of the street for hours, without being able to move, to go where some urgent business is taking me just because this *I* wants to go somewhere else. I would have killed myself if I knew that this other *I* won't outlive me. But, how can I be sure about this? Isn't my handwriting getting smaller? Am I not already writing in such small letters that my handwriting, if I continue in this way, will turn into a simple illegible line on paper – which will best express my feelings?[77]

The notion of a coherent, permanent, autonomous, and free subject, as Foucault suggests, is a historically conditioned and historically determined construct, along with the analogous subject representing the individual in literature. In postmodernist texts, Hutcheon argues, subjectivity is presented as a process — it is a textual self-preservation that paradoxically directs our attention to details.

Discovering Cracks

In the essay "What is an Author?"[78] Michel Foucault points out that in the act of writing the emphasis is on the problem of creating a space in

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[77] Basara, *Chinese Letter*, pp. 75-76.

[78] Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113-137.

which the subject of writing is constantly disappearing. Writing, in that sense, becomes related to the sacrifice of life. The connection between writing and death is manifested in the erasure of the individual features of the subject who writes. As a result, the writer's trail is reduced to an indication of his absence – the writer must simulate a dead man in the game of writing.

> Word by word, sentence by sentence (there it goes, slowly) and suddenly, there is a huge pile of impossible sentences fighting with each other, expressing something quite the opposite of what I want to say. While the sentence is in my thoughts, in my head, it is living and whole, but immediately after I write it down, it becomes a corpse and starts falling apart in front of my eyes in words, syllables, then letters and in the end there is nothing left of the sentence but the ants that have chewed her. That's why I write and never look back. I have to type and type until the ribbon breaks, until the paper runs out, until I finish, until I die, until something happens. If I turn around to look, I'll become a pillar of salt. That's how it seems to me. I think I can scientifically prove this: I who started writing this do not exist anymore, and I who will put a • at the end of this sentence still does not exist. Only at this moment does this *I* exists. Now it doesn't exists any more, because this is another sentence and some other *I*... Now I purposely didn't put a period at the end of this sentence but it doesn't help. I exist only momentarily. Generally speaking, this thing about my existence – it's all so uncertain.[79]

It is not enough, Foucault emphasises, to repeat the empty claim that the author has disappeared. Instead, one should locate the space vacated by the author's disappearance, and observe the cracks that this disappearance reveals. The question that needs to be asked is: how, under what conditions, and in what forms does something like a subject appear in the order of discourse; what place it can occupy in a particular type of discourse, what functions it can appropriate and what rules it must follow. In short, it is a question of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of the role of the producer, and of analysing the subject as a mutable and complex function of discourse. In this sense, it can be argued that the obsessive theme of the novel *Chinese Letter* – disappearance – appears as its knot; it is conditioned by the fundamental dilemma of the heroes:

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[79] Basara, *Chinese Letter*, pp. 13-14.

My thoughts most frequently think about disappearing; they think I don't think enough about death, that my avoiding the subject of death is not a reflection of courage or carelessness, but of the mere cowardice, and of fear of coming face to face with it. Think of all the things that we do in hospitals so that people can heal and die healthy. And death is just some general place. That's how they treat it. Since everybody shuns it, what is left is only life, the order inside life, birth registries, records, card catalogs beyond which life doesn't even exist. Everything is being recorded. Even the smallest detail of somebody's life. Day after day this is getting harder and harder, so they give orders that everybody should start keeping his own files as I do. If you've been allowed to exist, then it should be known how you exist. Who can remember everything they do, and especially what they *do not do*? I hope this won't sound as if I'm advocating death as a solution. No! Far from that. I'm terrified of death. I think I already mentioned that. I'm writing about disappearing just because I'm afraid of it and because I hope (as I hope I will meet Luna again) that this disappearance could miraculously disappear. Why do I write then? I write because this life, to which I'm desperately clinging, is boring, is filled with disgust, with narrow-mindedness and *fear of death*. I'm trying to fight this. Inside life, there is no solution. No, there isn't, and there's nothing that can be done about it.[80]

Paradoxical Discourse

In his study *Form; or, Not of Love*, Stanojević states that *Chinese Letter* is a novel in which, instead of narrating what happens, narration itself happens. The genre dynamism of this novel is enhanced by a series of fragments, short stories, that are related to the discussion of disappearance. Sava Damjanov writes that *Chinese Letter* is a "novel" – the quotation marks call into question the validity of the generic designation – whose main character is mutable, deprived of identity. It lacks the basic determinant of identity: a name. At first, the character's name is Fritz, but in the second sentence of the novel we learn that he was not called that yesterday. After a few days, he is no longer Fritz, but Fin, that is, Fi, then Salajdin Bajs, and then he will be Fritz again. And so on. In the end, it remains doubtful

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[80] Ibid., p. 90.

whether he is called anything at all, and whether he exists as a consistent entity. In the novel, all the characters figure as an indeterminate, undifferentiated, fluid, and mutable mixture of speech. They are not clearly situated in time or space, and the events in which they are involved can be read both as digressions and as important parts of the basic action, which is also mutable. Therefore, paradox is the central formula structuring Basara's fiction. Expressions of paradoxical nature acquire the status of a new literary convention. This peculiar discourse is not only the result of a successfully constituted skewed perspective and effects of surprise. Paradoxical statements negate textual entities – these statements are in the service of universal disappearance, which is one of the obsessive traits of Basara's fiction. It constantly questions and denies what was previously verbally rendered as an actual referent. Paradoxical discourse also contributes to the formation of an ironic-parodic vision, which has become a recognisable mark of Basara's work (whether he writes essays or fiction), accounting for its comic tone. The formula of the paradox is closely related to another important aspect of Basara's writing: the treatment of language and the practice that ensues from it. At the heart of this treatment, according to Damjanov, is a paradigm that can be defined as a literal understanding of language, or a literal understanding of the metaphorical nature of language from which arises the textual realisation of the literal meaning of certain phrases. One of the most conspicuous codes of Basara's fiction is metatextuality, which is for the most part brought about by direct statements about the literary text: contemplating the procedure, providing autopoietic explanations, exposing literary technique, making theoretical comments, discussing poetic problems, etc. Basara's fiction speaks of nothing. There is no coherent semantic orientation in it. The established textual reality is denied and subject to destruction.

In her book *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon notes that contemporary theorists of all political persuasions have pointed out that *subject* is a topic in fashion in both criticism and literature. Fredric Jameson, for example, calls the fragmentation and death of the subject a fashionable theme in contemporary theory, which marks the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad, the ego or the individual. The coincidence of the ideological interests of criticism and art and their common focus on the ideological and epistemological nature of the human sub-

ject marks a point of intersection that could determine postmodernist poetics; it is a point of challenge to any aesthetic theory or practice that assumes a safe, confident condition of the subject or omits it altogether. According to Hutcheon, philosophical, "archaeological," and psychoanalytic decentering of the notion of the subject was performed by Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan respectively. However, to decenter does not mean to deny. The subject is inevitable, and finding a place for him means first acknowledging his difference, and then his ideology. The emphasis that metafiction places on utterance, the subject's use of language, and the multiple contexts in which that use is situated is aligned at the level of theory with pragmatics, discourse analysis, and speech act theory. Benveniste articulates the consequences of the speech act of self-identification in language in relation to the definition of subjectivity as the ability of the speaker to position himself as a subject.[81] Subjectivity is, therefore, a fundamental feature of language – one establishes oneself as a subject in language and through language because only speech establishes the concept of *I* in reality. This understanding of subjectivity has a strong bearing not only on any general theory of the subject, but on any attempt to interpret the subject in literature.

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[81] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971).

THE STRATEGY OF READING - READING STRATEGIES

Perhaps this ordeal points us toward what we are seeking. The writer's solitude, that condition which is the risk he runs, seems to come from his belonging, in the work, to what always precedes the work. Through him, the work comes into being; it constitutes the resolute solidity of a beginning. But he himself belongs to a time ruled by the indecisiveness inherent in beginning over again. The obsession which ties him to a privileged theme, which obliges him to say over again what he has already said – sometimes with the strength of an enriched talent, but sometimes with the prolixity of an extraordinarily impoverishing repetitiveness, with ever less force, more monotony – illustrates the necessity, which apparently determines his efforts, that he always come back to the same point, pass again over the same paths, persevere in starting over what for him never starts, and that he belong to the shadow of events, not their reality, to the image, not the object, to what allows words themselves to become images, appearances – not signs, values, the power of truth.

Blanchot, *The Space Of Literature*

Others as the Constitutive Element of the Subject

The provocative impulse to write this part of the book came straight from the story. The story is entitled "Svetislav Basara Interviews Samuel Beckett for the Third Programme of Radio Belgrade."[82] I will single out, for analysis, three fragments of this story and quote them according to the original, highlighting some points that will be important for later exposition:

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[82] Cf. David Albahari, "Svetislav Basara intervjuiše Semjuela Beketa za Treći program Radio Beograda," *Fras u šupi* (Beograd: Rad, 1984), 68-69.

1)

S.B.: Have you ever seen *the rain*?

S.B.: Excuse me?

S.B.: Have you ever seen the rain?

    (*Pause*)

S.B.: I did not expect such difficult questions.

2)

S.B.: […] and I knew what it should look like, in the form of a *monologue*, even when it seems to be a *dialogue*, always between *silence* and *darkness*, darkness and silence, until not a single *unvisited place* remains in my memory, until I am all my work.

3)

S.B.: I am *emptiness*.

Samuel Beckett once stated in a conversation that it seems to him that literature before him was mainly interested in power and knowledge, and that he was interested in impotence and ignorance.[83] The question that arises is: how to shape helplessness and ignorance in a way that would interest the reader? The protagonist of Beckett's novel *Molloy* is not someone who knows nothing, despite the fact that his entire inner monologue is a challenge to knowledge, even a mockery of knowledge. Each sentence of his monologue begins with a refutation of the previous one, every statement is followed by a *but*; the knowledge that is ignored here is the kind of ignorance that is established in relation to prior knowledge. The reception of such a discourse also requires knowledge that would lead to ignorance, and such a strategy is not exhausted only in the refutation of knowledge. Some of the methods of establishing this learned ignorance are, for example, Molloy's mention of his *dabbling* in anthropology, theology, magic and the like, and especially interesting is his *scientific* method of establishing the order of sucking pebbles, which is considered the most successful example of permutation as a postmodernist literary practice.[84] The novel *Molloy* consists of two long internal monologues, one of which belongs to Molloy and the other to Moran, his pursuer, but there is some conflation,

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[83] Cf. Milivoj Solar, *Nakon smrti Sancha Panze: eseji i predavanja o postmodernizmu* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2009), 157.

[84] Cf. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 230-231.

so it is not entirely clear whether there is a single person or more. Beckett's novel is composed of sequences that gradually arouse curiosity in the reader, but the sequence in question does not possess the coherence of the story; the fundamental impression it leaves is the impression of gradual destruction. The traditional experience of the novel includes a hero – an individual conditioned by history, in conflict with the world, who regularly loses this battle either by dying, where death confirms him and his choice, or by accepting some fictitious existence ironically. The process being described is a process of cognition – both the protagonist and the reader eventually know something they did not know at the beginning; the end of the novel makes sense of its beginning. There may be something like the paradox of human existence, but the paradox is solved in terms of literary technique by the reader realizing that some kind of destiny made the story possible. In Beckett's novel, nothing enables a story – the story is not realized in this way because even the ironic understanding of destiny is doubly contested: Molloy and Moran are not even subjects, as they do not differ in principle, due to conflation, and the end of the novel does not makes sense of the beginning as the series could continue with new characters. Molloy stops at the end because he cannot go any further, and Moran listens to a voice commanding him to compile a report (perhaps just the one that makes up the novel).

The corpus of texts by S.B. that I want to introduce into dialogue with S.B.'s novel *Molloy* comprises three books: *Vanishing Tales*, *Chinese Letter*, and *Peking by Night*. Among these works there are differences in the choice of form and the degree of emphasis of individual elements, but in certain variations and nuances each carries within itself an existential spasm of the subject facing emptiness. Basara's fiction entertains intertextual relations in almost all of its aspects. However, when all the topics are (already) spent, in the text that is thoroughly relativised, what remains is I and Nothing. The narrator plays with the way the text is performed by way of irony, abandoning it and returning to it, thus keeping it on the verge of self-abolition. His text vibrates between disappearing and emergence. In this context, Basara's character is not looking for a solution or a point, but for his own name, because naming confirms existence. That name is mutable and elusive. The difficulties with the name are a sign of the subject's disintegration – the character is just the remainder. In the deeper layers

of meaning, Basara's texts represent the striving of consciousness for a re-alised state that does not exist where consciousness is, but somewhere far away, outside the everyday world. Hence the archetype of a distant place in Basara's fiction, which has the function of expressing a critical attitude to-wards the environment, but also insecurity, instability, wandering. I come to the inevitable question: what is the relationship between S.B. and S.B.? In order to resolve this relation, I will reach for another relation, estab-lished in the novel by one of the S.B.'s. Molloy and Moran wander in the ruined space of S.B.'s novel. They are not heroes in the true sense of the word, but they are not antiheroes either – no ethical features can be attrib-uted to them. They are not even characters (they do not have permanent psychological features according to which we could distinguish them from each other). They change without motivation, moving in space and time prompted by vague urges – one by an opaque desire, the other by a com-mandment that is mysterious. They are not the instigators of events in the story, because there is no story. In a few scenes, they seem to be characters. That is all. Still, we could say that they differ from each other, but only when Moran appears, because he is the persecutor, and Molloy becomes the persecuted. However, Molloy has no idea that someone is persecuting him, and Moran gives up the persecution and returns home (not because of what happened to Molloy, but because his son left him). Thus the re-lationship between the persecutor and the persecuted explains nothing, and in the last scene it would seem that Moran becomes Molloy, so the story of the persecutor could precede the story of the persecution. The two characters merge and intertwine in a senseless wandering that ends with Moran's decision to sit down and write down the final (or perhaps initial) sentences of their adventure: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining."[85] Moran, like Molloy, had a break in communication, and this break was the result of his inability to leave the frame of the present (Solar 2009: 49-57).[86] Physical time gradually destroys the physical side of the person and psychological time cannot overcome it because it cannot transcend the present. Molloy and Moran both lack time and space in which they could make sense of

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[85] *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1965), p. 176.

[86] Cf. Solar, *Nakon smrti Sancha Panze*, pp. 49-57.

life. When Moran was given paper and pencil, he could only write down a series of statements whose contradictions can be understood as a game that replaces the search for meaning and significance by enumerating all potential combinations. The reader does not know whether Molloy was actually Moran who returned home, or whether he was Moran before he discovered the language of birds. The reason for this opacity is in that the roles are interchangeable – the differences are nullified. The persecutor is also persecuted; a voice commands him to follow the one who is persecuted by an unknown inner urge. They separate only in moments that are unrelated in time. The stages of their journey are like pebbles that Molloy sucks to replace real hunger, and the time span in which they could be arranged does not exist. Solar concludes that Molloy and Moran must be described just like that, because they are precisely characters who have lost their destiny and can "wander the space of a would-be novel in which they lost their personality and have to play a game that has rules, but is impossible to win due to an excess of possible combinations." Before discovering the language of birds, Moran is an investigator – his role is to solve a riddle and therefore he must try all possible combinations. A Moran who understands the language of birds plays with pebbles-words that lose touch with reality, their meanings distorted at will. The development of these characters leads to a key unifying trait: they are losers. In that sense, Solar's thesis can be accepted that the characters who wander through the devastated space of the so-called artistic prose are no longer characters, but become functions in a text that encompasses life not in real time but in the moment of the present, in a game that reduces time and space to a fictional playground where the "master of the game" tries out all possible permutations. Solar radicalizes this thesis: the place of survival of the characters, as well as the way to understand them, should be sought elsewhere (not in the novel!), in a space where time has only one dimension, and that can be the screen, as well as a story fragment.

So I go back to the fragment of Albahari's story and the question of S.B.'s relationship with S.B. If I replace the names *Molloy* and *Moran* with the initials *S.B.*, the term *persecutor* with the term *interrogator* and the term *persecuted* with the term *interrogated*, the result is as follows:

- S.B. and S.B. are neither heroes, antiheroes, nor characters;
- they are not the instigators of events in the story – there is no story;
- they differ from each other only when one of them acts as an examiner;
- the relationship between the interrogator and the interrogated is unclear;
- they intertwine and merge;
- they experience a break in communication;
- their roles are interchangeable;
- they do not have the status of characters, but become functions in a text that encompasses the moment of the present;
- in this sense, the text is structured as a space for testing possible permutations.

Albahari's story thus proves to be the bridge between the two S.B.s. However, things are less problematic with the S. B.s than with their real-life counterparts, the authors whose names appear in the title of Albahari's story. Since the title ostensibly refers to reality and the possible intertextual and poetic relations, it is important to point out that Basara's narrator does not hide his connections with Beckett's narrator, as evidenced at the level of narrative procedures, in the shaping of the *self-abolishing hero*, in the ample use of the rhetorical potential of paradox, and in other language games that functionally underline the worldview to be mediated (a devastated world without support and meaning; language as a world-creating act that loses touch with reality; the subject facing emptiness; doubt in logic) – but also at the level of intentional coincidence that causes humorous effects, so in the pages of Basara's fiction Beckett rides a bicycle, and one of the characters has a stolen copy of the translation of the novel *Molloy*.[87] Yet, despite these connections, it cannot be said that Basara is a follower of Beckett, because, unlike Basara's, Beckett's narrator does not *narrate* his poetics. To go back to the story again: in Albahari's story one of the S.B.s argues that speech is *formlessness*, that nothing can be done to make one word differ from another, but that if there is a *framework*, everything fits easily into it. By these statements the first

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[87] Basara, *Peking by Night*, pp. 25, 93.

S.B. legitimizes himself at the beginning, and at the end concludes: *I am emptiness*. What is the relationship between the framework and emptiness? *Frame* is a term that Derrida introduced to literary theory,[88] tracing his interest in the boundary zones of the text, such as spaces, titles, genre clauses, epigraphs, signatures, notes. Derrida questions the relationship of centre and margin, internal and external, as the relationship of the first and the second in which the second does not come after the first, but allows the first the quality of primacy. The framework exists only because there is an internal indeterminacy of that which is framed. In other words, contextualization is necessary, but there is no final context. The frame is constantly moving and multiplying infinitely.

Emptiness, on the other hand, according to Iser, has a meaning similar to *instances of indeterminacy* (Ingarden), due to which the reader must in various senses supplement what is being presented in a literary work.[89] In one of these senses, Svetislav Basara is a *reader* of Samuel Beckett.

"Searching"

> *The author, as subject of enunciation, is first of all a spirit: sometimes he identifies with his characters or makes us identify with them, or with the idea which they represent; sometimes, on the other hand, he introduces a distance which allows him and us to observe, to criticise, to prolong. But this is no good. The author creates a world, but there is no world which awaits us to be created. Neither identification nor distance, neither proximity nor remoteness, for in all these cases, one is led to speak for, in the place of... One must, on the contrary, speak with, write with. With the world, with a part of the world, with people. Not a talk at all, but a conspiracy, a collision of love or hatred.*
>
> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*

The story I have chosen to analyse – "Searching" – was included in Basara's short story collection published under the (English-language)

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[88] Cf. Biti, *Pojmovnik suvremene književne I kulturne teorije*, p. 342.

[89] Cf. ibid.

title *Peking by Night* in 1985. This book was exceptionally well-received amongst the Serbian literary public as one of the best representatives of Young Fiction of the 1980s. Critics noted the attempt at creating narrative forms in disregard of the procedures standard in mainstream literary works, as well as the tendency to return to "simple forms" of storytelling, such as sketches, adages, very short stories, parodic fragments, and the like. Parallel to the dissolution of dominant types and extant forms, a renewed interest in bathos was evident; the protagonists in this book repeatedly question the purpose of existence and disappearance, and their hypertrophied emotionality is established only to be abolished, and abolished to be established. The narrator "mimics the simulation of stereotypical emotions in order to better express his doubts before the pitfalls of disappearance."[90] It is noted that the content of Basara's fiction stands in opposition to the narrative structure interrogating the established conceptual framework – the purpose is examined and criticised through the infantilization of narrative material.

I shall cite the story in its entirety because it is brief but also because of the type of analysis to follow:

Searching

It seems a long time ago, or far away, when I was last awake. It was last night. I fell asleep early, tired of being scattered, dejected, my soul diffuse, unable to resist the abysses of nothingness that pressed what little *me* there was, threatening to pop it like a soap bubble. My dream seems closer and more real than the reality before it, perhaps because a long while has passed. I've grown old in my sleep. My dead friends have died again, the living have gone with *their* smiles on their faces. I joined them wordlessly. (Only the dead speak in dreams.) We continued on, I don't know where to, I thought they knew the destination, they probably thought I knew it, because it was *my dream*, if a dream can have an owner. We walked along a corridor without any visible end. There were doors at both ends, in a row, I knocked on all of them, opened them and asked:

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90 Станојевић, *Форма или не о љубави*, p. 206.

am I here, continued on, numb, without hope I would ever find what I was looking for.

My friends had moved farther down the dream: the dead more and more desperately alive, the living ever closer to death. I feared I would wake up in the midst of my dream, that I would go back up there, into the world they taught me was real, to the form they dressed me in by mistake, out of which – for the nth time – I had set off in search of a stranger. So I fell even deeper asleep, if one can say so. Even more tired. It was comforting to know that at least there were no policemen there to stop lonely night strollers. And everything looked somehow more real to me: the horizon turned upside down and the corridor with no end. My friends had moved far off. They no longer turned back to look at me. I knocked on the next door, asked *am I here*, my eyelids heavy, because I don't sleep even when I dream. What else can I do but continue on, open each door one by one, until I finally enter a familiar room and see *him* in the corner – and I know the sentence word for word – typing out the final line of *my* story and turning around to see who has come in...[91]

The story begins with a formula announcing fiction: *It seems a long time ago, or far away, when I was last awake. It was last night*. According to the "contract" concluded by accepting the convention of *it seems*, the reader agrees to read a story told from the position of *today*, or rather *now*. This *now* is generated from the position of a dream, because the narrator of this story, according to its initial statement, was last awake *a long time ago / far away / last night*. If the time of narration is *now*, the place from which narration is generated can only be a dream, or the act of dreaming – the way the beginning of the story is organised excludes wakefulness.

According to Kordić, Basara's stories attain their fictional character when structured as phantasms or dreams.[92] For example, "The Wonderful World of Agatha Christie," "The Perfect Crime," and "Lost in the Super-market"[93] are stories in which dreams perform the framing function and are a means of motivation, as well as of creation, which the narrator places in another narrative register – a story about creating a story. The structur-

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[91] Basara, *Peking by Night*, 102-103.

[92] Kordić, "Dekonstrukcija pripovedanja".

[93] English translations of the latter two stories are included in the collection *Fata Morgana*, pp. 125-133 and 187-202.

al perspective of dreams and phantasms makes an alternative truth about the world and the subject possible; this kind of truth in Basara's fiction is affirmed by figuring the subject and the world as grammatical subject and object. This perspective enables a discourse through which the narrator doubles his speech. The speaking subject in the story "Searching" is defined by the concepts *dispersion* and *diffuseness*: *I fell asleep early, tired of being scattered, dejected, my soul diffuse, unable to resist the abysses of nothingness...* while his *I* appears in the story under the labels of *that*, *he*, and *stranger*. In the first case, *that* in place of *I* appears in an object position, as a *remnant* of the whole *I*: *that pressed what little* me *there was, threatening to pop it like a soap bubble*. In the second case, *I* appears as a *stranger*: after the "episode" of opening a series of doors and asking *am I here*, the object of the search is named as a stranger: *out of which – for the nth time – I had set off in search of a stranger*. In the third case, *I* is *he*, once again in the object position (*and see* him *in the corner*). The distribution of these three designations is implemented with rhythmic regularity: *that* comes at the beginning of the story, the *stranger* in the middle, and *he* at the end. The organisation of the search has a logical internal dramaturgy. *That* at the beginning places the reader in the context from which the search should be read – the context of diffuseness and dispersion; the *stranger* enhances the effect of being lost and the subject's lack of support and security indicated initially, while *he* at the end of the story underlines the basic idea, which will be revealed through my analysis of its central section. The key concept there, but also of the story as a whole, is death. It is tied to the concepts of dreams, dreaming, narration, and time. In this sense, the statement *Only the dead speak in dreams* is especially interesting. In his brief piece "The Idea of Death," Giorgio Agamben claims that the angel of death – that is to say, the harbinger of death – is language itself, and what makes it difficult for us to die is this *announcement*. Only "those who understand the innocence of language likewise grasp the true sense of the announcement, and may, in the event, learn to die," concludes Agamben.[94]. On the other hand, Derrida claims that learning to live is impossible for anyone who is alive:

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[94] Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, translated by Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (New York: SUNY, 1995), p. 129.

To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. At the internal border or the external border, it is a heterodidactics between life and death. [...] If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between two, and between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain* itself with some ghost...[95]

I shall return to the claim *Only the dead speak in dreams* and read it with Agamben's analysis. The initial question is how a living being can possess language, or rather what the ability to speak can mean to a living being. Speaking is a paradoxical act that simultaneously contains subjectification and desubjectification, and in which language appropriates the individual only in complete dispossession. The existential status of the speaking living being is thus a certain ontological glossolalia, "an absolutely insubstantial chatter in which the living being and the speaking being, subjectification and desubjectiflcation, can never coincide."[96] Agamben concludes that this is why Western metaphysics and thought on language sought a connection between the living and speaking being, attempting to provide consistency to the subject's *dreamt substance* – an unintelligible glossolalia. There is no moment in which language would inscribe itself into a living voice, nor is there a place where a living being could make logical sense of itself, save theology (where word has become flesh). In this non-place of connectedness, deconstruction leaves its *mark* and *difference* in which voice and written word, as well as meaning and presence, differ endlessly. However, Agamben claims that it is the impossibility of a connection between living beings and language that enables testimony. It is possible if *I* is suspended in a yawn; the place of testimony is "the intimacy that betrays our non-coincidence with ourselves."[97] The non-place of connectedness proves to be a place of testimony. An especially important question in the context of Basara's fiction is the one Ag-

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[95] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), p. xvii.

[96] Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, 129.

[97] Ibid., p. 130.

amben asks, keeping to the intersection between Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and Benveniste's theory of utterance: *how can the subject testify to its own collapse?* In other words – what does it mean to be the subject of desubjectification?

Allow me to return to "Searching." The statement *Only the dead speak in dreams* can be linked with the implied statement regarding the narration that *he* – the other – *is generating*: the search for self ends with entering *a familiar room* in which *he* is typing the final line of *my story*, with the note that *I know the sentence word for word*. It is also interesting to note the semantic attachment of the concept of possession (*my story*) to the aforementioned set of concepts (especially death, narration, and time). The only reliable thing owned by the narrator is the story, not narration. Narration requires a mediator (*he*, the other). Let us examine the status of the concept of time in the story. The marker of time appears already in the opening sentence (following the "contractual" phrase *it seems*) – *a long time ago*. However, a potential alternative – spatial – designation is added immediately thereafter: *or far away*. These determinants are related to the narrator's wakefulness. Everything that follows is in the domain of dreams. *My dream seems closer and more real than the reality before it, perhaps because a long while has passed*. The narrator ages in his sleep, and his friends die again, while their smiles are appropriated by the living; he joins them *wordlessly* because *only the dead speak in dreams*. The interesting question then asked is that of ownership. Can a dream belong to anyone? The narrator claims that he does not know his destination, but he assumes that his companions do, and that they likely in turn believe him to possess that particular piece of information, as it is his dream. However, he immediately calls into question the possibility of owning a dream. As the dream continues, time speeds up: *My friends had moved farther down the dream: the dead more and more desperately alive, the living ever closer to death*. Fear of awakening then appears for the first time, and what is especially problematic about wakefulness is accepting the conventions of reality: *I feared I would wake up in the midst of my dream, that I would go back up there, into the world they taught me was real, to the form they dressed me in by mistake, out of which – for the nth time – I had set off in search of a stranger*. Two points are noteworthy here: on the one hand, refusing the offered convention about what is *real*, as well as the *form* that affirms the "contract" as

to what is real, and on the other hand, the motif of repetition (*for the nth time*) tied to the possibility of finding alternative forms of reality/fiction. The search for the stranger at the end of the story results in narration itself. It is also interesting to note how the storyteller organises the "respite" or delay in a final solution: *So I fell even deeper asleep, if one can say so.* The fear of awakening is replaced with a feeling of comfort engendered by the dreamer's knowledge that it was *comforting to know that at least there were no policemen there to stop lonely night strollers*. This kind of assertion is typical of Basara's early fiction: the oneiric construction is *struck* by the sudden insertion of a detail that has a political or ideological component, while its associative significance, read in the context within which it appears, usually results in comic effects due to the "impact" of irreconcilable elements. Basara's early fiction is rife with such "insertions," which are highly functional as they operate as parasites on a backdrop which allows them to stand out and produce significant effects. After the statement on the absence of policemen, everything begins to appear *somehow more real to me: the horizon turned upside down and the corridor with no end*. The testimonial subject *seems to* rise to the surface of reality. He knocks on the following door, asking again *am I here*, and adds that his eyelids are heavy *because I don't sleep even when I dream*. This procedure leads to the conclusion: the opening of a door to a familiar room in which the *other* finishes typing (not writing, typing!) his story:

> There is, thus, no absolute beginning. Every narrative solution proves to be a variant of an original that does not exist. Something can be told only if it has already been articulated. The perseverance of the already articulated is not invalidated even by symbolic death. This is what makes the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist the topic of Basara's story, even a sign of the individuality of literature, its truth, which refers to nothing outside of itself.[98]

The reading strategy for Basara's "Searching," which begins with the acceptance of its initial contractual formula *it seems*, introduces a narrative strategy from the position of *now*, which is indicated/denounced as a state of sleep and dreaming. The organisation of the opening of the story

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[98] Kordić, "Dekonstrukcija pripovedanja".

negates the possibility that the narrator is awake. The story gains its fictive character through the structuring of the phantasm/dream. The dream performs the framing function and is a means of motivation, as well as of creation, which the narrator places in another narrative register – a story about creating a story.

The structural perspective of dreams and phantasms makes an alternative truth about the world and the subject possible; this kind of truth in Basara's fiction is affirmed by figuring the subject and the world as grammatical subject and object. This perspective enables a discourse through which the narrator doubles his speech. The speaking subject of "Searching" is scattered among the signs *that*, *he*, and the *stranger*: *that* appears in the object position in place of *I*, as a remnant of the whole *I*; the *stranger* is the object of the search for the indicated (diffuse) *I*, while *he* is again in an object position, this time the object of observation and the place out of which the story is generated. The foundational concepts of the story are those of death, dreams, narration, and time. This analysis has established their relationship, beginning from the statement *Only the dead speak in dreams.* What is of particular interest in this context is the question of how the subject gains the ability to testify to its own collapse. The statement *Only the dead speak in dreams* is joined by the implied statement regarding the narration *he* – the other – is generating. Narrating requires a mediator; only the narrator is in possession of the story. This reading strategy requires the introduction of the (genitive) phrase *my story*, which indicates the problem of ownership of the story and narration, and immediately thereafter, over the very dream from which the story is being told. Moving the story and speeding up narrative time results in two complex problems: the first is that of refusing conventions of the *real* and forms that might affirm the contract about reality, while the second is tied to the possibility of locating alternative forms of reality/fiction. The speaking subject seems to rise to the surface of reality, while the search for the stranger results in narration itself.

NARRATIVE THEOLOGY
(1986–1987)

With the publication of the essay collection *On the Edge* in 1987 Basara arguably "matured," since, as Zoran Jeremić points out, most of the aesthetic and ideological attitudes articulated in the book will later be used in his fiction.[99] Prior to this book of essays, Basara published collections of short stories *Vanishing Tales* and *Peking by Night*, as well as the novels *Chinese Letter* and *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*. In Jeremić's opinion, as an author decisively formed by the spirit of urban mythology, Basara in his first books defiantly proclaimed the continuation of one of the principal currents of Serbian fiction (represented by the work of Danilo Kiš and Borislav Pekić), itself closely related to a tradition of world literature exemplified by Kafka, Beckett, and Borges, while also invoking the teachings of metaphysicians, this first stage of his writing reaching its high point with the novel *The Cyclist Conspiracy*. In an interview with Dejan Ilić in 1997, Basara comments on his book of essays *On the Edge* and the novel *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* and on some other features of his narrative work, such as his propensity for first-person narration: he claims that he was never interested in objectivity, and for him, the third person is maintaining a kind of distance from writing, "the petty-bourgeois imperative of *non-interference*."[100] At the time of writing those books, which I consider to be related, Basara claims to have intuitively sensed that it doesn't make much sense to deal with external phenomena (including the psychological domain) and that "the peg on which the whole problem hangs is in fact me."[101] In this context, he embarked on writing in the sense of not only rejecting grand narratives, but the story in general, and placed it under the magnifying glass of the self. It wasn't the circumstances of "the self" that mattered to him, only what "the self" actually is. Basara therefore stepped into the field of the religious, without, as he maintains, even knowing it himself:

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[99] Зоран Јеремић, "Басара by night," *Басара*, p. 5.

[100] "Тумарање по беспућу," *Басара*, p. 65.

> When, in my youthful confusion, I thought that I was lost, I was in fact already saved. When you stay alone in a room long enough, with a sheet of paper in front of you, it quickly becomes clear that you're also made up of small, internal stories about yourself. Nice situation: empty stories outside, empty stories inside. When you dare to admit to yourself that the self, in its purest of forms is only a point where longings and anxieties rage, then it won't take long for the day to arrive when you will sink into a dream and cry: "God, help me!"[102]

In this way, Basara explains his original aversion to the third person, too: he points out that he was facing a big problem, because the subject of his interest – the self – proved to be but "an unbearably present nothing."[103] On the one hand, there was narration in the third person, which he suspected was a lie, and on the other, everything was firmly connected with the fictitious self. Basara concludes that it is probably from this atmosphere of his first books that a critical view of his comic nihilism stems, which he considers to be a sign of superficial reading. He points out that he is always deadly serious, and that he didn't think that in a substantial sense the outside world was nothing – quite on the contrary, in his opinion, it was all too material – but it all seemed insignificant to him, so he asked what kind of *I* could accept such a world. Basara is opposed to the subversive and destructive projects of the modern age, and for him, writing is not a vehicle for expressing his ideas, but a means to bring his spiritual life into harmony with tradition, while mocking the subversive and basically provincial doctrines of the modern age – first and foremost the apotheosis of man and the pseudo myth of man's omnipotence. Basara points out that this is what the critics mistakenly interpret as his comic nihilism. Hence the atmosphere of paralysis and frustration that dominated his first books.

> I am convinced that there is nothing one can do. A being that exists, and sooner or later must die, can do nothing. That's right, and millions of pages of humanistic gossip don't help. Nothing can disprove the fear and truth of the fact that we can't do anything for ourselves, nor can we do anything for anything at all. The life of modern man, all his hyperactivity, is just a

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[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

manic delay in dealing with that fact. A large part of literature is also in the function of this delay, so I would rather see myself as a narrative theologian than as a writer.[104]

Basara defines the thematic focus of his early books as the "archaeology of the ego," and argues that his later works speak of the outside world. He sets up some barriers here: he claims to have left the care of the *I* to religious introspection, so he had to indulge in the general delirium of producing false reflections of reality – he openly says that his geographies and phenomenologies are completely fabricated; moreover, they are fictions that tendentiously refuse to resemble anything real. He adds that they later began to resemble reality, but "that's another story."[105] According Basara, fiction is true when it doesn't present itself falsely – when it shows itself to be fiction. This is true because there is no mimesis; there are no reference points. The rule that Basara states here is: "The less mimesis there is in a work of art, the truer it is."[106] He emphasises that the gap between the world of objects and our perception widens when fiction (and according to Basara, every written text is a fiction) simulates objectivity and truthfulness. The reason for this, he argues, is in the placement of supra-philosophical and ideologically blurred lenses between them. His conclusion is that reality suffers more in the process than aesthetics. In this sense, historicism and objectivism, according to Basara, devastate reality because the number of these lenses increases over time to the point of absolute opacity. In this way, he explains the popularity of his novel *The Cyclist Conspiracy* – people read this novel because they intuitively sense that grand history is based on the same principles as his novel; in other words, imaginary problems obscure the real (metaphysical) problem: the problem of life and death as a logically irresolvable aporia. But, on the other hand, *The Cyclist Conspiracy* clearly declares itself to be fiction – not a mimesis of the phenomenal, but a *mimesis of unreality of the phenomenal*. An example that illustrates this is the fact that readers of *The Cyclist Conspiracy* accept, in most cases, the only authentic document of the novel – *An Analysis of the Ideological Ori-*

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[104] Ibid., p. 66.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid., p. 67.

entation of the Journal, Vidici*, and the Newspaper* Student[107] – as fiction. Basara emphasises that the essence of *The Cyclist Conspiracy* project was to demonstrate that false and authentic documents are equally fake; in other words, that history is a field of inauthenticity. In this sense, history shows itself as a place of loss of identity and subjectivity – it is objective only insofar as we become objects in it.

Basara's narration is always on the verge of turning into an essay, as Ilić points out,[108] while his essay collections can be read as narrative fiction. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges the difference between the two genres. He explains this as follows: the division into essayistic and narrative prose is not meant to explain things and to bring order to literature; the point of all such divisions is to atomise perception, in order for the sense of the particular to expand at the expense of the feeling for the general. In his case, the books of essays are created as a recapitulation of a period and paving the way for new interests. According to Ilić, the novel *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* represents a turning point in Basara's work, while the author himself claims that a turn is only hinted at. This is the first time that the narrative *I* steps out into the world. It is dithering, but also self-conscious. On his own account, after *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*, Basara "gave up on the world. The world is irrelevant for salvation and ruin alike."[109] Since then, all of his literary projects have been aimed at articulating the insignificance of global reality. A careful reader, Basara warns, will notice that for him, the world after *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* is no longer a horrible place, but a simulated one. He interprets the title of his first book of essays – *On the Edge* – as a kind of concise essay on his position in the world: constantly being on the edge. On one side of that edging is the everyday world, and on the other side the mystical space of internal spiritual experience. When it comes to Basara, the title of the book usually summarises its programme and concept. This book contains the text "Metaphysics of Fiction in the Light of the Decline of the West," which, according to Ilić, could be seen as programmatic more generally.[110]

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[107] Basara, *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, pp. 90-108.

[108] Cf. "Тумарање по беспућу," p. 67.

[109] Ibid., p. 68.

[110] Cf. ibid., p. 71.

This text, on Basara's explanation in the same interview, summarises his experience of life and of literature; it is a kind of construction of an intellectual identity, part of the painstaking process of mastering the inner reality. Basara argues that it is ultimately about sharpening one's perception. In this context, he expresses his astonishment at the fact that none of the people who have written about his books have noticed the principal role that perception plays in them. Visions, deceptions, illusions are all mentioned, but perceptions are not. "In one of its significant layers, my literary project could be defined as sharpening perception."[111] He warns that it is by and large ignored that the domain of perception abounds in commonplaces, as does the domain of language. Just as we automatically use linguistic generalities, conventional phrases, ready-made sentences, we also perceive phenomena by means of established perceptual patterns. Basic prejudice, Basara warns, is that it is the subject who is the owner of perception. If it were not so, media manipulation would not be possible, Basara concludes:

> But it very much is possible, and already exceeds the limit of equilibrium: now the *object* becomes a more active factor in the process of perception. A great example is right in front of us: Serbian national TV network. The programmes of that infernal television make the viewers passive to the extent that the illusions it broadcasts are more convincing than the possibility of direct insight is. This is the phase of hi-tech totalitarianism that I wrote about in *Virtual Kabbalah*. The time of the creation of the "Metaphysics of Fiction" coincides with the twilight of the low-tech phase. Just over ten years have passed and things have changed dramatically. First of all, the heliocentric system has been tacitly suspended, and the New World Order is inaugurating geocentrism again. However, this time, the Earth, which is placed at the centre of the virtual universe, is *an optoelectronic copy of our planet*. At that time, geopolitics was still taken into account. Now these wares are only hawked in the unstable territories of Russia and former Yugoslavia.[112]

Taken as a whole, *On the Edge* is a sort of preaching about storytelling.[113] Predrag Marković interprets the title of this collection – the awareness of existence *on the edge* – as the awareness of creation. In this sense,

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[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid., p. 72.

[113] Cf. Марковић, "Проповедник прозе," p. 98.

to think about the world in which one is creating is not to think about the meaning of that world, but about the meaning of creation. Basara's essayistic lectures, as well as his fictions, according to Marković, are lectures on philosophy, a speaking about the other, precisely because they give meaning to the speech of the other. All paradoxes thus belong to creation and allow being on the edge as being constantly in the position of leaping, despite the fact that the leap is interrupted by fragments of speech. The preacher speaks in metaphors – metaphors are the goal of speaking; the narrator creates what he is talking about because the subject of the speech is forgotten, concludes Marković. In this sense, to create in a world without a creator is tantamount to consenting to being a creator. In this way, the consequences of the paradox of Basara's texts become the consequences of re-creation. Marković explains the necessity of banalisation, the impossibility of thinking about the world, caricature and inauthenticity as the fruits of a time that has renounced faith. The fiction of metaphysics, thus, according to him, becomes the last possibility of doubt in faith – a kind of resuscitation of a process that once defeated the individual in an attempt to rationalise the world.

Basara should be considered a writer of religious provenance – a Christian writer, in fact, as Ivan Radosavljević claims in his reading of the novel *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*.[114] He also believes that this novel marked a turning point in Basara's work. Radosavljević emphasises the importance of the name of the main character in the novel – Ananias – in the context of the New Testament. Namely, Ananias is one of the disciples from Damascus, to whom God appears instructing him to go and find Saul, who, in turn, at that moment, since God appeared to him on the way to Damascus, is blind, and to lay his hands on him and make him see again. According to Radosavljević, that is the pattern on which the novel *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* is based. Ananias, the narrator of that novel, is himself a convert and has his own Saul – his own father – who needs to be enlightened and freed from the darkness in which he lives, to be made able to see. After conversion, his father will indeed continue to spread the faith (in America), before he goes off to Syria. In

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[114]Иван Радосављевић, "Апостолски ланац: о религијским аспектима романа *Напукло огледало*," *Басара*, pp. 99-105.

his study, Radosavljević proves the religious basis of *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*, as well as its connections with the relevant Biblical text, and also refers to the answer that Basara gives to the question posed by the contemporary state of the world and man in it – it can be presented as a an "apostolic succession" of sorts, which is actually a series structured by characters who endlessly pass the faith and the knowledge of the Way, Truth, and Life on to each other. According to Radosavljević, this answer is the most important aspect of the totality of the meaning and significance of the novel *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*. Faith, religion, and God play a role that is of key importance in the world that Basara creates in the novel, Radosavljević points out. It all starts with the narrator gaining the knowledge that he did not evolve from an ape. Ananias, the first-person narrator, before gaining this knowledge, believes in the order of reality whose constituent parts are evolution, history, science, the Party, and the Youth Alliance. This order disappears irretrievably, and due to his newly acquired knowledge, Ananias realises its falsity and unreality. The new knowledge cannot be questioned – it is the truth that the Holy Spirit communicates to the narrator in a dream. In this way, Ananias becomes aware of the fact that he was created from nothing, just like everything else that exists. From that fact, Ananias draws a paradoxical conclusion: that he doesn't exist. That is, he exists only as a voice in a novel that is actually writing itself. Initially, Ananias is the only one in the world of the novel who acknowledges this fact; this disturbs the initial balance, which will be re-established when the narrator manages to convince others around him of what he knows. According to Radosavljević, Ananias' father is a representative of others: the basic conflict on which the plot is based is the difference between the knowledge that the narrator has and the delusion in which his father lives. The narrator's action moves towards the goal of eliminating that distinction. When this goal is achieved, a kind of balance is re-established in the world of the novel and the narration ends. The knowledge that the son possesses, Radosavljević explains, is of a religious nature, and its transfer to others is possible only through their conversion. The laws of the plot in *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* dictate that Ananias converts his father. The narrative voice of the novel, Ananias, is left out of the world of the novel he creates by his own decision: he retains the superior posi-

tion of the creator on whose will the content and the nature of the created world depends, but since at the same time he himself is a part of that world – against his own wishes, because that is what the empirical author of the text wants – he is forced to fight with those who inhabit this world, and above all with his father, in order to gain the desired position. Radosavljević emphasises the external sign of the narrator's not belonging: the time in which he chooses to exist – 1949 – as opposed to the indefinite present of the other characters in the novel. The time in which Ananias exists is not defined by standards valid in the time of others; the first day of "his" time begins when the Holy Spirit speaks to him. When he tells others that the time in which he exists is different from their own, he encounters opposition – the first quarrel with his father was provoked in this way. During this discussion, the narrator presents the concept of indoctrination for the first time, according to which, true knowledge is only his privilege, acquired by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. The true cognition is contrasted with the knowledge the other inhabitants of the space of the novel believe to possess. Such false knowledge is the result of indoctrination. Ananias has the role of an apostle in the world of *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*, concludes Radosavljević. He is a figure who knows the truth at its source, he spreads it and hands it over to others, and tries to lead them to the path of salvation: "Like the Apostles, he leaves 'his ship and his father' for the Word of Truth."[115] According to this interpretation, the idea of *being lost to this world* is the central motif in the narrator's discussions and in the evidence he presents: salvation is possible only *in another world*, and for man to be saved in the other world, he must be dead to this world. The narrator, as Radosavljević points out, conveys an eminently religious truth, according to which the search for fulfilment in this world is the wrong way; it is necessary to look towards the interior of one's own personality. When this is done, the realisation follows that nothing is to be fond there, i.e. nothing authentic. Since he was created from nothing, man as such is also *nothing*; still, he is *something* more by virtue of the divine spark that given him by the act of creation, explains Radosavljević. Dejan Ilić wrote exhaustively about this problem in his essay "The Expe-

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[115] Ibid., p. 101.

rience of Emptiness and the Experience of the Saint in the Fiction of Svetislav Basara."[116] His preliminary thesis is that Basara's fictional world does not fit completely into the interpretive framework of the postmodernist paradigm, because his stories and novels do not speak exclusively about the "outside" world. In this sense, the definition of postmodernism given by Linda Hutcheon focuses on the socio-historical dimension of the so-called historical metafiction. If we define this dimension as secular, it could be said that Hutcheon leaves the religious dimension of literature out of her considerations, concludes Ilić. Basara's first three books – *Vanishing Tales*, *Chinese Letter*, and *Peking by Night* – can be understood as a kind of *religious introspection* – in these texts, the characters try to determine their own *I* in relation to the narrator; the narrative *I* tries to determine itself in relation to the author, and the author tries to determine himself in relation to God. In this attempt at self-determination, reason is inactive, because it cannot overcome or remove the ontological barrier – the discontinuity between man as a creature and God the creator can only be overcome by a mystical "sacred experience" that contradicts logic and common sense. That is why this fiction abounds in absurd and inexplicable situations, concludes Ilić. These books map the boundaries separating humanity from the divine. It is only in *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* that the narrative *I* steps into the outside world – that stepping out is a mission, an attempt to share his personal mystical experience with others. Ilić contends that Basara's fiction abounds in metatextual comments that point to such a reading, and yet literary criticism has largely failed to pay attention to the religious beliefs often expressed in Basara's books, as well as to the insights into the nature and state of the contemporary world that arise from such beliefs. Ilić puts forward a strident thesis with which we must agree:

> Although it is true that Basara's narration decomposes the narrative form and at the same time exposes the illusions that are presented to us as undeniable truths; although it is true that by juxtaposing ideological, historical, and literary constructs he exposes and carries to absurdity various procedures of "the production of reality;" although it is true that by decomposing

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[116] Dejan Ilić, *Osam i po ogleda iz razumevanja* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2008), pp. 167-201.

and examining the forms of fiction, he actually shows that all of the comprehensive sign systems that give meaning to our experience are provisional and unstable – although all this is true, when we talk about the fiction of Svetislav Basara, we cannot conclude from this that his fiction provides us with an insight into the existence of man, doomed to the meaninglessness and inauthenticity of existence. On the contrary, in parallel with all this, Basara narrates how it happened that human existence became seemingly meaningless, suggesting a way out of hopelessness through the acceptance of the word of God.[117]

In *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*, Basara's narrator says: "All of history is just a series of unsuccessful attempts by humans to become like gods. In our effort, we have ceased to be humans and have become mannequins."[118] History, continues Ilić, is an attempt to interpretively connect past events in view of a single ultimate meaning – here the author relies on the concept of the history found in Karl Löwith and M.H. Abrams. While this concept is derived from the theological understanding of history as an event of salvation, it differs from the theological view because the guiding principle is different: it is no longer a matter of God's will and providence, but of man's will and reason. In this sense, the change in the conceptual pattern for the past, present and future of human history can be presented as a replacement of the rectangular biblical pattern *paradise – collapse – redemption – regained paradise* with the post-biblical spiral pattern *unity – multitude – regained unity*. Thus, the historical pattern has been translated into the referential frame of the self-exaltation of the human race, which should lead to the removal of evil and suffering in the world. In this way, religious history becomes a secular form of history, the meaning of which is the attainment of good, justice, and truth in this world. However, as Ilić further explains in his study, the trouble is that faith in the human mind and progress proved unfounded – everything that happened from the end of the 18th century onwards proved that is was unreasonable to believe in man's ability to independently manage his own destiny and the destiny of the world by relying on reason. The weakening of faith in the human mind has necessitated a re-examination of the key notions of progress, including

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[117] Ibid., pp. 184-185.

[118] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, p. 82.

an understanding of secular history as a meaningful sequence of events. The conclusion was that both progress and history were meaningless. Gaining awareness of this, man has stepped into a post-historic time, in which he must redefine what is good, just, and true. It was concluded, on the other hand, that the world, having renounced God, did not deserve any better than what had happened to it over the last two hundred years. These conclusions also apply to particular histories: for example, the history of a state or a people. In this context, the transition from the general to the particular fails to alter anything: the novels *The Cyclist Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail* deal with the general, while the novels *The Fated Land* (1995) and *Looney Tunes* (1997) narrate the events of the 1990s Yugoslavia.

Let us return at the end to Basara's essay "Metaphysics of Fiction in the Light of the Decline of the West"[119] as the core of his narrative programme: in this essay, the author clearly states that in his view literature as well as history is a nonsense with an illusion of meaning abut it, wherein lies the connection between them. An important theme of the essay, as well as of Basara's work in general, is mimesis. This has already been discussed in the context of the *mimesis of the unreality of the phenomenal* as a kind of formula for Basara's narrative machine, but this thesis should be supplemented by Basara's point about the politics of mimesis: mimetic literature, as Basara argues, is always at the service of history – primarily because it spreads misinformation. History, on the other hand, inevitably leads to fascism and to totalitarianism in general, to the most primitive state of consciousness – the course of history demonstrtes this unequivocally and every engagement, Basara further claims, turns into totalitarianism. History is created behind desks, where false myths are written about the purity of blood or the purity of ideas, which never existed. According to Basara, contemporary fiction should be engaged, it is more necessary than ever, by pointing to the dimension of man facing the absolute being / the unconscious / God. Basara calls this *the engagement of dis-engagement*, and it is more necessary than ever because in our time man has been reduced to a single (robotic) dimension of his potential. He feels like nothing, because he is almost nothing, in his mindless desire to be everything.

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[119] Basara, *Na ivici*, pp. 43-51.

> But, how can one talk about what can't be talked about? All the possibilities are abolished by language itself; language simply refuses to speak of anything that transcends mimesis. The logos is broken down into logic, and more recently into logorrhoea. We no longer speak in order to say something (nor do we write for that reason), but we speak and write in order to drown out the silence dumbly pointing to the nothingness within us.[120]

The possibility of salvation is sought in the space of the crack that can arise from the destruction of language: writing with the awareness that we cannot write or prove anything can free us eventually from the mania of trying to prove – because evidence is, as Basara paradoxically concludes, a sign of ignorance. Basara argues that the decline of Western civilisation begins, therefore, on the day that civilisation turned to logic. The West shows a pathological tendency to marshal events chronologically and systematically, thereby establishing the foundations of technology and allowing for the exploitation and consumer madness at one go. These pseudo-paradoxical conclusions were allegedly written in 1987, before the break-up of Yugoslavia and the unfurling of transitional flags, but they could have been published for the first time yesterday, on the site of some virtual portal, within Basara's *virtual Kabbalah*. In both cases, we should take them into account.

Basara's book of essays *On the Edge* opens with "The Biography that Kills" and closes with "The Beast that Devours Itself."[121] Since the problems these essays open up are compatible with the problems of Maurice Blanchot's essays, I will read them together and thus try to provide a frame of reference for the reading of Basara's autopoietics. I proceed in this manner, not in order to establish the equivalence of Basara's fictional and non-fictional discourse, nor in any attempt at "aligning" the worldviews of the two authors. It seems to me that reading Basara and Blanchot together helps us understand Basara's fiction in a way that differs significantly from the way in which it has been read thus far: instead of approaching it from the position of some predetermined knowledge, I will try to read it carefully, so as to allow it to reveal itself. This "hesitant reading" seeks to illuminate the narrative voice and reveal the principles by which it es-

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[120] Ibid., 45-46.

[121] Ibid., 7-20 and 57-62.

tablishes itself. In addition, the intention is also to examine the consistency of the narrative voice: should one speak of a voice or of voices? Is there evidence for the claim that Basara's poetics changed? Does he, on the contrary, adhere to a coherent poetic programme throughout? I will start from the beginning: the sentence that opens *On the Edge* is "Good and evil are relative terms in history."[122] It could appear in any of Basara's books. It can even be said that it represents a kind of motto of *The Cyclist Conspiracy*. The elaboration of this thesis, on the other hand, resembles parts of *Through the Looking-glass Cracked*: "When it the particular is abstracted, history appears as a metaphysical conflict of being and non-being; it is above all a deception and grows into a drama only when we succumb to this deception"[123] Soon after these introductory considerations, the author introduces death in his exposition. On the second page of the book we are faced with death, which is presented as the common goal of all events in life. Namely, according to Basara, the biographical "good" and the biographical "evil" are equally fatal. And the greatest of all evils is death. In such a setting, history figures as a chronology of the inability of the human race to resist the urge of destruction, which arises from nothingness. In other words: to accept history, and biography within it, is tantamount to suicide. The goals of history are vague, the author argues, and are never achieved. In the process, things are turned upside down: history is considered as something normal, the historical good as good, and the historical evil as evil. Success in life, as Basara preaches further, is a failure of individual life, because to succeed in life means to mystify one's biography. Our biography is a thing of the past, but the past is neither dead nor lost. There is nothing real in time, Basara concludes. The only positive aspect of the historical course is separation: distinguishing the real from the unreal. The pain of separation is the suffering of the world – this is Basara's theological conclusion. These birth pangs should give birth to something more real. The concluding remarks are, as expected, paradoxical: the biographical sequence is but wasting one's life on what we dread the most: dying. That is what most people are doing. The minority distances themselves from history, that is, biography, using the time to be born again.

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[122] Ibid., p. 7.

[123] Ibid.

At this point I will pause and join Blanchot's thought to Basara's: writing on Kafka, Blanchot argues that the writer writes so that he could die.[124] As paradoxical as this thesis may sound, the contradiction refers us yet again, to paraphrase Blanchot (and Basara!), into the very depths of experience: the writer draws his own power from his relationship with death. Exploration of the possibility of death seems to be the purpose of writing, but that exploration becomes significant only when it is necessary. The issue of one's own power of dying comes in force only when all excuses are rejected, Blanchot points out. The human vocation of the writer consists in creating one's own death. The final essay in *On the Edge*, "The Beast that Devours Itself" is permeated with theological issues to a much greater extent than "The Biography That Kills." It opens with the question of Creation: what was in the Beginning? According to Basara, the mystery of creation reveals the metaphysical unfoundedness of reason. Namely, faced with the question of why anything exists – reason reveals itself as but a phantasm that does not understand its own meaning. The function of reason is the rationalisation of the incomprehensible and the inconceivable; in other words, the world was created from nothing, and therefore the core of the world is nothing, as is the root of our being. Our fear of nothingness is proof that nothingness is part of our experience. In addition, Basara continues, our desire for immortality shows that immortality is in our nature. Man is a synthesis of seemingly incompatible contradictions. Here, the author introduces the figure of God in his exposition, just as he very quickly introduced the figure of death in the first essay. In this way, the essay acquires strong theological outlines, unlike the first one, which insisted on the problems of writing and biography, and thus on the problem of death. Here, the matter is set out differently: at the centre is the problem of God, and the sets of problems associated with him are not related to writing as a philosophical problem, but to a certain *technology of writing*. The technology of world-making discussed can also read as a consideration of the technology of creating a fictional world. Namely, the basic operative categories are God, reason, false paradise, technology, the Fall, and faith. They are set in interesting relations,

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[124] Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 93.

about which it is necessary to say something in more detail. Basara argues that the world only makes sense if it has God. Otherwise, it is subject to the rule of chance, and coincidence is just a euphemism for depersonalisation which ends in nothingness. Reason, on the other hand, declared God to be nonsense. Science, which is the pinnacle of reason, agitates against the supernatural, warns Basara, and provides no evidence against it. Science, which insists on evidence, demands faith. Therefore, aversion to the idea of God is incomprehensible only at first glance – behind aversion there lies fear. To acknowledge the existence of God, we must renounce any illusion of our own omnipotence and omniscience. In other words, it would mean giving up your own self. Here, Basara introduces the notion of technology into his considerations: the assumption that the Spirit creates from freedom, while technology creates from necessity is the staring point. "The distant shadow of such creation is art, whose fruits are different from the creator, and yet contain his indelible stamp."[125] Technology is necessary to transform the world into a false paradise, Basara warns. Technology is not known in a true paradise, because there is no need for it there. Before the Fall, there was a state of immediacy and completeness. After the Fall, Satan's envoys appear as enlighteners and humanists. The foundation of every good must be freedom – that is why God did not intervene to prevent the serpent in its undertaking. It would be violence against the freedom of being. Adam abused his freedom and left his descendants a legacy of reason and death. Adam's legacy is a split mind. This split introduces death into the wholeness of life, and evil into the wholeness of good. The Fall, however, was not a fall into technological insanity; it is a human creation. The advancement of technology is associated with the deepening of alienation – Basara explains this phenomenon as follows: where need flourishes, technology flourishes too. And the need grows where the whole is lacking; where emptiness and the sense of something being missing are felt. Technology has no goal, Basara argues; the goal can only be guided by a linear flow, and technology is a system which is closed in on itself. Therefore, the only possible starting point is self-destruction. In this way, the solipsism of the creator can be seen transparently: the creation reflects its nature.

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[125] Basara, *Na ivici*, p. 58.

Basara cites one extreme example to explain his thesis: the medieval project of a machine for turning humans into animals, although ridiculed for its naive malice, was not actually realised due to two reasons alone: because it is not commercially viable, and because no great technologist is interested in such a thing (he does not need animals, but robotic humans).[126] Basara claims that it is natural that the goals of technology in history are – mindless. The clock is at the core of technology – writes the author of *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, in which the clock, along with the bicycle, is one of the basic building blocks of the novel's plot. "The clock introduces time into the obvious; time no longer passes, it doesn't *flow* towards some source, but repeats itself in a closed circle. The pointless turning of the hands lulls us into the illusion that everything repeats itself and from there it leads to a deadly reconciliation with the determinism of history and biography"[127] The consequence of such a process, Basara concludes, is manipulation: technological hell is disguised by the dream of the Saviour's return, and the unreal space of such contaminated time is populated with virtually limitless possibilities for manipulation. Lately, Basara preaches, the ideal has become the satisfaction of needs, with needs evolving into refined perversions, resulting in the necessity of the highest degree being distorted and indicated as success. What is overlooked here, Basara warns in his theological sermon, is the possibility of freedom. Namely, in order to meet ever growing needs, man had to invest a lot of work, and any work that is not creative is "pure cretinisation,"[128] so it is quite logical that the most monstrous tyrannies of this world insisted on the slogan: *work*, *order*, and *peace*. In Basara's terminology, *work* means *cretinisation*, *order* means *obedience*, and *peace* means *deadening*. Therefore, the tyranny of the clock (dead time!) Is what kills the will to live a creative life, he concludes. "The circling of the hands creates the illusion of eternity."[129] But time is different from its technical surrogate, Basara warns; it flows toward its goal, which is its own abolition in the confrontation with eternity. At this point, he introduces the central notion of his experiment: the beast. The beast is syn-

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[126] Cf. ibid., 59-60.

[127] Ibid., p. 60.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

onymous with technology. She is at the height of her power, while man is in endless desolation. The technology of consciousness is something that is of special interest to Basara – not only in that text, but also in his fiction (especially in *The Cyclist Conspiracy*). He is interested in the role of consciousness of technology in maintaining idiocy. Personal judgment is a rare occurrence, Basara maintains, because in a technological society, few people have any experience. Everything is mediated. The individual is shown here as a psychophysiological medium in which the messages of ideological centres of power resonate. "In the light of such reasoning, John's *Revelation* is seen as a collection of charming hallucinations."[130] The essay ends in a theological spirit; of course, it is a specific narrative theology. Namely, Basara concludes that the only consistent humanism, along with Buddhism, is the "mystical body of the Church,"[131] which is different from the church as an institution, because it is a council of everyone: both the living and the dead, in which "there is hope for evil, for the desperate too, but there is no hope for the mediocre, for those who are neither hot nor cold, for those who don't want hope, blinded by the false wonders of technology that, in front of everyone's eyes, devours itself and its children."[132] The final motif of the essay is, once again, death: in his interpretation, to be deluded, to love determination, to be enchanted by technology – means to want death voluntarily. The love of death is unforgivable, unlike even the most terrible hatred. It is a pseudo-paradox of the Basarian type: the weakness of the will is mistaken for a clinging to life, and to the weak of will, this lie is seen as the truth of life. The last sentence of the essay reads: "But he who has seven Debts and seven stars tells each of the deceived: I know your deeds, that you have a name, that you are alive, and that you are dead."[133]

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[130] Ibid., p. 61.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid., p. 62.

RUMOURS OF THE NON-EXISTENCE OF THE WORLD (1988 - 1989)

C as in *Conspiracy*

The letter C of Svetislav Jovanov's *Dictionary of Postmodernity* opens with the entry *The Cyclist Conspiracy*.[134] We learn that this novel, published in 1988, is the key achievement of Serbian postmodernist fiction, but also the most significant novelistic achievement of the ninth decade of the 20th century in Serbian literature as a whole. According to the dictionary, this is a novel that radically breaks with the previous notion of novels in Serbian literature tradition in several ways: the treatment of narrative, character formation, and contrasting ambience. With this novel, Jovanov points out, an attractiveness, wit, and tension are achieved unattainable for modernist forms such as, for example, *the stream of consciousness*. The novel achieves such effects by using the fantastic, the humorous or the bizarre, by combining unusual philosophical premises and counterpointing various genre forms (such as letters, treatises, interviews, historical chronicles, photographs, manifestos, and architectural drafts) and rhetorical figures (irony, paradox, allegory, hyperbole), and situations such as, for instance, the alternation of apocrypha and facts. At the heart of the novel – both at the narrative level and at the level of commentary – is the history and work of an organisation called *the Little Brothers* of the Evangelical Bicyclists of the Rose Cross. The (secret and fragmentary) history of this alleged Order is shaped as the reverse or hidden meaning of the official history of European civilisation. The history thus depicted ranges from ancient Antioch and the Byzantine iconoclasts, through the discovery of a Renaissance perspective (pronounced fatal), to the Gulag and the mystical city of Dharamsala. The mysterious ideologue of the Bicyclists – Joseph Kowal-

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[134] Svetislav Jovanov, *Rečnik postmoderne: sa uputstvima za radoznale čitaoce* (Beograd: Geopoetika, 1999), 49.

sky – and the other members of the Brotherhood exist in eternity, and they meet in dreams and watch over the horrors of history, which for them is just an illusion of evil, a great madness, a distance from God and essence. In their perspective, history is meaninglessly linear, ideologised, and indeed robotised. One of the key sentences of the novel, according to Jovanov, is "In order for the Tower of Babylon to finally be destroyed, it first had to be built."[135] In the novel, Freud and Stalin, the Templars and Sherlock Holmes, Kabbalah and computers appear and alternate on an equal footing – they are all actors in the eternal conflict between barren reason and saving madness. *The Cyclist Conspiracy* is a document which boasts protagonists, copyists, translators, inventors and commentators. The endless series of narrators/characters, the oscillation of narrative levels and the spaces of history as a dream draw their originality, concludes Jovanov, from the irony and picaresque plot twists, as well as from the critique of postmodernist superficialities and relativisation. The splendour of the novel is also based, according to Jovanov, on the heresy of the rhetoric which holds nothing is sacred, but at the same time, on the irreconcilability of a specific ethic that leads the reader to the forgotten roots of what is sacred, mythical and sublime. Ala Tatarenko takes *The Cyclist Conspiracy* as an example of *high postmodernism*, noting that this novel can also be defined as a postmodernist ahistorical novel, a novel of ideas, a novel of illumination, and historiographical metafiction.[136] The novel is structured in the form of a collection whose editor has the initials of its empirical author – S.B. The theme of the novel is the apocryphal history of the idea carried by *the Little Brothers* of the Evangelical Bicyclists of the Rose Cross. The bicycle is a cult symbol for the members of this sect, and clocks are an object of hatred. This kind of spiritual quest, undertaken by the cyclists, is presented in historical sequence, from ancient times up until the 20th century. A special place in this history is occupied by the messiah, Joseph Kowalsky. The novel consists of textual blocks (for example, *On the Threshold of the New Era*, *Correspondence*, *Poems*, *Prose*, etc.) that are structured from materials that narrate the history of the basic idea. The authenticity of the idea is ensured by the

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[135] Basara, *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, p. 244.

[136] Cf. Ала Татаренко, *Поетика форме у прози српског постмодернизма* (Београд: Службени гласник, 2013), p. 284.

choice of non-fictional forms such as confession, the analysis of ideological orientation, project description, etc., and the introduction of recognisable historical figures, so, for example, the heroes of the novel are in correspondence with Freud. The history of the cycling idea in the novel, as Tatarenko points out, is presented fragmentarily and in the manner of an aporia, while the attitude towards grand histories is expressed by using the wide possibilities provided by paradox. The narrative framework of the novel is taken up by *A Tale of My Kingdom* by the apocryphal king Charles the Hideous. He writes history because, as *The Cyclist Conspiracy* has it, "only one who has no history has the right to write it."[137] The fictional character of the work is attested to by the title – instead of *The History of My Kingdom*, Charles titles his work *A Tale of My Kingdom*. On the margins of this work are commentaries, written by the king's majordomo (otherwise, in a novel marked as the figment of the king's imagination) Grossman, whose name suggests a small man with a grand surname. His marginal notes become visible only after two hundred years – this testifies to the paradoxical materiality of the apocrypha for posterity. The editor, S.B., initially considers Charles the Hideous a fictional character, and Charles acquires the status of a historical figure only after the discovery of another apocrypha, which is a transcript of a transcript, entitled *The Manuscript of Captain Queensdale*, and containing the introductory comments of the publisher and an unknown scribe. The illusion of the documentary character of the text, as Tatarenko points out, is created by two mutually supporting fictions. In this way a simulacrum is created. A book of history in such a world is merely a shadow of a shadow. Fiction is thus created by history and literature, and its definition is – conspiracy. In that sense, Tatarenko concludes, the anthology compiled by S.B. was called upon to solve a task analogous to that which Charles the Hideous faced: to create a history of a fictitious idea, i.e. to both write its history and to render it real by producing documents, photographs, correspondence, and literary works from the pen of cycling ideologue Joseph Kowalsky (a fiction within fiction). In addition, it is important to point out the internal contradiction of the text: Charles the Hideous meets Grossman, who does not know that he is a product of the king's imagination – the whole history of cycling is built

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[137] Basara, *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, p. 8.

on the mutual negation of the presented theses. In other words, if being a figment of the king's imagination does not prevent major-domo Grossman from writing *A History of the Diabolical Two-Wheeler*,[138] according to the same logic, *the Little Brothers*, who are the fruit of S.B.'s imagination, can leave behind various written documents, such as manifestos and architectural projects, and may also have followers among artists, politicians, and athletes of the late 20th century, as the novel suggests in its final "chapter," "The Secret List of Evangelical Cyclist."[139]

The notion of time in *The Cyclist Conspiracy* is organised in such a way that the usual direction of time does not exist, and the heroes have the ability to predict the future as well as form the past based on it. The capriciousness of the flow of time enables, for example, the correspondence between Joseph Kowalsky and Branko Kukić. The novel is not conceived, Tatarenko points out, as an anti-historical novel, but as a postmodernist novel of ideas – it is a kind of almanac of material on the history of an idea. In the process, the accompanying history is presented as a framework for the history of the transformation of ideas into ideology. This transformation is brought about by forming a concept (i.e. a system) and writing a proclamation (i.e. a document) that enables the duration of one idea. The function of the document in *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, therefore, is to create the illusion of the systematic nature of the cycling idea and its theoretical foundation. However, it is almost impossible to follow the ideological concept of the novel, so that the reader quickly gets lost in the labyrinth prepared for him by the editor. A comment by Charles the Hideous that Tatarenko cites in support of her thesis that it is a novel of ideas, is of interest in this regard: Charles the Hideous claims that his people are "counterfeit persons without ontological backing," and they "do not even know what ontology is."[140] Tatarenko concludes that in this way, the implicit author of the novel sends the reader a sign that he is dealing with a novel of ideas that appears in a period in which ontology reigns over epistemology. In other words, the implicit author gradually creates the illusion of an ideology that simultaneously denies itself. The violation

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[138] Ibid., pp. 31-39.

[139] Ibid., pp. 284-285.

[140] Ibid., p. 15.

of the usual rules takes place in the novel on several levels: not only by uncertain chronology, but also by uncertain appointments. Thus, for example, both supporters and enemies of the cycling ideology have the same surname: Meier. It is an intentional strategy for naming heroes. The name Charles the Hideous does not only imply the irony of the tradition of imperial names (cf. Philip the Fair); to a speaker of Polish, Tatarenko points out, it would suggest Charles the Different. Tatarenko offers additional arguments for her interpretation, referring to the fact that the name of the hero Joseph Kowalsky is also of Polish origin, and that it is also the name of the hero of Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke*. It is, in fact, the equivalent of the Serbian surname Kovačević (Smith). The name of Joseph K(owalsky) determines the fate of the hero, writes Tatarenko, just as the motto, in which the words of Franz Kafka are quoted, determines the fate of the novel: "The Messiah will come at the point when he is no longer necessary. He will not come on the last day. He will comeon the very last of all possible days."[141] Joseph is also the name of the Master who, according to the *Manuscript of Captain Queensdale*, is, as an elder member, at the head of the cycling *Little Brothers*. It is also a very significant allusion to Joseph, Mary's biblical husband. Kowalsky comes from the family line of Antioch blacksmiths. The reference to the opposing tradition at work here is both paradoxical and logical, given the structure of the novel: the blacksmiths have constructed an iron bird, and the cyclists renounce the ascent to heaven; vertical motion gives way to a horizontal, cyclical motion. Fake treatises, letters, and architectural drawings also point to the falsity of supposedly reliable testimonies of a dubious idea. For example, *A Letter to Branko Kukić*[142] allegedly by Joseph Kowalsky, does not bear his signature, but the signature of the editor, and the lost second part of *A Tale of My Kingdom* appears at the end and thus frames the main part.[143] In this way, the (story) of the cyclists formally returns to its starting point. The secret project of the *Little Brothers* called the *Grand Insane Asylum* contains the *Plan of the Grand Insane Asylum* by L. Loentze,[144] and in the Appendix one can find a description of the "Building: 'City Babylon the

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[141] Ibid., p. v.

[142] Ibid., pp. 228-236.

[143] Ibid., pp. 270-272.

[144] Ibid., pp. 260-269.

Great' Hospital: Technical Description" by the architect "Mihailo Jova-nović, arch.,"[145] as well as a "Secret List of Members of the Evangelical Bicyclists,"[146] including many contemporaries of the novel. Despite the fact that time is supposed to be irrelevant to the idea of cycling, the signs of the times are strongly visible in *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, especially in the *An Analysis of the Ideological Orientation of the Journal,* Vidici*, and the Newspaper* Student. Namely, a secret organisation of cyclists is denounced by members of another secret organisation. In the place of the opposition of the government and the conspirators, there are two groups of conspir-ators – the blacksmiths and the masons, while the representatives of the ruling ideology are only implied; they are not present in the novel. The result of such a procedure, according to Tatarenko, is the following: the historical and spatially marked ideology in the novel becomes an empty space. The anonymous document, authored by members of an obscure society, links postmodern literature with rock culture, by means of key terms: for example, *Boy*, the central negative category,[147] refers directly to music. Namely, the band Boys (Dečaci), which later changed its name to Idols (Idoli), was associated with the magazine *Vidici* in a certain way, just as one of their hits included the lines *The comrades of mine are merry all / Riding their bikes, so proud and tall*. But the key elements of this connec-tion are nevertheless contained in the collage of poetics of the band Idols, in which profane and sacred music, as well as banal and multi-layered ut-terances, are indifferently mingled.

Romantic Irony in Postmodern Guise

According to Slobodan Vladušić, *The Cyclist Conspiracy* is Basara's greatest achievement.[148] There are many ways to reading the novel: one

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[145] Ibid., pp. 275-277

[146] Ibid., pp. 284-285.

[147] Cf. ibid., pp. 93-96.

[148] Slobodan Vladušić, "Između postmoderne i romantizma (ili: kako govoriti u svoje ime?)," after-word in Svetislav Basara, *Fama o biciklistima* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva/ Nin, 2005), pp. 243-256.

is to interpret it as an instance of *historiographical metafiction*. It is a term that Linda Hutcheon uses to denote theoretically self-conscious fiction that sees history and fiction as human constructions and thus creates the conditions for re-examining and processing the forms and content of the past.[149] Writers of historiographical metafiction start from the assumption that traces of subjectivity are ineradicable in the text – in other words, a document is necessarily a construction in which traces of the author's gender, class, and race and/or his culture are inscribed. In historiographical metafiction, historical knowledge is refracted through a fictional document, which implies the disintegration of the (Aristotelian) distinction between history and poetry. The fictional text is, therefore, "disguised" as a document, with the aim of proving (as a pseudo-document) what is unprovable. Thus, at the same time, she suggests that all documents serve as evidence for fiction, which – disguised as a document – is considered true. Basara relies on the postmodern teaching on the textuality of history: his history of the Order of the Cyclists is structured as a collection of edited texts that acquire the status of a document by the act of editing. In *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, as Vladušić notes,[150] the figure of the editor replaces the figure of storyteller. This transformation is crucial to postmodern storytelling. The causes of this transformation, as Vladušić suggests, should be sought in the decline of faith in personal experience or in testimony, not only in terms of the truth of what is being witnessed, but also in the context of the importance of witnessing as such. The process of editing texts in *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, as Jerkov suggests, points to a postmodern change in the relationship between truth and discourse.[151] The discourse of truth no longer exists in the sense of a discourse that would proclaim the truth; it is a discourse that depends on how truth is constituted. This novel confirms this hypothesis, Vladušić shows, because it shows the truth of the Order of the Cyclists as a construction made up of elements of the world that belongs to the reader. The texts that comprise *The Cyclist Conspiracy* fake their affiliation to documentary discourse and thus ask of its readers

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[149] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 105-123.

[150] Vladušić, "Između postmoderne i romantizma (ili: kako govoriti u svoje ime?)," p. 244.

[151] Aleksandar Jerkov, "Nemoć istorije, istorija nemoći," *Reč* 28 (1995), p. 78.

to approach the novel in a manner different from the one habitually used for reading fiction. Basara's novel inserts its own imaginary world into the real world, and the latter is inhabited by the novel's readers. By doing so, it questions the opposition between facts and fiction. It should be noted that this reading of *The Cyclist Conspiracy* brings this novel closer to typical postmodern works. As Brian McHale points out, in the postmodern novel, the ontological question is predominant, while in the modern novel is was the epistemological question.[152] *The Cyclist Conspiracy* provides arguments for this attitude, because it shows that insisting on an epistemological question leads to the transformation of an epistemological dilemma into an ontological one. We find an example of this in the narrative which the Order of Evangelical Bicyclists of the Rose Cross inserts into the world of known historical facts: the focus is thus shifted from the epistemological insight into the textuality of history onto the ontological question – in other words, the question of the meaning of the reader's world.

Vladušić warns that this way of reading *The Cyclist Conspiracy* can conditionally be called learned, because in this way, Basara's text is inserted into a framework constituted by theoretical postulates around which there is a consensus among the professional reading community. However, the poetic features of the novel fail to explain Basara's popularity with unprofessional readers. Vladušić therefore proposes a phrase that opens up the possibility of reading Basara's novel beyond the opposition of expertise and inexpertness, in an imaginary space shared by professional and unprofessional readers: it is a phrase taken from Roland Barthes, who states that a certain type of fiction has *theory blackmailed*. Barthes writes of the avant-garde texts that pay attention to theory and serve it in a way that offers it material for its own argument.[153] Vladušić draws a parallel between the avant-garde texts cited by Barthes and historiographical metafictions, including novels that consciously want to be the material of feminist, postcolonial, etc. studies. Namely, these texts do not in any way try to escape the theoretical framework to which they offer the least resistance (and they could do so, for example, by using irony or some other rhetorical means).

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[152] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.10.

[153] Cf. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (London, Macmillan, 1977), p. 54.

When it comes to *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, but also as regards Basara's work as a whole, Vladušić claims that we can notice that something in it goes beyond the expectations of a small group of professional readers, and this "surplus" is exactly what intrigues a large group of unprofessional readers. Theory is "blackmailed" insofar as the novelist no longer speaks on behalf of a nation or class, but on behalf of minority groups. Perhaps the writing of fiction, asks Vladušić, thus moves in the circle in which proposed poetic truths are copied, in order to be recognised by theory? Such an agreement is the foundation of peace between literature and philosophy, the author concludes. At the heart of both is the narrative of a weak subject. One of the peculiarities of the impotence of the subject is the disintegration of cultural space – which preserves the importance of subjective attitude and subjective emotions, and is created on the border of Enlightenment and Romanticism.

The contemporary consumer of narrative cultural products does not expect narration to come from authentic experience; this renunciation of individuality mediated by the work of art points to the disintegration of the tradition of humanism that begins with the Renaissance, and experiences its re-actualisation in Sentimentalism and Romanticism. Barthes warns that the texts of the great avant-garde also possess those properties which theory fails to recognise. Vladušić asks: is *The Cyclist Conspiracy* such a text? In order to answer this question, one should move in the opposite direction and give up reading the novel within a theoretical perspective. Since it is impossible to read the novel "as it is," Vladušić proceeds to single out the moments that leave the horizon of political or poetic correctness. Such a reading raises questions that could not be asked in the (previous) deductive reading of the novel. We must agree with this interpretation. The first question that this approach immediately poses is: why does *The Cyclist Conspiracy* begin in medias res, and with the text of Charles the Hideous, *A Tale of My Kingdom*, even though the constitution of the Evangelical Bicyclists chronologically preceded the creation of that text? Is this a story process that makes the story more interesting? If the answer is yes, then only the place of that text in the composition of the novel is clarified, but its meaning eludes us. Vladušić suggests a different reading: the apocrypha of Charles the Hideous, the first text to follow the "Editor's Preface," plays an important autopoietic role. Namely, this text

focuses on the place and meaning of storytelling within the world in which it is narrated. The first sentence of that piece of writing alone establishes a firm opposition between the world and the subject. What will be repeated throughout the text is stated at the very beginning: Vladušić describes this process as a continuous divergence of the subject and the implied knowledge and opinions of the world. Such disagreement occurs in the form of an incident, which varies from the negation of mainstream opinion, through the prediction of the future to politically incorrect attitudes. In order to separate his own text from the world, Charles the Hideous implements a whole series of diversion methods. His appellation, too, Vladušić warns, can be read in this context: ugliness is symbolic of the hero's alienation from the world. The methods used by Charles the Hideous can be read as forms of power that the subject expresses in the world of the powerless: the synecdoche of powerlessness appears parallel to the king's text, introduced by the majordomo Grossman, who writes down the king's words and leaves his comments. This game between the king and Grossman is a game between two types of writing: confession and commentary. In terms of poetics, Vladušić establishes the conflict that takes place throughout the novel – the conflict of Romantic confession and postmodern arrangement. With this conflict comes the problem of primacy: who has the right to narrate, the one who creates, or the one who arranges? The author asks the question: what gives us the right to call Charles the Hideous a Romantic subject? He cites two mechanisms noticeable in the actions of the king and Joseph Kowalsky in support of his argument. The power of Charles the Hideous is an emanation of absolute power – the king speaks and acts in the name of God: he orders the birth of Joseph Kowalsky (and some other characters in the novel, including Sigmund Freud!). The power in question here – the power of the subject – is inherent, Vladušić points out, in Coleridge's notion of imagination, where the power of the artist acquires the status of secondary power and differs only in quantity from the primary power of God. The Romantic origin of Charles the Hideous' narration is also confirmed through romantic irony, the author warns: an important structural element of the entire *The Cyclist Conspiracy* is precisely a series of contradictions, understood as contradicting oneself. For example, the apocrypha of Charles the Hideous, which derives its import from the fact that it opens the novel, depicts the character of Grossman both as a

person whom Charles the Hideous met, but also as a product of the king's founding imagination. Another example of romantic irony in the novel is the biography of Joseph Kowalsky. In it, variations on the theme of contradiction appear in very explicitly. In the rumours, Kowalsky is represented by mutually exclusive notions – sometimes as an ascetic, turned to his own inner world, other times as a dissolute young man; some describe him as a gentle man of full understanding, and others as rude, arrogant, and cruel. Kowalsky's character is an example of the Romantic subject, concludes Vladušić, because any subject who cares about the absolute can be called a Romantic subject. The tactic for reaching the absolute is Schlegel's idea that man always contradicts himself and connects the opposing extremes. Vladušić claims that this is the founding principle of the novel. In this sense, the symbolic meaning of the bicycle (apart from the interpretations that appear as leitmotifs in the novel) is the idea of constant movement – it is only by being in motion that the bicycle maintains balance.

It is important to point out that this does not mean that everything in the novel is subject to contradiction: some opposites remain firm throughout the text: for example, male/female, East/West, Spirit/Matter, person/boy. According to Vladušić, the strength of these oppositions goes beyond the game of romantic irony. This is where Basara's novel challenges typical postmodern texts, in which all solid oppositions are deconstructed and thus reduced to the level of difference. The fact that there is no "blunting" of opposition points to the power of the romantic subject: his ability to frame and overcome his own text. This shows the reader as the last instance of the literary institution. The two heroes of *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, the "creator" Charles the Hideous and the key "hero" Joseph Kowalsky, constantly produce values, and despite the fact that they deny most of them, Vladušić argues that they thereby pose a challenge the idea of universal indifference implied by the postmodern motto *anything goes*. The novel examines the tensions between postmodern and Romantic poetics, discussed by some postmodern theorists. For example, McHale argues that the "romantic godlike poet" is "both immanent and transcendent, both *inside* his heterocosm, and *above* it, simultaneously present and absent."[154] McHale's views on the nature of Romantic authorship are conditioned by

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[154] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 30.

postmodern scepticism about the tendency of the Romantic subject to present itself as an instance equal to God. Vladušić explains that this scepticism is fuelled by a notion of a liberated work that renounces its creator. According to McHale, the fictional world is inevitably altered once it acquires a visible creator, the godlike Romantic poet: it becomes less and less a mirror of nature, and more and more an artifact. This remark by McHale, warns Vladušić, is symptomatic because it indicates the way in which postmodernism interprets romanticism – he points out that the work includes the process of its own creation. The text thus begins to tell the story of its origin, thus becoming – in the words of postmodern theory – metafiction. The intention that makes the Romantic subject create metafictions remains outside of the theoretical horizon of the entire postmodern theory. This intention is connected with the pursuit of the absolute and totality; the desire to emphasise one's own artistic self – a strong and solid subject. The conclusion of Vladušić's analysis is that the novel *The Cyclist Conspiracy* is a symbiosis of postmodern poetic postulates in which a powerful Romantic subject is "enwrapped." In this context, Basara's text owes its exceptional reception to the postmodern construction of the Romantic subject, which sees Romanticism as a continuous self-irony by which it conceals the serial production of values, and not as an expression of hypertrophied emotionality. According to Vladušić, the aforementioned production of value indicates the deep emotionality of Basara's text.

Basara's occasional penchant for confrontational opinions, which Vladušić highlights, is beyond any correctness – it does not return the opinion back to the abandoned centre, but instead moves it towards the very margins of the margin. According to Vladušić, perhaps this constant shifting of positions (not unlike pedalling a bicycle!) shows the only strategy available for retaining individual opinion in postmodern times: contradicting oneself. It saves the thinking mind from all possible labelling. Perhaps the secret of the response to Basara's writings, concludes Vladušić, is precisely in the fact that his texts subtly undermine the poetic postulates of postmodern fiction by following them only to a certain point. It is a role that these texts must play in order to be readable in anti-romantic times. Yet in some aspects of the novel — in the places where the protagonists speak — the process of editing seems to give way to Romantic expression. It is something Vladušić calls the *energy of utterance*, which he claims is the

driving force of the best pages of this novel. In other words, he concludes, what the "ordinary," unprofessional reader likes in Basara's fiction is exactly this excess of subjectivity, the essayistic voice ringing changes on philoso-phemes, regardless of the limits and restrictions of public opinion.

Autopoiesis, History, Hearsay

The Cyclist Conspiracy is narrated as a detailed conspiracy theory.[155] All the narrative instances of the novel, as well as all of the characters, who are one and all *Little Brothers* of the order of Evangelical Bicyclists of the Rose Cross, follow a perfectly structured plan. The consequence of this structure are multiple connections between the partts of the novel on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis. Perišić notes that a paradigmatic con-nection between the parts can be found between almost any two selected fragments, and the most noticeable examples are the repetition of the gen-eral construction of the whole novel in its particulars. For example, the novel begins with the situation of finding a manuscript, which is repeat-ed on a micro level when Captain Queensdale's manuscript is discovered. This situation is also a paradigm for the part in which the alleged literary work of Joseph Kowalsky is presented. His poems and prose function as a found manuscript. The convention of writing a preface to a found manu-script, used repeatedly, is transformed here into writing a biography of a fictional author of the collected works. According to Perišić, the paradox-ical nature of Basara's story is that it is not even important: it is there only to witness the simulacrum it represents. To do this effectively, one needs to have a strictly and consistently derived structure, which will thus parody the lost purpose of the real world. The question that Perišić poses in the light of this thesis is: how do the autopoietics signals in the novel about a cyclist conspiracy direct the reading of it in the direction of a carnival rid-icule of the real world? As an example of ironic autopoietics, Perišić cites the description of Evangelical Bicyclists by the "author" of the fragment

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[155] Igor Perišić, *Gola priča* (Beograd: Plato/Institut za književnost i umetnost, 2007), p. 82.

The History of a Lie, Herbert Meier.[156] His comments represent a necessary ironic unmasking of the order/procedure to which he is opposed, since he is set as a demystifier – in other words, he is ironically distanced from the subject of analysis. In this way, his research shows that the rumour about the Evangelical Bicyclists of the Rose Cross is the effect of a compilation of mystifications, i.e. the writings that precede his text within *The Cyclist Conspiracy*. These contain but a bunch of contradictory concepts which are forcibly connected (as is, presumably, the novel itself) by way of scholasticism, astrology, mechanics, dubious poetry, false biographies, forged history, and symbolism which is, according to Meier, obviously constructed. The elements that Meier lists – the constitutive components of the novel – can be followed and observed in the text of *The Cyclist Conspiracy* very consistently, without being bothered by the negative value that Meier assigns them (because that is merely the personal attitude of the alleged author of the fragment). This is why Perišić argues that the catalogue of autopietic themes and procedures in the novel is significant.

The "author" of the aforementioned fragment further states the fact that the text contains a series of political implications that are enwrapped in a transparent veil of mystery. The answer to the question about the political implications of the novel is given by another "author," and an "unknown" one at that, in a fragment of the novel entitled *An Analysis of the Ideological Orientation of the Journal,* Vidici*, and the Newspaper* Student. That text is, in fact, an authentic document, but that is not relevant to the function it performs within the novel as a whole. The position expressed in it is thus as ironic as it is anonymous and unreliable. In the second place, it is mystifyingly suggested that the Analysis originates from Masonic circles. The irony is further underlined by the introduction of quotations parodying an anonymous social conscience. Such quotes verify terms emptied of meaning as a legal announcement of something that is socially correct, as Perišić emphasises. The function of such determinations, by which the "authors" are different instances, consists in the ironic description of the main text. It is precisely the thematic and content plane that coincides with some of the novel's meaning planes. The ironic charge stems from negative value determinations – advertising one's own worthlessness aims

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[156] Cf. Basara, *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, 109-112.

to take a position that allows one to safely oppose a discourse that aspires to the ability to know or to produce one's own positive side. If by means of negative value provisions one's own text is declared worthless, the point is to foreground the positive value of self-awareness, which does the work of deconstructing. It is a call to reconsider all constructions, ideologies, and systems of thought. The consequence of such a procedure is the fundamental anti-doctrinaire nature of Basara's fiction. Perišić sees an autopoietic description of this anti-doctrinaire stance in the attitude King Charles adopts toward conspiracy; claiming to be tolerant of everything, he thus showcases the process behind the novel itself:

> If you believe in anything other than God you become a heretic. But I am tolerant toward heretics as well. This is my doctrine: if all men are sinful, no one knows God, and therefore all theologies are heretical. Short and simple. And that's why my kingdom is a sanctuary for heretics.[157]

Perišić points out that later on in the text Grossman says that Charles does not believe in God either: such a statement obviously undermines the Christian ideology of the novel, which could be taken at face value, provided the carnivalisation to which it is subjected is ignored. In that sense, we can agree with Perišić that tolerance towards everything, where only God is unquestioned, is a feature of this novel, but also of the whole of Basara's fiction. Despite the fact that Basara's books (especially his essays) also contain drafts of a new ideology (fundamentally derived from Christianity), they are anti-doctrinal in nature, because the narrative subject is always carnivalised.

If we ignore the carnivalisation and subject Basara's ideology to a thorough analysis, we come to the conclusion that it is a peculiar understanding of Christianity that is not canonical but represents a personal search for God within Christian coordinates. Perišić finds proof that Basara's version of Christianity is not doctrinaire in the fact that Basara's favourite theologians are heretics, such as Meister Eckhart or Rosenkreutz, and we can include here the French philosopher of history René Guénon, often quoted in Basara's works, who is not only an apostate from

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[157] Ibid., p. 9.

Christianity but also a convert (to Islam). It is important to point out one significant shift in the function of carnivalisation performed by Basara's narrator: Perišić states that Basara's carnivalisation follows in the wake of Rabelais, as interpreted by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, but with a significant alteration. Namely, according to Bakhtin, Rabelais' basic aim was to decompose the official image of the epoch, and he achieved it by perverting the norms of the world he presented. At the same time, the general view of the world was stabilised by being turned upside down. The result of Rabelais' procedure is anti-doctrinal and the same is true of *The Cyclist Conspiracy*. However, Perišić notices a difference in the direction of carnivalisation. The movement of Rabelais's process is downward. In this way, the doctrinal seriousness of official opinion is overcome by being lowered into the material, and then into the carnal. The symbolic correlates of official culture are the sky and the head – consequently, their ousted counterparts are the earth and the abdomen, genitals and buttocks. In contrast, Basara is concerned with carnivalisation that proceeds in the opposite direction. For example: Rabelais is an opponent of medieval austerity – Basara apparently wants to bring that back; apparently, because the declarative advocacy of a medieval anti-materialist notion of life cannot constitute a serious appeal for its return, and because carnivalisation does not allow a single truth to be established in the text. Least of all the truth that appears as the reverse of an official truth that is being reversed. The specific procedure of *carnivalisation upwards* affects the other side as well, so that it is impossible to establish a stable meaning of the novel – it plays with all ideological mechanisms and all systematic ways of thinking. This interpretation becomes even more interesting when we take into account the claim that these two carnivalisations stand at the beginning and the end of an era. Namely, after the medieval mystical seriousness, at the beginning of the modern age, it was necessary to decentralise the value system downwards (into the realm of materiality and life), and this was done in the name of reason; then, after considering the results of the action of reason in history (the basic theme of the postmodern era and its revaluation of history), it was necessary to redirect the carnivalisation upwards and re-examine what reliance on reason has led to. Carnivalisation upwards is in this sense a mental carnivalisation, and its meaning in Basara's fiction is the transformation of modern heliocentrism into medieval geocentrism.

This process resulted in a revaluation of every truth that serves as a starting point for rational thinking about reality. Perišić sharpens his judgment with the suggestion that this type of carnivalisation could also be called philosophical carnivalisation, because it means reversing and re-examining the system of thought in the tradition of deconstruction.

In Basara's fiction, there is a verso to every recto character – the fundamental effect of carnivalisation is ambivalence. Carnivalisation is unlike irony, warns Perišić, insofar as it is not possible to identify a positive pole in the text as a negative reflection of that which is being ironized. All the worlds on offer are equal. In other words: value judgments are absent and the usual hierarchy is inverted, much like in a carnival. The ambivalence of carnivalisation is a function of a security measure that prevents some sort of new ideological scheme being established. An interesting example of carnivalisation in the novel is the figure of a blacksmith – homo faber. In Latin, the noun *faber* has a synonym, *ferrarius*, which happens to be the name of one of the erstwhile leaders of Basara's cyclists, as Perišić points out in his analysis. The fact that Josephus Ferrarius' surname means blacksmith signals that cyclists are placed in the historical lineage of those who actively participated in the emancipation of humanity. The demystifier of the Order of *Little Brothers*, Herbert Meier, claims that cyclists are continuing the tradition of the ancient association of blacksmiths from Antioch – these sons of Fire are guardians of the ancient covenant of God and of people. The blacksmiths, therefore, figure here as representatives of God. The sect of architects, which is opposed to them, is in collusion with the devil and represents the sons of the Earth. The task of the cyclists is to win yet another secret war, which is being waged below the surface of world history. At first glance, the blacksmiths receive a positive treatment in the novel: their successors, the cyclists, have the task of saving the world. However, if we know how the carnivalised cyclists go about that task, then the enlightenment myth of man as a blacksmith of his own happiness is parodied through the figure of a blacksmith; which means that the myth of consciously serving the progress of mankind is also parodied. Thus, the cyclist – the modern homo faber – takes destiny into his own hands and wants to master the forces of nature, but he does not stop there, instead, he establishes a secret organisation which implements his goals. The conclusion that follows from this setup is: if it is necessary to constitute an

organisation in order to achieve a personal goal, it is clear that this goal is impossible to achieve, because history testifies that such projects end in totalitarianism. According to Perišić, the subtitle that designates *The Cyclist Conspiracy* as a novel is also an autopoietic signal: "When a part of the text cannot be analysed in a satisfactory manner until the reading focuses on the genre, the text in question is a work in which generic self-awareness is an important structuring principle."[158] At the beginning of the novel, the editor explains what prompted him to write the novel – it all started in the provincial library of Bajina Bašta, where he came across two books. He also says that he escaped to the library to get away "from a sadness the cause of which [he] still cannot mention."[159] Coming at the very beginning of the novel, this testimony is especially emphasised, and it also gives the reader a kind of promise of a subsequent clarification of the enigma. However, there is no explanation; at least not in the way one might expect it. Namely, as Perišić notes, only in the preface of another editor – the copyist of Captain Queensdale's manuscript, do we find a similar place: the manuscript was found thanks to the fact that the unknown copyist left London and went to the provinces, after being "crushed by inexplicable depression and fatigue."[160] There is no explanation, nor can one be found because it is a generic convention: the author of *The Cyclist Conspiracy* wants to place the novel in the Gothic tradition, which requires that the motivation of the editors of found manuscripts to be inexplicable or that it should not be talked about. A Gothic novel needs mysterious narrators, or precisely editors. In this way, the whole text is shrouded in a veil of mystery. The title of the novel itself presents a mystery – the word *conspiracy* does not designate a genre, but it does associatively direct the reader's attention toward something secret and implies a generic model rather close to the Gothic novel. Perišić sees the figure of Satan in this context: he is an indicator of the presence of the Gothic in the work. The majordomo of King Charles, Grossman, sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for a doctorate, and at one point He even appears in person, enveloped in an opaque cloud of sulphuric vapour. In addition, a number of allusions to the Devil appear in

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[158] Perišić, *Gola priča*, pp. 118-119.

[159] Basara, *The Cyclist Conpiracy*, p. 2.

[160] Ibid., p. 44.

the text (for example, the architects – the opponents of the cyclists – are claimed to be in collusion with Him). The bicycle, the basic material correlative of *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, is also ironically demonised: in several places in the novel, it is characterised as a satanic device. For example, the passage in which Grossman presents his own view of the history of cyclists is entitled *A History of the Diabolical Two-Wheeler*. The fate of Captain Queensdale's manuscript is another example of the demonisation of discourse: in his preface, the "unknown copyist" writes that, having found the manuscript, he "made six completely identical copies and inserted them into six expensive, but interesting, books," certain that they will reach the right readers, those who will do the same thing he did: "make six copies of the text and find a way to release them into the world."[161] One such was the alleged publisher, who printed it in six copies, and released them "into the world to find its six readers."[162] The profusion of sixes strongly suggests the number 666, which further enhances the Gothic lustre. Yet, the novel does not aim to create tension and inspire dread, as a real Gothic novel should; its effect is primarily parodic on the thematic plane, while as regards genre the effect is one of pastiche. The demonic aura enveloping the characters of *The Cyclist Conspiracy* is primarily a sign of the inaccessibility and unknowability of their true nature. The central character of the novel, Joseph Kowalsky, is half Satan – in other words, he can be neither described nor explained. Perišić points out that the overall relativistic philosophy of Basara's novel shows through in the characters symbolising the elusiveness of the principles of good and evil. Like all of *Conspiracy*'s characters, Kowalsky is irreparably ambivalent. The Gothic is only one of his aspects, and the Gothic aura is a means by which Gothic as a genre is introduced into the novel as one of the constitutive and (at the same time) parodied principles. Thereby it appears that the Devil is not so unequivocally negative; in other words, there is no a priori truth that would be immune to the carnivalisng and degrading action of literature.

In the already quoted interview with Dejan Ilić, Basara claims that the theme of *The Cyclist Conspiracy* is, among other things, the relationship between literature and truth. He argues that fiction is more real than

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[161] Ibid., pp. 46-47.

[162] Ibid., p. 43.

reality and that the purpose of the artistic articulation of fiction is to prevent the world from sinking even deeper into immanence. He also argues that literature is one of the few remaining connections with the higher spheres of the universe. He explains that in his prose, from *The Cyclist Conspiracy* onwards, he builds mock-ups of ideologies and political creations, "but so that it is obvious that they're mock-ups." These are "images" that are "patched" so as to make visible the technology with which the originals were "patched"[163] Basara argues that despite the grotesque that such fiction offers, the heat of general inertia very quickly prevails – reality becomes more grotesque than the most grotesquely constructed fiction. As an example, Basara cites Estracia, a fictional country from his novel *The Fated Land*, which, in his opinion, when compared with present day Serbia, appears to be a state governed by the rule of law. The narrator of *A Letter to Branko Kukić* in *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, signed with the initials "S.B." (thus posing as a fictitious representative of the author), writes to the addressee Branko Kukić that they both suffer from the burden of history that does not belong to them.[164] Hostility towards history is marked here as hostility towards its concrete variant, warns Perišić: the communism imported in Serbia/Yugoslavia.[165] According to Perišić, this is a realisation of the general tendency of the novel: one of the projects of the Evangelical Bicyclists is the project of an exit through which one can get out of history; Charles the Hideous also loathes history, so he metaphorically flaunts his status as a fictional character, saying that he has been forcibly inserted into it. The reason he does this lies in the fact that there would be no place for him in an orthodox history (because he is historically non-existent). He, therefore, enters the course of history uninvited and wants to destroy it. Perišić explains that he is not able to realise his wish because his historical and narrative competence is limited by his fictitious status. Still, there is a way to do it: he can transcend history by escaping above. Charles therefore plans to raise his kingdom to heaven: his monks will pull it out of the clutches of history. This operation is carnivalised by virtue of the fact that elsewhere its performance takes place physically, and not only meta-

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[163] "Тумарање по беспућу," p. 68.

[164] Basara, *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, 234.

[165] Perišić, *Gola priča*, pp. 239-240.

physically. Thus, the struggle against history is won by shifting the battle onto another plane. "As usual with my books, the title summarises the programme and the concept."[166]

What programmes and concepts do the titles *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, *Phenomena*, and *In Search of the Grail* summarise? The original title of the first novel has the word *fama* (Latin for voice or story), which refers to a tale that is spread, a rumour, a gossip, or a piece of news. If we consider these meanings in the context of the presentation in Basara's fiction thus far, but also in the light of literary theory, it is evidently related to the narrator's speech. It is an instance of communication. The voice has an interest – it presupposes focalisation, i.e. relating to characters. Additionally, word or voice can be a metaphor for intention, as well as for meaning and totality. If *fama* is a story (this, along with voice being its basic meaning) which has the nature of a rumour, gossip, or a piece of news verging on hearsay, it is logical to ask what it is about. The answer is: about cyclists. Jurgis Baltrušaitis' *Fama birotariorum*, a chapter in Svetislav Basara's *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, states that the "Evangelical Bicyclists, generally speaking, try to observe everything *from above*,"[167] and "the pinnacle of the Bicyclists' meditation is to separate the soul from the body and observe oneself on a bicycle from a height of some three hundred feet."[168] It is obvious that cycling has something to do with perception and perspective, which in turn brings us back to the issues of storytelling, focalisation, point of view, and narrative voice. Who speaks about the cyclists in the novel? What kind of story are they telling? In the afterword to the 2007 edition of *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, David Albahari writes that after the appearance of that novel, Serbian prose was no longer the same, just as Basara was no longer the same writer.[169] His early novels testified, Albahari writes, to the author's playfulness and postmodernist games with content and form, as well as to predilection for the absurd, are all features typical of Basara's fiction. With *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, Basara establishes a structural model that was to be frequently used in the years that followed – the anthology. In his preface,

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[166] Basara, *Looney Tunes*, p. 73.

[167] Basara, *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, p. 86.

[168] Ibid., p. 87.

[169] Cf. David Albahari, "U vozu," afterword in Svetislav Basara, *Fama o biciklistima: roman* (Beograd: Dereta, 2007), 383–391.

the Editor S. B. refers to *The Cyclist Conspiracy* as an "almanac."[170] Albahari points out that Basara establishes a connection with Borges' Library of Babel in the very first sentence of his novel: "Endless are the secrets of provincial libraries."[171] Basara also thereby refers to the postmodernist view that writing is first and foremost our reaction to what has already been written, and not to the real world. The world is created in books, the world is an illusion, and writing an illusion of an illusion. *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, Albahari contends, is both a historical pun and a serious analysis of historical events. It is both a philosophico-religious treatise and a parody of ideological thought. It is a mixture of real and unreal; it plays with the entire literary tradition, but also disrupts established narrative strategies. And those are just some of the layers of meaning contained in the novel.

We continue: *Phenomena*. The word comes from Late Latin *phaenomenon* (appearance), itself derived from Ancient Greek φαινόμενον (*phainómenon*, thing appearing to view), neuter present middle participle of φαίνω (*phaínō*, I show). The etymology indicates that the term refers to a manifestation that exists only in the consciousness; a rare, extraordinary occurrence, an unusual case, a miracle, a rarity, an exception. In this context, phenomenalism is a subjective-idealistic direction in philosophy, which denies the existence of the objective world and considers only the incidences of consciousness, i.e. phenomena, to be real. What kind of phenomena do Basara's *Phenomena* deal with? This "transcript of the burned book," for example, tells of Rosenkreutz's metaphysical projection, Falseland – the land of forgers, of the power of illusion, and related phenomena. In *Phenomena*, Basara's idea of the world as a simulated place is reinforced:

> One author, who wishes to remain anonymous, interprets the described phenomena as follows: It is known, he writes, that determinism and necessity rule the human world. The closer a man gets to God, the less he is bound by predestination and necessity; it is said that he has mastered himself and that he can work miracles. The same thing happens, but vice versa, as in a mirror, when a person moves away from God: determinism and limitation are weak. But going over to that side, reality is less and less real; it is a punishment for arbitrariness. After all, any such project ends in

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[170] Ibid., p. 2.

[171] Ibid., p. 1.

nothingness. Not the slightest trace of him remains except in the writings of science fiction and poetry that linger in libraries as a (futile) warning to future generations.[172]

Finally, the third title, *In Search of the Grail*, points us to the medieval story of the miraculous bowl (Grail) from which Christ ate at the Last Supper and in which Joseph of Arimathea allegedly caught his blood when Christ was pierced on the cross. It is, in general, a mysterious and miraculous shrine. What does that title mean? The last chapter of the novel, entitled *Illumination*, is narrated in the first person – the narrator relates how he was left completely alone after Kowalsky's death. He could no longer rely on his support, which protected him from a distance with invisible power. The narrator describes his trip to Bajina Bašta on a ROG bicycle. He goes to fulfil Kowalsky's prophecy, regarding finding a name for the novel in one of the deserted streets. Arriving at his destination, he saw "purple letters" blazing in the sky "above the blackened roofs," spelling "G R A I L."[173] However, his ecstasy is abruptly interrupted by the realisation that it was a banal optical illusion: on the roof of the hotel, the neon sign proclaimed "GRILL" but "letters were partially black and broken, so that the name of the god of gluttony appeared to spell out GRAIL. *Felix error*. The truth, so say the mystics, is always hidden in a lie, the holiest in the filthiest."[174]

A Paradigm Shift?

The novels *The Cyclist Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail*, as well as the collection *Phenomena* bring a change in the global narrative and cognitive perspective in relation to Basara's earlier works. As Mihajlo Pantić points out, the change is only seemingly radical, in fact it had been carefully prepared. In Basara's early texts – *Vanishing Tales, Chinese Letter, Peking*

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[172] Basara, *Fenomeni/Феномени*, p. 42.

[173] Basara, *In Search of the Grail*, p. 206.

[174] Ibid., p. 207.

by Night, Through the Looking-glass Cracked – the narrative voice emerges from the text being decomposed, insecure about the world, and especially of its own existence.[175] He narrates principally its own inability to hold it together and to conceive of himself as an integral entity. In contrast, in the second phase of his work (which is heralded by *The Cyclist Conspiracy*), the perspectiveshifts from the horizontal to the vertical: the narrative subject rises from the aporia of his own ego to a suprahistorical position. In doing so, he paints a picture of an anarchic reality, which is at the same time fictional and factual – but not mimetic!

The paradigm shift occurs with the 1987 book of pseudo-scholastic essays, *On the Edge*, which reveals its true meaning only when read in the perspective provided by the books that followed. At the same time, it is important to take into account Pantić's reservation (with which we must agree) that the word *change* in this context is something we need to approach with a certain dose of scepticism, because these are books that converse with, complement, and explain each other. In *On the Edge*, Basara rationalises some constant features of his early fiction: he explicitly renounces the Cartesian character of the world in which, under the pressure of irrational, dark, forces and final questions, we are no longer able to discern our own true character. He does this using the form of an essayistic-eclectic mixture. In Pantić's view, the novels *The Cyclist Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail*, to which the stories from the *Phenomena* (because they belong to them organically, and can even be considered an appendix of sorts) should be added, represent his version of the genre of the novel of *illumination*. In this way, Basara establishes a kind of discreet, associative correspondence with the current trends in contemporary world prose – Eco, Rushdie, and, in Serbian literature, Milorad Pavić. In a novel of this kind, the history of the world is observed and interpreted as the result of a mystical conspiracy, forged by individuals or small groups, in possession of sundry heretical truths. In *The Cyclist Conspiracy* this role is assumed by the Order of the Little Brothers of the Evangelical Cyclists of the Rosy cross, to which some of the most famous historical figures of the 20th century, such as Stalin, belong alongside fictional characters (for example, the pro-

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[175] Сf. Михајло Пантић, *Александријски синдром II* (Београд: Српска књижевна задруга, 1994), pp. 164-168.

tagonist of the novel, Kowalsky), but which also includes several known and unknown Serbian contemporaries of Basara's. In his fiction, Biblical obedience, relativism, agnosticism, the unbound literary play, where it is possible to connect everything with everything else, are all professed cheek by jowl. This is where the possibility of freedom is to be found: literature, and art in general, is a game that creates a space of absolute and authentic human liberation, albeit only temporarily and only linguistically.

The choice of form is significant: the novel is "Alexandrian" in its conception – it is an encyclopaedic collection of miscellaneous texts by various authors, while the novelist appears in the guise of the editor. This form is apposite for the unusual mixture of fiction, farce, mystification, esotericism, and historiographical metafiction. Everything is specious, possible, and allowed in this kind of novel, and it is precisely by foregrounding this illusion that the text suggests that nothing is as consistent and balanced as the logic of a literary text. In *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, Basara narrates a Rabelaisian alternative history of our time, following the destinies of his heroes from the Order of the Little Brothers of the Evangelical Cyclists of the Rosy cross. Pantić describes his method in the novel as an endless diatribe against the false seriousness of our century, which with its ideological rigor, mustachioed frown, and neo-Pharisaism, produced wars, genocide, camps, and gulags. Pantić emphasises the global intonation of Basara's narration as a necessary element for establishing critical value judgments about his fiction, defining it as *grotesque hyperbolisation*. It is a discourse on the first and last questions of human existence, illuminated by destructive irony, sarcasm, black-humoured outbursts, and overstepping the bounds of polite mimetic writing. Thus, the basic questions receive grotesque treatment, which paradoxically results in a Copernican turn in meanings. In this way, the writer's image of the world gains specific weight through linguistic play and is included in a traditional sequence composed of the works of his legitimate literary ancestors. According to Pantić, Basara's fiction is unequivocally "Alexandrian" in origin, based empirically not only on literature, but also on other spiritual disciplines, and at the same time it is strengthened by authentic and unique individual experience, as well as talent. In that sense, his fiction is a representative exemplar of literary writing at the end of the century in this part of the world and we can consider it as ensuing from narrative models and forms current in the

period: such as negative utopias, documentary writing, metafiction, etc. In addition, Basara's fiction undoubtedly belongs to the postmodernist literary context in many of its features. In the first place, Pantić emphasises the following features: de-ideologisation, syncretism, and transavantgarde forms, distrust of great narratives, doubt in any usability of systems of thought, resistance to authoritarianism, and the de-hierarchisation of values. However, he also points out that there is one important aspect which postmodernism critically renounces and which Basara re-establishes: metaphysics. Pantić concludes that every writer of merit, in one way or another, breaks through the horizons and conventions of his own epoch, and with Basara, this slippage is large and significant, although from the postmodernist point of view, it can be branded as retrograde. Basara's reaction to this interpretation is interesting: in "The Constitution of the Novel *In Search of the Grail*," under Article 4, he (the text includes a facsimile of Basara's signature) declares that "The novel has no connection whatsoever to the Masonic order known as Postmodernism."[176] Of course, this is also a typical postmodern gesture of self-irony. Pantić concludes: "If for other postmodern writers only an opaque, dark void pulsates behind the crack of the mirror of the world, Basara, looking through it, would like to meet God. And that, no matter how pretentious, always becomes an artist."[177] In his fiction, Basara consistently alienates consequences from causes: with various plots he emphasises the influence of the present on the shaping of the past. In the novels *The Cyclist Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail*, members of the Order of the Little Brothers reshape mankind's past by means of various techniques of liberation from the time-space limitations of the phenomenal world. As Maja Rogač points out, the method of deconstructing cause-and-effect relationships is also noticeable in narrative procedures, often directed against the conventional logic of narrative connection,[178] and one way of expressing the deconstruction of continuity in narrative is the fragmentary form of Basara's fiction.

In *The Cyclist Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail*, Rogač points out, the violation of causality is present in the form of the concept of reversible

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[176] Basara, *In Search of the Grail*, p. 5.

[177] Пантић, *Александријски синдром II*, p. 168.

[178] Maja Рогач, *Историја, псеудологија, фама: Студија о прози Светислава Басаре* (Београд: Службени гласник, 2010), p. 96.

history and the influence of the future on the past.[179] The doctrine of the Evangelical Cyclists of the Rosy cross can be reconstructed on the basis of a fragment of the novel: it testifies to the causality of history. In other words, the events that ensue can reshape the past. Cyclists act on history from the future – from the position of awareness of the illusory nature of time. For example, the motif of rebellion against timepieces, deadlines, and calendars in these novels is treated with a certain humorous bent: as a conspiracy of the Cyclists who ritually destroy clocks and thus express their rebellion against time. Rogač points out that Basara redefines the notion of historical fact by drawing attention to the mystification of the authority of historical documents, sources, and evidence: he cites pseudo-documentary material such as photographs, drawings, and letters, and gives it the status of facts in a given context. In doing so, he supports historiographical discourse. Regardless of the patent method of mystification and undisguised parody, as Rogač rightly notes, *The Cyclist Conspiracy* skilfully simulates historical logic and sets up the included documents with the same goal. In the novel, the whole complex system of signs which, scattered throughout history, points to the Little Brothers (the Cyclist conspiracy) is declared a historical fact by the authority of various narrators. In the novel *In Search of the Grail*, however, more openly parodic contributions appear, such as the monument on the Square of Psychoanalysis in the town of Bajina Bašta. From these textual signals Rogač concludes that the process of alienating and falsifying known content and actual sites mobilises the reader's historical and empirical knowledge of them and thus undermines the simulacrum of documentary, which the author maintains by the illusion of objective and neutral presentation. By employing such narrative procedures, Basara draws attention to the usual ignoring of the difference between an *event* that is neutral and a *fact* that is a matter of convention, i.e. it is produced by certain narrative strategies. In this context, one of the important questions that becomes relevant in postmodernity and to which Basara often refers is: how does the way in which one presents certain facts legitimise a certain way of interpreting history? In essays and digressions within his novels, the author points out the mechanism of affirmation of selected facts in a way that parodies it, or interprets it critically. The selection of

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[179] Ibid., p. 98.

documents is always in line with the ideological interest of the creators of history. The novels *The Cycling Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail* show several parallel histories of mankind. The relationship between official and apocryphal history is rendered problematic on multiple narrative levels, implying a relationship between the conspiratorial vision of human history (in the context of the hidden meaning produced by the Evangelical Rosy cross cyclists) and accepted history. The gap between canonical and non-canonical history is most clearly represented by the characters of Charles the Hideous and Grossman. Thus, Charles the Hideous' *A Tale of My Kingdom* is designated "apocryphal," although, as Rogač suggests, this history could have the character of an official version of events, given Charles' status as a sovereign. He even cites his own exclusive right to history. Rogač concludes: it is characteristic of these two rival narrators that the events they narrate are not shown, so it remains undecided in which history readers should place their trust.

Basara's fiction often explicitly – even programmatically – renounces plot in the conventional sense, as a trivial form that attracts the reader's attention. Rogač notices the recurrent variation of motifs in several novels, which are subjected to simultaneous presentation and deconstruction. The novels *The Cycling Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail* exhibit this kind of continuity: the motif of the secret society of the Evangelical cyclists of the Rosy cross connects fragments of different orientations; some of the texts confirm the pseudo-mystical tradition of the Little Brothers, while others demystify or even challenge it. In *The Cycling Conspiracy* and *In Search of the Grail* the narrator is conceptualised polyphonically. There is no superior narrative instance that would determine which of a series of dissenting narrative voices should be given priority. The plurality of narrators makes it possible to lose the notion of the authenticity of the narrative vision of a particular fragment. The most pointed narrative antipodes in the novel *In Search of the Grail* are, as highlighted by Rogač, Charles the Hideous and Grossman. The parallel histories written by these two characters supplement and refute each other as regards facts but the actual events are not shown – readers are left in doubt as to which narrator to believe.

POSTSCRIPT

Basara's particularly significant autopoietic text is "*Post scriptum*," the concluding chapter of the 1989 collection *Phenomena*. This text brings to a close the body of work selected for the present purpose, except for the 1990 novel *In Search of the Grail*, which is included because it is a kind of postscript to *The Cycling Conspiracy* even if it does not formally belong to the period under review, i.e. before the collapse of Yugoslavia and the emergence of a new socio-historical, cultural, and even publishing context. Reading "*Post scriptum*" as an autopoietic text highlights a particularly interesting aspect that I want to pull into focus here: it establishes a dialogue with Basara's first book, more precisely, with the story that has already been emphasised as central, "Circumstances." The opening sentence of the postscript to *Phenomena* reads: "In this collection of imaginary inquiries, I'm a Borges who believes in God."[180] The differentiation of the terms *up* and *down* is emphasised and the thesis presented – theologically intoned, as in *preaching* – to the effect that the horror of the modern world outdoes the horrors of all other times because its primary facet is the oblivion of the vertical: everything is reduced to a horizontal dimension. This is a degeneration of perception and within this perspective the universe takes on the features foisted upon it by indoctrinated and perverted consciousness. The text continues in a confessional tone: "Since I am, despite the widespread rumour that I'm a writer, only a theologian who, in the absence of public interest in theology, resorts to literature, I had to use the form of a story."[181] The writer points out that to this end he had borrowed several procedures that the more attentive reader will know the origins of. Then follows the autopoietic confession: form is no longer of interest to him, and the subject of *Phenomena* is mystification. It was for these two reasons that he filled the finished forms with content. "After intensive exploration of the inconsequentiality of the subjective (to which my earlier booklets were dedicated), I undertook the exploration of the inconsequentiality of the objective."[182]

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[180] Basara, *Fenomeni/Феномени*, 63.

[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid.

He points out that he did not make use of any objective phenomenon, inventing the problems dealt with in the book instead, and the process of rendering the inexistent objective made him realise that imaginary problems (at least literary ones) are just as difficult to solve as those deemed real. The writer further states that he gave free rein to imagination and all but followed the surrealist practice of automatic writing. A common feature of the fictions he constructed is that they compellingly resemble everyday reality. Fiction reminds him of the *circumstances* we are surrounded by on a daily basis to such an extent that at times it seemed to him an allegory – a stylistic trope he finds repulsive. If reality resembles the fiction of negative utopias, Basara argues, that is not his fault. That reality is empirically attested is itself a fiction popular in enlightened circles, for the inquiries demonstrated that it is incomparably more absurd, fantastic, and monstrous, than anything even the wildest imagination could invent. This does not surprise the writer, because the imagination of an individual is completely powerless against the lies that have been accumulating for thousands of years. Basara emphasises that the project of turning the world into a forgery, which is the story of "Falseland... the Land of Forgers," is not the result of any conscious intention. He concludes that what is at stake is the following: any untruth projected into the world harms the subject, because the world is what we project into it. Thus, the circumstances in which we live are created by ourselves, and by lying, we do not falsify the truth, but ourselves. In this way, man becomes untrue – hence unreal. The author goes on to claim that people who do not exist are not a fiction; unreality is the real state of today's world. To enable the belief in lies and movement within their world, Falseland's propaganda, conceived in the Renaissance, sought to push the soul (which, according to Basara, is the most real thing in man) into the world of fiction – where the idea of Falseland was created. Judging by the Neo-Platonists, the soul in this world can only be seen in forms from which it draws from its own substance and attributes to the external world. If the soul is removed, the world remains without a soul – Basara thus opens up a problem: if such a world is inhabited by people of dubious ontological grounding, what about human knowledge? What, for example, of science? Of history?

Of particular interest, from the point of view of postmodernist poetics, is the autopoietic take on citation: "In constructing a world analogous

to the one which claims to be the original, it seemed to me equally irrelevant whether I should quote Montezuma, Sitting Bull, Marx, or Hegel; or whether I should use fabricated quotations like the one attributed to Isidore of Seville."[183] In this sense, the author claims that Falseland is not an absolute fabrication – as there is no such thing. After all, he notes, all states acquire significant features of the literary Land of Forgers. The counterbalance to this negative utopia is the story of Rosenkreutz's metaphysical projection, which thematises hope for the existence of a society of honourable people who care about the fate of a world to which even God has turned his back. The way "*Post scriptum*" ends is significant in this regard:

> Counterfeiting adopts ever more perfect forms, uses ever more subtle means, permeates all forms, so the only way to tell the truth today is to publicly admit that everything I have written in this book (and not only in this one) – is an outright lie.
> But I have thereby told the truth. [184]

"Postmodernists" and "Traditionalists"

This segment is dedicated to the contextualization of Basara's poetics on a broader canvas, with special emphasis on the controversy that took place in 1996 among the Serbian cultural public over the issue of postmodernism versus traditionalism, i.e. the status of national values and traditions. This controversy ties in with the understanding of the postmodern literary and cultural field advanced by Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1997) and Niall Lucy in *Postmodern Literary Theory* (1999): postmodernism acts as a blow to both opposing ideological sides and each side is forced to contradict its own assumptions in order to defend itself. The central question that arises with regard to Basara's fiction is: can the genre of the novel in the narrower sense present things as they are, given that things are exceedingly incongruous today and undeniably

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[183] Ibid., pp. 64-65.

[184] Ibid., p. 65.

cannot be rendered according to standard codes of significance? According to Lucy, the answer to this question, lies in writing *illegible* literature. In the controversy in question here – in which Basara is an implicit participant – it is the generation of writers who came to prominence in the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s that is charged with writing illegible literature (mostly novels) by the representatives of the "traditionalist" group, against which in turn the objection concerning the *unrenderable* reality can be raised.

In 1996, the editorial board of the magazine for literature and social issues *Književne novine* organised a panel in which the foremost literary critics discussed the current situation on the literary scene in Serbia.[185] The main topic of this debate, which developed into a controversy, became the question of the social mission of literature and its consequent relationship to national values and traditions, the latter invariably farmed in pairs of opposites: national vs. non-national, traditional vs. modern, and domestic vs. foreign. The clash of views between the participants did not lead to either consensus or compromise, as both sides held steadfastly to their positions (which only proved that the conflict existed). The crucial character of the rift was confirmed by the fact that it reverberated beyond the narrow circle of readers of *Književne novine* and was transferred to other periodicals (*Vreme* and *Наша Борба*). The discussion thus became a testimony to a change in the literary paradigm. The delay in the articulation of the conflict enabled the representatives of the postmodernist current to recapitulate their previous activities, as well as to verify the justification of adapting postmodernist thought to Serbian literature. In this short overview, I will present the main theses of the most prominent participants in the controversy in order to map the fundamental points of the conflict and thus gain insight into the state of the literary field in question, as well as the interpretation of the problems by the two opposing sides – the "traditionalist" and the "postmodernist." In that sense, Mihajlo Pantić's "Several Introductory Remarks," is most significant, starting as it does from the thesis of a monologic, i.e. non-polemical, type of culture, to which, in his opinion, Serbian culture belongs. This results in a lack of an objective, global, and polyphonic perception. Pantić defines the problem field as follows:

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[185] See *Књижевне новине*, XLVII(1996), issues 923 through 930.

literary life reflects issues arising from an immanent poetic understanding of literature, as well as conflicts whose origins are ethical rather than aesthetic – in a broader sense, issues that are political and ideological in nature. Pantić views the situation of Serbian literature in the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s in the light of a latent polemic that refuses to be formulated, and sees the reasons for such a situation in the fact that a generation of writers had entered the literary scene at that point who were not bound by any form of predetermined ideology.

In the later stage of the controversy, Pantić describes the cultural situation in Serbia as a *simulation of cultural rituals*. According to him, literary life is inauthentic and constantly produces and imposes various "conspiracies," so we can talk about a paradigm shift. He concludes that literature today is powerless and represents a silent retreat into language, which becomes a parallel reality that constructs itself, and the participants in the debate are themselves *post*, even if they refuse to be, simply because they had witnessed all the utopian ideological concepts and watched all of the historical-enlightenment films, and now they face the defeat of all spiritual and social projects, no matter what they were based on. In his opinion, the political reality in which they live and the literature they write and read is hopeless. In his contribution, entitled "The Truth and Morality of Postmodern Literature," Aleksandar Jerkov starts from Foucault's thesis that truth in discourse can shine only when there are political conditions for it to do so. A view of literature that relies on empiricist epistemology implies that a certain political and historical truth in the literary material belongs to a former epoch, Jerkov claims. Today, repression takes place in a different way. In the new epoch, literature without poetic self-awareness cannot preserve cultural-historical memory. The new textuality – the poetic self-consciousness of postmodernist literature – establishes the truth of literary discourse because in this way (as opposed to a predetermined political truth) a new poetic but also moral dignity is acquired, which is needed to act on readers' consciousness and their understanding of historical processes, as well as of political conflicts. "The Postmodern Age and the Iceberg" is a contribution by Jerkov in a later stage of the discussion, in which he insists that the controversy is an attack on postmodernist literature and its compulsory defence. Jerkov emphasises the distinction between the terms *the postmodern age of Serbian literature* and *postmodern-*

ism, because the postmodern age of Serbian literature differs from "pure" postmodernism due to the absence of programmes and diversity, as well as to the intersection of modernist and postmodernist poetic features on the one hand, and traditional and modernist ones on the other.

"Once again, On the Poetry of the End of the Century" is a contribution by Saša Radojčić, who claims that this dispute will probably not be able to remain within the boundaries of aesthetics, because almost every dispute in Serbian literature over the past fifty years was an ideological showdown. Radojčić believes that the most important change that has taken place is the loss of the wider reception scope of Yugoslav literature, which provided Serbian writers with an easier and more natural path of affirmation. Miodrag Perišić participated in the first round of the debate with several pieces, of which I have singled out "The Compromise between Arts and the Media" and "There are Good and Bad Writers." In the first, he points to the misunderstanding between criticism and the literary market, concluding that an author's literary position should be separated from his political stance (or at least recognised when the two overlap to the detriment of literature), while in the second he argues that the question of differentiating postmodernism from other poetic concepts is of no ideological consequence. According to Perišić, the real ideological issue has been avoided here, and it is primarily of political, and not creative, provenance. The question he asks is: is the affiliation of a literary text to a particular cultural corpus determined by the political beliefs of the writer or by the language in which the work is written? Perišić's answer to the question of the lost horizon of Yugoslav literature is that, in actual fact, such a horizon simply never existed.

In the further course of the discussion, Vasa Pavković argues in the text "Three Modernities and Postmodernity" that the situation of criticism is so acute that it is necessary to place the ethical values of the critic's literary engagement in the very foreground of discussion. Pavković believes that in recent years there has been a process in which many former ardent fighters for socialist aestheticism in their mature and late years have become ultra-traditionalists when it comes to literature: they advocate primitive, national, class, political, and social engagement of simplified political feuilletonism – which amounts to their confrontation with the spectres of their own youth. In "Literature and Commentary," Tihomir Brajović expresses

the opinion that the consideration of contemporary Serbian literature very quickly turned into a discussion of postmodernism in contemporary Serbian literature, based on the pros and cons of postmodernism. Brajović believes that the confrontation came too late – it should have taken place in the mid-1980s at the latest. He emphasises the importance of Predrag Palavestra's book *Critical Literature*, with the subtitle *The Alternative to Postmodernism*. This book appeared in 1983 and it introduced the notion of postmodernism into critical discourse in the Serbian cultural field quite early on – it tries to problematize the position of writers, and thus the position of critical consciousness, in relation to this notion and the further complex of notions it implies.[186] It seems to Brajović that Palavestra's book sketches out what was happening in Serbian literature well, and that is the replacement of one ideological paradigm with another. In this way, a space was created in which elite literature could criticise the crumbling ideology. At the same time, however, another set of taboo topics came into being, created by the new ideological paradigm.

In "Postmodernity and Morality," Mileta Prodanović describes the preceding debate about the current moment of Serbian literature as an elaboration of the mimicry model. It seems to him that everyone is a little reluctant to name things. The issue of "postmodernity" and morality has been touched upon but not elaborated. It is important to consider the moral position of those who were there before postmodernity, and are still there. In "Similarities and Differences," Dejan Ilić points out that postmodernism does not represent any absolute novelty in relation to the literary heritage. It seems to Ilić that in the Serbian literary environment postmodernism is understood as an act of radical opposition. It is not clear what postmodernist fiction opposed is opposed to, as it is easy to see that postmodernists are more tolerant of literary heritage than, for example, representatives of interwar modernism. The second oversight of the discussion that Ilić points out was made when, in these discussions, the fiction of the 1980s was equated with postmodern fiction. According to Ilić, the terms *Young Serbian Fiction* and *Serbian Postmodernist Fiction* cannot be synonymous.

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[186] Предраг Палавестра, *Критичка књижевност: алтернатива постмодернизма* (Београд: Вук Караџић, 1983).

The consequence of the logically erroneous derivation of the basic features of postmodernism, according to Ilić, is the misinterpretation of the national feelings of postmodernists. The problem arises when the criterion of non-nationality is used in the interpretation and evaluation of a body of work. Ilić makes an important contribution to the discussion with a review of Serbian fiction in the 1990s: he points out that in the context of the latest Serbian fiction, it can be said that discussions of postmodernism are something that should slowly move into the field of literary-historical considerations, because new narrative models appear, markedly different from postmodernist patterns. There is a noticeable return to mimetic mode, developed plots, and well-rounded characters. The position of the narrator is once again stable, and the social context once again becomes an important element in the motivational structure of the narrative. "Between Politics and Postmodernism" is a piece by Leon Kojen, in which he argues that from a political and economic point of view, the world we live in does not differ much from the world of ten years ago – power is in the same hands as it was then, economic life is, as then, subordinated to the political goals of the ruling elite, the mass media (which exercises enormous influence) are tightly controlled, as it was back then. But on a cultural and symbolic level, things have changed: with the disappearance of Marxism as an official ideology and the formal acceptance of multiparty democracy, the position of literature, as well as of humanistic thought in general, has changed dramatically. Literature has lost its special position in the public sphere and left a void that someone had to fill.

The only female voice in the controversy belongs to Ljiljana Đurđić. Her contribution, entitled "Serbian Literature Today: Situation Normal," is an overview of the situation on the contemporary Serbian literary scene in the context of European and world literature. In her view, Serbian literature is small-scale literature, without impact in the world, or even European, literary context, and as such can know nothing about itself and must sink into insignificance. "Postmodernism is no (literary) crime" is a contribution by Sava Damjanov, in which he warns that the dispute has forgotten that there are other poetic options present on the scene, apart from "traditionalism" and "postmodernism": non-fiction (especially memoirs), classical fantastic or realistic prose, as well as radical syncretic experiments of the verbal-visual type, which are based on the experience of the

avant-garde. According to Damjanov, writers who consider themselves representatives of the postmodernist current very much do establish a relationship with the national cultural tradition – some implicitly (through intertextual links in their prose and poetry), but most of them explicitly (in theoretical, critical or literary-historical essays). The real problem is that the postmodernist selection from the local literary tradition, as well as the reflection on it, is radically different from the traditionalist one, which refuses to understand that tradition is not something which is dead and codified once and for all, but a spectrum of phenomena which every generation needs to rediscover, evaluate, and analyse.

As a final comment of this debate I will turn to the opinion presented in Boris Postnikov's book *Post-Yugoslav Literature?*[187] According to Postnikov, discussions about postmodernism in Croatian and Serbian literature in the 1990s took place in the context of nationalist ideology – whether they explicitly attacked postmodernist poetics in the name of that ideology or, on the other hand, denied the ability to oppose such ideology. In order to understand what is postmodern in Croatian, Serbian and other post-Yugoslav literatures today, Postnikov warns, it is necessary to abandon this perspective and, instead of literary procedures, narrative techniques or self-referential strategies, talk about the economic, political and social context of transition. The contributions to the debate do largely correspond to the situation delineated in Eagleton's study *The Illusion of Postmodernism*, published (like Naill Lucy's study, *Postmodern Literary Theory*) the following year. The policy of postmodernism was and is, according to Eagleton, both enrichment and escape – if it opened up significant new political themes, this is partly due to its escape from older political issues, not because they have disappeared or been resolved, but because at the moment they seem unresolvable. Postmodernist literature is a commentary on reality that is expressed in a new way – in the words of Brian McHale, on an ontological rather than an epistemological basis. Therefore, in the context of this controversy, it is important – as Silvija Novak Bajcar warns – to notice the difference between the po-ethics of Danilo Kiš and the poetics of the postmodernist writers.[188] In the first

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[187] Cf. Boris Postnikov, *Postjugoslavenska književnost?* (Zagreb: Sandorf, 2012).

[188] Cf. Silvija Novak Bajcar, *Mape vremena* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2015), p. 189.

case, universal poetics and ethics are still possible, while in the second the critical dimension expands from the field of politics and sociology into all forms of life. Postmodernist literature, even when it abandons reference, does not lose touch with reality – it is always a response to impulses that come from reality. Postmodernism has no escapist basis: its engagement is simply expressed differently than in mimetic poetics. Nail Lucy's chapter, "Performing Politics,"[189] argues that postmodernism acts "as a *blow* to both sides of politics," and that "in order to defend itself against this blow, each side is forced to contradict its own assumptions."[190] This view is fully applicable to the controversy discussed here: the "traditionalist" critics condemn postmodernism as an attack on timeless truths and values. "But if in fact there *were* such an order of timeless verities, one might wonder why it would ever have to be defended since it could surely never come under threat. If it is true that truths and values are unchanging, why should there be any need to say so?"[191] Postmodernism is "apolitical" according to the principle that political responsibility calls for intervention, not indifference, and it is excessively "political" according to the principle that art and literature express a higher order of truth. Postmodernism is thus seen as a threat to the assumption that culture is political and as a threat to the conservative view that culture protects human identity from political putrefaction. "If politics and literature did have secure identities, then in a sense there would be nothing of a 'political' or 'literary' to decide."[192] Earlier in his book, Lucy raised the question: "How can the genre of the novel proper [...] possibly tell it as it is if the way that things are now is so utterly improper and, according to standard codes of sense-making, so absolutely unrepresentable?" According to the Romantic tradition on which postmodern theory draws, he explains, the solution is "to write *unreadable* literature."[193] In the controversy under consideration, the objection about the illegibility of literature (primarily novels) of the generation of writers that came to prominence in Serbia in the period from the mid-

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[189] Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory*, pp. 141-162.

[190] Ibid., p. 152.

[191] Ibid.

[192] Ibid., p. 156.

[193] Ibid., p. 55.

1980s to the mid-1990s is specifically articulated on the side that can be defined as "traditionalist." The objection that could be addressed to that party would concern the unrepresentable reality, which is never explicitly mentioned in the deabte, yet an attitude toward it is implicitly present in each of the contributions.

THE DIAGNOSTIC TRILOGY OF SVETISLAV BASARA

By way of conclusion, I propose a brief analysis of three of Basara's more recent novels – *Mein Kampf* (2011), *Longevity* (2012), and *Abomination* (2013),[194] the point of including them being an attempt to establish the continuity of Basara's narrative speech. To read Basara's early works of fiction alongside his more recent ones is to map *the same in different ways*. The analysis shows that Basara's fiction demonstrates constancy primarily at the level of the implicit author. The central problems that this analysis raises are the way of reading history and the departure from postmodernist poetics in the form of going beyond the socio-political dimension of reality and returning to metaphysical preoccupations. "Basara, in essence, looks at things simply and practically. The world is a concentration camp, disguised as a comfortable life."[195] The philosophy of history in the region corresponding to former Yugoslavia is closely related to the philosophy of parochialism: at the very end of Radomir Konstantinović's seminal study *The Philosophy of the Parochialism*, first published in the journal *Treći program* in 1969, we find a short note (accidentally under number 13), under the heading "Serbian Nazism."

It explains the problem of Serbian Nazism as something that was not imported from German National Socialism, but represents "the ultimate expression of the parochial spirit."[196] In other words, Nazism expresses the fundamental contradiction of this spirit: between the eternally tribal as irrational and its empirical-rationalist attitude, which is contrary to any irrationality, including the one invoked by the spirit of the tribe that embodies it. The parochial spirit is thus inevitably confronted with the urge for mysticism and its own inability to accept that mysticism. According

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[194] Svetislav Basara, *Mein Kampf* (Beograd: Laguna, 2011); *Dugovečnost* (Beograd: Laguna, 2012); *Gnusoba* (Beograd: Laguna, 2013).

[195] Dario Grgić, "Svijet je konclogor," *Zarez* br. 328, 16. veljače 2012, p. 37.

[196] Radomir Konstantinović, *The Philosophy of the Parochialism*, translated by Ljiljana Nikolić and Branislav Jakovljević (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2021), p. 300.

to Konstantinović, the evil of Serbian Nazism is the evil of this contradiction. Nazism in this sense is, in the domain of the Serbian parochial spirit, the impossibility of that spirit to be empirically-rationalist and mystically faithful to its eternal tribal ideal at the same time – the myth of the tribe which turned into a tribal myth by the inability to oppose history and be repeated. In the language of Svetislav Basara, the theses proposed by Konstantinović sound something like this:

> A person with an occupancy right will never betray his homeland, while people who go where they want and when they want create chaos, even when their intentions are honourable. Which is rare. As soon as they go somewhere, they have something in mind. Tenants instinctively know that this world is a chaotic Brownian movement and refrain from unnecessary outings. If you need to go somewhere, then you should do it in an organised way, as when welcoming and paying your respects to comrade Tito (earlier) or when going to a rally of the National Socialist Radical Party (somewhat later) in order to support the Serbian national interest with sandwiches and beer. And the national interest is absolute stasis.[197]

Or:

> The goal of every nation is to perpetrate genocide against itself. In the nation, only the dead feel good, although among the dead there are quite a few who are formally alive. And only the dead are partially spared national terror.[198]

One of Basara's most provocative themes is precisely the philosophy of history. An almost obsessive motif in his writing is history as an institutionalised knowledge of the past – both national history and the history of literature.[199] Basara emphasises the declining value of the criteria of truth in modern history and points to the lost vision of the sacred history of mankind, within which the definitions of truth and falsehood apply. Some Basara scholars have seen this problem – for example, Mihajlo Pantić and Dejan Ilić – as a departure from the postmodernist concept. Maja Rogač

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[197] Basara *Mein Kampf*, pp. 147-148.

[198] Ibid, p. 76.

[199] Рогач, *Историја, псеудологија, фама*, 85.

emphasises that consistency with the postmodernist concept would imply that the author mainly deals with the basic difference between *event* and *fact*, according to the criterion of possessing or adding meaning. Basara, on the other hand, contrasts factual value with the notion of truth, which can hardly be reconciled with the postmodernist view of history as a discourse that establishes a certain system of meaning. Basara sees contemporary historiography as a privileged discourse whose scientific authority is based on establishing selected facts narratively.

The most noticeable departure from postmodernist poetics is the overcoming of the socio-political dimension of reality and returning to metaphysics. The awareness of God's presence and superior meaning is expressed in an unconventional way in Basara's writing: as an experience that can be found behind the illusion of reality. In essays and novels, the author expresses his religious beliefs and attitudes, and some motives of his fiction are understandable only in the context of that fact. Basara's relationship to history can be viewed in the context of the dissemination of historical material, which is carried out in the privileging of storytelling over the story in postmodernist texts. Basara's novels regularly problematise the referential function of history in literature. The deviation from the postmodernist concept is noticeable precisely in the way in which the author thematises history. The interpretation of history in Basara's novels is determined by different, seemingly irreconcilable methodologies and views, which are linked by a single criterion: Basara invokes the Christian contemplation of history as the linear and finite duration of the world in time, preceded and followed by the mystical experience of eternity. Basara pays special attention to the problem of the desacralisation of history, as Maja Rogač, following Dejan Ilić's thesis, points out in her study: in Basara's fiction, the humanistic concept of the desacralisation of history is presented precisely as an act of foisting the suprahistorical pattern onto the referential framework of human evolution. Basara approaches the issue of humanism in a specific way: he interprets his epoch in relation to a religious attitude. The privileged theme of Basara's fiction is certainly the discontinuity between the phenomenal world and reality, experiential perception and spiritual insight. Of particular importance in this context is the Gnostic understanding of history – historical existence is, according to the Gnostics, under the rule of the deity. It could be said that, for Ba-

sara, one of the possible epilogues of the postmodern crisis is precisely the religious paradigm.

Basara manages to conceptually link the deviating strategies of interpreting the world, the postmodern and the Christian, by means of a single criterion: a departure from the positivist understanding of history (which is characteristic of both approaches). This deviation is manifested on the one hand as doubt in the historical script, and on the other as doubt in the reality and significance of historical events as such. For religious experience, the continuity of history is established only in relation to transcendence, while postmodernism considers historical continuity exclusively as a discursive category. Basara draws attention to an oversight in the conventional approach to history: the neglect of the fact that it arises by the subjective act of writing. The consequence of this oversight is the objectification of and even dogmatic belief in historical knowledge as an accurate reconstruction of the past. In his 1996 essay collection *Virtual Kabbalah*, Basara argues that the authority of modern history rests on the multiplication of information as a new concept of knowledge. That is why modern history does not rest on an idea of the meaning of history itself (whether viewed as humanistic or eschatological), but solely on the summarisation of data.[200] In modern history, one cannot recognise the evolutionary optimism that presupposes or aspires to a happy future for humanity – only a kind of pseudo-scientific authority remains.

Dario Grgić describes Basara's peculiar take on the use of documents as *documentary imagination*. Thus, for example, Basara writes the history of Serbia in his 2010 novel *The Beginning of the Rebellion against the Dahijas*,[201] but after the first few pages of the novel he plunges into oneirism and he begins writing oneiric history. He is not interested in the historically identifiable horizontal movement of the world-spirit through history, but instead in its vertical rise or fall. Grgić defines Basara's writing technique as anti-modernist postmodernism:

> He is a writer for whom the world remains a secret, as opposed to a set of taboos, that he will reveal and thereby scandalise you. His points of orien-

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[200] Cf. Svetislav Basara, *Virtualna kabala* (Beograd: Derta, 1996), pp. 7-8.

[201] Svetislav Basara, *Počeci bune protiv dahija* (Beograd: Dereta, 2010).

tation are metaphysical humour and esoteric irony, and not social prohibitions. [...] Basara found a way to talk about the fundamental things in an interesting way. For him, politics is a mask, like everything else. And his fundamental worldview is anti-modernism plus Baudrillard.[202]

Basara's novel *Mein Kampf* (2011) offers a story without a break: there are no parts, chapters, nor paragraphs – the narration is in the first person (as usual in Basara's fiction), and the narrative situation is reduced to a bare minimum: the action takes place in a hospital room. *Mein Kampf* is, as Balša Brković aptly said, a hospital room novel with a story gone berserk carnival-style. He describes Basara's narrative as the craziest stream of consciousness imaginable, and we can only agree; it suffices to list some of the topics that the novel deals with: cancer, the end of the world, religion, fascism, diplomacy, anatomy, Tito, the church, the nation, Vuk Karadžić's language reform, catatonia, conceptual art, tenancy, freedom. This flow of consciousness on the sickbed represents a radical annihilation of the body, movement, and space – only speech remains. The narrator (one Kramberger) suffers from herniated disc and is in the neurology ward, along with a certain Aprcović, who suffers from prostate cancer, but there is no place for him in the oncology ward. According to Kramberger, Aprcović is the most spiritual man he has ever met. He is aware that the end of the world is coming. The third important character in the hospital room is Drempetić, who is a bully: despite being quite healthy, he refuses to leave the hospital, establishing a reign of terror. There are also Gutović, a character whose "existential status" is "undecided"[203] (that is, he is catatonic), and Hadžimanov, who had suffered a stroke, a Macedonian who had only been to Macedonia once, and even then they refused to grant him political asylum. The world of *Mein Kampf* is, therefore, the world of a Macedonian without Macedonia, an Aprcović without a testicle, a Drempetić without a diagnosis, a Gutović without an existential status, and Kramberger without a bicycle. Namely, it was precisely when riding a bicycle that the narrator (the alter ego of the very author of *The Cyclist Conspiracy*) felt a sharp pang and has been out of the saddle ever since.[204]

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[202] Grgić, "Svijet je konclogor," p. 37.

[203] Svetislav Basara, *Mein Kampf* (Beograd: Laguna, 2011), p. 101.

[204] Ibid., p. 7.

In this mad story, in which the whole world is a big hospital (a project known from *The Cyclist Conspiracy*), *Mein Kampf* is actually the creative project of the narrator himself, his literary fantasy: for years he intended to write a book on Serbian fascism that would be called *Mein Kampf*. "*Mein Kampf*, my struggle, the struggle against the abuse of the nation for Nazi purposes. It is, it should be said, an internal struggle."[205] Another of Kramberger's imaginary literary projects is the monograph *Tito and the Absurd*. In his judgment, the connection between Tito and the absurd has been "insufficiently explored" – or rather, "completely unexplored."[206] Observations on fascism and freedom, as well as on fascism and art, have a special place in the novel. In this context, a significant character of the novel is the conceptual artist Era Milivojević. According to him, fine art must become spiritual, and spirituality implies the absence of the figurative, of forms and notions. The narrator uses this character to outline a general theory of the relation between fascism and art: namely, the "devil's painting technique," i.e. perspective, is directly responsible for the rise of fascism: "Before *perspective* was invented, the idea of *Lebensraum* was absolutely impossible." The explanation is straightforward: "An honest man has no business outside of his town or his village. Perspective, Era said and kept repeating, is responsible for the emergence of *distance*. Before perspective, everything was close by, after perspective, everything became far away."[207] On the other hand, fascism is closely connected with the notion of freedom: fear of freedom leads to the mass acceptance of fascism. In that sense, Kramberger concludes, the biggest mistake that communism made is contained in the famous slogan *Death to fascism, freedom to the people!*

The novel *Longevity* (2012) is the second part of Basara's diagnostic trilogy that begins with *Mein Kampf*: here, too, actual Serbian situation is held up for scrutiny (as well as its permanent state, as Teofil Pančić described the theme in his review of the novel[208]) and a typical Basarian diagnosis of the disease is offered: reality suffers from a lack of itself. This is

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[205] Ibid., p. 74.

[206] Ibid., p. 64.

[207] Ibid., p. 118.

[208] Teofil Pančić, "Zmaj-tetka i frankfurtski majmuni," *Vreme* 2012, br. 1133. https://www.vreme.com/kultura/zmaj-tetka-i-frankfurtski-majmuni/

the reason, as Pančić points out, why the method of psychological realism, as well as linear narration, causality, and other paraphernalia of stable cultural and social systems, are absent from Basara's novels. But on the other hand, his novels abound in subversions of these very literary procedures. Although there are no direct points of contact between the two novels, *Longevity* is a sequel to *Mein Kampf* in the sense that it takes off where the latter stopped. The narrator is no longer called Kramberger but Nastasijević; he is not in a hospital but is feeding the monkeys at the Frankfurt Zoo, and the character who is his rival and interlocutor this time is not Drempetić but Maslać, who feeds the monkeys with him.

"And what could be sweeter while feeding monkeys for imperialist marks, that is, euros, than riffing philosophically on Serbia as such and in itself and other 'patriotic' interests? Especially 'in the diaspora,' the big-headed hypocritically paradoxical obsessive-compulsive overheated patriotism of which being one of the main targets of this 'comendy dell'arte.'"[209] Just like *Abomination* (2013), the third part of the diagnostic trilogy, will later be subtitled *caricature*, so *Longevity* is a novel subtitled *commendia dell'arte*.[210] The mispronounced and misspelled word *comendy* is used in another context within the novel: by Kangrga, the third most important character, while describing the actual political system. Kangrga is the novel's reasoner. However, in a way, the main character of the novel is absent, the title refers to the narrator's aunt, Jelena Nastasijević, who passed away at the age of 98. Kangrga explains her historical significance as follows:

> The life of your aunt [...] is the only reliable Serbian history, now I'm quite sure of it. [...] Anyone who wants to know the truth about the Eleusinian mysteries of Serbian history, Kangrga pointed out, should carefully study the life of your aunt. Everything is written right there, black on white. Your aunt is a phenomenon of the greatest historical and social significance, Kangrga said. If it weren't for your aunt, Serbia itself would be long gone. Nothing in Serbia, Kangrga raised his voice, was as solid or endured as sturdily as your aunt, who is still going strong and is steadily advancing towards the age of one hundred. No Serbian social order, no Serbian dynasty and state,

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[209] Ibid.

[210] Svetislav Basara, *Gnusoba: karikatura* (Beograd: laguna, 2013).

has anything on your aunt when it comes to solidness and longevity. [...] Your aunt's life, Kangrga said, absorbed and reduced almost all Serbian disasters. All of Serbia's fratricidal battles were first fought in the soul of your aunt, and only then, significantly weakened, were they transferred to the battlefields of this world.[211]

Let us mention here only one more specific role of Jelena Nastasijević in world history: according to the narrator's testimony, she toppled communism. This is not at all unusual considering that her brother is personally responsible for the terrorist attacks in the US, after he converted to Islam many years ago. Chronology? Causality? When it comes to Basara, it looks like this: in the 1995 essay "The Tree of History," the author sees the causality and cause-and-effect logic of connecting historical events exclusively as an illusion produced by historians themselves.[212] This essay could, as Maja Rogač suggests in her study of Basara's fiction, be seen as an example of his connection between the Christian and postmodernist reflection on history. The novel *Abomination: a Caricature* has from the first been designated as a text that is not a novel at all. At the book launch at the Student Cultural Centre in Novi Sad, in late 2013, a specific disease of Basara's novel-writing was diagnosed: namely, he has not written a novel for a long time. He once did write them, although that should also be checked, it was said. His last novel, according to the presenter, was probably *The Mongolian Baedeker*, published way back in 1992. So, all of his novels were written before the war, or wars. Once the wars began, Basara gave up writing novels (that outdated nineteenth-century type of fiction!) because he realised that fiction was simply impossible. The formula he used was as follows: in order for something to be fiction, it must be in binary opposition to something that is not. Without this type of distinction, fiction does not exist, nor does the novel as a genre. In this part of the world, that particular difference has been thrown off balance, distorted, and eventually absorbed by these wars of ours.

The question is obvious: if *Abomination* is not a novel, then what is it? Here we will easily agree with the definition of Novica Milić, who claims it is a "diagnostic record," pertaining to the trilogy started with the

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[211] Basara, *Dugovečnost*, pp. 115-116.

[212] Светислав Басара, *Дрво историје* (Ужице: Октоих, 1995), p. 10.

diagnostic records *Mein Kampf* and *Longevity*. All three "diagnostic novels" are written in the style of Thomas Bernhard, intentionally. And what is Basara's diagnosis? The illness he writes about in the trilogy is similar to manic depression. Two (anti) heroes of the novel *Abomination*, the narrator Masleša and his interlocutor Mandarić, suffer from bipolar disorder, as we learn at the very beginning of the story. In the course of narration, this diagnosis comes to encompass the entire Belgrade cafe *Majestic*, which functions in the novel as the synecdoche of Serbia. The beginning of the novel is interesting for several other reasons: first of all, the choice of the pseudo-generic designation (*caricature*) and the epigraph ("God, how empty and terrible is being in your world becoming. – Gogol") constitute a kind of reading instructions: the reader is warned before immersing himself in the text that it is something that is an empty and eerie caricature of God's world. The third significant element of the beginning of the novel is the timing of the plot: the day of the murder of Zoran Đinđić, who is also a character in the novel. The title is, as is characteristic of Basara, a kind of narrative formula. The first layer of meaning refers to the prophetic books of Ezekiel and Isaiah in which prophecies are voiced regarding the appearance of plastic (!): namely, since neither of the prophets had an idea about this material (which the narrator refers to as "abominable"), they had to give it a descriptive name. They settled on *devastating abomination*.[213] This phrase is also a summary of Basara's diagnostic trilogy.

In his novels and essays, Basara repeatedly emphasises the effect of ideological models and especially of national mythology on historical insights. Basara's pseudo-mythology, as interpreted by Maja Rogač, is a specific type of interpretive procedure by which the author fictionalises his critical attitude towards the most important (monumental) figures of Serbian cultural and political history. He first demythologises them by removing the aura of collective approval and then transposes them into a new mythical setting – his own value system. The two key figures in Basara's pseudo-mythology are Vuk Karadžić and Dobrica Ćosić. Basara emphasises the consequences of the change of elites which came about through Vuk's language reform: affirming peasantry as the new elite, the reform declared the educated bourgeois class decadent. The reversal of

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[213] Basara, *Gnusoba*, p. 18.

cultural values occurred simultaneously with the standardisation of speech of the most numerous but uneducated social class, and the ideological consequence of this linguistic and cultural upheaval was a significant change in attitudes towards high culture and art. According to Basara, the way in which Vuk's language reform was realised conditioned a number of political and social problems that would transpire eventually. Basara pays special attention to the secularisation of Serbian culture as an important cause of the crisis of national and cultural identity. The narrator in *Mein Kampf* has a secret ambition to become a minister of culture, in order to repeal Vuk's reform of language and script and reinstate into Serbian alphabet all those wonderful letters that Vuk Karadžić threw out of pure envy (just because he was unable to read them). The struggle for longevity thus resulted in devastating abomination. In the language of Basara's diagnosis: "All this, let me repeat, is the inevitable consequence of Vuk's language reform, which gave every bum the right to speak on behalf of the people."[214]

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[214] Basara, *Main Kampf*, p. 83.

CONCLUSION

The literary-historical and cultural context in which Svetislav Basara's fiction appears is challenging in numerous ways for any researcher who chooses to deal with his poetics. Namely, the question that repeatedly remains unanswered thus prolonging the agony of constituting a text about it is: *What to highlight?* The contexts within which one can read Basara's work are almost innumerable. It is contemporary fiction, assuming positions with respect to various and very different phenomena of its time: from political everyday life to sophisticated theoretical dilemmas. It is writing consciously set against modernism, postmodernism, socialism, colonialism, idiotism, and various other -isms. I could have read it in the context of contemporary Serbian literature and interpret it, for example, in the context of *Young Serbian Fiction* or specific forms of postmodern narration. I could also have looked at it completely outside the national framework and read it in the context of something that could be defined as "world literature," and then I would focus on the relationship Basara's fiction establishes with, for instance, Beckett, or Borges, or John Barth. Furthermore, I could have read it in parallel with the literary theory contemporary with it, and would come to the conclusion reached by Dario Grgić, quoted above, that his fundamental worldview is anti-modernism plus Baudrillard. An ideologically oriented reading would also be appropriate: Basara's fiction is very provocative in that sense. However, I did not opt for any of these (or many other) approaches. As appealing, appropriate, topical, and fashionable as they are, I rejected them as a methodological approach because I believe that they do not illuminate what I am interested in: the literary text itself. I was interested in the principle by which *the text constitutes itself*, as well as the way in which it establishes connections with other texts by the same author, thus forming a unique and unrepeatable script, which has a special place not only in Serbian literature of the late 20th and early 21st century but in literature as such. I think this is a relevant body of work, well worth reading carefully. So I did not approach it with a prefabricated theoretical framework, a set of questions to be answered in the affirmative or in the negative, thus producing a scholarly relevant equa-

tion. Instead, I approached the text of Basara's fiction from within. The answer to the question of what to highlight would therefore be: I tried to highlight reading. Over and over again.

The analysis of Basara's fiction from the 1980s showed that his 1987 collection *On the Edge* is of singular import: it is a synthesis of aesthetic and ideological views that its author would later use in his fiction. Prior to this book of essays, Basara published collections of short stories *Vanishing Tales* (1982) and *Peking by Night* (1985) and the novels *Chinese Letter* (1985) and *Through the Looking-glass Cracked* (1986), while after it he wrote the novel *The Cyclist Conspiracy* (1988) and the generically unclassifiable *Phenomena* (1989). It can be said that *On the Edge* is a book in which Basara rethinks the strategies of his own narration and foreshadows the further course of his narrative speech. It maps issues that can be identified throughout the entire corpus of his fiction, and that I interpret as fundamental features of Basara's poetics:

- first-person narration
- rejection of great narratives / exploration of the possibility of rejecting a story in general
- narrator focuses on the problems related to *the self* / irrelevance of circumstances / the central question being what is *the self*
- forays into the religious sphere
- *the self* is an unbearably present nothing
- third-person narration denounced as a lie / distance from writing / the petty-bourgeois imperative of non-interference
- the fictional *I* is the place in the text can generate story and meaning (emptiness as a form of search; threads)
- early fiction as the *archaeology of the ego*
- the care of *the self* handed over to religious introspection
- the truth of fiction is in self-referentiality and metatextuality (fiction is true only when it is not mimesis)
- fiction declared as fiction: mimesis of the unreality of the phenomenal (e.g. *The Cyclist Conspiracy*)
- narratives verging on essays / essays as narrative fiction
- essay collections recapitulate a period and pave the way for new interests

The idea of *being lost to this world* is a central motif in Basara's fiction and in his essays. The narrator preaches a kind of religious truth: he positions himself as a narrative theologian. Adopting this stance, the implicit author writes a trilogy of religious introspection (*Vanishing Tales*, *Chinese Letter*, *Peking by Night*). In these texts, the characters try to position their own self in relation to the narrator, while the narrative I tries to position itself in relation to the author, and the author tries to define his relation to God.

According to Basara, engagement in fiction is desperately needed, and consists in pointing to the dimension in which man comes face to face with absolute being, the unconscious, or God. Basara calls it the engagement of disengagement. The possibility of salvation is in the crack created through the destruction of language itself – writing with the awareness that we cannot write or prove anything can free us from the mania of proving, because evidence is for Basara a sign of ignorance of what is being proved. In this sense, he sees the beginning of the downfall of Western civilisation in the moment it turns to logic. In the last essay in *On the Edge*, entitled "The Beast that Devours Itself," theological issues come to the fore: it opens with the question of creation: What was in the beginning? According to Basara, the reason's lack of metaphysical foundation is revealed in the mystery of creation. In other words, the function of reason is to rationalise the incomprehensible and the inconceivable. The world was created out of nothing; the core of the world is nothing; the root of being is also nothing. Fear of nothingness is proof that nothingness is part of our experience. The desire for immortality, on the other hand, shows that immortality is in nature. Man is a synthesis of contradictions. At the heart of this essay lies the problem of God and it is not by coincidence that the concomitant problems have to do with a *technology of writing*. The discussion of the technology of Creation reads as a consideration of the technology of fictional world-making.

Before I proceed to give my concluding interpretative remarks, and in order to draw a tentative conclusion about the nature of the body of work under consideration, I will reflect on a story "A Sentence Torn From Context" from to Basara's first collection, *Vanishing Tales*. Since its length does not exceed one page of the book, I will quote it in its entirety (it begins and ends with a set of three periods):

... in the darkness, groping around and bumping into things, I looked for the bed which was not in its usual place but in quite a different one, and the possibility existed that there was no bed in that room at all, so, tormented by the length of the sentence, I decided to sleep leaning against the wall, hoping that sleep could distinguish between *up*, *down*, *left*, *right*, but sleep differentiated them quite well, and anyway there weren't any walls, that's not what this was about, so I thought: maybe there is no bed in this room, maybe I went into the wrong room, and I went out into the hall where there was a series of identical doors on both sides, and I was no longer *in any room at all*, and that lessened the chances that I would finally go to sleep and made the situation even more difficult – it is difficult to go to sleep if you do not know where you are – but I didn't give up, there was still hope that I would find myself although it was late and it was a little unpleasant to enter the other rooms, in the darkness, groping around and bumping into things, to look for the room that I was *really* in – I rejected the possibility that I was not to be found in any of the rooms without giving it further reflection – and then the notion occurred to me that I had fallen asleep long ago and that I was only dreaming that I was looking for the room I was in along an endless hallway, so I thought: excellent, I will stand *here* and wait until I wake up, but I could not define that *here* in a space of endless and identical doors and it took a lot of time for me to comprehend the hopelessness of my position, to realize that the hallway had neither beginning nor end, that I was just an undefined character in a fragment of a sentence whose meaning I could not determine, a sentences torn from the context of a portentous story that I knew nothing about...[215]

According to Aleksandar Jerkov, this short text by Basara can be understood as a sentence torn out of a huge infinite sentence, in which the whole life of the hero is written.[216] That comprehensive sentence would fulfil the functions that a novel has in modern literature. It does not exist, but Basara's story points to it. This is sufficient evidence that the "A Sentence Torn From Context" is a trace of the novel – that is, a false novel, and from that Jerkov concludes that this false novel has two opposite forms. The relationship between the story and the world in Basara's story is altered: the world that should be *behind* the story and the story itself are

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[215] Basara, *Fata Morgana*, 121.

[216] Cf. Jerkov, *Nova tekstualnost*, pp. 103-104.

mixed so that the length of the sentence can influence world events. The world of the story, therefore, does not claim to stand *behind* the act of storytelling as a *reality* to which it refers.

In this context, I would conclude by through by way of setting up a dialogue between Basara and Jean-Luc Nancy. Namely, Basara's book of essays *On the Edge* (1987) and Nancy's book *The Creation of the World or Globalisation* (2002) question the metaphysics of the city and the problem of world creation. Nancy says that the world has lost the ability to create the world and gained only the ability to multiply it; everything happens as if the world is tormented by the death-wish which will soon have nothing to destroy but the world itself. Basara, on the other hand, writes in his essay "Metaphysics of the City":

> History begins as a crime, as the usurpation of freedom, goods, power over others. So, in order for the memory of human activity to be possible at all, it was necessary to forget God, and the city is an ideal place for that.[217]

Nancy continues: the world is happening. It happens, and it takes place beyond our ability to understand it. The world is our product but also our alienation. It is no coincidence, then, that the world and the worldly have remained indeterminate, from Marx to the present day — they lie between finitude and infinity; new and old; between this world and the next. The world lags behind what it should and can be, that is, what it already is in a certain aspect but we do not recognise it. The world which is seen – the one presented – is a world exposed to the subject of the world, and the subject of the world (that is, the subject of history) cannot be alone in the world. Even without the presence of a religious image, such a subject retains the position of God the creator, director, addresser, and addressee of the world. Even in classical metaphysical notions of God, Nancy warns, it was the world itself that was at stake. In this sense, the feature of the world that is in a state of becoming is a feature by which the world moves away from the status of an object with the intention of being the subject of its own globalisation. The world is a totality of meaning, Nancy concludes. In other words, the meaning of the world is not produced as a return to

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[217] Basara, *Na ivici*, 39.

something outside the world. The world has come out of the order of the notion. Such a world is first and foremost a world without God – capable of being the subject of its own notion, its own production, its own maintenance, and its own destination:

> The God of onto-theology has produced itself (or deconstructed itself) as subject of the world, that is, as world-subject. In so doing, it suppressed itself as God-Supreme-Being and transformed itself, losing itself therein, in the existence for-itself of the world without an outside (neither outside of the world nor a world from the outside).[218]

Basara warns in his essay "Biography that Kills" that the Buddha did not doubt the appearance of the world, but simply surpassed it. The distinction between good and evil in that world is a waste of time, Basara concludes, arguing that in general, this distinction boils down to the correct conclusion: the history of this world is evil, and everything else behind it, whatever it is, is good. "Every talk of the end must begin from the beginning of the world," Basara argues in the essay "The Beast that Devours Itself."[219] The world only makes sense if it has God, he concludes and highlights that in the beginning, that was the Word. For him, this means that the creator has a goal in creating the world, and each individual self must learn the secret of that goal in order to become purposeful. Otherwise, everything is left to chance, which is just a euphemism for depersonalisation into nothingness.

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[218] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, translated by Franfois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 44.

[219] Basara, *Na ivici*, p. 57.

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