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. Maja 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 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," р. 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 (*Selbstreferenz* 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:
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> 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: 1° C'est un geste manuel, opposé au geste vocal (on pourrait appeler cette écriture-là scription, et son résultat scripture). 2° C'est un registre légal de marques indélébiles, destinées à triompher du temps, de l'oubli, de l'erreur, du mensonge. 3° 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).