

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-

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

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

¹³⁶ Cf. Ala Tatarenko, *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

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

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 come on 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

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 Jovanović, 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 conspirators – 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 connection 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 utterances, 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

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?)," afterword 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

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 it 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 metafiction, including novels that consciously want to be the material of feminist, post-colonial, 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).

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

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 metafiction 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 philosophemes, 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 parts of the novel on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis. Perišić notes that a paradigmatic connection between the parts can be found between almost any two selected fragments, and the most noticeable examples are the repetition of the general construction of the whole novel in its particulars. For example, the novel begins with the situation of finding a manuscript, which is repeated 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 manuscript, used repeatedly, is transformed here into writing a biography of a fictional author of the collected works. According to Perišić, the paradoxical 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 autopoietic signals in the novel about a cyclist conspiracy direct the reading of it in the direction of a carnival ridicule of the real world? As an example of ironic autopoietics, Perišić cites the description of Evangelical Bicyclists by the “author” of the fragment

¹⁵⁵Igor 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

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

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 reevaluation 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

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

¹⁵⁹ Basara, *The Cyclist Conspiracy*, 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 carnivalising 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

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-

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,

¹⁶⁶ Basara, *Looney Times*, 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 φαίνόμενον (*phainómenon*, thing appearing to view), neuter present middle participle of φαίνω (*phainō*, 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, phenomenism 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, False-land – 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

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*

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-

¹⁷⁵ Cf. 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 Rogач 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*, Rogач points out, the violation of causality is present in the form of the concept of reversible

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

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

¹⁷⁸ Маја Рогач, *Историја, псеудологија, фамма: 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

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.