

THE DIAGNOSTIC TRILOGY OF SVETISLAV BASARA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or:

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

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

¹⁹⁷ Basara *Mein Kampf*, pp. 147-148.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰¹ Svetislav Basara, *Počeci bune protiv dabija* (Beograd: Dereta, 2010).

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

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

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

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

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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

The novel *Longevity* (2012) is the second part of Basara’s diagnostic trilogy that begins with *Mein Kampf*: here, too, actual Serbian situation is held up for scrutiny (as well as its permanent state, as Teofil Pančić described the theme in his review of the novel²⁰⁸) and a typical Basarian diagnosis of the disease is offered: reality suffers from a lack of itself. This is

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 118.

²⁰⁸ Teofil Pančić, “Zmaj-tetka i frankfurtski majmuni,” *Vreme* 2012, br. 1133. <https://www.vreme.com/kultura/zmaj-tetka-i-frankfurtski-majmuni/>

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

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

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

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹³ Basara, *Gnusoba*, p. 18.

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

²¹⁴ Basara, *Main Kampf*, p. 83.