

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹⁵ Basara, *Fata Morgana*, 121.

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

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

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

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

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

²¹⁷ Basara, *Na ivici*, 39.

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

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

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

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

²¹⁹ Basara, *Na ivici*, p. 57.