

Amor Patriae in Literary Journalism: Analysis of Croatian Homeland War Stories

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ABSTRACT

The Homeland War in Croatia (1991-1995) resulted with a relatively great production of various hybrid nonfiction genres. War journalism in the mainstream media mainly reported facts by young inexperienced journalists. War reporting was dry and nowhere close to literary journalism. With one exception. In November 1991, Joža Vlahović, the doyen of Croatian journalism went to the frontline as a war reporter. This resulted in a series of short stories that fall into a wider scope called new journalism, literary journalism, immersion journalism, or narrative nonfiction. Hence, the research of these texts which were first published as war reports in 1991 in newspapers, and twenty years later gathered in a book significantly titled "Onaj rat je bio bolji" (That War Was Better), is a multidisciplinary research effort within literature and communication sciences to investigate these brilliant stories of a specific genre in always intriguing common ground of literature and journalism.

Key words: Joža Vlahović, literary journalism, nonfiction, war prose, homeland war

Introduction

Professionals of literary research, as well as those pertaining to the communication field, have no dispute over the fact that literary journalism, in fact, exists, and that many glorious names of literature were, in fact, journalists (or, at least, started as ones before taking off into fiction). Many great works of new journalism, literary journalism, non-fiction literature, literature of reality (only some of the many terms of the field), were in fact – literature. It is often agreed that putting labels on valuable literature texts based strictly on facts is not worth the dispute. Is it journalism? Is it literature? Does it matter? However, what remains a challenge for a professional researcher is to draw a conceptual framework for an analysis of a particular text, when the mere definition of a genre is elusive and there is no clear consensus on what literary journalism, after all, is?¹

„What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet“ (Shakespeare, W., Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene II), inspires Martinez¹ to warn that „what seems most important seems to be observation of the journalistic phenomenon that involves the production of these in-depth pieces, and not to get entan-

gled in language barriers or nets of sterile definitions“ (p.25).

For the purpose of this case study, research of a series of texts by Joža Vlahović, first published in the media during 1991/92 and later gathered in a collection of short stories under the title *Onaj rat je bio bolji* (That War Was Better), literary journalism is here holistically understood as both genre and discipline. As a discipline it emerged in the US/UK² – termed also as literary non-fiction or creative non-fiction, and taught in the communication and journalism studies, it has in the meantime risen to the level of global phenomenon, but was also coined “some kind of Big Brother in the epistemological Oceania.”

These stories, therefore, the object of a research in the discipline of Literary Journalism, are strictly fact based, descriptions of visiting the frontline, talking to defenders/soldiers, civilians, sharing food, shelter and thoughts with them, entangled in the reporter’s own reminiscences, literary and life memories of events and feelings, all published in daily newspapers in the middle of a war among other texts packed with deadly statistics. So as to literary journalism being a literary genre, what seems crucial is the fact that adopting this name for a genre is explained by understanding that the texts under consideration are narrative.³ The objective of this paper is therefore to anal-

use these short stories as a literary journalism narrative with a focus on their literary value which makes them unique pieces in Croatian war prose using the topic of war in besieged cities in Croatia during the Homeland War.

Theoretical framework used to analyse the texts of Joža Vlahović is based on Eason's typology of Ethnographic Realism and Cultural Phenomenology⁴, as „two modes responding to and organizing the experience of reporting which is typically a personalized, interpretative and evocative account of reality“. These two categories, refined and supplemented by the theory of rationalism and romanticism in journalism by Joseph M. Webb⁵, create a spectrum from „objective“ to „subjective“ – along which to situate individual works of literary journalism. Within the framework of such conceptual complexity runs this interdisciplinary endeavour with the aim to critically analyse the collection of short stories which are one of the rare pearls of Croatian Homeland War prose.

The Context: Journalist Without Borders

Joža Vlahović (1930-2004) was indeed a journalist without borders, journalistic adventurer beyond the boundaries of Croatia and former Yugoslavia. He was a journalist, reporter, columnist, and editor. As a journalist, editor and editor-in-chief, in *Radio Rijeka*, *Novi list*, *Borba*, *Politika/NIN*, *Vjesnik u srijedu* and *Vjesnik* he was considered the doyen of Croatian journalism. Already over sixty when the war started, having had a long sound career as a reporter, leading columnist and the founder and the first editor-in-chief of a weekly *Danas* (Today), which had shaken the social scene in the eighties with severe critique of the socialist system, he decided by the end of 1991. to put on the hat of a war reporter and use his reporting skills to convey what was known in journalist theory at the time as human story. That was not his first literary journalism adventure. He was actually known, particularly at the beginning of his career as a first-class reporter who wrote chronicles of social life in an unusual manner through the lens of ordinary people whom he used to find in the most unusual places avoiding the mainstream methods of socialist journalism to interview local party official celebrities who, according to him, had nothing valuable to say. It was exactly this peculiar way of approaching the non-fiction narrative accompanied by his brilliant writing style of implied subtle humor and lucid observations, that got him the unofficial title of the best reporter in former Yugoslavia.

The meaning of the word „reporter“ in Croatian, although of an equal spelling as the word „reporter“ in English, meant more than just a reporter. He was the author of reportages. Not every report is reportage. It meant something somebody was reporting that went beyond journalism, for that matter. It meant that he was the writer of what was known as „reportaža“ and was, already, although not in any syllabi of journalism studies, as there were none at the time, known as a specific genre, that required literary talent and is actually – literature. His

„reportages“ (*reportaže*) were specific as he was not limiting himself to the descriptive features of people and places but used stories to convey messages that were, very often, not welcome by communist, allegedly, non-existing censorship.

It was in his early days that he discovered that through human stories he could convey powerful messages without being explicit. Humor with the right dose of sarcastic critique of a socialist society came later in columns, maybe also because the reportages, or, what we would call now, literary journalism, almost totally disappeared from the pages of the press. He, nevertheless, after being dismissed in the first half of eighties as plotting against the Communist Party, and after a decent period of being totally banned from any publishing, continued with his light humorous criticism of the Communist Party and the system that in the second half of eighties was already running to its end, although people were not aware of it. That was the job, that was what he did. He was a journalist, a critic of the social system.

But, beneath all that, those who understood the trends and historical context, knew he was and remained till the very last day – „reporter“, author of reportage, a literary journalist although it did not exist as a term then, and probably does not even exist today. That is why, in his new state and always his only country, patria, Croatia, young, fragile, defenseless country nobody had yet recognized, which the third strongest army in Europe started destroying, the killing of people and the destruction of cultural monuments and anything that was part of Croatian identity, he was facing a very specific challenge, his role in the defense of the country. So, he decided to go to the front, although many thought it was not smart, let alone dangerous. Started as a literary journalist and ended as one. As if everything in between was just an intermezzo.

Review: Write It Down, Joža!

The twenty-years passed between the autumn and winter of 1991 when the war reports by Joža Vlahović were published in the newspapers and the day when they were published in a book as a collection of short stories. Today we read them as non-fiction prose in which the journalistic genre of reportage merges with a soft autobiography and introspection, essayistic-reflexive excursions oppose bitter reality satire, all-time Galician humor reveals the bloody "death statistics" of Croatian martyrdom from the end of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Vlahović's letter was bequeathed to the truth about the conquering Serbian war against Croatia.

„We shall not find the real peace“, he wrote, „until each of us finds his place in the war“. While traveling by train in November 1991 to Osijek, Vlahović recounts memories of a similar war trip by train almost half a century ago. Then he travelled to Zagorje with "underage Zagreb rowdies" to get food for the whole family. Vlahović comments auto-ironically on the "unusability" of his war experience,

given by a biological determinant: he was too young for that war, and too old for this one. However, the hardened chronicler who turned sixty decided to leave the capital Zagreb, then still a peaceful war area, from which he could wisely comment on the war events, and set out for the battlefield in eastern Slavonia and Lika. Shortly before 19.00, a "tired and somewhat worn-out reporter" arrived in an unlit city, in a real, almost "Zagreb darkness", and then by taxi to the semi-dark Hotel Central on the second floor. Only the next day he would find out from the police report what kind of hell he found himself in: "Terrorists from Tenja and Klisa opened fire from a multi-barrel rocket launcher on Osijek, Donji grad and the eastern part of the city, and from 19, 25 to 21, 20 fired 24 grenades."

But to Joža it was even more "burning under his feet" in peacetime Zagreb, because like most people in the war he had to get rid of the feeling that he was useless in defending the survival of his own country. The curse of unannounced death, heavy Osijek awakenings with a regular morning rhythm of demolition and killing right after seven o'clock "by eye, randomly, as it falls", sirens for dogs and people as everyday experiences, "compulsion" to everyday heroism, war stories about Đoko, a football player from Osijek, retold in the shelter, fateful stories about Šahta from Tvrđavica and photographer Tahir, real and "code" names of people he met, some of whom were real and some "paper" heroes, the places from which he searched for war news (Osijek, Dalj, Vinkovci, Đakovo, Otočac, Podum, Čanak, Staro Selo), Vlahović had to write it all down. However, his "war reports" occasionally go beyond daily events and fall into the collective memory. Reminiscences of the war diary from the First World War by famous writer Egon Erwin Kisch, who reached the battlefield through parts of Eastern Slavonia, will open a whole scale of comparisons for Vlahović: in Kisch's time, the whole regiment of soldiers was weighed in Dalj; in the First World War, Dalj was a "town for weighing soldiers"; in World War II it was a city for peaceful survival:

In this, the first or third, Serbian war of conquest, Dalj is a town for the destruction of innocent civilians, and for, I am afraid to say the words, the slaughter of Croats. Some people testify, and it is understandable that their names are not mentioned, that at least three hundred corpses of civilians of all ages were counted only in the first days after the so-called liberation of Dalj.

This war is pure anachronism, states Vlahović. Individual events, from private human stories (mourning of a mother over a dead son of non-Croatian nationality and the shooting of an old man in Staro Selo), as well as war tactics on the eastern battlefield, make Vlahović aware that this war could last long, perhaps even after the war itself. This war is not coming to an end, Vlahović concludes, because its initiator is irrational logic that has its source in hatred against everything Croatian. That is why in this war – unlike that one – death "does not wear or demand a uniform". That is why this war is a pure anachronism, a war to which it is impossible to adapt, a war in

which one cannot be late, a war of conquest, plunder and kidnapping, a real barbaric war "as if hordes of Asian wild horsemen were riding from the deep darkness of past centuries". That is why the "other" war had to be better than this war – the title paralogism of this collection reveals.

Vlahović does not hide or mystify the sources of the occult war game in which Croatia found itself at the end of the 20th century. In the background of the horrors of war, two forces clashed according to the law of equilibrium: good and evil. And he knew where his place was. Silent "death statistics" needed the strength of the testimony of the written word. Vlahović testified existentially to the central idea of the book about the importance of finding a personal place in the war for a future in peace. The place in the war predetermined the speech genre and speech rhetoric of all later orators in peace. And only in that place can one recognize whether the speech about the war is one of posers, from some "pleasant" target / trans / para position, or authentic, speech by Vlahović.

Literary Analysis: *Amor Patriae*

The paradox from the title phrase of the collection (That War Was Better) is similar to question like "tree lines along the roads that lead to the truth." Can any war as a misfortune and evil in itself be better? Or is "this war" about which Vlahović writes only gradationally worse than the one that preceded it? What did "this" war of Greater Serbia and Yugoslav National Army aggression against Croatia bring in relation to "that" or World War II? This war, writes Vlahović, "is not just a dirty war, because every war is mostly like that, but it is a conquest, plunder and kidnapping, real barbaric, as if hordes of Asian wild horsemen were riding from the deep darkness of the past centuries." A war without rules, in which only that which is connected to destruction and death can be expected with certainty (*Izgubljeno božje stado*, The Lost Flock of God). In such a war, demolition and killing is regular, but without established military objectives.

That morning, they began their regular job of demolishing and killing immediately after seven o'clock, out of sight, at random, where it falls it falls. There seems to be no evidence that the enemy, especially those from Chetnik-minded villages in the Osijek area, wants to hit any military target. They don't care. They are looking at the city in the distance and shooting. (*Zadnji mjesec u godini i u ratu?*, The Last Month of the Year and in the War)

The broken ethics of warfare in "this war" is not a novelty in the history of warfare. "That" World War II was also devastating to civilians and, according to its conquest goals, could hardly be called a "just war." This war, imposed on Croatia, according to the approximate world chronology of wars number 14,601. war, however, has an even darker background that points to hatred as its real driving cause. Hatred for everything that is Croatian, which has been systematically encouraged for decades,

has crept into the souls of ordinary little people. Their soul was sick to death. When the mother blames the Ustashas for the death of a son of Serbian nationality who was killed by grenades fired by Serbs (*Uzbuna za ljude i pse*, Alert for dogs and people), then it is a disease of the soul that has no cure, and such a war (in the soul) can last after the end of war. Tito's Yugoslavia, according to Adrian Hastings⁶, was an impossible project precisely because of the special character of Greater Serbian nationalism, its ethno-religious construction, great territorial ambitions, long-standing propensity for ethnic cleansing and incredible mythomania.

No nationalism has ever made better use of a mythology which has turned history on its head and got the world to believe in it: first, in regard to the Battle of Kosovo and the early Turk-Serb relationship; second, in regard to the 'Serb' identity of Croats and Bosnians; but, third, also in regard to twentieth-century history, especially the Second World War, in which a myth of Serbs in the 1940s as Anti-Fascist protectors of Jews, contrasted with Croats and Muslims as Fascist co-operators, has been sedulously spread and widely accepted in the West, wholly in defiance of the facts, but as providing a subtle justification of Serb aggression in the 1990s. (p. 146)⁶.

Irrational hatred fed by myths could not be rationally explained nor could it be eradicated by rational reasons. Under the rush of such hatred, the only question left is "how to keep oneself clean" (*Pucanj u Starom selu*, Shooting in Staro Selo) and not get entangled in a spiral of evil. To respond to hatred with hatred would be to agree to the logic of mutual pollution. The answer therefore lay on the other side. Vlahović as a man, Vlahović as a war reporter, Vlahović as a writer, as well as the narrator in his non-fictional stories seeks a foothold in love and in a very special love for the homeland (*amor patriae*). Such love is generous, compassionate, and supportive and does not care about its private interests, or even the risk of exposing one's own life to mortal danger. The components of that love according to the definition of patriotism are: special affection for one's own country; a sense of personal identification with the country; special concern for the well-being of the country; willingness to sacrifice to promote the country's good.⁷

The idea of patriotism originates from the classical tradition of Roman republicanism and rests on the equating of the terms *patria*, republic, common freedom and the common good.⁸ Patriotism as a virtue was a form of "filial love" (*pietas*) that required due respect for the gods, parents and the homeland. It is no coincidence that the ancient Roman poet Virgil, in his epic work *Aeneid*, described Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome, as pious (*pius*). In the ancient system, the virtue of *pietas* belonged to the cardinal virtue of justice⁹ and was a powerful force in shaping social life. In the Christian system the virtue of *pietas* is Christianized, but retains the characteristics of ancient virtue. It is not only a religious form of "piety"

towards God, but also a form of due respect for parents and patriarchy, as confirmed by Article 101 (*De pietate*) II. part of the Theological Summa (*Summa theologiae*) of Thomas Aquinas.^{10,11} He rejects the objection that piety refers only to God and proves that it is applicable to both parents and the homeland (ST II-II, q. 101, a. 1). Connecting the notions of *pietas* and *patria* after the example of Cicero^a, Aquinas also refutes the objection that *pietas* is not a special virtue – different from others because it arises from love (*procedit ex amore*), does not differ from religion, and belongs to justice (ST II-II q. 101, a. 3). *Pietas* is a special virtue towards its subject. Just as religion is a special expression of faith, hope, and love specifically directed to God, so *pietas* is a special expression of love for parents and the homeland.^b *Pietas* is also different from devotion to God in religion and as a special virtue of caring for the good of one's own homeland includes righteousness as a general virtue of caring for the common good.^c

In a gradational series of duties, man is, according to Thomas Aquinas, after God, the greatest debtor to his parents and homeland. In a similar way,^d Maurizio Viroli defines patriotism: "We have a moral obligation towards our country because we are indebted to it. We owe our country our life, our education, our language, and, in the most fortunate cases, our liberty. If we want to be moral persons, we must return what we have received, at least in part, by serving the common good⁸ (p. 9).

Viroli seeks to sharply demarcate the rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism despite their conceptual overlap in scientific theories and colloquial use⁸, since patriotism understood as nationalism, as the history of fascism and National Socialism shows, can have catastrophic consequences. He finds the key to the difference in the patriotic love for common freedom on the one hand and the nationalist exclusivity towards the cultural, religious and ethnic unity of one (own) people on the other. In addition, patriotism is rational love, because as a civic virtue it is important for the preservation of law and order, which is a prerequisite for our freedom. Patriotism thus solves the

^a Thomas Aquinas uses other terms (*civitas*, *regnum*, *respublica*, *communitas politica*) for different political configurations of society (Cf. MacArt)¹².

^b „Just as religion is a protestation of faith, hope and charity, whereby man is primarily directed to God, so again piety is a protestation of the charity we bear towards our parents and country. /Ad primum ergo dicendum quod sicut religio est quaedam protestatio fidei, spei et caritatis, quibus homo primordialiter ordinatur in Deum; ita etiam pietas est quaedam protestatio caritatis quam quis habet ad parentes et ad patriam. (ST II-II, q. 101, a. 3, ad 1).

^c In the ancient system the virtue of *pietas* belonged to justice.

^d „Consequently man is debtor chiefly to his parents and his country, after God. Wherefore just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so does it belong to piety, in the second place, to give worship to one's parents and one's country.“ Et ideo post Deum, maxime est homo debitor parentibus et patriae. Unde sicut ad religionem pertinet cultum Deo exhibere, ita secundo gradu ad pietatem pertinet exhibere cultum parentibus et patriae“. ¹²The reflex of such an interpretation of patriotism is also visible in Pope John Paul II, who connects patriotism both with the fourth commandment of God (Respect father and mother) and with the Latin term *pietas*.¹³

question of reconciling our special love for our own homeland with the universal principles of freedom and justice.

Through a historical interpretation of patriotism from classical antiquity to contemporary theories, Viroli explores the possibility of patriotism without nationalism or, more specifically, patriotism as an "antidote to nationalism" and establishes a classification of the two types of love. The love of patriots is "inclusive" ("broad", "merciful", "generous", "intelligent", "defensive", full of "compassion" and "tolerance" and "respect" for differences. The love of nationalists is "exclusive", "envious", "deaf and blind", "offensive" and full of "contempt", "intolerance", "hatred", "fear" and "resentment", longing for "uniqueness", "pride", "fame", "greatness", "domination", "oppression" and "exclusion."⁸ One "must find ways to encourage and maintain true patriotic passion and love" against nationalism (ibid. p.12).

The firm distinction between patriotism and nationalism, however, is not entirely sustainable. There are different forms of patriotism (from extreme to moderate and ethical), just as there are different forms of nationalism. Historically nationalism (civil, ethnic, liberal and ethnocentric, liberal etc.) in qualifying terms can be peaceful or aggressive, inclusive or intolerant, religious or secular, sporadic, or universally present. When it comes to overlapping between homeland and nation in nation-states, it is difficult to distinguish them, and they diverge when the homeland is not ethnically homogeneous and when the nation lacks its own homeland. Finally, both patriotism and nationalism "involve love of, identification with, and special concern for a certain entity. In the case of patriotism, that entity is one's *patria*, one's country; in the case of nationalism, that entity is one's *natio*, one's nation: in the ethnic / cultural sense of the term".⁷

The context in which Vlahović's non-fiction prose originated points to the overlapping of love for the homeland and love for the nation in a sensitive moment of the struggle for the survival of the nation-state, but without a trace of exclusive nationalist rhetoric. In a small gallery of real characters, the deserved place belongs to heroes and ordinary people of non-Croatian nationality. It is important to note also that he does not consider his departure for the Eastern Battlefield a heroic feat, but a duty, in the best tradition of ancient and Christian patriotism. Just as the people of Osijek who stayed in their city were forced to be heroes, Vlahović was simply morally obliged not to be useless in defending his homeland:

Ignoring the many feigned patriots, some false refugees and indifferent vagrants, who hope that the suffering of war is reserved for others, I think that most people in the war for the survival of their own country are happy if they get rid of the feeling of being useless in its defence. When they ask me from Zagreb on the phone on Wednesday how am I in Osijek, I will only answer with one word: reborn! (*Prisiljeni na herojstvo*, Forced to heroism).

Whereas the classical theorists allowed for three just causes of war – defense against unjustified attack, restitution of property wrongly taken, and punishment – patriotism, then, is not for Vlahović, merely an extension of the duty of caring for others; it is a special concern for the survival of one's own country, and that special and particular love includes universal human values.

Literary Value and Beyond

The interdisciplinary analysis of Jože Vlahović's short stories published in the Homeland War as newspaper reports and later printed as short stories, confirmed not only the literary value of these texts nominally belonging to literary journalism or non-fiction prose, but also the ontological-anthropological core of a unique prose, the style of which is a characteristic only in this minor part of his overall journalistic work, because, in the anthropological and dramatic depth and literary style, these stories are unique as they describe a unique experience the writer never had before.

It is an authentic Vlahović discourse that could have arisen only in the specific conditions of immersion in the tragedy of war in cities under siege by aggressors imbued with hatred and irrational impulses that appear like ghosts in deafening artillery fire and tears and grief of civilians, wounded youngsters, defenders' pride. Spreading out in front of the reader the drama of mutilated souls, wounds of destroyed landscapes, ruins of beautiful Croatian cities and planned destruction of Croatian culture, history, that define the author's deeply humanistic personality in the form of the primordial need for morality and defense of the homeland, Joža Vlahović, even under the ashes and molds sometimes piled up by the present, succeeds in conveying to the reader that one true sense of defense in the homeland war deeply marked by love. *Amor patriae*, indeed!

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AMOR PATRIAE U KNJIŽEVNOJ PUBLICISTICI: ANALIZA HRVATSKIH PRIČA IZ DOMOVINSKOG RATA

SAŽETAK

Domovinski rat u Hrvatskoj (1991.-1995.) rezultirao je relativno velikom produkcijom različitih žanrova hibridne publicistike. Ratno novinarstvo u vodećim medijima uglavnom su pisali mladi neiskusni novinari. Ratno izvještavanje bilo je suhoparno i ni blizu književnom novinarstvu. Uz jednu iznimku. U studenom 1991. Joža Vlahović, doajen hrvatskog novinarstva, odlazi na bojišnicu kao ratni izvjestitelj. To je rezultiralo nizom kratkih priča koje spadaju u širi opseg nazvan novo novinarstvo, književno novinarstvo, uronjeno novinarstvo ili narativna publicistika. Stoga je istraživanje ovih tekstova koji su kao ratni izvještaji prvi put objavljeni 1991. godine u novinama, a dvadesetak godina kasnije objedinjeni u knjizi znakovitog naslova “Onaj rat je bio bolji”, multidisciplinarno istraživanje unutar književnosti, i komunikacijske znanosti kako bi istražili ove briljantne priče specifičnog žanra u uvijek intrigantnim dodirnim točkama književnosti i novinarstva.