

Writing War, Writing Memory. The Representation of the Recent Past and the Construction of Cultural Memory in Contemporary Bosnian Prose.

Abstract

Focusing on the work of Miljenko Jergović, Nenad Veličković, Alma Lazarevska, and Saša Stanišić, this paper examines how the representation of the recent past intertwines with the construction of collective memory in contemporary Bosnian prose. The author argues that a first, significant function of recent Bosnian literature consisted of not only witnessing the horror of the Bosnian war but also turning historical events into sites of memory. This is especially true for the literature about the wars of the nineties – the siege of Sarajevo, Srebrenica, etc. However, the involvement of Bosnian authors with the recent past – in prose written during the war as well as in more recent works – proves to be more complex and seems to be indicative of a growing interest in and reflexivity upon the ways in which collective and individual memory are constructed. This paper suggests that the interest in memory/remembering the recent past has been accelerated by the war and the social and political turmoil of the nineties. This liminal situation urged writers firstly to represent the horrors of the recent past in order to prevent them from falling into oblivion. Secondly, because war emerged as a kind of turning point, a radical break between past and present, writers were compelled to reflect on the processes of remembering and oblivion and on the ways identity is constituted by a strange and often unpredictable interplay of both.

Keywords: contemporary Bosnian prose, war fiction, cultural memory, Miljenko Jergović, Nenad Veličković, Alma Lazarevska, Saša Stanišić

Introduction

This paper examines how in contemporary Bosnian prose the representation of the recent past intertwines with the construction of collective memory. In addition, it will discuss how memory and processes of remembering are addressed in contemporary Bosnian prose, more specifically, how remembering (and forgetting) eventually affects the constitution of (both individual and collective) identity. I will argue that a first, central function of recent Bosnian literature consisted not only in witnessing the horror of the Bosnian war but also in turning historical events into ‘sites of memory’ (*lieux de mémoire*), to use the well-known coinage by Pierre Nora (1984). This is especially true for the literature about the wars of the nineties – the siege of Sarajevo, ethnic cleansing, Srebrenica, etc. However, the involvement of Bosnian authors with the recent past – in prose written during the war as well as in more recent works – is more complex and indicative of a growing interest in and reflexivity upon the ways in which collective and individual memory are constructed. I will conclude by suggesting that

this interest in memory/remembering the recent past has been accelerated by the war and the social and political turmoil of the nineties. Specifically, writers seem to have responded to this situation in at least two interconnected ways. First, they composed literary accounts fictionalizing the horrors of the recent past in order to prevent them from falling into oblivion. Second, war's emergence as a defining manifestation of the radical break between past and present compelled writers to reflect on the processes of remembering and oblivion and how identity is constructed by a strange, often unpredictable interplay of both.

Analyzing some major works by a few crucial writers, I neither aim to provide a full overview of contemporary Bosnian literature nor pretend to cover all its interesting or characteristic features that could, in one way or another, be related with the representation of the past. Instead, I would like to focus on some intriguing tendencies that indicate how collective memory is constructed in and through Bosnian literature. I do not claim these tendencies to be the exclusive characteristic of Bosnian literature because we might also recognize some of them in contemporary Croatian and Serbian literature and, *mutatis mutandis*, even in contemporary 'Western' literature and culture¹ in general. I believe, however, that Bosnian literature, compared to all post-Yugoslav literatures, especially provides us with some apt examples of how literature can stabilize, transform, and reflect individual and collective memory.

Literature as a medium of collective memory

There exists a huge body of literature on collective memory, which is perhaps not surprising given its increasing popularity. Especially worth noticing, however, seem to be the concepts that have been introduced and developed by certain German literary and cultural theorists. Two scholars who have contributed to the field since the eighties are undoubtedly the Egyptologist Jan Assmann and his wife, the literary theorist and Anglicist Aleida Assmann.

¹ Interestingly, the shifting interest of Bosnian authors in memory rather than in history, in remembering rather than in describing/examining the past, also coincides with a general shift in the West from history to memory, an attitude that the French philosopher François Hartog (2003) has called 'presentism' (*présentisme*).

They provide us with a sound theoretical framework for the concept of cultural memory (Assmann J. 1992, Assmann A. 1999). The Assmanns relied on the theory that had been developed during the 1920s by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, according to whom memory (collective memory in particular) is not so much a biological (neurological) as a social product. Like our consciousness in general, Halbwachs considered that our memory depends on socialization and communication, and it can thus be analyzed as a function of our social life (Halbwachs 1923, 1950). Therefore, Halbwachs coined the term collective memory (*la mémoire collective*) for a concept distinct from history and consisting of the cultural representations of a certain group living in a certain area (Halbwachs 1950). Thus, collective memory would be subject to change over time, whereby the memories of the group are formed in a fashion that allows them to be adjusted to contemporary ideas or presumptions and to the desires of the society (Assmann 1992: 34-48).

According to Jan Assmann, however, we should distinguish not only between individual and collective memory. On the collective level, he argues, we should also distinguish between communicative and cultural memory, in order to include the cultural sphere, which Halbwachs allegedly excluded (Assmann 1992, 2008: 110). Cultural memory and communicative memory would be two different ways of remembering. To put it succinctly, both *modi memorandi* have a different content, source, depth, structure as well as different carriers and functions. Communicative memory refers to oral, everyday communication, which is to a great extent unorganized and unspecialized, involving mostly personal experiences. It covers only the recent past, and any experience that extends beyond three generations is swallowed by a zone of oblivion situated between generational memory and cultural memory, the latter referring to an even more remote past. Because this zone of oblivion shifts with succession of generations, the ethnologist Jan Vansina has called it *the floating gap* (Assmann 1992: 48 ff.). If a group or society wants to overcome this floating gap between present/recent past and remote past, it needs to crystallize living communication into the forms of what Assmann has called 'objectivized culture' (texts, images, rites, buildings, monuments, cities, or even landscapes) and, most importantly, to institutionalize the content it wants to be remembered. This content is, of course, not the past as such but the past as it is remembered or, more correctly, as it should be remembered by the group (Assmann 2008:

113). Cultural memory, thus, is clearly connected with the construction of identity: '[o]ne has to remember in order to belong [to a group]' (Assmann 2008: 114).

Of course, the strict division between communicative and cultural memory is a distinction that might be valid for the study of oral or ancient cultures, such as the Egyptian one, but when applied to modern societies, such a clear-cut division appears to be rather problematic. Moreover, as Astrid Erll has aptly observed, Assmann's use of the concepts 'cultural' and 'communicative' is rather confusing. For example, the adjective 'cultural' in Assmann's theory of cultural memory does not refer to culture in its broadest sense but to high culture (*Hochkultur*). This implies a rather monolithic or homogenous notion of culture and a singular memory, which is problematic when applied to modern societies (Erll 2005a: 113, Neumann 2003: 61) as well as to older, traditionally multicultural societies, such as the Ottoman or Habsburg Empire, or even socialist Yugoslavia. In addition, culture is always a matter of communication. More problems arise when we examine how the theory of the Assmanns includes literature, i.e. how the connection/interconnectedness between culture, memory, identity, and literature is discussed (cf. Neumann 2003: 59-61).

Notwithstanding the criticism the theory of the Assmanns has attracted, it provides many valuable insights, albeit with slight modifications to some of the concepts. A useful and instructive approach for examining the role of literary texts in the transformation of collective memory has been developed by Erll, who has relied heavily on the theory of the Assmanns but also modified and extended some of its key notions. Erll emphasizes that literature, not unlike film, can function as a 'medium of collective memory'. First of all, literature is an important *cadre médial* – a coinage that clearly refers to Halbwachs's *cadres sociaux de la mémoire* and that could be loosely translated as a (referential) framework – which means that literature offers models and schemes that enable individuals to frame their own (historical) experiences and personal memories (Erll 2005b, esp. 256-260). She distinguishes, then, three functions which literature as a medium of collective memory fulfills on a collective level: storage, circulation, and cue. First, literature serves as a storage medium that enhances the iconic augmentation of collective memory (*Literatur als Speichermedium*). Second, literature circulates the information to be culturally remembered (*Literatur als Zirkulationsmedium*). Third, literary texts can function as a cue, almost automatically triggering associations of a

national tradition or a national literature, even in broader social circles in which certain works have never been read (Erll 2005b, esp. 260-264).

Departing from her research on novels about the First World War, she has distinguished four² modes of a specific ‘rhetoric of collective memory’: an experiential mode, a mythicizing or monumental mode, an antagonistic mode, and a reflexive mode (Erll 2005a: 167-193, 2005b: 267-271, 2008: 390-392). To put it succinctly, the model of Erll aims to reveal how literary texts (re-)create the past according to different registers of remembrance. Whereas experiential modes represent the past as a recent, lived-through experience that is the subject of ‘communicative memory’, monumental or mythicizing modes are constituted by literary forms which remind of the media and representational practices typical of Assmann’s ‘cultural memory’, such as myths and rituals. Referring to the remote, mythical horizons of a culture (for example, to foundational events), mythicizing modes try to create some deeper, compelling meaning out of the past of a distinct (religious, ethnic, national) community. Strategies preferred by experiential modes are a detailed depiction of everyday life in the war and the representation of oral speech or the use of stream-of-consciousness techniques, while mythicizing modes seek to create a primordial atmosphere and use intertextual references. Examples of experiential modes would be the fiction of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves on the First World War, whereas Ernst Jünger’s *In Stahlgewittern* is mentioned by Erll as an example of the mythicizing mode (2005a: 169-176; 2008: 390-391). Antagonistic modes are made up by ‘literary forms that help to maintain one version of the past and reject another’. Conveying the identity, norms, and values of specific social groups or cultural formations while simultaneously representing them as true, antagonistic modes tend to disavow the memories and values of other groups and nations. Not infrequently resorting to negative

² A fifth rhetorical mode, which Erll mentions only in her book *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*, is the historicizing one. Historicizing modes represent historical events as part of a closed, completed past, which now belongs to the field of historiography. According to Erll, they belong to the cultural system of knowledge of a group or society rather than to its cultural or communicative memory, in which the past appears as part of the present, as something which remains actual. Historicizing modes tend to make use of historical sources and are the prevailing, but by far not the only way of historical representation used in the (traditional) historical novel. Scott’s novel *Waverley*, writes Erll, is an example of a novel that combines a historicizing with an experiential mode. (2005a: 177-178)

stereotyping and biased or partial perspectives, they help to construct images of Self and Other. The we-narration in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, aims to create a shared collective identity for the young front-line soldiers as opposed to the older, war-mongering generation at home, writes Erll (2005a: 178-184, 2008: 391). Reflexive modes, then, are constituted by literary forms whose representation of the past allows its readers to observe at a distance the modes of operation and the problems of remembering. These modes are close to other discourses on memory and are often self-referential. Recurrent strategies are the use of explicit narrative comments on the workings of memory, as in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, or the montage of different versions of the past, as in Edlef Koeppen's *Heeresbericht* (Erll 2005a: 184-189, 2008: 391-392). Of course, literary texts can, and most often do, combine several modes, for example, one of the first three modes with the fourth, reflexive mode. This paper will focus on two of them: the experiential and the reflexive mode.

Bosnian war literature: condensing communicative memory, or how to turn historical events into sites of memory

In what follows, I will briefly discuss some examples of Bosnian war fiction ('war writing', *ratno pismo*) and how it tends to recreate the past in order to preserve memories of the war. A strategy that characterizes many short stories and novels about war could be defined as 'mimetic approximation'³, i.e. representing the past as a lived-through experience while at the same time probing the limits of representation and language. According to Erll's model, such works adopt an 'experiential mode' of representation of the past. *Experiential modes*, Erll writes, 'are constituted by literary forms which represent the past as a recent, lived-through

³ 'Mimetic approximation' is a coinage of Andreas Huyssen, a term that, in the words of Kristiaan Versluys, 'emphasizes that traumatic experience is inaccessible to language (no full mimesis is possible), yet there are means that witnesses can mobilize so as to avoid the terror of memory, while yet reviving it for themselves and their audience. To put it differently: mimetic approximation involves "closeness and distance, affinity and difference" (Huyssen 2000: 79) Documentary "authenticity of representation" (Huyssen 2000: 76) is never possible, since language distances, distorts, and adulterates trauma experience. Yet language itself – properly attuned – can carry within it a force that lends it a kind of mediated *authentication*' (Versluys 2006: 988).

experience. They are close to what Jan Assmann has called “communicative memory”. The specific qualities of communicative memory are often staged in literary texts by first-person narrative, thus indicating “life writing” (Erl 2008: 390). This experiential mode is a recurrent feature of war literature in general. Not surprisingly, some of the most impressive war fiction, such as the work of Miljenko Jergović, Nenad Veličković, or Alma Lazarevska, has been written exactly in this vein. Devoting themselves to the reality of the everyday life of ordinary citizens, all three authors challenge conventional notions of war literature, each in a different way.

Jergović’s *Sarajevo Marlboro* (*Sarajevski Marlboro*, 1994), which almost became a cult book in Bosnia and Croatia, is a collection of short stories, zooming in on how the lives of ordinary citizens are suddenly interrupted by war. As Ammiel Alcalay has aptly stated in his introduction to the English translation of *Sarajevski Marlboro*, ‘Jergović has molded a writing of the quotidian, a writing of everyday history whose details interrogate myths and lacerate the heart’ (Alcalay 2004: xiv). War is rendered visible in *Sarajevo Marlboro* as a *mise-en-scène* of human fates, depicting how small people are unexpectedly overwhelmed by the dark forces of history. The narrator, while often performing with a charming naivety combined with a touch of dark humor infused with many understatements, strangely manages to witness the tragedy of war in an unexpectedly effective⁴ and aesthetic way. Making use of colloquial language, rendered in free, indirect speech, Jergović lets a great variety of typical Sarajevan characters take the stage. Thus, his stories resemble a kind of oral history, which is implicitly stated by the narrator of the story *Photograph* (*Fotografija*) when commenting on the protagonist of the story:

The people who write about the war in Bosnia without any thought of personal gain, or any wish to clamber over the bodies of the living and the dead in order to achieve success – a select few, in other words – are actually quite similar to Senka. Without

⁴ As Aida Vidan has remarked, typically, ‘the last few sentences in Jergović’s stories tend to carry much of the emotional burden of the entire text, with a slight turn of phrase often revealing additional and unexpected layers of meaning’ (Vidan 2001).

any profit to themselves or others, they bravely seek to preserve an image of a world that has been shattered. Sometimes their unflinching descriptions or honest reports, not to mention their uncompromising points of view, offend public opinion. It is not unknown for such writings to be condemned as national treason by Orthodox believers. But in fact they are only vain attempts to discover a truth, a reason to exist. At a time when just about everything else has been lost or destroyed, faithfulness is the only thing left to believe in. When the time comes to write the history of Bosnia, only people like Senka will resist its lies. (Jergović 2004: 158-159)

The collection of short stories *The Devil in Sarajevo* (*Đavo u Sarajevu*, 1996) by Nenad Veličković could be read as an ‘anthropology of the siege of Sarajevo’, providing insight into the material, social, political, cultural, and economic transformation of the city. On the micro-level of the organization of the text (plot, setting, description of characters, action), many stories document⁵ what life looked like during the siege, not restricting themselves to a mere realistic description of the suffering of citizens who were exposed everyday to shelling, sniper fire, and famine, or of their struggle to survive physically. Ivana Maček, an anthropologist who has done extensive research about everyday life in Sarajevo during the siege of the city, has stressed several times in her book that the real life experience of the Bosnian war differed extremely from conventional ideas about war as ‘soldiers fighting on the front lines while civilians work to sustain the war effort’ (Maček 2009: 191). This experience is something that Veličković tries to convey in stories such as, for example, *U policiji* (*At the Police Station*) or *Downhill* (*Downhill*). As the protagonist of the short story *At the police station* expresses his feelings about worthlessness and futility or even the devaluation of human life in war time, ‘like never before, [...] [he] clearly sees how small and meaningless he is in the big deals of others, and how they play with his rights and life as the wind with crumpled papers’ (Veličković 2008: 56, translation mine). For the protagonist states that ‘[a]ll their stories about

⁵ Most importantly, ‘documenting’ war is not the same as giving a realistic or naturalistic account of it. Cf. interview in which Veličković explains that he was interested in re-narrating real-life stories (‘priče iz života’) (Veličković 2008: 239).

fatherland, honor, and freedom are a lie, colorful knick-knacks with which the blood of the killed and the tears of the survived are being paid' (Veličković 2008: 57, translation mine).

However, this does not mean that Veličković's stories can be read solely as a kind of 'documentary fiction', which devotes itself entirely to describing the (horrifying) circumstances in which ordinary people lived. Details about daily life in a city under siege most often provide only the background or the setting for Veličković's stories, whereas their point forces (invites) the reader to ponder more general, ethical (at times even metaphysical) themes related to war and what it does to human beings.⁶ A closer look at one exemplary story shall clarify this.

Glass (Staklo) is a brief, barely six pages long, story about an old Muslim shop owner, Omerbeg, who habitually makes a daily stroll to his shop through the *baščaršija*, drinks a little water at the pipe in the wall of the mosque, and sits in front of his jewelry shop. When the shelling of the city starts, he is forced to close down his shop. Although his children insist that he stay at home, he cannot resist and after a while resumes his daily walk to his shop. He finds the *čaršija* deserted, the street and houses severely damaged, and the glass of his shop window broken. He cleans up the splinters of the glass and eventually succeeds in convincing a handyman to put new glass in the shop window, and then he goes home. This happens again and again, and every day it is more difficult to find glass, to find handymen that are ready to risk their lives only to install a shop window that will be broken again tomorrow, and to convince his children that he is not just wasting his money. One Friday, however, his brother visits him, and gives him a precious book, thus trying to persuade him that in times of war he should not risk his life and waste his money because of a simple shop window. On that single day, he stays at home and does not visit his shop. During the night, however, a sharp pain under his ribs wakes him up from his dream, in which 'he had been looking from above, from his estate on Sarajevo, [which lay down] in the midst of blossoms as the bud on the bottom of a calyx, and he had seen God, in himself and in everything around

⁶ Literature should try to convey a meaning, an idea, a moral truth, as Veličković claims in an interview (2008: 241-243).

him' (Veličković 2008: 30). Once awake, he feels he has lost this moment of epiphany and knows that he will find it again only on his journey from his house to his shop. That very morning, the *čaršija* is bombarded severely, and only after the explosions have finally stopped, he goes out to find his shop totally demolished. When the dust has settled and the sun comes through, the pain under his ribs becomes sharper, and he dies. In the end, this is a story about how people try to preserve their human dignity (and moral standards) in times of war and how this is the only way for them to survive physically.

Often told in an anecdotal manner, the short stories of both Jergović and Veličković, not unlike anthropological or especially oral history research, tend to convey the war experiences of ordinary people, thus countering the teleological bias any historiographical account of the wars unavoidably contains. As Enver Kazaz has astutely observed, by creating 'a history from below', Bosnian war writing counters 'big history' and 'the ideological postulate of grand narratives' (Kazaz 2004: 163). In other words, by representing the recent past as experienced by ordinary citizens, Bosnian war literature offers access to a non-structured/fragmented, open social or communicative memory of the time. However, rather than mere 'conversational remembering' or 'practicing oral history', literature has the ability to circulate memories of certain historical events, such as the siege of Sarajevo, and turn them into sites of memory, stressing what should be remembered in the long term.⁷

Where does the past end, and the present begin? The war as a turning point

War literature not only tries to convey the experience of war but also tends to reflect on the ways in which war can be represented through literature and how the war experience often

⁷ Apart from the siege of Sarajevo, other sites of memory are constructed – or questioned – in contemporary Bosnian prose. Not surprisingly, the genocide at Srebrenica is one of them. It seems, however, that this theme poses many more difficulties to writers of narrative fiction. As far as I know, there is only one novel dealing with the theme of Srebrenica, titled *When it was July* (*Kad je bio juli*, Zagreb: V.B.Z., 2005) by Nura Bazdulj-Hubijar, but it cannot rival in quality (it is not convincing and cannot really move the reader) with the non-fiction accounts of eye-witnesses as collected in *Srebrenica's Deadly Summer 1995* (*Samrtno srebreničko ljeto '95. Svjedočanstvo o stradanju Srebrenice i naroda Podrinja*, Tuzla: Udruženje građana "Žene Srebrenice", 1998) and Emir Suljagić's *Postcards from the Grave* (*Razglednica iz groba*, Sarajevo: Civitas/Biblioteka Dani, 2005).

becomes a turning point in the life of people, influencing their understanding and framing of the past and its connections with the present. As a first example, I will briefly discuss Veličković's novel *Lodgers* (*Konačari*, 1995). *Lodgers* raises questions about what we usually associate with the genre of war literature and the possibility of literary representations of war. According to Kazaz, a frequently used narratological device of contemporary Bosnian war writing is what he has called the 'infantilization of the narrator' (Kazaz 2004: 163). This is undoubtedly true for Veličković's novel. The text of *Lodgers* is structured as a first-person narrative by a teenage girl, Maja, who is uncertain if she should describe her war experiences in the form of a novel or in the form of a diary: '[w]hat I am writing will be a novel in the form of a diary, or perhaps a new form – a diary in the form of a novel' (Veličković 2005: 6). As Maček has argued, conventional historical accounts of the war in Bosnia – and this is probably true of all contemporary wars since the Second World War, in which civilians seem to have become an indispensable element, a justified means/target of strategic warfare – are unable to capture what war looked like for ordinary citizens because historians 'organize the reality of war as experienced by individuals into a narrative with fixed and symbolically pregnant dates and events' (Maček 2009: 198). This seems to be exactly the problem with which the narrator of *Lodgers* is trying to cope. In the terms of Tatjana Jukić, 'she [Maja] is aware that a novel requires a clear-cut or at least meaningful division between its beginning and ending, a requirement that the war situation rules impossible.[...][Thus,] the very first glance at Veličković's text implies [...] an impossibility to talk about the war in Bosnia' (Jukić 1996, section 1).

The impossibility of talking about the Bosnian war, however, should also be understood as connected to other representations of it. More specifically, Veličković's pseudo-diary can be interpreted as a reaction against the dominant discourse of Western journalism, photography, and television, and its impact on TV-watchers around the world. Humor and irony seem to refute reductions of the war in Bosnia to an ethnic clash and simplistic stories about an ancient hatred lasting centuries. When asked in an interview how he had managed to narrate the horrifying and sad stories of his protagonist in such a relaxed

and humorous way, Veličković answered – ‘how else would it be possible to tell them?’ (Veličković 2008: 244). Thus, the infantilization of narration, inherent in the pseudo-teenage diary, combined with ample humor, enables the author to tell his sarcastic truth⁸ about the war or at least to pose some sarcastic questions about how the war is understood and represented by the nationalist opposing forces as well as by the TV-watching West and its prejudices about ‘the barbaric Balkans’. This is evident in the next sentences that Maja writes down in her diary:

The war is being waged between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. Davor says that the war is being waged because the Croats have Croatia, the Serbs have Serbia, but the Muslims don’t have Muslimia. Everyone thinks it would be right for them to have it, but no one can agree where the borders should be. Dad says that Davor is a dunce and that the war is being waged because the Serbs and Croats want to divide Bosnia and kill and drive out the Muslims. I don’t know what to say. [...] No! I don’t think I’ll be able to explain objectively and impartially to an average foreign reader why war is being waged. Probably, like all wars, it’s about taking territory and plunder. But I can’t think of a *probably* for why a city of half a million inhabitants should be bombarded day after day from the surrounding hills. Why would anyone (in our case the Serbian artillery) destroy houses, burn libraries, and shatter minarets and the poplars planted around them? (Veličković 2005: 6-7)

Maja’s story focuses on her family, which had to leave their home and hide in the basement of the city museum where her father is the director. As with the form of the novel, the setting of the story – the museum – is also not chosen at random. While the museum in the Western tradition is considered not only as an archive in which artifacts of the past are preserved but also as an institution with a key function for the establishment and retention of cultural memory (cf. Assmann 2006), the museum in *Lodgers* becomes a place where people hide

⁸ Cf. footnotes 6 and 7 for Veličković’s ideas about the documentary value and character of his short stories and about the effect and influence of literature on politics and ethics.

from the turmoil of history. As Jukić has pointed out, Maja's family, along with other refugees in the museum, seems to represent the multiethnic richness of pre-war Sarajevo, whereas the city museum itself represents 'a spatial rendition of the history of Sarajevo' (Jukić 1996: section 1). Maja's grandmother is Jewish and the oldest member of the family. Maja's mother is half-Croatian, half-Jewish but with a huge interest in macrobiotics and eastern meditation techniques. Although her father is a Muslim, he is the only one in the museum who speaks Latin fluently. In addition, he happens to be a historian. According to the Jewish tradition, Maja could be considered Jewish while according to the Muslim tradition, she is a Muslim, as Jukić has noted (1996: section 1). Her half-brother is her mother's child from a previous marriage with a Serb, so his ethnic origins are Serbo-Croat-Jewish. Of course, the museum symbolizes Sarajevo's multiethnic landscape and its century-long tradition of multiculturalism. When examined more closely, the mixed ethnic origins of the museum's inhabitants ridicule both the nationalist myth of ethnic purity and the Western understanding of multiculturalism that actually relies on the same notion, since it assumes that however mixed a melting pot may be, it always consists of different yet in the end clearly distinguishable nationalities.⁹

The young narrator also invites the reader to reflect on the porous border between past and present. By ironically describing everyday life and tracing how habits and norms change overnight, Maja reveals how the difference between past and present is established ideologically: what was perceived to be normal yesterday is no longer normal today, and what had been seemingly forgotten can be recycled. For instance, she analyzes how people used to greet each other in the past and how they greet today:

Recently Dad had been speaking two languages in parallel. When I drew Mother's attention to this, she explained that the new language was, in fact, the language of his

⁹ A similar point is made by Jukić: 'Veličković's war clearly demonstrates that our age is quite firm about the boundaries between cultural and political centers and peripheries: if the center is characterized by weak thought, peripheries are characterized by perversely powerful ideologies; if the center holds valid that fact is fiction, the periphery will try its best to implement any myth on offer; if the center declares multiculturalism as its fundamental creed, the peripheries get ruled by ethnic cleansing' (1996: section 2).

childhood, that's how his grandma, grandpa, and uncle spoke. And as far as the greetings themselves were concerned, they were gradually replacing accreditation. There were so many greetings that they not only separated one faith from another, but one conviction from another. For example, former communists, who had become old believers overnight, on leaving said *Poselam* and *ciao*. Dad says that they were once commies, and now they're 'sommies'. That expression derives from the word *somun*, which denotes a kind of loaf, round, flat, and slit on top. *Somun* is the favorite bread of Muslim believers during their fast called Ramadan. (Veličković 2005: 121)

Some pages further, she writes:

I had noticed that as of a few days ago our neighbors had started using medieval titles, which is confirmation of the theory that the transition from socialism to capitalism passes through the Middle Ages. (Veličković 2005: 128)

Amongst others, one humoristic episode is indicative of the changing value of historical interpretations and worth quoting at length:

Two drug-addicts brought into the museum a quarter of a yard of asphalt with the prints of two shoes in it. Left and right. They belonged, legend had it, to the Sarajevan assassin of the Austrian Empire, Gavrilo Princip. The asphalt had been planted into the pavement in front of the Young Bosnia museum, from where at the beginning of this war national fury had uprooted it and flung it into the Miljacka River, from where it had been dragged out again by addicts' intuition. Julio offered Dad Gavrilo's footprints, but Dad didn't know what to do with them. And he had the shoes somewhere among his exhibits, so, when an appropriate time came, a new print could be made. (Veličković 2005: 68)

Julio eventually sold the piece of asphalt to some UNPROFOR soldiers, who actually wanted to buy a medieval Bosnian gravestone (*stećak*), but who were, in the end, satisfied with Princip's commemorative plaque, too. This episode reminds us that the old socialist historical

narratives were quickly devaluating and replaced by new ones during the 1990s. In addition, due to the worldwide media attention focused on Sarajevo, Bosnian history had become very popular among foreigners, turning its material artifacts into valuable commodities. And also, as Maja bitterly remarks, Sarajevo itself ‘was becoming popular in the world, like the work of a dying painter. Or a can with Coca-Cola written on it. Maybe its future coat of arms would be the mark for pure fleece wool’ (Veličković 2005: 109).

Similar, albeit philosophical rather than humorous, reflections about remembering and forgetting can be found in Alma Lazarevska’s collection of short stories *Death in the Museum of Modern Art* (*Smrt u muzeju moderne umjetnosti*, 1996). Her stories show in yet another way how broad and differing the spectrum of Bosnian war literature is. Cynthia Simmons has rightly pointed out that Lazarevska’s processing of the Bosnian war is rather ‘atypical of the genre’ and that because her short stories ‘believe the collective scream’, which has been ‘identified [by critics] as the unifying characteristic of [Bosnian] war literature’, ‘readers were [...] perplexed, in *Death in the Museum of Modern Art*, by the author’s philosophical and often ironic distance from the ongoing nightmare of war’ (Simmons 2000: 59). According to Simmons, the work of Lazarevska should be considered in a broader frame of women’s responses to war in general. Feminist critics, such as Svetlana Slapšak and Katja Kobolt (Beyer 2004, Kobolt 2006) have celebrated the collection of short stories as a perfect example of *écriture féminine* that, according to Kobolt, can offer us insight into the female experience of war and the inner struggle of the female heroine against the destructive forces of war (Kobolt 2006: 297). Indeed, Lazarevska’s stories are populated neither by *chetniks* nor by defenders of the city; we almost find no description of the destruction of the city or atrocities committed to citizens, shelling is only described in highly metaphorical language, and even Sarajevo is not called by its name but mentioned only as ‘the besieged city’ (*opkoljeni grad*).

Although defining her work in terms of feminine writing might certainly be an appropriate way of approaching it, the stories of Lazarevska are also interesting for other reasons. Specifically, they offer valuable insights into how the war became a juncture where people were compelled, to put it in Maček’s terms, to ‘negotiate normality’, i.e. to come to terms with the new reality ruled by war and to adapt their previous behavior and, most importantly, *moral* standards to the quickly changing social rules and norms of a city under siege (Maček 2009: 5-10, esp. 9). Thus, the beginning of the siege is clearly experienced as a

caesura, while war conditions force the narrator to remember ‘the normality’ in which she had lived before the war and ask questions about the present in which she is living. As the narrator states in one of the stories: ‘[e]verything is unusual and yet so quotidian in the besieged city’ (Lazarevska 2000: 41). In the story *Greetings from the Besieged City (Pozdrav iz opkoljenog grada)*, the female narrator refashions the end of a sad story she reads to her son because she cannot bring herself to reveal the death of the protagonist Pablo. However, when she and her son walk through the city and come across a ‘Sarajevan rose’, as the flower-like pattern, left by a shell in the sidewalk was commonly called, she is confronted with the impossibility of sticking to her pre-war values. Being asked by her son – ‘Mama, did that much blood flow when Pablo died?’ (Lazarevska 2000: 42), she suddenly realizes the tragic fact that her son, a little boy whose friend had been killed by a shrapnel only some days ago, had become accustomed to death and that it is an illusion even to consider the possibility of protecting him from the harsh reality by inventing happy ends to sad stories. Lazarevska’s stories, and this could be also illustrated by other examples from *Death in the Museum of Modern Art*, reveal how during the war the most ‘normal’ appearances and habits, intellectual and philosophical convictions seem to acquire another meaning, not in the least because people are unceasingly confronted with the finitude of life (cf. Beyer 2004: 217-220).

‘Life writing’ and collective memory – war, post-socialist reality, or how to remember (and forget) Yugoslavia

The radical historical (political, psychological) shift that was caused by war seems to have inspired writers to reflect upon not only the gap between the socialist past and the post-socialist present but also the ways in which collective and individual memories (and identities) are constituted today. This reminds us of what Erll calls *reflexive modes* of collective remembering: ‘[L]iterature usually allows its readers both a first- and a second-order observation: It gives us the illusion of glimpsing the past (in an experiential, mythical, or antagonistic way) and is – often at the same time – a major medium of critical reflection upon these very processes of representation. Literature is a medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory’ (Erll 2008: 391). Several pieces of contemporary Bosnian prose can illustrate such a reflexive attitude towards the representation of the past and its relevance for

the present.¹⁰ Some authors even strive to ponder issues that are central to remembering and forgetting in general. How do we remember? Can we rely on our memories? How do societies forget and remember? What is to be remembered? The recent work of Saša Stanišić and Jergović offers fascinating examples of the ways in which literature can provide links between the past and the present.

A central question of Stanišić's novel *How the soldier repairs the gramophone* seems to be: how do our memories about our childhood help to constitute our self? Stanišić's semi-autobiographical¹¹ novel was originally published in German under the title *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* (2006).¹² Not unlike the author, the narrator and main protagonist of the novel Aleksandar Krsmanović grows up in Višegrad, a small town in Eastern Bosnia made famous by Ivo Andrić and his novel *The Bridge over the Drina*. Whereas Andrić is mentioned only sporadically, the river – and to a certain extent, the bridge – for several reasons occupies a central place in the life of the young narrator, who frequently speaks of it as 'my river'. Aleksandar is a passionate fisher, and as a barely fourteen-year-old boy he wins a regional fishing contest, which makes him a candidate for a competition on the national level, to be held in Osijek. Due to the outburst of the war in Croatia, the contest is cancelled. At this point, his happy childhood definitely comes to an end – an end that had already been announced by the death of his beloved grandfather Slavko. Soon, war arrives in Višegrad, and Aleksandar becomes a witness of harassment of Muslims, rape, and other atrocities committed against his fellow citizens. Although the siege of the city, the games he plays with his friends, and the atrocities he witnesses are described in an often comic way by the

¹⁰ This is also the case with works that, strictly speaking, do not belong to the genre of war literature.

¹¹ Born in 1978 in Višegrad, Stanišić moved to Germany in 1992 and chose to write in German.

¹² It might seem questionable to include this novel in an article on contemporary Bosnian prose, especially because its author has – at least to my knowledge – not written anything relevant in Serbo-Croatian. However, given the traumas wrought by the wars of the 1990s on the entire Yugoslav cultural space, and the cultural, geographic, and linguistic displacement of millions of people, writers and intellectuals among them, I would strongly argue that language is an extremely poor criterion for a writer's inclusion in—or exclusion from—any fledgling 'national' canon. Given its theme (memories of the war and of socialist Yugoslavia) and approach (life-writing), Stanišić's novel can be read as a captivating example of how writers deal with the gap between past and present caused by (the Bosnian) war. In other words, *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* is, formally as well as thematically, too interesting an example not to include it into this paper.

fourteen-year-old Aleksandar, they are narrated in such a way that the reader cannot mistake their significance. For example, while trying to figure out why only certain people are being harassed, he comes to the conclusion that it is because they have ‘the wrong name’, a seemingly naïve observation that conveys a bitter truth. Relatively soon after the occupation of Višegrad by Bosnian Serbian forces, Aleksandar’s family leaves the city for Germany. However, his life in the city of Essen never really becomes the theme of the novel. Instead, his life in Essen forces him to ponder issues of national and individual identity, memory, and belonging.

As Frauke Matthes has rightly remarked, ‘until the war breaks out in Bosnia, he does not have to think about his identity; it is something he takes for granted. Throughout the novel, he very much perceives himself as a “true” Yugoslav’ (Matthes 2009: 2). Aleksandar’s interpretation and subsequent staging/performing of Yugoslav identity, Matthes suggests, has two sources: first, he himself does not fit into the rigid ethnic classifications of the dominant nationalist narratives of the time because his mother is a Bosnian Muslim and his father a Bosnian Serb. Second, the narrator’s idea of a genuine Yugoslav identity is strongly connected with the ideas about national identity which he acquired from his paternal grandfather, who was an admirer of Tito’s socialist policy (Matthes 2009: 2-3). As his grandfather tells him on the morning of the day when he was to die, after giving him a magic hat and stick: ‘If you wear the hat and wave the wand you’ll be the most powerful magician in the non-aligned states. You’ll be able to revolutionise a lot of things, just as long as they’re in line with Tito’s ideas and the Statutes of the Communist League of Yugoslavia’ (Stanišić 2008: 1).

Moreover, Aleksandar’s memories of Yugoslavia and Titoist ideology seem to be conditioned by his happy childhood and his close relationship with his grandfather. For example, the narrator recalls: ‘I always preferred talking to Grandpa putting Marxist ideology into practice, Socialist self-government, Tito’s foreign policy, or the best way to gut a fish.’ (Stanišić 2008: 61) This becomes almost painfully clear when, in his twenties, seven years after the end of the war in 2002, Aleksandar decides to go back to his hometown only, as he says it, ‘to compare [his] memories with here and now’ (Stanišić 2008: 244). He finds out that while he was away everything and everyone in town had changed beyond all recognition and that he himself is a stranger who does not know anyone in town, as his friend Zoran points

out. The Višegrad of his childhood seems to have totally disappeared not only because of the high unemployment rates and other bad physical, economic, and social conditions but also because so many people from his childhood are poignantly missing. Thus, his happy childhood memories are all that is left of his Yugoslav identity and of Yugoslavia itself. Memories, it turns out, are not sufficient material on which to build an identity. Although the book starts with a first-person account of the childhood of the narrator, this childhood is narrated in a rather linear and coherent way, and the reader can imagine the narrator to be a twelve- to fourteen-year-old boy. After his return to Višegrad, however, the account of the narrator's childhood is framed as a kind of flashback, the chapter being entitled as 'When everything was alright, by Aleksandar Krsmanović, with a foreword by Granny Katarina and an essay for Mr Fazlagić'; the narration is fragmented, creating the impression that it is not a mere story about the past but a (re)collection of memories, indicating a disbelief in a genuine identity.¹³ In addition, the fragmented structure of the whole novel seems to echo the pattern of individual memories and to confirm that memories are always complex constructions – and never 'passive or literal recordings of reality' (Schacter 1996: 5).

However, Aleksandar's return to his town does not end with a simplistic outburst of Yugo-nostalgia, but, in the terms of Matthes, with a straightforward attempt to engage with his memories and to renegotiate his displaced identity (Matthes 2009: 8). The gap between past and present with which the narrator struggles seems to be of both a geographical and a temporal/historical nature. Trying to reconcile the memories of an idyllic childhood in socialist Yugoslavia with the harsh reality of post-war Bosnia and the displaced identity of an immigrant, Aleksandar starts 'making lists' of things and people that he used to love but now irrevocably belong to the realm of memory. The straightforward confrontation of the narrator with his memories shows us that they make up an important part of our individual identity, but that identity nevertheless must be (re)negotiated continuously because we live in the present, and the past is but a foreign country.

¹³ Incidentally, this part contains some of the most poetic pages of the book, which only enhances the feeling of nostalgia.

Fascinating examples of the ways in which literature is a way of not only enacting, performing, restaging the past, but also reflecting upon the content, mechanisms, and problems of collective and individual memory can be found in *Mama Leone* (1999) and *History Reader* (2000) by Jergović. As Andrea Lešić has argued in her outstanding essay on these works, ‘Jergović is an author whose near obsession with memory seems to provide us with an important literary contribution to the development of memory research’ (Lešić-Thomas 2004: 431).¹⁴ Jergović’s *History Reader* (*Historijska čitanka*) is a collection of small essays that had been originally published as a regular column in the Sarajevo weekly *Dani*. These columns ‘treat a vast range of everyday habits, objects, public and semi-public personalities, and character types that marked Sarajevo – and the former Yugoslavia as a whole – of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s’ (Lešić 2004: 432) in a rather nostalgic manner. Published under the title *History Reader*, however, the essays seem, as Lešić has rightly observed,

to suggest a project of producing an alternative history, a history of everyday life and the recent past (well within living memory) which would address such ‘insignificant’ phenomena as children’s games, neighborhood gossip, or what type of sandwich was taken on day trips. As such, it appeared as an antidote to the grand historical narratives that stood behind nationalist discourse, and that tended to view individuals’ lives in the context of centuries (rather than lifespan) and collective identities such as *narod* (‘people’ or ‘nation’ rather than the more intimate and immediate communities such as family, neighborhood, or town). It is as if *Historijska Čitanka* proposes a literary version of [an] oral history program [...]. (Lešić -Thomas 2004: 432)

Jergović’s stories, thus, seem to offer a *cue* to its readers (or, to put it in the terms of Erll, they function as a *cadre médial*) – triggering and reviving their memories of socialist Yugoslavia, and of Bosnia/Sarajevo in particular. What memories, however, does he evoke? Or what is the

¹⁴ For the following analysis of Jergović’s *History Reader* and *Mama Leone*, I heavily rely on the 2004 essay by Andrea Lešić.

historical value of the memories he revives? In this respect, it is interesting to take a look at the author's preface to the book. As Jergović puts it, his *History Reader* is 'neither history, nor fiction' but is instead

an inventory of an utterly subjective history of a city, a country, and a time. [...] This book does not talk about real events, but about memories of real events and about the strategy of forgetting. Names and years have been remembered wrongly [in this book], some cities have been confused with others [...]. Probably there exists a rule according to which one remembers and forgets, but since stories about remembering are usually either history or fiction, we avoid to think about such rules. (Jergović 2006: 9, transl. Lešić -Thomas 2004: 434)

Jergović almost explicitly states that remembering always involves forgetting, but that this forgetting is not necessarily something that discredits memories. Instead, what matters are the emotions that these memories evoke in the reader, who recognizes them as being 'true'.¹⁵

The same seems to be true for Jergović's *Mama Leone*. In the words of Lešić, this book could be read as 'a novelistic companion to *History Reader*' (Lešić -Thomas 2004: 437). Indeed, in similar ways it invites the reader to 'reflect upon the content, mechanisms, and problems of collective memory' (Erl1 2003: 56). The structure of *Mama Leone* is reminiscent of the sharp difference between *before* and *after* the war. The first part contains childhood memories, narrated in the first person, which recall the time before the 1990s. The narrator of the childhood stories pretends to remember even the most impossible events, such as, for example, what happened when he was born. In other words, he constantly reminds the reader of the unreliability of our memories. To make the contrast between the two parts of the book even more obvious, the title of the second part is *That Day, a Child's Story Was Completed*. This part is narrated in the third person and tells the fates of immigrants that, having escaped

¹⁵ As Andrea Lešić has demonstrated, a certain tension between mythologization and its ironic deconstruction can be found in almost every essay of Jergović's *History Reader* (Lešić-Thomas 2004: 434).

the war in Bosnia, are now confronted with the irretrievable loss of their homeland and everything associated with the feeling of belonging (to a country, a city, a nation).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored how literary works bear witness to the drama of the recent Bosnian past while at the same time reflecting on the interconnectedness of war, memory, and identity. Rather than, like Aleida Assmann, making a clear-cut distinction between cultural and literary texts, I concur with Astrid Erll that even non-canonized¹⁶ literary texts can intervene in the construction of cultural memory because, apart from functioning as *cadre médial*, they can store, circulate, and recall the memories of the (recent) past. Admittedly, if we agree with Dominick LaCapra, we should probably be skeptical about the role of literature in constructing cultural/collective memory because, so the argument goes,

‘[f]or memory to be effective on a collective level, it must reach large numbers of people. Hence the acts or works that convey it must be accessible. A difficult novel, such as Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, or a comparably demanding film, such as Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, will have a limited audience and will affect larger numbers, if at all, only through the mediation of teachers and commentators, particularly if it becomes a “media event”. A novel such as Camus’s *The Fall* may reach larger numbers, but its intricacy creates extreme indeterminacy about the way it may – or should – be read’ (LaCapra 1998: 139).

¹⁶ Of course, apropos Aleida Assmann (2006), we could argue that in order to enable the shift from communicative to cultural memory, institutions are needed that continually activate the material storage mediums, such as a canon, which could be distributed by the educational system. Because I did not do any profound research on the reception of these texts, neither in Bosnia nor abroad, it is rather difficult to say anything about the way the images of war and the memories of Yugoslavia have been or will be integrated into collective memory. Admittedly, it is hard to say if any of these texts will be canonized, thus becoming part of the corpus of texts whose content must be remembered. In addition, the objection could be raised that a real canon of contemporary Bosnian literature does not exist yet and that school curricula usually do not pay attention to contemporary literature. Moreover, different school curricula exist in the two political entities of Bosnia, the Federation and the Republika Srpska.

Literature is certainly only one medium of collective/cultural memory, and today it is by far not the most influential one, not in the least because of the factors that have been mentioned by LaCapra. Nevertheless, the way in which contemporary Bosnian prose recreates and reflects upon the past might be indicative of a change in the cultural memory that had been dominant during and prior to the nineties, suggesting that literature makes room for less heroic, collectivist, and (nationally) exclusivist modes of collective remembering.¹⁷ I have argued that a first, important function of Bosnian war literature had been to condense communicative memory about the war, i.e. to witness and thus to store memories about the atrocities committed to and the suffering of ordinary citizens during the turmoil of the war. I have demonstrated, then, that contemporary Bosnian prose presents the war not only in what Erll has called an experiential mode but also in a reflexive mode. Thus, the very process of writing about war appears to have in several ways initiated reflections about pre-war normality and, recalling the words of Maček, about ‘negotiating normality’ under the conditions of war as well as about the border between past and present. Most often, war has been depicted as a turning point on the individual as well as on the collective level. At the same time, writers have become increasingly interested in memories of (life in) socialist Yugoslavia. And finally though no less importantly, the distorting effects of war seem to have inspired writers to ponder broader issues of collective and individual identity.¹⁸

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¹⁷ A similar point has been made by Enver Kazaz (2008: 127).

¹⁸ The author is a postdoctoral research fellow of the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). He would like to thank Frauke Matthes, who was so kind to send him a copy of her paper on Stanišić given at the ACLA’s Annual Meeting in 2009 (26–29 March, Harvard University).

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