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Post-Crisis Reckoning: Making Sense of Early 21st-Century Civilizational Ruptures

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Abstract. As the world is struggling with the Covid crisis and its numerous aftereffects, it is easy to forget that the present pandemic is only the latest of a whole series of paradigm-changing 21st-century crises. Indeed, the word "crisis" has become one of the key concepts for the understanding of the early 21st century. Thus, crisis seems very much to be the default position of the 21st century, the new norm. In this paper, I argue that the 21st century has a recognizably different cultural logic from what the previous one had: most of our social, ideological, political, financial, and ecological paradigms are either changing or will (or must) change soon. As most of our critical concepts, intellectual tools, and ideological frameworks were made during the boom years of the late 20th century, they are clearly outdated and inadequate today. Thus, in this paper, through taking account of these shifting intellectual and artistic paradigms, I attempt to indicate how the present crisis of knowledge and sense-making may be turned into a process of knowing and making sense of crisis, and thus help us meet the challenges of the new century. It is often through these fault-lines, breakdowns, and inconsistencies of our narratives that one may recognize those pre-crisis assumptions that we have to critically re-evaluate and update in order to understand the new century.[1]

Keywords: crisis of knowledge, 21st century, ideological crisis, modernity, Covid pandemic

As the world is struggling with the Covid crisis and its numerous aftereffects, it is easy to forget that the present pandemic is only the latest of a whole series of paradigm-changing 21st-century crises. Indeed, the word "crisis" has become one

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of the key concepts for the understanding of the early 21st century. A large and rapidly growing number of publications discuss 9/11 and its consequences, the current security crisis caused by international terrorism, the 2008 global financial crisis as well as its social and political knock-on effects, the 2015 European migration crisis and the ensuing melting of the political centre, the (now official) global climate crisis and its various manifestations worldwide, the damaging effects of social media and its confirmation-bias-produced alternative realities, or the crisis of liberal democracy, to mention only the most memorable examples on this long and gloomy list.

What I wish to explore here, however, is not so much this series of crises per se. What interests me is rather the *crisis of knowledge* we face: the breakdowns, the ruptures, the paradigm shifts, the changing perspectives; in other words, the ways we try to make sense of this crisis situation, the kinds of theories and narratives we make up in order to grasp what is going on. I will argue that our narratives of crisis reveal a profound crisis of narratives. It is getting clear that the above list of crises was caused by human error, miscalculation, misjudgement, and, of course, deliberate blindness to certain systemic issues. In other words: *we* messed it up, *we* had it wrong, the crisis is a result of failures in our social apparatuses, from the media to academia, from fiction to finance. If today there is a perceptible distrust towards the so-called elites, including not only the political class and the financial sector but also the global academic community, that is not without a reason. As uncomfortable as it may sound, we, the intelligentsia, are part of the problem.

Since 2016, when I started working on the representations of crisis in European cinema, I have attended numerous conferences and all sorts of other academic events on the related social, economic, and political issues. While there were innumerable talks about the aspects and manifestations, that is, the symptoms of crisis, there was very little about what we, the intellectual elites had messed up and should do or think otherwise. Did we see the financial crisis coming? Or Trump or Brexit? Or the rapidly growing social inequality, social polarization, and the tribalization of knowledge? What topics did we publish about in all these years? Did we analyse or raise awareness about potentially disruptive social phenomena? And even after the fact, since these crises erupted, have we understood the causes of these disruptive events, and have we changed our institutions, conceptual frameworks, regulations, and policies? Have we re-examined critically the kinds of assumptions, approaches, theories, and concepts that we have been relying on, the ideas that *did not* prepare us for these crisis situations? Have we really started thinking differently?

I am not convinced that we have. In other words, behind these well-known crisis situations there is a profound and increasingly disconcerting crisis of knowledge, one that we are just beginning to address, one that we should take

very seriously if we are to live up to our responsibility as members of the 21st-century global intelligentsia. Needless to say, it is a most timely task. So far in the 21st century, each and every crisis situation came as an unforeseen shock and was perceived at the time as the worst in living memory. As archived media coverage clearly demonstrates, this was the case with 9/11, with the 2008 financial crash, with 2016 (Brexit and Trump) as well as with the Covid pandemic.

To get a bit of historical perspective on this rupture we are trying to make sense of here, it may be worth remembering 2016, at the end of which the year was declared by many to be "the worst year ever". Today, in 2021, most of us probably only remember 2016 for the Brexit vote and Trump's election victory, yet it was also the year of a new and unparalleled wave of Islamist terror attacks in Western Europe, Aleppo's long siege and eventual destruction during the Syrian Civil War as well as the Zyka epidemic. The media craze was also fuelled by the sudden death of a series of pop culture icons, such as Leonard Cohen, David Bowie, and Prince, towards the end of the year. Thus, in late December, not only was social media swarming with "worst year ever" and "f*ck you 2016" memes: it seemed that every self-respecting (and less self-respecting) newspaper felt the need to address the issue, take stock of the damage, declare the end of the world, bathe a bit in self-pitying apocalyptic sentiment, or simply put the year's events in historical context. Penguin even took the opportunity to publish a whole volume, *F*ck You 2016: A Look Back on the Worst Year Ever.* What is worth remembering about these events, in my opinion, is the drama of a historical turning point, the experience of witnessing the unprecedented, and a sense of a cultural readjustment to the possibility of a gloomier future.

When brought into one single context, 2016 and the Covid pandemic constitute one single crisis narrative, in which the surprising shocks of disruptive events are far from being mere accidents but rather symptoms of untended malfunctions, results of certain fundamental issues relating to environmental change, liberal democracy, or neoliberal capitalism. The Covid pandemic – whether it proves to be a "regular" zoonotic disease caused by shrinking natural animal habitats or a lab leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology – can certainly be regarded as yet another symptomatic effect of our global, systemic, civilizational malfunctions.

In *State of Crisis*, Zygmunt Bauman calls attention to the paradoxical nature of this situation: we become conscious of how critical it is to respond quickly and appropriately to a crisis situation in a moment when (precisely because of that crisis) we suddenly feel ignorant and uncertain:

> [T]he idea of "crisis" tends to drift nowadays back to its medical origins. It was coined to denote the moment in which the future of the patient was in the balance, and the doctor had to decide which way to go and what treatment to apply to help the ill into convalescence. Speaking of crisis of

> whatever nature, including the economic, we convey firstly the feeling of *uncertainty*, of our *ignorance* of the direction in which the affairs are about to turn – and secondly the urge to intervene: to *select* the right measures and *decide* to apply them promptly. […] And let me add that there is an endemic contradiction involved: after all, the […] state of uncertainty/ignorance doesn't bode well for the chance of selecting "right measures" and so prompting things to go in the desired direction. (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 7)

Consequently, such a state of crisis also entails a fair amount of confusion and bewilderment. So far, the early 21st century has been a time when our late-20th-century grand narratives repeatedly come to be shaken, undermined, and discredited. Most of the old signposts, maps, and know-hows are gone. Our concepts and opinions of historical progress, social development, liberal democracy, or capitalism are all changing with amazing speed. As a result of all these crises, breakdowns, and rearrangements, one can easily have the impression that the new century's dominant cultural logic is markedly different than that of the previous one. Trying to comprehend current events through our late-20th-century concepts seems to be as frustrating as futile. Those concepts (and economic policies, political ideologies, and financial strategies) were all forged during the boom years of the late 20th century, during a time when we did not (want to) seriously calculate with some of the most definitive and disruptive conditions that we face today. Thus, our time is a time of reckoning: the overall feeling seems to be that we used to be blind and ignorant, we strayed far off the right track, and now our ignorance has a high price to pay. This is a radical moment in our intellectual history too: a time when complacency equals betrayal, business as usual is by definition failure, and a radical re-examination of our pre-crisis conceptual frameworks is essential in most academic disciplines. Every crisis situation we experience must be a wake-up call, meant to awaken us from the slumber of pre-crisis intellectual conformism. Thinking through the crisis, we must learn to think otherwise.

The first sweet dream that we had to wake up from was probably that of "the end of history". Today, when pre-crisis expectations are upset on an almost daily basis, it is almost embarrassing to realize how much our vision of the future used to be shaped by Francis Fukuyama's vision of a "happy ever after" global community that is finally relieved of the burden of paradigm shifting, reinvention, or critical thinking. In order to understand the historical process between the pre-crisis and the post-crisis world, one should not forget that *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) was an elaboration of an article from a much more symbolic year, 1989, and was inspired by the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the cold war. Fukuyama's main argument was that with the demise

of these communist regimes, "liberal democracy as a system of government […] conquered rival ideologies", and thus it "may constitute the endpoint of humankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government", and as such it brings about "the end of history" (1992, xi). He contended that "the twin principles of liberty and equality" are faultless, and therefore "the *ideal* of liberal democracy could not be improved on" (1992, xi). Fukuyama's books from the 1990s reveal a profound optimism about our economic, political, and technological advancement: according to his vision, we are on the right path towards a "posthuman future" of ever longer and healthier lives, stable and ever more tolerant liberal democracies, continuous technological and economic development, and a happy, affluent, and therefore peaceful global community. The best of it all is that in order to achieve this global utopia we do not really have to do anything extraordinary, we only have to let the machine roll.

It is truly remarkable that only thirty years after the heyday of this paradigm (formulated by undoubtedly one of the best minds on the planet) everyone with a BA degree or with a broadsheet newspaper subscription could mention several reasons why Fukuyama's vision was doomed to fail. To be fair with Fukuyama, however, one must not forget that the nineties produced several "best years ever". Communism collapsed, "the West" won the Cold War, the nuclear disarmament agreements finally relieved humanity from the threat of imminent nuclear war and extinction, the unimaginable affluence that neoliberal capitalism produced silenced most of its critics, and much of the intelligentsia of the developed world seemed to be quite happy with its position of limited cultural responsibility. A whole number of outstanding books were written in both the human and the social sciences (for the context of this paper, the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Ajun Appadurai, and Jean Baudrillard come to mind), yet compared to the role of intellectuals in communist and state socialist Eastern Europe, 1968 France, or the crisis-stricken 21st century, one cannot help but associate that pre-crisis era with intellectual conformism. This attitude was mostly due to an acceptance of the basic social, economic, and cultural settings of the system and a withdrawal into academic practices and ways of thinking that only challenged the status quo on paper, in theory, and in small academic circles. In other words, it was not only Fukuyama who thought that we should just let the machine roll.

When trying to define our present condition as a crisis situation encountered at the failure of a much-wished-for utopia, it is important to widen the historical context and look for the deeper causes of our present situation. It is easy to blame neoliberal capitalism and the senseless, irresponsible greed that fuels it for the social and environmental damage it caused; and it is similarly easy to ridicule the utopian vision that rapid technological progress and the fall of communism led Fukuyama to. The point to keep in mind, however, is that such wilful blindness to the collateral damages that come with material wealth or the utopian wishful

fantasies associated with the idea of progress are systemic issues resulting from the very spirit of modernity. The fantasy of transcending the human condition, of becoming superhuman (or post-human) is as central to the modern world as our habit of turning a blind eye to the long-term consequences of short-term economic gains. Though we often associate modernity with science and rationality, arguably it has always been partly based on unquestioned, non-empirical assumptions (for example, about the source of happiness, free will, or the desirability of control over nature), and it has always been propelled forward by the (almost religious) belief in progress, which will eventually lead us to a utopian state of affairs. The key point for my present argument is that our late modern pre-crisis worldview, which we recognize as ignorant, irresponsible, and detrimental today, was not simply a result of greedy bankers, cocaine-sniffing stock investors, or utopian technophiles. This worldview was very much rooted in modernity's core assumptions, which often function like objects of faith. No doubt, it is partly this irrational, secular belief-system-like aspect of modernity that is responsible for the above mentioned systemic blindness and detrimental side-effects as well as for the difficulties of changing course. The 21st-century crisis of grand narratives also involves the crisis of our previous beliefs, the correction of which is much more difficult, emotionally challenging, and time-consuming than, for example, changing the regulations of the financial sector or modifying an algorithm. In other words, dealing with such a pervasive crisis as the early 21st-century one is never simply a matter of rational, practical, or intellectual rearrangement.

The above considerations may also explain why most academics working in the human and social sciences were fascinated by Fukuyama's utopian vision, why we were more than happy to believe that we only have to fight such good old, well-defined enemies of modern social emancipation as bigotry, autocracy, racism, and sexism, and then everything was going to be awesome. These well-known social maladies, I would argue, were inherited from the dominant post-Second World War intellectual mainstream (or, more specifically, from the influential social movements of the late sixties). Before the crisis situations of the early 20th century, it seemed that the work of the 68-ers was successful, that these mediaeval leftovers were in retreat. It often seemed that we had won all the important historical battles. Most of our concepts, theories, and academic practices reflected this comfortable and comforting view.

Retrospectively, however, looking back from 2021, it appears like a very different story. Now it seems that by the time the new century arrived, this post-1960s intellectual paradigm had gradually turned into a gilded cage, a noble, rewarding, yet intellectually restrictive, potentially treacherous trend. It was and perhaps still is a *gilded*, rewarding paradigm: one that clearly puts "us" on the "right side" of history, one that comes with the feeling of moral superiority, and one that we can practice comfortably, since the ideological metanarrative of

this paradigm often works as a safety net for our analyses and interpretations. Yet, this paradigm was also a *cage* in some ways that we realize only now. Looking back from 2021, does not this paradigm seem a bit *too* comfortable, *too* gratifying, offering a position a bit *too* narcissistic? Was it this feeling of moral and intellectual comfort that effectively blinded much of the intelligentsia to the "new" set of maladies we are facing today? Were these systemic errors of our pre-crisis grand narratives that assisted the rise of such issues as growing inequality, the rise of segregated and selfish elites, the birth of the global precariat, the return of religious fundamentalism, or political tribalism?

In the light of this (relatively) new set of social maladies, Fukuyama's 1990s vision, as well as the intellectual paradigms built around it, seem both utopian and naïve. As Fukuyama himself has also pointed out with unparalleled clarity in *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018), a whole number of previously unrecognized damaging processes came to fruition in the new century, resulting in a profound shift in our thinking. Fukuyama's main topic in this book, identity politics, is one of the best examples of the crisis of late-20th-century approaches and the grand narratives they were built upon. About thirty years after his end-of-history narrative went global, here Fukuyama demonstrates how an intellectual paradigm that seemed to enhance emancipation and social justice may also fuel social polarization, political tribalism, and the decline of tolerance. Such examples have woken us up to the fact that history is far from being over, some of humanity's most dramatic battles probably lie ahead of us, and in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century, we, intellectuals must leave our comfort zones, sort out our intellectual heritage, and learn to think more critically and more responsibly.

Of course, such paradigm shifts are less of a novelty for Eastern European intellectuals. After all, we did not have so much time to get *that* comfortable in that utopian bubble. Our institutions and positions were never made of ivory. My guess is that to many Eastern European intellectuals, such as Svetlana Boym, who witnessed the false promises and eventual demise of the communist version of the "end-of-history" narrative, the fact that history did not have a sublime end-point (contrary to Hegel, Marx, and the early Fukuyama) did not come as much of a surprise. As opposed to Fukuyama's distinctly modern concept of a "coherent development of modern societies" into "liberal democracies and technologically driven capitalism" (Fukuyama 2002, xii), Boym called attention to the utopian wishful thinking underlying (and potentially undermining) the project of modernity, and the characteristic instability of modern societies. Boym was also keen to highlight the ways our desire for a better future are repeatedly compromised by our yearning for (the fantasy of) a home outside or before history. Boym's crucial insight was that this interminable nostalgia is inextricably intertwined with the very idea of progress: "the sentiment (of nostalgia) [...] is at

the very core of the modern condition" (2001, xvi), and "nostalgic manifestations are side-effects of the teleology of progress" (10).

A comparative reading of Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) and Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future* (2002) may offer one the possibility to notice some of the mistaken assumptions and systemic blind spots that led to the 21st-century crisis of grand narratives. Reading these two books together one has the impression that Fukuyama's statistics-based, informative, rational arguments about the intoxicating prospect of eventually transcending the human condition feel overly cerebral and somehow reductive of what we know about the driving forces of history. Interestingly enough (and most gratifyingly for those of us who work in the humanities), Boym's observations, made on the grounds of cultural and art history, prove to be more "rounded", more sensitive, and thus more accurate with regard to the possible blind spots of modernity. One of the most obvious points where Boym got it right (and Fukuyama did not) is the issue of nostalgia. In Boym's formulation, "modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space: before entry into history" (2001, 8).

History proved Boym right: in the post-crisis world, this kind of nostalgic longing for imagined pasts is one of the most stable currencies. It was a main factor in the Brexit campaign's emphasis on Britain's past greatness, in Trump's idealization of America's "great" industrial past as well as in the rhetorical patterns of countless right-wing populist politicians over the world. It seems that the nostalgic, almost religious longing for a pre-historical edenic time and place can be successfully covered up by (and projected into) a utopian view of the future as long as modernity is delivering on its material promises. However, as soon as the rapture of ever-increasing material affluence is threatened by a crisis, this projection collapses, we lose hope of a fantasy future that could bring us what we lack, so we fall back on the regressive trails of nostalgia. This is precisely what we may witness in the post-crisis world: it is this temporal reorientation of desire and fantasies from the future to the past that delegitimizes progress-oriented metanarratives, re-tribalizes human communities, and causes a major ideological crisis that echoes through the entire social, political, and cultural sphere. There is a number of intellectuals, such as Stuart Sim, who regard this as a sure sign that we are approaching the end of modernity (as we knew it):

> Financial crisis, environmental crisis: what is the combination of credit crunch and global warming telling us about the way we live? I would contend that such events signal modernity has reached its limit as a cultural form. In consequence, we have to face up to the prospect of life "after

> modernity" where a very different kind of mental set than the one we have been indoctrinated with will be required. Modernity, my argument will go, has collapsed under the weight of its internal contradictions; the modern world's insatiable need for technologically driven economic progress has finally been revealed as unsustainable and, even more importantly, potentially destructive of both the planet and the socio-economic systems so painstakingly developed over the past few centuries. We have been encouraged to believe that those systems would roll on into the indefinite future, yielding ever better returns as they went; now, we shall have to think again. (Sim 2010, ix)

It is hard to deny that the series of the above mentioned 21st-century crises have seriously undermined the fundamental belief system of modernity. This is especially true, and is not likely to change any time soon, if one includes, like Sim, the effects of the ongoing ecological crisis as well. Bauman and Bordoni come to the same conclusion in *State of Crisis*, arguing that "the crisis facing the Western world is not temporary, but the sign of a profound change that involves the whole economic and social system and will have long-lasting effects" (2014, vii). Such studies of the post-crisis world and dramatic social, cultural, and economic realignments are convincing, and it is clear that we are living a "state of crisis", during precarious, transitory times, yet whether this amounts to the "end of modernity" remains to be seen. When declaring such a dramatic end point of modernity, are we not influenced by the very same cultural logic that we are trying to understand? Is it not possible that, somewhat paradoxically, it is the very cultural logic of modernity that would make us announce yet another historical turning point, this time the end of modernity?

As opposed to Sim, I would argue that it is too early to announce the death of the modern project. Perhaps ours is just another shift in the history of modernity: a turning point for sure, definitely crisis-like, a drastic change of direction with screaming tires and burning brakes, yet more likely a time of sorting out the heritage of modernity than moving "beyond" it entirely. Thus, as a safeguard against dramatic declarations of Fukuyama's and Sim's style, I would rather resort to a Boym-like definition of the present, early-21st-century crisis of modernity, which highlights its instability, uncertainty, and loss of direction. Thus, in order to denote the present stage of modernity, I propose appropriating Boym's concept of the *off-modern*. In the context of architecture and art history, Boym defines off-modern in the following ways:

> In the twenty-first century, modernity is our antiquity. We live with its ruins, which we incorporate into our present. Unlike the thinkers of the last *fin de siècle*, we neither mourn nor celebrate the end of history or the end

> of art. We have to chart a new road between unending development and nostalgia, find an alternative logic for the contradictions of contemporary culture. Instead of fast-changing prepositions—"post," "anti," "neo," "trans," and "sub"—that suggest an implacable movement forward, against, or beyond, I propose to go off: "off " as in "off the path," or way off, off-Broadway, off-brand, off the wall, and occasionally off-color. "Off-modern" is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history, at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress. (2017, 3)

Thus, Boym's concept of the off-modern, when applied to the post-crisis world, may well denote the present crisis of knowledge, the sense of confusion, the loss of direction, and the general questioning of modernity as a solid, well-founded, forward-moving, progressive historical movement. In other words, the concept of the off-modern signifies the feeling that we have lost our way, we have gone off the right track, this is not where we are meant to be, that something feels *off* with the project of modernity. As I propose it, the term signifies this crisis in our worldview and systems of knowledge, it stands for a socio-cultural dysfunction, an unravelling of little-understood fantasies, a painful disenchantment about our (almost religiously held) beliefs about some utopian, teleological metanarratives. In this sense, the off-modern is not meant to be the new name of the next historical era. It may always turn out to be a temporary dysfunction; one can never rule out the possibility that we will eventually sort out the heritage of modernity, get rid of the malfunctions, clarify our misguided preconceptions, throw out the garbage, recycle modernity in a purified, friendlier, smarter, more habitable way that does not feel this off. Hence the feeling of temporariness and transitoriness of our era: only time will tell how long this sorting out will take and how much damage we (and the planet) will have to endure before it does not feel so off anymore.

If you love films or have a cinematic imagination, you may imagine the situation in the thinly disguised allegory of a Danny-Boyle-style thriller. There is a group of hikers in the high mountains, on an excursion that looked like fun, the scenery is amazing, the challenges are thrilling and motivating. We already got quite far and feel quite high on our advance. The top seems so near, yet there are ominous signs, first easy to miss, later more pronounced, and the most experienced/learned/traumatized/sceptical one in the group keeps reminding us of the dangers that this altitude naturally entails. And then, suddenly, something bad happens. We realize that we have lost our way, that the path we have been following is a treacherous and dangerous one, causing the death of one of the hikers. The group is shocked. This is not what we signed up for, this was not part of the plan, this is not what the excursion was meant to be. Who is to blame? What shall we do?

When did we lose our way? Which decision was wrong? Suddenly we would all like to go home (*nostalgia*), and forget about this foolish trip altogether. But the damage cannot be undone, someone is dead, we are all in danger, and time is running out. It is hard to keep panic under control or not to resort to blaming each other. Some of us are still in the phase of denial, repeating our pre-crisis account of events, claiming that the damage has nothing to do with the path we have been following. But nobody can really keep a clear mind. The loss and the danger pushes the group towards emotional outbursts and irrational, excessive responses. Fraternity, solidarity, and friendship are unravelling. This is the moment of crisis in the medical sense of the term, the time when the future of the patient hangs in the balance (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 7), when we need clear thinking and solidarity most, yet that is swept away by fear and anger. In Danny Boyle thrillers – as in *Shallow Grave* (1994), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Sunshine* (2007) –, such unexpected events easily let loose the pathological, destructive underside of human beings, so we have to understand where we are and find the best possible track while also wrestling with all the dirty stuff that was buried (in shallow graves) underneath the nice and proper surface we maintained while everything looked alright. Will history follow the storyline of Boyle's thrillers? If so, more of the previously buried, off-smelling foul stuff is likely to emerge, and we are to see plenty of gore before we can reach any kind of narrative closure.

Such a Danny-Boyle-style thriller gets frighteningly close to the off-modern early 21st century. This is the time when the smell becomes intolerable, so we start opening the shallow graves of the modern project. As it turns out, most of our glittering modern skyscrapers have been built on these shallow graves, so the structures are compromised and instable. We are only beginning to understand why we are being visited by so many "ghosts of the past", those obscene creatures that are so off-sync with what this project was meant to be. The off-modern is also the time of encountering these bizarre, pre-modern leftovers, behaviour types, social processes, irrational responses that we thought we had already moved beyond (Boym 2017, 5). The grand project of modernity is sick, wounded by the failure of its latest utopian vision, tormented by its costly past mistakes, so it easily falls prey to all those who would like to feed on it: nationalist populists (like Trump or Orbán), shady autocrats (communist China, Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey), and religious fundamentalists (mostly the Islamists). Their critique of "the West", modernity, or capitalism is often correct, yet their responses to the crisis situation tend to be regressive and cynically opportunistic. In the present, off-modern ideological landscape, these regressive answers (that offer discount tickets to different historical or mythical times) are at war, at *the* culture war, with the (increasingly more confused, irrational, dogmatic, militant, and panicky) modernist progress beliefs. This confused and confusing, off-modern dispute takes place in an institutional and legal environment that was designed during

the good days, for the good days to come (no wonder that it fails so often and so spectacularly in times of crisis), and is mostly still run by a political élite and its supporting technocracy and epistemocracy (journalists, academics, government advisors, think tanks) who were educated and rose to their status during the glorious pre-crisis years.

One of the best examples of this off-modern confusion of historical grand narratives and the corresponding social imaginaries is the rise of a new kind of hybrid political formation that we usually (somewhat simplistically) refer to as nationalist populism. Let me refer to an example "close to home": the Orbán governments, which have been governing Hungary since 2010, can be regarded as a typical post-crisis, off-modern political formation. First, their breakthrough landslide election victory in 2010 was in no small part a reaction to the 2008 global financial crisis, and the ensuing disenchantment with global neoliberal capitalism (and the political mainstream that had decided to let it loose). In other words, the political formation and ideological narrative established by the Orbán governments would be unimaginable without the crisis of our pre-crisis grand narratives. What we have seen in Hungary since 2010 (and probably elsewhere in the world too) is a typical crisis response, a reactive political-ideological makeshift fabricated as an answer to the delegitimization of the pre-crisis mainstream.

The Orbán regime's policies and political messages also reveal a profound shift in the political narratives of late modernity: in an increasingly threatening, confusing, rapidly changing world, the Orbán regime offers more predictability and security at the price of less freedom and less democratic values. This is a clear reversal of our modern assumptions about progress and democratization, which entails many characteristically off-modern inner contradictions. One of these is the paradox of freedom: Orbán's 19th-century style narrative of constant fight for national freedom and independence (usually understood as freedom from the EU's supra-national bureaucracy) is accompanied by a strong state power (with few checks and balances) that does not regard individual citizens as capable of making informed, free decisions and upholds a system that reduces free democratic citizens to obedient followers of an autocratic, semi-religious personality cult.

There is a similar, off-modern mismatch between Orbán's recycling of 19th-century nationalism, his conservative critique of late-20th-century modernity, and his characteristically postmodern operational definition of truth. The media and communications apparatus of Orbán's hybrid regime seems to be founded on the recognitions that human beings relate to the world through narratives (see Lyotard's elaboration of narrative knowledge in *The Post-Modern Condition*), that "metaphors are more tenacious than facts" (so as to use Paul de Man's famous phrasing from *Allegories of Reading* 1979, 5), that cognitive dissonance created by empirical evidence never seriously endangers the popularity of emotionally

embedded, reassuring political narratives, hammered by a professional media empire. In other words, the system's regressive, anti-modernist nationalism (in which "postmodern" is a swearword) is promoted by a characteristically postmodern, "post-crisis" and "post-truth" media apparatus, which relies on some of the very principles and technologies of power that it criticizes in Western democracies.

My goal here is not so much to reiterate a liberal critique of the Orbán regime. Rather, I wish to emphasize the extent to which this (apparently very successful) political formation manifests many characteristic features of the above described, crisis-ridden, off-modern cultural logic of the early 21st century. Is it possible that Orbán understands something about the 21st century that politicians in more affluent countries, in more privileged circumstances have failed to comprehend? Is it possible that after all Orbán has a more accurate view of some problematic issues of modernity, for example, about the human need for security, the irrational aspect of politics, the illusionary nature of free will, the nature and need of dignity, or the seductiveness of tribal identity narratives?

As such examples may indicate, our current off-modern world and its crisis of grand narratives can be intellectually fruitful because such symptoms of the post-crisis, off-modern world reveal questions about some of the fundamental assumptions of modernity, and as such they are to be studied and learnt from. Ironically, our "post-truth" era has revealed several "truths" of late-20th-century capitalism and liberal democracies that were effectively covered up or neglected during our intoxicating pre-crisis dream of the end of history.

Such examples may explain why I associate the off-modern with the state (and sense) of crisis, which is not only financial or environmental but also social, political, cultural, and ideological (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 21–25). This is why one could argue that the disorienting time of the off-modern amounts to nothing less than what Foucault used to call a *coupure épistémologique*, an epistemological break (Foucault 1997). In other words, in the 21st century, the *meaning* of things (in the most general, radical, and philosophical sense) has changed. Democracy, progress, citizenship, free will, equality, liberalism, capitalism – none of the keywords of our late-20th-century worldview were left unaltered by this profound shift. Things simply do not mean the same as they did before the crisis, and they probably never will. Furthermore, true to the spirit of an epistemological rupture, now several of our key pre-crisis concepts seem naïve, ideologically motivated, or simply based on mistaken assumptions (Fraser 2007, xvii–xviii; Foucault 1997, 4). This is why the temporality of crisis is also that of a cut, a break, a moment when the constructedness and discontinuity of history comes to light (Foucault 1997, 4–22; Webb 2013, 12). This is also why the off-modern is also a time of intellectual reflection and comprehension. We are disoriented beings living the times of an epistemological rupture, a profound and

radical socio-cultural and political rearrangement that Western societies have not experienced since the Second World War.

Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic can be regarded as only the latest, albeit loudest, and so far most devastating wake-up call. It reminds us of how degrading ecosystems make such infectious diseases become more likely, how globalization has made humanity vulnerable to the spread of deadly viruses; it revealed the fragility of economies reliant on global supply chains, highlighted the value of stability and safety in a global system designed with the sole goal of profit-maximization, increased the social rift between white-collar workers (whose jobs can be easier done online) and manual workers, and, in the long run, it is further increasing inequality both in individual states as well as in the global context. It is a wake-up call reminding us that the most important challenges of our times can only be solved on a global scale, and that we need to readjust, get rid of our previous blind spots, and develop the kinds of institutions, theories, policies, and narratives that enable us to tackle such crises. We need to understand that not only the job descriptions of physicians and medical workers changed overnight: the intellectual elites have to wake up from their comforting slumber too. Talking about culture is not a comfortable classroom task anymore. What we think, how we interpret texts, how we conceptualize social and cultural phenomena have acquired a new significance. We need new stories about ourselves, new concepts and theories about humanity, new priority lists, and a newly engaged intelligentsia to help humanity through the challenges of the new century.

Appendix: Questions and Answers

Boróka Prohászka-Rád: Is it possible that the crisis of humanities, which we have been talking about for decades, can be surpassed exactly at this point when the humanities seem to have a vital role in re-shaping narratives about humanity?

György Kalmár: I do hope that that is the case. I agree that in recent decades the social and cultural role of the humanities have been continuously decreasing. I see this as a mistake that can be traced back to some misconceptions that our dominant cultural logic dictates. Misconceptions, for example, about how to build a good human society or what constitutes a good life. (I use these seemingly anachronistic terms with reference to Aristotle.) It seems that we have to reinvestigate some of our key ideas about such issues, such as what a good life is or what we really need. The 21st century will have to challenge our current ideas about materialism, individualism, or consumerism. This cultural mythology will have to change, and the humanities as well as social values and cultural values will have to re-emerge as important elements of the new cultural logic.

The humanities should have a crucial role in this process. That is us. Therefore, what we do, what we think and write do matter.

Renáta Zsámba: What is your opinion about Huntington's concept of the clash of civilizations and his critique of Fukuyama? Do you find Huntington's ideas relevant to the present-day crisis?

György Kalmár: That is an important question, and also a difficult one. Some political and ideological tribes still consider Huntington's vision crucial; they think that the future is going to look like that. I think it is possible that in certain parts of the world events will unfold according to this vision. However, in my opinion, the challenges that lie ahead of us can only be answered globally, by getting beyond this tribal, "clash-of-civilizations" logic. If we keep fighting these tribal wars, then we are basically finished. Perhaps this is the greatest social experiment in human history, whether the better angels of our hearts will prevail. The results are not in yet. I hope Huntington was mistaken, but I have the feeling that there will be many moments in the next fifty years when we think that after all he was right. Perhaps those will be the times when you do not want to watch the news or switch on the TV because you do not want to watch what is going on.

What I focused on in this lecture, however, was not intercivilizational conflict but rather the crisis and inner shifts in what Huntington refers to as Western Civilization. In my opinion, the present crisis is mostly due to the inner problems of modernity. I hope I could also indicate why what Huntington calls Western Civilization cannot be treated as a solid, distinct, monolithic entity with a transhistorical essence. It is changing right in front of our eyes.

Constantin Parvulescu: You are an intellectual working at a university and supported by national funds. As an embedded intellectual within these institutions, do you feel that your ideas are supported institutionally? How do you see our institutions? In the processes you described, institutions are quite important.

György Kalmár: I think there is an institutional crisis, mostly because our institutions were designed in the pre-crisis, "good years", with that Fukuyama-style vision in sight, with the idea that it is going to be plain sailing. If, for example, you look at how the European Union treats the pandemic, how slow and clumsy it is, you realize that when a crisis hits, these institutions do not really work. Ironically, the best advertisements for nationalist populists has been probably the European Union itself, by being so clumsy in these crisis situations. Marginal political figures on the other hand, such as nationalist populists, responded to the crisis better than the establishment. They were quicker to understand what is going on, what the weak points of the mainstream are and how to exploit that. I think they surf these waves of change better than the mainstream. My theory is that the more privileged, powerful, and wealthy an institution is, the more protected it is from crises, the longer it can pretend that everything is okay, and

the later it will respond. That is why the more mainstream an institution used to be, the clumsier it became after the crisis. Smaller and perhaps more marginal institutions were quicker to respond. That is why we have to think and find ways to reform our institutions for the new century. We need to put thinking into it. That is where we can intervene.

Anna Menyhért: I do not see the channels and the frameworks how this change in the status of humanities can happen. What we can see is the general devaluation of humanities at all levels. You talked about Fukuyama being naïve and too optimistic, but now I think that *you* are a bit too optimistic because you did not say *how* this change will happen.

György Kalmár: Perhaps if you enlarge the time frame, it becomes easier to understand. It is hard to make predictions. I do not have my crystal ball with me right now, but my bet is that by the end of the century the humanities, and all the cultural and social values they promote, will be more important. But before we get there, we have some radical and shocking crisis situations to live through. Probably the global population will be halved by then, our institutions and political formations will be quite different, our concepts of life and what is a good life will be quite different. The present form of modernity will probably look like a historical relic. But it is a long way till there, and we have to reach several historical breaking-points before we start changing these paradigms, because we are so deeply rooted in this form of modernity. We have been practising this for at least three hundred years. That does not change from one decade to the other. Twenty bad years of crisis, like the ones we have behind, will not change a cultural logic practised for three hundred years. But I think it will eventually change. One of the things that will change it is a whole new series of crises that will break this cultural logic. The other, hopefully, will be a whole set of new discoveries, not just technological but also about human beings and communities. In my opinion, we have to start putting ideas into this change, to create a pool, so that when a crisis hits we can rely on these ideas and theories. They should be around, in the minds of policy-makers. We have to start working beforehand; it is not enough to react when something hits us. At least, that is what my crystal ball told me last night, but it is not always reliable, you know…

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Natural Disasters and the Rise of the Modern Prometheus

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to present a specific literary evolution in the context of catastrophes brought by war, revolutions, pandemics, and natural disaster. Discussing works by Daniel Defoe and the Byron–Shelley circle, we will observe how traumatic events influenced literary and artistic expression, reflecting the social, political, and historical context of the authors' lives. People tend to relate to heroes and myths more easily in times of crisis, hoping to find force and motivation in their fight for survival and improvement. The myth of Prometheus as a benefactor of mankind was one of the most influential for romantics, with Byron and Shelley casting him as a revolutionary hero that helps man combat the tyranny of his oppressors. Mythopoeic romantic poets such as Blake, Byron, and Shelley hoped to animate their fellows with their revolutionary creation into fighting against autocracy and for their liberties. Mary Shelley, on the other hand, turned Prometheus from the mythical ancient hero of humanity into the modern romantic anti-hero, creating in the process the first modern work of science-fiction.

Keywords: Prometheus, myth, modern, pandemic, disasters

Introduction

Today, with the global fear caused by the pandemic, people need to relate to previous similar experiences, be they real, historical events like the Spanish Flu or fictional ones. There has been an abundance of news relating to the previous major pandemic one hundred years ago, and there are reports in the news about readers showing a sudden interest in representative works of fiction depicting pandemics such as Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* and Albert Camus's *The Plague*.

Considering literature as an expression of human thoughts and observations on their environment since the earliest times, catastrophic events of major impact

on human lives and societies have been reflected in literature since its beginning. Some of the oldest recorded texts hold references to cataclysmic events that changed the course of history and the fate of mankind. The Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, the Greek mythology, the Bible, etc. present people's views about the origin and creation of the world and humanity. The unexplainable was attributed to supernatural dimensions. Gods and titans, angels and demons populated the first sacred texts, where people were merely imperfect and impotent reflections of their creators. Amongst them, the mythical figure of Prometheus stands out, as a god of fire that helped people more than any other, and even sacrificed himself for the benefit of humankind. The myth of Prometheus, a myth of creation, is relevant for our discussion because it is about the creation of life and about the consequences of that creation, as well as about the fate of that creation. In the revolutionary torments that were shaking Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a new fate for humanity was at stake. Rebellion against an oppressive earthly authority that had been long established on foundations of divine empowerment took forms that included revolt against all manifestations of oppression and authority, religious included. It is this idealized and revolutionary interpretation of the myth that appealed to English romantic poets like Blake, Byron, or Percy Shelley, and, somewhat differently, to Mary Shelley. Percy Bysshe Shelley and his friend Lord Byron had a vision of Prometheus that embodied the Titan as a liberator of humanity, while Mary Shelley's approach was rather one of a failure, a Romantic anti-hero that was trying to help the human race, but whose endeavours, due to his own weak nature, ended inevitably in chaos and disaster.

Between Myth and Reality: Natural Disasters and Pandemics

Man seems to have created the myths of his own origin and evolved together with those myths, in a reciprocal dependency. In the attempt to explain their place in the universe and their own creation and fate, people conceived myths to account for them. In the opinion of Northrop Frye, mythmaking has several important functions, control being the most necessary:

> Man is a myth-making as well as a tool-using animal, but constant vigilance is needed to make sure that he keeps control of what he makes. For it is with myths as it is with technology: just as man invents the wheel and then talks about a wheel of fate or fortune overriding everything he does, so he creates gods and then announces that the gods have created him. He makes his own creation, in short, a power to stop himself from creating. (2005, 151)

It is exactly that control of creation and the failure to exercise it that play a decisive role in the novel of Frankenstein and makes the modern Prometheus an anti-hero of humanity.

Myths and legends of the oldest times retain relations of catastrophic natural events that plague mankind. From the story of the flood, present in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Greek mythology, and the Bible, to the ten plagues mentioned in the Exodus, disasters seem to have accompanied the difficult history of man as constant and terrible threats to his very existence and a present reminder of his fragility and constant exposure to the whims of higher powers. Scientists today believe they have found rational explanations for such ancient calamities: natural phenomena of extraordinary amplitude. Some of them attribute the ancient stories of the flood to events like the end of the last Ice Age, with the massive retraction of ice leaving behind immense quantities of water to be captured by the Black Sea and suddenly released into the Mediterranean, or a devastating eruption of the volcano on Santorini, causing a huge tsunami that swept away the entire coast of the Mediterranean Sea, obliterating ancient civilizations that were mostly developing on the coast. Science and religion may continue their modern debates as to the origins of such blurred ancient epic cataclysms, but historical records closer to our times can offer more precise information as to the natural changes, disasters, wars, revolutions, and pandemics that have afflicted humanity in modern times. Scientists have found that the northern hemisphere underwent a process of cooling from around 1300 to 1850, leading to dramatic events in European history. Towards the end of that period, the most powerful volcanic eruption ever recorded – the Tambora eruption of 1815 – contributed even further to dramatic climate change that was to influence the creation of some of the most daring literary expressions of modern times: Byron's and Percy Shelley's poems "Prometheus" and "Prometheus Unbound", John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

Pandemics have also been a constant reminder of human frailty when exposed to the uncontrollable forces of nature. This has most likely been so since the beginning of our history and, as present events remind us, is still the case. The great plagues that swept across Europe were documented as tragic witnesses and apocalyptical warnings for generations to come. The Black Death, the most devastating and fatal pandemic that is recorded to have ever hit humankind, is estimated to have killed 30–60% of Europe's population in the middle of the fourteenth century. It was the second great catastrophe of the century, after the Great Famine of 1315–1317 caused by crop failure related to the natural process of climate change that started the Little Ice Age. Survivors left their impressions in writing and in frescoes and paintings on church walls, leading to an artistic allegorical motif of the Middle Ages known as the *Danse Macabre*. Promoted by the works of German painter Hans Holbein the Younger in the sixteenth century,

the theme was of much interest to nineteenth-century composers Franz Liszt and Camille Saint-Saëns.

After the late Middle Ages, the next major outbreak of pestilence to devastate England was the Great Plague of London (1665–1666), which killed nearly a quarter of London's population, approximately 100,000 people. It was followed the same year by the Great Fire of London, which left 7 out of 8 inhabitants of the City homeless. One of the best sources that documents the Great Plague of London with references to the Great Fire as well is Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722. The book was written in a form that triggered from the beginning discussions related to its genre – documentary or fiction. It recollects the memories of a survivor of the Plague and Fire, a certain H. F., who has been associated with Defoe's uncle, Henry Foe, an eyewitness and survivor of the pestilence. The book, published under the initials H. F., gives a detailed account of the events in London during the plague, some of which bear striking resemblances with those of the COVID pandemic of our days.[1]

One specific social behaviour that can be noticed today, when people are already tired by the long pandemic and by the restrictive measures imposed on their lives, is that of relaxation before time, abandoning the lockdown and going back to business as usual, disregarding the sanitary measures meant for protection and prevention. It was not different 350 years ago: "yet as I have observed that the distemper intermitted often at first, so they were, as it were, alarmed and unalarmed again, and this several times, till it began to be familiar to them; and that even when it appeared violent, yet seeing it did not presently spread into the city, or the east and south parts, the people began to take courage, and to be, as I may say, a little hardened" (Defoe 1722, 15).

To add even further to the dramatics of the situation and to the increased apocalyptical fear and superstitious frenzy, cosmic events anticipated and accompanied the disasters, like a grim prediction of terrible punishments cast upon mankind. Two comets crossed the sky of London, one before the plague and another before the great fire. Although comets as natural phenomena were already understood by scientists and educated people, in the eyes of the many,

1 Orders of the Mayor of London in 1665:
"Feasting prohibited.
That all public feasting, and particularly by the companies of this city, and dinners at taverns, ale-houses, and other places of common entertainment, be forborne till further order and allowance; and that the money thereby spared be preserved and employed for the benefit and relief of the poor visited with the infection.
Tippling-houses.
That disorderly tippling in taverns, ale-houses, coffee-houses, and cellars be severely looked unto, as the common sin of this time and greatest occasion of dispersing the plague. And that no company or person be suffered to remain or come into any tavern, ale-house, or coffee-house to drink after nine of the clock in the evening, according to the ancient law and custom of this city, upon the penalties ordained in that behalf." (Defoe 1722, 35)

they were warnings of divine sanctions to come. In times of crises, when all logical answers seem to fail, the return to mysticism and superstition appeals most conveniently to people, be it to try and explain the unexplainable, or to suggest the possible achievement of the seemingly impossible. The latter seems to have been put to work by English romantic poets and revolutionaries such as Blake, Byron, and Shelley and their ilk.

A Premonition of Enlightened Thought: A Chain of Volcanic Eruptions to Change the World

Mary Shelley chose to send the young Frankenstein to study in Germany, in the town of Ingolstadt. That choice cannot be by chance. Ingolstadt was known as the birthplace of the secret society of the Illuminati, founded by Bavarian professor Adam Weishaupt in that university town. The movement gained much influence and spread across Europe in the mid-1780s, before being banned by the Bavarian government. The Illuminati society is thought to have been a republican one that intended also to replace Christian religion with a new kind of religion based on reason. Such goals were more than welcome by the daughter of the revolutionary figures Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and the lover of radical republican and atheist anarchist Percy Shelley. Ingolstadt would become the perfect place for Frankenstein's initiation into the secrets of mysterious knowledge and out-of-the-ordinary experiments. One of the metaphoric images used by enlightened scholars and by the Illuminati was that of volcanic eruptions symbolizing the outburst of the repressed people through revolutions that would change the face of the world. Like in a volcanic eruption, immense tensions accumulated over centuries of social and political oppression would be released forcefully and unstoppably. The association of human uprising to the uncontrollable forces of nature unleashed was meant to illustrate that once liberated, man's freedoms would not be contained by any earthly or heavenly authority. Many saw the French Revolution as such an outburst. And some even believed that real volcanic eruptions contributed to and were associated with such human outbreaks.

In romantic literature nature was observed and invoked, even adulated more than ever. The end of the Little Ice Age, as the cooling from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries is known today, coincided with some other major natural outbreaks: volcanic eruptions that possibly led to social upheavals and revolutions, with consequent effects on literature and philosophy. The eruptions of the volcanoes Laki (Iceland, June 1783–February 1784), Vesuvius (Italy, 1794), and Tambora (Indonesia, April 1815) were three of the most powerful blasts recorded in history that are also associated with social and political events that

led to dramatic consequences in human history. The Laki eruption of 1783–1784 is believed by some historians to have contributed to the sparks that ignited the French Revolution due to the climatic changes its clouds of volcanic ash caused in Europe, leading to famine and poverty in much of France. The eruption of Vesuvius in June 1794 coincided with the height of the Great Terror during the French Revolution and was interpreted by some as the announcement of its end the following month. The Tambora eruption of April 1815 is the largest volcanic eruption in recorded history, and its climatic consequences might have influenced the creation of some of the most original, remarkable, and enduring pieces of literature.

The global effect of the Tambora eruption was "the year without summer". 1816 is registered as a very cold, wet, and dark year in many parts of the northern hemisphere. In several parts of Central and Western Europe and New England the ashes of Tambora covered the skies and prevented the sun from casting enough light and warmth onto the earth, with calamitous effects on agriculture. Europe, already devastated by the long Napoleonic Wars, experienced in some of its regions a disastrous famine that caused people to leave their homes, wandering aimlessly throughout the country in extreme poverty and starvation. Switzerland and South Germany were hit especially hard. A terrible reminder of that famine is a coin issued by the city of Nuremberg in 1817, with the inscription: "O gieb mir Brod mich hungert" and "Verzaget nicht – Gott lebet noch" (Oh give me bread I am hungry – Do not be disheartened, God still lives)" (Brönnimann 2016, 32).

Political Revolutions and Poetic Rebellion

After some of the revolutionary ideals of the Enlightenment had been partially implemented at the beginning of the French Revolution, the Great Terror that followed and the end of the French Republic under Napoleon's military dictatorship and imperial ambitions was a devastating blow for many reformers, republicans, and liberals all over Europe. In Germany, Friedrich Schiller, also known as the "poet of freedom", was disappointed by the turn taken by the French Revolution, and dismissed the citizenship of honour that was granted to him by the French Republic. In England, William Godwin and his daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin were also enthusiastic intellectuals with revolutionary views. Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was one of the first public feminists, a liberal progressist, and author of the first feminist manifesto: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). William Godwin was an influential figure in British literature and society, considered to be one of the first influential representatives of British radicalism and anarchism. With such ancestry, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin could not have fallen far from the tree. Within the influence of her

parents' ideas lays also the explanation for her particular vision of the modern Prometheus, in contrast to the Byronic–Shelleyan ideal of the mythological hero, as we shall further explain.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem "Prometheus", published in 1789 – the year of the French Revolution –, is the first powerful and influential example of the modern image of Prometheus infused by the spirit of the Enlightenment. The enlightened man does not recognize Zeus's authority over humankind any longer and claims that he is capable and willing to decide over his own destiny. The enlightened spirit feels now liberated from the state of tutelage described in 1784 by Immanuel Kant in his essay on the meaning of Enlightenment. According to Kant's theory on Enlightenment, man was in a state of tutelage, not being able to manage his own destiny because he did not have the courage to use his own reason. *Sapere aude – Dare to know* is, according to Kant, the motto of the Enlightenment. Goethe's Prometheus, the embodiment of the spirit of the Enlightenment, makes it clear that he now has the knowledge and claims for himself the rule of the Earth:

Musst mir meine Erde	Now you must leave alone
Doch lassen stehn,	My Earth for Me,
Und meine Hütte, die du nicht gebaut,	And my hut, which you did not build,
Und meinen Herd,	And my hearth,
Um dessen Glut	The glowing whereof
Du mich beneidest.	You envy me.[2]

In a complete revolutionary turn, it is not man who envies the gods, but it is the supreme God that envies man.

The Year without a Summer

In the summer of 1816 – the year without a summer –, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was accompanying her lover, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his self-imposed exile from England. Pressed by his creditors and tired of his trials for inheritance, Shelley flew from London and embarked for Europe on 3 May 1816, ten days after Lord Byron had done the same thing, also running away from his creditors, but additionally from a huge scandal caused by his relations with his half-sister Augusta and the divorce that it prompted. In the summer of 1816, Shelley and Byron met for the first time on the shores of Lake Geneva. The meeting had been arranged by Mary's half-sister Claire, who initiated an affair

2 Translation © Richard Stokes, author of *The Book of Lieder*, published by Faber, provided courtesy of Oxford Lieder (*www.oxfordlieder.co.uk*).

with Lord Byron just before his going into the exile from which he would never return. Mary had started an affair with Percy Shelley two years earlier, when she was sixteen and the poet twenty-four. Percy was married and had a son with his wife Harriet. Mary's father, William Godwin, whom Percy came to visit as a mentor before engaging with Mary, banished him from the house and forbad Mary to see him. They fled to Europe taking Mary's half-sister Claire with them. During their journey through Europe, they took a tour on the Rhine, a strong attraction for the English in those days, with its castles, wild nature, and legends like the *Nibelungenlied* or the new fantasy of *Loreley*, created a few years earlier by Clemens Brentano. Many English people considered the Rhine and the nature and tales that enveloped it as the essence of romantic themes and motifs.

After such a romantic preamble, during which Mary Shelley came very close to the Frankenstein Castle near Darmstadt, and to the legends that surrounded it, our travellers would arrive two years later, in 1816, on the shores of Lake Geneva, determined to spend the summer there. But 1816 was not a common year. Switzerland, and Geneva in particular, was a place sought out by wealthy Europeans who, driven by romantic impulses, were rediscovering the wonders of nature's wild beauty. People went there to spend the cooler summers on the lake and take long trips to the spectacular mountains of Jura and Mont Blanc. The weather was generally very pleasant, allowing for long walks on the lake's shore and daily boat trips on the lake. But that particular year, after the Tambora eruption, was not a usual one. The pronounced cooling in temperature caused by the eruption one year earlier translated into cold, bad weather for most of the time. Meteorological surveys of that year in other parts of Switzerland indicate that only on three days in July did it not rain. There were 28 days of rain out of 31, the rain typically falling for the entire day, as compared to 11 normally (Brönnimann 2016, 20). There were unusual violent storms, like those of 13 June and the following days, confining the tourists and residents to the indoors for several days and nights. The spectacular storm was to inspire scenes in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826) as well as in Byron's "Darkness" (1816). Shelley's group went for consecutive evenings in June to Villa Diodati, Byron's residence for the summer, and even spent some of the nights there due to the heavy rains. A common way to spend those evenings was to gather after dinner and discuss matters of poetry, politics, and philosophy. Long hours of discussion continued well into the night, with Mary Godwin being particularly fascinated and absorbed by the exchange of philosophical ideas between Byron and Shelley.[3] As a lighter alternative for entertainment over the long evenings, ghost stories were always a pleasant digression. It was on one such occasion that, after reading from an old and very rare book of German ghost stories brought, probably, by Byron (Holmes 1994, 379), the lord had the idea of a writing contest,

3 As she states in the introduction to the second edition of Frankenstein.

provoking everyone there to write a ghost story. Mary had been listening for some time enchanted by the discussions of Shelley and Byron as to the origin and meaning of life. Byron's young companion, a physician named Polidori, added to the discussions his very good knowledge of the latest medical practices, while Shelley remembered some of the experiments he did when studying. Electricity and galvanism were hot topics at the time. The result of this proposal, amplified by the extraordinary knowledge and skills of the circle, and augmented by the terrible climate, was a Gothic tale of horror that was to become the first modern novel of science-fiction: *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*. Polidori also published a short story, *The Vampyre*, more of a pamphlet, introducing through it the theme of the vampire to a broader modern audience. The publication of his story would not bring him any fame though, rather trouble, as he was accused of plagiarizing Byron. It is possible that he wrote this story after one told on those evenings by Byron. Byron had been acquainted with the topic of vampirism during his travels to Greece and Albania, six-seven years earlier. In his poem "The Giaour", he had introduced the English reader already to the feared character. Polidori's account also mentions the legend as a specific superstition of the Balkan area. It must have been so, if we consider the attention paid by the Austrian authorities to the phenomenon of alleged vampirism in their Balkan territories in the eighteenth century. Maria Theresa's personal physician, a Dutch doctor named Gerard van Swieten (a source of inspiration for Bram Stoker in the creation of his character van Helsing), was put in charge of investigations in the region of today's Serbia and Bosnia to elucidate the strange stories of vampirism that were circulating in the area. He found, of course, nothing to support such superstitions, but it shows nevertheless the strong impact such legends had on people in the Balkan area.

The Birth of the Modern Prometheus

The fantastic creature that was introduced to the Western audience before the introduction of the modern vampire by Polidori has had a deep impact and resonance on European and world culture in the last two hundred years: the modern Prometheus. The bad weather of 1816 might have influenced the Byron–Shelley poetic circle in Geneva in their choice of long discussion on life and the role of man in the universe and of writing dark Gothic stories of horror, but the germs of the modern Prometheus lie much deeper in the general context of the age. The traumatic novel is the result of a traumatic age. The scientific and industrial revolutions resulted in a revolution of thought – the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The philosophers of the Age of Reason, starting with Thomas Hobbes and continuing with Voltaire, Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant, were pleading for a new social order,

for a new world order. In that new order, people were to be guided only by their reason and to regain in this way their natural rights. Freedom, liberty, and equality of chances started to be viewed as the basic, fundamental rights of people, ideals everybody was invited to adopt and to help establish.

The political order, though, did not follow. The American Revolution was the first successful liberation movement that consecrated the modern philosophical, political, and social principles. In Europe, the immense tension that had been building up for centuries exploded eventually into the French Revolution. Liberals, democrats, progressists, and revolutionaries all over Europe and in America were thrilled. Their hopes were higher than ever; an ancient dream of man was within grasp, right there, in front of their eyes. For quite a few of them, the bitter disappointment that followed[4] turned much of their enthusiasm into despair. Liberal and romantic thinkers and poets were trying to save the moment and animate people with their heroic poems of ancient times, populated with both benevolent and maleficent gods that were fighting each other over the fate of humankind. People were called to take their destinies into their own hands and overthrow man's corrupt system of power and return to a natural state of liberation, both physical and mental.

The context was ripe for the invocation of one of man's greatest heroes, the Titan Prometheus. The classical education of the time in Europe relied heavily on the classics of antiquity, tracing all roots of Western culture to the Greek and Roman worlds of ancient times. Such education would inspire Byron, Shelley, and his wife-to-be Mary to draw on the mythical figure of Prometheus as an embodiment of man's highest ideals of freedom. Mary though – and this is her highly innovative approach – chose not to follow the classical representation and instead turned Prometheus into a modern anti-hero. Inevitably influenced by her classical education, revolutionary parents, the historical context, and her entourage, she created a modern myth out of an ancient one, rearranging the eternal cycle of life and death and reinterpreting the role of creator and creation.

For an eighteen-year-old, to have produced such a fantasy novel seems almost incredible. From where to get such ideas when one is so young, ideas like using the dead to create living monsters? A possible answer is given by the traumatic events of that age. One of the most influential English philosophers of the time was still Edmund Burke, and his theories and opinions were widely circulated. In a 1796 letter written in his own defence, Burke relates some of the terrible events during the Great Terror period of the French Revolution:

> They have hyenas to prey upon carcasses. The national menagerie is collected by the first physiologists of the time; and it is defective in no description of savage nature. […]. Neither sex, nor age, nor the sanctuary

4 The Great Terror and the end of the Republic under Napoleon.

> of the tomb, is sacred to them. They have so determined a hatred to all privileged orders that they deny even to the departed the sad immunities of the grave. […]. Their turpitude purveys to their malice; and they unplumb the dead for bullets to assassinate the living. If all revolutions were not proof against all caution, I should recommend it to their consideration that *no persons were ever known in history, either sacred or profane, to vex the sepulchre, and, by their sorceries, to call up the prophetic dead, with any other event than the prediction of their own disastrous fate.* (Burke 1903, 5; emphasis added)

Burke's reference is to the Revolutionary Exhumations at Saint-Denis in 1793, when the tombs of royalties and other prominent figures in French history were desecrated by legislative order in a symbolic gesture against all previous order. This governmental sacrilege by the profanation of tombs, meant also to destroy the memory of the French kings, sent a wave of shock and disgust throughout Europe. The earthly remains of the great leaders of the nation were dismembered and covered with quicklime for the rapid corrosion of the remains that were then dumped in common trenches (Lindsay 2014, 1).

Such stories made the headlines of European and British newspapers and were intensely discussed and debated upon. The case of Burke using that horrific event in a letter of defence is just one example. Mary Shelley must have known about that horrible desecration and that might have also been a source of inspiration for the novel. Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus, the scientist who believes he can help mankind by creating new life from the dead, is also desecrating tombs in order to accomplish his own scientific revolution. With no regard for the dead, no respect for those passed, this is already a universal taboo broken by the frantic, maniacal Frankenstein during his act of creation. In creating such a Promethean figure as Frankenstein, Mary might also premonish of a fate reflecting the revolution that ends up eating its own children.[5] The unorthodox and uncontrolled use of science without moral restraint might end up destroying humanity. The reversed perception of the modern anti-hero's actions is that, while assuming for himself the role of a God, a Creator, instead of creating life from chaos, he turns life into chaos, risking not only the safety of himself and his beloved ones but also the fate of humanity. In this way, he does not bring order into a chaotic world, nor does he create a world from nothingness, but, on the contrary, risks destroying everything that has been achieved by humankind in its historical evolution. His actions are not altruistic and glorious acts to help his fellow man but lunatic pursuits of vanity for his own glory. He creates but is not capable of taking responsibility for his creation. He does not even dare

5 In a 1793 writing, Jacques Mallet du Pan introduced the expression "like Saturn, the Revolution devours its children". Saturn is the Latin version of Cronos, the first-generation Titan.

to confront his creation but instead runs away cowardly, hoping that his deeds will remain unknown, that the monster will somehow vanish from the earth. When his creation traces his whereabouts and confronts him, he fails again, and again. The antithesis to the ancient myth and to the modern interpretation of Goethe, Byron, and Percy Shelley is complete. Everything in the development in the story predicts Frankenstein's own disastrous fate following his sacrileges and "sorceries", just as in Burke's vision of the French revolutionaries. The story might be the result of revolutionary disappointment and at the same time a warning for the future.

Prometheus – The Original

In his work *Language and Myth*, Ernst Cassirer makes a direct connection between the meaning of language and the meaning of myth. In his opinion, the interpretation of myths is not possible without the interpretation of the names of mythical heroes. The name, claims Cassirer, gives the actual identity of the characters and explains their actions and their roles.

> Here in the realm of spooks and daemons, as well as in the higher reaches of mythology, the Faustian word seemed ever to hold good: here it was always assumed that the essence of each mythical figure could be directly learned from its name. The notion that name and essence bear a necessary and internal relation to each other, that the name does not merely denote but actually is the essence of its object, that the potency of the real thing is contained in the name – that is one of the fundamental assumptions of the mythmaking consciousness itself. (Cassirer 1953, 3)

For Cassirer, that theory becomes a "methodological principle" for discussing myths in a scientific and philosophical way. Following his method, we shall try to present the origin of the character and his name. Prometheus's name could be translated as "forethought" or "fore-thinker", and, by extension, association, and contextualization, even as "foreseer". His brother Epimetheus's name would mean as much as "afterthought", while his future wife bore the deceptive name of Pandora, meaning "all-gifts". The names of the two Titans, credited by several ancient sources with the creation of human and animal life on Earth, is symbolic for the dual nature of man. The two constantly colliding sides of man stand antithetical to each other in a permanent attempt to create the necessary balance to maintain the correct direction. While Prometheus, the fore-thinker, is constantly looking forward to the future, Epimetheus is looking at the past. Prometheus is depicted as intelligent, daring, and brave, while his brother is considered naïve

and even foolish. Prometheus could "foresee" the poisonous gift that the trickery of Zeus sent in the form of Pandora, but Epimetheus nevertheless ignored all of his brother's warnings and advice. But Prometheus may also have suffered from his own weak nature. According to Hesiod's version of the myth, the first one to be transmitted, the lauded Titan and friend of humanity might also have had a darker side. Due to his recklessness and double play, instead of helping humans he actually brought the wrath of the gods upon them by his audacious actions. The well-known fire episode is second to the episode of the offerings to the gods, implying the sacrifice of an ox from which Prometheus trickily offered the bones wrapped in fat to the gods, while keeping the meat for the humans. The angry Zeus punished man for this, by forbidding him fire and thus the possibility of cooking his meat, forcing him therefore into an animal-like state. To repair his mistake, Prometheus stole fire from the gods, and this time was himself punished by Zeus. But people had to suffer even more. All pestilence was brought upon them by the "gifts" in Pandora's box, to which hope was cynically added for humans to keep enduring their miserable faith led by an illusory trust in a better fate. In a typical dual antithetical construct, the two Titan brothers represent the two sides of human character and personality. The two twin brothers are one entity with a dual nature. Prometheus's recklessness and double play and Epimetheus's foolishness seem to combine perfectly in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The visionary scientist is both reckless in his actions and foolish as not to recognize the disaster that he has brought upon his fellows. His creation seems to be more intelligent, more compassionate, and even more moral than its creator. Frankenstein is the forethought and the afterthought at the same time.

The second version of the myth is transmitted by Aeschylus, who transforms Prometheus into the divine hero of humankind, the one that stands by their side in their confrontation with the merciless gods of Olympus. This Promethean image is the typically romantic and revolutionary one, as expressed by Goethe, Byron, and Percy Shelley.

Prometheus Reinterpreted: Twentieth-Century Visions

The power of myths is amplified by crisis situations like wars, pandemics, revolutions, or natural disasters. In 1816, Europe was devastated by more than twenty years of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The result: everybody wanted peace and rest. But this was hard to achieve as the wars effected, as usual, poverty, lack of resources, hunger, and despair. The cold and dark year of 1816 and the famine that followed overlapped with an already critical situation. But the most daring spirits were still lit up. England was part of the larger European effervescence that would eventually lead to events of the revolutionary year of

1848 – even though, in a typically insular way, the British were more passionate towards reforms than revolutions. "Throughout England generally there was a powerful renaissance of the reform movement in the autumn of 1816" (Holmes 1994, 401). But this was not enough for hardliners and radicals like Percy Shelley. He would continue his ideas in *Prometheus Unbound*, on which he was working in 1818, giving Prometheus a political dimension, one to re-enact the eternal struggle for man's freedom. "Finally, in political terms, this is the moment of uprising and revolution against tyranny and imposed authority. Shelley is here not being nationally or even historically explicit. It is perhaps the old Illuminist ideal of world revolution, originally symbolized by a string of volcanic eruptions" (Holmes 1994, 580).

The idea of creating a new modern revolutionary myth out of the ancient myth of creation and emancipation of men is by no means adventitious with Percy Shelley. According to Harold Bloom, the major English romantic poets Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley are mythmakers. Their efforts at creating or, actually, reinterpreting ancient myths and adapting them to express their romantic and revolutionary views are part of a larger romantic mythopoeia, an endeavour that resembles ancient struggles of Creation and translates into modern Titanism. "Blake, Byron, and Shelley are Prometheans, Titans" (Bloom 1959, 10). It is extreme Titanism that Byron and Shelley approach, like Blake before them (Bloom 1959, 60). Prometheus is a rebel against unnatural established order, a hero.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* though, he is the fallen hero, but not in the same way as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Her modern Prometheus contrasts with those of Goethe, Byron, and Percy Shelley. In her vision, he is not the stoic depicted in Cicero's *Disputations* nor the proud rebel against forced authority but, by contrast, merely the whimper of a whim. Frankenstein displays no stoic discipline nor proud rebellion but inconsistency, immaturity, lack of vision, and lack of understanding of man and of mankind, resulting in a personal failure of catastrophic proportions. Frankenstein is rather the modern rebel without a cause, disobeying and challenging the world without understanding it, trying to change it and bring a new order into it without being able to put order in his own life. His failure is catastrophic only for his own small universe, though he tries to endow it with universal significance. Mankind is left unafflicted, unaware even of his personal drama. Still, he sees himself as being responsible for the faith of the human race, believing he could destroy it by a double failure. This might only illustrate more his own perception of the self as a creator of unlimited powers, capable of both creation and the destruction of his creation. In this respect, he might resemble the Zeus of the Promethean poems of Goethe, Shelley, or Byron, a whimsical and tyrannical god that has already been outrun by his creation, the afterthought. Not even in his final collapse is he capable of understanding his

moral failure. He is not able to really see and understand and take responsibility for his creation and his mistake. He runs from his creation, as he tries to escape reality by cowardly hiding and pretending that the monster is not there, or that it will disappear miraculously. He is hoping that his actions will have no consequences, not being able to take responsibility for his deeds. He cannot take action, cannot decide what to do, and seems to be in a state of inertia close to idiocy. No matter what the monster pleas for or threatens to do, he remains inert, hoping that it will pass. As Harold Bloom claims, the monster seems more human than its creator: more emphatic, capable of more intense human feelings and emotions, be they positive or negative. Mary Shelley's modern Prometheus shows himself as a weak god haunted by his own chimeras, destined to failure. There is nothing grandiose in him, as he proves to be inferior to his own creation, physically but also mentally, and even morally.

> The greatest paradox and most astonishing achievement of Mary Shelley's novel is that the monster is more human than his creator. This nameless being, as much a Modern Adam as his creator is a Modern Prometheus, is more lovable than his creator and more hateful, more to be pitied and more to be feared, and above all more able to give the attentive reader that shock of added consciousness in which aesthetic recognition compels a heightened realization of the self. (Bloom 2009, 3)

Thus, Mary Shelley adapted Prometheus, "her enduring mythical hero" (Bloom 2009, 4), to the modern vision of men and gods, enveloping the mythical figure with the romantic rebellion and macabre darkness. Burdened by an age of great achievements and great disasters, of revolutionary utopias followed by grim dystopian realities, of high hopes and broken dreams, Mary Shelley gave birth to the modern Prometheus as the modern anti-hero, as failure: an Icarus that flew too close to the sun, a prophetic Titan turned into a whimsical Zeus, that plays with his creation he does not understand, being ultimately overrun and defeated by it. The foreseer becomes after-seer. Prometheus becomes Epimetheus, and his naivety and lack of clarity in vision and action opens a route that can lead only to disaster for all people. This type of the modern Prometheus would come closer to Mircea Eliade's interpretation of the ancient Prometheus as the one who, through carelessness, double play, and deceit, ultimately brought plagues and disasters to mankind:

> All in all, far from being a benefactor of humanity, Prometheus is responsible for its present fallen state. At Mekone he instigated the separation between men and gods. Then, by stealing fire, he exasperated Zeus and thus caused the invention of Pandora […] and, in consequence, the propagation of

> all kinds of cares, tribulations, and misfortunes. For Hesiod, the myth of Prometheus explains the sudden coming of evil into the world; in the last analysis, "evil" represents the vengeance of Zeus. (Eliade 1978, 256–257).

Eliade distinguishes further between the Hesiodic and Aeschylean representations of Prometheus: "For Aeschylus, who substitutes the theme of progress for the myth of the primordial golden age, Prometheus is the greatest civilizing hero" (Eliade 1978, 257). These two types of representations seem to have worked in the case of the Byron–Shelley circle in 1816 and thereafter. While Byron and Percy Shelley embraced Aeschylus's vision of Prometheus, Mary took a different turn, possibly after her curious and thorough observations of the two great poets, sensing perhaps a duality in their natures that made them titanic both in success and in failure.

In the same line of interpretation, Eliade continues: "The first men, Prometheus affirms, lived 'underground, deep in caverns closed to the sun'; they did not even know the succession of the seasons or the domestication of animals or agriculture" (1978, 257). This state of mankind is similar to the one described by Byron in his poem "Darkness", written in July 1816 in Geneva. Byron, although a follower of Aeschylus's version of the myth, seems to have experimented himself with a darker vision of creation and destruction in the summer of 1816 in Geneva, at the same time Mary was already dreaming of Frankenstein, and even if Prometheus is not explicitly mentioned in the poem "Darkness", we know how much influence the myth was for all his writing.[6] The poem describes the end of men and of all life on Earth, brought about by the disappearance of the sun, moon, and stars. Wild animals become domesticated by themselves, getting closer to people in those final moments of life, but man, even reduced to only two last survivors, is still his worst and most terrible enemy. The dim light these last two survivors spark from the remains of an altar is cast upon their appalling and decaying, starving features and, at the terrifying sight of each other, they both die of fear. Northrop Frye's identification of fire and heaven with Promethean myth and apocalyptical images may give an additional interpretation of Byron's poem: "In Classical mythology the story of Prometheus indicates a similar provenance for fire, as does the association of Zeus with the thunderbolt or fire of lightning. In short, heaven in the sense of the sky, containing the fiery bodies of sun, moon, and stars, is usually identified with, or thought of as the passage to, the heaven of the apocalyptic world" (Frye 1957, 145). This apocalyptical Byronic approach

6 In a letter to his publisher John Murray, dated 17 September 1817: "Of the Prometheus of Aeschylus I was passionately fond as a boy (it was one of the Greek plays we read thrice a year at Harrow); – indeed that and the Medea were the only ones, except the Seven before Thebes – which ever pleased me. The Prometheus if not exactly in my plan, has always been so much in my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or any thing that I have written" (Byron 1904, 174–175).

is antithetical to the world described by Aeschylus, where Prometheus freed men from their fear of death. Lord Byron would choose again the Aeschylean approach for his poem "Prometheus" of the same year, following his political and revolutionary credo, but Mary Shelley stayed with her vision of choice, emphasizing the duality and the antithetical nature of her modern Prometheus, this time in line with the visions of the great romantic poets:

> The antithesis between the scientist and his creature in *Frankenstein* is a very complex one and can be described more fully in the larger context of Romantic literature and its characteristic mythology. The shadow or double of the self is a constant conceptual image in Blake and Shelley and a frequent image, more random and descriptive, in the other major Romantics, especially in Byron. In *Frankenstein*, it is the dominant and recurrent image and accounts for much of the latent power the novel possesses. (Bloom 2009, 2)

Conclusions

If in myths and legends as well as in their poetic emulations of the early-nineteenth-century English romantics' creation and destruction are often seen as heroic, or artistic, sometimes apocalyptical, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* or Lord Byron's "Darkness" envision less glorious endings of men. The darkness that surrounds such writings is strong enough to draw the weak characters in the stories and manipulate them, but the moral of such stories is actually a glorification of life. Such apocalyptical creations as the above mentioned are warnings about the future cast in times of great distress. There is always a story to tell, and therefore a storyteller. If there is no one left to tell the story, there is no story. The idea behind those stories is that of survival, of hope, of a new chance, a new beginning. It is more of a warning, in such writings, against the senselessness of people and their arrogance, and not necessarily the morbid vision of the authors. Authors of such writings seem to be rather in love with and fascinated by life, and not desperately attracted to death. Their expression is artistic sensibility horrified and disgusted by the vulgar pursuit of immediate rewards, the adoration of false idols in the ultimate form of absolute power, and the inertia of humankind. The invocation of Titans in poems like Goethe's and Byron's "Prometheus" and Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" are also calls to battle, for people to fight for their freedom, liberties, and rights – for their very lives.

The context of war, revolutions, pandemics, and natural disasters as illustrated by the great volcanic eruptions of 1783–1815 created the proper conditions for a re-evaluation of classical myths, be it in a revolutionary mode as by Percy Shelley

and Byron or through the modern anti-hero with Mary Shelley. It is most likely with her that Prometheus enters modernity. People tend to be influenced by catastrophic events, even more so when these follow each other over a short period of time or even overlap. The traumatic events of the fourteenth-century Great Famine and Black Death, the Great Plague of London followed immediately by the Great Fire of London, and, finally, the combined natural and social events that culminated with the French Revolution and early-nineteenth-century modern revolutionary spirit left deep marks in literature. During English Romanticism, they were transposed into literature by titanic figures such as Blake, Byron, and Shelley, with a fresh and intriguing modern perspective introduced by Mary Shelley in her apocalyptical science-fiction novels *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* and *The Last Man*. The myth of Prometheus came in handy for the poets of the time, conscious and anxious about the shifts of their time: "In the industrial age, however, Prometheus, who stole fire for man's use, is one of the favourite, if not the actual favourite, mythological figure among poets" (Frye 1957, 155).

Natural disasters also helped shape the modern myth, with poets finding proper ground for the symbolic interpretation of motifs of the Enlightenment. If the god Vulcan chained Prometheus to the rock by the order of Zeus, and Hercules, to his great honour, liberated him, the great volcanic eruptions of 1783–1815 created at least some background for a change in nature that contributed to the constantly changing human nature in the turbulent decades at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Human character changed as well. The romantic poets and rebels took against the tyrannies of their societies, be they political, social, moral, or religious, and challenged the "gods" of their time in a Herculean attempt to free the Prometheus in us, in all the people. In their poetry and prose, they incited to the liberation of all the people, from all their constraints. Byron even fought and died for the noble cause of liberty. Their legacy is still valid. And their Promethean examples might inspire us today in our own times of crises. We can only wonder how Prometheus might be reinvented today, in the light of the social reactions generated by the coronavirus pandemic, perhaps by the next Shelley, newly inspired whilst whiling away the evenings trapped in some alpine Covid lockdown bolthole with poet-philosopher friends.

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Hope and Hopelessness through the Lens of Myths. A Comparison Based on Short Texts by Kafka and Camus

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Abstract. Not only do myths stand at the beginning or represent the birth of literature, but they have been present all along ever since. In times of havoc caused by natural catastrophes, wars or pandemics, people look for answers to the uncertainties that surround them. While often presenting such chaotic states themselves, myths can give an answer or offer a solution to these problems. The aim of the present paper is to compare and analyse short texts mainly by Kafka and Camus that deal with ancient myths (e.g. that of Prometheus, Odysseus, or Sisyphus) focusing on the type of answer they bring to the questions raised amidst and after the two world wars. The paper mainly focuses on the connection between hope and hopelessness.

Keywords: ancient myths, hope, hopelessness, existentialism

The current pandemic has caused a worldwide crisis similar to the effects of the two world wars almost a century ago. People's response to such an impasse often manifests itself in fear, and when facing the many uncertainties, they either seek hope or become hopeless. Besides the official help on the socio-political, economic, or psychological level, literature and myths can also offer a certain answer in such situations. Myths have been present in humanity's life since ancient times, cradling not only literature but also human mentality. Although myths have suffered several alterations over the years, their essence has remained the same. Many times the different versions of a myth function as multiple mirrors, showing us the ancient values but also pointing at the differences between past and present, old and modern, as well as at the possible reasons behind the changes, thus offering possible solutions, too.

The aim of the present paper is to look at and analyse short literary texts written roughly between 1917 and 1950 and referring to the mythical heroes of Prometheus and Odysseus by Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and Albert Camus (1913–

1960), making reference to writings by Brecht and Sartre as well. The questions the paper tries to answer refer to how these texts present hope and hopelessness, what their response is to the problems of their time, and how their examples can be applied to our present situation. The chosen works, *Prometheus* and *The Silence of the Sirens* (1917) by Kafka and Camus's *Prometheus in the Underworld* (1946/1947) reflect on the condition of the modern individual confronted with the havoc provoked by the wars and the rapid changes on all levels of life.

One of the attitudes that can be adopted in a period of fear and despair is that of the existentialists,[1] a group which both Kafka and Camus, but also Brecht, not to mention Sartre, can be connected to. In fact, Sartre was one of the main existentialist writers of the period. His existentialist philosophy revolved around human liberty and the belief that human beings are able to rule over their own fate (Peyre 1948, 24). Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" is changed into "I do exist, therefore I am" because the source of actions should no longer lie in reason but in what existentialists call subjectivity, a sort of consciousness pre-existing before any reasons could be given to explain it. According to existentialists, we ourselves are the question, and therefore we cannot ever ask the question *why* about ourselves. Thus, existentialism highlights the importance of the subjective self, while this subjectivity becomes the source of our freedom as well (cf. Mansfield 1954, 13–14). Freedom is united with existence itself, which is tied up with experience. On the other hand, the experience of living from moment to moment is beyond any rational explanation. However, people tend to mask their freedom to themselves and like imagining that they do things because they have to. Each moment people make choices, yet if they mask their freedom and do not take responsibility for their choices and actions, they only place their hope into justifications, which is a kind of cowardice (Mansfield 1954, 12–18). The focus lies upon choice and action, the only reality; for human character cannot be taken for real, it is a mere possibility. What we call the *I* is total freedom, a kind of emptiness. Thus, to existentialists, human beings and human existence are ambiguous because, on the one hand, individuals are condemned to be free, while, on the other hand, they deny their freedom (Mansfield 1954, 20–21). Existentialist heroes are in a perpetual crisis because of the anguish they feel. This dread is not equal to fear since that would mean that there was something that one was afraid of. Existential anguish rather refers to the fear of nothing, to the awareness of being in suspense (cf. Mansfield 1954, 16). While this ambiguity of the human being itself had already been considered reality by Kierkegaard, one of the forefathers of existentialism, there were some differences in view with respect to hope and hopelessness between him and Sartre, for example. Kierkegaard postulated that there was no structure that was able to reach God because there lay

1 Existentialism refers to ways of thinking that were highly common in European philosophy between 1930 and 1950. These tendencies interpret human existence in the world focusing on its concreteness and problematic nature (britannica.com).

an infinite space between us and Him, yet he believed that if one was to take a leap, then God could be grasped, and that this leap was hope or faith. In opposition to the Danish philosopher, Sartre's humanism is regarded as pessimistic. There is an unexplainable paradox which seemingly haunts the individual who is the forger of his/her own destiny, but his/her actions also determine the fate of every human being as well. On the one hand, there is absolute freedom, while on the other hand each individual is accountable for the way of the world (Mansfield 1954, 21–23). The state of anguish is caused by the magnitude of the task, that is, free choice and responsibility, which the individual can only master with courage. The burden is all on him/her; there is no God to assist them (Peyre 1948, 24).

Camus did not want to be associated with the existentialist group and Sartre, yet his philosophy allied with the anti-Christian ethics of the former. In Camus's view, the sin against life consisted in putting one's hope into another one, whereas clear-sighted indifference should always be the starting point (Peyre 1948, 27). In a similar way to Sartre, Camus focuses on making choices and taking decisions: "I shall continue to believe that this world has no higher meaning. But I know that there is one thing in it that has a meaning: man, because he alone demands to have a meaning" (qtd. in Peyre 1948, 28). Thus, both in Sartre's and Camus's view, existentialist heroes are men of choice and decision. Writers also belong to these heroes because they use words as signs and not as mere objects. By writing, they enter the realm of action, and their texts deliver a certain message (Peyre 1948, 29).

Kafka, whose literary work also bears existentialist traits, chooses heroes who have lost their freedom, or, more accurately, the initiative of choice, and as a consequence have no foothold on the world. The absurd situations that surround these heroes lead us to believe that Kafka's universe builds on an impossible assumption, yet the readers and the protagonists seem to share the nostalgia to be a pure object, not aware of their pure freedom (Mansfield 1954, 16). In his short texts *The Silence of the Sirens* and *Prometheus*,[2] the author borrows his protagonists from the ancient Greek mythology, yet dresses them into modern garments. In the story relating the encounter between Odysseus and the sirens, Kafka alters the Homeric version of the myth; here, Odysseus not only lets himself be tied to the mast but puts wax into his own ears, too. In this way, he cannot hear the sirens sing, nor move away, having secured himself in a double manner. At least this is what Odysseus thinks, because in this version of the story the sirens do not sing: "And in fact, when Odysseus came, the mighty singers did not sing, either because they believed the only way of tackling this opponent was with silence, or because the sight of the utter bliss on Odysseus's face, as he thought of nothing but wax and chains, caused them quite to forget their singing" (Kafka 1917, n. p.).

2 Both texts appeared in *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, sometimes referred to as *The Eight Octavo Notebooks,* published posthumously in 1953, which contained philosophical and literary writings, fragments and extracts written by Kafka between 1917 and 1919.

Kafka used a kind of silent hermeneutics, where without singing, that is, without words, only the movements remained, which could be filled up with whatever content (Seidensticker and Vöhler 2001, 327). The modern garments are the movements that without words are void of any particular meaning. At the beginning of the 20th century, ancient myths and heroes got stripped off their vast meaningfulness. There was the modern individual left without any assistance, no gods, no belief system to rely on, just as Sartre would render the situation later on. On the other hand, pure rationalism could not provide meaning either, nor was it able to replace the ancient world. Since the sirens refused to sing, and it was only Odysseus who thought they would be singing, the hero got defeated. Odysseus, "a cunning fox" (Kafka 1917, n. p.), relied on his intellect in order to win over the dangerous singers. However, his wit was useless. What the modern individual was proudest of, namely his intellectual power, turned out to cause his downfall, a winner on the outside, a loser on the inside. Kafka's Odysseus made a choice and acted, but from the Sartrean perspective these are to be interpreted as justifications, reactions and not initiatives, and thus, acts of cowardice. The modern individual wants to succeed without really taking responsibility, without really listening to and seeing what is needed to be done. The intellectual power that Kafka's Odysseus hopes to find refuge in is only illusory since reality and the human being are more complex and definitely more ambiguous in nature.

The true hero of the second text to be discussed by Kafka is not Prometheus as the title shows, but the relationship between reality, truth, and texts. This modern parable[3] is made up of five short paragraphs, the first four of which are variants of the Promethean myth, while the last one is an explanatory interpretation of the previous ones. Each version of the myth presents another facet of Prometheus's story. Kafka begins with the closest variant to the ancient Greek myth, where the focus lies on the betrayal, the punishment, and the hero's timeless suffering (Kálmán 2007, 54): "According to the first, because he had betrayed the gods to men he was chained to a rock in the Caucasus and the gods sent eagles that devoured his perpetually renewed liver" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). Next, due to his suffering, Prometheus gets melted together with the rock, which means that his suffering and the rock are one (Kálmán 2007, 54), and it is only the rock that can be seen: "According to the second, Prometheus in his agony, as the beaks hacked into him, pressed deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). In the third variant, Kafka highlights the process of forgetting, because no one seems to remember Prometheus's treachery, the reason behind the cruel punishment. However, we no longer get any information about the other aspects mentioned in

3 For this part about Kafka, as well as Camus later on, cf. Mihály Vilma-Irén "The Myth of Prometheus – A Brief Encounter between Kafka and Camus in Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue". *LDMD* vol. 8, 2020, Literature, 187–195; http://asociatia-alpha.ro/ldmd/08-2020/LDMD-08-Lite.pdf.

the previous paragraphs, whether the suffering has stopped, or how the story has come to an end; this section is only about having been forgotten (Kálmán 2007, 54): "According to the third, in the course of thousands of years his treachery was forgotten, the gods forgot, the eagles forgot, he himself forgot" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). The last variant takes the row of interpretations one step further; it implies that people have gotten weary of Prometheus's story. This is possible because the story has become meaningless (Kálmán 2007, 54): "According to the fourth, everyone grew weary of what had become meaningless. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). Thus, the story begins and ends with the rock, that is, reality, the unexplainable that the story tries to explain. This is what the fifth paragraph points out: "What remained was the inexplicable range of mountains. The legend tries to explain the inexplicable. Since it arises out of a foundation of truth, it must end in the realm of the inexplicable" (Kafka 1917, n. p.). There is something to truth which cannot be rendered in words or in texts. Stories are only able to hint at deeper meanings using words as symbols. However, just as in the case of Odysseus and the sirens, in this text Kafka also reflects how the ancient myths became devalued in the early 20th century. Throughout the five paragraphs taking the Promethean myth as an example, he follows how mythic stories came into being and how their elements faded with time, leaving behind only the rock. The modern individual is not at a loss because of having been left with the rock, i.e. reality. They are at a loss because this is a frightening reality. This situation leaves them in a state of anguish since they can no longer rely on ancient belief systems, nor on God nor on their intellect because neither of these can provide a reliable explanation. Kafka's modern parables are statements of "man's awareness of the supernatural, but rather than bridging the gap between the here and the there, the rational and the irrational, they reveal and perpetuate this gap in an insoluble enigma" (Politzer 1960, 49). These texts suspend time and thrive towards the supra-real, managing to conquer reality by extending into unreality; they are "parabolic trials instituted against a world deprived of any meaning" (Politzer 1960, 57). This way Kafka is in line with existentialist thinking, where they were more concerned with questions than giving answers. His heroes are trapped in dread, are weak, and do not have the courage to act. Yet, despite the weakness of the protagonists and the pessimism of the content, the texts are signs and have a message. They clearly show the actual state of the human beings at the beginning of the 20th century, that is, anguish, and they raise questions that demand an answer.

Bertolt Brecht provides an answer to the questions in 1933 with his short story entitled *Odysseus and the Sirens*, which he intends to be a kind of myth critique, but myth correction, too: "One finds a correction for this story in Franz Kafka, too, which does not in truth really seem credible latterly!" (qtd. in Parker 2014, 332). Brecht combines the Homeric source with Kafka's version: in a similar way to Homer's text, Odysseus lets himself be tied to the mast and puts wax into the

ears of his companions, yet, as with Kafka, the sirens refuse to sing. However, they do not remain silent either, they curse as the ship goes past:

> Are we saying that I am the first to register concerns? I said to myself: all well and good, but who – apart from Odysseus – says that the Sirens really sang, at the sight of the bound man? Are we saying that these powerful and adroit women really squandered their art on people who possessed no freedom of movement? Is that the essence of art? My preference is to assume that the distended throats seen by the rowers were cursing the damned wary provincial with all their might, and our hero performed his (equally attested) contortions because he was in the final analysis embarrassed! (qtd. in Parker 2014, 332)

By dismissing Odysseus's credibility, but also that of the truth value of the myth, Brecht agrees with Kafka and proves that these ancient stories have become obsolete. However, he also makes use of the myth to point at the role art should play in the society towards the middle of the 20th century. He corrects the myth so as to make it appropriate for a particular situation. The sirens stand here for socially engaged art, whereas Odysseus is the "wary provincial", who does not really want to listen to what art is saying. Another important idea underlined by Brecht is that art is not for people who are not free. Both of these arguments bring Brecht closer to Sartrean existentialism, firstly due to the use and role of words, i.e. these/art should become actions, and, secondly, because of the idea of freedom/lack of freedom.

In *The Flies* (1943), Sartre elaborates on the existentialist theme of freedom: "men are free, and once freedom has burst into a man's soul, the gods are powerless against that man" (qtd. in Peyre 1948, 25). Like Prometheus, Orestes disobeys Zeus and the Furies, arguing that he has his own law: "For I am a man, and every man must discover his own path. Nature abhors man, and you too, sovereign of the gods, you abhor men" (qtd. in Peyre 1948, 25). Orestes's and Prometheus's deeds are not mere acts of rebellion but a proof of responsibility – they act free according to the situation they find themselves in.

Camus's Prometheus, though in the Underworld (1946/47) – World War II can rightfully be considered hell –, is also able to make decisions and take action when needed. The text starts with the question "What does Prometheus mean to man today?" (qtd. in Thody 1970, 77). Throughout the essay, Prometheus's figure is shown from different angles, his character ranges from the positive hero to the sinner, which allies with the ambiguity of the human being. His rebellion may have caused the historical chaos of the time, yet he is still considered a fellow individual (Thody 1970, 77). While Prometheus is the cause of mankind's problems, he also presents the solution to them, in as far as he has followers. Prometheus loved mankind to such an extent that he gave them freedom, and means to use fire, technology, and art.

However, out of the Promethean gifts, the modern individual only used technology and saw an obstacle in art – this attitude resembles that of Brecht's Odysseus, too. This is contrary to the true spirit of Prometheus, who did not distinguish technology from art, i.e. body from soul. The modern individual would try in vain to first free the body by all means and forget about the soul, for was/is it possible for the soul to die? (cf. Thody 1970, 77). Although the background against which Kafka and Camus wrote, an alienated and alienating world, was similar, whereas in Kafka's text all the protagonists got weary of everything, Camus's Prometheus can perform actions and thereby change the situation. In this instance, it is the modern individual who acts as the ancient gods did, because in case Prometheus returned, they would tie him to the rock, acting out of the very humanism that Prometheus symbolized. The modern individual's blindness can also be compared to people's betrayal of Christ (cf. Thody 1970, 77–78). What Prometheus and Christ offered to people was freedom, the promise of choosing their own future, of making their own decisions. Thus, in Camus's text, we have a congruence between content and writing intention: choose, decide, and act the way Prometheus did, for we are all in a net, and what one decides has an effect upon the whole.

At the end of his essay, Camus turned from the Promethean myth to myths in general: "myths have no life of their own"; they have to be given flesh (qtd. in Thody 1970, 78), a view that resembles Kafka's, since the source of these myths is to be found beyond their interpretative variants, i.e. in the realm of absolute truth. It may be true that the modern individual no longer believes in the world of the ancient myths; however, there is a mythic grid that lies at the foundation. This grid is made up of residual elements – by residual I mean essential, that which has been preserved over the years –, which are always the same, yet can take up whatever shape needed according to the prevailing times. In Camus's text, for example, Prometheus's strength lies in "his quiet faith in man. This is how he is harder than his rock and more patient than his vulture. His long stubbornness has more meaning for us than his revolt against the gods. Along with his admirable determination to separate and exclude nothing, which always has and always will reconcile mankind's suffering with the springtimes of the world" (qtd. in Thody 1970, 79). It is the figure of Prometheus, and not the rock, that Camus takes for reality – another proof of existentialism and subjectivity. No gods, nor God was there to help, and thus Sisyphus and Prometheus are the examples to follow; they are metaphors of the modern individual's condition, but at the same time models to follow.

This attitude may be applied today as well, regardless of the nature of the crisis. Existentialist ambiguity resembles incertitude caused by any sort of havoc, most of all due to the anguish which these states result in. In seemingly hopeless times, the individual seeks hope, yet, as the analysed texts show, the realm they think to find hope in, e.g. ancient belief systems, God, reason, etc., is quite illusory. However, these texts cannot be regarded as hopeless and pessimistic, precisely

because of their deep humanism. Their words are actions. On the one hand, they present a diagnosis of the period they lived in; they are signs of the alienation felt by many intellectuals. On the other hand, all the texts deal with and make use of myths in order to perform their actions and render their messages. This is possible because there is a deeper layer of myths, which is grounded in truth that cannot be fully depicted in/by/through the various textual versions. Thus, while myths undergo changes – as proved through the close reading of the texts –, in fact, the mythic grids and the residual mythic elements remain the same. Only times and texts, i.e. the outer garments, change, becoming mirrors of their ages. Thus, their actions work on at least two levels: firstly, on the level of content, i.e. Odysseus becomes a weak hero, a model not to follow, while Prometheus urges to choose and act in the name of human liberty; secondly, they prove the existence of a mythic grid that goes beyond everything, even beyond dichotomies such as hope and hopelessness. Becoming aware of these grids one can understand better the way all phenomena work, and this awareness can bring one closer to making decisions more consciously and act accordingly.

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Detecting Post-Nuclear Crisis in Hanna Jameson's *The Last*

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Abstract. Hanna Jameson's post-apocalyptic detective novel, *The Last* (2019), addresses contemporary issues that affect us on both a collective and an individual level. The author diagnoses the denial of nuclearism and calls for an awareness of the nuclear age combined with the looming threat of climate change. The novel negotiates alternative strategies for the treatment of crisis brought about by the nuclear attack and borrows many of the thematic and structural elements from twentieth-century nuclear fictions in which the apocalypse is not necessarily regarded in negative terms but as a chance for regeneration. The events of the post-nuclear months in a Swiss hotel are narrated by an American historian whose written account serves several goals. It gives the illusion of delaying crisis, but it also reveals his fears and traumas conjured up by radioactive spectres. There are two different types of narratives at work, the narrative of the crisis and that of the investigation. The narrator-protagonist becomes obsessed with finding the solution to a murder mystery, which in a metaphorical sense is to give a soothing answer to the death of millions. However, this attempt keeps failing, and thus the narrative of the crisis devours all kinds of rational initiatives to resolve chaos. In order to elaborate on the psychological impact of the post-nuclear crisis in subject construction, I do not only examine the character of the amateur detective of the whodunit whose intervention aims to restore order, but I also apply Gabriele Schwab's concepts of post-nuclear subjectivity and nuclear hauntology.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic detective novel, post-nuclear crisis, investigation, trauma, post-nuclear subjectivity

Introduction

On Day Fifty-Two after a global nuclear attack, Jon Keller, the narrator-protagonist of Hanna Jameson's *The Last* (2019), records the following remarks in his diary, which he keeps calling "Chronicle":

> Everything that had happened before – our past lives – barely mattered. We lived day to day and could no longer remember all the people we hated, the things that upset us, made us angry online […] vendettas against journalists, news anchors, politicians, celebrities, relatives… all gone. A girl was murdered, but it had happened before. Before didn't exist anymore. The giant slate of the world was clean. Consequences no longer existed. (60; ellipsis in the original)

Jon, who is one of the survivors of a nuclear holocaust and a former political scientist of Stanford University, is grieving his former life, the banal little things of everyday existence and painfully recognizes his limits to make progress, to bring order and justice into the chaotic present. The confrontation with the failure of the coping strategies he has been trying to fully realize in order to survive and to stay sane not only aggravates his situation but foregrounds ontological and epistemological crisis brought about by the nuclear attack. In *Narratives of Crisis*, Matthew W. Seeger and Timothy L. Sellnow argue that "[d]isasters create significant confusion. Often […] those experiencing a crisis are unable to make sense of what is happening. This paralysis often compounds the damage […] normal conditions are radically and rapidly disrupted. The fundamental sense of personal meaning may be lost as a person's life story takes a sudden and unexpected turn" (2016, n. p.). Jon's personal account of the initial post-nuclear months in a Swiss hotel details the stages of crisis that the members of the community go through from the anxiety to daily disturbances, depression, and new coping methods. Jon's journal, however, meets other rhetorical goals. As a self-appointed detective, he is determined to find a solution to a murder mystery that took place exactly the same day as the nuclear attack. His new position as a sleuth lends him the illusion of heroic qualities that compels him to step up in the face of crisis and, in a metaphorical sense, give a soothing answer to the death of millions. Seeger and Sellnow also remark that "a postcrisis narrative consistently tries to answer the question, 'Who is to blame?' Blame and responsibility for a crisis are fundamental issues that communicators must address" (2016, n. p.). Thus, the account of the crisis transforms into a blame narrative where the goal is to determine blame and responsibility following the attack. In a narrow sense, Jon's aim is to find the murderer, but his secret wish is also to explain the causes that have led to the present disaster. As a consequence, the process of investigation points towards and becomes intertwined with contemporary global and political concerns related to nuclear politics grounded on the denial of nuclearism. Similar to other narratives of crisis, Jon's chronicle is supposed to fill in the communication vacuum, "create larger meaning structures that may be rooted in patterns of association such as cause and effect" (Seeger and Sellnow 2016, n. p.), but it is obviously influenced by his social, cultural, and ideological

standpoints. While Jon keeps deluding himself that his chronicle in the hotel is exempt from emotional details and qualifies as a record of the last days of history, it is obviously a very personal and intimate form of diary that familiarizes the reader with family stories, his daily routine, and, most of all, the regret for the lost chances to be a better husband and a father. While he reveals his traumas, desires, and fears conjured up by radioactive spectres, he refuses to succumb to the apocalyptic appeal, maintains a hopeful tone, and struggles to make progress. This twofold image of the apocalypse has been an often contested issue in nuclear holocaust fictions. The image of the "giant slate of the world" being clean marks the ambivalence inherent in apocalyptic imaginary. On the one hand, it conjures up the horrors of complete destruction, but, on the other hand, it also signals a new beginning, which gives apocalyptic stories a new horizon.

In *Writing the Apocalypse*, Lois Parkinson Zamora remarks that apocalyptic visions have inspired a significant body of imaginative literature and visual art since the Middle Ages (1989, 1), but the past two decades have seen an increase in the negotiation of such visions in the light of crisis in global terms: "The word is used again and again to refer to the events of recent history, whether nuclear or ecological or demographic, which suggest all too clearly our ample capacities for self-destruction" (Zamora 1989, 1). Gabriele Schwab's *Radioactive Ghosts* joins this argument by pointing out that "[t]he nuclear age, and especially the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War, and the antinuclear resistance movements, as well as the nuclear disasters like Chernobyl[1] and Fukushima continue profoundly to mark the cultural imaginary and nourish fantasies" (2020, n. p.). Experimental texts reveal the deepest anxieties about the past and the future of the planet as well as that of the human species, which create a double haunting. The knowledge of the past and its possible return in the future terrifies us, so as a form of defence mechanism we remain blind to the damage and perennial risks nuclear bombs have done in the world as well as to the consequences that the spectral presence of radioactive contamination might have in the future. Thus, images of remainderless destruction brought about by nuclear war have always challenged the "trope of unrepresentability" (Schwab 2020, n. p.), which creates a pervasive paradox in apocalyptic imaginary. Schwab quotes Jacques Derrida's essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now" to explain the deeply ambivalent feature residing in the tension between the two modalities of visualizing total annihilation. According to Derrida, what lies at the core of this ambivalence is the inability to disregard the "destructive potential of nuclear weapons" on the one hand and to give in "to the lures of the apocalyptic

1 For example, a recent Hollywood movie, *Upside Down* (2012), reproduces the ghastly images of the Chernobyl catastrophe. In his article, Norbert Gyuris claims that the spatial imagery of the apocalypse in the movie heavily feeds on the dark and empty streets of Pripyat, its abandoned and ruined buildings in a heavily polluted environment (2015, n. p.).

imaginary" (qtd. in Schwab 2020, n. p.) on the other. The following quote justifies this claim: "This ambivalence creates an inescapable double bind: the refusal to imagine extinction would amount to buying in to the politics of denial, and (self-) deception; succumbing to the apocalyptic imaginary, on the other hand, would amount to buying in to the ecology of fear and annihilation that enables nuclear necropolitics in the first place" (Schwab 2020, n. p.). This paradox then urges literature to produce "concord fictions" to find "ever-new modes of indirection by inventing strategies of speaking of other things for putting off the encounter with the wholly other […] The question of indirection as a response to the limitations […] of quasi-realistic representations profoundly shapes debates about nuclear fiction" (qtd. in Schwab 2020, n. p.).

Hanna Jameson's book, a post-apocalyptic detective novel, is one of the latest attempts to grasp the anxiety and the apocalyptic vision that surround the nuclear age, yet it escapes the direct treatment of remainderless destruction. While *The Last* explicitly addresses the fears of an anticipated nuclear attack and its possible aftermath, it satisfies itself with the "quasi-realistic" representation of a nuclear holocaust and wards off the fears of total annihilation in favour of a utopian or even a nostalgic vision of returning to a primitive, pre-historic condition. Jameson seeks to soften reality and soothe the traumas of death with various methods. Among these, there is the vision of survival that Schwab also describes in her book: "However, ever since humans began to imagine extinction in apocalyptic visions and stories, they have also supplemented them with stories of precarious survival" (2020, n. p.). Jon's moral message at the end of the book, "[i]nstead of a conclusion, we've been offered nothing but more life" (Jameson 2019, 390), ties in religious undertones. Despite the temporary loss of faith, the narrator is not only the last one in the community to know and quote the Scripture, but he often thinks about fate or God's providence that has brought him to Switzerland and saved him from death. From this perspective, the initial dystopian vision embodies a utopian one that connects the narrative to the biblical apocalypse in which the apocalypse "is not merely a vision of doom [but] […] a luminous vision of the fulfilment of God's promise of justice and communal salvation" (Zamora 1989, 2). According to Elena Gomel, "the horror of macro-scale destruction" (1995, 345) is, however, a pre-condition to rebirth that allows for "the establishment of the New Jerusalem" (1995, 345). It is, however, only in isolated communities where the "promise of micro-scale regeneration and renewal" (1995, 345) can be realized. In the novel, the destruction of the nuclear bombs is distanced from the survivors located in a remote hotel somewhere in a forest. This way environmental contamination and the various responses to the crisis can be more highlighted without the absolute confrontation with extinction and the dread of killing. Although Schwab scornfully remarks that "[t]he apocalyptic imaginary can all too easily be co-opted for all kinds of

purposes" (2020, n. p.), which is a reference to the distorted representations of Hollywood productions, Jameson's novel proves to be a serious book in raising awareness of the nuclear perils and advocating "political urgency of imagining extinction" (2020, n. p.). Nevertheless, the fact that the author forecloses mourning with the utopian vision of a new world in the end might undermine such ambitions. The major concern of portraying the end of the world, however, does not lie so much in this particular controversy than in the intersection of two types of narratives, that is, the narrative of crisis and the narrative of detection. This way, *The Last* joins the latest trend of exhibiting "crime fiction's ability to depict and discuss ecological crises and abuses [as well as to] directly expos[e] the criminal acts they involve and their violent effects on people and the environment" (Puxan-Oliva 2020, 362). The fact that the nuclear attack and radioactive contamination are also forms of ecocrime demonstrates the ability of various subgenres of crime fiction to constantly renew themselves and divert the attention from local to global levels.[2] The combination of diverse genres obviously results a hybridized form and demonstrates the experiments that authors of mystery novels have been making to renegotiate the conventions of the genre. The fact that Jameson has thrown the conventional patterns of the whodunit against the narrative of post-apocalyptic crisis is a brilliant way to challenge the genre's limits and revise the concept of crime and criminality. Furthermore, finding a solution to a murder mystery proves to be an alternative method for Jon Keller to delay the psychic impact of the unexpected disaster. This establishes a parallel between him and the deeply traumatized gentleman sleuth of the classical formula in which the detective's compulsion to investigate is an escape from his wartime traumas. Just like Golden Age detectives who attempt to treat the chaos of modernity and end the confusion with rational means after WWI, Jon's loss of ontological and epistemological security due to the nuclear attack also calls for "some immediate action to alleviate the potential threat" (Seeger and Sellnow 2016, n. p.). Susan Rowland argues that "[t]he golden age novel presents a self-referential social scene as a metonym for the wasteland of modernity. The detective quests for the grail, which is the healing knowledge of the source of social sickness […] Once this knowledge is possessed, the criminal can be removed and thereby the wasteland renewed" (2010, 122), and thus the ultimate desire to solve death and

2 Puxan-Oliva also remarks that the capacity of crime fiction to reflect on global problems and the future of the human species allows for considering the genre within the field of world literature. In *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st century*, Adam Kirsch attempts to come up with a definition of the global novel despite the fact that critics consider it a disputable category: "The novel is implicitly global as soon as it starts to speculate on or record the experience of human beings in the 21st century. Global novels are those that make this dimension explicit […] The global novel exists, not as a genre separated from and opposed to other kinds of fiction, but as a perspective that governs the interpretation of experience […] The local gains dignity, and significance, insofar as it can be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon" (2016, n. p.).

evil is fulfilled. Nevertheless, the quest for truth and solution is not that simple, the detectives usually face danger, confusion, or social unfairness that reinforces "the impermeability of modernity to reason" (2010, 122). Although Golden Age detectives never fail in resolving the puzzle, they are rarely immune to the crime they are involved in. Their very presence is a sign of moral transgression which they seek to hide with control and moral superiority justified by their upper-middle-class or aristocratic status. Despite many of the similarities, Jameson's narrator does not share the intellectual success of the gentlemen detectives. His endeavour in meaning making or finding truth fails, and his investigation creates a vicious circle driving him back to the start to be ceaselessly confronted with his traumas and the inability to make progress. This suggests that the two types of narratives do not only run parallel with but also against each other. It is the aim of the present paper to examine how the narrative of detection and that of the post-nuclear crisis complement and refute each other in order to explore contemporary discourses of the nuclear imaginary.

Mysteries of Crisis and Investigation

In the opening scene of the novel, Jon Keller is waiting for his conference talk in *L'Hotel Sixième*, near Zurich, "in the middle of nowhere" (Jameson 2019, 3). He recalls his wife telling him about the darkest nightmare she had one night: "Nadia once told me that she was kept awake at night by the idea that she would read about the end of the world on a phone notification […] For me, three days ago, it happened over a complimentary breakfast" (Jameson 2019, 3). Although Jon admits that he has not been alert since their conversation, he could not erase Nadia's words from his mind. He feels stupid and unprepared, although in retrospect he admits that there were warning signs of the crisis which he either did not take seriously or deliberately ignored. His refusal or blindness to the nuclear peril are exactly the symptoms of how nuclear subjectivities, or, in other words, our experience of and relation to nuclearism, have been shaped since the Second World War according to Gabriele Schwab, whose main interest lies primarily in the impact of the nuclear age on psychic life. She claims that "[i]n relation to nuclear threat, familiar psychic defence mechanisms, such as splitting, doubling, dissociation, denial, moral inversion, deceit, psychic encryption, forgetting, and, in some cases, even traumatic amnesia, have become common conditions of human functioning in everyday life" (2020, n. p.). While reflecting on fragments of his former life, Jon remembers escorting his wife to protest marches back at home in California, which, however, did not seem serious for him at all: "I remembered feeling doom-laden about politics, but there had been no sense of urgency in me […] Even after all the marches I accompanied Nadia to, all the

antinuclear protests that had made me feel like I was living in the sixties, the mounting hysteria, I had never believed it" (Jameson 2019, 121). It is only after the attack has happened that Jon realizes his useless liberalism and his failure to take political action. Schwab also argues that denial is a form of self-defence but it carries real dangers:

> Many do not want to think or even know about the full extent of the nuclear threat [….] This means that we go on living as if the nuclear danger were not there […] But as a coping mechanism, splitting also creates a scarring psychic rift that is potentially threatening, not only because it causes the ontological insecurity of divided selves, but also because it reduces the felt urgency for political action and resistance. (2020, n. p.)

Denial and psychic splitting that generate the nuclear unconscious stand in the core of her theory of nuclear subjectivities, which Jameson also diagnoses in her novel. Jon's intentional blindness to "the damage done by innumerable atomic tests in the United States and around the world" (Schwab 2020, n. p.) is symptomatic of the defence mechanisms against fear. Jon's bitter remarks about his unthinking attitude towards the ongoing threats are echoed in his diary a few weeks later, when he feels capable of recalling Day One, the day of the bombings: "My hands started shaking. I couldn't read. All I could see was the word NUCLEAR. I caught myself. It couldn't be actually nuclear. Not in that way. Nuclear meant the end" (Jameson 2019, 63). Jon is not only exposed to confronting with his ignorance towards the threats of nuclear war, but his urge to place accusations on a particular group is doomed to failure despite the fact that someone has actually initiated a nuclear attack. His notes "I heard, 'They've bombed Washington!', and even now I'm unclear on who *they* were" (Jameson 2019, 68; emphasis in the original) might also imply that there will be no monstrous other to put the blame on. Another hint at his indifference to political urgency is described at the end of his "chronicle". He tells us about the night before he left for the conference. His wife Nadia was watching a demonstration against nuclear arms on TV. In retrospect, Jon feels that he has not only disregarded the signals of a nuclear attack but he has always been a man to avoid confrontation and resolve problems in his marriage too: "The banners being shown on TV were all the same: STOP DOOMSDAY. END THE NUCLEAR RACE. That kind of thing. I had poured myself a glass of wine while bitching about one of Marion's teachers" (Jameson 2019, 376). Schwab points out that "[t]hose [...] who are exposed to the media but brush their fears aside […] are all the more affected by the nuclear unconscious" (2020, n. p.).

On the first day of the attack, Jon's seeing the images of the nuclear attack hitting various cities in the USA and different parts of Europe generates diverse emotional responses ranging from total devastation to disbelief and even relief. First he feels

that his eyesight and hearing stop functioning properly, and then everything goes blank. Nevertheless, two months later when he recollects the events of the first day and comments on the sight of "[the] blinding flash of light, the cloud – the biggest cloud [he] had ever seen" (Jameson 2019, 64), he demonstrates a rather different attitude which proves that he has started to process and interpret the moment when history ended. Jon explains that his refusal to believe what he saw is rooted in the various Hollywood productions about a possible apocalypse which reminds us of Schwab's claim about apocalyptic texts and films: "the apocalyptic imaginary in general inevitably entail[s] a symbolic domestication of the ultimate threat of nuclear destruction" (2020, n. p.). Jon's self-reflexive comments justify Schwab's point about the domestication of nuclear violence: "It didn't seem as real as the headlines. Maybe we had all been desensitized to the imagery by too many movies" (Jameson 2019, 5). Following the dropping of the atomic bombs, the group in the hotel has no longer access to news or Internet connection. On the first day, Jon notes: "Now we can't send emails" (Jameson 2019, 4) and a couple of weeks later: "Then, it became hard to get news from anywhere but social media, because most of the TV channels were no longer broadcasting" (Jameson 2019, 68). According to Seeger and Sellnow, crises in general "precipitate a meaning deficit by disrupting […] the patterns of sense making. During a crisis, communication channels […] are often cut off. […] There is a need, therefore, to tell stories and offer accounts and explanations to reduce the uncertainty […] and create or recreate meaning" (2016, n. p.). Experiencing total isolation and a meaningless existence, Jon's first response to coping with crisis is to start recording the events of the days. Writing becomes a therapy, a new goal to get up for, a means to interpreting the abnormal situation and remain sane: "I'm going to keep writing. I feel like if I don't keep writing, I'll lay down and die" (Jameson 2019, 18). Jon's quick decision to start writing is not only among the limited available resources he has access to, but it is also part of the psychological need to return to "precrisis function and a sense of balance or homeostasis" (Black and Flynn 2020, 32) that individuals in crisis seek with the goal of restoring their former condition. In this sense, the act of writing also offers the possibility to revise and re-interpret one's past, to reflect on change, and also to create a sense of unity in the midst of chaos. Since Jon's diary also qualifies as a sort of autobiography that tells fragments and memories of his life, it is also the moment where his narrative identity,[3] a theory formed by Paul

3 The concept of narrative identity was developed by Paul Ricoeur, who claimed that the self comes into being and to an understanding of "one's self in the world" (Crowley 2003, 3) through the act of telling a life story. According to his theory, identity is divided into two categories: *idem* and *ipse*. "*Idem* refers to a notion of identity based on Sameness[,] whereas *ipse*, described as Selfhood, can incorporate change within a recognizable entity. In *Time and Narrative*, *ipse* is analogous to narrative identity and involves the telling and reading of a life-story, whether factual or fictional, such that the figure of identity that emerges offers a new insight into the self" (Crowley 2003, 1–2).

Ricoeur, evolves. One example of narrative identity that Ricoeur suggests in his *Time and Narrative* "is based on Freud's clinical work with individuals whose cure involves making narrative sense of the fragments of memory and stories that disorder their sense of identity" (Crowley 2003, 3). Ricoeur also remarks that "the subject comes to self-knowledge through the construction of a 'coherent and acceptable story' about himself" (Crowley 2003, 3). The diary becomes a form of a talk cure where Jon becomes both the writer and the reader of his own story that help him locate himself in a post-apocalyptic world. Apart from detailing the impact of the catastrophe on an individual and collective level, the diary also becomes crucial in maintaining a dialogue between the reader and the writer, which is one of the most important elements in classical detective fiction when it comes to investigative methods and procedures.

On Day 50, Jon and two members of the hotel staff find the dead body of a nine-year-old girl in one of the water tanks on the roof of the hotel while they are trying to inspect the cause of the bad taste of the tap water. Finding the unidentified corpse of the little girl establishes the mystery element and triggers the detective's work. Classical whodunits that stem from Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle started to flourish in the interwar era and are notorious for their formulaic structure. Although the Golden Age of detective fiction is extremely diverse, there is an organizing element that most authors submit themselves to: "The works of the Golden Age authors often project worlds of radical rationality, in which the chaos and senselessness associated with crime are vanquished by the investigator's transcendent reason" (Shiloh 2011, 12). The pursuit of crime requires logic, the collection of evidence, and deductive skills, all of which drive the detective to the resolution. While Golden Age sleuths intend to maintain a rather cold, rational, and objective image during their investigation to highlight the triumph of reason, they cannot remain detached from their social and cultural context; in reality, they become symptomatic of war traumas. Their intervention has several goals. They are to map out the chaos of modernity in search of truth, knowledge, and reality, soothe post-war traumas, and seek to find rational means to explain the death of millions in the First World War. Gill Plain comments on this feature in interwar detective fiction: "Someone is to blame, and the wartime absence of explanation is superseded by detective fiction's excess of possible solutions" (2001, 34). In interwar whodunits, detection is often a form of self-therapy to heal war traumas, just like in the character of Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey. Wimsey's hobby to investigate grows out of the desire to suppress his shell shock, yet the sight of the dead corpses and engagement in criminal deeds lead him "inexorably back into the reworking of the very depression he seeks to assuage" (Plain 2001, 48). Jon's desire to give himself a detective project suggests an explicit parallel between him and classical gentleman detectives. He is traumatized by losing his family and having to cope with the aftermath of a

nuclear attack. He investigates to find meaning, keep control, and, at the same time, avoid confrontation with reality, but the investigation itself forces him to relive what he is escaping from; his psychological inadequacy and the sight of the dead body ceaselessly signal chaos. Representing authority as a white upper-middle-class male, he contends that the categories of right and wrong still exist and that by finding the murderer he could eliminate evil and find truth. Seeger and Sellnow point out that "[c]risis narratives pit the protagonist against the antagonist in a struggle to restore order from the chaos of crisis" (2016, n. p.). Given that a post-crisis situation entails uncertainty and confusion, leadership is wanted "for the kind of direction and coherence" that it can provide (Seeger and Sellnow 2016, n. p.). Jon's taking charge of the investigation borrows him a new position in the community, as Seeger and Sellnow remark, "[b]y imposing order on chaos […] the leader may become a hero" (2016, n. p.). In this sense, Jon has a reason to "thank the Bomb" (Gomel 1995, 344) since he can prove his masculine virtues, leadership skills, and intellectual superiority. Gomel claims that the nuclear holocaust is a "blessing in disguise [for] the protagonist" (1995, 344) since he can become an independent man, "the leader of the community" (1995, 344). Although detectives are supposed to exude the image of heroism, it is rarely the case in Golden Age detectives who demonstrate reduced masculinity and are relatively anti-heroic. While Jon undoubtedly becomes one of the leaders in the community, he relies on masculine strength and aggression only in extremis. Instead, he often gets too emotional and irrational being so much involved in the murder case. The dead corpse of the young girl keeps reminding him of his daughters whom he feels he has let down. Capturing the murderer becomes a mission, which also nourishes the illusion that he is capable of protecting others, especially his family he has probably lost for good. He often fights with his rational and irrational sides, and investigation is the only strategy to retain control. While searching the room of the family whose daughter has probably been murdered, he is overwhelmed by fear and despair: "I sat on the Luffmans' bed and thought I was going to cry, but I managed to keep it together. It had been a while – too long – and the urge to lose control scared me, I didn't know what else I might end up doing if I gave in to it" (Jameson 2019, 55).

Jon's methods for investigation follow the same course of those of the amateur detectives of the classical formula, yet he cannot reach the solution. There is no evidence to be collected, no clues to be read, no witnesses left. He even fails to make sure about the identity of the dead girl. He unwillingly admits that the struggles to survive have overridden all other concerns, so his strategy to treat crisis with rationality and control seem to be failing: "Survival takes up so much space. The rest of the time, when I'm not surviving or writing, I deliberately occupy my mind with other tasks, like trying to find out more about the girl in the water tank […] That being said, I still feel like I'm letting down Harriet

Luffman. I haven't got any closer to finding her killer" (Jameson 2019, 255). Another reason for his failure is the resistance of the survivors in the hotel to co-operate with him. They are either uninterested, have lost faith in everything, or resent Jon's enthusiasm to stand for authority. A conversation with Sophia, the cook of the hotel, clearly indicates that Jon has been totally left alone in his mission: "You know what we think of as right and wrong don't exist anymore. […] No one is coming to enforce law. Even if you did find her killer, which you won't, no one is coming to take him away. What will you do? Do you think you're the law now?" (Jameson 2019, 167). Jon is so much blinded by his good will to solve the puzzle that he tends to forget about his own involvement in violence. It is exactly his participation in carrying out a violent act on others, such as his approval of the execution of one of the survivors in the hotel, that not only blurs the categories of right and wrong but also proves that the detective and the criminal are secret sharers.

Given the fact that the detective is rid of his potential to make meaning "in an era of wide-scale environmental crisis, [his] reassuring and restorative functions must, once again, be reconsidered" (Walton and Walton 2018, 2). Critics who apply ecocriticism to crime fiction argue that some deviations from the classical formula that the detective exhibits in environmental crime fiction, such as "the execut[ion] of justice extrajudicially, or present[ing] solutions that are wrong, partial or come too late to change the course of events [...] grow in significance and centrality in the figure of the ecological detective" (Walton and Walton 2018, 3). In cases of an "escalating climate catastrophe […] ecological detectives may be called upon to bear witness, diagnose, organise, protest, persuade, suffer, mourn, and act" (Walton and Walton 2018, 3). Jon Keller's role as a detective becomes more promising when it comes to witnessing and diagnosing the impact of the nuclear catastrophe on both nature and the community. During the first few weeks, Jon examines the trees, the weather, and the clouds to inspect the changes in the natural habitat. He reports on the insects being silent, the birds disappearing, the trees browning and dying, the lack of sunshine, and the cold weather despite the summer season. He understands that nuclear catastrophes enact long-term radiation and slow death, but he is fairly unsure how radiation exactly works and how it impacts his body. His uncertainty about the effects of radiation refers to the uncanny effect produced by radioactive contamination. Joseph Masco's *The Nuclear Borderlands* explains that "nuclear materials are sources of invisible power. Radiation is colorless and odourless, yet capable of affecting living beings at the genetic level. In this sense, nuclear materials produce the uncanny effect of blurring the distinction between animate and inanimate […]" (qtd. in Schwab 2020, n. p.). The majority of Jon's diary, however, is not so much dedicated to the environmental changes than to the coping strategies of the survivors in the hotel. Apart from the immediate response to the crisis culminating in a couple

of suicides,[4] Jon also reflects on how the nuclear attack shapes the psychic life of the survivors and contours the emergence of post-nuclear subjectivities. Schwab uses the term "in reference to the subjectivity of survivors of nuclear attacks of disasters" (2020, n. p.), namely those of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl, and Fukushima. Analysing the testimonies of survivors, she gets to the conclusion that they can be read "as paradigmatic of postnuclear subjectivities" (2020, n. p.). Common features marking post-nuclear subject formations generally include "obsession with illness developing in radioactively contaminated bodies; fears of reproductive damage and related phantasms of the mutant body; the phantasmatic refashioning of the disaster zone into an idyllic space of freedom; haunting from the future linked to the vision of planetary extinction" (2020, n. p.). In the novel, the reader witnesses almost all of these features discernible in the psychic disposition of the characters. The fear from illnesses and the lack of enough medicine is one of the most emphasized concerns. When they seem to be running low on available medicines and pills, a little group of people go into the city armed with guns to get some. For Jon, this is the first time to confront with anarchy, given that two of his former colleagues from the university need to be shot in order to take possession of the drugs. Other visions also haunt the characters, including the future of the human species, reproduction, and the fate of new-born babies. Paralysed by the fear of death, some men show signs of atavism in their sexual impulses. One of the residents tries to rape a young girl and accuses the others of taking possession of all the available women in the community. Although his sentence is death penalty for the attempt, the other men keep fantasizing about possible ways to save the planet. Jon is witnessing a conversation between two of his friends and concludes that the gender divide has not only deepened, but the male compulsion to maintain life would reduce women to self-replicating machines: "I was mortified at the thought that any of the women here might find out about this; three men in a room discussing their reproductive rights like they weren't even people now that civilization had gone" (Jameson 2019, 160).

All these anxieties become resolved when the community finally decides to leave the hotel in fear of being hunted by violent gangs hiding in the forest. Upon arriving in the city of Saint-Sion, Jon's first remarks in his diary delineate a utopian community: "Long live Saint-Sion! PEACE. It's a city, but not like any I remember. It's like a myth I heard once, about a word like 'community', but I never saw it realized in any part of the society we'd built before" (Jameson 2019, 372). Jon's reaction to order and peace implies the restoration of religious beliefs

4 Grounding on Juliet Mitchell's theory of trauma, Judit Kusper claims that trauma can violate one's defence mechanisms with such great intensity that the subject can no longer cope with the aftermath regardless of the event being foreseen or not. Suicide is a response to an unexpected crisis where the subject is left with no available coping strategies to heal the trauma (2020, 440).

he has lost; the idyllic picture of the houses, children, and people promises a return to an Edenic state. This hopeful vision about the future after a nuclear catastrophe echoes Schwab's description of how Chernobyl survivors related to the zone of exclusion: "Nuclear haunting from the future provokes a highly ambivalent oscillation between apocalyptic fears and their counterpart, […] a creation of postnuclear Eden […] the fantasies of a postnuclear idyll are survival fantasies, designed to ward off the fear of the devastating short- and long-term effects of the fear of repetition" (2020, n. p.). While this type of attitude reinforces powerful denial according to Schwab, it enables the survivors to put up with the threatening and precarious conditions. In Jameson's book, the dread of the future is replaced with the idea of a utopian community where money has no use, where new ways of farming are being devised, where the levels of radiation in the water are still very low. Gomel's observation of survival fantasies draws on similar conclusions: "In fact, those characters who do not commit suicide or otherwise perish after the Day are much better off at the end of the novel than at its beginning. A collection of vaguely dissatisfied loners, they eventually band together to form a utopian community" (1995, 344). This peaceful sight is only shattered by the presence of armed soldiers who maintain peace with guns to enforce law and order. Maintaining peace and freedom with violence has been a contested issue not only in crime and apocalyptic fictions but also in political, cultural, and historical discussions that explore nuclear threats (Schwab 2020, n. p.). This contradiction, however, creates a heterotopia given that two types of worlds, a utopian and a dystopian, are juxtaposed in Saint-Sion as if reminding the residents of the illusory consolation that utopias can offer: "although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical" (Foucault 1994, n. p.). The initial optimism about moving into the city and upon the sight of a harmonious life is slowly undermined by violence, which is a hint at the omnipresence of crime. Jon's personal mission has almost terminated, with one exception. While the investigation has failed him, he cannot escape meeting the culprit and facing another trial. Although he envisions a brighter future, his passive observation of the murderer beaten to death casts a shadow on a new start. Jon's detective work to find someone to blame has failed, and even if the murderer has been eliminated in the end, he cannot cope with the larger scale of crime: nuclear violence and environmental crime.

Conclusion

Jon Keller's goal to write a chronicle, regain control, and find truth to reorder chaos prove to be aborted ambitions in a post-nuclear world. Although he has recognized collective responsibility for the disaster, he keeps displacing his anxiety into the detective project and find an individual to blame. His bitter words about his own ignorance and the denial of nuclear threats clearly indicate that all humans are participants in nuclear violence. In the end, the only option left is to restore the image of humanity with the hope of a new beginning in a utopian world to escape the sight of the ruins they have caused. Similar to the traumatized sleuths of the Golden Age, who evade reality by recapturing unity with the mythical English landscape, Jon is also ready to bury his traumas in the mythical community of Saint-Sion.

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Covidian Metamorphoses: Art and the Poetics of Transformation in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*

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Abstract. Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), coined "the first Brexit novel", relied on a very "time-sensitive" publication schedule: weeks after the manuscript had been submitted, the book was already published, documenting almost in real-time the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. The remaining three volumes of the *Seasonal Quartet* (*Winter,* 2017; *Spring*, 2019; *Summer*, 2020) also followed a similarly tight schedule; hence the last piece of the collection, published in the summer of 2020, could already reflect on yet another crisis: that of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first lockdown in Britain. The *Quartet* offers art as a vital coping mechanism for such critical times, but the present paper argues that the function of art in the *Quartet* is even more pervasive than that. The sequence's entire poetics of transformation is founded on art as a mediatized means of experiencing the world, which is then turned into a rhetoric of transformation. The paper traces the three main motifs of the *Quartet*: that of the tree, the stone, and the cloud/sky to look at how their art-based transformations create a sense of connectedness in the four novels.

Keywords: Ali Smith, crisis, transformation, art, *Seasonal Quartet*

I. Introduction: The Artist and Her Age

"It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (Smith 2017a, 3), read the opening sentences of the first piece in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* entitled *Autumn.* Published just a few months after the 2016 Brexit referendum, the novel relied on a very time-sensitive publication schedule: weeks after the manuscript was submitted, the book was already printed, documenting almost in real-time the aftermath of the vote. As it were, the course of events both in

the UK and globally supplied excellent material to Smith's exploration of "the worst of times" in the following three volumes of the loosely connected quartet: *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020) also followed a similarly tight publication schedule; hence the last piece of the collection could already reflect on yet another crisis: that of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first lockdown last spring. Even though these crises could suggest that we are living extraordinary times, it seems, as György Kalmár argues, "as if this feeling kept haunting us, as if we were living through a series of terrible events that probably started with 9/11 in 2001", overall hinting at a more general crisis of liberal democracy in the late 20th century (2020, vii–viii). Even the fact that *Autumn*'s opening lines echo those of yet another narrative about a very different historical period, Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* alludes to the same non-extraordinariness of crises. Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* offers art as a vital coping mechanism for critical times by showcasing elevating pieces of art from all media, as Preston concludes in his review: "telling future generations what it was to live in these fraught and febrile times, and how, through art, we survived" (Preston 2020). The present paper argues that the function of art in the *Quartet* is even more pervasive than that: the sequence's entire poetics of transformation is founded on art as a mediatized means of experiencing the world. I am going to support this claim by tracing the three major motifs of the *Quartet*, that of the tree, the stone, and the cloud/sky, to look at how their art-based transformations create a sense of connectedness in the four novels.

The fundamental realization that we are living in critical times also underlines why, as Ali Smith in her Goldsmiths Prize lecture argues, novels matter. "The novel matters" – she contends – "because Donald Trump" (Smith 2017b). Drawing a comparison between the rise of fascism in the 1930s, "the last time of Thanatos", she points out that the novel is a form that is able to tell us "what the anything and the everything of living in a time of Trump and a time of Brexit are" (Smith 2017b). The events that are casually mentioned in the novels – even for readers who are only vaguely familiar with British domestic and foreign affairs (e.g. the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017, the Windrush scandal of 2018, or the Tory MP Nicholas Soames barking in the House of Commons) – already belong to the past, yet the fast-paced publishing experiment can still be regarded as successful inasmuch as the novels engage the future just as well as the present.

The legitimacy of writing for the present, however, has also been problematized in the last piece of the *Seasonal Quartet*, in a letter that one of the protagonists, Daniel wrote to her sister Hannah from an Ascot internment camp in the 1940s, eventually eluding the answer: "The other day I was really thinking of you when the debate we had was: Should The Artist Portray His Own Age. I tell you Hanns there was nearly a fistfight. And you would be so proud of me, because I spoke up and said, but what about the artist portraying her own age" (Smith 2020b, 189, emphasis in the original). Although the novels do not include any conclusion

to the debate, they are still closely rooted in the question. The first national lockdown of the UK, for instance, serves as a point of reference with mask-related puns for the protagonists of *Summer*, originally published on 2 July 2020,[1] also underlining a zeitgeist of isolation and the lack of connectedness.

> This is the precise point at which Charlotte takes the phone away from her ear and presses the hang-up button.
> She puts the phone in her pyjama jacket pocket.
> She is close to tears.
> Why is she nearly crying?
> Because of something quite unexpected. The bright sides of graffitied trains and the smudges on the insides of train and bus windows where people have pressed their noses. She is now crying because she is missing these things so much. (Smith 2020b, 332)

Charlotte is not only crying because she misses physical human contact but also for grieving her lost relationship with her former boyfriend, Art – similarly to how the entire *Quartet* is founded on the idea of connectedness way before the pandemic rendered the entire world "united in isolation" (Smith 2020b, 338).

Crises and critical situations, however, are not regarded as incapacitating, they are rather treated as the raw material to be transformed into something aesthetically pleasing or meaningful, just like clouds are formed "if they had a piece of something, like a tiny fragment of dust, or salt" (Smith 2020a, 161). Similarly, in *Summer*, Daniel encounters an artist, Kurt, in the internment camp, who collects discarded items and rotten food to turn them into statues. "He most urgently wants any porridge that goes uneaten, if there's any that he comes across left in a dustbin after a breakfast. That's when Daniel sees that the sculptures are made of solidified porridge and that the porridge they're made of has gone so mouldy that each of the sculptures is sprouting green hair. These sculptures are alive, he says" (Smith 2020b, 178).

II. Metamorphoses

II.1. "The Tree in Me"

Art transforming crisis into something of value is but one aspect of the *Quartet*'s poetics of transformations, which is present in all layers of the novel. *Autumn*, describing the dominant sentiment after the Brexit referendum as fundamentally paradoxical, identifies the significance of the decision as dividing the nation

1 In the UK, the first lockdown measures came into force on 26 March 2020.

against itself. "All across the country, the country split in pieces. All across the country, the countries cut adrift. All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there, […] a line you don't even know exists here,/a line you can't afford there,/a whole new line of fire,/line of battle,/end of the line,/here/there" (Smith 2017a, 59). It is in this context that the possibility, and even necessity, of transformation appears as a balancing, all-encompassing force in the novel and the sequence alike.

It is certainly not by chance that probably the most important hypotext in *Autumn* is Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* At one point Elisabeth, "his neighbour's daughter" (Smith 2020b, 143), reads to Daniel, lying unconsciously in a nursing home: "She opens her book at random. She starts to read, from where she's opened it, but this time out loud, to Daniel: *His sisters, the nymphs of the spring, mourned for him, and cut off their hair in tribute to their brother. The wood nymphs mourned him too, and Echo sang her refrain to their lament*" (Smith 2017a, 171). Surprisingly, it is not Echo and Narcissus's story but that of Daphne and Apollo that makes a recurring appearance in the novel. Daphne, turning into a tree to protect her honour from lustful Apollo is evoked in the context of the Profumo affair, as Christine Keeler is being interrogated in a dream vision of Daniel (Ranger 2019, 404). The process of morphing into a tree, however, just as Daphne did, is a central motif of the novel that is not limited to the scope of the Profumo scandal.

In his analysis of the Ovidian tradition, Tamás Bényei contends that turning into a tree is fundamentally different from turning into a stone or animal, as the human body preserves its vertical dimension and hence part of its anthropomorphic proportions and symmetry (2013, 35–36). This anthropocentric conception of turning into trees is of utmost significance in the game that Daniel and Elisabeth play: they think of a character each and then make them work together to create a story. While Elisabeth decides to pick a man with a gun, as it is wartime, she says, Daniel chooses a character who is a man in a tree costume. Standing for those who have been marginalized because of their uniqueness, their difference, but more specifically transforming into a strong symbol of foreigners under the fire of xenophobia, the tree is transformed into what is probably the most humanist symbol of the entire novel. "Think what it'd be like if everyone started wearing tree costumes, the man with the gun said. It'd be like living in a wood. And we don't live in a wood. This town's been a town since long before I was born. If it was good enough for my parents and my grandparents and my great grandparents" (Smith 2017a, 125).

While it is the most pronounced in *Autumn*, trees remain to be offered as connectives between people or between different layers of the diegesis throughout the remaining three volumes, just like in the case of the Profumo-affair allusion. In *Winter*, Sophia meets Daniel in the 1980s under a large tree, and later on her

reunion with her sister Iris also happens when the latter arrives with a small magnolia tree in the Christmas tree's stead. More importantly, in *Spring*, Richard Lease, an elderly TV director, after, in passing, associating from the lemons on display at a supermarket to "the breast on the statue of the woman whose hands are turning into twigs in the Villa Borghese" (Smith 2020a*,* 263), that is, Bernini's statue of Daphne and Apollo, meditates about lemon trees, further exploring the tree-migrant analogy that *Autumn* created.

> But what's in his head now is the little lemon tree some friend of his ex-wife gave his ex-wife for Christmas. That tree had arrived smelling heavenly. Then it lost all its flowers, lost all its leaves, grew leaves again, lost them again, grew a few back again. But it was a resilient thing. It had only finally died the winter after they'd gone and he realized he'd never once thought to water it in all the months. (Smith 2020a, 265)

The harsh reality of the English climate and neglect for a lemon tree is then juxtaposed with the other major plotline of *Spring*, that of Britt, a warden at "a UK immigration removal centre by SA4A, the sinister security firm that has appeared in the previous books" (Preston 2020), making the commentary on the situation of immigrants in the United Kingdom easily decipherable.

Spring includes yet another tree image, implicitly referring to one more hypotext: a specific reading of Katherine Mansfield's short story, "Bliss". Richard interprets the pear tree that appears in the text as a counterpoint of all mundane things, as a self-contained point of reference (Smith 2020a, 279). Just right after his epiphany about the meaning of the tree in the text, he finally finds the over-the-grave message of his recently deceased friend/lover, Paddy, once again offering the image of the tree as a piece that connects people through implicit yet clear references to canonical texts.

The last jigsaw piece in the progression of the tree imagery is yet another text that the protagonists of the *Quartet* encounter: a poem carved into an "eaten-away stone" at a church backyard, discovered in *Summer* by Grace in the late 1980s: "The tree in me shall never die. Be I ashes be I dust. That is the tree that joins the sky. To earth and us. The tree in me shall never die. No lovers sleeping breath compare. With her shy music in the sky. Of leaves and air" (Smith 2020b, 305). The tree, therefore, functions as a versatile symbol woven into the entire *Quartet*, very much like Daniel, whose "energy is steady, something like a tree root" (Smith 2020b*,* 208), linking together people, as it eventually turns out that almost everyone is connected to Daniel, the 103-year-old German immigrant – diegetic levels such as in the case of embedded storylines and various pieces of literature and art, while in the above-mentioned poem the tree also holds together the earth (stone) and the sky (clouds), the other two most prevalent motifs of the novel.

II.2. "The Stone with the Hole through the Middle of It"

While trees in the *Seasonal Quartet* connect various elements and layers of fiction, another recurring motif, that of the stone, tends to be associated with art as a transformation, a painful process that always exposes a sense of emptiness, of lack. While – as trees have many roots – the motif of the tree is connected to many literary texts and related art pieces in the novels, a round stone is always singular, whence all the stone occurrences throughout the *Quartet* are somehow connected to one single stone: a part of a sculpture by British artist Barbara Hepworth, referred to in the novels as a "mother and child maquette" (Smith 2020b, 167). In *Autumn*, the reader learns about the maquette as one of Daniel's valued properties, as an item that he would have been willing to sell but he was happy he could not because part of the statue, a smooth, round stone, the "child" from the duo, was missing. Called "arty art" (Smith 2017a, 43) by Elisabeth's mother, and contrasted with their own items of decoration – "The picture of the squirrels made from bits of real pinecone. The poster of the dancers by Henri Matisse. The poster of the woman and her skirt and the Eiffel Tower" (Smith 2017a, 44) – the "mother" part of the maquette was resting on Daniel's table, incomplete but still regarded as a very much appreciated piece of art. Although the first novel of the sequence does not inform the reader that part of the "stone" is missing, and it is only in the closing novel, *Summer*, that we can read how "a woman he slept with once stole the child piece of stone" from Daniel (Smith 2020b, 167), the maquette still feels incomplete: "the stone with the hole through the middle of it" (Smith 2017a, 44).

Hepworth's art is a recurring source of inspiration for Smith, and one that she tends to refer to when talking about the significance of writing. In her aforementioned Goldsmiths Prize Talk, she draws a comparison between novels and sculptural arts: "say you decide […] to cut a Barbara Hepworth-like hole in your novel either by leaving something unsaid […] leaving readers with a hole at the centre of their reading, then that unsaid thing that pierces the work will also pierce the reader" (Smith 2017b). The image of the stone as a sore lack in the middle of the text is the most pronounced in the second part of the sequence, *Winter*. One of the most articulated storylines in the novel focuses on Sophia, who – as it can be concluded when reading *Summer* – was in fact the woman who took one half of Daniel's maquette, although it is only after her death that she admits it in her will. Instead, *Winter* opens with a disembodied head of a child, "floating by itself in mid air" (Smith 2017c, 7) and only visible to Sophia, which later on, after having been wilfully turned into a head of a child from a piece of stone by Sophia, unstoppably, inevitably reverts back to being just a stone in a time loop of the clock striking midnight again and again: "Midnight again. Sophia counted the chimes. The umpteenth midnight of the night, she told the

head. The head didn't care. The head was the kind of silent they say graves are. She rolled the head into her hands on the coverlet and picked it up. It was heavy, the heaviest it had yet felt. It had no eyes now. It had no mouth" (Smith 2020b, 130). The sense of loss that is an unalienable part of the transformation of life into art is then juxtaposed with the arrival of Art, Sophia's son, later revealed to be fathered by Daniel himself.

Although it is only in *Summer* that the missing stone finally makes its way back to its mother, when Art visits Daniel to retrieve it per his mother's will, the same pattern can be seen in *Spring*, but this time the reader witnesses a brief reunion between an actual mother and child, immigrants helped to find each other by a secret network of benevolent strangers. By yet another piece of stone, the memorial cairn of the Culloden Battlefield, they meet again. "A child runs across the grass over the bones of the dead and leaps into the arms of a young woman. Can you imagine seeing a heart leap? That's what it looks like. The young woman wraps her arms around the child. They stand there like that and it's like the world can't not coalesce round it" (Smith 2020a, 332). Although the "hole" in the middle of the novel is, for a moment, filled, the most ancient of all, the bond between mother and child is temporarily re-established, they are once again torn apart. "It's not hard for the uniforms to surround them. They don't run away, the child and the woman. They just stand there hugging as if they're one person, not two. The people in the uniforms separate the woman and the child" (Smith 2020a, 332–333).

Despite, or rather especially because of the very materiality of stone, it becomes the basis of a set of elaborate and recurring word games throughout the four novels. It is the "thoughtful and hard-won English" (Smith 2020a, 271) of Lux, the Czech immigrant that is able to integrate a sophisticated pun when knocking on the metal side of a bus: "I refute it bus" (Smith 2017c, 289), referring to Samuel Johnson's appeal to stone, "I refute it thus" when he wanted to prove that physical reality really exists. The appeal to stone appears in yet another version in *Winter*. Art, who has been dumped by his ex-girlfriend Charlotte for not seeing the political relevance and the reflections of *his own age* in his nature writing, turning his *Art in Nature* blog into an "irrelevant reactionary unpolitical blog" (Smith 2017c, 58), has a revelation in the shape of a piece of earth, a piece of Britain, of actual soil in its very physicality, hanging above their dining table (215). "As if, […] instead of Dr. Johnson kicking the stone, the stone came and kicked Dr. Johnson. Reality exists, and it has come knocking, and Art […] will be knocked into a resensitized political awareness", argues James Wood in a review of the novel (2018).

He also adds, "it's not simply that she loves puns; it's that she thinks through and with them; her narratives move forward, develop and expand, by mobilizing them" (Wood 2018). Yet another word play on the similar forms of "head" and "dead"

can be regarded as a clear and apparent linguistic manifestation of the substantive transformation that seems to take place concerning the child stone: right before Sophia's encounter with the head, the novel starts with a poetic prologue – later on it turns out that it was based on Art's Google search on the word dead – repeating the word more than fifty times in various contexts in just a few pages. Later on, after a bedtime story about a man killed with a stone (dead by a stone to the head), the association becomes even more visible. For Sophia, "Dead. Dead. Dead, the bell went. Or maybe: Head. Head. Head" (Smith 2017c, 79).

Autumn, at certain points, foreshadows the recurring pun. "Daniel is now in an increased sleep period [that] happens when people are close to death. He is beautiful. He is so tiny in the bed. It is like he is just a head. […] his body so near-nothing under the covers that it hardly makes any impression, just a head by itself on a pillow, a head with a cave in it and the cave is his mouth" (Smith 2017a, 33). Daniel, a person who is regularly referred to as a child – "laughs silently but like a child" (38) and then signs a postcard (as it happens, to Sophia) "with love from an old child" (15) – now symbolically takes the place of the stone that was taken from him, just like in the reunion of mother and child in *Summer*, long before the symbol itself was fully explored.

These structural moves are closely connected to the necessary abstraction that allows art to transform a child into a child's head and then into a smooth-surfaced stone ball, and also to the literary device that enables the novel to integrate other media: ekphrasis. Elisabeth has to write "a portrait in words" about Daniel, and their friendship in *Autumn* is based on a sequence of ekphrases that Daniel gives of Pauline Boty pop art artist's collages, and then, in return, in *Summer*, Elisabeth, now an art professor, describes pictures that she recently saw to Daniel.

II.3. "The Nursling of the Sky"

The first ekphrasis of a Boty-collage in *Autumn* is already connected to the third major motif of the *Quartet*, that of the sky. Just as Pauline Boty's collages typically use "a picture of a picture" (Smith 2017a, 81), that is, source material that are not objets trouvés in the sense that they have already been transformed and adjusted, this one, an ekphrasis of the work *Hair Dye*, starts off with the depiction of an artificial sky: "The background is rich dark blue, Daniel said. A blue much darker than sky. On top of the dark blue, in the middle of the picture, there's a shape made of pale paper that looks like a round full moon" (Smith 2017a, 73).

Along with the context of art as mediatization as seen above, the sky – and, adjacently, clouds and air – could be characterized, contrary to the relatively stable motifs of trees and stones, as examples of what Masterson calls the "necessarily metamorphic, expansive" imagination of Smith's (2020, 365). Although each novel adds its share of air-related symbolism to the *Quartet*, it is

undoubtedly *Spring* that expands it to its maximum capacity (just like *Autumn* was primarily focused on trees and leaves, *Winter* on the stoneness of stones, and the concluding *Summer* on connecting the three).

In *Spring*, one of the tropes that connects the collage-like layers and plotlines of the novel is that of the cloud, but just like in the Boty-ekphrases above, the clouds in Smith's fiction are always mediatized through either visual art or poetry. Fitting into the line of extraordinary British female artists being evoked in each of the novels of the *Quartet*, *Spring* uses the art of Tacita Dean as a point of reference throughout the text. Her *Bless Our Europe* is sent as a postcard from Richard to Paddy, Dean's works generating a testimony about the transformative power of art: "They'd made space to breathe possible, up against something breathtaking. After them, the real clouds above London looked different, like they were something you could read as breathing space" (Smith 2020a, 79). Later on, Smith also refers to Dean's short film *A Bag of Air*, about the artist's experiment to rise with a hot-air balloon to collect pure mist, which, quoting Dean's narration, also evokes alchemy as a frame of understanding art: "If you rise at dawn in a clear sky, and during the month of March, they say you can catch a bag of air so intoxicated with the essence of spring that when it is distilled and prepared, it will produce an oil of gold, remedy enough to heal all ailments" (Smith 2020a, 218), and later on the narrator herself explicitly connects Dean's artworks to alchemy and transformation – echoing Richard's insight about the painted clouds changing the way he perceives reality: "The film is a piece of pure joke-vision. But in it, breathing takes flight. Alchemy and transformation become matters of good spirit. Something dismissible and ridiculous – and magic if you'll let it be – happens in front of your eyes" (Smith 2020a, 220).

The magic of transformation is echoed in Shelley's "The Cloud": also an attempt of communication by Richard directed towards the then-deceased Paddy. Intending to read it at her funeral, Richard hopes to turn the personification of the cloud in the original poem into a prosopopeia for his missed friend: "I am the daughter of Earth and Water / And the nursling of the Sky; / I pass through the pores of the oceans and the shores; / I change, but I cannot die" (qtd. in Smith 2020a, 287). The juxtaposition of Tacita Dean's artworks and Shelley's poem is the centre of the associative network starting from the image of the clouds that is expanded to cover a number of connected themes, such as cyclicity and birds for "The Cloud", and, among many, breathing and hot air in the case of Dean's works.

In fact, hot air and the sense of elevation that the image encompasses can be claimed to link together Dean's hot-air balloon and Shelley's poem. Handwritten by her mother, the following lines open the notebook of Florence, a magical, almost mythical child who wishes to get back to her mother, currently in detention: "All through your life people will be ready and waiting to tell you that what you are speaking is a lot of hot air. This is because people like to put people down. But I

want you to write your thoughts and ideas in this book, because then this book and what you write in it will help lift your feet off the ground and even to fly like you are a bird, since hot air rises and cannot just carry us but help us rise above" (Smith 2020, 324). While it capitalizes on the discrepancy between the colloquial and literal meaning of "hot air" in a vertical figurativity of language, as Masterson remarks, "the Maya Angelou allusion to 'rising above' is vital" (2020, 366). One of Angelou's similes, in fact, "but still, like air, I rise" (Angelou 2013, 163), functions as a reversal of the one used by Shelley, already quoted in the novel: "Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,/ I arise and unbuild it again" (qtd. in Smith 2020a, 287). Although the ground of the comparison in the physical movement remains articulated in both cases, in Shelley's poem the tenor – the personified cloud/air – is paralleled with the human-like forms of the ghost and the child, also maintaining the womb-tomb cyclicity, whereas for Angelou the human lyrical speaker of the poem is compared to air as a vehicle.

Also connected to Tacita Dean's art is the motif of breathing, something that – as being taken for granted – is only mentioned in critical situations, mostly in anticipation of an inevitable loss: this is how Elizabeth in *Autumn* listens to Daniel's inhalations, exhalations, and the eerie silences between them, how Sophia in *Winter* closely monitors the head if it is still breathing, and also how Hannah, Daniel's sister, guards the sleep of her soon-to-be-abandoned daughter, Sacha. In *Spring*, however, the crisis that is manifested by a sudden attention to breathing is connected to a Vietnamese immigrant, Hero, who, in his confinement in the Immigration Removal Centre both literally and figuratively, needs more air to breath. The way his English is continuously corrected by Brittany Hall, the guard and also a semi-allegorical figure of contemporary Britain, just emphasizes the legitimacy of his questions and the lack of responsiveness from the officer's side.

> Why can't we open window in this prison? he said. Open a window, she said, and this isn't a prison, it's a purpose-built Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design. When you're live in Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design you dream air, the deet said. When you're living, she said. Or, when you live. You dream about air. . .
> Tell me. What is like to breath real air?
> Breathe, she said. What is it like. Why are you lying on the floor?
> I watch clods, he said.
> He meant clouds.
> I am watching, she said. Clouds. (Smith 2020a, 160)

Similarly, yet another metonymy of the sky, that of the birds that populate it, is also connected to Hero, dreaming about being able to breathe real air. In *Summer*, Sacha Greenlaw, granddaughter of the aforementioned baby Sacha, writes a

letter, addressing the detainee without knowing him. Wanting to send him "the open horizon" (Smith 2020b, 121), she starts to write about swifts and the unique features of these migratory birds, evoking their symbolism and peculiar biological traits. "Why would we ever imagine that anything in the world takes a shape more important than the eye or the brain or the shape in the sky of a bird like that" (121), she concludes. All this resonates with yet another remark regarding birds, this time a Canada warbler by Lux, the Czech immigrant. When, lured to the countryside in the hope of spotting a rare bird, a group of tourists arrive to Cornwall, Lux underlines the apparent discursive link between immigrants and migratory birds, also hinting at her unavailability for a relationship with Art: "What can I say? The world is full of people looking for meaning in the shape of a bird not native to this country turning up in this country after all" (Smith 2017c, 290). Lux's implied metaphor is then turned into a pun later on, when Art realizes that he is never going to see the Canada warbler or Lux again: "One flown bird doesn't stop the whole kingdom of birds from singing. It's just one gone bird" (Smith 2017c, 303).

III. Conclusion

In this context, art's ability to make "space to breathe possible, up against something breathtaking" (Smith 2020a, 79) is not only a commentary on art's aesthetic function, but it also gives a very clear position about its engagement with politics. Besides the poetics, the rhetoric of transformation equally became central in *Seasonal Quartet*: the novels make very powerful arguments about/through art in the process of poetic transformations, mostly in line with what Monica Germanà suggests about Smith's entire oeuvre before the *Quartet*: "about the acknowledgement of the other within ourselves, the erasure of neat borderlines separating us from the other, and the permeable coexistence of simultaneous identities within the post-millennial self" (2017, 106). In this respect, it is especially telling that both *Spring* in 2020 and *Summer* in 2021 were nominated for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, awarded to literary pieces that "come closest to George Orwell's ambition 'to make political writing into an art'" (The Orwell Foundation).

In Smith's *Quartet*, Orwell's initial intention works both ways: while political writing is surely transformed into art, writing about art is, reversely, always committed to changes in contemporary social reality and hence is political. In my paper, I argued that the transformations that create the web of tropes that hold the *Quartet* together are in fact invariably rooted in art and the very act of mediatization that it entails. This adhesive function of art was explored by looking at three, interconnected motifs from the novels, which, it can be argued,

can also be associated with specific parts of the sequence and also comment on various functions of art.

The motif of trees is mostly expanded upon in *Autumn*, evoking not only the Ovidian transformations but also the connective function of art: mapped on the image of a tree connecting the earth and the sky, trees and the related art literally establish a network of art where the characters of the books are connected by telling about specific art pieces to each other, experiencing them together, or just happening to share a catharsis at one point of their lives.

In *Winter*, instead of the interconnected network of trees in art pieces, the narrative focuses on one very specific piece of stone, and in the context of all the other novels in the sequence reflects on the painful nature of turning everyday experience into art (and vice versa), while based on a pun, stones and earth are also conceived as vehicles for a sobering reality check. Interestingly, this most down-to-earth of all motifs seems to have generated the most surrealist visions of floating heads and hovering Cornwalls.

Third, the sky – the centrepiece in a group of images such as clouds, birds, postcards, air, or breathing – is the main focus of *Spring*, where it is used to comment on the transforming, Protean nature of art, but also on the power of art as something transformative. In this respect, it shows a visible parallel with one of *Spring*'s protagonists, Florence, who magically brings the best out of everyone she encounters and makes "the world bigger, not smaller for them" (Smith 2020a, 180).

The grand majority of these gestures of the connective power of art, however, turn out to be under erasure: while the futility of art was subtly present in all the volumes, all this becomes apparent in the fourth piece of the *Quartet*, *Summer*. Although the family union happens because of the statue, none of the participants are aware of the fact that they are a family. Similarly, from *Spring*: while Florence and her mother can momentarily reunite, they are once again torn away by SA4A personnel. Even though a postcard of Tacita Dean's cloud paintings is sent by Richard Lease, the addressee, Paddy, is long gone and will never get it – just like Daniel and his sister, Hannah, who, when apart, communicate through letters that were never sent but were set on fire and turned into ashes, while asking a bird to send it to their sibling (Smith 2020b, 193). And, finally, the poem carved into the stone is forgotten by Grace, and later on "she looked at the photo she'd taken and saw that though it was still a beautiful picture you couldn't see any of the words on the stone to read them, and all she'd actually got a record of was a blur of twigs, a surface of old stone, some bright lichen" (Smith 2020b, 317). Still, even cancelled like that, "art lower case a" (Smith 2020b, 336) still functions as "the great connective" because, as Charlotte, Art's former girlfriend in *Summer*, states, "What art does is, it exists. [...] And then because we encounter it, we remember we exist too. And that one day we won't" (Smith 2020b, 336).

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An Image of Korean Women during the Japanese Occupation of the Peninsula, as It Emerges from Literary Masterpieces

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Abstract. This paper[1] aims to offer a picture of the darkest period in the history of the Korean women, namely that of the Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). The only advantage Korean women enjoyed as a result of their country's annexation to Japan was access to institutional education, even if this was done in Japanese and from Japanese course books. But this came with a price: many of the Korean teenaged females were turned into *comfort women* (sex-slaves) for the Japanese soldiers before and during the Pacific War. Not only did these girls lose their youth, but they also lost their national and personal identity, as they were forced to change their Korean names into Japanese ones and to speak Japanese. To build the image of the fate of the Korean women during this bleak period, the research method I have used is a simplified version of content analysis, "an analysis of the content of communication" (Baker 1994, 267). I have explored the content of fragments from a couple of novels authored by Korean or American-Korean authors, which cover the historical events in the peninsula leading to the end of WWII (Keller's *Comfort Woman* (2019) and Bracht's *White Chrysanthemum* (2018), to mention just a few) and which are focused on the topic of *comfort women*,[2] i.e. young women that were sexually exploited by the Japanese military. The results of the analysis indicate that many of the surviving victims became "unpersons" and led a life of solitude and misery until their death.

Keywords: Korean Peninsula, Japanese occupation, Korean women, comfort women

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2 This is a euphemistic term employed to refer to young unmarried women who were recruited as sex slaves for the Japanese military. In Japanese, they were called *daishindai* 'team of offering bodies' or *ianfu* 'comfort woman', while in Korean, *chongshindae* 'battalion slaves'. Frequently, these young women were referred to by the letter 'P' coupled with their nationality. Thus, Korean sexual slaves were called *Chom-P*. "It has been suggested that the slang 'P' derives from the English initial of the word 'prostitute', but it is more likely that it comes from the vulgar

1. Introduction

At present, Korea is mainly known to the world through its corporate names like Samsung, Hyundai, or LG and through its popular culture, which has turned from a local into a global phenomenon. "Yet, its remarkable modern history with its important implications is still not widely known and appreciated" (Seth 2010, 3). This is what inspired me to bring to light one particular period in the modern history of the peninsular country, namely that of the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea (1910 to 1945).

Until the late nineteenth century, Korea prided itself in territorial unity, institutional stability, historical continuity, ethnic unity, and in its efforts to keep the kingdom free of any external influence (hence the nickname of "the hermit kingdom" attributed by Westerners). At the turn of the century, the country became the fighting ground for the world's major imperial powers. "Japan, China, Russia, the United States, and European powers competed to take control, and the Kanghwa treaty with Japan in 1876 forced Korea to abandon its long-standing isolationist policy. The country was eventually pressured to open its doors by signing treaties, but the inept government was not able to cope with the increasing tide of foreign intrusion" (Yu 1987, 62).

From among these warmongers, Japan, being the geographically closest and the fiercest of all, came out the winner. After a period of slow but continuous assimilation of Korea, the peninsular country lost its century-long independence in 1905 and became protectorate, or, more exactly, "an exploited colony" of Japan (Cumings 2005, 15). In 1910, Korea was annexed to Japan, and it remained under colonial rule until the end of WWII. The Japanese occupation of Korea marks a period of crisis, of political turmoil, of extreme poverty and humiliation for its people, who were robbed of their crops, of their belongings, of their language and alphabet (*Hangeul*), and of their Korean names by the Japanese. "Schools weren't allowed to teach Korean history or language. Hardly any books or newspapers were published in Korean. People weren't even supposed to tell old Korean folktales. […] By order of the Emperor, all Koreans are to be graciously allowed to take Japanese names" (Park 2002, 3–5).

Though the annexation of Korea to the Japanese Empire was broadcast to the world as an act of favour granted by a developed Japan to its neighbouring country, in a state of feudalism at the beginning of the 20th century, it was actually a policy of oppression.

In this paper, my intention is to sketch a picture of the Korean women during the Japanese rule, to bring to light their courage to fight against the social norms

Chinese term *p'i*, for vagina. It should be noted that the use of the terms 'P' and comfort women was confined mainly to the military, while 'comfort women' was not so much a euphemism as a form of officialese" (Hicks 1997, 29).

of the time being driven by their motivation to study in educational institutions, a right reserved mainly for men, as well as their sexual enslavement by the Japanese soldiers. The roadmap of the paper is the following: section 2 briefly presents the theoretical framework, i.e. content analysis, the data I have used to achieve my aim, and the research questions. Section 3 is dedicated to the analysis of fragments excerpted from six novels. I have divided this part into 2 subsections, each corresponding to one period of time of the Japanese rule. The conclusions are gathered in section 4.

2. Research Methodology

The research method employed in this paper is a simplified version of content analysis, the goal of which "is never just description; rather, the analysed content must be related to […] factors about the documents, about the persons stating the content, about the intended audience, or about the times in which the content was produced" (Baker 1994, 268).

For the current study, I have selected a sample of novels (or "content") to be analysed, which are representative for the investigated topic and which have "a clear historical time frame" (Baker 1994, 106), namely the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910–1945). They have been written mainly by authors of Korean-American origin: Mary Lynn Bracht (2018) *White Chrysanthemum*, Annabelle Kim (2016) *Tiger Pelt*, Eugenia Kim (2009) *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, Nora Okja Keller (2019) *Comfort Woman*, Helie Lee (1997) *Still Life with Rice,* Young-Sook Moon (2019) *Trampled Blossoms*, and Linda Sue Park (2002) *When My Name Was Keoko*. Though they are works of fiction, my choice for these particular novels was dictated by the fact that most of them are based on biographical information. Thus, authoress Helie Lee is the granddaughter of the main heroine in her novel *Still Life with Rice*. A second reason for choosing novels as primary data for my study is that the plight of comfort women was not of major concern for the historians. This issue came to light only in the early 1990s, when the first survivor of a comfort station, Kim Hak Sun publicly told the story of her life as a sexual slave for the Japanese military. "Her example gave others the courage to join her in a class action which was launched in the Tokyo District Court on 6 December 1991" (Hicks 1997, 15). Consequently, as in content analysis the researcher must rely on printed materials (Baker 1994), my only choice was to draw together information form literary masterpieces. Moreover, since these novels are culturally valued works, "they represent important aspects of the culture under study" (Baker 1994, 268), i.e. the Korean culture.

From the novels mentioned above, I have extracted fragments whose content was focused on the general topic of *comfort women*, with two

sub-themes[3]: a) education – the Korean girls' strong desire to have access to education, a right reserved mainly for boys in the Korean patriarchal system; b) the horrors experienced by a large number of Korean teenagers, euphemistically called *comfort women*, who were either selected from schools or simply abducted and sent to front-line brothels (*comfort stations*) to provide sex services for the Japanese soldiers during WWII.

By using a kind of jigsaw puzzle technique, i.e. putting together information from the novels under consideration, I hope to be able to provide a clear (though touching) picture of Korean women's fate during the Japanese occupation, bearing in mind a line from one of the novels, which says: "War is a man's game, but the women and children seemed to suffer the most" (Lee 1997, 211).

The research questions the paper intends to provide answers to are the following:

1) How have the historical events impacted the lives of the young Korean females in the second quarter of the previous century?

2) Will the physical and moral damage inflicted by the Japanese military to the Korean women during the colonial rule ever be acknowledged by the Japanese government and punished?

The analysis of the data will be made in chronological order: section 3.1 is dedicated to the third decade of the 20th century, the period of time when the Japanese colonizers encouraged the education of Korean children (including girls) in an institutional setting, this being the only advantage for women during the Japanese rule in Korea; section 3.2 covers the time when Japan got involved in the Pacific War. Even if Korea was not directly involved in this world conflagration, it did suffer its effects: many Korean boys were forced to fight for the Japanese army, while many girls were sexually enslaved by the Japanese, in the so-called "comfort stations", or "recreation camps".

3. Korean Women during the Japanese Occupation

3.1. The 1920s and the 1930s

Maybe the only advantage the Korean women had during the Japanese colonization was access to schooling. In the patriarchal system of Korea, the virtues attributed to women were: being good daughters, good wives, and good mothers. "Education under this patriarchal value system seems to function as an important mechanism to produce a 'virtuous' woman and thus to maintain

3 In *content analysis*, "documents might be categorized in their totality by major themes" (Baker 1994, 268).

the Korean patriarchal system" (Hyun 2002, 1). At the end of the *Joseon*[4] era, education was essentially for the benefit of men. But not all women would accept this idea. Some of the young females belonging to the *yangban*[5] families were educated at home by their own mothers or by private tutors (an example in this respect being Haejung, a female character in Kim's (2009) *The Calligrapher's Daughter*). They were predominantly instructed on female morality and attitudes and on household activities. Unfortunately, girls of the lowborn did not have the luxury of being educated, as they had to work in the field. In the most fortunate cases, they would receive informal training in cooking and sewing, skills that would prepare them for their future marital life. This amounted to the fact that most of the Korean women were illiterate. According to Yu (1987), in 1930, 90% of Korean women were illiterate, while in the late 1950s illiteracy of the female population in Korea was about 80% (Seth 2010).

As a protectorate of Japan between 1905 and 1910, Korea showed willingness to carry out reforms under Japanese auspices. These reforms, known as the *Kabo Reforms*, were aimed at the modernization of various domains of the Korean society, including the educational system. The development of the Korean educational system was enhanced due to the establishment of ordinary schools by the colonial government all over the peninsular country. According to Toyoshima (2003, 122), "[o]rdinary schools were colonial institutions designed as a means to disseminate colonial ideologies, and played a dominant role in the education system". Initially, these schools were meant for the children of the Japanese colonizers, but, in time, Korean children were also allowed to attend them.

After the annexation of Korea to Japan in 1910, the education system was divided into primary education (four years), secondary education (four years for boys and three years for girls) or two-three years of vocational education (Oh and Kim, 2013). In the third decade of the previous century, "[t]hrough the Korean Educational Ordinance of 1922, the primary school course extended to six years for boys and girls" (Oh and Kim 2013, 115), following the Japanese model. At the same time, during the same period, secondary education was also extended to five years for boys and four for girls.

At the beginning of the Japanese rule, schools employed both Korean and Japanese teachers, but when Korea was entirely assimilated by Japan, the Japanese took over the role of teaching children, even if many of them were not qualified for such a profession. What is worth mentioning is that these ordinary schools encouraged the education of girls, irrespective of their social background. Thus, the number of Korean girls who were enrolled in such schools started to increase, although it was much lower than that of Japanese schoolgirls. According to Seth

4 Joseon was the former name of Korea.

5 The term *yangban* refers to the hereditary aristocracy in Korea, which was made up of landowners and government officials (Seth 2010).

(2010, 38), "[t]he very fact that many women were attending the new schools was a sign of the radical changes in Korean society that were starting to take place".

As it emerges from Park's novel *When My Name Was Keoko*, "elementary students all went to the same school, but in junior high, boys and girls went to separate schools. Japanese students had their own classrooms" (Park 2002, 19). This ethnic separation is also confirmed by secondary data sources. Thus, according to Oh and Kim (2013, 115), "primary schools and middle schools were divided in terms of ethnic groups".

The beginning of the institutional education of Korean girls is touched upon by Eugenia Kim in her novel *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009). Haejung, the calligrapher's wife, regrets not having had the chance to study at school and is determined to help her daughter, Najin, to receive formal instruction, despite her husband's opposition. Najin's father, a staunch traditionalist, was very much against his children attending school because the classes were taught by the colonizers, the Japanese *kanja* was taught in lieu of *Hangeul*, the Korean alphabet, and Korean books were burnt or confiscated, so that the pupils were forced to study from Japanese course-books. Still, Haejung hoped that her husband would consent to sending their daughter to school, as the Japanese started building public schools, which "can teach all women, not just *yangban* daughters" (Kim 2009, 11). It is very true that the educational initiative of the Japanese empire was only a plan to educate the Korean children and adolescents into becoming Japanese sympathizers. Moreover, Japanese imperialism used Korean women's education as a means of manipulating them, of spoiling the harmony in their family, and, in the long run, of destroying the society as a whole. So, Japanese education was a double-edged sword. This is evident in the following fragment excerpted from the above-mentioned novel.

> I can't understand how any educated man could send his son to those teachers. Think of the lies they'll learn! […]. Think of the propaganda those sabre-wearing quacks will spew. The pirate teachers – peasants and shopkeepers – coming here for free land and opportunities stolen from our countrymen. Think of their maps – colonist geography! Their books – imperial revisionist history! And surely nothing classic will be taught. They mean to raise a nation of ignorant collaborator sheep. (Kim 2009, 21)

Another character in Kim's (2009) novel, Deacon[6] Hwang, being more open-minded than the calligrapher, tries to convince him of the necessity of equal

6 At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, quite a large number of Koreans embraced Christianity, the missionaries contributing to the education of girls, especially in the missionary schools.

education rights for both boys and girls, even if the educational process is conducted by the colonizers:

> Deacon Hwang: Did they [women] not shout as loud as we did? Did they not die as tragically as men? Do they not desire independence as passionately as we do?
> Calligrapher Han: They've already coerced thousands of our youth to attend university in Tokyo. Our sons are forgetting what it means to be Korean! Now they'll take the women too?
> Deacon Hwang: Not just Tokyo. Any worthy student, man or woman, can study in America, Germany, or France, perhaps. They (i.e. the Japanese) also plan to expand Soongsil Academy and Union Seminary in Pyeongyang.
> Calligrapher Han: Bribes. Means to control us! (Kim 2009, 83)

The calligrapher's suspicions were right: Japanese education for girls came with its shortcomings, as confessed by Keoko, the heroine of Park's (2002) novel:

> All our lessons were in Japanese. We studied Japanese language, culture, and history. Schools weren't allowed to teach Korean history or language. […]. My own hair had been cut short, chin-length, with bangs, when I started school, because that was the required hair style […]. Everyday, the whole school met in the courtyard to recite the Emperor's education policy. We sang the Japanese national anthem. (Park 2002, 33–34)

What the fragment reveals is that the Koreans were not allowed to be Koreans any longer but were forced into becoming obedient servants of the Japanese emperor; in other words, they lost their national, cultural, and personal identity.

But girls' access to education came with a price. During WWII, the Japanese used schools for recruiting "female ammunition"[7] for the soldiers in the front line. They relied on the help of *chin-il-pa* (literally 'lover of Japan' – Koreans who cooperated with the Japanese) and also on the school-girls' naivety, who believed in the promises made by the Japanese, namely that they would be given jobs in textile factories in Japan, where they would be provided with a place to stay and a lot of food to eat. In a period when Korea experienced acute famine, causing lots of casualties especially among children, girls could be very easily persuaded that their effort would be beneficial both for them and for their families, as illustrated by the excerpt below:

7 This is one of the many derogatory terms used by the Japanese soldiers for the women they forced into sexual slavery.

> Buntaro-san took up the megaphone. "All girls sixteen years and older, report to the northeast corner." […] When the older girls had lined up, the principal began speaking to them. "His Divine Majesty, the Emperor is giving you girls a wonderful opportunity. There is a great need for workers in Japan, […] making uniforms for the honorable members of the Imperial forces. A salary will be paid to your families here in Korea. It is a chance to help both the Empire and your own family! Who among you would like to volunteer for this noble cause?" (Park 2002, 96)

As sexual issues were taboo in the Korean families, none of these schoolgirls suspected anything bad, especially as the message of the schoolmaster was wrapped in such enticing terms. And although the fragment above mentions "volunteering", these poor, innocent girls were actually forced into leaving their families, without even being given the chance to go home and say good-bye to their parents. But this issue will be approached in more detail in the following section of the paper.

3.2. Korean Girls as Comfort Women during WWII

It is said that during hard times, women have it worst. And indeed, the worst treatment a woman could receive is to be sexually abused and tortured. This is what the Japanese soldiers did to about 200,000 Asian women, most of them Koreans, starting with 1932 until the end of WWII. The horrors these victims had gone through were brought to light only in the 1990s, when Kim Hak Sun, one of the surviving comfort women, was the first to speak out in public. A plausible reason for this long period of silence is the fact that in Korea, a society based on Confucian principles, a woman's sexual purity was extremely important. As such, comfort women chose to repress the wounds of their past and be buried with them, rather than to be discriminated against and marginalized in case the sad truth concerning their youth had been exposed. It would have meant loss of face for them, something the Koreans are very strict about. Once the fate of comfort women was revealed to the public, the issue started being investigated and deeply explored in novels (see a partial list in section 2 above).

As we have seen in the previous section, one spot the Japanese recruited comfort women from were the schools. But very often young girls were abducted from the streets of the places they lived in (Chun-ja in *Trampled Blossoms*), others were abducted from the beach, where they helped their mothers as *haenyeo* 'sea divers' (Hana in *White Chrysanthemum*), whereas still others were sold by family members because of the poverty they experienced (Akiko in *Comfort Woman* "was sold like a cow" by her eldest sister, when she was only twelve years old). In some other cases, ordered by the Japanese to fill the "positions made vacant", the city governments notified the Korean families with eligible daughters.

Once recruited, these girls were taken to all the Japanese-occupied countries: Inner Mongolia, China (Manchuria), or the Philippines. Some of them would travel along with the front: from Mongolia to Hong Kong, then to the Philippines and, eventually, back home (as was the case of Haruko of *Trampled Blossoms*).

Due to the fact that the Japanese soldiers found it easier to use Japanese names, once the girls arrived at the comfort stations, their Korean names were replaced by Japanese ones. Moreover, the girls were also assigned numbers. This is revealed in Chun-ja's recollection of the first day in the recreation camp: "The first thing you need to do is memorize your number. Your numbers will be assigned from the youngest to the oldest. Number 1 is Haruko, Number 2 is Fumiko, Number 3 is Akiko, number 4 is Junko. So from now on, your name is Haruko, Number 1. Got it?" (Moon 2019, 61).

This procedure deprived the girls not only of their nationality and personal identity but also of any kind of human traits: they were not people but numbers that Japanese soldiers could play with.

The terrible life of comfort women in the recreation camps is very difficult to put into words. In these places, girls as young as twelve or thirteen years of age had to serve a large number of soldiers a day – in between twenty (Bracht 2018) to forty (Moon 2019) –, six days a week. The regular soldiers got thirty minutes with the girls, while the officers an hour. And the longer the lines of "customers" grew, the more violent they became with the comfort women.

Despite the fact that the girls were instructed on how to stay away from being infected with venereal diseases or becoming pregnant, as the number of soldiers they had to "accommodate" daily was quite high, these two dangers were often difficult to fight. Many of the comfort women died because of the complications brought about by the diseases they got, which caused their crotch to rot (Moon 2019). The treatment applied by the Japanese to those that survived the venereal disease is unimaginable for human beings. When the officers of the recreation camps realized that the comfort women were infected and, thus, useless, they would take them out of the camp under the pretext that they were "transferred", but actually they abandoned them in the forest. In other camps, the girls who got the venereal diseases were not provided food any longer and were left to die (Moon 2019). Others were simply shot. When Akiko, the heroine of *Comfort Woman* (Keller 2019) became pregnant, the doctor gave her a choice: rat poison or the stick. Witnessing the horrible death of another comfort girl, who had chosen the rat poison to abort her baby, Akiko went for the latter. Without being given any anaesthetic, her foetus was pulled out of her womb with a stick. And as if this physical pain was not excruciating enough, she also has to endure an even worse one. As a thirteen-year old girl, all she wanted was to get back to her family, and this made her beg the doctor who performed the abortion to help her have the wish fulfilled. "But he only laughed and pushed himself on top of me, using my

body as the other soldiers had done. Afterwards, as he wiped himself on my shirt, he opened the screen partition and let others watch him examine me. 'This one is still good', he called over his shoulder. He pried the lips of my vagina open with his fingers. 'See?', he said. 'Still firm and moist'" (Keller 2019, 35).

Many of the comfort girls could not endure the physical and psychological pain and tried to either resist the abuse of the Japanese soldiers, to flee the camps, or even to commit suicide. The punishment they received is difficult even to read about: they were "skewered from vagina to mouth, like a pig ready for roasting" (Keller 2019, 21), beaten on their breasts with hot spatulas, or even "seared on the chest with a red-hot iron", like cattle (Moon 2019, 128).

Eventually, WWII came to an end, and Japan surrendered. During the retreat from the zones they occupied, the Japanese soldiers tried to wipe away any trace of their criminal acts committed against many Asian women. They slaughtered not only the comfort women but also the Korean soldiers who had been forcefully conscripted in the Japanese army. When it came to the means of getting rid of the comfort women, the Japanese were as imaginative as they were in punishing the girls for resisting them. "They killed all the comfort women. Then they stacked up their corpses, poured kerosene on them, and set them on fire" (Moon 2019, 126). In other cases, "they herded a group of comfort women into a cave and blew them all up with grenades" (Moon, 2019, 171). The following fragment illustrates the cold-bloodedness of the Japanese soldiers:

> At length, the sergeant in charge of the girls rousted them from the tent. He marched them into a hole in the ground circled by sandbags. He ordered them to hunker down for an impending air strike and left them quaking there. […] They knew, as animals would, that they were in mortal danger. They hugged each other in the tight confines of the earthen bunker. After an hour, the same sergeant, accompanied by two soldiers armed with machine guns, returned to the dugout. […] The soldiers opened fire into the dugout. The girls' screaming stopped quickly. But the machine gun fire continued at excruciating length. (Kim 2016, 76–77)

The comfort women who managed to survive, i.e. the heroines of the novels considered in the analysis, had mixed feelings related to their freedom. On the one hand, they all longed to return home, to their families, and they were convinced they deserved to be happy because they had suffered so much from the brutality of the war. On the other hand, even if they were aware of the fact that they were just innocent victims, they felt ashamed and were afraid of their parents' reaction at finding out that they had been used as "public toilets"[8] by the Japanese:

8 Another derogatory term employed by the Japanese in referring to the comfort women. They also called them "sacred latrines".

> Chung-ja (Haruko): How am I going to look Mom in the eyes? What am I supposed to tell her? […] Given everything my mom had gone through, I couldn't bring myself to reveal my own wounds. I couldn't tell her that her daughter's womanhood had been taken from her.
> Sam-rye (Akiko): I'd rather not go back. I can't face my mom like this, let alone the rest of my family. (Moon 2019, 210–219)

The reactions of the family members on seeing the girls at home after such a long time differed from case to case. Some mothers were more understanding and welcomed their daughters whole-heartedly, realizing that they were not to be blamed for their tragedy. But in many situations the victims of the Japanese soldiers would be cast out like pariahs. The fragments below illustrate the two attitudes:

> Chung-ja's mother: You didn't do anything wrong. It's all the fault of this wicked world. What can we do aside from going on with our lives? You can tell me anything. Hiding the pain inside will just make it worse. You need to let go of those awful memories and make a new start. (Moon 2019, 223)

> Lee Hanah's mother: The woman raised her hand over the shoulder and paused in this position for a moment as if to gather all the strength of her horror and rage and pain. Then she slammed a backhand down on her daughter's face. The little girl hurtled to the floor. She closed her eyes and lay still as a grave, as she had done so many times before. She heard her mother scream again and again: '*You should have killed yourself!*' (Kim 2016, 102)

One could not help but sympathize with Lee Hanah, first and foremost for the tormenting endeavour of opening up to her mother, telling her how she had been kidnapped, taken to a comfort station in China, marched back to Korea after the end of the war, and how she was the only girl who survived the shooting of the comfort women by the Japanese. On the other hand, we could also figure out the reasons behind her mother's reaction. It was not because of the lack of love that she behaved like that towards her daughter but rather out of too much love. She knew exactly that in the Korean society a woman who had been defiled outside marriage was marginalized. At the same time, Lee Hana's mother was sure that victims of such a tragedy would never lead a normal life, a pain too great for a parent to endure. And it is very true that most of the women who survived their enslavement tried to hide away from the world, living in seclusion, or suffered from mental illnesses (Kim Soon-Hyo / Akiko in Keller 2019). The "lucky" ones would marry widowers with children (as was the case of Chung-Ja / Haruko in Moon 2019), impotent men, who wanted to save their face by marrying any woman, irrespective of her social

condition or her past (this being the case of Lee Hanah, Kim 2016), or American missionaries (Akiko in Keller 2019), who, as servants of God, were more lenient in terms of the sexual past of their wives. As Bok-sun, one of the comfort girls in Moon's novel, put it, "[w]e have to keep quiet about everything we went through. Who could tell about the horrible things we suffered? Only the sky above us and the earth below will know the truth" (Moon 2019, 184).

And indeed, the families of our main characters never learned of their tragic stories while the women were still alive. Akiko, the heroine of Keller's *Comfort Woman*, made an indirect confession of her ordeal via a recording. Her daughter found the tape in a box, together with other things, such as a note with Akiko's Korean name, only after the death of her mother. By listening to the recording a number of times, she could identify the secret Akiko did not have the courage to reveal while alive:

> *Chongshindae* [Battalion Slave]. Our fathers and brothers conscripted. The women left to be picked over like fruit to be tasted, consumed, the pits spit out as Chongshindae, where we rotted under the body of order from the Emperor of Japan. Under the Emperor's orders, we were beaten and starved. Under the Emperor's orders, the holes of our bodies were used to bury their excrements. Under the Emperor's orders, we were bled again and again until we were thrown into a pit and burned. (Keller 2019, 193)

Old Chung-ja, the heroine of Moon's *Trampled Blossoms* (2019), disappeared from the home she had been sharing with her daughter's family. Three years after she had been reported missing, the family got a phone call from the House of Sharing, a shelter for the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery, informing them that Heo Chung-ja had passed away. Everybody was wondering why grandma Chun-ja had chosen to spend her last days in this place. The only possible reason was that she had been a comfort woman, an experience she had kept silent about for fear that her daughter's and her granddaughter's lives would be affected. In the three years she spent at the House of Sharing, she put down her life experiences in a book, which came out two days after her death.

Three of the novels that served as sources of information for this paper bear very suggestive titles: *White Chrysanthemum* is the symbol of mourning – all the surviving victims mourned for their lost lives, as well as for their friends from the recreation camps who had departed to Heaven. *Trampled Blossoms* makes the reader think of the dreams of the sexual slaves that were crushed while they were young girls, "before they had a chance to bloom" (Moon 2019, 244). Keller's *Comfort Woman* leaves no room for interpretation. All of them represent a humble tribute paid to the victims of sexual slavery under the Japanese occupation and a message that such crimes should not happen again.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the fragments excerpted from the seven novels indicated in section 2 sought to find answers to two research questions, the first focusing on the impact of the historical events in the second quarter of the 20th century on the lives of young Korean females. As we have seen, the Japanese colonial domination had a devastating impact on Korea in general and on Korean women in particular. The lives of the girls who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military were totally destroyed. Some of them could not endure the thought of being dishonoured and the brutal treatment of the Japanese soldiers and chose to commit suicide either by hanging or slashing themselves or by drinking quinine. Those who survived suffered from mental alienation that prevented them from integrating into the society. They were marginalized by their own families for fear that their tragic past would "contaminate" all their relatives. They had no prospect for marriage, not to mention for becoming mothers, because many of them suffered brutal mutilation of their intimate organs. As they were of school age when they became comfort women, these girls could not finish their education, a dream made possible but also soon shattered by the Japanese. Thus, many remained almost illiterate, which reduced their chances of finding a job. All this shows how an act like the one committed by the Japanese could turn a human being into an "unperson".

The answer to the second research question concerning the acknowledgement by the Japanese government of the damage inflicted on Korean women and the official apology addressed to them is more problematic. Initially, the "[l]iving victims were too intimidated to challenge the might of the Japanese state" (Hicks 1997, 10) immediately after the end of WWII. Then, the "desire to hush up shameful things rather than embarrass family members – a concept typical in most Asian societies" (Peterson and Margulies 2010, 173) – may also account for the women's long silence. Moreover, as Hicks stated:

> Then as now, rape was never an easy charge to sustain. Given the high moral value attached to chastity, the comfort women invariably emerged from their wartime experiences defiled, yet unable to accuse their abusers. They had everything to gain by keeping silent and everything to lose by making accusations. From the patriarchal point of view, it was seen almost as a kindness to the comfort women to pretend that this systematic brutalisation had never taken place. (1997, 34–35)

On the other hand, the Japanese took all measures to cover up the atrocities committed during the war by mass killing the comfort women – as we have seen in the fragment excerpted from Kim's (2016) novel – or by attaching them as

nurses to local hospitals (Hicks 1997). At the same time, they also seem to have burned all the documentary evidence. Thus, the Japanese government strongly denied any knowledge of the existence of comfort stations and of the sexual exploitation of teenaged girls by Japanese troops. But many sources prove the contrary. Thus, Peterson and Margulies (2010, 172) point out that "[t]he Japanese imperial army first developed its system of 'comfort stations' at the request of Okamura Yasuji, Vice Chief of Staff of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force", in order to prevent the Japanese soldiers from raping the local women and from contracting and spreading venereal diseases. The same authors, just like Hicks (1997), also acknowledge professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi's major contribution to the revelation of the truth concerning the sexual enslavement of Asian women by providing documents from the archives, which proved that members of the highest level of the Japanese government had authorized the act. Jinwung Kim (2012, 349–350) stated that "the orders to recruit these so-called comfort women came from the highest echelon of the Japanese government, including the highest military authorities, and recruiters were the Japanese police and local government officials".

In the late 1990s, after Kim Hak Sun spoke publicly about the brutal and dishonourable treatment she had endured, more and more victims came into the open with their life stories. As a consequence, women's organizations in Korea (and in all the other countries from which the Japanese military abducted young women to sexually exploit them) brought the case to the public and urged the government to demand apologies and financial compensations from Japan. In 1995, cornered by the world on the basis of hands-on evidence provided by professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi and of the confessions of the surviving comfort women, the Japanese government issued an apology and promised financial compensation for the war victims. Apparently, the Japanese perpetrators of the comfort station system remained unpunished. This stirred the rage of the Korean feminists who faithfully continue the so-called Wednesday demonstrations[9] every week in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. "The Wednesday Demonstrations have been held every week since the first so-called comfort woman came forward twenty years ago, though Emi[10] has only attended once a year for the last three years. The demonstrations call for justice, for the Japanese government to admit their war crimes committed against thousands of women during WWII" (Bracht 2018, 79).

Additionally, the Statue of Peace, a golden bronze artwork representing a young girl forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial military, was placed in

9 The first demonstration was held in January 1992 (Bracht, 2018).

10 Emi is the younger sister of Hana, a sea diver who accepted to become a comfort woman only to save her sister. Realizing Hana's sacrifice, Emi's entire life is haunted by her sister's spirit. In December 2011, towards the end of her life, Emi starts participating in the Wednesday demonstrations, hoping to find her sister or get at least some bits of information about her.

front of the Japanese Embassy in the capital city of South Korea in 2011 to remind the Japanese politicians that they had not kept their promise.

According to an article posted in *The Korea Times* on the 16 February 2021, currently there are only fifteen registered survivors of the recreation camps set up by the Japanese military during WWII. They are still fighting to obtain an official apology from the Japanese government for the crimes committed against them during WWII. As Lee Yong-soo, aged 93, one of the surviving victims stated, "I am not asking for money for compensation, but for the Japanese government's full acknowledgement of its crimes and an apology to the victims." Hopefully, her wish will be granted while she is still alive.

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Change, Crisis, Perspective, and Identity in Two Novels by Rózsa Ignácz

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Abstract. For Hungarians who remained stuck beyond the borders after WWI, finding themselves in a foreign country from one day to the next, the historical trauma of the Trianon Treaty occasioned intercultural tribulations never experienced before. What the resulting Transylvanian literature discussed here is concerned with, however, is not what Jeffrey C. Alexander's cultural trauma theory calls "the trauma process", "the spiral of signification" (Alexander 2004, 11). Rather, it is concerned with "the indelible marks" "the horrendous event" left "upon group consciousness […] changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004, 1). This literature displays a rich array of the management strategies of minority identity. Earlier I devoted a book to the identity types that ensued from those strategies (Dani 2016a). The present work is based on that monograph and moves on. This time I wish to focus on the key figures of two Rózsa Ignácz novels (*Anyanyelve magyar* and *Született Moldovában*) to demonstrate the complex identity patterns that an erosion of minority native language and culture, so destructive to identity, yields. The road that the Hungarian minority travels leads through a succession of active and reactive changes, crises, and modifications of perspective in the maze of minority versus hegemonic intercultural relations.[1]

Keywords: crisis, identity, native language, Rózsa Ignácz, Hungarian minority

"It Has to be Written When You Feel the Inner Compulsion To."

In my monograph study *Identitásgyarmatosítás Erdélyben: identitásdrámák és interkulturális stratégiák a Trianon utáni székelymagyar irodalomban* ("Identity Colonization in Transylvania: Identity Drama and Intercultural Strategy in Post-

1 The choice of the literary works to be discussed is also meant to be a tribute to writer Rózsa Ignácz so unfairly silenced by the communists and to her son, Ádám Makkai, poet, linguist, literary translator, and winner of the Kossuth Prize twice, on the first anniversary of his death.

Trianon Székely–Hungarian Literature") (2016a), Székely–Hungarian identity types were examined that cannot be described by using traditional analytical methods. My identity typology thus evoked the John Milton Yinger and the Beth Bowman Hess models of assimilation theories and the G. J. Ashworth–Brian Graham–J. E. Tunbridge theory of plural society. As for identity theory, I relied on Thomas Hylland Eriksen, William Bloom, J. P. Plamenatz, Anthony D. Smith, and György Csepeli. Jan Assmann provided the notion of cultural memory and its related concepts. Some categories of Homi Bhabha's colonial/postcolonial theory were also essential for those interpretations and reinterpretations. Karl Erik Rosengren's theory of communication as well as Everett M. Rogers and Thomas M. Steinfatt's theory of intercultural communication also contributed to the theoretical toolbox.[2] The interpretive framework for handling the special situation of diaspora existence was furnished by the László Vetési ethnogram.[3] The identity types that I set up can be grouped according to various perspectives; the monograph offers more than thirty choices for the reader of the discussed literary works, against which to test their own minority identity strategies. From the various manifestations of the natural human being of nature, i.e. uncolonizable identity, through the examples of self-destructive uncolonizability and identity-relinquishing conformity to the predicament of rootless I-identity, a good number of identity types can be established, which lead to a better understanding of minority existence on the one hand and endow us with a clearer insight of the often self-contradictory interpretations of today's European identity on the other hand.

The present study takes some of my earlier findings as its starting point and develops them further. Using the examples of two Ignácz novels (Rózsa Ignácz, 1909–1979), I hope to show how *changes* necessitated by historical and political pressure, causing the minority's *changed* relation to its native language and native culture, lead to language- and culture-related (and various other) *crises*; and what the perspectives that the individual, the group, minority society, or national minority can contemplate are.

"With the homelessness of the one who has two motherlands, I am being tossed back and forth between Transylvania and Hungary", we can read in a Rózsa Ignácz letter (*Levelek Erdélyből* – "Letters from Transylvania"; 1998, 5).[4] The whole life and work of the writer – who was born in Székelyland, socialized in Transylvania, and then repatriated in Trianon-truncated Hungary (with Transylvania no longer part of it but belonging to Romania) – was hounded by the interlocking duality of "itthon" and "otthon"[5]: by the meaning and interpretation

2 (Yinger 1994, Hess 1988, Ashworth–Graham–Tunbridge 2007, Eriksen 2008, Bloom 1990, Smith 1991, Csepeli 1992, Assmann 2004, Bhabha 1998, Rosengren 2000, Rogers–Steinfatt 1999, Vetési 2001). For detailed justifications of introducing these theories, cf. the monograph itself.

3 For detailed justifications of introducing these theories, cf. the monograph itself.

4 The quotations from Ignácz Rózsa's novels are the author's translations.

5 Hungarian for "here at home" versus "at home there".

of native land and home country and by her bond to her native language. Her life was imbued with her insistence on her roots to the extent that she succeeded in "passing" this strong emotional and intellectual relationship with Transylvania on to her (now late) son, Budapest-born poet, linguist, translator, and American professor Ádám Makkai. The professor professed, together with Széchenyi, that a human being lives in his or her language. His life took him to many places in the world, but "home" always meant one place only. He covered extreme distances between Transylvanian Kovászna and Hawaii, but what really mattered was the inner journey, in the course of which the broad scholarly "curiosity" of the linguist always returned to his mother tongue. Besides, Professor Makkai often revisited Transylvania, where he established close relationships with young Transylvanian-Hungarian writers; finally, he moved back to Hungary in 2015, after sixty years of emigration.

These are important items of information in our context – change, crisis, and perspective – since whenever Ignácz changed from home country to native land or back, *change* was always followed by *crisis*. The feeling of the homelessness of those who have two homelands often descended on her whenever she made a journey from home to home (from Hungary to Transylvania or back) – a change when the sense of homelessness intensified. "I am at home here in Pest; my family, my work, my subsistence are all here. Still, I go home every summer with the frenzied haste of someone drowning, for whom it is a matter of life or death to catch a quick breath of that singular air. The way I always set out: this is going to be my last, leave-taking trip" (Ignácz 1998, 5). Then, after a lengthier stay in Transylvania, the *crisis* grips her: "And I return determined that next year I will move home forever" (Ignácz 1998, 5). It is a sensation which could (also) be called the consciousness of the dual homelands.

Her dual-homeland consciousness amounted to more than what permeated the mind of the individual subject: it did not exactly enhance her reputation as a writer either. In order to be fully regarded as a Transylvanian author, she should have stayed in Kolozsvár (Ro: Cluj), and her works should have been published by *Erdélyi Szépmíves Céh*. In order to be regarded a Hungarian writer, she should have been associated more fully with Budapest (Nemény i 2009, 6). Duality manifests itself in her "twin careers" too: she started out as an actress but then turned to writing. Some writers looked at her as someone who was "more of an actress"; for the theatre world, she was "more of a writer" (Nemény i 2009, 5).

Her novels are filled with stringent social criticism, with the pain over the loss of Transylvania although "she did not cry and wail, did not weep for the return of everything, but gave us a realistic rendering of how the Hungarians lived under Romanian rule in Kolozsvár" (Makkai 2004). Multilingual, belletrist, and literary translator Ignácz's firm adherence to her mother tongue is partly atavistic. But it is deliberate too: "I know only one heritage that I am devoted to: my native language. I

could talk about success, a successful life, I could say thanks for the free gift of talent only if I could rightly say that I was not only living by my mother tongue, however little, but I also did something for it" (*Asszonysorsok és nőszerepek az irodalomban. Ignácz Rózsa*). It is no accident, then, that several of her novels and other pieces of writing are permeated with the role native language plays in identity formation and preservation. Her characters exemplify how the life of a community forced into minority is shaped by the common bond of the mother tongue and how national and cultural identity are being destroyed by the erosion of the native language.

The title of her first novel – *Anyanyelve magyar* (Native Language: Hungarian) (1937) – is already indicative of the strong Ignácz–mother-tongue relation just outlined. The protagonist, Ilona Kovács, is a portrait of the artist. The mentality Ilona represents and the opinions she offers are loaded with a view of the world based on Ignácz's personal experiences, combined to become the novel's ideological discourse. This work lays before us the events of the Kolozsvár high-school years: the way the Hungarian student, while exploring her possibilities in the post-Trianon Romanian world, is confronted with the aggressive assimilative attempts of the majority culture. This is not done by this Hungarian author as an accusation of Romanian power pressure, nor with intensified literary techniques, nor is it overdramatized. The same is true for *Született Moldovában* (Born in Moldavia) (1940), a novel that presents the broadest spectrum of identity management by members of the Székely-Hungarian minority community. At the time of writing that novel, Ignácz could not yet have met modern theories of assimilation, colonialism, post-colonialism, and diaspora. Nevertheless, she depicts adroitly the process that could be adequately described with those would-be theories: the way the erosion and stigmatization of the mother tongue, language exchange, bilingualism, and linguistic assimilation (may) lead to the total abandonment of cultural and national identity. What the novel shows us is authentic. Ignácz did not simply rely on her creative fantasy, or, at best, on information acquired from secondary sources to be able to delineate the tragic identity drama of the Csángós.[6] She researched the subject on the spot. The results of that and her personal experiences went into her description of the characteristic features of Moldavian Csángó life, the native-language aspect included, assimilation, cultural identity, religious life, diaspora life, and the painful present of all these.

When the textual subjects of the two Ignácz novels are examined in the context of the mother tongue/identity formation relation, the two protagonists claim our attention: Ilona Kovács of *Anyanyelve magyar* and Dávid Gergely of *Született Moldovában*. According to the identity typology established in my earlier work quoted above, Ilona's identity pattern is multiple-stage, forced minority-identity management, while Dávid's one is rootless I-identity[7] tribulations. Through

6 Hungarian-speaking natives of Moldavia.

7 According to Jan Assmann, identity has two forms: I-identity and we-identity. For the sake of a

the character of Ilona, an omniscient narrator relates the events of the author's Kolozsvár student years in a diegetic fashion. So, the implied author creates the textual universe of *Anyanyelve magyar* through a non-dramatized, extradiegetic narrator, to use Gérard Genette's well-known terms (Genette 1980, 228; 1988, 132–134). The implied author of the other novel, *Született Moldovában*, also speaks through an extradiegetic narrator, who is not dramatized either. In the background lies what Ignácz accumulated as a result of on-the-spot research of several months in Moldavia, as has already been mentioned. The narrators of both novels would certainly agree with the view expressed by Sándor Balázs concerning majority culture strategies deployed against the minority: "[i]t is through withering culture that national identity must be made unfunctionable" (Balázs 1995, 97). Both novels are a penetrating study of exactly that hegemonic effort.

Identity

The notion of identity has no single definition; we have no theoretical model based on general scholarly consensus since we have countless "identities", conceived on diverse conceptual bases: national, cultural, ethnic, diaspora, individual, collective, double, majority, minority identity, and more. This paper, with its focus on the role language plays in identity formation, will embrace János Péntek's concept of identity as most relevant. It is a theory that states: identity is nothing else than the answer to the question "who am I?", "what am I?". Péntek asserts that "native language" is not simply a sociolinguistic category as it is also charged with emotional and symbolic content attached to it by a narrator or by her/his community. Furthermore, if a speaker and a background community identify themselves in the same language, thus distinguishing themselves from everyone else, "the symbolic value of the native language becomes more intensive" (Péntek 2010, 161–162).

We can also have recourse to Ferenc Pataki:

> Identity becomes a problem – that is, self-definition causes tension and difficulties – where and when, as a result of increasing social differentiation and the emergence of the individuated social self, identity categories become gradually detached from their natural, inherited, and fixed basis. They will be more numerous as a result and lose their rigid adhesion to the individual. The notional richness of articulating and handling reality – with the other human being and ourselves in it – will increase.

better understanding of how collective sociocultural identity works, the "I" must be divided into *"individual" and "personal" identity*. Individual identity "builds itself up in the consciousness of the individual"; personal identity falls to the lot of the individual from society, it follows from his or her "special place in the social network" (Assmann 2011, 111–113).

What Pataki adds – "On the other hand, the individual is granted more and more ample free scope to realize choices, decisions, conscious, and chosen identity manoeuvres" (Pataki 1986, 14) – is pertinent as an abstracted distillation of identity's essence. In post-Trianon Transylvania, however, these are the very operations that history and politics deny the Székely-Hungarians.

Patterns of Minority Identity, Viewed in the Triple Framework of Change–Crisis–Perspective

What follows below is an attempt to outline, in the triple framework, the formation-process of key characters Ilona Kovács's and Dávid Gergely's identity types (i.e. multiple-stage identity management [Dani 2016a, 123] and the development of rootless I-identity [Dani 2016a, 183]) with the help of relevant segments of the two narratives.

Therefore, with close attention to the details of the two storylines, I tried to keep track of the various changes, also the crises these changes may have generated as well as of the impact those crises exert on the two narrative agents (Ilona and Dávid, whose fates determine the main directions of identity discourse in the novels). This will be done from the point of view of their perspectives (how they can get on in life and/versus to what extent they are able to retain their language and culture). An overview of my findings follows now, with detailed elaboration later below.

	Ilona kovács	Dávid Gergely
CHANGE	*narratorial discourse:* narratorial discourse remains unchanged all through	*narratorial discourse:* narratorial discourse remains unchanged all through
	the storyworld: change of location (from native village to large city); changes effected by various cultural influences; change in self-evaluation; experience of discrimination, increasing sense of being a minority; intercultural experience; use of native language repressed,	*the storyworld:* change of location (experience of the Csángó village and the community of the Romanian capital); activization of dimly remembered native language; constant adjustments of self-evaluation; pressure of discrimination becoming permanent ("young gentleman", "bangyen"-hood); intercultural experience (Máté, the Csángós, Éva); dilemma of bilingualism;

	Ilona kovács	Dávid Gergely
	pressure of majority culture steps up; change in the (individual and personal) segments of I-identity – no doubling of identity; changes in we-identity; interrelationship of career expectation and change	native language and Hungarian culture periodically erupt from under the surface (pulsating awakening to native culture); change in the (individual and personal) segments of I-identity – doubling of identity; changes in we-identity; interrelationship of career expectation and change
crisis	existential crisis; identity crisis; the crisis of I-identity (individual and personal); there is no we-identity crisis; the where-am-I-at-home crisis	no existential crisis; identity crisis; the crisis of I-identity (individual and personal) and we-identity; the where-am-I-at-home crisis
perspective	change of identity; name-change; language changed; assimilation; career guaranteed; OR: return to the pre-change world (she finds her way back to Hungarian identity)	change of identity; no change of name; bilingualism (is it possible?); rootlessness versus assimilation; career guaranteed; OR: assimilation (aborted assimilation attempt: Dávid dies)

Changes

My uniform theoretical guidance in discussing the triple problematic of change, crisis, and perspective will be the theoretical background expounded in the first („Changes") subchapter.

Relying especially on Yuri Lotman (among others), Peter Hühn defines what can be regarded to be an "event" in a narratological sense as a "decisive turn" in the life of the character(s) (2016, 37–38). "Decisive turns" in our context are turning points or at least crucial experience impacting minority predicament or eliciting major response from minority identity; for instance, effecting a change in a determinant of minority identity (like use of the native language); but resistance to the pressure to change can itself become a determinant of minority strategy.

The above table indicates ten changes in the life of the two key characters, where the use, loss, or abandonment of the native language is a catalyst in the background. (Read more about it below.) There is a common factor in the two cases, though. It is the absence of change in the *narratorial discourse* as opposed to the varied picture that the changes in the storyworld characters' thinking, attitudes, and actions present. While there is no change in narratorial presentation, we cannot sense overdramatization either, in the way the narrator handles the motivation, consciousness of storyworld narrative agents; no hidden

critique, no suggested narratorial agreement or disagreement can be detected. In other words, Ignácz's are not judgemental characters.

In the Ilona Kovács story, change of location is one of the important changes. The switch is from the community of a pure Székely-Hungarian village to the multilingual and multicultural environment of a Transylvanian large town. Nature symbolism is indicative of what it meant to arrive from the spring into winter: "fog descended from the alps of Gyula […] it climbed up along the gutters to the eaves. It entwined the pillars of the church. Mildly, soft and snow-white. Kolozsvár was engulfed by the fog… December nineteen twenty-seven…" (Ignácz 1990, 28). The young Székely village girl is confronted at every step with what remains of the old, bygone Hungarian world. The aged representatives of the Hungarian aristocracy construe a peculiar interpretation of the "the new world's" gaining ground: the identity challenges of the post-Trianon present make them retreat into the cultural memory of the past. In cognitive narratological terms, this is what determines their cognitive architecture and inner representation. Theirs is a vanished world: "I can still see the house half-sunk in the ground. Its mouldy walls wobbly under the huge roof. It is squatting scared at the corner of Egyetem street, across the cemetery. In Kolozsvár, under Majálistető"[8] (3).

It is in this environment that Ilona lives as a Hungarian, with every cultural influence (Romanian, Jewish, and Saxon schoolgirls, together with the more and more arrogantly dominant Romanian culture) making her sense of being a minority citizen stronger. They exert a negative influence on the individual and personal segments of her I-identity. "Tough little Hungarian is how Rebrescu mocks me at school". And then, trying to imagine what it would be like to live in Budapest: "I wonder how they would tolerate me, or they too would ridicule me in the student's canteen there with my Mongolian cheekbone?" (222). What is more, the supremacy of the Romanian schoolgirls, her roommates, humiliates the Hungarian in her (even if the remark is not meant specifically for her but for the Hungarian servant): "you stupid yokel! Au, tu unguruaica tu!" (12).

No wonder that her self-evaluation is changing, too. In the succession of events, she tends to see her being a Hungarian in an increasingly negative light as a result of continual discrimination (they deride her as "Tartar-headed Kovács"). Her relation to what for her is a foreign language and culture is apparent, feigned, in fact – in Bhabha's terms –, cultural mimicry. Genuine multiple group identification[9] is out of the question here, when we are dealing with a hegemonic sociocultural majority pressure, which demands your cultural identity in exchange for social opportunity. Ilona undergoes some transformation in the course of all of this, though. As a matter of fact, she can barely notice how close

8 "Majálistető" means "May-picnic hill" (Hungarian).

9 On multiple group membership, see sociologists Vernon L. Allen, David A. Wilder, and Michael Atkinson (1983, 92).

her minority cultural identity comes to being colonized by hegemonic majority culture, too. It is because she is a talented student, cut out for foreign languages, too. When asked by the inspector if she wished to do her geography examination (at the high-school-leaving examination series) in Hungarian or Romanian, she chooses the latter. But with her it is a momentary manifestation of the situational identity[10] of an enthusiastic student, and not sociocultural positioning at all.

A direct consequence (and a catalyst) of these changes is that the native language is pressed back more and more. Owing to her Romanian-language schoolwork, Ilona's Hungarian is no longer faultless in spite of the fact that she was socialized in a Hungarian environment. Her language competence begins to dwindle, slowly but steadily: "Geography, history, constitucia. Contitucia. What is it in Hungarian? Good grief! She no longer speaks Hungarian" (21). What is more, the assimilative weight of the majority culture whose aim is also to wither minority language is educating the girl to think in Romanian: "Think in Romanian – Miss Suciu, the history teacher said –, and you will no longer use so many incorrect expressions" (21).

This is what makes minority feeling permanent and bad social stereotypes stronger: it reinforces the social conditioning which maintains that the majority culture is more valuable, therefore superior; so convinced, majority culture will, in turn, really look down upon minority culture as less valuable, inferior. It backgrounds native language (too), and eventually leads to the deformation of both segments of Ilona's I-identity. Her Hungarian friends need to step in, collective we-identity must interfere to prevent the total loss of identity that Ilona has been managing in a multi-stage fashion.[11]

In the background of the process, beset with changes, we find Ilona's career plans for the future. For a Székely-Hungarian to be able to make her own way in life, a diploma is needed (it is her aspiration to be a physician), but Romanian language is a degree requirement. The greater the extent to which she becomes Romanian, the better chances she has of succeeding in society. A direct consequence of this is, however, that Ilona no longer identifies herself in her native language, and she is thus gradually drifting away from the group which provides her we-identity. The disintegration of native language skills is only the beginning. Another indicator of encroaching assimilation is name change. Ilona Kovács can or could become Dr Ilona Covaciu: "If … you become doctor Covaciu, it will not hurt you at all" (252); "Rebrescu advises me to change my name to Covaciu when I enrol [i.e. at the university]. I wonder why she cares for me so much?" (253). The majority culture's assimilation strategy that pushes Ilona Kovács towards becoming Ilona Covaciu and capitalizes on her wish to be getting

10 On situational (or small) versus large (social) identities, see Alexandra Georgakopoulou 2006, 96–100.

11 On multi-stage minority identity crisis management, cf.: Dani 2016a, 123–129; 2016b, 23–25.

on in the world is causing confusion in her information processing and inner representation – the first steps in the gradual but systematic dismantling of her minority identity.

Gergely Dávid (or should we say "David Ghergheli"?) is culturalized in a Romanian environment from the very start. He loses his Hungarian mother early; the father – who embodies the conformity of abandoned identity – becomes Adalbert Ghergheli and departs for Bucharest, leaving his son behind. The boy, who is left without a family, is being raised by a Romanian family in a small Moldavian village. He does not speak his native Hungarian; the music and the rhythm of his mother's words are not more than vague memories. While in Ilona's case the question is whether her steady sense of Hungarian identity can waver or even be shaken and destroyed, the Romanianized father's son's, Dávid's native identity *is* shaky and staggering from the outset.

Change of location will gain central significance in Dávid's identity tribulations when he visits the family of his schoolmate for a longer period of time in a Moldavian Csángó village. His sense of rootlessness begins to subdue when he meets the Csángó community for the first time: "Because sometimes you live years in just moments, and there are pictures that dig themselves into you forever. He saw it for the first time, and saw it like this ever after" (Ignácz 1997, 149). David is a man of double identities, in a sense. Both the individual and the personal segments of his I-identity are charged with Romanian identity; Hungarian language and culture are a barely glimmering, fading memory. His everyday direct contact with Romanian-majority environment and culture drives this individual closer to the cultural Other, to integration into the other culture. He has no own (Hungarian) cultural group (or we-) support; moreover, his cognitive functions, value system, and representations are extremely reduced. His emotional attachment to his own culture vanished in the past: his Hungarian identity is latent, consisting of threadbare elements of the native language.

Changing cultural circumstances have a twofold influence on him: right at the beginning of the novel, he meets Máté, the Székely on the run, and comes under his influence. He owes the activation of his native-language memories to Máté. Dávid remembers only the first line of the Hungarian evening prayer (even that with a Romanian accent), and is not even sure that the line is Hungarian: "I don't remember how it goes on. Tell me, is this Hungarian speech?" (12). He admires the Székely young man's dress, habits, reactions, and the Romanian he speaks with a Hungarian accent. His sense of rootlessness gets somewhat dissolved, while still being tossed about between the Hungarian and Romanian cultural sway. The Romanian high school community, Máté's unwavering Hungarian identity, the customs of the Csángó village (that Dávid often finds difficult to describe), the cultic use of (atavistically survived) snippets of Hungarian language – all mutually impacting one another – land Dávid in a serious identity crisis.

His rootlessness gives him a sense of insecurity in the first place, but processing the world more and more makes his identity more and more unsteady: "And I have to decide at last, now, at the age of fifteen, before choosing a career and stepping out into life what I am after all? […] Which is my people, Niculai?" (102–103), he is asking his Romanian friend in despair. He puts this feeling into words for the Hungarian monastic of the village, too: "What I am ashamed of is that, like Máté, I am neither outside nor inside […] that I can be neither Romanian nor Hungarian. I am ashamed of what I am, and I am looking for… what, after all, Father. What am I? Something between the two, something that everybody in it is ashamed of. Something, which is a disgrace […]" (174).

The question plagues him more and more. The Székely-Hungarian Máté could be his direction indicator, his point of orientation, a fixed point for Dávid. Máté could be "the ancestor" that Toni Morrison speaks about apropos of black American literature in her "rootedness" essay: "these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationship to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom". "The absence of an ancestor" is "frightening", "threatening" (Morrison 1990, 330). Máté is a proto-, primaeval Székely after all. He is there for Dávid. But the cultural confusion in Dávid's soul does not let Máté fulfil the role of "the ancient", to provide rootless Dávid with a sense of rootedness. (Ilona does have her "ancestor" too, Feri Borbáth, her friend, another uncompromising Székely.)

But besides Máté, the diaspora community of the Csángó village (they speak Romanian but pray in Hungarian at church) and later on the small Reformed Church congregation of the Hungarians in Bucharest (who all have their different methods to awaken the young man to the realization of the importance of his native culture and language) – could all serve as handholds for Dávid to hold onto. Their we-identity could be a firm support for his wavering I-identity in his rootless existence.

Another motivating reason for the confusion of self-assessment is ceaseless discrimination ("something, which is a disgrace"): "bangyen"-hood.[12] They constantly make him feel that he is displaced, that he has no home country; whichever way he turns, Hungarian extraction means immense disadvantage in this intercultural space (he used to be scoffed at as "little gentleman" in the Romanian native village of his childhood). He ventures in the direction of bilingualism, but this makes his already unstable identity even more unsure. And the vortex of rootlessness pulls him down only deeper. On the one hand, he is open to Hungarian language and culture, to Hungarian Reformed religion (his renegade father had him baptized Greek Orthodox originally). On the other hand, numerous factors – the Romanian–Hungarian double impact systems, the false-consciousness strategy of the history teacher, not mentioning his father's

12 "Bangyen/bangyin" is a Romanian word to jeer at Transylvanian Hungarians.

example, who discarded his identity – keep pulling him back into an identity crisis whose source is, again, his rootlessness.

His experience of the Hungarian Reformed Church community of the Romanian capital city (the city of the "bangyens", in terms of the novel's world) is promising. But its identity benefit is ambivalent. True, the Hungarian housemaid, who does not speak Romanian, and Éva, the Protestant minister's daughter, both exert an influence on both segments of Dávid's I-identity, although first they treat him as someone with double identity: "I said this to Mr Ghergheli only… If I were to speak to Mr Gergely… I would be saying something quite different" (276). The Hungarian community ensures strong, unambiguous Hungarian we-identity for Dávid, no doubt, and his socially-based personal identity is strengthened by it. Learning Hungarian plays a definite role in this: "snappish, cracking, hard language is this Hungarian. When he spoke Romanian, the words were asleep in his mouth, so it seemed sometimes; the soft, guttural sounds were dropping out of his mouth with such self-evident laziness. […] But Hungarian double 't' and double 'l' put his attention and vocal cords to the test all right […]. I will change, I will start a new life!" (300). His returning cultural memory, his mother's vaguely remembered snatches of words bring him increasingly closer to his mother tongue: "My God! … Indescribable, celestial happiness fills him since all of them, all of them are here with him, he hears, he knows that his mother is speaking to him, Máté encourages him, and Ersze whispers" (164).[13]

Still, Dávid's tragedy is inevitable. David Ghergheli's plans for the future (he would like to be a degree holder) and his childhood friend's cultural and political nationalism drive him in the direction of the Romanian fascist organization, the Iron Guard, something that eventually means Dávid's death. As Dávid Gergely, he was Hungarian-born; as David Ghergheli, he was socialized in a Romanian environment. His native language and minority identification could not recover enough to enable the Székely-Hungarian Dávid Gergely, a man of rootless I-identity from the start, to assert himself *as a Székely-Hungarian* in Bucharest's chaotic life.

Crises

The changes discussed above lead up to crises in both characters' lives. Ilona Kovács has to cope with a serious existential crisis provoked by changes arising from the need to leave her native village in order to pursue her studies (and in Romanian at that!) so as to be able to make her way in life. Gergely Dávid/David Ghergheli is not confronted with an existential crisis. He is already a second-generation "renegade", even if it is involuntary and not unambiguous – reasons why the identification issue can precipitate into tragic identity tribulations for him.

13 In the Csángó name usage Ersze means Elisabeth.

The father, justifying his decision with his consideration for his son (but regarding his own plans to succeed in life in fact) becomes a conformist, who gives up his Hungarian identity. The background that looms behind it all is what Daniel R. Miller theorizes as "the tyranny of the immediate social context" (Miller 1983, 326). In our case, it is the tyranny of being forced into minority existence, in which social opportunities are curtailed unless you switch sociocultural identification, as the father did (and his son will, too, eventually). This is how Gergely Béla goes for the Romanian identity of Adalbert Ghergheli, switching group affiliation and discarding who he was before. What he means by saying that he undertakes the move of assimilation (also) out of regard for his son is that Adalbert Ghergheli does not want his son to be an alien in his own country; he does not want Dávid to live the life of a "bangyen". It is the father's deliberate intention that his son should grow up to be an unquestionable Romanian. In order to achieve this, he cuts his son off from his native language, from Hungarian culture and religion. True, he does secure him livelihood.

It seems that the existential crisis, which grips the father, costs him his native language and culture. What he is presented with is the imperative of language change and culture change, the command to achieve his goal in another sociocultural environment. His sociocultural positioning is motivated by something that can be grasped with multiple group membership theory. Gergely Béla lays emphasis on "the evaluative dimension" of the identification issue: on "how well am I doing?". With him, the "who am I?" matters less.[14]

The identity crisis that Ilona and Dávid toil over is intense, involving identity confusion, the erosion of the native language taking the lead role in the background with the alternating intensity of loss and retainment. The overall pattern in Ilona's case is retainment → loss → retainment; in Dávid's case: loss → retainment → loss. Numerous small incidental details – plot elements, considerations, dilemmas, possibilities, and impossibilities – are teeming inside both patterns.

The identity crises of both characters are closely related to the pulsating impacts of the we-identities that reach them with alternating intensity, frequency, and with mostly contradictory message load, from the minority and the majority cultures that surround them. The I-identities of the two character agents are being shaped or deformed in relation to the decreasing or increasing intensity of same-culture or hegemonic-culture impacts with signs that are positive or negative, depending on identity programmes and representations.

The chain of changes, crises, and perspectives leaves its strong and characteristic imprint on the final outcome in both cases. The where-is-home issue becomes clearly defined behind Ilona's resolute decision. Her home in the world can only be a place where her identity crisis disappears. So, she returns to

14 For the theoretical aspect, see Allen–Wilder–Atkinson 1983, 95.

her motherland. Quite the contrary, Dávid's identity tribulations develop into a tragedy: he is denied the sense of home by his rootlessness.

Perspectives and Conclusion

Both Ilona and Dávid have two roads to travel. As for the high school student, the narrator leaves no doubt about the choices she has. Ilona either changes her national and cultural identity and steers her course towards total assimilation through changing her name and language, and then the road to success in the world is open for Ileana Covaciu, or deliberately steers clear of assimilation and returns to her Székely-Hungarian (national and cultural) minority community to go on seeking her place as a Hungarian minority in her own native community. The Kovács pattern is clear – the narrator makes her decision: Ilona goes home.

Dávid's identity-related vicissitudes are much more complex, and his perspectives are aligned with this: the opportunities to choose from are generated around him in several phases, under double pressure. He has no time – and the fast pace of events does not let him – to fortify his I-identity with the help of his latent cultural memory, with his openness to the barely remembered mother tongue. In other words, circumstances do not let his native-language culture and we-identity fortify his I-identity to the degree that would help him change his name and identity in the *opposite* direction – *back* from David Ghergeli to Gergely Dávid – and thereby assimilate into his own national community. The boy was torn out of his native minority community, and his assimilation into majority culture is so strong that he himself is incapable of altering the course of his own life. The only realistic perspective left for him is annihilation.

In Pataki's terms (quoted above), applied to Dávid's specific case, Dávid's identity became "detached" from its "natural, inherited, and fixed basis". Pataki also argues that "[t]he individual should always be able to say where he is 'at home' in the world after all" (Pataki 1986, 16). This is exactly what a minority individual, set on the course of loss of identity, can no longer say.

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Suffering, Trauma, and Death in Anna Terék's Poetry Book *Halott nők* [Dead Women]

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Abstract. Anna Terék is one of the most interesting Hungarian poets of the young generation. The study is focused on Terék's third poetry book, *Halott nők* (Dead Women) (2017). The book is a poetry cycle that shows stories/voices of five women. Violence, physical as well as psychological and symbolic, becomes destructive to the identity of the individual but also to the identity of the community. At the same time, it demands an effort of expression. The paper analyses these issues. The study describes the speech / narrative forms and their functions, and it examines the system of metaphors and the specific poetic language. The poems are closely related to the Yugoslav Wars. The study refers to this historical background but also shows the poems' universal dimension, which makes it possible to speak about them in terms of the life stories of today.

Keywords: Anna Terék, Hungarian literature, trauma studies, contemporary poetry

Introduction

In Anna Terék's poetry book *Halott nők* (Dead Women) (2017), suffering, trauma, and death are shown as a constellation of different traumatized voices. The book consists of five monologue stories, all of which are thematically formed around the same themes. Each story describes the enormity of the suffering that the protagonists endure in their lifetimes, their entanglement in toxic relationships, and their inability to free themselves from them, a kind of inability that only death can break – since only death makes it possible for the protagonists to express their suffering in their own words and thus to reveal the intricacies of individual and collective trauma. The book is an evocation of pain, suffering, and death that can shock with its intensity. At the same time, it allows the reader to go beyond it, to exceed his/her own experience, and, thanks to that, to better empathize with other people. By doing this, the book draws attention to areas

that tend to be ignored and marginalized in social discourses. The paper focuses on the structure, stylistic elements, and language by which this is achieved.

Hybridity and Homogeneity, Individuality and Collectivity

The very title, although brutal, precisely indicates not only the subject matter but also the lyrical subjects and their main characteristic, namely being dead. The book consists of five poetic cycles. These are: "Jelena", "Siberia", "Maja", "Judit", and "Island" – in each of them, the lyrical subject is of female gender. Each woman describes her death and life marked by suffering. The only exception is the last cycle, which also presents the story from the perspective of a man entangled in it. One is of the impression that, paradoxically, the protagonists' narratives show not life but its absence, because the fate of these women is filled with both physical suffering and emotional distress to such a great extent. The first voice belongs to Jelena, a Serbian mother who has lost her son during the war and commits suicide. The second part tells the dramatic fate of a young nameless woman, whose life forces her to move between Siberia, Paris, and Serbia. The third voice belongs to Maja, a young girl from Sarajevo, brutally killed by soldiers. We also meet Judit, a young cancer patient, who is trapped in a toxic relationship with her mother. The last part shows the story of a drowned nameless woman and her fanatically religious husband.

Such a radical gesture of giving a voice and possibility to self-express to a dead person – though death does not always mean physical death here – brings to mind the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia. In classical rhetoric, this figure of speech was used to strengthen argumentation and to show a separate perspective on the discussed topic, thanks to which a more complete view of the problem became possible. The perspective of a dead person is particularly interesting. The classic literary example is the collection of Edgar Lee Masters, who in his *Spoon River Anthology* gives voice to the citizens of a provincial American town, creating a demystifying image of a small town society, based on cross-referential perspectives. In the case of Terék's book, this literary relationship is also emphasized (Görföl 2017, 121; Pataky 2017, 108). However, unlike Lee Masters's, Terék's characters do not know each other, they are not related, and there is no doubt that they are fictional.

It is clear, withal, that we are dealing with a well-thought-out concept of the entire book, in terms of not only the subject matter but also of the structure and language. The very structure of the poems is diverse – from the multi-page monologue of Jelena, the longest piece of the entire volume, to short, only a few lines long poems in the "Maja" cycle. Such a structure means that one can look at

individual cycles as a conversation of individual voices and compare the whole to a mosaic, where every tiniest element has its place, but the meaning becomes fully visible only when looking at the whole book. And, although the described stories can be viewed separately and each poem can be interpreted individually, another possibility of reading opens up, where the boundaries of individual stories get blurred and the fates of individual characters permeate. This would mean that the analysis of individual poems necessarily remains incomplete because only the holistic interpretation of the entire book allows to achieve a comprehensive insight and reveals the multiperspectivity of the lyrical subjects.[1]

The poems describe the relationships between each of the women and their closest families. When we look closely at the plot elements and poetic structure, we notice numerous repetitions. This makes it possible to look at individual fates/narratives as elements that build a specific vision of society along with relations within it. The picture of society becomes multilayered and complex. Some critics (Pataky 2017, 113) even argue that we can read *Halott nők* in line with the poetics of a family parable thanks to elements such as the social, historical, and geographic context, but also the repeated names of the protagonists and recurrent fragments of the plot. One such obvious repetition is linking the fate of Jelena and Maja – Jelena's father turns out to be one of Maja's persecutors. Next, we can list the theme of the sea and the character of Pavle, who seems to be the same person in two cycles – in "Maja", the girl's father is named Pavle, and in the poem "The Sea of My Dad" we read: "Before he moved to Sarajevo, / my dad was a fisherman and was very hairy. / Mum says, / his beard hung down totally into the water, / the sea urchins were stuck in his long hair" (Terék 2017, 79).[2] In the "Island" cycle, the name of the woman's lover is Pavle; he is a fisherman with a beard that grows longer and longer after her death. The third example is the one of Judit's father, whose name is Ivan, the same as the partner of the nameless Russian woman from the "Siberia" cycle.

Such small elements at the plot level, along with repeated motifs and metaphors, only emphasize the impression of homogeneity of the whole book. Also thanks to this, the narrative is a reference not only to one specific history of trauma – ways of experiencing it and attempts to process it – but also to the social reality with its specific determinants. And although the individual stories take

1 This mosaic character is further emphasized by the graphics complementing the book created by László Antal – selected motifs / phrases of few poems, although initially connected with the narration, are reworked in such a way that they give a universal picture of the story told. The graphics are present in the Hungarian edition of the poetry book.

2 The translations from Terék's poems are my own throughout the article. Only two poems from this book have been translated into English. These are "Trick" and "Running", translated by Csilla Hajnal Nagy and published on the author's website: https://annaterek.wordpress.com/2019/08/19/trick/ and https://annaterek.wordpress.com/2019/08/19/running/ (Last accessed 29 June 2021).

place in different places and at different times – one might have the impression that temporal references are blurred, even to the extent of moments sensed as being out of time – and the women differ in age, nationality, and personal life experience, we can say that we are dealing with the stories taking place in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20th century, with particular emphasis on the importance and consequences of the war in the Balkans. It would seem that such a precise historical and social context will limit Terék's poetry. Nevertheless, this does not happen. Terék manages to create poems that go beyond the framework of any specific socio-historical context, because at the heart of the book there lies the paradigm of the victim – or even the victim–perpetrator dichotomy –, the paradigm that is above any specific socio-historical framework and tends to be often neglected in social discourses. Trauma, precisely the experience that leads to it, is situated within the broad contexts of war, toxic family relationships, patriarchy, rape, illness, religious fanaticism, and loneliness, and it requires a specific form of narration. This points towards the idea of the collective narration, where the polyphonic nature of individual lyrical subjects creates a new narrative quality – the collective voice of women that bears witness to their lives. Thanks to that, the book gains a universal dimension that resonates with the reader.

The image of a woman that emerges from the poems is unambiguous – in *Halott nők*, the woman is trapped in a world that is distant, even hostile to her. It is a world in which she is tied to her surroundings – man, family, and social expectations. In this world, a woman is weak, powerless, unable to fight, passive, even apathetic. She is unable to fully define herself, to gain her own identity with which she could resist and overcome the suffering that is inflicted upon her. In this world, she is to live silently and must succumb to the will of others: "He's mad at me because / I'm not quiet enough, / I can't live / silently" (Terék 2017, 64). Paradoxically, only death gives her the strength to articulate the pain and suffering, thanks to which she regains her own voice. It is the woman's power now to narrate her life. She can finally express the truth of her existence, and thus she takes steps towards liberation from the suffering that imbued her life.

At this point, several questions emerge: are these stories/portraits of women limited only to a stereotypical view of social roles? Does this picture of the fate of women not seem to be exaggerated? Is the opposition between men and women not too radical here? The answer to all these questions is no. Although the author delimits social roles quite precisely, she does not do it arbitrarily. On the contrary – poems are written from a perspective in which one can clearly feel empathy, which might be called social, or simply human, empathy. Despite the fact that women are the protagonists of the book, men also get their place in it. The fate of men is closely related to the fate of women, but we get to know them mostly from the perspective of women. We meet men who have succumbed to alcoholism, used physical as well as psychological violence against their loved ones, men

who are lovers and men who are cheated on, men whose dreams and hopes have not come true. We also meet fathers who oppress their sons or who simply do not know how to play the role of a parent, and finally little boys who are taught from an early age to live in a society where violence is the norm. The only man who is given a voice as a lyrical subject is Gašpar from the cycle "Island". His monologue is also the poem closing the entire book. The lyrical subject tells the story of the betrayal from his own perspective, but, interestingly, there is no negation of the female perspective. Rather, there is a complete inability to understand and self-reflect, which is caused by the strongly imposed framework of religious and social norms. Men also become prisoners and victims of the norms, expectations, and social requirements of a given culture. It is also their fate that we see as tragic. It should be noted, however, that Terék does not take responsibility from the shoulders of the perpetrators – whether it is a soldier raping a girl, a fanatical husband, or a toxic mother. However, the author shows the multifaceted nature of human existence and the fact that humans are social beings. And trauma, as much as it touches an individual's fate, often has a social background, even when society ignores and rejects the unpleasant and inconvenient, and refuses to deal with its dark side.

Language and Narration

One of the fundamental issues in the literary representation of trauma is that of the language used to describe the most extreme experiences. Each time this language has to be re-invented. As Anna Menyhért emphasizes, literary language cannot remain silent about trauma, nor can it hide it, but at the same time it must show that the current language is inappropriate to talk about trauma. Menyhért speaks of the necessity to show and preserve this (linguistic) break in literature because only then will it be possible to create a connection between the past and the present and thus validly speak of trauma. This new language must, therefore, get rid of gullibility and naivety (Menyhért 2008, 6). In return, it must offer distrust and challenge the status quo to break the silence. The language of trauma must respect the individuality as well as the fragmentary, incomplete, and active nature of memory, which does not negate suffering or the traumatic experience itself. At the same time, it has to demand an answer. Such a language can create literature. The act of literary telling, which requires then the act of listening (reading), allows the individual to articulate the "unspeakable". Literature – both fiction and non-fiction – not only enables the recognition of a particular individual trauma but also makes it possible to grasp it on a bigger scale and arouse the awareness of social, cultural, and political factors that lead to trauma. And, by doing so, it also offers a better understanding of individually and collectively

experienced trauma. This power of literary texts, the ability to express the most extreme experience, and literature's diversity of representational modes precede other cultural expressions of trauma.

As Joshua Pederson emphasizes, the discourse of trauma often means not silencing the traumatic experience but on the contrary – more intensive work of the memory in order to recall the smallest details from the past (Pederson 2014, 339). Of course, this does not mean linearity or completion of the narrative (memory). However, recalling, remembering a traumatic experience and articulating suffering, making it present, can help and can bring relief, i.e. incorporate the traumatic experience into the self-image, which has both psychologically and epistemologically positive consequences.[3]

In *Halott nők*, Terék creates a new and adequate "language of trauma" that unfolds in an authentic and natural way to tell about the suffering experienced by the protagonists. It is a minimalistic poetry that uses simplicity, language naturalness, concreteness and ellipsis as its main elements. Poems – monologues are associative in their nature because the lyrical subject selectively draws from past events. As critics point out, they can also be referred to as short stories because the language does indeed gravitate towards prose in many places (Förköli 2018, 112; Kustos 2018, 52). Lyrical subjects find their own way to express trauma and articulate suffering, which, at the same time, means that they gain subjectivity and identity. This necessity to express oneself, finding the right words for one's story, and thus obtaining identity and individuality even in the face of death is also emphasized in many places in the poems, e.g. when speaking to God, one of the protagonists says: "I try to find the right words for you, / but they all are falling out of my mouth" (Terék 2017, 125). Nevertheless, the language, in many places very naturalistic, turns out not to be an obstacle but a means by which the characters manage to articulate their suffering. This is achieved using very few, though coherent, stylistic devices.

One of the most important, if not the most important technique, which in a sense takes over the role of the main stylistic device, is fragmentation at the conceptual, structural, thematic, and lyrical levels alike. At the level of the poems' structure, the author uses this technique very consciously. First of all, the cycles/monologues do not form a linear story but have a rhapsodic structure (Gorove 2018, 79) – one memory evokes another, and yet another; time is blurred. The stories told are not "full", but they fully show the enormity of the

3 Looking at trauma as something unspeakable and unrepresentable, which is contradictory on the level of experience and language, is characteristic of the first wave of trauma studies developed around Cathy Caruth's model. Through the diversity of narrative (artistic) expressions, the view presented in this paper, i.e. that traumatic experience, can contribute to the knowledge of the self and of the external world – and show at the same time the cultural conditioning of trauma –; it is closer to the research developed within the pluralistic theory of trauma (Balaev 2018, 366–367).

pain and suffering experienced. Also, the very structure of individual poems (or fragments) is of a similar nature – the lines are usually short, end in enjambment, and are "broken" (also in the typographic sense), which reflects more clearly and emphasizes the fates that are told. At the same time, enjambment plays a role in slowing down and building up tension, thanks to which the train of thought gets a stronger, often unexpected ending. As a result, the author elaborates a more dynamic language in spite of the static character of content and metaphors. This fragmentation, or "fracture", appears in many places in the text also on a lyrical level – it is a metaphor of the disintegration of one's personality and impending death, which is the key issue in the entire book (see examples listed in the next section of this paper).

This technique can be seen, for example, in an excerpt from the "Jelena" cycle, which begins with the words "My Dad…". In this fragment, we learn many details about the life of Jelena's dad, we get to know him and the whole family, we get to know his youth, even the fact that he failed a microeconomics exam in college and thus he was afraid to go home. We also learn about the difficult relationship between Jelena and her father – he is ashamed she is not a boy, he never tells her she is pretty, etc. The repeated phrase "my dad" is fully completed only at the very end of the poem – we learn that Jelena's dad was shot by "two laughing soldiers". We also get to know the reason why this happened – because he "knocked out a little Bosnian girl's twenty-eight teeth with a gunstock" (Terék 2017, 15). The attempt to ignore or forget this event is ineffective – the lyrical subject admits that in the end she has to face what her dad did. This little Bosnian girl turns out to be Maja, the character we get to know later, and we can precisely see what Jelena's father has done in the poem "With a Gunstock".

It is worth paying attention to the specific varieties of the "language of trauma" in *Halott nők*. This language changes in different cycles and adopts separate varieties which correspond with changing lyrical subjects. From this perspective, attention should be paid to the cycle entitled "Maja", where the lyrical subject is a little girl and the language reflects this content – the language is sometimes naive, sometimes evidently repeating the words of adults that the girl must have heard (like in the poem "Naughty"), and, above all, it shows how, in the eyes of a child, war becomes something normal, something that one gets used to when they experience it every day. We can also speak of a special tone in the case of the last cycle of the book, i.e. in the poem "Gašpar", which in its fragments imitates a prayer stanza, showing the widower's religious fanaticism.

Motifs

The above-emphasized homogeneity of the entire book on the lyrical level means that the traumatic experiences of the five protagonists have been described using a homogeneous but extensive network of motifs, metaphors, comparisons, and repetitions. First of all, the overriding and very broadly understood motif of death must be emphasized. It should be pointed out that death does not only affect the heroines themselves but also their relatives (children, family members) and people who are complete strangers to them, which is part of the perspective of the collective narrative: "I'm going to die / like anyone else" (Terék 2017, 68). The poems also radically show the parent's suffering caused by the death – as a result of illness, war, accident – of the child and the inability to deal with this experience and to express it in words. However, as understood in *Halott nők*, death does not only mean physical death – not all lyrical subjects speak from beyond the grave. Death is also a metaphor of passivity, helplessness, deprivation of one's voice, deprivation of one's life. It is associated with total resignation, e.g.: "let it be finally over" (Terék 2017, 108), and brings relief from suffering, e.g.: "I would like to / kill her, so she won't have to suffer any more" (Terék 2017, 48). In many places we read that the women are to live without any movement, without any sound, that a static and overwhelming force pulls them down and makes it impossible for them to move, which can be understood as the sign of impending death. Yet, there is no doubt – death does not bring happiness, death is the final state from which there is no escape or return.

One of the clearest metaphors of death is the picture of breaking into pieces, of (physical and mental) fracturing and disintegration – more precisely: one's life is breaking into small pieces that can no longer be put together:

> I tried / to pay less and less attention / that I should fall, and break into small splinters / together with my stripped bones. (Terék 2017, 17)
> While crying, my mother annihilates / all, still intact / ideas about how she will live. (Terék 2017, 33)
> I broke in two like the sausages, / if you prick the fork into them. / Right in the middle. (Terék 2017, 37)
> I have torn / into tiny parts / from the inside. / Like splinters, they sting in my circulatory system / and my heart / when I lie on my side. (Terék 2017, 37–38)
> The death / shatters the bodies / into tiny, soft pieces. (Terék 2017, 70)
> The sky leans over me / pushes my shoulders, / splinters chip off the edge of my spine. (Terék 2017, 124)

Dreams, plans for the future, and life itself are broken. The female body is broken. Decay, as clearly visible in the above quotes, is often correlated with the metaphors of the body and corporeality. The body in *Halott nők* is the "defeated body" (Terék 2017, 30). Mental suffering is strongly and intangibly related to perceived physical suffering. Death puts an end to the human body, which is after all limited and finite, as in the poem "Death", which vividly shows how individual parts of the body gradually atrophy in the face of impending death. It can even be said that in Terék's poems it is the body that rules our existence, and we are at the mercy of its physicality. The passing of life manifests itself in drying up, creaking, fracturing, and breaking: "I keep getting dry, getting / more and more fibrous, / creaking inside with every turn" (Terék 2017, 130). The body, as a separate being, is the vector of memories and images from the past that mark the human psyche: "Because the child dies in vain, / nothing ever happens after that. / In the heart remains a crack, / and in that crack settles fear" (Terék 2017, 10) or "My body remembers / reminds me / creaking" (Terék 2017, 37).

Death also means war. In one of the book's most shocking poems, these three elements come together. "With a Gunstock" tells the story of a gang rape of a young Bosnian girl. The poem begins with a familiar metaphor: "I don't have anything / that can still be broken" (Terék 2017, 93). Then the picture of breaking the body into tiny pieces is repeated: "I'm afraid that they will break my bone, totally crash my joints, / and I won't be able to run away, / or if I get caught in the meantime, / others will smash everything / inside me" (Terék 2017, 93–94). Next, the poem moves on to the comparison of a weapon to a penis, and to the rape scene where the motif of gaze, which is present also in other poems, plays an important role. An equally shocking comparison is the comparison of the sounds of a bombardment to the sounds of a heartbeat that an unborn baby hears in the mother's womb.

It is also important to emphasize the semantics of the body, which stresses the body as a whole, but also its individual parts, especially the eyes, mouth, and nose. In *Halott nők*, the body is presented as meat (Terék 2017, 17, 25), parts of which are easily destructible: they break, fall off, dry out. Both physical and mental pain are present at every level of the narrative. The motif of eyesight is most ambiguous here. Eyes indicate the eyesight with which you look at something, the blurry gaze of a drunk little boy, the eyes of a man expressing his desire, the eyes of the protagonists expressing pain and helplessness. It is watching people being executed in the streets, it is looking into the vastness of Siberia, which makes you blind, it is an attempt to find a wife's lover in the eyes of strangers. Or on the contrary, it is looking away from something that is beyond understanding and accepting: "My eyes faded forever" (Terék 2017, 32) or "They didn't allow him to continue looking at my body. / So I also turned away" (98).

The mouth, in turn, is related to swallowing, which also functions as a metaphor in various ways: it is the swallowing of pain, the digesting of what is happening, it is annihilation, swallowing the son, but also pieces of a broken window, city, or the whole family, which expresses fear and helplessness. It is also the mouth uttering and spitting out words of a prayer or the mouth of a dead wife that is full of sand. The sense of smell is also strongly associated with suffering – this motif opens the book, and it is correlated with Jelena's suicide. At the beginning, the smell of gas is pleasant for Jelena, but at the end it brings death. Also, in the next parts of the book, smell is identified as the smell of death, symbolizing decay spreading throughout the body and absorbing it.

These, as well as other motifs, structural fragmentation, and thematic repetitions – like the theme of conversation with God; the oxymoronic theme of home, not as a place where one finds happiness and security but pain and suffering; the theme of parents unable to help their children; the theme of toxic relationships with parents; the theme of abandonment; the theme of uprooting and emigration; etc. – provide the strength of the book. The intensity of the images is based on the directness of the language on the one hand and on the thematic repetitions which contribute to the cohesion and dynamism of the poems on the other.

Conclusions

Although Terék's book might be qualified as feminist literature, the author herself does not follow this path directly despite the fact that she shows different spheres of physical and mental violence committed on women, which have their source in the socio-economic and historical cultural context. The psychological level of the entire book demonstrates the processes that lead to deprivation of integrity and, as a result, to the tragic end of the protagonists. The fragility of a human being is shown here from many perspectives. Different voices enter into dialogue, interact with each other, and reveal the depth and complexity of human fate. At the same time, the author shows with great empathy that the world is not black and white. However, she does not absolve anybody of guilt and responsibility. The book shows that suffering and trauma, apart from affecting individual fates, also possess a social dimension because they are the consequences of the relations within a given society and culture, the lack of social empathy as well as often unconscious mechanisms of compulsion and violence which in times of war, or simply crisis, become even stronger and exacerbate social inequalities. The past, with its traumatic experiences that affect society, demands an effort of talking about the past, because only articulating these experiences can bring healing. Otherwise, passivity and silence only maintain the status quo, or even deepen it. Individual and collective trauma demands gaining a voice, demands

its own narrative. Terék manages to find this voice. *Halott nők*, directly but also empathically, with moderation and sensitivity towards individual fates, tells about the trauma that can be historically localized. But, at the same time, this voice remains universal and resonates outside the author's cultural background.

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In Dystopian Retrospect of a Crisis Mood: *My Life as a Spy* by Katherine Verdery

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Abstract. My essay bears a deliberately oxymoronic title as it offers, on the one hand, a reminiscence of 1984, as a most depressing year in the actual history of Romania and likewise in my own earliest career memories. On the other hand, it proposes a contemplation of George Orwell's British postmodern dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Last but not least, it presents certain 1984 aspects as rendered by the following exceptional book, a great challenge for any scholar of my homeland and my generation: *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* (2018). Distinguished Professor Katherine Verdery, its author, a contemporary American scholar, belongs now also to our Romanian academic elite. Yet this book testifies to her darkest experience in our country, just before the Iron Curtain fell down. Although the parallel between these two books may seem risky at first sight, they share much more than meets the eye; and my claim endeavors to go beyond this visible pretext of the new COVID-19 pandemic, another crisis which has intruded upon all our lives – just like a spy.

Keywords: dystopia, retrospect, Doppelgänger, clone, spy, surveillance, crisis, virus

Motto: "In short, the clone worked much like a virus."
(Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy*, Prologue)

A Crisis Book, Concerning Us All

By her specialized research achievements and significant contributions to anthropological and ethnographic studies of Transylvania, as now a Doctor Honoris Causa of Babeş–Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, American Professor Katherine Verdery is now an authority in Romanian cultural studies.[1] Yet *My*

1 Though we are aware of Professor Katherine Verdery's outstanding and universally acknowledged sound contribution to the academic research of the Romanian brand of communism, this is not

Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File (2018), the book that I am approaching here, is a special case that can leave no reader indifferent, whether American or Romanian. It concerns us all, especially at such a time of crisis as today. And here is the first quality that her disquieting volume shares with George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949): little could these two authors guess the ironically prophetic messages once conveyed by their books.

As for the books themselves, no other two books could be more different from each other, in many essential regards, such as the following: one is fiction, the other one is non-fiction; one is a gloomy *anticipation*, the other one is an endlessly painful *memory*; one is British, the other one – American. Apparently, for a Romanian (passionate and professional) reader, like myself, these two books should remain at a safe cultural distance from each other. And yet…

What will always fascinate the same reader about both these apparently accessible books is their tragicomic echo. Katherine Verdery's volume starts from this irresistibly funny title: as if any serious spy, still teaching at an American university today, would ever dream of (playfully) sharing publicly some memories from a formerly secret activity. Or just offer some sort of a practical guide in spying/being spied on.

Essentially, like a good postmodern book, *My Life as a Spy* relies on *self-reflexiveness*: the late-20th-century "spy" within this book is watching now the (actual) spies all around her; yesterday's spies and spies of today. In a way, there must also be a "spy" at the back of any scholar's mind, never easy to please, always doubting and looking for perfection. Yet what this book depicts in exquisitely vivid imagery, just as familiar to us, besides this restless innermost scholarly "spy", is a world of totalitarian *surveillance* populated by (in)visible outer spies, whether professionals or amateurs, casually betraying an unsuspecting foreign friend: "It is my hope" – the author promises – "that this book will render visible a certain set of surveillance practices and their effects, in a world in which new forms of surveillance proliferate every day" (Verdery 2018, xii).

This is a singular book to read for a teacher like myself: neither (pure) literature, although continually alluding to it, nor (just) fact; in-between a detective-story parody (much more fun actually than the classic "Agent 007" series) and some random diary/file notes; from infamous institutionalized gossip to (often affectionate) reminiscence and desperate/enthusiastic letters home and candid fieldwork notes. Last but not least, the substantial photographic evidence of her surveillance and moral abuse. The author's main qualities now are her lucidity

our concern in the present paper.

On the other hand, having read with good profit one of the first and best reviews of *My Life as a Spy*, i.e. Neal Ascherson's essay "Don't Imagine You're Smarter", promptly published in the London Review of Books, in the summer of 2018, we consider that the time has come now for a Romanian reader to also comment on the American Professor's informal book about her Romanian experience.

and convincing sense of humour – both giving a certain stylistic value to this kaleidoscope. Moreover, by detaching herself from the first shock of discovering the almost three thousand pages of the eleven CNSAS[2] files on her account, Katherine Verdery bears no grudge now to those who once betrayed her. This is what should win over any reader. Plus her genuine narrative gift.

I should say that Edgar Allan Poe belongs, too, in this puzzling picture background, sending us greetings from his William Wilson, the absolute romantic *double dealer* (anticipating Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray); and likewise from C. Auguste Dupin, the classic unconventional detective prototype (paving the way for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes). Poe's romantic *Doppelgänger* and his lucid master of *ratiocination* would keep us good company all through this hallucinating trip led by Katherine Verdery. Yet her Gothic brand may also evoke to us, Romanians, rather homely sites of inspiration: after all, Bram Stoker's Dracula was born in this same Eastern European neighbourhood, the world-famous fantasy in its original English still haunting some ghostly Transylvanian castle. Nevertheless, I felt grateful for never finding any mention of this one in Katherine Verdery's exquisite book.

The Clone and the Virus

The *Doppelgänger* personae in *My Life as a Spy* can also have surprisingly strong affinities with certain contemporary Romanian representations of the *double dealer*. Katherine Verdery proves to be a knowledgeable reader of some of our best Romanian authors of today: Herta Müller, Ana Blandiana, Gabriel Liiceanu, or Stelian Tănase, to name just the most frequently quoted in her book. In the early 21st century, now as a reluctant reader of her own eleven files of the Securitate surveillance, all completed while she was doing her earliest scholarly research here, in totalitarian Romania, during the last (and the worst) two decades of communist dictatorship, anthropologist Katherine Verdery shared her bewilderment and disgust first with that confessed by writer Herta Müller, winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature:

> In my file I am two different people. One is called "Cristina", who is being fought as an enemy of the state. To compromise this "Cristina" the falsification workshop of Branch "D" (disinformation) fabricated a Doppelgänger from all those ingredients that would harm me the most [in her new home in West Germany] – party-faithful communist, unscrupulous secret agent. Wherever I went, I had to live with this Doppelgänger. It was

2 CNSAS – Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității (National Council for the Study of the Securitate's Archives).

> not only sent after me wherever I went, it also hurried ahead . . . It has taken on a life of its own. (Verdery 2018, 6–7)

The other important Romanian author whom Katherine Verdery quotes in her Prologue to *My Life as a Spy* is philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu. This is how he renders his own shocking acquaintance with his "evil twin", as one of moral defilement and annihilation:

> This cheap misrepresentation wasn't just bad and ugly. It was also dangerous, because – in the role of "target" that I had been assigned – it had been at the same time aimed *against* my life. It was my *Doppelgänger*, my double, ready to eliminate me. It was I, indeed, but an "I" that was negative, an "I-enemy," which in the end would *have to be* eliminated . . . This Clone from the File recorded and reproduced the cells of the original, but commandeered them according to its own logic. (Verdery 2018, 7; emphasis in the original)

And then the contemporary American scholar's conclusion reads here as a prophecy for our own 21st-century version of the classic Roaring Twenties: "*In short the clone worked much like a virus*. Because the replica would resemble him, the Securitate could readily substitute its fabrication for his 'real' self and change his destiny, making him appear guilty of things that might send him to languish in a Romanian labor camp" (Verdery 2018, 7; my emphasis). Therefore, this devastating experience of actually meeting one's "clone" in some surveillance files resembles *an infection with a virus*, perverting and eventually murdering its target/source, i.e. the actual self, the actual mind of a human. Just before starting to read them, Verdery's hesitation when confronted with the CNSAS poisoning pile of slanderous files about her is well justified. For the concerned person under the surveillance magnifying glass, just reading such documents is in itself a morbid experience. And against it, no vaccine has yet been discovered. For all its thoroughness, not even the Securitate (or the Romanian-Orwellian *Thought Police*) could have anticipated the proportions of this living allegory soon to enter our existence. Indeed, the two types of invasion are comparable to each other: that of the murderous virus and that of the *Thought Police* surveillance. But against this latter kind of traumatic intrusion, one is – if not helpless – obviously less prepared to resist; and hardly ever immune.

Informers and/or spies were ubiquitous in 1984 Romania, just as they were in George Orwell's dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They were omnipresent like a catching disease, poisonous like a perverse infection, and the disheartening atmosphere thus created was quite comparable to what we are nowadays experiencing, obsessively trying to protect ourselves against the insidious virus,

which can be anywhere in the air or which can be brought by anyone, never quite as harmless as it might seem.

In Point of Language

Still another Romanian-American book that Verdery's *My Life as a Spy* reminds me of is *The Woman in Red* (1990), that "collective novel", thus defined by Martin Adams Mooreville, another American scholar who happened to be in this "Wild East" of ours around the time of that late 1980s crisis, just preceding the official ending of the Cold War. That belated Romanian Jazz Age novel pastiche, put together as an (im)perfect narrative hybrid by three young writers who were – like Katherine Verdery – academics themselves: Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeți, and Mircea Mihăieş, is always accompanied by Martin Adams Mooreville's 1990 witty Afterword: "Conquering the Wild East". This essay was originally published in *The New York Literary Journal* on "March 29, 1990, pp. 18–19" (Nedelciu, Babeți, Mihăieş 2011, 497). Martin Adams Mooreville had arrived that far overseas due to a Fulbright scholarship, while Katherine Verdery crossed the Atlantic for a second research interval, in August 1984, by means of an IREX scholarship.

This time, what brings the two books together, the American non-fiction volume and the Romanian novel, despite their obvious difference in structure, again, is their (meta)linguistic in-betweenness. *The Woman in Red* is quite a challenge for any ambitious literary translator, mainly because of its "free" blend of early-20th-century oral Romanian (as spoken in Banat, a cultural zone actually including, on a realistic map, Verdery's Hunedoara, her first ethnographic research zone) and colloquial and even slangy immigrant American English used around the original 20th-century Roaring Twenties. On the other hand, the situation of *My Life as a Spy* is even more paradoxical: the book's Romanian version, promptly published by *Vremea Publishing House* in Bucharest, during the same year when it got published in the US, actually *completes* the American original book by means of a "second original" (or even some sort of a "clone", if one dare say so), in which the Securitate files are quoted in their true-to-fact versions. Whether in Romanian or in English, the infamous files are written in the Romanian blend of *Newspeak*, the dull duplicitous language, deliberately deprived of expressiveness, from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In other words, these books will forever float between our two languages, Romanian and American English, to prove their hybrid "nature", or rather their deep *Doppelgänger* status.[3]

3 It is never too late to remark on Katherine Verdery's admirable command of and fluency in Romanian, our archaic/awkward mother tongue. On the YouTube website, there are numerous rewarding recordings of Professor Verdery's recent academic conferences in our country, where she remains a most distinguished guest of honour.

On the other hand, the challenge of *My Life as a Spy* is extremely complex for anyone ready to enjoy a book invoking *polyphony* from the very first pages: "*This is a polyphonic work*, incorporating the voices of the Securitate officers and their informers, my field notes and field index written at the time of my various research stays in Romania, letters I wrote home, people I interviewed for this book after 2008, and my ruminations on this material as I read it in the present" (Verdery 2018, xiii; my emphasis).

Although Verdery writes from the anthropologist's viewpoint and may not seem to be ever preoccupied by modern narratology, I was encouraged by her own notion of *polyphony* here*,* implying one of Mikhail Bakhtin's essential narratological theories. The Bakhtinian *voicing* concept is at home as guidance everywhere around in this recent American book about Romania, which goes beyond the frontiers of either document or fiction, back to the dreary historical past of the Cold War. Here one may also add the grotesque audio image of the foreigner's native language, which is bound to be mocked at whenever it is misunderstood, as this is represented in Bakhtin's dialogical essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse". Because Katherine Verdery has always had a gift for foreign languages, which has earned her well-deserved praise, she never regarded our (exotic) Eastern European land as a sort of Babylon.

And although in the end she emerges as a brave survivor of this double-sided research experience, Verdery's belated discovery of her own fake personae, clones, multiple selves, pseudonyms, code names, or conspiracy nicknames, from all her overwhelming eleven CNSAS files proves to her *as poisoning morally as a virus*. All these build a distorting labyrinth of an institutionalized gossip network, so harmful for the candid young researcher preparing her doctorate in 1973, then for the mature scholar returning and resuming her work in ill-omened 1984, and then again, for the consecrated academic, revisiting our country after December 1989, who eventually takes her chances to read the almost three thousand pages gathered about her by the Securitate officers and their dutiful informers in their Romanian blend of Orwellian Newspeak.

As soon as one has closed this book, the echo of its very first paragraph will bring it full circle:

> There's nothing like reading your secret police file *to make you wonder who you really are*. Page after page, all your activities, all your motives, are subjected to a reading from an alien position embodied in a logic different from anything you recognize. Events you remember as significant might appear without comment, while others you thought unimportant burgeon into grounds for your expulsion from the country. (Verdery 2018, xii; my emphasis)

Another Bakhtinian idea that suits my (amateur) approach of this singular volume is that of the unpredictable destiny of a book. Once the book is published, Bakhtin claims, the author can hardly influence its own chances into the world anymore. The book is like a grown-up child, facing its destiny beyond the author's/parent's best protective intentions. It is also in virtue of this Bakhtinian idea that Katherine Verdery's book has challenged me. And this bridges the gap between her book and Orwell's dystopia on the one hand and my own memories of 1984 on the other hand.

No other 20th-century dystopia can be more polyphonic than Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The terrible haunting voices from the ubiquitous telescreens would never prove thunderous enough to stifle/silence Winston Smith's endless inner monologue. This vocal juxtaposition results in a *grotesque polyphony*, yet never in anything like a dialogue. Strange as it may seem, this aspect of the British writer's book evokes so much of my adolescence and youth in Romania. And this same atmosphere of hallucinating real life is likewise so faithfully rendered by the American professor's memories of my homeland back in 1984.

1984 in Live Recording

Resuming her anthropological research in Transylvania, Dr Katherine Verdery was back here again in August 1984, this time with an even more ambitious academic purpose: to study "the historical formation of national ideology" (111). She meant to find arguments in favour of her own theory: "my view that national identity is a conditioned historical effect rather than the foundation of human existence, as most Romanians (including many of its historians) believe" (118). Ironically, her vision is persuasive for me today, just by opening this kaleidoscopic book of her memories, surveillance reports, photographs – taken mostly without her permission. For me, this book represents now a confirmation of my own unbelievable memories of those Orwellian times in Romania. Fond of my books of literature, as I have always been ever since my adolescence, I might come to think such things never happened in our real lives but just in some great writer's dystopia, read a long time ago. And yet…

This interval is evoked in the volume's Chapter 2, "The 1980s: The Enemy's Many Masks". This time the author lives in Cluj, perhaps the most important city of Transylvania; she has a room at *Hotel Continental*, which is frequently searched in her absence by the Securitate. Her conspiracy name in this interval's surveillance files is "Vera". She is trapped between some of the people's friendliness, quickly responding to her own natural frankness, and some others' xenophobia, fuelled by the Securitate agents. Somewhere in her field notes she says: "*there are three categories: people who are clean, securişti, and people*

passing as securişti. This really blows the mind" (Verdery 2018, 129; italics in the original).

Paradoxically, for some survivors like ourselves, Katherine Verdery's *My Life as a Spy* may be read now, in 2021, as the convincing evidence that desperately sought for *"written record" of the past*, for which Winston Smith craved in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the proof that such things had once actually *happened*.[4]

On the other hand, Orwell's Winston Smith's irresistible urge to start writing *a diary* on a chilly day of April 1984, in dystopian London, seems to me to have lent something to (Verdery's) Vera's *field notes* of 1984-1985, in real Romania. Perhaps this is actually the first aspect that triggered my parallel between these two books, despite anything else. Winston's and Vera's eagerness to write down their candid innermost thoughts impresses me here and now as an essential expression of *alienation*. And my risky parallel is somehow confirmed by the inevitable final discovery of these intimate notes by *the "wrong" reader*: O'Brien – in dystopian 1984; the Securitate in actual 1984. And yet, in a strange way, these private/professional notes were even *meant* to be read by the "wrong" readers: ironically, Winston had originally hoped O'Brien would one day read his diary, as either friend or foe. It is just that he mistook O'Brien for a friend, for a fatally long time. The same happened to real Katherine Verdery, in real Romania, in actual 1984. At that time, she was thirty-six years old; dystopian Winston Smith was thirty-nine.

Moreover, the same sharp contrast between Katherine Verdery's candid field notes and the infamous secret police files about Vera has always evoked in my mind the contrast/juxtaposition within the Orwellian dystopia between Winston Smith's desperate diary and his job at the *Records Department* at the *Ministry of Truth* (or "Minitrue"), where he was supposed to actually destroy any evidence of "real" life in London, Oceania; or at least "translate" such news into "Newspeak", much to the same outcome.

These two types of texts: the personal one and/versus the official one will run in an absurd parallel, thus explained by Katherine Verdery in her book:

> A secret police file is the traces of a state creating a person; the "organ" (as they called themselves) for doing so in communist Romania was the Securitate. When I gained access to my file, I was able to see that process, to discover a reciprocal self-fashioning in which the Securitate made me a spy as I made myself an ethnographer, each act of creation influencing

4 Though we admire such classic studies of George Orwell's dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as the Chapter 8, "The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty" of Richard Rorty's book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), we deem a discussion of this in the present paper to be superfluous now. Likewise, Harold Bloom's essay on Orwell's postmodern novel in the volume *Novelists and Novels*.

> the other. Each of us sought anchors enabling us to define and classify our research object – for me, the peasantry of a Romanian village, and for them, "VERA". (Verdery 2018, 131)

In another one of Verdery's field notes, specific details of the terrible 1980s "*austerity measures*" can still ring a bell to some of us:

> *Field notes, 27 Jul. 1982*
> *Romania has gotten a World Bank loan, whose condition is that there be no imports. This means that 60% of coffee sold consists of oats, so coffee is called by a name that means "neigh."*[5] *No stockings, no sprays, because something in their manufacture has to be imported. No soap. As long as no imports, whole sections of factories are at a standstill, so the budget has to be wrung from the villages. The problem with wringing from the villages is that international treaty says no exporting of food if the local population is going hungry. Therefore rationing, which is supposed to be secret. General expenses keep rising.* (Verdery 2018, 141; italics in the original)

Extremely responsive to whatever was going on around her, former "Vera" resorts now in her book to quotations from Romanian writers, such as Stelian Tănase or Herta Müller: "Novelist Herta Müller, writing of her relation to the Securitate in her book *The Appointment*, also captured brilliantly *the insanity* of the times. The book's last line: 'The trick is not to go mad'" (Verdery 2018, 142; my emphasis). But then, this was the very decisive impulse of Orwell's Winston Smith before starting his diary, on a fictive day of 4 April 4 1984: to defend his sanity.

As for the quotation from Tănase, this is a fragment Verdery took from his diary, eventually published in 2002:

> Winter 1984-85, terrible and grotesque winter. Who can forget people's amazement that something like this could happen to them, that they should suffer so much? Lack of heat, no water in apartments, no heating gas. Driving prohibited for all vehicles but public transport. Food inexistent in the stores. Long lines, which last whole days and nights. So many dramatic situations. Old people and children, dead. Ambulances not circulating. The dispatcher asks you if the person is pregnant and about to give birth,

5 What she means here is our old "nechezol". Its traumatic taste would never fade from a keen memory: a fine "remembrance of things past", (not quite) in the line of Marcel Proust's dainty madeleine. This is almost too good to be true: here Katherine Verdery mentions "nechezol" in her book *My Life as a Spy*. There George Orwell mentions the ever smaller chocolate ration in his dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It just goes to prove that there are books which can absorb us within until we come to wonder again about that frontier between *fact* (of a past *forever* remembered) and *fiction* (here to stay *forever* as a classic now).

> otherwise they refuse your call. They ask how old the person is, then refuse the call. What a time! What a nightmare! It's dreadfully cold in the house. The electricity is constantly interrupted, and electric heaters have been taken off the market. Someone is punishing us, is seeing to it that we die. (Verdery 2018, 142)

Surviving can be a gift, yet also a matter of practice. I remember that winter quite well; I was an undergraduate of our faculty, where I teach now. Some workers of the technical team made a joke in the spirit of the day by putting one paper cup full of water in each one of our classrooms. The water froze in all the cups, except for two. Just as Katherine Verdery mentions later in her book, students would attend classes fully dressed in their winter coats and hats and gloves. They took manuscript notes writing with gloved hands. These are such unforgettable crisis memories. It is a great comfort to find out someone else recorded them, likewise, in black and white.

In English, Tănase's book title is *At Home They Speak in Whispers. File and Journal from the Late Years of the Dictatorship*. This title is again true to fact. For who could dare to talk to anyone else but family members about obvious outrageous everyday life? And yet, Verdery also writes about the "rumours and queues" of "Cheauschwitz" – as people had come to call their homeland, in their typical vein of black humour. Here is another fragment from one of her formidable field notes:

> *Marina says winter in Bucharest was terrible; for three weeks running, there was no gas in her building at all, so residents drained the water to keep the radiators from freezing. The official reason for the cuts was to save industry, but coincidentally lots of old people died in the cold – she wonders whether that was part of the plan. Also – lots of infants – in three hospitals, all the incubators cut out. Marina's pregnant friend told her of a new law: it used to be that the father of the child would go to declare it at the civil registry on the day of its birth, but now he would go on the twentieth day, so statistics will not show all the infant deaths. Radiators in a number of schools burst during winter break and were not repaired by the beginning of school in February. Marina went to classes in a hat, fur coat, and gloves. She says there has never been anything like this in her lifetime. Diplomats from the French and Italian embassies were evacuated to Bulgaria and Serbia; before going, they protested officially to the Romanian government about their work conditions.* (Verdery 2018, 143–144; italics in the original)

Obviously, Marina, Verdery's Romanian acquaintance, was a teacher at that time. As a female student at the time, I can also evoke here our weekly compulsory

military training classes. Therefore, as a training infantry soldier, I was supposed to wear my clumsy uniform, which would hardly fit any young woman undergrad those days, once every week, to our classes with women officers and back home. Early in the morning, approaching the military school, one had to salute any officer one met down the way. One frosty morning of that gruesome winter, I was wearing my civilian thick fur hat instead of my shabby uniform hat, to keep my ears warm. I was on the bus. An elderly officer got on the bus, and I got instantly terrified: I could *not* salute him as I had no uniform hat on. The elderly gentleman pretended not to have seen me, it was such a kind expression of silent solidarity. Who knows, maybe he also had a daughter back home, embarrassed by the same absurd yet official situation.

In 1984 in Romania, George Orwell's dystopia was everyday life. At that time, Katherine Verdery may have been aware of the Orwellian *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or she may have not. Would that have been a warning of any kind to her against returning to our country? Anyway, Orwell's ominous masterpiece, though *as if* written with *that* Romania on the author's mind, was only unofficially known here. The grim 1949 prophecy had eventually come true, in a country where the book itself was *blacklisted*, wherefore its first published translation into Romanian was delayed until 1990, after the collapse of Ceauşescu's dictatorship. Therefore, the British dystopia only became well known to the Romanian readers at the same time with the "collective novel", *The Woman in Red* – likewise delayed by the local *Thought Police* censorship. No wonder why Romanian readers fell in love with both these forbidden books. At once.

Nevertheless, back in 1984, Orwell's dystopia did have a clandestine Romanian audience consisting of intellectuals who could either read it in the original English language or in any other major European language, whether German or French. It was a matter of luck. If you were fortunate enough, you found it in the original. If not, anyway, it was too exciting a chance to miss. I remember my first encounter with this book was then by means of a borrowed worn-out photocopy version translated into French. All the time I had was two days and one night with this forbidden book all to myself. I would not have missed it for the world. And I am positive that, had anyone told me back then that it would not be long before I got to teach this book, officially, at the same faculty where in 1984 I was still a belated student, I could never have believed it. This is a fact of historical truth: in 1984 in Romania, it was still too early for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

And yet the book belonged here, better than anywhere else, as it seemed to us all who could reach it *despite* the perverse unwritten law of dictatorship. And likewise against *the self-doubt* and *uncertainty* that were being inflicted on some of us by any possible means: from the general precarious living conditions and "austerity" (also experienced by Verdery here at that same time) to a certain category of young people's meagre chances towards self-assertion, by access

to university studies. These young people were offspring of former so-called "enemies of the people".

Any kind of a further career that relied on freedom of mind, creativity, and the *power of words* was being carefully prevented by the state policy and its devoted *Thought Police*. The vast majority of Romanian young people back then were to become engineers. These "new" engineers were *a cloning substitute* of the entire former Romanian middle class. They would be safely provided with good endurable jobs, in the socialist factories and plants. They would be considered (the only kind of) intellectuals (needed in what was called the "multilaterally developed socialist society"). So busy with impossible, unrealistic production plans to fulfil, in all branches of a collapsing, ever more isolated national industry, they would hardly feel inclined to read or write, let alone think. They would mostly evolve into "good" Orwellian citizens, giving up their *own lives*, just like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, willingly adopting a grey routine instead of a meaningful existence; teaching their children the virtues of brainwashing obeisance to the unique national party. They were ever more numerous, influent, representing a *cloning social élite*. Anyone who wanted a safe better life for their offspring would advise them to study engineering. Indeed, they had the chances to get better off than the *proles* (i.e. Orwell's term for the working class in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), who were in fact their own parents in most of the cases.

On the other hand, in actual 1984 socialist Romania, there were ridiculously few undergraduate students of philology – especially letters; of philosophy – which only mattered as socialist doctrine; of history – which was being continually denied, outrageously transformed overnight according to the ideological plan of the unique Party; of law – distorted and repressed in virtue of the same policy; of sociology – perverted into some discipline to serve the same absolute control purposes; of journalism – which was only accessible to candidates ready to pay lip-service to the dictatorship and play the obscure game of the day. It goes without saying that all these fields and disciplines of academic study, specifically related to the freedom of mind, creativity, and the *power of words*, were attentively supervised by the Securitate. It goes without saying, too, that anthropology and ethnography belonged together under this same umbrella. Hence the particular intensity of the clashes between Katherine Verdery and her eager Security spies. If we just add to it their specific xenophobia, the eleven surveillance files on her account are quite easy to explain.

Just like in Orwell's dystopia, in real Romania, *the past* was grossly changed and history was being blurred to please *the Party* and *Big Brother*. The few successful university graduates would confirm their reliability and further on write and publish diligently in Romanian *Newspeak* – a nonsensical idiom popularly known as "wooden language". Most of these few pseudo-intellectuals came from families with "clean files", of "sound social origin". Therefore, failing

at least the first attempt at an entrance examination, to any one of these faculties, ideally having to deal with the freedom of mind, creativity, and the exquisite *power of words*, plus the faculties of arts: visual arts, music, drama, and film studies, was quite a common experience among the *other* daring candidates who lacked the basic quality of the "clean file". It all depended on their parents, who had been themselves victims of the same system. Mine has been an exceptionally fortunate case: I owe it all to my mother, who would never let me fall prey to *self-doubt* and *uncertainty*. As we can see, whether for an American scholar visiting us or for a Romanian scholar "born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same" (Whitman 2013, 23), writing about Romania has never been easy.

The CNSAS files discovered and quoted by Katherine Verdery attest to precisely the fact that inoculating *self-doubt* and *uncertainty* has always been a well-defined purpose, an end in itself, persistently aimed at by the Romanian Securitate or by any other surveillance institutions, by means of specific psychological techniques of intimidation, demoralizing, or misinformation. This should not surprise anyone: ever since 1949, when it got first published, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would anticipate this infallible policy of the unique Party, prevailing over almighty *Ingsoc* ministers such as: "Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, and Miniplenty" (Orwell 1977, 7).

There is also a certain American side of Orwell's intricate (and even lyrical) dystopia, a book which is perhaps too famous for its own good and nowadays quite often misinterpreted, if not downright abused. Firstly, in this nightmarish fantasy, the terrible map of Oceania, the horrific homeland of London-born Winston Smith also includes the original/former USA, besides the original/former UK. If there were any room for Romania left, this should be somewhere lost in Eurasia, as this dialogue between Winston Smith and O'Brien shows:

> "You are not even masters of this planet. What about Eurasia and Eastasia? You have not conquered them yet."
> "Unimportant. We shall conquer them when it suits us. And if we did not, what difference would it make? We can shut them out of existence. *Oceania is the world*." (Orwell 1977, 213; my emphasis)

Secondly, Orwell's "Appendix, The Principles of Newspeak", often included just by itself in the most prestigious contemporary anthologies of literature, makes direct reference to the *Declaration of Independence*, the (now romantic) birth certificate of the United States of America, sarcastically dismantling it. And this quotation from the *Declaration of Independence* is employed to illustrate the virtues of *Newspeak* in which no *thoughtcrime/crimethink* should/could survive:

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government. . . .* It would have been quite impossible to render this into Newspeak while keeping to the sense of the original. The nearest one could come to doing so would be to swallow the whole passage up in the single word *crimethink*. A full translation could only be an ideological translation, whereby Jefferson's words would be changed into a panegyric on absolute government. [. . .] It was chiefly in order to allow time for the preliminary work of translation that the final adoption of Newspeak had been fixed for so late a date as 2050. (Orwell 1977, 251; emphasis in the original)

Ergo the year envisaged in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for the absolute triumph of *Newspeak* is 2050: it will not be long now, would it?

The Books We Read

"The best books, he perceived, are those that tell you what you know already" (Orwell, 1977, 161). This is one of the numerous paradoxes the reader may encounter in Winston Smith's inner monologue. We may still hesitate as to what to make of it: either take it as an ultimate metafictional witticism, comprising within itself the nameless reader's own reflection, or consider it as a warning against the most insidious mental manipulation of the *Thought Police*.

Therefore: what are we looking for in a book? Is it absolute truth? Is it instruction, information? Is it a certain pleasure of the mind, imagining a silent, secret dialogue with a much admired author?

"Et in Arcadia ego." I know 1984: I have read the book, I once was alive, then and there. Or rather "I am the man, I suffered, I was there" (Whitman 2013, 57).

Neagu Djuvara was himself no poet. He was an exquisite Romanian historian, a man of the world in the very best of all possible meanings; a lucid thinker and experienced traveller blessed by an exceptionally long lifespan and likewise a sharp sense of humour. Rounding up one of his bold books of the early 21st century, entitled by a rhetorical question *Is There Such a Thing as True History?*, the venerable scholar concludes:

> To sum up, this is the awkward fate of a historian: he has to content himself with the thought that his work can never render an everlasting building but just a brick or some wall corner of a building ceaselessly crumbling, as in Master Manole's legend; still a building which we are doomed to go on building, endlessly, as in the myth of Sisyphus. And if ever, once in a hundred years, due to some absolutely exceptional talent, any historical piece of writing still survives, its chances to eternity intact, then the survivor in its author shall be rather the Poet than the Historian. (Djuvara 2004, 137)[6]

It is Plato who first believed that somehow poetry is nearer to truth than history. There may be a certain spiritual affinity between the two thinkers: the ancient Greek philosopher and the Romanian historian, miraculously also our contemporary for a while. Both pertain to the Balkans, a cultural zone so frequently fallen under big question marks – on the cultural map of the world, a zone of continual conflict and crisis.

The daring American protagonist of Katherine Verdery's first-person narrative grows up (also) in this dangerous place, so far away from her home, bravely approaching it all by herself. Her intellectual generosity and story-telling gift are evident. She may be boldly riding a Mobra motorbike instead of sailing on a raft down the Mississippi. But the spirit of Huckleberry Finn, at once candid and curious, vulnerable and confident, runs in the family. And, having read *her* book now, we can paraphrase Mark Twain's most popular anti-hero: we have (all) been there before.

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6 My translation from Romanian.

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