Serbian Modernism through Post-Yugoslav Eyes: Milisav Savić's *Scars of Silence*

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The first two decades of the twentieth century, ushering in "new" movements in the arts later summarised under the umbrella term "Modernism," were a time of unprecedented cultural ferment among the South Slavs, who were to be united in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918. After a century of liberation wars against the Ottomans and active state building, the newly-emerged Kingdom became the historical prototype for the various future manifestations of Yugoslavia: the monarchist Yugoslavia of 1928, the Communist Yugoslavia of 1944, and the so-called "rump" Yugoslavia of the 1990s. With the birth of the new kingdom—a kind of proto-federation—the arts in Serbia and Croatia (and to a lesser extent in Slovenia) acquired what could be called a "European voice." This was distinct from the muted regional voices of the nineteenth century, such as Šenoa's call for a Croatian realist prose in the 1860s, or Svetozar Marković's delayed echo of the Russian Natural School of Aesthetics. While writing in a "small language," which would not be read by the majority of Europeans, or at least not immediately, the Yugoslav writers and poets of the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Krleža, Andrić, Crnjanski and a pleiad of others, assimilated the poetic genres of the new European cultural paradigm of Modernism. This at least potentially assured them an equal place amongst the Modernists of the "major" European languages—Whitman, Przybyszewski (writing in German), Hauptmann, Verlaine, Mallarme, the Scandinavians, Maeterlinck, and the Russians.

It is with this European cultural baggage that two of the greatest Serbian Modernists (although one of them was born a Croat) of the interwar period survived World War II to form a constitutive part of the literary and cultural scene of postwar Communist Yugoslavia. Andrić returned from his diplomatic post in Berlin, to which he had been appointed earlier by the Royal Yugoslav government, to spend the war years in occupied Belgrade, writing his major novels *The Bridge on the Drina, The Spinster,* and *The Chronicle of Travnik.* Crnjanski led a paranoid and depressed existence in exile, in London, until Tito's government persuaded him to return and allowed him to

Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies 14(2): 259–64, 2000.

take up a more or less independent position amidst a literary scene dominated by a repressive ideological culture that was still being promulgated for the masses.

Thus these two elitist and non-Communist writers, along with Miroslav Krleža and Dušan Matić, whose declared leftist persuasion did not detract from their artistic elitism, formed the backbone of post-World War II Yugoslav culture.

It was thus in the laboratory of the European/Yugoslav Modernists, with its universal discourse of desire and transgression, that the younger generation of Yugoslav writers—those born at the end of World War II—was aesthetically formed. Milisav Savić belongs to this generation, and has been a representative of a Yugoslav Postmodernism in the making since the early 1970s, along with such writers as Danilo Kiš, Borisav Pekić, Milorad Pavić, Branimir Šćepanović, and many others.

As a Postmodern writer, Savić belongs to the European canon. His novels and stories, which are being translated into some of the "major" languages, present a fragmented picture of reality and a stylistic heterogeneity which is characteristic of postmodern writing in all the major Western literatures of the second half of the twentieth century.

On this score, Savić should be grateful to Andrić and Crnjanski for their respective contributions to post-World War II Yugoslav literature, which allowed the writers of Savić's generation to avail themselves of the great European universal tradition of Modernism. From the point of view of his reader from the 1990s, Savić's prose owes much to the Modernist techniques of both Andrić and Crnjanski, particularly to the latter. Not only does Savić's prose constitute a symbiosis of genres, such as autobiography, diary, chronicle, and historical novel, rendered in a *pastiche* of both realist and surrealist (absurd) modes of representation; it also foregrounds self-reflexivity as a language game played out between the subject's conscious and unconscious self.

However, this inheritance is not enough for Savić, or rather for his narrator-hero in *Scars of Silence* (*Ožiljci tišine*, 1996). He (or rather his narrator) has a grudge against his mentors, and particularly against Andrić, for the silence which they maintained in the face of the repression of the student protest movement of 1968, in which Savić and his literary hero were both participants. This grudge gives the title to his novel—*Scars of Silence*—and forms its major manifest theme: the political and, by extension, moral responsibility of the writer to society. The posthumous "trial by letter," to which the novel subjects Andrić and Crnjanski (literally, through inserted "letters to the editor" in the daily *Politika*), does not end with a "sentence" for the two Modernists. Instead, they, and their wives, are reunited in death with the narrator, who also turns out to be a dead man or a ghost. The silence that eclipsed

their lives is transformed into a dialogue beyond the grave, carried on by the two older writers (who exchanged very few words during their historical lives), whose conversation circle is completed by Savić's narrator, who remains unnamed to the end.

The circularity of this inconclusive *sujet* is not accidental. The structure of the whole novel turns on the idea of a circle, evoked in the opening pages through the location of the action in an Istanbul prison, in which the unemployed narrator-writer finds himself in 1995, returning from a sanction-busting smuggling expedition to Turkey. With this obvious allusion to Andrić's novella *The Devil's Yard* (*Prokleta avlija*, 1954), Savić, in fact, creates a "supplement" (in Derrida's sense) to Andrić and Yugoslav Modernism: he appropriates, through multiple intertextual framing, not only the Yugoslav literary tradition, but also the biographies of its two major players. He takes it upon himself to give both Andrić and Crnjanski new, fictionalized ("supplementary") biographies, through which his text "explains" not so much the past lives of the two Yugoslav Modernists, but assists in the construction of an interpretation of the post-Yugoslav present in the 1990s. The use of the past to illuminate the present is the actual function of the literary "supplement" and in this sense Savić's novel satisfies the conditions of postmodern "archeological" writing in Foucault's sense.

In keeping with the principles of archeological aesthetics (manifested through the structure of the "supplement" as illumination of the present through the past), Savić's novel is thus not about the past of the post-Yugoslav writer but about his historical present. The novel is, in fact, the post-Yugoslav writer's "testament" which assumes the form of a cry—but the cry is a mute gesture, like Edward Munck's Modernist painting of *The Scream*—emanating from a dead literary hero and addressed to the dead. The "scars" of silence are thus not the scars inflicted on the body of post-Yugoslav society, its political process, and its literature by the "silence" of Crnjanski and Andrić in the face of political repression during Tito's Yugoslavia, but those created by the silence or one-way communication of the Law. This is symbolized by the Kafkaesque investigator in the Turkish prison, who is as politely repressive vis-a-vis the "accused" author-smuggler as are the European Union and the world community vis-a-vis the Serbian Yugoslavia of the post-Communist 1990s. The principle of circularity of Savić's narrative is here in evidence once again, carrying with it a profound ironic connotation. Turkey, whose repression of the Balkan peoples is one of the main themes of Andrić's opus, concentrated in the metaphor of *The Devil's Yard* with which Savić's novel opens, is here represented as the carrier of the Law (as a member of the EC). Turkey is depicted as the arbiter of justice in the matter of the post-Yugoslav protagonist and, by extension, the whole complex problem of

the post-Yugoslav *given,* of which the Turkish (EC) investigator appears to have intimate knowledge but no understanding. Thus the inheritor of Andrić's literary tradition finds himself literally transposed into the world of Andrić's fiction—the world of the pre-Yugoslav Balkan Slavs (historically the Bosnian Serbs, but in Savić's narrative all Serbs). This unfortunate group is caught in the grip of a diabolical higher power which eliminates the basic possibility of cultural and political dialogue between the "excluded" and the "civilized" Europeans. The irony of this multiply framed circularity resides also in the fact that the cultural achievements of the Yugoslav Modernists, such as Andrić and Crnjanski (but also any other Yugoslav writer of the interwar generation), are placed into reverse gear. Instead of being the foundation on which the post-Yugoslav writer could continue to build in order to assure continuity of the dialogic relationship with Europe which the Yugoslav Modernists had begun, the achievements of the Yugoslav cultural heritage are devalued by a "deaf" and "silent" Europe. This depreciation leads directly not only to the death of the post-Yugoslav writer but also to the demise of the whole of post-Yugoslav culture. It is thus the "silence" of Europe, epitomised by the suave Turkish investigator, which is leaving the "scars" on Savić's narrator. The "silence" of Andrić and Crnjanski in the face of Tito's repressive regime is only a screen; rather, it constitutes something like the reaction of a caged animal, which turns to self-mutilation (to biting open its own entrails) in the absence (or inaccessibility) of the "real" object of its *ressentiment.*

Thus the political sins of the fathers (Andrić and Crnjanski), which the not-so-young post-Yugoslav writer-narrator is carrying (along the lines of the father-son dialectic in Russian culture from an earlier era, epitomised in Dostoevsky's Pyotr Verkhovensky/Stepan Trofimovich son-of-the-1860s/father-of-the-1840s plot in *The Devils/The Possesed*) are in fact not part of the "real" of the plot of Savić's novel. They constitute a screen, which is both a block-out mechanism, like that of psychic censorship, and at the same time a window or mirror into the "unconscious" of the text. This unconscious is represented literally in the twin mother/daughter figures of M and S—two female characters, both of whom constitute the poet's (narrator's) *desire.*

The figure of M is that of a middle-aged nurse, who in her youth ministered to Ivo Andrić on his deathbed in the putative (fictional) biography recreated in Savić's novel. At the end of the novel, after she breaks off her relationship with the unnamed post-Yugoslav writer-narrator because she (unjustly) suspects him of having an "incestuous" sexual relationship with her daughter S, M ends up ministering to Serbian youths who were mutilated in the post-Yugoslav war in Bosnia. For every Serbian reader, this picture of M cannot fail to evoke the picture of the Maid of Kosovo, celebrated as the angel ministering to the fallen Serbian heroes after the Battle of Kosovo in 1389.

This event signalled the fall of the Serbian medieval kingdom to the Ottomans and the beginning of the end of Serbian culture, which did not see a revival until the nineteenth century and did not experience a full return to the European Enlightenment project until its own Silver Age evolved, represented in part by the Modernists Andrić and Crnjanski.

This woman M is the post-Yugoslav writer's true Muse. She is Yugoslav to the core in that she represents all the facets of the leisurely, comparatively wealthy, cultured middle class of Tito's Yugoslavia in the 1970s without, however, belonging to the political elite. She is apolitical and aesthetic. She is sensuous and bodily. She likes to eat well and have good sex. She is a voracious reader of newspapers—that is, her essence is that of the moment, of the lived experience, of Being. It is through the war and the sanctions that her life with the narrator gradually grinds to a halt: their sensuous journeys crisscrossing Europe (which they map and appropriate) cease. Her love life with the narrator (and hence her essential Being) is overshadowed by the actuality of the present moment (1995), which is represented by her daughter, who is seductive simply through the fact that she is young. This daughter, designated by the letter S, never consummates her relationship with the narrator. Instead, she has a series of boyfriends in her age-group, who are impotent or juvenile, until she meets a warrior—a boy who belongs to the Serbian volunteer-cum-mercenary army fighting in Bosnia. This pimpled youth, who seems to have loads of money for weekend trysts in expensive Belgrade hotels, who wears gold chains as an insignia of the mercenary, thuggish level to which this "army of liberation" has degenerated, is the contemporary face of the younger generation. He symbolizes the "sons" in relation to Savić's narrator, who also has a son from a previous marriage, who returns from Australia to volunteer for the war, which the narrator is powerless to prevent.

The mercenary boyfriend of S, who is himself in the business of raping women, abandons S after she is gang raped by a band of youths who enter her flat after the narrator-author exits her and her mother's life. The mythological "rape of Europe" is thus reenacted in Savić's plot but without the connotations of rebirth carried by the classical Greek myth.

In an attempt to overcome the impasse of his love life, which symbolizes the impasse of his life in general and the historical situation in which he finds himself, the narrator-writer has recourse to an escapist gesture, effected by the psychic mechanism of displacement. That is, in his perception, the images of M and S become blurred at the end of the novel and merge with the faces of the two dead wives of the Modernist writers Crnjanski and Andrić—Vida and Milica. There is no other connection between the two Yugoslav heroines—M and S—and the wives of the two Yugoslav Modernists. Andrić's lady, who represented the writer's mature-age desire (Andrić married Milica when he

was sixty five and she past forty, although he survived her) and is approximated to the middle-aged M, was a retiring, cultivated, and educated woman. She had none of the banal characteristics of Savić's M. Vida Crnjanski, on the other hand, was a "classical" young lady of the *art nouveau* Silver Age when she married Crnjanski in the 1920s and, while endowed with great beauty and sensuality, had none of the vulgarity and superficiality of Savić's S. The displacement of the narrator's desire from a "real" and banal present into a "classical" and ideal past thus represents a retreat of the post-Yugoslav writer into the *imaginary*—the repressed region of the unconscious in which the mechanisms of condensation produce metaphor and those of displacement produce metonymy or signifying substitutions. This is precisely the post-Yugoslav writer's escape route into catharsis: if he is barred from the "real" of his cultural heritage—the whole of European culture constituted in a dialogic relationship between the writer's native Yugoslavia and the surrounding European world—then he has no option but to turn his gaze inward, into the graves of the dead, and to squeeze blood out of a stone. The dead are thus the source of the "letter," the Word or Logos. This new signifying chain is the rope Savić and the post-Yugoslav writer are meant to use to climb out of the Lake of Despair represented by the post-Yugoslav political and social situation. Savić's novel is Ariadne's thread, which, for the moment, leads him back into meaning and (European) postmodern discourse.