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Between Cry and Hope. World War I in Croatian Literary Avant-Garde

Although the literary-historic period of literary avant-garde, with Expressionism as its predominant stylistic element, did not last long in Croatian literature, only about ten years between 1917 and 1928, the projective strength of its poetics is felt even today. The avant-garde perception of literature, the man, and the world became itself a part of the national tradition of artistic thinking, so the living traces of 'the poetics of the new' are recognized beneath the shell of some later approaches and concrete realizations. Taking a slightly ironic view, the loudly demanded anti-traditionalism of the avant-garde (the negation of history, the aesthetic reevaluation of tradition) became a traditional tool and experience of subsequent individual literary practices (Flaker 1982, Slabinac 1988). The tragedy of World War I is one of the basic external political and social events that shaped the thematic and mental characters of the Croatian literary avant-garde and is thus embedded into the artistic experience of the entire Croatian literature. War events, especially the events from the second half and the very end of the war, marked the beginning of a new artistic period, and a dynamic distribution of accumulated feelings – sorrow, pain, and protest – in poetical, prosaic, and dramatic works. The time of a speculative and aesthetic metamorphosis began. If we asked for a key term that could both by its significance and by its meaning cover the central experience of the expressionist insight into the new anthropology, the new spirituality, and the construction of the concept of the New Man on the ruins of the former organization of the physical and the spiritual world, with World War I as that external physical fateful 'trigger' for the inner change of aesthetic paradigm, then metamorphosis or change would be that term. It is well known that metamorphosis, equally in explicit and implicit expressionistic texts, is dimensioned in two ways: aesthetically, as a search for a new expression for new substrates of meaning, and spiritually, as an intention to take a new direction in the establishment of an ideal measure of humanity. Humanity was understood as an attribute of the newly built super being whose moral and spiritual perspective will excel all the embezzled ideals known at that time (Anderson 2011, Washton Long 1993). The metamorphosed old world installed in the order of the new world a universal leader for every space and every time. It projected a sign of spiritual personality into the measure of the Nietzschean super symbol of the new age, into the New Man, freed from the burden of sin, from the mundane and physical substance of atrocity and evil. In the context of emphasized spiritual change, a diabolic man of dark contemporary times became a Knight

of Light of the future times: the New Man is the center of the expressionist optimal projection, the cornerstone of expressionistic mania for the establishment of a new myth on the salvation of the humankind (Flaker 1982: 66-72). Thus, the measure of all things becomes the metamorphosed man in the metamorphosed universe of new possibilities, wishes, and hopes. In other words, the brave new homeland became cosmic distances, as a consequence of escaping from the intimidating practice of war and post-war everyday life and from the imposed norms of the so-called civic culture. The expressionists believe that they can understand the world in its entirety, and that gives them the feeling of having supernatural power, the all-creative and all-destructive divine instance that punishes the old and creates the new. The final expressionistic cry for a new life can also be explained by the idea that in Expressionism a man is directly opposed to eternity, to a cosmic substrate of duration, and art becomes a certain form of religion, a triumphant conquering of the primordial human soul, as the expressionists fanatically *believe* that it is precisely by art that new principles of human existence and action can be reached:

In virtue of that, Expressionism has developed into a literary movement unbounded by social borders and unrestrained by aesthetic conventions. Gazing at the ugly things in life, at its reverse, at the moment when spiritual and political crisis, caused by the sudden expansion of industry, and mechanization of life in European countries, started to appear at the surface and destroy the earlier way of life, Expressionism went into its full swing in the war and post-war years. As it was open to all subjects, it branched off into several differentiated streams. Accepted as the expression of authentic needs, Expressionism in Croatian literature was creatively articulated in a specific style, as a result of our spiritual aspirations. We thus had psychological, anti-war, social, cosmic, political, and a few other variants of Expressionism (Jelčić 2004: 349-350)¹.

1. *War and Misery of Humanity*

In the darkness of despair, on the edge of financial existence, in the destroyed and badly wounded Europe, a scream of consolation appeared, an opportunity for a new artistic generation to make itself heard through the strength of hope for the birth of a true ideal of humanity, and of new forms of artistic and social life. Exclamation, hecticism, judgement, anxiety, skepticism, grotesque, fantasy, hallucination, cosmic code, Messiah's call... the time of lunatics and subversives, the time of the poet and essayist Ulderiko Donadini. His "philosophy of war" from a short essay of the same name written at the end of 1916, with certain dramatic tones and with a deliberate concern for the future of the centuries-old 'ethical Europe', induced the idea that the content of war in a human and social sense is realized by a turnabout, and the event itself, broken into millions of images coming from the battlefield and from tranches, is too enormous to be understood by a modern man as "we have no phantasy of all the atrocities that happened" (Donadini 1916b: 75-77). Once a

¹ Here and afterwards, unless otherwise indicated, the translation is mine (I.M.).

candidate for an Austro-Hungarian soldier, and now a ‘damned artist’ with a certified diagnosis of neurasthenics, a man free from the ranks and a war career, thus also a bit neglectful and ironic, Donadini was still hoping that the new man of art will none the less find the exhausted monologue of inspiration and that a perspective will appear from which one will be able to reach and describe the phenomenon of “monster-war” for which there currently exist “no thoughts, no words and no phantasies”, and that in the laconic and deadly precise way can be best described by a single word: indescribable.

War, as a dynamic form of death, and a black spot of the human sinking into nothingness, already entered its third year, and acceleration, challenge, and the test of artistic consciousness were still looked for:

Life is manifested in the dynamics. It excludes immovable ideals. A futuristic desire for war is a hysteric scream of humanity for change and motion (Donadini 1916a: 1-4)².

The advocacy of speeding up human history that would in the Neronic way show the misery of humanity to the artists who would then be able *in situ* to explore that misery creatively and present it in their works, was at the beginning of his dangerous life in Croatian literature completely natural to Donadini. A programmatic justification of war, or at least a poetic attenuation of the physical desert and a temporal vale of tears by means of, in Croatian cultural and literal conditions, still topical futuristic phrases – this is what stands at the beginning of artistic conquering of the big topic of the Great War within the frameworks of Croatian literary expressionism. Those very few programmatic texts appearing after Donadini, his magazine “Kokot”, and his manifest *Savremena umjetnost* (“*The Modern Art*”) from August 1916, which mention the currently swept wind of world war, observe the war as the biggest possible evil, although not without certain coldness and calculated bizarreness: war is indeed the beast that meaninglessly destroys human lives. However, as it is so, war is also the crack through which one can not only see and hear the roar of canons and the rat-a-tat of machine guns. This crack also opens the possibilities for the appearance and fulfilment of a new vitally human and social hope (Milanja 2002, Donat 2003, Matičević 2008). Human heads fall and nothing can be done about it, but art is eternal, and it will save humanity by the new challenge of spiritual freedom at the rear of a stentorian scream of the bloody everyday life. As expected, the stimuli are German, Nietzschean, Messianic, and some potent things start unravelling towards Judeo-Christian tradition and the merging of the two myths, a Nietzschean New Man, and a Christian Messiah. In Cesarec’s essay-manifest *Tebe Boga hvalimo!* (“*Te hominem laudamus!*”, 1919, after a hymn *Thee, O God, we praise*; Matičević 2008: 217-233), the perspectives of salvation should be looked for in the Russian commune and in the blazing shadow of the Great October, more specifically in the image and work of comrade Ul’janov. Encouraged by the Bolshevik practice and the

² “Život se manifestira u dinamici. Isključuje nepomične uzore. Futuristička želja za ratom jest histeričan krik čovječanstva za promjenom i gibanjem”.

phenomenon of the New Man Lenin, the path towards a more human and fair society on the premises of a Communist platform and practice was not so distant and unknown any more. Besides, if we accept the interpretation of historic facts by which the October Revolution of 1917 is, among other things, the result of the World War I, then the cumulative and critical Krleža's view from the raving *Hrvatska književna laž* ('Croatian Literary Lie', 1919) seems no longer far from the topic and semantic cluster of the Great War (Vučković 1982 and 1985). At least in the sense that we can say that his calculated visor, after the mud thrown at the symbols of a grave, a warehouse and a pavilion, is aimed at the practice of the choir singing from the Kremlin, and that he sees the strength for the change of Croatian postwar conditions in the vigilant and critically oriented national collectivity. Nietzsche's Superman is the mass of people, and not a chosen individual, saturated by ideology. The mass in movement provides for the dynamics of changes, and individuals serve to the runny molasses of the national being. Krleža, and especially Cesarec, under the then close attack by the Russian political practice, were convinced that a spiritual metamorphosis of a man should be preceded by a social and economic revolution (anyway, aren't the artists just the wheels in the monumental mechanism of revolution, said again that same comrade Ul'janov). On the other hand, Ljubomir Micić in his manifest *Čovjek i umjetnost* ('Man and Art') from the first issue of the magazine "Zenit" (Zagreb-Beograd 1921-1926) starts from the perspective that generally defines the so-called spiritual, cosmic expressionism, although in a somewhat fashionable, trashy, clownish, and narcissistic way, what the Zenitism movement fundamentally was. War is a physical proof of how low a man stooped, and a genuine despise for a man. Therefore, the aim of Zenitism, as a self-proclaimed heart of Expressionism, its central collection point, is to bring awareness to the creative impulse in the search for the renewing spirit of the modern man, the new spiritual and intellectual strength, through the installation of an appropriate super being, the New Man: after the cataclysm of the terrible war, in the waste land and abolished landscape, in emotional and spiritual entropy, in the sounds of thoughts and the downfall of touch, one demanded and endeavored to find a living human heart. Even Virgil Poljanski (a pseudonym of Micić's brother Branko) in the only issue of his Ljubljana magazine "Svetokret" from 1921 ecstatically invokes the new face of art, and he observes the New Man also in the active forces of Soviet revolution. However, it seems that his work was not about the conscious Marxism and Leninism, but about the emotional ostentation with the current sources of fascination. Lenin and Trockij are the symbols of the dynamic, agile, and freed human nature, the untamed form of the new (Maković, Medić 2007, Šimičić 2008).

2. *World War I in Poetry and Prose*

Outside the sphere of theoretic mind, the living human nature was found in the meanders of the genre-defined, practical mind. Poetry, prose, and drama experienced, adopted, and conquered World War I as their great cornerstone theme, without which the corpus of artistic texts of the Croatian Expressionism would have been fundamentally

impoverished. That is especially true if we take into consideration the fact that even the greatest poets of that period, like Antun Branko Šimić, although not covering the reality of war in their explicit texts, they indirectly speak a lot about that same reality of war. It is present in their creative work as the elementary and direct human experience, as the basis that shaped them and wore them out, even if they themselves did not concretely use the war motives and themes. To use the military terminology, they felt the war and they wrote about it both in frontal assaults and as a rear echelon. Their analysis went from a bigger to a smaller degree of denoting the reality of war, i.e. to the allusive reaching of the war atmosphere through motives and meaning, by terminating the signifier plan of war, but not losing the connection with the semantic and meaningful substrate of the war condition, and of the consequences of war. This is well recognized in the poetry of that time. The feeling of desperation caused by helplessness, the underlining of the absurdity of war destructions, the ironic reflex over one more triumph of human stupidity, the creation of dark images of despair and decay, a fatalistic historic going around in circles, melancholy, nihilism, indifference, *memento mori*... All these are the basic characteristics of the war lyrics written by Krleža, of his *Pjesme I, II, III* ('Poems I, II, III' [that by their very title rhythmicize the military marching, 1918-1919]), and of *Lirika* ('Lyrics', 1919), in terms of motives a somewhat more distant poetry collection, about which Croatian literary science spoke analytically in the whole range of works (Stamać 1973, Kravar 1980, Milanja 1987). The reflex of war demon can be found also in the voices from the cycle *Simfonija* ('Symphony'), in the sixth 'symphony' entitled *Ulica u jesenje jutro* ('Street in the autumn morning', 1919):

A procession of the poor black people is going down the street, plucking strings and singing in an undertone:

This is Us, We, the children of bloody Europe!

We, the children of the Middle Ages, of Barracks and wine.

Gigantic black feet are stamping on us,

This is Us, We, the children of bloody Europe!

[...]

The voice from the headquarters echoing: Links vorwärts aufmarschieren!

*Doppelreihen rechts Front!*³

And a man in the battalion is staggering and singing:

Lo, I'm walk in the troop without a head,

And the wind is whistling and I think of nothing,

It is late autumn and the first snow is melting away.

And the wind is singing: Clamber, man, clamber! (Krleža 1982: 159)⁴

³ German: military commands in the Austro-Hungarian army: Left flank, march! Doble columns right face!

⁴ "Ulicom ide povorka crnih jadrnika, udaraju u žice pjevajući poluglasno: / To smo Mi, Mi, djeca krvave Europe! / Mi djeca Srednjeg vijeka, Kasarne i vina. / Po nama gaze gigantske crne stope, / to smo Mi, Mi, djeca krvave Europe! / [...] / Glas komande ječi: Links vorwärts aufmarschieren! /

Surely, in many poems from the above mentioned poetry collections war is not the primary, denotative diagnosis, but, as an experienced measure of historic reality and as adopted aspect of the validity of reality, it is reflected in the range of other, expressionistically acknowledged motives and topical lines – in the theme of death, transience, fear, despair, social sensitivity and care for another human being, in the screams of frantic silence, and in the constant resistance towards the machine grinding human lives. War as the measure of validity and as the moment of social-historic reality, a physical factor and the origin of poetic suffering, enables the lyric narrator to create and model a cocktail of thematic characteristics, morals and messages with no little appellative value, which Expressionism in its critical burst especially emphasized, at least when it was about that one pole of his reflex that was called activist. We should not disregard the fact that these are only conditional distributions, since activism does not mean the absence of intimacy and contemplation. The war lyrics of Krleža, speculative and intellectual in its essence, does not hide its view of life. However, it is far from trying to provoke by unbalanced exclamation and anti-traditionalistic poetics, by pathos of its message, and by a militant gesture in the name of vamped pacifism. Krleža gives his anti-war messages rationally, deliberately and, as noticed in the scholarly literature, in a closed up, almost colloquial dramatic form:

Everything in Krleža's lyric poetry is one big nocturne, a big dying, one big death and rot, the malediction of emptiness and a poisoned state of a soul. Krleža depicts all these moods through precise and rich expressions that cannot be linked to any poetic forms, but by which he does not infringe upon the basic poetic laws. This poet always resorts to plastic, metaphoric and strong expressions distended by the contents, and rhapsodic from despair and sadness, from the pain of his soul and the brokenness of everything (Čolak 1975: 74).

It has to be added that Krleža's 'war lyrics' is often enriched by the motives of Golgotha and Good Friday, and by Biblical images to which Krleža will occasionally return in his later works. However, his lyric works often show him ardently, and thus somewhat unconvincingly advocating the ideology of the October Revolution and of Leninism. Opposite to Krleža's rational measure of cruel reality convincingly testifying about the decay of the entire humanity within the frameworks of the narrow perspectives of political divisions, and about the decay of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as a direct consequence of war events, egocentrism is more visible in the works of the poets foreseeing the retreat from the materialism of this world, from revolutionary movements and war motives, of those poets whose denotation is more distant from the historic and political stratum. This means that they are variably preoccupied by the states of mind and by the search for the distant horizons inhabited by astral and intergalactic Krishna-Buddha-Christ in *Beli plamenovi* ('*White Flames*', 1919) by Josip Kosor, and by Messiah-White Wanderer from the early col-

Doppelreihen rechts Front! / A čovjek u bataljonu tetura i pjeva: / Hodam eto u četi bez glave, / I vjetar fijuče i ne mislim ništa. / Jesen je kasna i prvi snijeg kopni. / A vjetar pjeva: popni se, čovječe, popni!"

lection *Stihovi* ('Poetry', 1919) by August Cesarec, by the cosmic energy of justice and love, by the symbols of healing and life restoration. Even Miroslav Feldman in his first poetry collection *Iza sunca* ('Behind the Sun', 1920) does not give up the paradigm of life in the shade of war turmoil, with no noticeable subject substance. Above all, he is left with only the sorrow of the soul over meaningless victims, but also and eventually – when he managed to suppress the war anamnesis and appease his feelings at least a little – with personal grief for the unrealized love and for the unfulfilled longing from his youth (Milanja 2000).

The prosaic expression of Croatian 'war Expressionism' is marked first of all by Krleža's Home Guard stories from *Hrvatski bog Mars* ('Croatian God Mars', 1922), as a genre-defined counterpart to his war lyrics, in which, through the destinies of Home Guards, their war units, and military commanders, he continues questioning the foolishness and fatalism of human collectivity in the escalated historic situation, with the polyphony of voices and a catalogue of individual character traits:

The experience of the barracks, of exercises in the troop, of a military hospital, and even of a short stay at the Russian front-line, have surely contributed to the total image of war reality in *Croatian God Mars*. The book is dominated by the rationality of the writer's view of life directed against the anachronistic manifestations of the imperial and aristocratic order in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and against the absurd fetishism of the army and war violence over the enemy and over one's own people (Vidan 1993: 350).

The general tone of all the stories in this collection is distinctively anti-war, and its motivic determinants are brutality, violence, death, pain, human primitivism and hopelessness. This modernistically-formed narrative procedure, with the narrator rambling between a war chronicler and the inner voice of his characters, with scattered expressionistic simultaneity of events, convincingly underlines the state of the complete decay and of endangered human existence. Krleža gave a final blow to the fragmented national collective, in a possessed and poetically ironic movement of trains towards the solar invocation in the genre-defined hybrid and futuristic vision of *Hrvatska rapsodija* ('Croatian Rhapsody', 1917). The title itself, apostrophizing the one-movement music form of 'rhapsody', indicates the character of an episodic, but at the same time integrated structure, a free flow, with the range of greatly contrasting moods, colors and tonalities. One can recognize some basic expressionistic features – a hybridization of forms ("confusione dei generi" – a mixture of poetical, prosaic and dramatic expressions; Poggioli 1975: 89), a simultaneity of events, dark humor effects, grotesque images, the dynamic use of lexical and syntactic units, semantic and aesthetic tension in the setting up and opposing of naturalistic and of idealistic details, the allegoric image of the train that gradually turns into a symbol – the optical projection of the desire for the all-embracing, solar, and cosmic change, for a revolution, freedom and final liberation of Croatian man from the burden and hardships of historic changes...that is why it can be most reliably said that *Croatian Rhapsody*, along with the author's expressionistically conceptualized cycles of poetic symphonies, dramatic legends, and war lyrics of the same period, stands at the beginning of the development of expressionistic style in Croatian

literature. Without the totality of Krleža's early works, the national variant of expressionistic poetics would have been in its essence significantly impoverished and by all means less expressive and less important for the development of Croatian literary modernism than it is considered today when there are numerous studies and monographs about that literary period. Precisely opposite to the malediction foretold by the Croatian literary historian Antun Barac back in 1929 in his essay *Između filologije i estetike* ('*Between Philology and Aesthetics*'): today, nobody should feel lonely with the subject and issues related to the period of Croatian literary avant-garde as many literary critic and analytic works studying this period have been written in an expertly and academically appropriate way (Barac 1968).

August Cesarec's story *Na posljednjim tračnicama* ('*On the Last Rails*', 1919) is also marked by related motives, although by more moderate expressionistic accents than it was the case with Krleža. Through the character of Ilija Koren, in the collision of mimetic and symbolically expressionistic images, Cesarec's story sketches the general decay in a social image, and in individual destinies immediately after the war (Vučković 1975; Rapacka 2001; Milanja 2012). The character of Ilija Koren appears again in some other Cesarec's short stories as a kind of a war chronicler, but as he appears in the short stories written outside the expressionistic procedure, these stories are not mentioned here. After a Krležanian ride on the train, Ilija Koren finishes his warpath in prison where he, deprived of all humanity, experiences some rambling dreams, the ill-omened and "crni odrazi dotadašnjeg života" ('black reflections of his former life', Cesarec 1966: 93). In the said story, Cesarec placed his character in the center of a demonic atmosphere and within a dynamic portrait of the chaotic amorphous human mass turning like the wheels of a locomotive. Visionary images and symbols, very often of Biblical origin, ghostly images of night, and the constantly elevated emotional state of mind of Ilija Koren, testify about the author's nightmarish perception of war, and about his constant protest against inhuman, animal conditions in which a man of his time ended. A story entitled *A Junakinja bez spomenika* ('*Heroine without a Monument*') from the first collection of short stories written by Stjepan Mihalić (*Novele 'Short Stories'*, 1932), where a peasant girl becomes a prostitute in order to help her husband, an Austro-Hungarian soldier, can also be considered as an expressionistic stylization and a completely indisputable thematic offspring of the complex of Croatian God Mars. The fragments of a novel by Tito Strozzi published in Krleža's and Cesarec's literary magazine "Plamen" in 1919 are characterized by a special quality of the prosaic expressionistic style. Considered to be the anticipation of the Krleža's Home Guard period, this prosaic excerpt is also the first example of Croatian Galician war prose, and also an exemplary evidence of the talent of its author who finally proved himself by his dramatic texts, by his artistic talent and by his director's work in the most important Croatian theaters (Batušić 1994). Naturalistically and expressionistically intoned descriptions of war horrors, fears and anxieties, a rich lexical and rhetoric repertoire, the emphasized psychologization in the observation of events, suggestiveness in the creation of war images are the main characteristics of these Romanesque fragments in which Strozzi emphatically committed himself to pacifist ideas. In all three fragments (*Juriš*, *Desetnik Trull*, *Uzmak* – '*Charge*', '*Squad Leader Trull*', '*Retreat*')

there is a mixture of the narrator's subjective analysis of war events and their realistic description. A fictive narrator is the mediator through whose reflections on the meaning and purpose of warfare we follow a gradual destruction of the emotional and moral integrity of every individual-participant in the war chaos. The reflections of the narrator-confessant are given with measure, coldly, and rationally, from the distance of a reliable psychologist / analyst and a veteran of war. The related interior monologues are intersected by realistic descriptions of the events on the front line. Within a causal enumeration of events, and through the optics of the interior narrator, Strozzi embedded impressive, stylistically rounded images of war conditions. One of such images from the end of the third fragment stands out. The soldiers running from a stronger enemy find several barrels of wine and, in spite of all the dangers present on the frontline, they indulge in the half-crazy and lascivious drinking and exchange of blows. By a successfully realized combination of a naturalistic description and an expressionistic grotesque, we observe a range of sketches showing military wild excitement and 'human lowness':

As we were passing by a warehouse grinning in a comprehensive fire, the soldiers happened to find the wine. The news was spread at lightning speed. In the disgusting outcry of joy, the berserk people began rolling the barrels to the road. Down the hill. One barrel dashed into a group of soldiers running to get their treat. The barrel crashed them all. Some of them were laughing, the others were crying. One neat-handed artilleryman perforated the barrel with a hit from his carbine and put his mouth on the hole greedily sipping warm wine. A booming hooray was the pay he got for his sharp wit. They started imitating him. Some other soldiers who lost their guns on their way were beating the barrel with logs so hard that the barrel was finally reduced to matchwood. Then they threw themselves on the ground, face down, and licked frantically the soil impregnated by wine. Soon the crowd staggered, completely drunk.

– Long live war! – They screamed, emptying their full field water bottles (Strozzi 1998: 60)⁵.

In the second fragment in which the narrator, meeting the diabolic squad leader Trull and his concept of war, tries to comprehend more deeply the nature of man and his wish for destruction, Strozzi tried to envisage a step towards the unconscious. That second, central, fragment is like a verbal break between the two more dynamic parts whose 'war tactics'

⁵ "Kad smo prolazili mimo jednog skladišta, što se cerilo u sveobuhvatajućoj vatri, naiđoše vojnici na vino. Vijest se rasprostrani strelovito. Ogavnom vikom veselja stanu podivljali ljudi valjati trbušaste bačve na cestu. Niz brijeg. Jedno je bure baš naletilo na skup vojnika, što se žurio na gozbu. Zdrobilo ih do jednoga. Jedni se smiju, drugi plaču. Neki spretni topnik probuši bačvu hicem iz karabinke i stavi usne na otvor. Proždrljivo srčuć toplo vino. Gromki hura bijaše plata za njegovu oštroumnost. Oponašahu ga. Nekoji pak, što su putem izgubili puške, udarahu balvanima tako dugo po bačvi, dok se nije rastrijeskala. Zatim se baciše potrbuške na zemlju i lizahu pomamno vinom natopljenju zemlju. Zamalo je mnoštvo teturalo u potpunom pijanstvu. Živio rat! – drečahu, ispražnjujuć pune poljske čuture".

thematization is indicated already in their title. From the military point of view, it is logical that at the beginning there is 'charge', and then, if some (bad) war circumstances occur, there is also the 'retreat'. The latter word is of key importance for the determination of the entire dimension of the meaning of Strozzi's fragments: war is the retreat of humanism and humanity, the retreat for which everybody participating in it is responsible. At the very end of the segments, by confirming that he also is "krivac kalu sadašnjosti" ('guilty for the sludge of the present time'), the narrator readily takes his own responsibility. As Strozzi himself was an active participant in the war events in Galicia, as quartermaster first lieutenant of the Austrian army, these fragments are certainly also an autobiographic and intimist reflection, and perhaps also his personal excuse for something that should not have happened, and for which the author himself felt responsible. We will find some more directly expressed pacifist ideas in the author's collection of short prosaic pieces entitled *Razgovori sa dušom Smijeseiti* ('Talks with the Soul, Youlaughtoo'), published a year earlier, in 1918, consisting of nine sketch-like parts of the journey across the Earth of one soul unadjusted to ecclesiastical laws. In the part entitled *Rat* ('War'), Strozzi pathetically, by an elevated and typically expressionistic declamation, speaks up against the war and violence, and this soul brings a fictive narrator on a trip, all with the intention to bring him to an anti-war meeting. The surprising embodiments of the soul in a male goat, and later on in a dog, the motivation of events by a dream, the ironic and grotesque as the principles of negation of the 'common sense' of the physical world – all these can be found in this inventive prosaic work; still the prose remains nothing more than a sketch and an experiment. It has to be emphasized: it is a pity that the prosaic fragments of this creative aristocrat from a famous musical and acting dynasty Strozzi have not grown into novelized pieces of art, as this would have required some more persistence and harder work! Strozzi dedicated his artistic energy entirely to the Croatian theater that he entrusted by his numerous plays, and by his directing and acting engagement. His prosaic creativity was obviously just an ephemeral episode from his youth.

While the war prose of Krleža, Cesarec, and Strozzi was marked mostly by the images of collective chaos (broken, of course, and presented through individual perspectives), Donadini – the same one that in the aforementioned first manifest from 1916 somewhat laconically neglected the fact of the state of war as a futuristic necessary evil that will initiate the creativity of dedicated priests-artists – avoided to participate in the war events himself. On the example of Martin Semić in the novel *Kroz šibe* ('Through the Brushwood', 1921), we learn about the loss of a social center, about giving up on the immediate reality, and about the non-compliance to the mechanisms of life in the collective contracts of Donadini's heroes. In this novel, Martin, portrayed in a completely autobiographic fashion, tries, and eventually succeeds, to free himself from conscription at the very beginning of the war. He pretends to be mentally destroyed and he exhausts himself physically by week-long drunkenness, irregular nourishment, but also by frequent visits to brothels. It is sufficient to remember the destiny of Donadini himself and his pretended insanity that, ironically and bizarrely, in a schizophrenic attack, eventually took revenge on him by a sharp cut of

the razor on his own neck, in the famous mental institution in Stenjevec, the suburb of Zagreb, in the year 1923. And the cuts, again the diabolic destinies, reveal the evil behind the scenes of the Great War, in the way it is reflected in the mind of the main character Ljubo Kraljević from Krleža's *Veliki meštar sviju hulja* ('*The Great Master of All Scoundrels*', published in the literary magazine "Plamen" in 1919). Kraljević's 'sentimental neurasthenia' grows also under the pressure of knowledge about the war events, both at the front and at the rear, which will lead to the rebellion against order and arrangement of things, and to the final, fatalistic, and expressionistic cry: *Help! Help!*

3. *The Image of World War I in Drama*

In dramatic works of expressionistic period, Krleža continues to use themes and motifs already present in his prose, including: numerous cadets, orderlies, officers and generals, each in their own circle of fatalistic constancy. From *Galicia* to *Vučjak* (1922-1923), the entire national space is nothing more than Kroatenlager, a funeral procession with black and yellow flags on the quickly cobbled-up wooden coffins, and Krleža's plays, played on Croatian theater stages even today, collected in their characters "all the tragedy and all the wounds of Croatian people who have been fighting and bleeding for centuries, but always for the benefit of somebody else, in the act of high treason against their own nationality" (Jelčić 2004: 358, Gašparović 1977). The image of disappearance of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy from the world stage, and the very end of war, were depicted through the destiny of a discontent and disappointed journalist Horvat in the dramatic work *Vučjak*. Its most impressive part is the expressionistically intoned Horvat's dream, while Krleža's obsession with Biblical motives is completely evident in the choice of names of Eva and Lazar. In its deeper layer of themes and ideas, this dramatic work is actually a follow-up of the thematization of the lonely rebels of the world to which Krleža left a strong mark in the plays from his earlier creative period, in the so-called legends, introducing and stabilizing the symbolic and expressionistic poetic code into the Croatian dramaturgy. And, finally, there is a play called *Ruine* ('*Ruins*', 1917) by Rudolf Habeduš, as a typical, not too inventive (thus also naïve), and predictable dedication to the expressionistic New Man, in the character of the man coming home from the army and captivity. He is the man changed so much by the warrior and sufferer destiny that he now understands everything and forgives everyone, so on the ruins of the old world, there will appear a new, better, and more righteous world. In relation to this play, it is important to notice the very general indications at the beginning of the story. The story takes place "za jedne jesenske večeri u našem slavonskom selu" ('one autumn evening in one of our Slavonian villages') and "pod konac prvog svjetskog pokolja – u praskozorje ljudske revolucije" ('near the end of the first world mass killing – in the dawn of human revolution'). These general indications tell us that there is an attempt of synthesis, and a projection of a naturalistic plot into the dramatic space and concept of non-theological and anthropological ideas of Expressionism (Vučković 1982: 339). While Krleža's columns of half-dead and wounded people get lost on the bloody horizons of the provincial Europe, on its urban stages there is a stream of

war and post-war polychromy, a polygon of spectacles and cinematographic images, a vaudeville thicket of nations and habits from the frolicsome Paris of Josip Kosor in the dramas of his cafés, in *Café du Dôme* and *Café de la Rotonde* (both plays of the same title were written in 1918). The experience of war is something completely different: The clash of Europe and America, a plutocratic view of life versus a Dionysian one, the chimera of the bohemian metropolis, the power of money and the glory of artistic tradition. War is nothing but a distant drapery, a kind of exotic parallel world consumed by some other people who are now all dead. The wishes, energy and desire for life of the protagonists and decadents of the metropolis, reflect a false and carnivalesque hope and a final pragmatic consensus between the predator capitalism and a humanistic impulse of battered Mrs. Art who in the new post-war conditions, became completely adapted to the laws of the market and does not have an aversion to the bunch of green banknotes. Exactly a hundred years ago, in Kosor's horizon it was clearly stated that the financial aspect will create the future destiny of humankind, and art will either completely disappear or it will resolve its archetypal freedom and frolicsome existence by compromises, without subversive manifests and idealized goals. All the fragments of imagined reality of the two war plays by Kosor are placed at Montparnasse, in the previously mentioned Paris cafés, the famous toponyms of European avant-garde in the second decade of the 20th century, where Kosor spent the last months of war and the first months after the war. A café is a synecdoche, a micro image of the unity of the world that is after World War I full of turbulent economic and political turmoil. On the physical world stage, and thus also on the stage of Kosor's café (a Shakespearean *theatrum mundi*, or as said in the play: "Cio život i svijet – je špektakl")⁶, certain manifestations and processes appear and begin to be dominant and they have not ceased to exist until today. Moreover, they were, and they still are intruding as the only value criteria, as the only valid measures for the success in the Western world that were by more or less subtle mechanisms of coercion and dependence extended to the north, east and south. Kosor believes, and that is the ultimate meaning of his drama, that the power of money in the post-war world and the aggressive practice of gaining capital, centered in the USA, will gradually destroy all other human interest and equalize the national and individual particularities, among them the spiritual ones, to the level of cost effectiveness and pure profit. A concrete criticism of social condition, and especially of predatory capitalism, is set on the scene, with no intention to offer a solution for the described condition. Kosor is not directly interested in political realism, but more in its influence on the broader spiritual dimension of social relations. By still maintaining the avant-garde dramatic technique, along with the interlacing of spiritual patterns of expressionism and a repeated need for a spiritual revival, in his presentation of particular characters and scenes Kosor decided on the form of entertaining and carnival aspect. In the shade of the Great War that had just ended, and in the context of the newly established countries in Europe, among them also the national community of South-Slavic nations in the so called 'first Yugoslavia' (Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes / Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1918-1941), the cafés of Paris will gradually lead Kosor

⁶ 'All the life and world is – a spectacle'.

towards the building of a critical and completed social and political dramatic engagement, visible in his plays *Maske na paragrafima* ('*Masquerade on Paragraphs*' 1928) and *Nema Boga – ima Boga* ('*There is no God – There is God*', 1933) that experienced a rare political repression in the former Yugoslavia. Even in those plays Kosor will not abandon his expressionistic poetic code, and will stay faithful to Expressionism, in its formal and thematic variants, till the end of his dramatic work (Pavlović 2001: 214-227, Matičević 2013: 9-27).

4. *The Beginning of a New Life*

This is more or less all, and this is not negligible, as this critical and comprehensive work accumulates the very core of the expressionistic contribution to the analysis of the World War I themes in Croatian literature. Besides, the central part of Croatian and Mid-European expressionistic practice lives, and is present in the thematic, ideological and social coordinates of the war events, but also in the historical turmoil and political resets that occurred after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. War really accelerated in the Donadinian way the nature and orbit of artistic arrangement in the war and post-war years. The expressionistic stylistic element conquered the key elevations of artistic geography, and it bridled and, although, considering the context of suffering, it is atrocious to say, also ennobled the military drill of life in poetic, prosaic and dramatic pieces. Somehow, the same way as in 1916 on the pages of the wartime *Kokot*, when talking about the upcoming new sensibility of 'modern art', Donadini, its eccentric editor-in-chief, wrote:

It is a great skill to know how to finally meet something you have been waiting for. In the result of understandings of one artist lie the understandings of the society he lives in. The artist *who creates* lives with his time: he pulses. In the current war, one day brings as many events as several months in the years of peace can bring. One needs strength to subdue them all. The one who is not an artist cannot stand such an impulse. It is only at sea that a whirlwind can raise waves. Whoever wants to analyze a ghost, has to be brave so that he can look straight into its eyes. Great artworks have been published, and the artist had to live them himself. He has to possess not the universality of knowledge, but of understanding and feelings. New experiences create new feelings, and this war does not allow to be enclosed with the reminiscences to previous wars. The war itself, the object with a new construction and dimensions, will reveal to us many of those whom we have considered artists so far – should they just dare touch it – as powerless and diletantes; it will reveal to us the whole quantity of their artistic feeling for the completely new events, and they will not be able to be silent on it and to reach for something else. It has touched everything so much and has given its patina to everything. [...] The war has arisen feelings in all of us. We are still waiting for somebody who will be able to tell us what those feelings were (Donadini 1916a: 1-4)⁷.

⁷ "Velika je umjetnost znati dočekati nešto. U rezultatu spoznaja jednoga umjetnika leže spoznaje društva u kojem živi. Umjetnik *koji stvara* živi sa svojim vremenom: pulzira. U sadanjem ratu donese jedan dan toliko događaja, koliko u godinama mira tek nekoliko mjeseci. Treba snage da se

In the notion of the optimal projection of the future and in the specific appearance of the New Man, Croatian literary Expressionism found the necessary and needed dimension of hope and faith in the healing of the wounded man after a four-year destruction. The end of war marked the beginning of a new life, and Croatian writers knew how to recognize it and how to convey it to the readers as their own, collective experience. As the analysed examples of poetic, prosaic and dramatic works showed, the intensity of using the war theme as well as the very end of the war, ranged from a larger to a lesser degree of the war reality denotation, that is from a greater to a smaller extent of symbolization of war destruction and traumas. In short: the feeling of despair, anxiety and historical fatalistic spinning in circles was overcome by faith in moral and humanistic progress that will emerge by the arrival of the New Man. The whirlwind of literary revolution introduced so decisively, creatively and successfully by the Expressionism in Croatian literature, was significantly enforced by the thematic analysis of the World War I.

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podlože. Tko nije umjetnik ne može podnijeti toliki impuls. Vihor može dići valove samo na moru. Tko hoće da analizira sablast, mora biti junačan, da joj mirno gleda u oči. Velike umjetnine su objavljene i umjetnik ih je morao sam da doživi. On mora posjedovati ne univerzalnost u znanju, nego u shvaćanju i osjećanju. Novi doživljaji stvaraju nove osjećaje, a ovaj rat ne dopušta da ga se obuhvati sa reminiscencijama na pređašnje ratove. On sav, objekt s tako novim protegama i konstrukcijom, otkriće nam mnoge, koje smo dosad držali umjetnicima - ako se usude da ga se taknu - nemoćnima i diletantima; otkriće nam sav kvantitet njihovog umjetničkog osjećanja za posve nove događaje, a ne će moći da ga prešute, i posegnu za čim drugim, toliko se svega taknuo i dao mu svoje patine [...]. Rat je u svima nama probudio osjećanja. Još uvijek čekamo onoga, koji će moći, da kaže, kakva su bila”.

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Abstract

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Between Cry and Hope. World War I in Croatian Literary Avant-Garde

This paper is an informative and analytical description of the thematization / presence of the topic of World War I in the Croatian avant-garde creation (1917-1925). The theme of World War I plays such an important role in the poetry, prose and drama of literary Expressionism that without it, the corpus of artistic texts of Croatian expressionism and Croatian literary avant-garde would be significantly impoverished. The course of elaboration of war themes and of the very end of war in literary works went from a higher towards a lower degree of war reality denotation: the feeling of desperation due to helplessness, the underlining of the absurdity of war destructions, the ironic reflex over one more triumph of human stupidity, the creation of dark images of despair and decay, the fatalistic historical going around in circles, melancholy, nihilism, indifference due to the inability to change the state of war, memento mori... All these are the basic characteristics of the works written by Krleža, Strozzi, Donadini, Kosor and Cesarec. This paper also draws attention to the presence of the theme of the Great War, and to the echoes of war events in the manifestation texts of that period. Namely, it underlines the invocation and expectations of the arrival of art of the new times and new sensitivity, with the New Man as the symbol of salvation, renewal, and hope.

Keywords

World War I and Croatian Literature; Croatian Literary Avant-Garde; Croatian Literary Expressionism; Nihilism; Irony; Grotesque.