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## Historical Memory and the Identity of Places: Approaches to War in Works by Énard and Rastello

**Keywords:** fiction and nonfiction, Mathias Énard, Luca Rastello war, memory, history, identity of geographical spaces

DOI: 10.4312/ars.13.2.78-88

The idea of presenting and comparing two works as different in their genre<sup>1</sup> as the novel *Zone* (2008), by Mathias Énard,<sup>2</sup> and the collection of documentary prose *La guerra in casa* (1998), by the Italian journalist and novelist Luca Rastello,<sup>3</sup> occurs not only because of a common theme, namely the Yugoslavian conflict of the 1990s. The two works are also linked by the fact that they connect reflecting on history with reflecting on the identity of geographical areas. In both cases, the identity of places is redefined in the light of memories of the violence that was committed there.

The first is a work of fiction, but one that is profoundly intertwined with historical facts; the second a documentary based on the salvaging of oral accounts. Both came out of a cultural terrain which had absorbed two important debates of the last twenty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first concerned cultural memory and the role that writing plays in this (a debate led by the work of Jan and Aleida Assmann), and the second, the relationship between historiography and literature, which tapped into the clear separation between the two disciplines. Some of the most famous studies about this question were those by Hyden White and Linda Hutcheon but also, in a phenomenological context, those by Paul Ricoeur. In his case, it is not simply a matter of recognising the presence of a literary form in every historical account (White's argument), but rather of describing history in a way that can be *représentance*: "placing the accent not only on the active character of the historical

1 This article is part of the research programme P6-0239 which is financed by the ARSS (the Slovenian National Research Agency).

2 Matthieu Énard (born in 1972) is a French writer and translator, author of several novels including *L'Alcool et la Nostalgie* (2011), *Rue de voleurs* (2012) and *Boussole* (winner of the Prix Goncourt/Goncourt Prize 2015). The setting of his novel *La perfection du tir* (2003) is also a contemporary war in the Middle East.

3 Luca Rastello (1961–2015) was an Italian journalist and writer. During the 1990s, he went several times to the war zones of the Balkans. He wrote other investigative essays and two novels, of which the best-known – *Piove all'insù* (2006) – deals with generational conflict in 1970s Italy. His collection of narrative fragments and critical notes about contemporary society seen through the eyes of a dying patient was published posthumously under the title *Dopodomani non ci sarà* (2018).



operation, but on the intended something that makes history the heir of memory [...]” (Ricoeur, 2004, 236).

Both mentioned works of Rastello and Énard aim to make a precise connection between archive memory<sup>4</sup> and subjective living memory, or to give us a representation of history through a filter of reality. It doesn't matter if such experiences are actually factual, as in Rastello's writing, or rather a fictional reality, as in the novel *Zone*. What is relevant, though, is that their writing about individual experiences gives history a certain visibility.

It must be said that neither Rastello nor Énard focuses any attention on the theory of metahistory. This one frequently crops up in post-modern literature and tends to detect the act of construction, which for postmodernists is part of every historical account. Rather than questioning interpretations of history in the first instance, they are keen to recount history – although Énard seeks at the same time to tell an exciting imaginary story, which gives us the opportunity to think in a more global way about the geopolitical identity of the Mediterranean. And while in the Italian journalist's work a note in the paratext explicitly stresses the truth of what is recounted in the text, in the French novelist's work the reader at least never doubts the truthfulness of the documented facts which recur in the historical background of the fictional story 'lived' and told by his character.

In both the works, the topic of war obviously acts as a catalyst for thoughts about the presence of horror in human existence – as Énard asserts, “history is a tale of fierce animals, a book with wolves on every page” (Énard, 2010, 399) – and eventually raises moral questions concerning both individuals and community. However, both authors have chosen an approach which allows them to consider shocking questions without being moralistic: in this way, the matter retains its complexity.<sup>5</sup> For example, several episodes in *Zone* remind us how easily the roles of victims and executioners are reversed in history (see Énard, 2010, 159).

## Distance

In *La Guerra in casa*,<sup>6</sup> the author sets out precisely in the first few pages his intention to create a dual perspective within the work:

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4 With the concept of *Speichergedächtnis* Aleida Assmann defines the “memory of memories”, the object of historical science (Assmann, 1999, 134).

5 The complexity of history is anyway better safeguarded in Rastello's work. In Énard's novels (not just in *Zone*) some clichés do crop up.

6 An Italian critic wrote about *La guerra in casa*: “[...] un récit sage d'intelligence exceptionnelle et de rigueur morale” (Fofi, 2015).

We are not talking simply of war, but of this war and ourselves, of the often disastrous encounter between those who are involved and those who observe, of the looks that are exchanged between the two. Usually with the best of intentions. The couple on which the account centres represents the *here-there* relationship, with particular emphasis on the *here* (Rastello, 1998, VII).<sup>7</sup>

The text brings together several people's accounts, put in writing by Rastello himself: such a strategy therefore creates a dialogue between eyewitnesses, who told him their war memories or experiences with war refugees, and Rastello himself, the writer-scribe. It contains the accounts of some who found themselves at the heart of the atrocious events that occurred during the Yugoslavian war, and who try to reconstruct the labyrinth of their experience by telling their stories. But it also contains the stories of others who explain the daily hardship of coexisting alongside the war refugees whom they took in. At the end, the author adds a section that is more information-based: a rather dry record of this war. (We could say that these pages were probably written in order to *study* history, while the other parts of the book were written in order to *listen* to it.) Using this multiple perspective as a device, Rastello gives us an idea of the complex relationship between two worlds separated by conflict: one *there* and one *here* (represented in this instance by some Italians who helped refugees). On the one hand, painful memories, the difficulty of breaking the silence; on the other, the sense of guilt, the lack of information needed to understand everything. In addition, the continuity of certain clichés. What emerges from these accounts is that, through the effort involved in a dialogue between those who took part in the events and those who were simply observers, a sense of distance remains, because war re-configures the map in a complex way, both literally and metaphorically.

Instead of a culture in which (however exaggeratedly) dialogue is an instrument for promoting understanding between cultures, a work like this by Rastello makes the reader aware that war creates such divisions between those who have experienced it and those who only observed it from a distance, that (even in dialogue) there will still be things that cannot be overcome. This question is one that Ricœur also addresses well when he writes: "But the difficulty in hearing the testimony of survivors of the concentration camps constitutes perhaps the most disturbing calling into question of the reassuring cohesion of an alleged common meaningful world."<sup>8</sup>

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7 Here the original Italian version: "Non si parla dunque della guerra, ma di quella guerra e noi, dell'incontro, quasi sempre fallimentare, fra chi è coinvolto e chi osserva, degli sguardi che da questa sponda si sono gettati sull'altra. Quasi sempre con le migliori intenzioni. La coppia su cui il racconto si articola è la coppia *qui-li*, con attenzione privilegiata al *qui*" (Rastello, 1998, VII).

8 Ricœur, 2004, 532, note 24 to p. 166.

Furthermore, Rastello makes us aware that the reasons why someone chooses to support one side rather than the other in wartime are not always clear, even to that person himself. Our determination to master how we see things is often fragile. As he explains in the final pages of his text: “[...] you find yourself in a war zone thinking that you can bring a point of view, defend a role or represent a culture; but it is very probably the war that will give you whatever role it has decided upon for you” (Rastello, 1998, 260).<sup>9</sup>

## Proximity

Whilst Rastello’s work *La Guerra in casa* shows that memories of war tend to increase the feeling of distance between *here* and *there*, Énard’s novel underlines another aspect, namely that every war returns in the form of other wars. Firstly, it must be said that in the case of *Zone* the perspective adopted is not a multiple one, but rather a single wide-angle view, because its vision of the world and of history always remains that of the protagonist and narrator. Confronting different geographical and political landscapes through historical knowledge and individual memories of war (and even predominantly through the Balkan war of the 1990s) Énard tends to put forward analogies – including the dynamics of silence – as evidence. Rather than concentrating on multiple voices, on “polyphony”, to enhance the various perspectives one could have of a place or a particular cultural context, he increases the significance of a given place by using a viewpoint which projects it onto the screen of history (and of myth) in order to remember other places marked by a similar fate. In *Zone*, a succession of parallels is drawn between situations that are distant in both place and time. To move around becomes “a journey in time” (Énard, 2010, 9), *un voyage dans le temps*. And the image – with its multiple signifiers – of a network of crossing routes, which is ostentatiously used within the text, becomes a clear metaphor for history. This refers to what Westphal (2007, 25) noted concerning a transformation in the contemporary imagery used to represent history and, specifically, the fact that with the crisis in the idea of history as progress, linear imagery has been replaced by the idea of a network, a map, a root system, etc.

In figurative terms, the railway network also has a structural value in this novel, at a discursive level.<sup>10</sup> Within the plot (the train journey over the course of one night),

9 Here the original Italian version “[...] cadi in un luogo di guerra pensando di portare un punto di vista, difendere un ruolo, rappresentare una cultura; molto probabilmente, invece, è la guerra che ti assegna il ruolo che ha deciso per te” (Rastello, 1998, 260).

10 This involves an account which has both characteristics of a long (railway) track, through its extraordinary syntactic continuity and cohesion (there are almost no pauses or blank spaces), and elements of a network because of its frequent digressions. As one meta-narrative passage underlines: “so many images linked by an interrupted thread that snakes like a railroad bypassing a city, the

there are constant digressions, telling us of other journeys, encounters, memories of childhood, memories of books read, but also the encyclopaedic historical knowledge that the protagonist of *Zone* possesses (or rather, the knowledge that the author gives him).

The particular and admirable feature of this writing is exactly the fact that the *here* and the *there*, the historical and the fictional dimensions, the present and the past, are all brought into the present and put into the same time frame in order to create almost an effect of simultaneity and of depth.<sup>11</sup> For example, “I am in Venice” (Énard, 2010, 12) says the narrator in the present tense, but in order to speak of a fairly recent past re-lived in the train carriage near Milan.

Coincidences (and paradoxes) in this novel relate not only to collective history but also to individual fates. And this is especially noticeable in the story of the protagonist. In what is presented as the biography of Francis Servain Mirković, a soldier in Croatia during the war in 1991, there are elements of his father’s life, in particular his silence about his actions during the Algerian war.

Like other contemporary writers, Énard sometimes creates characters who are involved in evil.<sup>12</sup> Yet in an interview, he explains that it is not the individual psychology of violence that interests him, but rather the construction of collective wartime violence and the way in which it breaks all the codes we know.<sup>13</sup> The son of French father and a Croatian mother – as the author imagines him to be – Francis Servain Mirković tries with a radical gesture to shed his past as a volunteer soldier in Croatia and later a spy near an anonymous research centre. His attempt is symbolised by the task of getting rid of a case full of research documents by delivering them to some residents of Vatican City.

The character’s account, delivered in a stream of consciousness, moves through a mass of historical facts regarding deaths and atrocities; these come back to him by association with the places through which he travels during his journey from Milan to Rome.

For example, near Reggio Emilia the protagonist remarks:

on the opposite track, a train is passing, a freight train, headed for Modena, loaded with tanks of milk – there was probably no need for a train for the ten Jews rounded up in Reggio at the end of 1943. They must have transported them

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possible connection between trains in a station [...]” (Énard 2010, 50).

11 In our opinion, it does not occur in those Énard’s novels, which were published after *Zone*.

12 This phenomenon is well regarded by critics. In Italy, for example, Palumbo Mosca (2014) devotes a whole chapter specifically to the figure of the sniper.

13 Interview with Mazza Galanti (2017).

by truck, right nearby, twenty kilometres away to the Fossoli camp antechamber of Poland [...] Fossoli, then Bolzano and finally Birkenau [...] Birkenau, where all the tracks join, from Thessalonica to Marseille, including Milan, Reggio and Rome, before going up in smoke [...] (Énard, 2010, 174–175).

In remembering past and present conflicts in the Mediterranean region, Francis Servain Mirković, having become an experienced observer, questions himself about history without being able to understand its meaning. In the same way, he is unable to explain the reasons for his own decisions (Énard, 2010, 25). For example, with regard to his participation in the Yugoslavian conflict, he tries to justify it as a result of indoctrination by his mother. However, his observations more often involve situations, destiny or archetypal explanations, like the sins visited by fathers upon their sons (Énard, 2010, 367), as opposed to deliberate actions. The fact that modern civilisation has everything under control, as suggested in the text by the railway timetable, changes nothing:<sup>14</sup> human history is configured as the repetition of evil. The precise nature of a world made up of a comprehensive list of events coexists with an inability to explain what is happening.

## History as downfall

Alongside the numerous historical events marked by crimes, many other elements of the text, such as place names (Boulevard Mortier), books that the protagonist claims to have read (such as *Drifting Cities*), the atmosphere of places visited, and so on, fall into the semantic category of death and oblivion and, eventually, the notion of history as downfall. Even the novel's strongest link, with *The Iliad*, leads us to a text that is an archetypal discourse on war, death and destruction, although *The Iliad* is also full of very different meanings.<sup>15</sup>

Énard also seems to make reference to the famous essay by Benjamin, and to his “angel of history”, at the moment where his character explains to us: “I turn round once more in my seat [...] going backwards, I’m going backwards my back to my destination and to the meaning of history which is facing forward [...]” (Énard, 2010, 127). In his long monologue, Francis Mirković sees history essentially as a heap of ruins,<sup>16</sup> but unlike Benjamin, who still defends the idea that history could possibly regenerate, he excludes this notion. The writer of the novel perhaps sees it differently, apparently

14 “[...] *wir hatten die Gelegenheit*, you see this book is wonderful, it allows you to know what we could have done, what we could do in a few minutes, in the next few hours, even more [...]” (Énard, 2010, 51).

15 Courtier (2017) rightly pointed out that the writing of *Zone* simultaneously retrieves and reverses its hypotext.

16 Benjamin, 1980, 697.

giving history a chance with the rather enigmatic conclusion of his plot, which does not exclude the possibility of a new beginning.

Landscapes, as seen through the eyes of the protagonist, seem to the reader like archives of evil.<sup>17</sup> In his account, Francis Servain Mirković insists on highlighting the fact that traces of conflict, etched in urban and natural environments, always undergo a transformation, whether this process uncovers a willingness to exalt a particular kind of past or shows a willingness to erase the past. In one passage; for example, the protagonist and narrator remembers a journey in Croatia a few years after he had fought there, and notes:

I didn't recognize anything, none of my battlefields [...] the suburbs were dotted with wrecked or razed houses, abandoned, burned, bombed factories [...] I saw the cemetery a few kilometres away from Vukovar, what was left of the sun went away quickly and I stopped, a big flat field, a parking lot roomy enough for thirty tour buses, flags, a monolithic monument, it didn't take long time for memory to settle here I thought, the nation had reasserted its rights to its martyrs [...] (Énard, 2010, 171, 172).

Elsewhere, Francis Mirković confronts other ways in which the memory of places can be affected. He is a keen observer by profession, and from Tangiers to Barcelona, Vukovar, Thessaloniki and Istanbul, the way in which a community relates to the past never escapes him. Urban landscapes are sometimes scattered with statues glorifying national heroes, sometimes converted for other uses, as before, through transformations which could be aimed at erasing certain traces of history, more for economic than for expressly political reasons. This is the case in areas which were marked by atrocities and are now transformed into public spaces or tourist areas. In the Catalan capital, for example:

[...] at the scene of the carnage with the 2,000 corpses the Barcelona town hall built its Forum of Cultures, Forum for Peace and Multiculturalism, on the very spot of the Francoist butchery they raised a monument to leisure and modernity, to the *fiesta*, a giant real estate operation supposed to bring in millions in indirect revenue, tourism, concessions stands, parking lots, and once again to bury the poor conquered ones of 1939 [...] (Énard, 2010, 234, 235).

The fact that memories are not neutral comes across particularly strongly in the episode where the protagonist remembers tensions that erupted between France and Turkey, at the time when France had recognised the existence of the Armenian massacre and, reacting to that, Turkey reminded French politicians of the thousands who were

17 Among several studies on the topic of landscape as an archive of historical memory, see the recent one by Giancotti (2017), which also examines this novel by Énard.

killed in Algeria. Our character remarks: “the massacres of others are always less awkward, memory is always selective and history always official [...]” (Énard, 2010, 201).

## War and writers

Rediscovering the history of evil, its shadow, across geographical areas (and specifically the Mediterranean) is one of the aspects alluded to by the multi-semantic image of a night-time journey, as suggested by Énard. Seen from this perspective, places lose their identity as defined by the criteria of national culture and instead appear to belong to a much bigger area, with a closely shared history running through it.

Of course, the image of travelling at night also opens up yet more meanings, among them a metanarrative one: writing as a process of elaboration of what has been experienced, known, glimpsed or imagined. Indeed, this is something we should consider before concluding. Why do writers write? This question crops up several times in *Zone*, particularly when the narrator remembers writers who, like Cervantes, knew about war from personal experience (see Énard 2010, 131, 445).

Do writers write “terrifying stories” in order to tell of what they have seen and glimpsed as “observers of the dark side” of history? Or rather, do they write to offload the part of themselves that could have been involved in the evil? The novel raises some questions without, of course, seeking to exhaust all possible answers. In any case Énard, making a subtle analogy between writers and his protagonist – this one often defines himself as a spy or as an archaeologist, his activities having the aim of pulling things out of the shadows – allows us metaphorically to rediscover the writer’s multi-faceted role regarding cultural memory.

Translated by Lucy Schonberger.

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## **Zgodovinski spomin in identiteta prostorov: pristopi k vojni v delih Énarada in Rastella**

**Ključne besede:** literatura, Mathias Énard, Luca Rastello, vojna, spomin, zgodovina, identiteta geografskih prostorov

Članek govori o konfiguraciji spomina na vojno v nekdanji Jugoslaviji v devetdesetih letih in se pri tem osredotoča na roman *Zone* (2008) Mathiasa Énarada ter na zbirko dokumentarne proze *La guerra in casa* (1998) Luca Rastella. Cilj pričujočega članka je pokazati, da spomin na nasilne dogodke v obeh delih, čeprav na različni način, sproža nov pristop k identiteti prostorov. Medtem ko se v zbirki besedil *La guerra in casa* geografske lokacije ponovno razdelijo, in sicer na kategoriji »tukaj« in »tam« (na prostore, kjer so ljudje preživljali nasilnost vojne, ter na tiste, od koder so jo opazovali od daleč), v Énardovem romanu prostori dobijo bolj tekočo identiteto: zaradi skupne usode so prikazani kot prepleteni, ob tem pa je tudi zgodovina predstavljena kot mreža, na kateri se preteklost in sedanjost ter realna dejstva in mitologija pogosto prepletajo in celo prekrivajo.

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In this article we will examine the form taken by memories of the war in Yugoslavia during the 1990s in the novel *Zone* (2008) by Mathias Énard and in the collection of documentary prose *La guerra in casa* (1998) by Luca Rastello. Our aim is to show that in both works, albeit in different ways, the memory of violent historical events opens up a new approach to the identity of places according to which the identity of this place is not imaginable except in relational terms. Whilst in eyewitness accounts from the collection *La guerra in casa*, places and geographical areas are redefined only in the categories of “within” and “outside”, of “over there” and “over here” (places where people had direct experience of war and violence and those where people remained at that time outside it), in Énard’s novel they have a more fluid identity. The “here” and the “there” tend to be more entwined because of their shared fate; at the same time also history is represented as a network: individual and collective experiences, the past and the present, the historical and the mythical dimensions often intersect.