

# From a Violent Past towards a Global Ethics? Twentieth Century Atrocities in Select Novels of the Twenty-First Century

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*The relationship between ethics and literature has always been a contested one. I firstly discuss this relationship, arguing that literature is not ethical per se, which is the reason why it can serve ethical purposes. Secondly, I state, in line with Martha Nussbaum, why any ethical thinking today has to refer to global ethics. Drawing from this, I present three recent novels, all of which deal with fundamental twentieth century atrocities: Burnt Shadows by Kamila Shamsie, The French Art of War by Alexis Jenni and The Walnut Mansion by Miljenko Jergović. They pose philosophical and ethical questions about war, violence and the great ruptures of civilisation. They are a component of world literature in the sense that the plot, and the ethical reflection triggered by this, is not related to a single nation state, but to the global situation. The authors make use of a historical profile encompassing a period of 60 to 100 years of narrated time. In this way, they can make a connection between personal and historical-political development visible. But this connection is less enconced in the material history of the facts than in an ideology and "culture" that is responsible for the permanence of war and violent conflicts. The involvement of the characters in conflicts proves to be more than just a matter of character and of personal attitudes; it is also the result of social constellations. The personal and the political are never separated, which in no way releases the individuals from their responsibilities.*

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## **Ethics versus aesthetics? [“... and more isn't necessary”]**

In his commemorative speech at the opening of the Salzburg Festival 2016, the philosopher Konrad Liessman put forward, with reference to Hölderlin's poem *To The Fates*, the thesis that art, and in particular literature, does not have to be explicitly political in order to have a political effect. With this statement, he posed a series of rhetorical questions:

Shouldn't art itself despair in light of this state of the world, and if not fall silent, at least raise its voice in a political sense, shouldn't it intervene, at least draw attention to, transcend itself to point to those unbearable situations, shouldn't it take rousing action instead of worshipping beauty? (Liessmann)

The answer to this is that art, simply due to its existence, is already a critique of the world – “and more isn't necessary” – as the motto and the title of his speech, with an allusion to Hölderlin's poem, state:

In this rejection of the world, in this focus on art itself, there is a critique that does not intervene in an actionistic way, does not even name grievances, but instead retreats into a completely different sphere in which only one thing counts: the successful work of art [...]. And because of this, has art not always been, in a dual sense, a criticism and an objection to reality due to its sheer existence? Due to it insisting on this principle of creating from freedom, and due to it wanting to give credit to the criteria for success only to its own aspirations – to no other earthly, but also to no godly power. (Liessmann)

Anyone who dared to object to this position would quickly be accused of neglecting the aesthetic dimension of art in favour of a dull moralistic or political “message.” And yet, Liessmann's statement is only half the truth. For it is not even about racking one's brains over what art should or must do. It is quite simply about determining what art *does*, and what this means; what questions or problems arise therefrom. And indeed, there are a great many authors that do not stop at Hölderlin's “and more isn't necessary,” but who instead write contemporarily or historically critical texts, whose works do not exclude ethical and political topics, but explicitly address them. And that is precisely why there is this controversy that Liessman hints at.

Art and politics, ethics and aesthetics – to what extent these are compatible is an old dispute that is once again being revived today. For after all, it is a contradiction that is inextricably connected to the literature of modernity as autonomous art: if it is part of the essential nature of literature in modernity, the age of the *aesthetic regime* (Rancière), to

be “free,” not dependent on any economical or political power, and only subject to the laws of aesthetics, then how can it serve ethical or political goals? This contradiction has emerged in ever new forms in literary and political debates since the end of the eighteenth century – for example, as a dichotomy between *l’art pour l’art* and *littérature engagée*, as a plea for or against the “ivory tower,” but also within the encampment of political art – for example, in the *expressionism debate*, the so-called “Brecht-Lukács debate.” The opponents and proponents of the ethical and political dimensions of literature have debated at times very simply, and sometimes also with the sophistication with which Sartre’s essay *What Is Literature?* was penned, or Maurice Blanchot’s *L’Espace littéraire* or *La part du feu*, Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* or Rancière’s *Politique de la littérature*, or the arguments of the deconstructivists in Derrida’s cohort, or the moral philosophers in Martha Nussbaum’s, Wayne Booth’s or Soshana Felman’s following. As one can see, our topic – literature, ethics and politics – has a long history.

It is quite impossible to set out these debates in all their ramifications here, and I have not yet even differentiated between ethical and political questions at this point. However, it is important to me to locate my own stance on this question in the context of this great debate, and not to act as if it were possible to assume a completely new and independent position here. In essence, my line of argument will be that I simultaneously acknowledge and reject the contradiction between ethics and aesthetics; that I do not deny it, but that I refuse to side with either party; I make the assertion that here, we are dealing with a productive tension that need not necessarily be overcome once and for all in one way or another, and that we need aesthetic autonomy precisely for ethical reasons. I will summarize my position in the following contradictory statement:

- Literature is not about ethics, it is about aesthetics;
- Literature is always about ethics, precisely because it is about aesthetics;
- In our globalizing societies, literature might herald a global ethics.

Perhaps, however, it is quite useful to contemplate in which historical moments this debate about the ethical function of art flares up, and which societal problems it tries to come to terms with in this way. For obviously, this subject matter has a more explosive nature in certain moments than in others. One such important moment was the First World War. The war was also experienced as a collapse of val-

ues. What followed was a general discreditation of moral authorities and political institutions as well as of science. Literature, on the other hand, was viewed as a place where one could still meaningfully discuss ethical questions; aesthetics had remained ethically unobjectionable – and this despite the moral discreditation of many writers as well (see Mayer). After the Second World War, there was a similar discussion surrounding the 1968 movement, with a re-launching of the demand for political art. A further historical moment was, for example, the late 1980s, in particular in the eastern part of central Europe, when people saw in literature a power to aesthetically delegitimise and overcome the already shaky communist system. Today, one whole generation later, the issue has gained meaning once more, initially originating from the USA and France. Perhaps now, in view of the contradiction between the so-called *European peace project* and the bleak political reality, we are once again searching for ethical foundations, for art as the ultimately least ethically exhausted entity, that is to say for a reflective medium of reality that is not already completely corrupted by this reality?

The literary work of art as a medium of ethical reflection must not be mistaken for the problematic pedagogic stance that wishes to distil moralistic statements from literature. Instead, we must understand ethics as a meta-theory of morality – not rules of behaviour therefore, but rather practices of how one could arrive at substantiated rules (see, for example, Ricœur). With this, we have already made an important differentiation from a doctrinaire political literary criticism and similar such “engaged” literature that does not conceive of writing as a process of searching, but as something that already knows right from the start what its statement is.

Thus it can be seen that contemporary authors are increasingly assuming a cosmopolitan position when they discuss ethical political questions. It is an ethical reflection that also considers their own point of view and that takes into account the fact that considering global interconnections, the ethical discussion cannot seal itself off nationally either (see Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?*).

The main question for an ethical perspective on literature – no matter whether from the point of view of the artist or the critic – however, is the handling of the contradiction between aesthetic openness on the one hand, and an intended message or clearly interpretable statement on the other. While the moral philosophers, such as Nussbaum & Co., with all due interpretational caution, ultimately argue hermeneutically and do indeed seek to recognize an objectively distilled message from texts, the representatives of deconstruction, those whom Liesbeth

Korthals Altes describes as followers of a “*déconstructivisme de gauche*” (44), surmise the “illegibility” of texts and establish the ethos of the text as being beyond any moralistic or political message.<sup>1</sup> The question is whether these approaches succeed at finding “une voie médiane entre le relativisme épistémologique et éthique auquel semble contrainte la postmodernité, et le retour à des notions naïves du sens, du sujet et des valeurs” (ibid. 47). Paul Ricœur’s approach, which rejects several of Nussbaum’s postulates without lapsing into absolute relativism, seems to have more success with this.

L’originalité de Ricœur est [...] qu’il n’y a pas vraiment opposition entre l’esthétique et l’éthique, entre une lecture qui serait hors de l’éthique, d’une part, et un domaine pratique d’autre part, soumis à l’éthique, où il ne subsisterait rien du jeu imaginatif, esthétique. Il les voit liés dans une “tension fructueuse” (ibid. 51–52).

Ricœur assumes there is a “fruitful tension” between ethics and aesthetics that binds the two. Aesthetics is the corrective measure for all-too speedy certainties and a complacent one-dimensional worldview: “L’expérience esthétique s’avère ainsi indispensable à la disposition éthique d’un Moi qui est à la fois constant dans son ‘maintien de soi’ et précaire, conscient d’être habité par l’‘autre’” (ibid. 52).

The dialogic character of the work of art, which – as Sartre (1948) already knew – only unfolds its potential through its reception, is based on an ethics of dialogue or of “responsivity” (Mitterer) that in turn allows a self-reflection of the reading subject in the medium of aesthetics.

The dilemma of how a clear statement, a “message” is to be reconciled with the aesthetic and therefore communicative openness of the work of art, however, must continually be solved anew. After all, in doing so, multi-perspectivity and thereby interpretative ambiguity must be given the attention they deserve. Jean Bessière opines the same, when he says of a completely analogous contradiction:

De fait, ce paradoxe n’est recevable qu’à une seule condition: que l’œuvre le reconnaisse comme tel, qu’elle en fasse un moyen de la question de la valeur, et que cette reconnaissance soit, dans l’œuvre, rendue manifeste au lecteur. Grâce à ces dernières précisions, on entre, de fait, dans le jeu de la réflexivité. (5)

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<sup>1</sup> Of course Nussbaum also approximates Ricœur’s position in certain formulations. See, for example, her wording “that we grasp the practical content of a literary text adequately only when we attentively study the forms in which it is embodied and expressed; and that, in turn, we have not correctly described the literary form of, say a James novel if we have not asked what sense of life it expresses” (*Love’s Knowledge* 172).

With this, the ethical dimension is installed in the text itself, and evolves in the reception on the part of the reader. However, this means that there is no clear-cut set of values or “ethics of the text” that one could “objectively” describe, and that one cannot expect texts to teach us how “to live well” (Nussbaum) either. Thus, in concordance with Ricœur’s concept of literature as a “laboratoire,” Vincent Jouve is also of the opinion that:

La littérature se présente moins comme un catalogue de modèles à suivre que comme un laboratoire. Si la philosophie peut s’y intéresser, ce n’est pas en tant que réservoir d’un savoir éthique et moral, mais comme champ de possibles qui n’a d’autres limites que celles de l’imagination et où, en conséquence, l’expérimentation est plus libre que dans la réalité. (6)

The work in this “laboratoire” is an interplay between meeting and distance. On the one hand, it means delving into the text, allowing oneself to be seduced, it is emotional identification; but this is balanced out by the critical analysis that observes the text “from the outside.” In place of the Nussbaum-inspired “teaching us to live well,” Ricœur’s maxim could be: “plus une œuvre m’apprend à bien (me) lire, plus elle est éthique” (Korthals Altes 53). In this sense, ethics in literature means not to give answers, but to ask questions.

To sum up: when ethics and aesthetics collude, great works of art can arise. Hereby, however, aesthetics is not some sort of packaging for a previously established statement or idea, but it is the medium of an exploratory movement and an attempt to say things that cannot be said in any other way. Milan Kundera formulated this thought, with reference to Hermann Broch, in all its radicality: “The sole *raison d’être* of a novel is to discover what can *only* be discovered by a novel. A novel that *does not discover* a hitherto *unknown* segment of *existence* is immoral. Knowledge is the *novel’s only morality*.” (Kundera 6, original emphasis). The ethical reflection on the part of the readers is not forced by the text, but is instead supported by the text’s dialogic offerings. This is successful when texts are not “smooth,” but when something irritating, or even something contradictory is expressed in them, when they expose the paradox of which Bessière speaks. The aesthetic means for this can be so different and diverse that it is impossible to draw up a poetics of this artistic openness.

Which aesthetic means can be implemented in order to stimulate a global ethical discussion is what the following exploration aims to show, with the help of examples.

## **(Global) ethical reflection in the contemporary novel**

All three of the following examples are an objection to the argument arising from *l'art pour l'art*, which states that every type of art that explicitly broaches the subject of ethical or political questions is less valuable in an artistic sense. These are literarily complex works that make several central events and social developments of the last century the subject of discussion. They pose philosophical and ethical questions with direct reference to war, violence and the great collapses of civilisation in the twentieth century that continue to haunt us. Even if politics plays an important part in these works, the real questions are of an ethical nature.

However, these are texts that do not teach, but instead narrate, confront us with stories which, through what they tell and what they do not tell, discuss ethical attitudes and also demand such an attitude from us as readers. These are texts that pose questions in various ways, that is to say they question what they recount. In any case, these are not texts that “ambush” their readers and force a particular perspective onto them, but instead they demand answers and make answers possible. These are texts that do not directly, such as in the form of positive heroes and heroines as figures to identify with or by means of the explicit opinion of the narrative voice, or indirectly, in the form of clearly negative heroes and heroines, carry out moralistic evaluations. On the contrary, the “heroes” themselves are problematic, they fall short of their own aspirations, or they turn out to be powerless against that which they recognize as false. Presented with their story embedded in a complete network of relationships and experiences, which they neither perceive, let alone understand, on occasion the acting figures themselves know less about the world in which they live than the readers. But these heroes and heroines are always entangled in the social conflicts and struggles of their time, and they are, accordingly, more or less aware of this. They repeatedly have to make ethical decisions, and their success as well as their failure is what constitutes the narrative material.

All three novels are a component of *world literature* in the sense that the storyline, and in particular the ethical reflection triggered by this, is not related to a single nation state, but (to varying extents) to the global situation. The depiction of this world takes place to varying degrees in the three novels, but always dominantly, from the perspective of the individual figures, who, however, are thought of with more or less sympathy from the explicit or implicit narrative voice. But never are we sold an objectified worldview as the truth; the positions always remain

“undefended,” exposed to objection and opposition – not just to the judgement of the readers, but also to objection within the novel itself. This is a significant component of their literary ethics.

Regardless of these similarities in ethical behaviour, the selected texts differ in an elemental way even in their subject matter, and in the basic geographical and political conditions:

- A novel in which the main characters commute between various countries: it is one of those countries, that “always fight wars, but always somewhere else” (Shamsie 261) – the USA; furthermore, the country that aggressively subjugated other countries itself, but then became a victim of the nuclear bomb attacks – Japan; and the “hostile brothers” Pakistan and India, who in their rivalry do not shy away from atomic threats either;
- One novel concerns itself with a country that not only emerged as a colonial power, but also became a victim of Hitler’s aggression – France;
- Finally, one literary work takes place in a country that was formed after the First World War and was invaded by the Nazis in the Second World War, was forced to make great sacrifices and waged a war of liberation; a country which decades later, however, dissolved in a bloody civil war itself – Yugoslavia.

But the three pieces are also distinguished by means of the chosen narrative perspective and the narrative style, to put it briefly: by the respective aesthetic means. The linking of the personal with the political, which is present throughout, is accentuated very differently; the question of the responsibility of the protagonists stands out to varying degrees.

### **Kamila Shamsie: *Burnt Shadows***

In her novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009), the Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie tells the violent history of the twentieth century using the example of one of the largest ruptures of civilisation, the dropping of two atomic bombs over Japan. In her novel, the author draws a common thread between the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan, all the way to the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and the US detention camps in Guantánamo. Here, however, she is less concerned with the military

and political events than their influence on the attitudes and mentalities of the people in the respective countries.

The title plays on the fact that the heat of the atomic bomb vaporised people so quickly that their bodies remained only as shadows in the ground – a macabre symbol of the destructive power of the bomb. The content of the story: Konrad, a German pacifist, who has just fallen in love with the young Japanese woman Hiroko in Nagasaki, becomes a victim of the atomic bomb. She, on the other hand, survives and finds refuge with the German-American family of her boyfriend in Delhi. There she falls in love anew, with a Muslim Indian, and marries him. The division of India forces the couple to emigrate to Pakistan. Years go by. Her grown(-up) son Raza attracts the attention of the American secret services due to various circumstances. In the end, it is Kim, the granddaughter of Hiroko's American friend from Konrad's family, who denounces Raza to the CIA out of fear he could be a terrorist. He is seized and now faces an uncertain fate in Guantánamo.

The novel shows, not only in the course of action but also in the symbolism used, how the protagonists are inextricably involved in the geopolitical conflicts. Hiroko's back is burned during the atomic bomb attack, "three charcoal-coloured birdshaped burns on her back" (65); ever since, these parts of her body are numb and insensitive. This reminder is burnt into her, and it determines her life. The dark birds, to which an entire section of the novel is dedicated, will not let her go.

The clash of differing moral concepts and values becomes clearest in the confrontation between Hiroko and Kim; it is not so much a conflict between generations as it is between nations, for the people cannot escape from the cage of their nationally-oriented way of thinking. With this, Shamsie shows that it is not simply about individual morals, but about fundamental societal attitudes. When she accuses Kim, Hiroko accuses the whole of American society:

When Konrad first heard of the concentration camps he said you have to deny people their humanity in order to decimate them. You don't. [...] You just have to put them in a little corner of the big picture. In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that's what it was. In the big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he's guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb. (275)

Kamila Shamsie tells the story of a *global person*, from whose fate one can read global threads of connection. The novelty here is the post-colonial gaze that Shamsie directs at the US and the western world as a whole. Although her novel starts with the Second World War that originated in Germany, and initially a German man is at the forefront, Europe no longer plays any role in her narratives – the European breaches of civilisation remain only symbolically present as “burnt-out shadows.” The author is concerned with the problems of the current day from an Asia-Pacific point of view. Here, she comes to a horrifying realization, which in fact is relevant for Europe after all, namely the insight that the basic mental attitude that made the construction and dropping of the bomb possible in the first place remains in effect and makes further collapses of civilisation still possible. One example for this is offered by the following scene, in which the American Kim explains to her Japanese-Pakistani friend Hiroko why she regarded a Muslim with distrust:

Kim stood up, and walked a few steps towards Hiroko.

“If I did look at him and see the man who killed my father, isn’t that understandable? I’m not saying it’s OK, but you have to say you understand.”

“Should I look at you and see Harry Truman?”

Kim’s eyes first widened, then narrowed. Was that supposed to be a trump card? Ridiculous, and insulting. Her own family had lost one of its own in Nagasaki; Konrad’s death was the most vivid story of terror she had grown up with. (ibid. 273–274)

This is, as is the entire novel, a clear post-colonial challenge of the western, especially North American perspective. But obviously, this is not accompanied by a trite, clear division of good and evil. For Konrad, a victim of the atomic bomb attack in Nagasaki, belonged to Kim’s family, at the same time as being Hiroko’s fiancé, an insoluble entanglement. In this way, on the one hand, we are on Hiroko’s side, who embodies post-colonial criticism, but on the other hand, we can also understand Kim’s feelings, while we simultaneously distance ourselves from her when she lacks empathy for Hiroko, the victim of the bomb, and depreciates her answer as a strategic game (“trump card”). The fact that Kim is portrayed as quite likeable, and that she is also amiable towards the main protagonist Hiroko and is friends with her, makes this dilemma more complex, demanding and realistic, both aesthetically and ethically. Indeed, ethics and aesthetics do not actually have to form a contradiction.

### **Alexis Jenni: *The French Art of War***

The novel addresses a similarly long time period as *Burnt Shadows*, namely from Hitler's occupation of France until the present day in the new millennium. It also focuses on key political events, especially on the wars that France waged in this time. Here, low-threshold forms of violence such as the racist riots in the banlieues or the militaristic youth education are made a theme of discussion just as much as conflict-related violence itself.

With the very first sentence, a "tone" is set that will be characteristic for the continuing "melody" – the inseparable fusion of the political and private spheres: "Les débuts de 1991 furent marqués par les préparatifs de la guerre du Golfe et les progrès de ma totale irresponsabilité" (Jenni 9).

The decisive factor in this novel is, in fact, not the depiction of the big wartime events. That would be too banal, as the author himself reasons through one of his main characters: "Les événements posent une question que son récit ne résout pas" (52). That is why he resorts to a trick: we find out about the life story of the main character, Victorien Salagnon, who has participated in all these wars – from the Second World War, to the Vietnam War, to the colonial war in Algeria – as a soldier, but not directly from him himself. Instead, Salagnon tells his life story to a narrator (who remains unnamed), his much younger friend and art student who, in turn, imparts it to the readers. This provides us with an original structure of the work from two threads: the *Roman*, that is the life of Salagnon, told in the third person, and the *Commentaires*, in which the narrator discloses his own story, the encounter with Salagnon and his observations on the political events in the first person narrative. It is a broken, subjectivised account of the big story, in which precisely the person from whom we find everything out, our sole middleman, remains nameless and in the dark.

The novel thrives on the continuous intertwining of small and large events; the protagonists recognize the same patterns in banal everyday scenes as in the great waging of war. In this way, the novel becomes a history of mentalities and a political history in one – and this in the mirror of the reflections of a person who is not particularly likeable, a good-for-nothing and a flaneur, who precisely because of this, however, musters up enough time to engage himself in observation, listening, contemplation and in spontaneous encounters. For what Jenni commands masterfully are the reflective monologues of the narrator, which in the way in which he tells them turn everyday occurrences into dem-

onstrations of large-scale politics; likewise, the dialogues and debates that comment on many key scenes of the French war history of the twentieth century. This means that episode by episode, an overall picture of a (French) society is formed that is thoroughly permeated by a culture of war and violence, in which even children in history lessons find out not only the facts, but are, for example with the aid of Caesar's *Gallic War*, "instructed in the art of war."

I wish to go into more detail in one scene here, for, precisely in all its inconspicuousness and banality, it is perhaps the most interesting from an ethical point of view. It plays out in a *bureau de tabac*, where the narrator buys a newspaper. The newspaper seller, who is, incidentally, not reading a tabloid, but a quality newspaper ["On ne peut plus compter sur les caricatures pour se protéger des gens," as the narrator sarcastically and self-critically admits (192)], says to him, without clarifying his sentences in more detail, with reference to an anti-racist measure of the government:

"C'est avant qu'il aurait fallu agir. [...] S'il y a dix ans, quand il était encore temps, on avait frappé fort sur ceux qui bougeaient, on aurait la paix maintenant." (193)

Il n'affirmait rien de précis, je comprenais ce qu'il disait, et cette compréhension seule valait déjà l'approbation. Il le savait. Nous sommes unies par la langue, et lui jouait des pronomes sans jamais rien préciser. Il savait que je ne dirais rien, à moins d'entrer en conflit avec lui, et il m'attendait de pied ferme. [...] Il avait reconnu en moi un enfant de la I<sup>re</sup> République de Gauche, qui se refuse de dire et se refuse à voir. [...]

La pourriture coloniale revient dans les mêmes mots. "La paix pour dix ans", il l'avait dit devant moi. Ici, comme là-bas. Et ce "ils" ! Tous les Français l'emploient de connivence. Une complicité discrète unit les Français qui comprennent sans qu'on le précise ce que ce "ils" désigne. [...] Comprendre „ils“ fait être complice. (194–195)

The narrator realises immediately that a classic phrase is being quoted here, an intellectual figure that occupies an especially prominent place in the inventory of French racism. *I have given you peace for ten years*; with these words, in 1945, General Duval justified the massacre committed by the French army of the Algerian civilian population in Sétif. But although he is aware of this, the narrator does not react, does not put the newspaper seller in his place. He feels caught out, because he understands him, and this makes him helpless.

We are dealing here with a particularly interesting point, a multiply complex ethical discourse. Firstly, the reminder of the French colonial massacre is evoked, an exceptionally dissonant tone within the context

of the glorious hero's tale of the liberation of France from National Socialism in 1944/1945. Already, this is an important opposing voice against the official version that would like to present the *Grande Nation* exclusively as a victim of fascism. Secondly, here, a link is established between the colonial wars and the racist discourses of the present – a language-sensitive critique that shows that the racist patterns of thinking are still based on the old colonial we-them distinctions. And finally – and this is surely the most important point – the fact that the narrator self-critically admits his own failures, where a courageous intervention would have been called for. It is this personal level that actually makes the other two criticisms truly credible. The self-criticism is what first leads beyond the cheap, pure ideology criticism, which is indeed often articulated with a feeling of self-righteousness and arrogance. It is only this personal involvement that turns the political criticism into a scene of ethical complexity.

One dilemma, however, remains to be noted. With its detailed depiction of France's culture of violence and traditions of war, embodied by a male warrior caste, the novel still remains rooted in that against which it rebels. Salagnon is portrayed in a thoroughly complex manner as a soldier and artist simultaneously, but even he is, after all, just one version of the warrior. With this, the author puts exactly the protagonists of this warrior mentality at the forefront – other, deviating characters, especially female figures, such as Salagnon's wife Eurydice or the new (Arabic) girlfriend of the narrator, on the other hand, remain very vague and predominantly voiceless. This is where a post-colonial and feminist interpretation of the novel could pick up. The aesthetic question of how one can afford the meticulous depiction of that which one criticises without falling into the trap of suppressing everything else, everything resistant, and above all the perspective of the victims, however, must also first be clarified in such an interpretation as this.

### **Miljenko Jergović: *Dvori od oraha***

In many ways, Miljenko Jergović's *Dvori od oraha* (*The Walnut Mansion*)<sup>2</sup> offers a counterpoint to the two previous novels. Certainly, this is also a novel that tells the story of an entire century at once, from 1900 to 2000, and indeed here too, like it or not, the people are also

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike the two other books, this description is not based on the reading of the original, but on the German translation.

implicated in the greater history and politics. This is narrated using the story of a Yugoslavian family, namely chronologically back-to-front. The novel, therefore, begins in the present and moves further backwards with each chapter, from the death of the main character Regina all the way back to her birth.

But in contrast to the other two works, here the protagonists are not in the least bit concerned about passionately commentating, let alone shaping the political occurrences. The people *suffer* politics, almost like an illness, and they try to escape it, which, however, not all are able to do. This goes hand in hand with a completely different kind of character. Unlike Jenni's novel, which portrays almost only men, in Jergović's novel, the women are the real heroines. And – this is another aspect that makes this work unique – the story is told in an almost baroquely extravagant manner. The text consists of numerous small episodes that weave into one another and together form one great historical tale. They greatly soften the directness of the family story told in a backwards chronological order. But it is less of a heroic epic; from time to time, one has the impression that it is more of a picaresque novel, and usually it is a tragedy of the little people. The wars and the political events are tragic, but in fact they are presented as a farce and statement of human stupidity and malice. Jergović denies the events any pathos, including the pathos of criticism that we find with Shamsie as well as Jenni. This, too, is an important difference for the ethics of this novel.

Instead of pathos we find humour, irony, sarcasm and bitterness, satirical little scenes full of tragicomedy. The contempt for war and the culture of war is ubiquitous in Jergović's work, but is expressed perhaps nowhere as pointedly as in the scene in which a war, namely the Yugoslav War of 1992, is mentioned for the first time in the novel. There, he writes with unsurpassable sarcasm:

The following month, which was as long as the war lasted in Dubrovnik, would be the most difficult in Dijana's life, worse than the three months she spent with crazy Manda. Her son and especially her daughter rejected her and treated her like a stranger. [...]

Their relations would improve a little only on the twenty-third day of fighting. While they were in the shelter an incendiary shell hit their house and it burned to the ground, leaving nothing to serve as a remembrance of their previous life. (47)

Jergović embeds his stories in the political events that concern Yugoslavia and the entire European continent, and at times, the narration also spills over to the United States of America. But he wants

nothing less than to tell a political story of the century. In truth, it is a *story of private life* in times of war, violence and terror in the sense of Philippe Ariès. It is a story in which the pursuit of profit and vindictiveness, sexual desire, jealousy, betrayal, and the striving for a successful life are as much the driving motives as are brutal violence and human affection. Whether the heroes and heroines succeed, whether they survive or die a meaningless death – an absurd coincidence is often responsible for this. Few people are real villains, and true heroines and heroes are even scarcer. Most of the contemporaries swim along somehow in the great maelstrom of history and try, usually inadequately, to save their own skin. To this end, they are soon prepared to commit almost any turpitude. For each struggling group settles up with their supposed friends or real enemies in the most brutal way: “Men write history with knives, and women summon it with words. It was that way this time too, at the edge of every ravine, gorge, and animal dumping ground” (263). Jergović describes a war, particularly the Second World War, as a “mystical temptation of blood and slaughter” (267).

Some figures, such as Regina’s brother Luka, embody a type such as Švejk, who reject war and attempt not to become guilty themselves. They remain little-appreciated outsiders. Đovani, another of Regina’s brothers, conversely, returns to Yugoslavia out of idealism after Hitler invades France. He joins the Chetniks because he believes he can fight for freedom in this way. He does not personally participate in their murderous deeds; however, he is seen as the ringleader of a hit squad and is unceremoniously shot by the communist partisans. Regina, confronted with the news of his death, saves the family honour (and her position after the partisans’ win) by inventing a story about Đovani’s homosexuality, which he is living out in France. People are happy to believe this more exciting and attractive form of the “truth.” This is just one of the many examples of how the tragedy of the narratives unexpectedly turns into the tragicomic and the grotesque.

In this novel, there is an authorial narrator who bitterly relates the events and often gives a sarcastic commentary on them. Nonetheless, as a reader, one never feels blindsided or indoctrinated – probably precisely because he not only tells his stories in a seductively exciting manner, but because the narrator lays all his cards on the table, positions himself and therefore is open to opposition.

Nevertheless, he is also the ethical authority of this novel, who not only comments on the events, but also on the fantasies of the people and the justifications of their actions. Most of the time, however, he does not judge, but instead tells a multitude of stories and anecdotes, of ad-

ventures and embarrassments, of the most terrible violence and unlikely strokes of luck. This means that in the end, the ethical question remains with the readers – and this is a good thing. They can not only allow themselves to engage in judging the characters and their behaviour, based on their own experiences and their value system, to judge the author based on what they interpret from his novel, but they can also compare the novels with each other and decide which aesthetic strategies and which ethical assessments they find to be more convincing.

### **Comparing the three novels**

All three novels demonstrate how powerfully politics, one could almost say – world history – intervenes in the life of the individual and influences it. Nowhere is there an idyll away from the bloody battles, wars and civil wars, away from terror, military coups and takeovers by dictators. With this, the novels pose ethical questions just using the topics and plot – questions about the causes of societal violence, about the possibilities of a good life, despite all violent experiences. Again and again, the heroes and heroines themselves face ethical challenges that they often cannot withstand, they incriminate themselves and are partly responsible for the political developments that cause them to suffer. The overarching issue of all three works is very explicitly that of the causes of (societal) violence. The authors use the “*méthode roman*” to explore these causes in writing. In the prologue, Kamila Shamsie asks quite programmatically: “How did it come to this?” (Shamsie 4), while with Jenni, the question at the forefront is why the French still cannot live together peacefully today. Jergović, on the other hand, seems to be the only one whose writing originates from the idea of the immutability of human violence as a constant in social life, or to put it another way: he asks how a personal propensity to violence promotes and facilitates political violence, and vice versa.

In order to discover the causes of political violence, all three works make use of a historical profile encompassing a period of 60 to 100 years of narrated time. In this way, they can represent biographical links and make a connection between personal and historical-political development visible. But this connection is less ensconced in the material history of the facts. Rather, it is identified as an ideology or an intellectual attitude that still prevails and is considerably responsible for the permanence of war and violent conflicts, for a culture of violence. The involvement of the characters in conflicts and wars, their taking sides

or their avoidance, therefore, prove to be more than just the outlet of personal attitudes and a matter of character, but rather, they are also the result of constellations, dispositifs and discourses. The personal and the political are in this way never separated, which, however, in no way releases the individuals from their responsibilities.

The aesthetic strategies and ethical “answers” of the three works, however, are quite different. Although all three narrate a whole host of episodes and relate these very vividly, nevertheless, Shamsie and Jenni come closer to a *political thesis novel*, while Jergović’s thesis perhaps consists in rejecting all political regimes equally. Accordingly, the heroes and heroines of *Burnt Shadows* and *The French Art of War* extensively discuss world affairs, the wars and their own conduct. In *Burnt Shadows*, this leads to the recognition of the continuity of mechanisms of North American imperialism; in *The French Art of War* to the insight that the current French racism is largely a product of the colonial wars. *The Walnut Mansion*, on the other hand, is a single panorama of human atrocities that cannot be reduced to the respective political systems. Here, the political reflections are also less of an issue for the numerous characters of this novel; instead, this task is assumed by the narrator. But he debates less than he narrates. He offers an unlikely plethora of episodes “as only life itself can write them,” one might agree, that nonetheless all point in the same direction, consolidate towards the “argument” of human cruelty. If the “global ethics” of Shamsie and Jenni is the ethics of the global society, then with Jergović, it is the globality of human weakness and perfidy. Of course, all this is just my interpretation of the novels as a cultural science-oriented peace researcher, for the aesthetic openness of all three works refuses any and all definitive interpretations.

Translated to English by Lizzie Warren Wilson

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## Od nasilne preteklosti h globalni etiki? Grozodejstva dvajsetega stoletja v izbranih romanih enaindvajsetega stoletja

Ključne besede: literatura in etika / svetovna književnost / roman / 21. stoletje / estetska avtonomija / družbeni angažma / Shamsie, Kamila / Jenni, Alexis / Jergović, Miljenko

Razmerje med etiko in literaturo je že od nekdaj sporno. Prispevek najprej osvetli to razmerje in zagovarja tezo, da literatura sama ni etična, prav zato pa lahko služi etičnim namenom. V soglasju z Martho Nussbaum razloži, zakaj se mora sleherno razmišljanje o etiki danes navezovati na globalno etiko. Nato predstavi tri sodobne romane, ki se ukvarjajo z grozodejstvi. Vsi trije se dotikajo osrednjih dogodkov in socialnih premikov 20. stoletja. Zastavljajo vprašanja o vojni, nasilju in civilizacijskih prelomnicah. Ne poučujejo, temveč pripovedujejo zgodbe. Uvrščajo se v *svetovno književnost*, in sicer zato, ker se zgodbe in etična razmišljanja, ki jih te vzbujajo, ne navezujejo na posamezne nacionalne države, temveč (v različni meri) na globalno situacijo. Ne glede na te podobnosti se razlikujejo po tematikah in po zemljepisnih ter političnih scenarijih: *Burnt Shadows* (2009) Kamile Shamsie je roman, v katerem je v ospredju vprašanje atomskega orožja, bombe na Nagasaki in njenih posledic. *L'Art français de la guerre* (2011) Alexisa Jennija se ukvarja s Francijo, z deželo, ki ni bila le kolonialna sila, temveč tudi žrtev nacističnega nasilja.

Roman *Dvorci iz orehovine* (2003) Miljenka Jergovića opisuje vojne in nasilje v Jugoslaviji v 20. stoletju. Tema, ki povezuje vsa tri dela, je spraševanje po razlogih za (družbeno) nasilje. Pripovedovani čas zaobjema obdobja od 60 do 100 let. Avtorji tako naredijo vidno povezavo med osebnim in zgodovinsko-političnim razvojem. Toda ta povezava se ne skriva le v materialni zgodovini dejstev, temveč predvsem v ideologiji in »kulturi«, ki je odgovorna za trajanje vojne in nasilnih sporov. Izkaže se, da je vpletenost likov v konflikte in vojne več kot le vprašanje značaja in osebne držę; je plod družbenih konstelacij. Osebno in politično nista nikoli ločena, kar pa seveda posameznikov ne odvezuje od odgovornosti.

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