

Sonnet and Trauma

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The author of fourteen books of poetry, four collections of essays, and a volume of polemics, Miroslav Maksimović (b. 1946) has long been considered one of the most thought-provoking and innovative Serbian poets of his generation. In an unusual tour de force, in the 1970s and '80s Maksimović established himself as a minimalist who wrote about seemingly trivial details of everyday life (*Changers*, 1972; *Memoires of a Clerk*, 1983; *Sonnets about Joys and Difficulties of Life*, 1986) only to completely shift his focus in the mid-90s and—prompted by the Yugoslav wars and their devastating consequences—turn to several much larger issues: the neverending cycle of violence in the Balkans (*Sky*, 1996), the resulting feeling of confusion and resignation (*The Petrified*, 2005), and the pernicious effects of the first “transitional” years of the new millennium in Serbia (*Painting Reality*, 2012). Such an abrupt replacement of a magnifying glass with a pair of binoculars at first surprised some of Maksimović’s readers, but the depth of his insight into the nature of the “brave” postmodern world soon reassured even the toughest skeptics and made a leading Serbian literary critic wittily proclaim Maksimović “one of the most important war profiteers of Serbian letters.”¹

By both its subject matter and formal characteristics, Maksimović’s most recent book *Pain* (2016)—a perfect example of his change of focus—was immediately recognized as a unique poetic achievement of the last few decades in Serbia. As readers learn from the Appendix that details the tortuous process of the book’s evolution, *Pain* deals with a real event that took place in August 1941, when the entire Serbian population of the ethnically mixed village of Miostrah near Cazin in western Bosnia were massacred by their Muslim neighbors, the supporters of the Croatian *ustaše*. This was not an isolated incident but a part of a large genocidal campaign aimed at the complete extermination of the Serbs from the so-called Independent State of Croatia, a Nazi puppet creation which at the time also included the territory of present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina. The estimated number of the Serbian civilians killed varies, but even the most skeptical American sources

¹ Svetozar Koljević, “Sloj papira u sloju života,” in *Poezija Miroslava Maksimovića: Zbornik radova*, ed. Slavko Gordić and Ivan Negrišorac (Novi Sad, 2001), 33.

put it at 350,000,² while the more realistic ones allege as many as 690,000 victims.³ But one thing is beyond doubt: among more than 180 women and children who were slaughtered that day at the location known as Durdžić Grove were all the remaining members of Maksimović's mother Stoja Uzelac's immediate family—her six siblings, including her youngest brother, Luka, who was only two at the time, and her mother, Milka, while her father, Đuro, had already been killed at the family mill a few days before and his body dumped into the Una River. Thirteen years of age and the oldest child, Stoja was wounded in the upper arm but survived because the henchmen mistook her for dead and threw her with the rest of the victims into a pit from which she crawled the following morning and soon joined the anti-fascist partisan forces. Her physical wounds eventually healed, but the horrors she experienced haunted her for the rest of her life.

As a child and a young man, Maksimović was vaguely aware of his mother's tragedy, but it was not until after Stoja's death in 2007 that he finally pieced her story together. It is not surprising that, over the years, his mother's trauma gradually became his own, and a careful reader with some hindsight knowledge can detect a number of oblique references to the Durdžić Grove massacre scattered even throughout the works from his minimalist phase.⁴ As a matter of fact, *Pain's* introductory sonnet, "I Remember This," was written almost thirty years prior to the central section of the book, while the concluding piece, "I Remember This II," predates it by nearly a decade.⁵ In an interview, Maksimović stated that "at the subconscious level, the preparations for writing the book lasted a long time, perhaps my entire life,"⁶ but once the process of gestation was over, it was completed at an incredibly fast pace, in a cathartic outburst of creative energy: "One morning in February 2016, all of a sudden, uncalled for, there surfaced the sonnet 'At Durdžić Grove,' and right after it, I envisioned the outline of the whole book, all the titles

² See Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962–1991* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 8.

³ See Robert M. Hayden, "Mass Killings and Images of Genocide in Bosnia, 1941–5 and 1992–5," in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 491.

⁴ Maksimović himself pointed this out in an interview: "Even in the title poem of my first book [...] there's a detail that to me first looked like an accidental metaphorical slip ('he sleeps as if he were slaughtered'), but the phrase may well be a vague echo of the distant family history" (Miroslav Maksimović, "Odnos prema genocidu," in *Veliki prostor slobode* [Belgrade, 2017], 274).

⁵ See Miroslav Maksimović, "Upamtio sam to," *Okno*, no. 423 (1988): 19; also Miroslav Maksimović, "Upamtio sam to, II," in *77 soneta o životnim radostima i teškoćama* (Belgrade, 2008), 81.

⁶ Miroslav Maksimović, "Pažljivo čitajte poeziju," in *Veliki prostor slobode*, 290.

and themes of the poems from the central part of the book.⁷ Following the cue, he kept writing “a sonnet a day,” and finished the rest of *Pain* “in twelve short days.”⁸

Other than an impulse to spare his mother additional suffering, what else could prevent Maksimović from writing *Pain* much earlier? Did he need an emotional trigger, a catalyst that the belated visit to Durdžić Grove (described in the Appendix) provided in the fall of 2015? Or was he looking for the format which would enable him to approach something so morbid, so cruel, and—at the same time—so personal, and still make it aesthetically relevant?

In this regard, it may come as a surprise that Maksimović eventually turned to the sonnet form.⁹ However, the choice was quite logical because the sonnet—due to its strict requirements—offered him a perfect tool to keep the excessive horror of the subject matter at bay, preventing it from boiling over and destroying the poem from within. It is interesting that in an essay written twenty-four years before the publication of *Pain* Maksimović pointed out that “the element of poetic craftsmanship is embedded in the sonnet’s DNA like a genetic code that *protects it from self-destruction* [my emphasis].”¹⁰ But the selection of the format did not resolve all the problems because he had always considered the sonnet “a small form,” which, due to its limited scope, tends to “stay away from big topics that attract different, epically-minded forms.”¹¹ Since the massacre at Durdžić Grove not only implied the tragedy of a single family or a group of people from a particular village but also pointed to the traumatic historical experience of the entire nation, Maksimović had to find a way to combine the sonnet with one of those “epically-minded” forms capable of accommodating such a huge thematic extension.

Pain consists of only fourteen sonnets. Fourteen is the magical sonnet number: sonnets are composed of fourteen lines; the “crown of sonnets,” the ultimate product of poetic artistry, consists of fourteen thematically connected poems in which the last line of the preceding sonnet is repeated as the first line of the following sonnet; while the so-called “master sonnet” is a combination of the fourteen first lines of the fourteen constituent poems. Maksimović rather early started to experiment with the various possibilities these formal requirements offered—he inserted a

⁷ Ibid., 291.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ On the other hand, Maksimović has been experimenting with the sonnet form since the beginning of his career (he included four sonnets in his first book, *The Sleeper under a Sheet of Blotting Paper*, in 1971), although most of his sonnets written before *Pain* date from the 1980s and the early 2000s.

¹⁰ Miroslav Maksimović, “Sonet,” in *Skriveni posao* (Kraljevo, 2014), 90; the essay was first published in *Književne novine*, no. 838 (1992): 18.

¹¹ Ibid., 91.

block of fourteen loosely related sonnets in his third book of poetry *Poems* (1978),¹² and later turned *The Petrified* into a unique crown of sonnets in which the master sonnet is in fact a famous poem by another Serbian poet, Stevan Raičković,¹³ that Maksimović sampled for his own poetic purposes. But in *Pain* he did something even more radical. Due to its strong thematic unity, *Pain* may formally resemble the traditional crown of sonnets, but it also shows many idiosyncratic features. This is probably why Maksimović rejected some of the early critical descriptions of *Pain* as “a crown of sonnets without the acrostic or the master sonnet”¹⁴ and instead called it “a narrative poem composed of sonnets.”¹⁵ A careful examination of the book’s fourteen sonnets indeed reveals the presence of certain characteristics that literary theorists consider typical of narrative poems, including “a lyrical overture” (“I Remember This”), “an unexpected exposition which directly introduces a particular dramatic scene” (“At Duržić Grove”), “a focus on certain dramatic situations which define the climactic moments of the plot” (“Children’s World,” “The Pit,” “Pain,” and “1942”), “an abundance of dramatic monologues” (“I Remember This,” “The Knife,” and “I Remember This II”), and the “discontinuation and inconclusiveness of narration” (despite the strong thematic cohesion of the book, each sonnet in *Pain* still represents an independent poetic unit).¹⁶

What made Maksimović modify his already truncated version of the crown of sonnets and combine it with elements characteristic of an entirely different poetic genre? Writing about the youthful sonnets and the mature narrative poems of Skender Kulenović, Maksimović’s good friend and fellow poet Rajko Petrov Nogo stated that, unlike the sonnets, Kulenović’s narrative war poems enabled their author “to fuse his own destiny with the destiny of his people, to discover and recognize his own voice in the heart of historical sufferings and hopes.”¹⁷ That is exactly what Maksimović accomplished by overlaying his sonnets with the elements typical of narrative poems—in order to intertwine the details of his family tragedy with the motifs of his people’s collective suffering, he created a hybrid genre that follows the compositional principles of the lyrical narrative poem while continuing to adhere to some of the strict formal requirements of the sonnet.

Thus, one should first consider the way *Pain* is put together. The fourteen constituent sonnets obviously do not offer a fully compact block because the two

¹² All other poems from this book are in free verse.

¹³ “The Stone Lullaby” (Kamena uspavanka).

¹⁴ Miroslav Maksimović, “Isprekidana linija užasa,” in *Veliki prostor slobode*, 271.

¹⁵ Miroslav Maksimović, “Pažljivo čitajte poeziju,” 292.

¹⁶ Viktor Maksimovich Zhirmunskii, *Bajron i Pushkin: Iz istorii romanticheskoj poëmy* (Leningrad, 1924), 21.

¹⁷ Rajko Petrov Nogo, *Soneti i poeme Skendera Kulenovića* (Banja Luka, 2010), 15.

that were written earlier (“I Remember This” and “I Remember This II”) provide a framework that brackets the twelve poems dating from February 2016. The differences between the “frame” and the “core” emerge at multiple levels. There are metrical variations—while the first and the last sonnet feature relatively long fourteen- and twelve-syllable lines respectively,¹⁸ the remaining ones consistently employ somewhat shorter endecasylabic lines. Point of view and subject matter differ as well: in the “frame,” point of view is fixed to the speaker who recounts two painful memories of his own (one distant, one recent), only obliquely referring to the massacre at Durdžić Grove, while in the “core”—which directly focuses on the horrors that Stoja Uzelac experienced—it constantly shifts from an unidentified observer to the murderer to the victim(s), from third to first person, even with occasional switches from singular to plural. Finally, the events from the “frame” take place in Serbia—the introductory sonnet is set somewhere “in the Bačka lowland,”¹⁹ and the concluding one in “the basement of a clinic’s tower,” i.e., a hospital in Belgrade²⁰—while the events from the “core” sonnets happen at various locations (Durdžić Grove, the family house in Miostrah, the pit, the nearby mountain Grmeč), all of them in Bosnia.

The twelve “core” sonnets are further subdivided into distinctive thematic units. The first deals with the end of Stoja Uzelac’s “first life” (“At Durdžić Grove”); the second one discusses the deadly weapons used in the massacre (“The Axe” and “The Knife”); the third describes the parts of a mutilated human body (“The Head,” “The Hand,” and “The Leg”); the fourth introduces the victims (“Children’s World,” “Father,” and “Mother”); the fifth elaborates on life in the pit and the trauma it caused (“The Pit” and “Pain”); and the sixth announces the beginning of Stoja Uzelac’s “second life” (“1942”). The subdivision reveals an interesting compositional pattern: 1 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 1. Due to the absence of any pronounced thematic complements, “At Durdžić Grove” and “1942” stand apart, assuming a privileged status akin to “I Remember This” and “I Remember This II” insofar as they also provide the introduction and conclusion to the rest of the sonnets from the central section. In this way a second, inner “frame” is established, inscribed within the first, thereby suggesting the concept of concentric circles. The same concept is emphasized by the symmetrical arrangement of the remaining poems encompassed by the inner frame (2 + 3 + 3 + 2) and the possible symbolic implications of the number 12 that—among other things—may point to a closed circle (the representation of a cyclical phenomenon that, like the twelve months of the solar year, repeats itself ad

¹⁸ There is only one thirteen syllable line in the first sonnet.

¹⁹ Bačka is a region in northwestern Serbia, where Maksimović was born.

²⁰ Stoja Uzelac died in the Military Hospital in Belgrade. The location of the hospital is suggested by the oblique reference to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 (“following a brief peace, Tomahawks fetch old fears”).

infinitum), or the apostolic number that indicates the equally cyclical phenomena of human suffering and hopes for resurrection.

This unusual compositional pattern clearly reflects the continuous multiplication of the key traumatic experience: the traumatic experience from the speaker's childhood and adulthood in Serbia at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century ("I Remember This" and "I Remember This II"); the traumatic experience from his mother's childhood and adulthood, first in Bosnia then in Serbia, from the middle and the end of the twentieth century (the twelve "core" sonnets and "I Remember This II"); the traumatic experience from the more distant national past, reflected in the severed head of Karađorđe (Black George) Petrović, the leader of the First Serbian Uprising against the Turks in 1804 ("The Head"); and the traumatic experience from Serbian epic poetry, exemplified in the images of "an arm hacked off" ("At Durdžić Grove") and a "tiny hacked off hand" ("The Hand") that directly reference the well-known folk ballad in which a raven drops the arm of one of the nine Jugović boys, all killed in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, into their mother's lap.²¹ All these examples of personal and collective trauma create a compelling sense of doom that oppresses one generation after another—originating from the murky depths of the mythical-historical past, the horrors are endlessly replicated, affecting everyone, everywhere, at all times.

The motif of repetition emerges in individual poems as well. In the opening sonnet, "I Remember This," it is emphasized by the poem's somewhat unorthodox structure: even though the sonnet is graphically divided into two quatrains and two tercets, which—together with the "enclosed" rhyme—suggests a typical Petrarchan format,²² the distribution of the rhymes (abba, cddc, effe, gg) points at the presence of three quatrains and a concluding couplet, a division more representative of the Shakespearean sonnet. The English model is further suggested by the number of rhymes (7) and the manner in which Maksimović gradually develops the central argument in four consecutive "rhetorical" steps, withholding deliverance of the main idea until the very end: the first quatrain describes how "a knife slit a young pig's throat"; the second one invokes "the depths of the Una Pit"; the following four lines with enclosed rhyme introduce the "cutthroat" and his terrifying, non-emotional approach to killing ("quickly he worked, effortlessly his arm rose and fell"); while the remaining couplet emphatically states two main points not only of this particular sonnet but of the book as a whole—the enormous scope of the crime and its cyclical nature:

²¹ Vuk St. Karadžić, ed., "Smrt Majke Jugovića," in his *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. 2 (Belgrade, 1969), 220–22.

²² A typical English quatrain usually facilitates the so-called "alternate" rhyme (abab).

As he remarked, “I killed some eight hundred and never miss,” he rose and said, “Well, until next time.” I remember this.

In the sonnets that follow, the idea of multiplication is emphasized further through three formal elements: the repetition of important motifs and phrases, a rhyme scheme somewhat uncharacteristic of traditional sonnets, and the peculiar metrical organization of individual lines.²³ In the first sonnet of this section, “At Durdžić Grove,” the title phrase is varied four times, twice in the first line of the octave (“Onwards to Durdžić Grove, up to Durdžić Grove”) and twice in the first line of the sestet (“There at Durdžić Grove, the grove echoes each blow”), i.e., in two preeminent positions in the poem. This is not mere coincidence: two other important phrases—“like cattle” and “a girl’s [...] waist”—also appear in both the octave and the sestet.²⁴ The repetition of the key terms continues in the sonnets from other thematic groups, especially the ones that deal with the parts of a mutilated human body. The phrases “an arm hacked off,” “a head was cloven,” and “a leg [...] hacked off” from the sonnet “At Durdžić Grove” resurface slightly altered as “tiny hacked off hand” (“The Hand”), “the hacked off and hewn head” (“The Head”), and “the leg [...] hacked away” (“The Leg”). Other repetitions occur in the sonnets that deal with the instruments of the crime—“The axe, the axe at hand” in the first line of “The Axe” and “I’m a knife, I’m a knife” in the first line of “The Knife.” “The Knife” includes yet another repeated phrase related to killing: “I barge into their hut, I barge in their hall.”

Maksimović achieves similar repetitive effects by exploiting rhyme. Not a single quatrain from the central twelve sonnets utilizes either Italian enclosed rhyme (abba) or English alternate rhyme (abab), two typical and traditional combinations—instead, they idiosyncratically rhyme in couplets (aabb, ccdd). As for the tercets, each uses one rhyme only (aaa, bbb, ddd, eee, fff, in various combinations). The double-rhymed couplets in the quatrains further emphasize the idea of duplication, while the single-rhymed tercets create the hypnotic, hallucinatory effect of a distant, ritualistic beat that generates a feeling of uneasiness and apprehension as their muffled sound and the gradual deceleration of pace subtly announce the coming of “endless silence” and usher the reader into the nightmarish, ghostly realm lit by “a crescent blade of the waxing moon’s glow” (“At Durdžić Grove”).

Finally, a similar repetitive effect is created through the metrical organization of individual lines. The “core” sonnets feature endecasylabic lines with a movable

²³ The current English translation faithfully reflects all the listed features of the Serbian original.

²⁴ A few more examples of similar repetitions can be detected in the Serbian original, but it was not possible to always reproduce them in translation. Thus, the noun *raja* is repeated twice in the original in combination with several different variations of the same or similar words (*doterana* / *doterane*, *isečena* / *presečen*).

caesura that first seem to hint at rhythmical irregularity suggesting the brutal, “raw” quality of the subject matter and matching the cacophonous nature of some phrases (the harsh sound of the toponym “Durdžić Grove,” for example). A closer look, however, reveals something quite different—despite outward irregularities, individual lines follow a regulated, orderly pattern that largely replicates the system established by the rhyme scheme. In the sonnet “At Durdžić Grove,” the movable caesura splits the lines into two unequal sections of six and five syllables each, the distribution of which, however, is perfectly regular. The lines in the first quatrain are structured as follows: 6-5, 5-6, 6-5, 5-6; the second quatrain offers a variation: 6-5, 6-5, 6-5, 6-5; the first tercet uses the reversed order: 5-6, 5-6, 5-6; and the second tercet reflects the second quatrain: 6-5, 6-5, 6-5. Another two sonnets (“The Axe” and “The Leg”) follow the exact same pattern regarding the position of the caesura; all the quatrains in the remaining nine sonnets (with the only exception of “Pain” and “1942”) reflect similar models, with minor variations only in the tercets. Finally, even though “Pain” and “1942” differ somewhat from the previously established scheme, they still feature an emphatically regular metrical pattern.²⁵ In this way, all the main formal characteristics of the twelve “core” sonnets directly support the idea of the multiplication of pain as the central point of the book.



Using his mother’s tragedy as a paradigm for a collective trauma, Maksimović created a work that contributes significantly to the Serbian culture of remembrance. But *Pain* oversteps the relatively narrow boundaries of memorial literature as soon as it outlines them. Maksimović’s choice of the sonnet as the vehicle for conveying the horrors of war, his insistence on the full alignment of “form” and “content” at each compositional and structural level, and his decision to eventually introduce himself as the person “who writes all this” in one of the concluding poems (“1942”) give the book an unexpected thematic twist. This new, metapoetic possibility of interpretation is further suggested through the inclusion of the Appendix, which juxtaposes the poetic interpretation of the massacre with the factual, historical account of that event. Explaining the complicated relationship between poetry and history, Maksimović points out that it is irrelevant “whether the world is mirrored in a poem”—what matters is “whether the poem can create a world.”²⁶ Consequently, he insisted that the historical facts utilized in *Pain* must go beyond their own

²⁵ The metrical pattern of the lines in “Pain” is as follows: 6-5, 6-5, 6-5, 6-5 (both quatrains); 5-6, 5-6, 5-6 (both tercets). In this regard, “1942” is somewhat different: 6-5, 5-6, 5-6, 6-5 (first quatrain); 6-5, 6-5, 6-5, 6-5 (second quatrain); 5-6, 5-6, 5-6 (first tercet); 6-5, 6-5, 6-5 (second tercet). The patterns clearly separate these two “metaphysical” sonnets from those that directly reference the physical horrors of the massacre.

²⁶ Miroslav Maksimović, “Sudbina poezije,” in *Veliki prostor slobode*, 278.

facticity and “begin to hover above the reality of life,”²⁷ gravitating toward the central image of the “lithè girl’s graceful waist” that “like a dancer swayed” above the deadly pit in western Bosnia (“At Durdžić Grove”). Transcending the reality of the terrifying historical background and dancing above it, that aethereal shadow epitomizes Maksimović’s belief that “turned into poetry, suffering we experience in life gives meaning to both life and suffering.”²⁸ That is why *Pain* stands as a work that, despite all the horrors it depicts, celebrates the triumph of creative human effort over senseless destruction—the triumph of poetry over historical evil.

²⁷ Miroslav Maksimović, “Pažljivo čitajte poeziju,” 292.

²⁸ Miroslav Maksimović, “Pesnički vez,” in *Veliki prostor slobode*, 151.