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The Representation of “Home” – The Novels of Vladimir Tasic

Abstract

Vladimir Tasic is a professor of mathematics at the University of New Brunswick, as well as the author of several works of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. He writes in Serbian and English and publishes his work in Serbia and Canada. This article deals with his novels that were written in Serbian and translated into French and partially into English. The article tackles the theme of home in three of Tasic’s novels *Oproštajni dar* (Farewell Gift), *Kiša i hartija* (Rain and Paper) and *Stakleni zid* (Glass Wall). The concept of home is discussed in the broader context of the Western literary tradition as well as its implications in the discourse of migrant writers like Salmon Rushdie, Homi Bhabha and V. S. Naipaul, along with the earlier manifestations of home in the writings of an older generation of exiled authors such as György Lukács, Ihab Hassan and Walter Benjamin. In his narrative world, Tasic establishes a perpetual dialogue between concepts of “home” on different levels of their fictional representation.

Résumé

Vladimir Tasic est professeur de mathématiques à l’Université du Nouveau Brunswick et auteur de plusieurs livres de fiction et de poésie. Il écrit en serbe et anglais et publie ses livres en Serbie et au Canada. Ce texte traite de ses romans écrits en serbe et traduits en français, en allemand et partiellement en anglais. Le texte est centré sur le thème de la « maison » dans trois romans de Tasić : *Cadeau d’ adieu*, *Pluie et papier* et *Le Mur de verre*. Le travail se base sur la conception de la « maison » dans le contexte de la tradition littéraire occidentale et ses implications dans la création des écrivains-migrants comme Salman Rushdie, Homi Bhabha et V.S. Naipaul, de même que dans les mentions antérieures du même sujet dans les œuvres des intellectuels expatriés comme György Lukács, Ihab Hassan et Walter Benjamin. Dans son monde narratif, Tasić établit un dialogue incessant entre la conception de la « maison » aux différents niveaux de la présentation littéraire.

The intellectual – at least in one incarnation –
is everywhere and nowhere, never and always, “abroad.”

V. S. Naipaul

The idea of home has been one of the central concepts of Western literature since the earliest classical texts. The pattern of Odysseus’s impulse to quest for “home” prefigures a bulk of world literature. In order to answer the question of what motivates such yearning one must enter the complex web of metaphors of home, with the inevitable implications of the quest of

the hero, which, according to Jung, gives meaning to all human endeavour. In the same vein, T.S. Eliot hints that the utmost human triumph is to get to know the universe of the Self: "We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" (T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*). In the modern world of dislocated meaning, when mythology is unable to support the picture that we perceive as reality, how can literature furnish a new sense of home?

According to Walter Benjamin, the sense of alienation, isolation and anxiety of creative thinkers stems from the termination of oral storytelling and extends into modern narrative (Benjamin, 83-111). The existential anxiety, which has its later manifestation in the anxiety of home, marked the beginning of the modern age in which a fragmented vision constitutes one of its worse afflictions. It distorts the picture of reality in which man is deprived of "seeing the whole" or even attempting to see it. This impaired vision has changed the author's perspective. In the epic world, grounded in mythology, the author had, through the vital connection with mythology, insight into Divine wisdom. The modern author is robbed of the finality of meaning and seeing. As Rushdie puts it, "[W]e, are not Gods, but wounded creatures, cracked lenses capable only of fractured perception" (Rushdie, 12).

Theoreticians like Benjamin imply that spiritual homelessness redefined the traditional hero's quest for meaning and the stability of knowledge with its implications of home in its various metaphorical representations. The homely feeling symbolized in Odysseus's journey implies the stability of answers, the warmth of certitude and the knowledge of concepts, and borders.

To clarify the issue of the modern home, or homelessness, Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concept of "unhomely". With this, Bhabha opens up a whole new perspective of homelessness. He suggests that homelessness is not a stable category, since for the unhomely there is no spatial or conceptual reference of home – e.g. home is not, as Bhabha, puts it, "Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth. ... Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival" (Bhabha, 1997). Rather, it could be presented as anxiety, or terror of a closed space, a shrinking world bare of essential referents that (as Bhabha cites) Toni Morrison graces in a lyric, "Why does its lock fit my key?"

The angst which Bhabha calls the "anxiety of belonging" (Bhabha 1997) manifests itself as spatial and historical uneasiness. The "home" or dwelling is constantly haunted with shadows of various individual and collective traumas that take up the space of the Ego. Various narrations of the past from layers of individual and collective memory interfere with the Ego's sense of the historical present and the world. Those shadows creep up in the heart of modern dwellings. The unhomely moment intimated relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history into the wider disjunctions of political existence.

The modern novelist experiences spiritual homelessness as an axiom of his or her trade. In his literary transfiguration he becomes the homeless (anti)hero who quests for the scraps of meaning – the fragments of the lost totality which traditional memory encapsulates. It is for this reason that Benjamin quotes from Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*: "And from this...arise the genuinely epic experiences of time: hope and memory... Only in the novel ... does there occur a creative memory which transfixes the object and transforms it" (Benjamin, 99). While the epic world is embedded in history, announces Benjamin, the world of the novel has a most



frustrating relation with history: it furnishes fragments of history. Its silent voices constantly upset the narrative fabric. Past presents itself in historic present, as Toni Morrison puts it, through "unspeakable things unspoken" (Morrison, 1).

In his essay *Imaginary Homelands* Salman Rushdie speaks about the role of history and memory in narratives of "home". He suggests that writing about one's homeland implies imagining it, or writing about the homeland of one's mind. Rushdie actually states that as a modern novelist and a migrant writer he is aware that he is writing about "his" India, "a version, and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions" (Rushdie, 10). Writing his essay in North London, Rushdie further explains, he was haunted by monochromatic memories of his home, just as they appeared in a picture careless of its "real" colours, until he realized that he was writing from memory and about memory, trying to retrieve moments as if untouched by layers of new moments and new memories, "the grit of heaping years" (Hassan, 244), like in a Proustian ideal narrative about the past in which past moments would erupt as if in a parenthesis of the present. However, what emerges is a fictionalized past, his version, a fragmented vision, a collection of broken pieces of mirror.

Writing about exile, "real or imaginary" migrant authors like Rushdie, Bhabha, Hassan, and many others, including the subject of this article, "share displacement" (Hassan, 243) as they weave their words consisting of discourses and narratives of the Other. That is why the exchanges with the Other, be they temporal, spatial or psychological, create an ongoing dialogue between different dimensions of reality. To borrow Ihab Hassan's words, "How else can I speak of exile, or of a homelessness that is home?" (Hassan, 247)

Vladimir Tasic, a Serbian author who lives in Canada, writes about exiled people and the perpetual dialogue between exile and home that appears to shape their identity. Tasic writes prose in both Serbian and English. His three novels that are discussed in this article were written in Serbian.¹ In his prose Tasic creates a space, an alternative reality, in which the duality of perspective does not mar the vision of reality, but rather sharpens the picture. The narrative consists of a perpetual dialogue between inner and outer, memory and present, and above all various "homes". Thus the author builds an alternative universe in which facts and fictions create circles of patterned time and to which various signifiers of recorded "reality" refer.

Tasic invokes moments from memory in a Proustian manner. However, in the prose of the modernist Proust those flashes contribute to richness and presence, while in the postmodern narrative of Vladimir Tasic they tell of absence and hollowness. In his pursuit of the roots, Tasic writes about channels and walls; holes, ruptures and lapses in virtual webs; and above all, about the idea of home in its many "real and imaginary" manifestations. Tasic's novels could be seen as quest narratives in which the quester is a modern antihero, a Bloom-like character, who explores his dreamland of the archetypal past. "Past is home", says Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*, "albeit lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie, 9). It is, rather, the unhomey memory of home, or the remembrance of loss that is further disrupted by strange narrations of recent and faraway history.

1) The novels of Tasic (who also goes by the name Tasić, his birth name) novels have been translated into French, Slovakian, German and Macedonian. *Oproštajni dar*, *Kiša i hartija* and *Stakleni zid* were translated into French as *Cadeau d'adieu*, *Pluie et papier* and *Le Mur de verre*. *Oproštajni dar* was also translated into Slovakian (*Dar na razlučku*) and German (*Abschiedsgeschenk*) while *Kiša i hartija* was translated into Macedonian (*Дожд у хартија*).

Farewell Gift (2001), Tasic's first novel, opens with an emblematic scene of loss. On a wintry morning the protagonist, an immigrant in Canada, receives a parcel by mail. After reading the enclosed letter, he realizes that the ashes are not dedicated to his wife, a potter, but to him and are the sole remnants of his long estranged brother. Tasic establishes an image of deprivation and confronts the reader with the idea of bereavement, sorrow and human inadequacy. The initial scene triggers the memory of childhood and youth in a vanished country – Yugoslavia.

Tasic's narrator traces his memory through the labyrinths of the past, citing the events that marked the personal and social history of many generations in ex-Yugoslavia. Thus, the protagonist recreates his brother's personality as a fictitious (anti)hero of a lost world. The narrator reminisces about his life in his home town, Novi Sad. His school days, family holidays, and important events from childhood and youth are colored by the withdrawn, though rich and intriguing, personality of his brother. The narrator describes his brother's sophisticated exchanges with the world, his complex ideas and perplexity about the world of reality. He also describes his brother's deep vision, his suffering and denial as well as his symbolic retreat into himself caused by the intolerable pain provoked by the cruel death of a sparrow. His brother's superior sensibility was his "unrequested" gift, which haunted him like curse.

The "gift" is a central metaphor of the narrative and seminal to understanding the brother's personality. The brother himself describes the notion of a "gift" in a written piece, one of the rare relics of his life. Tasic presents his writings as a fragmented, partially lost diary. One diary entry is a mysterious and fascinating essay. It reveals his brother's essence-seeking mind: his eagerness to reject layer after layer of social hypocrisy and to explore the possibilities of art and religion to enshrine "truth". In his essay about the "gift" he presents the nature of a gift as a strangely locked art object, a haiku poem, enshrined in another art object, a box attached to a collage on a piece of rice paper. One cannot reclaim the poem without ruining the assemblage. The gift of art as well as of love and life exists without being seen – and, by implication, only when it remains unrevealed. The gift is not for use. The one who offers a gift should offer it without the wish (or intention) that his offer should be reciprocated and without any expectations whatsoever. Like God making plaster sparrows and giving his offer of life without looking back to see what becomes of his gift, we, the "wounded creatures", are forced by birth and faith to consciously take responsibility for the gift. By realizing it consciously, we deny its value. This is what the brother believed and sadly announced that one cannot talk about the gift any more than one can talk about love or truth.

Like an art object, the brother is enshrined in this vital meaning and "truth". By chance the narrator's wife uses his ashes to glaze her pottery. She herself employs the same word, "gift": "This is the most beautiful gift that I have ever received," said my wife as if she were speaking from a great distance, 'the first-rate ash...for glazing...how did you know (Tasic 2006, 132)?"² In this way, the brother is symbolically expressed in art. She endows him with the unrequested quality of a "gift" by the very fact of being unaware of the gift. She gives him the freedom and love of those Godly sparrows. This is the way one can express love in art.

The brother's "gift" in ashes has another symbolic aspect to it. This final gift gives authority to his story – the authority of death, as Benjamin has it, for the storyteller "has borrowed his

2) All quotations from Serbian in this article have been translated by the author.



authority from death" and this "authority is at the very source of the story" (Benjamin, 103). It introduces the notion of life seen as a whole, not in fragments. The gift in Tasic's narrative thus symbolizes its meaning and recuperates the power of the author to "counsel".

In his next novel, *Rain and Paper*, which received in 2004 the prestigious NIN (*Nedeljne informativne novine* or "Weekly Daily Newspaper") literary prize in Serbia, Tasic again sets his narration at the intersection of memory and history. As in his previous novel, narrative digressions and fragmentary pictures inform the reader of the broader context of the historical and personal past of the characters – a group of young people trapped in the confusing history in the last decade of the twentieth century in ex-Yugoslavia. In those years many young people left the country. Some stayed in resignation and bitterness. The narrator is one of those who left along with a huge wave of emigrants. She confesses:

Why did I leave? Everybody was leaving at that time. The filled out forms, queued, compared life in Cape Town, New York, Amsterdam and Prague. The city gradually emptied. Oh, no. In fact, it was not the city that emptied. The people that I knew were vanishing, while other more desperate people were coming in. (Tasic 2002, 140).

The narrator's father, her only parent (her mother died in childbirth), was the cause of her return. Her own father was an unhappy and now crippled man whose confused existence was marked by social awkwardness and frustrated relationships. He concealed the roots of his own trauma whose origins went back to the Second World War. Apart from the narrator, the main protagonists include a couple who stayed and two more people who have returned to their home town. Thus the protagonists of *Rain and Paper*, an inseparable group of five, share a troubled, distressing and generally homeless time in a literal as well as a metaphorical sense. Their reaction to the devastating reality they live in is imagination. Meeting in a café called *Pharmacy* they weave a tight web of their own fictions based on history and archetypes. In an adventure that could be seen as an attempt to reinvent the oral tradition of storytelling, they are building shelters of their imagination. That web of storytelling becomes their home.

The narrative fabric contains a most imaginative selection of pseudo-factual tales and anecdotes. In a vertiginous tour through paths of memory, folklore, recorded and oral "history" the reader breathlessly follows. The reader could say with Ihab Hassan: "True, names can distract; they can betray pretension and pedantry; worst of all, they can substitute allusions for thought... [if] you have come with a pre-established idea of the limits of the subject, of the names within bounds and without. Permit me to stretch" (Hassan, 106). In that irony and fictitious transcendence, the little group shelter from reality, which they already perceive as a history that has already been lived through.

On that distant day [in future] some other knights will dance and sieve through the cosmic debris that remains after us, and maybe they will find this letter, read and interpret it, and say, not without certain awe, which is my joy, my porcelain consolation: "Some unordinary people lived in this so ordinary place." (Tasic 2004, 267).

The "unordinary people" with their stories participate in a free play of signifiers in which the figures, facts and personal codes of their stories are transfigured and brought into a symbolic time. The narrated fragments thus tell of repeated patterns, usually of suppressed sorrow and pain, which blemish the neat causal order of official history. The timeless pain is thus described as an unhomey moment in a familiar grand narration of history.

Tatjana, the narrator, unexpectedly finds disturbing evidence about her father's past. Documents revealed the details about the tragic end of her grandmother. Her father's mother was a prominent fighter and a brave woman. For many years, actually until the very end she was much respected for doing her duty in War. Then, unexpectedly, she was accused of treason, impeached and eventually killed. Along with the injustice of this hypocrisy the documents reveal that her father, who was a little boy at the time, contributed to her capture by the Secret Police. She realizes then that the shame he felt because of that deed had scarred his life: "My father rejected water and died... There is a document. I found him several days before he died. When I entered the room everything was scattered around. As if he was looking for something, or he had suddenly gone wild..." (Tasic 2004, 211). She also realizes that his sorrow was expressed in silence: "Where did it come from? Why hasn't anybody told me? Did he leave it here because he wanted me to find it? Questions, always questions?" (ibid.). Tasic implies that "unspeakable things" lurk between the lines of the official version of history.

The concept of history as a recurrent calamity accommodates the plot of Tasic's next novel *Glass Wall* (2008). It relates the life of a couple of immigrants in Canada and their eleven-year-old son. At the beginning of the novel, the couple is already separated and now only at times shares a cold and frustrated communication over their son's upbringing. Their bitterness is in a way an outcome of their perplexity with the life that they have lived and failed to cope with. The story of their previous existence in another country, Yugoslavia, is presented in a sequence of scenes that pop up from memory at random. Those memory flashes bring idyllic images of family gatherings and travels in a totally different world, as if from another planet. However, that world collapsed and the couple found themselves leaving the country in political turmoil. No matter how far they go from their homeland, the politics continue to haunt them and creep into their relationship. Their emotional desolation escalates following a personal tragedy – the woman's sister, an "excessively" curious journalist, is killed in the home country under mysterious circumstances. That event symbolically harbours the numerous cases of terror and brutality of the political establishment that victimized the woman's sister.

The woman does not believe in the story of her sister's suicide. She wants to discover why she died, to reinstate logic into the baffling mass of documents, proofs, remembrances and illusions. She starts her own quest for vital answers. Thus, she starts a dialogue with the past through re-examination, reminiscence and an investigation of her sister's circumstances. The investigation of the incident becomes her new identity. She starts to see her circumstances along with her marriage as an ultimate hypocrisy and a bitter joke of destiny. She wants to *know*, to strip away the masks of family members, friends and acquaintances. So, she starts her quest for answers. Her husband misunderstands her decision to look round the "glass wall" and views her resolution as paranoia. "She [the sister] killed herself because the world is in its essence terrifying and unjust, and there it is terrifying and unjust in a most brutal way; because she saw real crimes and not Mrs. Marple's cases; because she was a poet and a



dreamer and believed in love..." (Tasic 2008, 150). That is how her husband conceptualizes the sister's death. The woman despises what she thinks is his harsh and cold attitude. Soon after the tragedy, the couple separates.

The story about the sister unravels without conclusion and answer. The investigation is taken over by the son. He appears determined to make sense of the past. As Tasic imparts, "The boy is patient. Time is not important. An ordinary box could become a time traveling machine. He will be captured in his boyhood until he triumphs over the past. He doesn't have a choice. The story chose him" (Tasic 2008, 174).

Angelic figures recur in Tasic's prose. The brother from *Farewell Gift*, Tatjana and her grandmother from *Rain and Paper* and the sister from *Glass Wall* resemble Benjamin's angel of history: "His eyes are staring, His eyes are opened wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread... With the storm blowing from Paradise. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris grows skyward" (Benjamin, 258). They are pictured as trapped in timeless moments of humanity.

Tasic's characters, most of them exiles, create a Novi Sad of the mind. They paint it in fragments and codes through their intimate histories, creating a chronotope, a spatio-temporal concept which accommodates the time span of the twentieth century. In their troubled experience of the century's end, his characters stand by aghast as if they live only to cover up for the unhomey moments of history that seem to perpetually arrive afresh. As these characters come and go, Novi Sad stands for a set of values, while also referring to a closed world, as in the world of the epic. Its dialogic potential can be perceived only in its transcendence through memory.

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