

Between History and Hysteria - Transgressions in the Novel
Danuncijada by Viktor Car Emin

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Traditionally, Central Europe has been most closely associated with the successor states to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A theoretical paradigm, which enables the reconceptualization of the literary and cultural histories of the Central-European space, namely, from the perspective of postcolonial theories as well as colonial and postcolonial literary criticism, demarcates Central Europe as a fluid geopolitical region which, through various historical periods, encompassed different areas. A question arises: does Central Europe constitute a true cultural configuration with its own history? And if such a configuration exists, can it be defined geographically? What are its borders?

Central European national literatures speak of colonial-like conditions caused by the permanent presence of different masters. Departing from the 'grand narrations' of imposed historical dynamics, these literary works search for a discourse of authenticity, a discourse of those who live in this space as subjects of continual colonial dynamics, indicating that the Central-European spirit can be fathomed through the destinies of small peoples.

In contrast, the metamorphosis of modern values is in the West discussed, which J. F. Lyotard describes as "the postmodern condition," which also includes "the crisis of narratives." By writing his "own" history, a Central-European intellectual/writer seeks to deconstruct the ossified concepts and "knowledge" of this area, which had been construed from the perspective of larger forces. Writers belonging to the Central European region, such as Franz Kafka, Italo Svevo, Robert Musil, Miroslav Krleža, Czesław Miłosz, Nedjeljko Fabrio and Claudio Magris, create their own imaginary worlds that are no longer constructed based on a strict division between literature and historiography.

Since the destinies of writers/intellectuals are by no means exceptional, we start with the thesis of Edward Said, namely that the intellectual, in setting forth his “counterdiscourse” (which does not permit one’s conscience to look away or fall asleep), is himself a kind of “counter-memory.” This includes, Said says, the task of publicly raising embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma. In the end, this intellectual is someone whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely marginalized. As a result, answers to the questions about “scenes” should be found with a writer/intellectual, one who speaks truth to power, one who testifies about persecution and suffering and one who, in his (symbolical) role as a writer, testifies to the experience of a country and/or a region, thus giving the experience a public identity which will forever remain written in the global discursive agenda.

In 1919, Gabriele D'Annunzio (born March 12, 1863, Pescara, Italy - died March 1, 1938, Gardone Riviera, Italy), an Italian writer, poet, journalist, playwright and soldier during World War I, and about 300 supporters, in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, occupied the port of Fiume (Rijeka in present-day Croatia). D’Annunzio ruled Fiume as dictator until December 1920, at which time Italian military forces compelled him to abdicate. D’Annunzio’s colorful career, his scandalous amours, his daring in wartime, his eloquence and political leadership in two national crises, all contributed to make him one of the most striking personalities of his day.

In a context of World War I, when Wilson and the Allies decided that the Italian-speaking port of Fiume would be given to the new state of Yugoslavia, D’Annunzio saw his chance. He called on the Italian government to occupy the city, and in September 1919, after they failed to do so, he took matters into his own hands. He marched on Fiume at the head of a cadre of *Arditi* or Daredevil storm troopers dressed in black and silver uniforms and black fezzes, which would be aped, like so much else that was D’Annunzian, by the Fascists. Greeted with cheers by Italian-

speaking locals, D'Annunzio announced that he had annexed Fiume, expecting that the Italian government would take control, but there was no reaction. Suddenly the poet-politician found himself in charge of a city in the grip of a delirious cocaine-enhanced bacchanal. Eventually Fiume, with D'Annunzio as its *duce*, declared its independence.

But the Fiume experiment attracted political radicals of all stripes, and the so-called Carnaro Constitution also reflected the contributions of unionists, syndicalists, socialists, and anarchists. D'Annunzio later wrote that he “wanted to establish equilibrium between two fundamental human tendencies, the need for liberty, for without that there are only slaves, and the need for association, because without that there is no society.”

D'Annunzio's occupation of the city of Fiume has been the subject of many different international studies, researches and papers.

In Croatian literature, there is a novel about the D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume, written by Viktor Car Emin. The full title of the novel is *Danuncijada. Romansirana kronisterija riječke tragikomedije 1919. – 1921.* It is considered to be one of the best novels in Croatian literature because of its postmodern *par excellence* style. Viktor Car Emin (born November 1, 1870, Kraj near Lovran - died April 17, 1963, Opatija) had also been politically active, like D'Annunzio, but unlike D'Annunzio, he opposed Italian irredentism and fascism and strongly supported the Croatian National Revival in the Istrian Peninsula. His literary work reflects his political engagement and struggle. In his literary work, he used the “black and white” technique (common in modernism) of presenting characters. The natives (Croats) are positive - “white,” and the invaders are negative - “black.”

While in exile during World War II, Viktor Car Emin wrote his novel about D'Annunzio's occupation (which followed World War I). The novel had been published in 1946 but has not

received recognition until recently. Unlike his previous works, in this novel the character of D'Annunzio is not presented in the “black and white” technique. Emin had been completely amazed by the complexity of D'Annunzio's personality. Emin denounced D'Annunzio's hysteria (also in the title of the novel - *kronisterija*, meaning “the chronology of hysteria”). Furthermore, the occupied city of Fiume is not only a geographical place, but is personified as a woman in the novel. The novel denounces a profusion of transgressions, for example the deliberate violation of the status quo and social, linguistic, artistic and other orders in various domains.

How had these events been presented by Viktor Car Emin in his novel? Before attempting to answer that question, one should note that the co-existence of literature (in writing about the work) and history (in writing about the past) has always been complex.

Literature has often been denounced as (pure) fiction, as nothing but a fantasy, and thus simply far removed from truth, facts and reality. In contrast to history!

In the current (post)postmodernist moment, the division between literature (fiction) and history (facts) has been diluted, as it has been shown that historical writings are itself an interpretation, that is the work of an author who is influenced by the subjectivity of the historian himself, as well as social, ideological, political and numerous other factors which certainly affect the recording of history. Moreover, one now sees that it is actually literature in its fictionality which, paradoxically, uncovers the “truth” as it brings to the fore that which has often been suppressed, overlooked, marginalized, or which is quite simply pushed under the carpet of the unconscious. All of this takes place in the wider context of the problematization of the truth as a fixed, unchangeable and undisputed category, that is that the truth becomes fluid while the in world, as Nietzsche wrote in his work *The Will to Power*, there is no longer one thought, but

innumerable thoughts. Literary writers have always been more or less taken this path and followed their own “truth.”

In this context we also view the subtitle of the novel. Viktor Car Emin had added as the subtitle *Romansirana kronisterija tragikomedije (1919 - 1921)* (a Romanced Chronohysteria Tragicomedy (1919-1921)), where he emphasizes the word *kronisterija*. This blended word is of interest. It synthesizes two ideas, chronology and hysteria, and its combination points to a departure from history as a relation of events (as that would be a chronology), but also to a shift toward a description of the internal development of a character, so that chronohysteria could mean the chronicle/history (of one’s) hysteria, hysterical chronicle/history. In a word, a meaningful, ironic game with words: history – hysteria.

The other blended word in the subtitle – tragicomedy – actually supports the complexity of the first word (chronohysteria), and as a whole has a double ironical effect. In the end, historical hysteria is a tragic comedy. Moreover, the entire subtitle impressively adds to meaning of the title of the novel *Danuncijada*. That word reminds one of denunciation. We can as a result interpret the title of the novel as a denunciation of D’Annunzio.

In Emin’s novel, D’Annunzio is most often called Ariel, which had not been chosen by chance. Specifically, by using this literary-fictional title, the author chips away at the historical person, allowing us a view into the differentiated and hidden dimensions of his inner being.

Along with this, there are dialogues, descriptions and narrative sequences which are intertwined with titles, subjects/themes and conceptual elements of D’Annunzio’s literary works, which are placed in relation to historical events. It seems as if what D’Annunzio created in his literary and artistic works is recreated in his military and political campaigns. And the same occurs in reverse. History thus becomes the validation of literature. But the process in *Danuncijada* also

goes in the other direction, as literature validates history. Viktor Car Emin allows us a PARALLEL READING of an external (both time and space) and an internal, subjective, mental (“hysteria”) panopticon. In a word, the metahistorical, allegorical, paradigmatic psychogram has been successfully demonstrated using a historical person.

But not only using a historical person. Specifically, Viktor Car Emin provides a great role to the city as a collective character, presented symbolically (and physically) as a woman. The city is a sexualized *topos* and the main hero of the novel communicates with it as a partner which needs to be conquered and humbled. Above this anthropomorphic (feminist) conglomerate, D’Annunzio practices the rituals of seduction, subjection, threats and blackmail which shows (or condemns) D’Annunzio’s conquering neuroses.

This is not a description of a historiographic subject, understandable from the prisms of historical acts, which excludes anything which cannot be subjected to a linearly conceived construct. Our thesis is that in his novel Viktor Car Emin is seeking to uncover the internal, he is plunging below the surface of visible HISTORY, beyond chrono-history, bring to light in his literary truth the background to events, and that is HYSTERIA. But he does not accomplish this solely through the prism of the main character, the historical person of D’Annunzio (which, as we have seen, are not the equal concepts), but through the prism of a double denunciation, through another character in this novel, which has not been observed such until now. This is the collective character called the City/Città.

Rijeka is a city which from a geopolitical view is found at the point of confluence of Middle European and Mediterranean cultures, which as a port had developed during the period of the Habsburg Monarchy. But the history of this city has also been written by many others who came here, leaving behind their influences with which a complex picture of identity had emerged. Form

the Illyrian Liburnians, who had been conquered by the Romans, through the Franks, Venetians, Austrians, Hungarians, as well as the French, English, Americans, Italians, etc.

D'Annunzio and the City. Emin's entire novel presents a complicated and complex game between the two. Yes, two, as the City is presented as a woman not (only) in a sexual sense, but also in her being. It is a Woman. The role of the City as a character, we would say, is as important as the most important character – D'Annunzio himself. He sees the City as an extension of himself, as a body which he must subsume. And that body is marked by the history of its numerous colonizations (D'Annunzio is only one in a list) and the subjection of its sexual/social roles.

This complicated relationship between the colonizer toward the colonized, Emin describes with the psycho(analytical) definition of hysteria, which, as we have already seen, is expressly signaled in the subtitle of the novel. But, we do not wish to imply, that he in any manner discounts the serious and dangerous dimension of the self-proclaimed military leader/conqueror, nor the tragedy of his historic intervention.

D'Annunzio, the infamous seducer, known for his insatiable lust and whose life and creative energies had been marked with a stream of interesting women, penetrates the City, treating it as he would a woman. But, not just any woman. The City is the woman he had sought in his lovers: phantasmagorical, desired, unreachable, *inifinitamente desiderata* - Unattainable. As an aside, it is interesting that hysteria as a disorder among men first came to be recognized, studied and treated during and immediately after the First World War. Thus, during the time of D'Annunzio's Entry into the City.

D'Annunzio treats the City-woman as an amorphous-libidinous mass, and, in his expressive speeches and correspondence, he modeled her in his propaganda as a feminist block. This co-relationship, this game, took place in a specific mental state – hysteria – which brought

about the degeneration of moral postulates on which the social community had rested and thus brought about a specific social state – anarchy.

With our look into the recent results of research into hysteria we can say that Viktor Car Emin certainly proved and denounced the hysteria of the *danuncijade*. That he had such a goal is not unusual since, as proven in many literary-artistic works, especially in the last hundred years, the hysterical character possesses creative forces attractive to many artists. Reading Emin's best novel one can easily make out certain aspects of hysteria. As a primary matter, one is dealing with the equalization of hysteria, in this specific case of the Poet and the City, which is seen in the complete surrender of the City to the Poet, that is their complete identification with one another in beliefs and actions. This rests on the principal that one's desires become the desires of another, whose desires in turn become the desires of the first, and so on. This circle of individual hysterias becomes a collective, massive and closed one. And mass hysteria, also known as a collective hysteria, has, as in an individual, an obsessive characterization, with the caveat that the collective version is more often described as a socio-psychological phenomena.

Emin implicitly shows that this is not merely a case of simple historical reconstruction (reconstruction of the authentic) and he does not portray D'Annunzio as a representative or monumental person. But he "arrived" at his conclusion, living in the border regions and in contact with the violence of "important" history, so that he explained violence on one's personal history: at the moment that he came to terms with the fact that he would never succeed in capturing D'Annunzio's "real" biography and that at the dividing line of history one must be complex in one's thoughts. In this context, the author's body and the bodies of the objects of his writing (D'Annunzio, Rijeka) are the loci of polyphonous historical narratives, indeed – variations of history and, thus, the display (of unseen) bodies. As a result, this chronohysteria acts as an

introduction to never-ending questions concerning the boundaries of the definitions of history and geography, leading in his writings to memories and history through hysteria – as a product of the body characterized by the lunacy of history.

In conclusion, we can see that Emin's condemnation of the *danuncijade* is an extraordinarily deep, complex, precise and meticulous literary-artistic display of (Rijeka's) historical hysteria which completely resonates with the subtitle's term – chronohysteria. This fact does not in any way lessen either the historical "accuracy" or, even less so, the literary-artistic value of the novel. Indeed, Emin anticipates postmodernist literature, through his reflective view of (or departure from) history run amok in which his testimony shows the relativity and complexity of (historical) truth.

D'Annunzio enters the city and there is already a hysterical identification between the two:

"A heavy armored car appeared, then a second, a third An *Ardito* appeared at the top of each of them. A revolver in one hand, a knife in the other. Now one shoots from his revolver, then another, and all of them scream crazily: *A noi!* And the masses around them as if they had all been channeled into one voice shouted – *A noi!* – while the girls from nearby climb the cars as if panthers, to the *Arditi*, whom they hugged and kissed, decorating them with flowers, little flags, taking off their black fezzes with long black tassels and placing them on their own heads. Others climb after them . . . and they also kissed the *Arditi* on their faces. . . . All hands are raised toward them, everyone wants to give them a nice word, women and young ladies want to choke them with their hugs. . . . D'Annunzio! *Il Liberatore!* The Archangel sent from God! *Evviva! Evviva!* Delirium. A deafening attack of collective insanity . . . Five or six ladies and young women like frenzied Furies pushed themselves to the car and threw themselves in, into the arms of the Poet

who, deeply touched, returned the kisses, with all the evidence of unchanging love. And the world around them in unending delirium. Everyone is kissing, hugging, shouting, yelling. And all caps and hats are in the air, flags are held high and lowered in front of him, the God-sent savior. Everyone is enraptured, spell-bound, frantic.”

Even D’Annunzio’s own Italian legionnaires are bewitched by their Leader. A young legionnaire turns to the people of Rijeka: “All of you are fooling yourselves – shouted the young man – if you know who our commander is. No, you do not know, you cannot know. I know. Our commander is a creature, we can say, who is celestial, *sopraterrestre*. He sees what others do not see, he hears what others do not hear . . . He knows what has been and what will be – a man who is an all-knowing prophet. He is the chosen one of destiny He has not been created like other men: his muscles are made of steel.” Another legionnaire responds: “Our commander is truly a veritable supernatural being. *Un superuomo* Our commander is neither good nor evil, neither gentle nor violent, neither sweet nor bitter, neither amiable nor irascible, he is all in one: good and evil, and love and hate, and merciful and cruel – everything, as this is how the demons who hide within him want it. His immortal works are created by our commander only at night, in the secrecy of the light of the stars he leads his discussions, *i suoi sublimi dialoghi*, with his demons But what is for us, his legionnaires, his most important capital, is his magical strength which our commander can, when it pleases him, chase one or more of his demons into us so that we can be like him – extraordinary, supernatural, immortal - *straordinari, sovranaturali, immortali*. Applause. Shouting. Songs”

Emin emphasizes how the citizens of Rijeka live under the pressure of an inexplicable nightmare. “Some of them feel like they are falling ever deeper into a dark pit. Here and there some already lose the feeling of time, even of the area in which they live, the faces and things around them appearing ever more unreal Because Ariel (D’Annunzio) is under the demon of anarchy and here in Rijeka that demon of his has power over all others. And a strong influence over people as it did not pass long before the City and everything in it transformed into a bed of happy anarchism. Every violent act of the Poet, ever one of his insolent gestures awakened in the youngest ever more admiration and expressions of a desire to copy him All of that is a subject of jokes and witticisms, sometimes on a mass scale. Excellent entertainment.”

But Viktor Car Emin, does not describe a pure comedy but a tragicomedy (as he emphasized in the subtitle) and consistently uncovers the background of this ecstatic and carnivalesque happiness. “Underneath the clown-like, hysterical entertainment, one finds tragedy, derangement, evil: Yes, all of this would be beautiful if it wasn’t for that somber feeling of insecurity which penetrated everything around: both people and things. But, and this is the most frightening, the City lives under the unending pressure of words: fire and iron, bombs and grenades, tumbles and deaths – blood, again only blood. *Versare or sangue. Tutto il sangue.* This is spoken by him, the Poet, with his melodious tone which runs through all veins and goes even deeper, to the subconscious in which lay many pristine, yet unexplored instincts. And these impulses, like some sort of secretive unseen beings, aroused by the unreachable music of his voice, extend their tentacles, arise from their eternal beds, enter into the blood, into the veins, in all of the most minute of arteries, permeating the man, taking control of him, commanding his temper and temperament, his

movements and impulses. All of this occurs best in the dark, in the late hours of the night, in the deep quiet when the demon of anarchy most often lays waste.”

Women are especially subject to the attacks of these demons. Emin testifies: “Ariel has some sort of secret power with which he can unbalance any woman. This mysterious force pounces from his being, and not only from the intoxicating tone of his voice. The entire City was in a constant status of ecstasy. Universal happiness often takes over such dimensions, so that by around midnight no one knows who is whose husband and vice versa, as the City, always titillated, racy and enticing, does not spend its days saying the Rosary. The two theatres, the cafes and restaurants, change from day to day to salons of licentiousness. They are followed by the wine bars and beer cellars. Everything revolves and turns, everything seethes and rages in the air – as the Poet said – *“delle sacre libidini”* Imbalances even passed through the walls of the temple of God.” And it continues to lay waste, Emin emphasizes. “As a microbe which is unseen by the naked eye, completely unnoticed it seeps into the homes of the rich and the poor, sowing conflict, breaking ties, even those most sacred. An ever smaller number of families still remain unmoved, an ever smaller numbers of souls who, like maggots, dissipate into some sort of perfidious, poisonous anxiety. . . . And the disequilibrium continues. And grows. And expands beyond the boundaries of the City: to the east, to the west. It expands in ever more paths which, untouchable, unseen, spreads everywhere, absorbed in the very core of the lives of people, old and young. And so it goes on and on”

The hysterical-anarchical mania results, as D’Annunzio, that is Ariel, himself says, into an orgy of our Rijekan indiscipline and intractableness. Hysteria as well as anarchy have in their roots a

resistance/demonstration/revolt against social norms. Thus in the Holocaust, as D'Annunzio calls Rijeka (along with these phrases: *Santa Entrada* (The Holy Entrance), *Città Olocausta-Holokausta* (The Marty City) in which the Poet arrived in a pilgrimage of love to fulfill his vow, etc.). Emin relates, “an atmosphere of *disobbedienze* prevails, disobedience, toward the same things which the Poet, as he himself says, had raised to the peak of human worth!. All this takes on a diabolical dimension, especially within the domain of collective hysteria. Dreadful stories were created and passed from mouth to mouth. And everyone added something of himself to them, until finally the Poet in the eyes of some people would appear as some sort of miracle. . . . He, as was whispered, was involved in black magic, Satanism and other diabolical arts”

Viktor Car Emin not only describes but explicitly set forth a psychoanalytical study of the “Rijeka Case”, through the words of Consigliere (a character in the novel): “Recently a friend of mine in Vienna, who is a psychiatrist of great renown [this certainly alludes to Freud – VJ], explained this to me. He is greatly interested in this, as he calls it, the Fiume Psychosis, for some of his pathological studies. In his eyes D'Annunzio is an absolute degenerate, which, as my friend says, is proved by the numerous examples of his relationships with women of the most bizarre predilections. There is never among people, as my friend claims, such a complete understanding and compatibility as among degenerates of the opposite sex. This is what in science is called, of which I had for the first time, I must admit heard, the madness of two, *folie à deux*. . . . It is no coincidence that the Poet, by virtue of his being, picked this specific city for his *prodezze* [stunts].”

All this leads to final, anarchic destruction in which the destructive instinct completely takes over the “Grande Beast” – as Ariel calls the Rijeka mass. “The Arditi and all other militias, as well as

the elderly, women and children – all are overtaken by the demon of destruction, taking in their wake all of those who are more moderate, even those whose duty might be to stem the tide of fevered emotions, to maintain order”

Before the final loss, Ariel in his fury compares himself to the Athenians (when the plague had occurred during the time of Pericles), and Athens with Rijeka for which he ordains, in keeping with the analogy, a tragic finale:

“. . . . I have mined not only our port and all of its equipment, but the entire City. And it is well to know: before anyone even considers to take it away from me, I will blow into the air the City and all its citizens and the legionnaires and myself as well. But, before we choke in the dust and under the ruins, I will do as they had done in Athens: I will open the gates to everything permitted and not permitted, so that everyone on the doorstep of death drinks from the cup those delights which he deems to be the sweetest and most intoxicating to him.”

In this context, we note one other symbolic detail. D’Annunzio, specifically compares himself to the Roman Emperor Nero and says:

“. . . there is nothing Hamlet-like in me – but Phaon or in the worst case scenario Epaphroditus, both devoted to the benefactor Nero, my most esteemed hero. And I do not know fear. Against the external enemy I have ordered the mining of the port, and as for what is inland, my petrol stations have more than enough oil. Should they stubbornly come after me, they will see how I

pass with the lyre in my arms through the burned streets of the City in flames. And again Nero . . .
..“

Setting forth his chrono-history which takes into account the most important points of real events, Viktor Car Emin, toward the end of his novel reveals the mechanism of D'Annunzio's hysteria which so easily caused mass hysteria in the City, as confirmed in D'Annunzio's words: "Rijeka is Pandora's Box. In it are all of my demons. One day I will open it, so that you can see what you hadn't seen."