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Dying by Instalments, the Cannibalism of a Regime

The paper analyses certain aspects of the narration of trauma in one of the best-known Slovenian novels thematising the violence of the Yugoslav regime in the 1940s and 1950s, *Umiranje na obroke* [Dying by Instalments, 1984], by the playwright and prose writer Igor Torkar (1913-2004). The paper contextualises the novel in the historical situation in Slovenia during the Second World War and in the period immediately after it, and relates it to other earlier and later representations of these themes in Slovenian literature.

Igor Torkar's work is deeply marked by his personal experiences of repression. Considering the close connection between this theme and the author's experience, it is necessary to briefly outline the historical context of a large part of his life, in particular the part he focuses on and writes about in his novel, which takes place in Yugoslavia, in particular in Slovenia, in the 1940s and 1950s.¹

1. The Slovenians during the Second World War (1941-1945)

¹ The main reference for the general historical data quoted in this article is Granda 2008. For in depth studies, from the Slovenian point of view, on the repressive aspects of the Yugoslav regime, see, in addition to the titles already mentioned in the text also (in chronological order) Rus 1961, Prunk 1962-1989, Štrovs 2014, Šturm 2015.

For over six centuries, almost the entire Slovenian population lived in the Habsburg Monarchy's provinces. When the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell, they found themselves part of a state that over the previous decades had various official names, but from 1929 onwards was commonly known as Yugoslavia. From the (re)birth of this state as a federal socialist republic in 1945 until the split with Stalin in 1948, Yugoslavia modelled itself on the Soviet Union in every way. Slovenia became one of the six republics that formed the new state, which dissolved definitively a few decades later, starting in 1991, following the secession first of all of the Republic of Slovenia, which from a national point of view (both linguistically and culturally), was the most homogeneous of the Federation. It was exactly for this reason, and also because it

was the only republic of the federal state that shared a border with as many as three Axis states (Austria-Germany after the *Anschluß*, Italy and Hungary) and for many decades to come with two states (Austria and Italy) of the European Community (or Union), that its destiny was often different from that of the other states on its south-eastern borders.

Following the Treaty of Rapallo (November 1920), tens of thousands of Slovenians (like many Croatians, but a far greater percentage), found that they were a minority in Fascist Italy and were therefore subject to the repression of the regime, which in some way 'immunised' Slovenia from any possible future sympathy for this dictatorship (Granda 2008: 273).

Despite this situation, and despite the fact that at the beginning, Slovenia was compact in its (at least passive) resistance to the Nazi-Fascist invasion, things changed very fast during the Second World War. The destiny of the Slovenians was very seriously affected during the whole of the following period and even today, the long shadow of these events is strongly present in the nation's consciousness. In this country, as in the whole of Europe, the population organised a rebellion that was widespread

and politically varied. From the beginning it was clear that the local Communist Party was the best organised, above all thanks to its close contact with the Soviet Union, although several other groups joined them, especially the liberals who were connected to the *Sokol* [Hawk] movement and the *krščanski demokrati*, the Christian Democrats. The Communist Party had a widespread network and a hierarchical organisation. At first, it was apparently open to political dialogue with other forces – in mid-1941 the name *Protiimperialistična fronta* [Anti-imperialist front], which in alluding to the anti-imperialist revolution indicated the deep intentions of the struggle, changed to *Osvobodilna fronta* (OF), the Liberation Front (Granda 2008: 272), a more representative term for the aspirations of the various factions. None the less, the Communist leadership quickly took increasingly more power into their hands and excluded everyone else. However, what alienated them – most of all in the eyes of their many supporters – were their methods, which were based on an extreme and often unjustified use of violence. In the end, in the absence of serious discussions, since any objection could put whoever ex-

pressed themselves in serious danger, some of the combatants believed that the Nazi-Fascists were the lesser evil. This is how, on 6th August 1942, the so-called Anti-Communist Volunteer Militia (MVAC) was formed. It was later commonly called the *bela garda*, that is, the white guard, with reference to the events in Russia. When Italy surrendered around six months later, this further intensified the various positions; the Italian invaders were able to leave the area almost unhindered, as long as they surrendered all their arms, but it was the collaborators, whether real or not, who paid the price for the crimes committed by them and in general by the Nazi-Fascists. The violence was often indiscriminate and brutal: the suspects were often beaten and killed, with widespread revenge even taken out on the wounded, the sick, the old and children. The previously feared political commissars, who were also based on the Soviet model, of the VOS (Security Information Service) were replaced by the dreaded OZNA, who later became the equally notorious UDBA. For the Slovenian population this was a double problem: a political one that involved the definitive establishment of a Party that was by then untouchable and repres-

sive, both with respect to its opponents and to its own members; in addition, a national problem, because the OZNA (as later the UDBA), unlike the VOS, also involved the elimination of the Slovenian administrative autonomy in favour of a completely unified 'Yugoslavian' partisan resistance structure. The Slovenian language was discriminated against and at the same time preparations began for the mass killings of the post-war period, which remained a deep and devastating collective trauma for the nation.

2. Slovenia in the Early Years of Socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1950)

The Communist revolution began in Yugoslavia in May 1945, at the end of the war, and its most dramatic expression in Slovenia was the massacre of thousands of anti-Communist soldiers. This event was destined to leave an indelible mark on all future generations, in particular in relation to the massacre of around 15,000 young Slovenians, mainly officers, who were killed between 8th and 31st May at Kočevski rog after trying in vain to escape to Austria. These were certainly not the only victims of fratricidal struggles between Slovenians, with on one

side, already during the conflict, Communists or sympathisers, and on the other side Anti-Communists. However, the extent and the brutality of this massacre, with the war by now over, also anticipated the violence of the new regime in peace times, because the persecutions and killings that had been planned before did not stop afterwards either. From January 1946 onward, with the approval of the new constitution, based on the Soviet model, which conferred absolute power to the Party leadership, a sort of final confrontation began. This was a period of violence directed not only at the political opponents, but also former 'comrades-in-arms,' people who had taken part in the partisan struggle fervently but who for various reasons had become a liability. The phenomenon became particularly intense after 1948, as will be seen later. Another category that the regime targeted was the Catholic Church, even though many priests had opposed Nazi-Fascism. In the decade following the war and afterwards, the Catholic Church was systematically persecuted – at the top (the bishops), also its priests, monks and nuns and even the simple believers. From May 1945 to the end of 1961, just under one thousand people – priests, monks,

nuns and seminarians – were sent to court (Griesser-Pečar 2005: 15; on this subject, see also, among others, Kvaternik 2001), and their trials were often summary. Some priests were killed, many of them were attacked and almost all of them were victims of various forms of harassment.

The persecution of former partisans of proven Communist conviction, including those who first fought against Nazi-Fascism, deserves to be treated separately. Many of them were accused, often completely falsely, of plotting against the regime, which branded them as traitors. This took place throughout Yugoslavia in the years between 1945 to 1953, but again in this case Slovenia followed its own particular path, at least partially.

From 1948 members of the party (some of whom very prominent) were systematically persecuted and were rightly or wrongly accused of remaining faithful to the Cominform (locally known as *Informbiro*), that is, of supporting Stalin's USSR. In June that year, Tito's regime openly opposed the former model inspired by Stalin, and, in a sort of collective paranoia, it began to fear conspiracies by these party members, called *informbirojevci*, or simply by the acronym IB (i-bé), *ibeovci*. The worst expres-

sion of the persecution of these former comrades² was the prison camp created on Goli Otok ('Barren Island'), an island off the coast of Croatia.³ This tragic place, which no one even dared mention for decades, concerned less Slovenians than people of other nations in the Federation. In fact, there were 'only' 566 Slovenian prisoners, compared to, for example, thousands of Serbs, Croats and above all (in proportion to their population) Montenegrins (Jezernik 2013: 16).

None the less, Goli Otok was certainly not the only place

where the regime tried to 're-educate' (the stated purpose in fact of these places) its real or alleged enemies. There were several other similar camps and many prisoners were also detained in prisons that were more or less harsh, and they were often tortured, generally in order to extort confessions that would implicate other unfortunate people.

The regime's obsession with the Cominform may have been the most evident aspect of its sort of 'siege mentality,' which was similar to that of other dictatorships. In those years, even a slight, very general or indirect criticism of Party members' activities or maybe just of the situation in the country, or even a joke with political implications, could be enough to find oneself trapped in a situation from which it would be difficult to escape. People would then be arrested, accused with no possibility of contesting the accusations (sometimes without even understanding what they were accused of), and sent to prison or to forced labour camps. Often, even after serving their sentence, the nightmare continued because, in order to be released, many of them had to agree to collaborate with the OZNA, and former prisoners found themselves in a dilemma that was dif-

² Based on official data, 55,663 people were arrested in Yugoslavia. All victims were only accused of supporting Moscow and the Cominform. In the following years, according to some Western scholars, this number rose to 300,000, but they also included other categories of persecuted people (Jezernik 2013: 15). In relation to the population, it was as though 1,000,000 people were imprisoned in Italy.

³ For information regarding the complex structure of the Yugoslavian repressive system, above all the forced labour camps, and the repressive methods used there, one can refer to the specialist literature. See, among others, Tasić 1987, Logar 1991, Jezernik 2013, Previšić 2022, in Italian also Scotti 2012; see also Morabito 2024; among the memoirs on Goli Otok, and among the Slovenian authors, it is important to mention Hrast 1991. The data in the present article are mainly taken from Jezernik 2013.

difficult to resolve: they either had to get their colleagues, friends or acquaintances into trouble by revealing something about them to the secret police, or else they would find themselves in trouble again and end up in the abyss of detention, forced labour or torture.

In this contest, at the end of the 1940s, a paradoxical and tragic series of events occurred in Slovenia. These were the so-called '*Dachauski procesi*' [Dachau trials], ten⁴ sham trials against active and respected members of the Party (see Ivanič 1990, Pučnik 1996, Jančar 2018, Čoh Kladnik 2014). Between 1948 and 1950, during these trials, 11 people were sentenced to death, and others were sent to hard prisons or concentration camps.⁵ The name given to these trials refers to the fact that the people accused were almost all survivors of Nazi concentration camps, in particular Dachau. Most of the people were intellectuals. Together with other categories of people who were persecuted – like the Catholics (see Kvaternik 2001, Merlak 2001, and above all

Griesser-Pečar 2005), farmers who owned land (see Čoh Kladnik 2012) and, after 1948, admirers of the Soviet Union, as well as minorities, for example Roma people and Jehovah's witnesses – the intellectuals, even if they were 'authentic' Communists, were often considered even more dangerous. One of the defendants on trial, together with other chemical engineers, was the writer Igor Torkar.

3. Igor Torkar: His Life

Igor Torkar (1913-2004),⁶ Boris Fakin's pen name, was born in the Karst region (Kostanjevica na Krasu) but spent most of his life in Ljubljana. The future prose writer and playwright studied chemical engineering and that became his profession. He joined the Communist Party at a young age. Already as a student, he took part in many young left-wing organisations, fought for the rights of the weakest and published political-journalistic articles and literary works, initially poems, in various journals. He later found that the expressive form that worked best for him was playwriting, even though he became famous

⁴ The number may vary, depending on whether some trials during those years were considered or not as part of this calculation.

⁵ Three others died during the interrogations, whereas one of the 11 people sentenced to death was spared.

⁶ Most of the biographical information on Torkar is taken from Jevnikar 1990.

mainly because of the novel which will be described in detail later, but also for reasons beyond literature. His passion for politics, supported by a personality that was action-oriented but also favoured a rational approach, exposed him to many difficult situations, in one of the most turbulent periods of European history. He was imprisoned by four different regimes, each adopting very different methods and with a different impact every time (Torkar 1979: 12). In 1938, as a young man, still in the Yugoslavia before the war, he came to the attention of the authorities because of his participation in student demonstrations and for distributing leaflets, and was detained for a few days. At the beginning of the war, since he had joined the Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation (OF) very early on, he was beaten up and then imprisoned for a brief period by the Italian Fascist authorities that occupied the province of Ljubljana.

However, his two most harrowing experiences took place later: first from January 1943 to May 1945, in the Dachau and Sachsenhausen Nazi concentration camps; then, and worst of all, the prisons of the new Communist Yugoslavia, the State that he himself had been involved in establishing and or-

ganising. Following a conviction in one of the 'Dachau trials,' he spent four years and four days in those prisons, just under half that time in solitary confinement. This was the deepest trauma of his life, and he wrote about it later in many literary and non-fiction works. Torkar was released on parole in April 1952, but had to wait almost 20 years (July 1971) until he and his group of colleagues who had been wrongfully accused were legally rehabilitated. It was only in 1985 that the State offered him and his fellow sufferers compensation, which he, however, refused. As mentioned above, most of the defendants in that trial were dead by then, they had either been killed or they had died from ill-treatment and torture.

Already by the mid-1950s, Torkar had been able to live an apparently normal life. He taught at the Ljubljana Academy of Figurative Art for 20 years, from 1954 until he retired in 1974. After already experiencing a partial easing of the regime's brutality in that period, the writer lived another 30 years, so he was able to see its end. One decisive date was 1980, the death of the dictator Tito, when the whole system began to fall apart. In 1984, Torkar was one of the first people to break a taboo,

that of narrating the abuse suffered by those like him, who supported the regime and generally agreed with its ideology. After seeing Slovenia as an independent and democratic nation, and unfortunately also the wars that devastated the neighbouring States that had emerged from the ashes of Yugoslavia during the whole of the 1990s, the writer, who continued to raise his rational and dialogical voice until the very end, passed away in 2004, at the age of 90.

4. Torkar's Work

4.1. Before *Dying by Installments*: Torkar and the Others

Torkar began his literary activity before the war, and he published poems in various journals. In 1940, his collection of satirical sonnets *Blazni Kronos* [Mad Chronos] was published and was appreciated for its effectively grotesque nature. Immediately after the war, more poems were published, and then more in the 1970s and 1980s, when the author, who was exhausted by his extreme experiences, did not give up but tried to express the horrors he had suffered in the Dachau camp and in the Ljubljana prison: *Jetniški soneti* [Sonnets from Jail, 1974].

The *Balada o smehu* [The Ballad of Laughter, 1977], which focused on the struggle of laughter, a profoundly human attribute, against inhumanity, was confiscated by the police.

Torkar was a highly acclaimed playwright. The following are just some of his many plays, mainly drama but also comedies: The theme of *Pisana žoga* [The Coloured Ball, 1955] is the partisan struggle, however, as Edvard Kocbek did a few years before in his collection of short stories *Strah in pogum* [Fear and Courage, 1951], it concentrates on a question that at the time (and for many years to come) was extremely delicate, that of the killing that took place within the Liberation Front. The play, like many of Torkar's works, shows a 'poetic protest, full of tension and humanity, against arbitrary violence' (Jevnikar 1990: 33).

The protagonists of *Pozabljeni ljudje* [Forgotten People, 1957] are ordinary, lost people, with a sad destiny. Despite the dark atmosphere, the play conveys a strong faith in humanity [Jevnikar, 1990: 33]. The setting of *Delirij* [Delirium, 1957] is even darker.

In the 1970s the atmosphere changed and although the author continued to write dramas, he also wrote comedies, like *Revizor 74* [The Government In-

spector 74, 1974]. Many of his works were written (or later adapted) for television.

Torkar also wrote several reports, reflections and provocative essays for newspapers and journals, a selection of which was published at the end of the 1980s. He received some awards but not the most important literary prizes, which may have been an indication of the continuing difficulty of Slovenian society, still during the 1990s and even later, to digest certain wounds from the past. Already in the previous decades, the writer had won several literary competitions, but only in those cases, in a tragicomic way, in which the jury did not know the names of the candidates.

He only wrote two novels, both mainly autobiographies. The first one, *Deseti bratje* [The Tenth Brothers, 1979],⁷ can be considered a combination of a memoir and non-fiction. It is full of portraits of his contemporaries and is particularly interesting from a historical point of view.

However, the author's most interesting prose is definitely *Umiranje na obroke* [Dying by Instalments, 1984] and it is no coincidence that it was published

after 1980, the watershed year. The fact that this was a new era could also be seen by the publication of works by other authors who, in those years, slowly but surely talked about what until recently had been impossible to express directly. The novel by Branko Hofman (1929-1991) *Noč do jutra* [The Night until Morning], published in 1981, was the first one to address the unspeakable Goli Otok. This was not a description of the author's personal experience; it was inspired by the tragically true story of the writer and journalist Ludvik Mrzel that he himself recounted to Hofman (see Lah 2017: 42). In 1982, Vitomil Zupan (1914-1987),⁸ a rebellious and nonconformist writer, published his *Levitan* [Leviathan], a sarcastic and unconventional memoir of the years he spent in Communist prisons. The following year, the comedy *Moj ata, socialistični kulak* [My Father, a Socialist Kulak, 1983] by Tone Partljič, was published. Partljič was the youngest of these four writers (he was born in 1940 and is still alive), and he was the only one of those mentioned above who experienced the regime through the eyes of a child. The light-hearted

⁷ The title refers to Slovenian folklore that attributes particular powers to the tenth son; in this case it implies Slovenian artists.

⁸ Several features of a character in *Umiranje na obroke* are inspired by him: the two writers were friends.

tone of his comedy, which has some wonderfully humorous moments, poetically transforms the events but at the same time the seriousness can just be seen in the background. A successful film with the same title (1988) was based on the play, and Partljič himself wrote the screenplay.

In fact, Slovenian literary works that alluded to the violence of the regime (with or without autobiographical plots) had even appeared from the end of the 1950s. However, for obvious reasons, the artistic language adopted in those years was necessarily the more abstract and symbolic language of poetry and the theatre. So, for example, there are the plays by Dominik Smole, Gregor Strniša, Primož Kozak and Marjan Rožanc; the poems by Dane Zajc, Ludvik Mrzel and others. Starting from the 1970s, these themes also gradually started to be found in prose, often with autobiographical references, including novels by Lojze Kovačič, Jože Javoršek, Marjan Rožanc, Žarko Petan, Drago Jančar and many others.

4.2. *Dying by Instalments both as an Autobiography and Fiction*

Starting from the end of the 1980s, while Yugoslavia was already breaking up and Slovenia was on its way to become a democracy and a sovereign State, many people decided to write their memoirs or edit those of others, based on their notes or diaries. Most of them, unlike during the previous period, were not professional writers but people from various backgrounds and political affiliations who, between the end of the 1940s and mid-1950s, were caught up in the grip of political persecutions. These works were therefore real (auto)biographies (see, in chronological order: Jeržšek 1989, Hrast 1991, Lenič 1997, Jerič 2000, Vovk 2000 e 2003, Hrast 2007 and Gomizel 2015).⁹

Dying by Instalments, which was written before all these works, is not, however, an autobiography, but a literary work for which the writer drew inspiration from his own experience. The novel, therefore, both from a point of

⁹ The list of titles mentioned, which is not complete for reasons of space, only refers to works published as books. Many accounts have been published in periodicals or within other works, but some have never been published.

view of the themes dealt with and also from a diachronic point of view, somehow fits in between the literary works with their indirect allusions that preceded it, and the factual biographies that followed it. Five years after the above mentioned *The Tenth Brothers*, Torkar started working on his autobiographical material again but with a different approach. In the meantime (1980) Tito had died, and the whole Yugoslavian system was showing signs of falling apart. What previously was unspeakable could now be said and written about publicly, although not without some hesitation.¹⁰ Maybe also the greater distance from the facts, if only just a few years, made it easier to write about them. In fact, the writer himself stated at the end of his text that he wrote this work between February 1981 and December 1983.

Reality or fiction? Regardless of the debate, which it is not the case to go further into here, since the opposition in this dichotomy itself can be questioned (see Čeh 2008: 25), the

discriminating factor between a genuine autobiography and a work of fiction is generally a question of the 'pact' with the reader. An autobiographical novel imitates the narrative of an autobiography in a certain way; however, the reader is aware of the different identity of the author and that of the narrator, which requires a fictional reading of the text (Čeh 2008: 26). Moreover: autobiographical prose may be limited to just some parts of the author's life, whereas a 'real' autobiography narrates the whole (or at least a large part) of the story of his life. In the case of *Dying by Instalments*, Torkar himself guides us along this razor's edge path, between a biography and fiction, and the novel is mainly narrated in the third person. The protagonist is one of the author's alter egos and can be recognised as such, but he is given fictional names (his 'legal' name, Fran Pevkar, his nickname Icek and in particular Gaber, Pevkar the partisan's *nom de guerre*) and different characteristics.

None the less, during the narration, the author often introduces authentic material, such as information taken from the court proceedings against him or other documents, for example newspaper articles. In these cases, the writer speaks directly to the read-

¹⁰ Only in the third edition of the novel (1988) was it possible to publish the provocative survey inside the book, in which the author asks the readers in what way the horrors of post 1948 Yugoslavia were less awful than those carried out by Stalin.

er in the first person and introduces himself with his legal name and surname (Boris Fakin), thus indicating the veracity of the information given. In crucial moments of the story, the real author talks to his alter ego Gaber, who is the one who 'tells him his story.' In doing so, he in turn narrates his own story and indicates to the reader that he is revealing something really autobiographical. Torkar, however, is not only, or above all, concerned about his own experience, he aims to write something paradigmatic: 'It's not my biography [...] it's that of a hero of our time. Of all those who have lived and died in our time' (Torkar 1984: 35).

The text consists of 18 unnumbered chapters, and each has a double title, with the conjunction *ali* ('or,' 'that is') joining the two options, a detail that has a theatrical feel to it. The first 100 pages or so (of a total of 400) are dedicated to the protagonist's childhood and youth, with a particular focus on the armed resistance against the Nazi-Fascist invaders. Several characters, comrades in arms and friends, are introduced in this section and they appear again in the large second part of the novel as interrogators, persecutors and executioners. After just 35 pages that describe one and a half

years in Dachau, and after a brief interval, which corresponds to a period of almost three years in the story (from the end of the war to the first problems with the regime), the novel continues with the series of events that had the greatest impact on the protagonist and the author himself: inhuman interrogations, false accusations, incrimination, prison, parole, the very long wait for rehabilitation, his disappointment with the poor attention given to this and the regime's belated and inadequate apologies.

4.3. *Dying by Instalments and the Author's Real Traumas*

Dying by Instalments narrates very painful experiences, even if poetically transformed, that the author himself suffered. As with other literary works of this kind, one can reasonably suppose that it is a sort of 'therapeutic' undertaking that helped the writer break the silence around the trauma that leads 'to the death of the soul' (van der Kolk 2014: 265).

The importance of breaking this silence, which is very dangerous for the human psyche, is highlighted by neuroscientists. None the less, they point out the great

difference between two different forms of self-awareness, 'one that keeps track of the self across time and one that registers the self in the present moment,' which in turn correspond to two types of narration (van der Kolk 2014: 269). Even though, according to these neuroscientists, the second one is more useful, since it is more likely to allow an individual to come to terms with their experience, a work that is intended to be published will generally arise from a more coherent and less spontaneous type of narration.

A more complex question, perhaps, concerns literature in the literal sense of the word, that is, literature that also includes an aesthetic point of view, which is the most interesting aspect here. However, even a writer of fiction generally tries to write in such a way that the reader will understand, and in any case (in the absence of the above mentioned 'pact') does not have to limit himself strictly to the facts. If, as scholars have observed, a story created 'for public consumption' and narrated many times, often, in the end, appears to its narrator to be true, this will presumably be even more the case for stories intended to be printed and conceived by an author who was already a professional writer before his trauma.

Taking all of this into consideration, and knowing the writer's real biography, one can in any case attempt to identify in the novel the signs of the trauma he really experienced. We will try and analyse some of the many passages of interest in this respect and follow themes that run through the whole novel like common threads, both in the form of dreamlike visions and as descriptions that appear as filtered by the protagonist's particularly subjective point of view.

4.4. Dreamlike Visions and Descriptions

In Torkar's novel, the protagonist's dreams, in which he is usually called 'Gaber,' play a key role. The main character, who in describing them speaks in the first person, generally sees himself as a bat, whereas his friends and acquaintances appear as aggressive birds. There are also often other animals, sometimes embalmed.

However, even in the descriptions that are not dreamlike, for example, the presumably realistic descriptions of the various kinds of confrontations (mainly interrogations) with many representatives of the regime's agents (and therefore appear to

be inhuman, alienated and de-personalised), one can see the obsessive return of some obsessively recurrent themes, in particular eyes and light, often accompanied by disturbing chromatic visions.

4.4.1. Flying Animals

These are some of the motifs that recur most often in the dreamlike visions presented in the novel. The narrator dreams that he has turned into a bat, a small, blind, flying mammal. Blind like the author himself, one may think, who for years did not, or did not want to see the dehumanisation of the regime. Disoriented like the protagonist who, during the narrative, gradually loses all his points of reference and is a victim of a truly perverse mechanism. This falling down into an abyss, in the narrative, as presumably in the author's biography, begins with his first contact with the OZNA and his first interrogations. At this point Gaber could still be free, if he collaborated with the secret police and reported his friends (but he chooses not to do that). His descent continues with his four years in prison and does not even ease when he is released from prison, a moment that does not bring joy because it

does not (and cannot) coincide with finding the points of reference he had lost.

The image of the bat flitting around desperately because it is lost had already appeared in *The Tenth Brothers* five years before. This Kafka-sounding metamorphosis recurs often in *Dying by Instalments*. One example is a passage from the chapter 'Preventive Prison, that is, a Clouded Mind,' when the protagonist finds himself in the increasingly tight spiral of the interrogations. After taking him (several times) to a special, remote office on the outskirts of Ljubljana, the police attempt to force him to make false confessions in order to be able to incriminate his colleagues. In the end, as a result of Gaber's repeated denial, he is sent to prison. During those weeks of regular meetings, he begins to have terrifying nightmares:

And once again, I'm getting smaller. I only measure ten, fifteen centimetres, my little body is covered with black hair, I cannot see my feet anywhere. My face is a rat's face, even my eyes are rat's eyes. My arms are flattened into two cartilaginous bat-like wings [...] Out of breath, close to

death, I now continue to flutter in circles, looking for a place to perch (Torkar 1984: 167).¹¹

The bat is also mentioned at the beginning of the chapter 'Parole, that is, Evil Isolation,' which describes the torturous process through which the protagonist tries, years after his release from prison, to find a semblance of normality. His previous life is lost forever, after his faith in his old ideals is shattered. The new reality is loneliness and confusion, the fear of a bottomless pit.

To come back... from where, when, where to? Whose world am I coming back to? Those dreadful dreams of bats [...] They clouded the eyes of my body and my mind. Everything around me looked blurred and was deformed into strange, transparent, bodiless ghosts (Torkar 1984: 231).

He also has a recurrent dream in which one of his closest friends from a long time ago, who has by now changed (his nickname is *Pločevinar*, a word echoing

¹¹ Here and below, the Italian translation from the original Slovenian is by M.B., while the English translation from the Italian is by C.S.

with tin, a low-quality metal) and turns into a rooster that pecks the protagonist until he bleeds because he is guilty of 'seeing too much'. The following is an example of one of such moments:

Then he flew up to my chin and started gouging my eyes out. In the meantime, he was singing [...] The one who's seen too much, the one who's seen too much is the one whose eyes the raven, is the one whose eyes the raven gouges out! Cock-a-doodle-doo! (Torkar 1984: 86)

The descriptions of eyes appear even more frequently in the novel. Alongside the descriptions referring to the protagonist, the deliberately stereotyped descriptions of the eyes of the characters who successively confront him recur dozens of times.

4.4.2. Eyes

Eyes that see too much are naturally unpopular with any dictatorial regime.

This theme, however, is also present in the novel with a different meaning. Our organs of sight, traditionally known as the

‘mirror of the soul,’ can also reveal their owner’s lack of humanity. In *Dying by Instalments*, the eyes are obsessively present and represent the various persecutors. The descriptions are repeated like a fixed attribute, every time a certain character appears: their shapes are geometrical and they are made of inert materials (metal, plastic, glass) in order to evoke machines, not human beings. Sometimes, there are unsettling instances of paraesthesia: the gaze of perhaps the most disturbing character in the whole novel, the fanatical and painfully inhuman Ras, has a ‘metallic sound.’

Another (linguistic, morphologic) particularity that emphasises this alienation is the constant reference to eyes as dual. Although the Slovenian language has and normally uses the dual form, for entities that are double by their nature, above all equal organs like eyes, ears and hands, it prefers the plural. The uncommon use here of the dual form adds an alienating characteristic, almost as though they were two single objects. The following is a brief description of each character’s eyes:

His eyes [Miro’s eyes, a friend from a long time ago, M.B.] – two small smooth aluminium

spheres – shine icily. [...] Under the ash [in his smile, M.B.], fanaticism, irony, caution and metallic confidence can just be seen, smouldering (Torkar 1984: 152).

An OZNA officer walks in.... His eyes are impossible to forget. Round. Like two halves of a ping pong ball (Torkar 1984: 159).

A new OZNA officer has come into the room. Tall, upright, athletic body, flawless [...] the only feature of his face that looks rather unfriendly, actually really treacherous, are his big black sunglasses [...].

Ras [his comrade-in-arms from a long time ago, M.B.] who, instead of human eyes in his eye sockets, has two small glass balls, stares Gaber icily in the face. It seems to Gaber as though Ras’s gaze makes a metallic sound. He can hear it in his ears and in his heart. A sound that stings. Burning (Torkar 1984: 178).

4.4.3. Light and Colours

In some respects, the theme of light is similar, in that in the novel it does not have its usual positive meaning. The (excessive) light relates explicitly on one hand to realistic images like that of the exhausting interrogations really experienced by the author, who was interrogated for weeks, even 20 hours at a time, while his prison wardens took it in turn to rest, to prevent him from sleeping:

Ras's question and Gaber's silence continue at a steady pace, slowly, sleepily, already for the eighth consecutive hour. The silver arrows of light from the lighthouse have also already been piercing Gaber's eyes for eight hours. His tears no longer fall in drops from his eyes. They flow. They burn more and more (Torkar 1984: 180).

On the other hand, the light also represents the obligation to see what one does not want to see because it hurts or is frightening. This can easily be linked to the trauma of the return to a 'freedom' – after the release from prison, as parole, and

without even the psychological comfort of rehabilitation – which leads to dreadful loneliness. The alienation of not being understood in a world that is impossible to understand, with the fear that by now lives constantly in one's soul:

Gaber opens his eyes, but because of the sunlight... why on earth does it seem so bristling with daggers?... he half closes his eyes. He takes a few steps... and stops. [...] Walking through this open space, walking across this light bristling with daggers... [...] The sunlight makes his clouded eyes dry and clear (Torkar 1984: 230).

Again here, like in the recurrent dream of the bat, the question is the return 'to where?' The world of illusions no longer exists and freedom cannot sooth this terrifying awareness: 'there's no joy in freedom' (Torkar 1984: 229). The confusion of the colours is also an indication of a reality perceived as distorted, monstrous. Unbearable to the point of almost making one miss the solid prison walls:

The worst thing is the sky. Gaber [...] had forgotten

what the sky was like, what the sky was. [...] How blue it is... no... how red it is... no, it's green... it's a corpse-like white. It's evil! It burns the pupils more than acid, more than fire does. Gaber closes his eyes so he doesn't get blinded. He puts out his left arm so he doesn't fall down. But what can he lean on? The wall... the wall... of the prison cell! (Torkar 1984: 229)

the psychological pressure of the interrogations, the torture suffered and the harsh prison conditions. Until the sad return to freedom, experiencing constant fear and an exhausting and frustrating wait for the rehabilitation that will arrive very late and will be disappointing. These experiences, albeit filtered through the novel, show a reader a glimpse of the suffering that remains, in essence, completely unspeakable.

In addition to being a literary work, the novel *Dying by Installments* can also certainly be read as an expression of multiple traumas, really experienced by the author over the years: from the incredulous dismay at being arrested for no apparent reason,

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