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Vladimir Zorić
University of Nottingham
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6293-8155

The Moral Witness: The Poetics of Testimony in Modern Serbian Poetry

(Dunja Dušanić, *Sa silama nemerljivim: pesnici kao svedoci modernog terora*, Belgrade: Dosije studio, 2021, 261 pages)

Dunja Dušanić's study explores the intricate relationship between poetry and testimonial discourse in the work of three Serbian Modernist poets: Rastko Petrović (1898–1949), Milan Dedinac (1902–1966) and Oskar Davičo (1909–1989). The book builds upon Dušanić's well-established research on autobiography and testimony in the context of the First World War, in particular her monograph *Fikcija kao svedočanstvo: iskustvo Prvog svetskog rata u prozi srpskih modernista* [*Fiction as a Testimony: The Experience of the First World War in the Prose of Serbian Modernists*, Belgrade: Dosije 2017 (Dušanić, 2017)] and her editing and curatorial activity pertaining to primary sources and artefacts from this period. Dušanić's selection in her latest study is very meaningful in the context

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of her argument. The three poets illustrate not only a range of traumatic experiences, from war (Petrović), to PoW camp (Dedinac), to prison (Davičo), but they also evince important analogies in their careers (study in France, involvement with surrealism) and poetics (belief in the expressive power of poetry), which is interesting in terms of literary history. Supported by well-chosen examples from the works of other Serbian and international poets, the study also paints a broader landscape of the aims and possibilities of testimonial discourse in poetry as such. The argument proceeds in five stages: it is foregrounded in a theoretical introduction, developed in three central chapters (each dedicated to one of the three poets in his capacity as a witness to a distinct type of terror), and revisited in a dynamic conclusion.

In the introductory chapter, "Testimony as a Poetic Genre," Dušanić outlines the scholarly context and defines the methodological cornerstone of her study. A late arrival at the banquet of literary genres, testimonial poetry has often been neglected – unjustly in Dušanić's view – in favour of other mimetically oriented modes of witnessing, especially those in narrative fiction and documentary prose. Even where the testimonial aspirations of poetry have been recognised and accorded due attention, Dušanić finds the methodological frameworks wanting. They either drift into an unproductive biographic approach (Forché & Wu, 2014) which frames poets as witnesses based on their lived experiences rather than their poetic texts, or, oppositely, opt for a text-centred perspective (Carel & Ribard, 2016) which tends, misleadingly, to bracket biographical facts and seek purely textual indicators of testimony. By referencing, among other items, Zbigniew Herbert's hermetic poem "The Pebble" and the Yasusada scandal in the United States, Dušanić has no difficulty in showing just how deeply problematic such polarised approaches are. Her own definition of this genre includes both biographic context and textual evidence in an intimate bond: "By poetic testimony I understand the autobiographic poetry written by witnesses to historical events of public significance who are driven by special, moral impulses." (Dušanić, 2021, p. 17) Connecting the two aspects of testimony by means of speech genre theory (Dulong, 1998), Dušanić argues that testimonial poetry is based on a *testimonial contract* between the poet and the audience whereby the earlier commits to tell the whole truth about an event and the latter, in return, commits to listen and attend to that truth. Dušanić's other key claim is that this testimonial contract is driven by an underlying ethical imperative whereby the poet is a moral witness (Margalit, 2002) who, having experienced terror, addresses a *moral community* of

readers on behalf of the community of victims, i.e., those who did not survive or choose for reasons of their own and hence cannot act as witnesses. Now, unlike in court cases, the poet does not depose under oath, so the testimonial contract is bound to remain implicit and will only be ascertained by certain textual and paratextual indicators of veracity. The principal aim of Dušanić's book is to establish what those indicators are and at which point or constellation they cease to be facultative and become mandatory, placing inexorable ethical and noetic demands on our interpretative procedures. Another related concern is to understand how these signals of testimoniality change in real time, with poets modulating them from one edition to another in order to match their shifting perspectives, or those of their audience.

Dušanić's first interpretative chapter, "The Last Ember of Humanity: Rastko Petrović as a Witness of Serbian Retreat in 1915", explores two versions of Petrović's long poem "Veliki drug" ["The Great Friend," 1926, 1970 (Petrović, 1926, 1970)], a remarkable poetic testimony about one of the most traumatic loci in recent Serbian history. In the wake of a massive German offensive against Serbia in the First World War, Petrović, along with some 30,000 youths of his age, was drafted and forced to retreat with the regular divisions of the Serbian army over the Albanian mountains; in a harsh winter climate, without any training, an overwhelming majority of those youths starved or froze to death. The central image of Petrović's poem is that of the "great friend," an unnamed and apparently unknown fellow recruit to whom the poet snuggles during a chilly night in order to get some precious warmth from his body; as he wakes up, he realises that his 'friend' has died of hypothermia (Dušanić, 2021, p. 71). Following this experience, the poet turns into a witness: the salutary warmth he received in that night becomes symbolic of a lasting spiritual rapport with the victim, an experience that needs to be conveyed as a testimony to the moral community of readers. However, Dušanić's method shows that the analysis of testimoniality is not merely about finding a prominent poetic image that somehow points towards witnessing. It is also, and even more so, about the laborious yet necessary task of identifying other signals of commitment to veracity – such as dedication, deixes, explanatory notes – that indicate a testimonial contract. These (para)textual signals change in different editions, so the scholar's task is to compare these editions with the poet's other works, including prose, to spot differential features. Without going into the fine detail of Dušanić's subtle philological argument, it suffices to say that by comparing the two editions of "The Great Friend" she was able

to demonstrate that Petrović cared about the testimonial status of his poem and how it would be received by the moral community to such an extent that, in the second edition, he added a series of notes which explained the verses in terms of their historical and biographic context (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 76–79), and a number of references to the sacrificial, Christ-like nature of the recruits' death (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 84–85). These changes further strengthened the testimonial contract, making such reading effectively mandatory (Dušanić, 2021, p. 105), and transposed his witnessing act from a personal realm to that of a collective, national remembrance of the Great War, which was also nourished in the wider society at the time (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 86, 100).

In the second interpretative chapter, "One Can Only Testify in the First Person: Milan Dedinac as a Witness of the Camp," Dušanić focuses on a different form of modern terror, the PoW camp, and a different period, the Second World War. Following the German occupation of Yugoslavia in 1941, Dedinac spent two years with other Yugoslavs in a German camp in Silesia and poeticised his experience in two editions of *Pesme iz dnevnika zarobljenika broj 60211* [*Poems from the Diary of Prisoner No. 60211*, 1947, 1964 (Dedinac, 1964)] and also republished some of this work in two different compilations, *Od nemila do nedraga* [*From Pillar to Post*, 1957 (Dedinac, 1957)] and *Poziv na putovanje* [*Invitation to the Voyage*, 1965 (Dedinac, 1965)]. The central image of this collection of poems is that of a net, which appeared prominently in Dedinac's pre-war poetry as a symbol of existential entrapment and which now gets a sinister historical confirmation in the image of barbed wire which surrounds him in the camp (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 124–126). Unlike Petrović (and, as we will see, unlike Davičo), Dedinac feels overwhelmed by the crushing weight of the dead on whose behalf he feels called upon to testify and doubts the existence of a moral community which would lend its ears to his testimony (Dušanić, 2021, p. 163). Nevertheless, he perseveres in his witnessing act: in the different poems, he reaches out to his camp inmates, especially those who had more traumatic experiences than him (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 159–160), but also to ethnic ancestors, ancient Slavs (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 158–159), and his literary forerunners, such as Stendhal (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 150–151), all of whom spent time in the Silesian mist. Dušanić demonstrates that the changes Dedinac made in the subsequent editions of the poems were not always clear cut: whereas some of them pointed towards the strengthening of the testimonial contract (e.g., placing the programmatic poem "Remember!" at the very end of the collection; see Dušanić, 2021, pp. 133–134) some others hinted at its loosening

in favour of presenting poems as stand-alone aesthetic units (e.g., the removal or displacement of the explanatory notes and fusing different voices into one; Dušanić, 2021, pp. 126–127, 138). If anything, these changes indicate that, after the first edition of the poems, Dedinac toyed with different aesthetic strategies of how testimony could be taken further; on the whole, they mean that there is a modal shift as testimonial reading ceases to be mandatory and tends to become optional. Yet, as Dušanić shows, even in poems which appear fully decontextualised after the removal of explanatory notes, or through a poem's appearance in a different work, there remains a possibility of a testimonial reading through contextual pressure of other units (Dušanić, 2021, p. 164).

The third interpretative chapter, "I Hand Over to History the Material of My Heart: Oskar Davičo as a Witness of Political Violence," explores the prison as an exemplary institution of class repression and political activism. As a member of the outlawed Communist Party, in the interwar period Davičo was imprisoned along with a number of other prominent Communists and reflected on the experience in his subsequent poetic works and prose. It is worth noting that Davičo did not make substantial revisions that could be profitably compared with the original. Consequently, Dušanić structures her argument in a slightly different way, opting to include four different poetic volumes which dwell on this topic and display testimonial aspirations: *Pesme* [*Poems*, 1938 (Davičo, 1938)], *Zrenjanin* [Zrenjanin, 1949 (Davičo, 1949)] *Višnja za zidom* [*Cherry behind the Wall*, 1950 (Davičo, 1950)], and *Hana* [*Hannah*, 1951 (Davičo, 1951)]. Differently from Dedinac, Davičo never concealed his faith in the testimonial capacities of his poetry (Dušanić, 2021, p. 196); differently from both Dedinac and Petrović, he supplemented his testimony with overt political activism (Dušanić, 2021, p. 198). One of his poems features the emotionally charged, programmatic image of the imprisoned poetic subject confidently handing over the material written down in his heart to the well-minded posterity, the latter being likened to the blue sky contemplated through the prison bars (Dušanić, 2021, p. 224). More importantly for testimony as speech genre, his poems reference the prison inmates, both those who served their sentence with him (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 205–207) and those who spent time in his solitary cell before him (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 190–193). At the same time, he projects a collocutor, who can be real or imagined (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 189–190), an in-text representative of the moral community that is expected to pay heed to the testimony. The poem's testimonial discourse becomes the meeting ground for the community of victims and the community of readers. In addition to

the close reading of Davičo's poems, a particularly valuable aspect of this chapter consists in its helpful distinctions between testimonial poetry and other related genres. The first among these is commemorative discourse: Dušanić discusses how elegy has a different priority in that it mourns the loss of lives rather than testifying on their behalf (Dušanić, 2021, p. 210). The second genre is political poetry and propagandist slogan-shouting, of which there is no shortage in some of Davičo's poems. Whereas testimonial impulse can coexist with commemorative (Dušanić, 2021, p. 209) and even ideological impulses in the same poem (Dušanić, 2021, p. 218), and the interpretative community is free to emphasise one or the other aspect, the same cannot be said of testimony and political propaganda: they are entirely incompatible and generate incoherent poetry (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 218, 224–225).

Dušanić's concluding chapter revisits the methodological assumptions, summarises the key findings, and gives some important hints about what these findings may mean for our understanding of testimonial poetry in general and these three poets in particular. She starts with a reminder that there definitely *are* poems which allow testimonial reading and that some among them actually necessitate such reading – any other conclusion would be ignorant, heuristically insignificant and possibly unethical (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 227–228). She then goes on to list the different signals of testimoniality that came up in her analyses: a) textual indicators (the poet's explicit self-identification as the subject of the poem); b) paratextual indicators (titles, dedications, explanatory notes); c) moral pressure to testify (often indicated by imperative mood or various nudges) (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 228–231). While such indicators have clear analogies across testimonial discourse as a speech genre, there is an additional set of characteristics which makes testimonial poetry very different from non-poetic forms of witnessing (Dušanić, 2021, p. 231). Dušanić talks of a reduction of differences between the author and the source which could also be described as presentifying: present tense, deixes and epiphanic claims are variously used in poems to convey a sense of immediacy which would be out of place or at least require a supplementary reason in, for example, a court deposition (Dušanić, 2021, pp. 232–234). On the subject of speech genres, Dušanić takes the opportunity to clarify that prose and poetic testimonies equally aspire to authenticity but configure it in different ways: whereas the laws of (narrative) probability tend to gain the upper hand in prose testimonies, in poetic testimonies one is guided by an arguably more elusive factor, namely the relationship between the object, the stylistic register and the tone of speech (Dušanić, 2021, p. 235). The fact that

the testimonial poetry of Petrović, Dedinac and Davičo came to recognition with such a significant delay can be put down to a number of factors: the global tendency to favour testimonial prose; the local political circumstances in Yugoslavia, which initially discouraged surrealist poetics and personal confrontation with history; poets' habit to publish their testimonial poems in heterogeneous volumes which exhibit other poetic genres, making it more difficult to tell the difference between them (Dušanić, 2021, p. 236).

In addition to the valuable insights in the individual chapters, a number of core methodological standpoints and critical qualities shine through in Dušanić's study as a whole. As a literary critic, Dušanić is a strong advocate of the idea of *validity in interpretation* and the concomitant notion of a range of plausible interpretations which have to be arrived at by a close reading of the text and which have to be distinguished from the Scylla of interpretative monism and the Charybdis of interpretative relativism. This sober position (and its consequential critical practice) enables her to reach the balanced conclusion that while many poems which are loosely labelled as testimonial cannot be read as testimonies at all, there are others in which such reading is possible, and still others where it is actually requisite. Sticking to the criteria of interpretative validity is all the more helpful because testimonial acts and aspirations need to go through *interpretative disentanglement* from the thoroughly nonmimetic fabric of Surrealist poetry in its different shades. This disentanglement requires both critical precision and imaginative empathy, and Dušanić shows in each new analysis that she is equal to the task. Finally, by exploring complex and often meandering publication histories and by unearthing critical reviews in obscure outlets, Dušanić also shows the workings of testimonial poetry over a *longue durée*. None of the three poets considers testimony as a one-off statement (as is normally the case in court practice), nor for that matter as a closed, well-rounded whole (as seen in many Modernist poems), and least of all as a coincidental phenomenon in their writing. On the contrary, testimony comes across as a *developmental process* which makes the poets revisit their generation's trauma over a number of years, and also as a *transformative experience* which changes them forever, to the point where they retroactively interpret and retell their lives before that trauma. What is more, the testimonial contract projects – or, as Dušanić puts it, "hopes for" (Dušanić, 2021, p. 241) – a transgenerational moral community which would be willing to go through a similar growth process by means of the poets' testimonies. At the end of her study, Dušanić observes that a deep faith in poetry

as a universal ethical and aesthetic good, which sustained the testimonies of Petrović, Dedinac and Davičo, may well have vanished from contemporary poetry (Dušanić, 2021, p. 240). However, at the very least, there is a profoundly *ethical quality* to Dušanić's determination to lead the way in that imagined, "hoped for" moral community by taking the poets' faith in all seriousness and by following up on its implications.

On the whole, Dušanić has successfully articulated the concept of testimonial poetry as a distinct genre in the Serbian literature of the 20th century and set this concept into the relevant poetic and political context. Theoretically, this study takes the investigation beyond the most influential theories of poetic testimony and assumes the sound attitude that this genre includes textual as well as biographical facts and that it combines private and public concerns within a third space. This study has shown – for the first time and compellingly – that testimonies do not only speak about different times and generations but also address different times and generations, making chronological changes and adjustments constitutive for the genre. In terms of interpretation, Dušanić's study offers a new reading of the poetry of Petrović, Dedinac, and Davičo – one that focuses on subcanonical poems that have never been explored in conjunction with one another. This enables her to reveal a number of illuminating analogies and contrasts between the three poets. From the comparatist perspective, at strategic points in the argument Dušanić goes well beyond the corpus of these three Serbian poets and adduces examples of testimonial poetry in other contemporary literatures, both larger, such as American and Russian, and (comparatively) smaller, such as Hungarian and Polish. No less important are Dušanić's comparisons of testimonial poetry with other genres, religious (e.g., martyrologies) and secular (e.g., elegy) ones alike. The study will also appeal to literary critics as its analyses of the testimonial poetry of Petrović, Dedinac and Davičo indicate that at least some segments of the Serbian literary canon should be re-examined with a view to integrating these bold but sadly undervalued poetic works. The study offers enough evidence to believe that these testimonial poems do not only come across as moral and aesthetic artefacts on a par with other, canonised works of those poets but actually articulate some of their obsessive topics in a more forceful way. Hence, Dušanić's original, erudite and methodologically rigorous study makes a timely and significant contribution not only to Serbian literary historiography but also to general literary theory and comparative literature.

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Świadek moralny. Poetyka świadectwa we współczesnej poezji serbskiej

Tekst stanowi recenzję książki Dunji Dušanić *Sa silama nemerljivim: Pesnici kao svedoci modernog terora* [Siły niezmierzone. Poeci jako świadkowie nowoczesnego terroru, 2021]. Zostają nakreślone założenia metodologiczne książki. Recenzent tropi jej nadrzędną argumentację i ocenia jej znaczenie w wielu kontekstach naukowych, jak literatura porównawcza, krytyka literacka i historia literatury.

Słowa kluczowe: *Sa silama nemerljivim*, literatura serbska, poezja świadectwa, wojna, obozy koncentracyjne, więzienie polityczne, recenzja

The moral witness: The poetics of testimony in modern Serbian poetry

This essay reviews Dunja Dušanić's book *Sa silama nemerljivim: Pesnici kao svedoci modernog terora* [Immeasurable Forces: Poets as Witnesses to Modern Terror, 2021], outlining the methodological assumptions of the book, tracing its overarching argument, and evaluating its importance within multiple scholarly contexts, including comparative literature, literary criticism and literary history.

Keywords: *Sa silama nemerljivim*, Serbian literature, testimonial poetry, war, concentration camp, political prison, review

Vladimir Zorić (Vladimir.Zoric@nottingham.ac.uk) – profesor nadzwyczajny i wykładowca slawistyki na Uniwersytecie w Nottingham. Jego zainteresowania badawcze obejmują tropologię wygnania w prawie, literaturze i naukach humanistycznych, a ostatnio obraz monarchii habsburskiej i Europy Środkowej w literaturach południowosłowiańskich. Jest autorem *Kiš, legenda i priča* [Kiš, legenda i narracja, 2005] i *The Rhetoric of Exile: Duress and the Imagining of Force* [Retoryka wygnania. Przymus i wyobrażanie siły, 2016], a także współredaktorem tomu *Yugoslav Literature: Past, Present and Future of a Contested Notion* [Literatura jugosłowiańska. Przeszłość, teraźniejszość i przyszłość kontestowanego pojęcia, 2019].

Vladimir Zorić (Vladimir.Zoric@nottingham.ac.uk) – Associate Professor in Slavonic Studies at the University of Nottingham. His research interests include the tropology of exile in law, literature, and the humanities, and, recently, the construction of the Habsburg Monarchy and Central Europe in South Slavic literatures. He is the author of *Kiš, legenda i priča* [Kiš, Legend and Narrative, 2005] and *The Rhetoric of Exile: Duress and the Imagining of Force* (2016), and the co-editor of *Yugoslav Literature: Past, Present and Future of a Contested Notion* (2019).

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