Rosanna Morabito

Memoirs of Trauma Halfway between History and Literature: Dragoslav Mihailović

Dragoslav Mihailović's experience in a concentration camp only appears in his literary works in 1990, with the publication of the first volume of *Goli otok*, a collection of testimonies from former inmates of the camp on the Adriatic Island. The autobiographical introduction to the first volume of *Goli otok* written by Mihailović differs from the documentary approach of the volume, enabling an analysis of the relationship between literary writing and the processing of trauma.

Dragoslav Mihailović was forced to live in the Goli otok concentration camp when he was 19 years old. Only about a quarter of a century later did he begin writing his documentary works and memoirs, for which he can now be considered 'najupornijim proučavaocem golootočke traume' ('the most tenacious scholar of the Goli otok trauma', Đurišić Bečanović 2022: 55).

Dealing with memoirs dedicated to an extremely traumatic experience, both for those directly impacted and for the society involved, makes it necessary to consider the particular ways in which trauma influences the individual, and not only the individual: 'nobody wants to remember trauma. In that regard society is no different from the victims themselves' (Van der Kolk 2014: 195).

The autobiographical discourse about trauma is different from other types of autobiographical discourses, due to the specific psychophysical conditions generated by the extreme experience. Neuroscience explains 'the difference between "narrative memory" – the stories people tell about trauma – and the traumatic memory itself' (Van der Kolk 2014: 180). By its very nature, the latter is very different from the memories that form our autobiographical narrative: since the 'lack of verbal memory is central in trauma' (Van der Kolk 2014: 182), 'traumatic memories are fundamentally different from the stories we tell about the past. They are dissociated: The different sensations that entered the brain at the time of the trauma are not properly assembled into a story, a piece of autobiography' (Van

DOI: 10.25430/10.25430/2281-6992/v13-005

der Kolk 2014: 195). The term *dissociation* is used here 'to describe the splitting off and isolation of memory imprints' (Van der Kolk 2014: 181) of trauma, which cannot be integrated into the current narrative of life on the basis of which the individual distinguishes past and present. These two forms of memory are linked to different, separate parts of the brain, which Van der Kolk calls the 'rational brain' (including the language area and consequently narrative memory), and the 'emotional brain', which triggers uncontrollable reactions at a physical level. Therefore, 'trauma is much more than a story about something that happened long ago. The emotions and physical sensations that were imprinted during the trauma are experienced not as memories but as disruptive physical reactions in the present' (Van der Kolk 2014: 205).

1. The Historical Context

Yugoslavia under Tito was internationally famous as the country of socialism with a human face. Nevertheless, it was no stranger to the Stalinist policies of persecuting dissidents.

The most systematic repressive practices, with the creation of what was a small universe of concentration camps, are linked to the country's expulsion from Cominform (*Informbiro* in Serbian and Croatian, which led to the supporters of its policy being called *ibeovci*) in 1948, following the breakdown of political relations between Tito and Stalin (Banac 1988; Jambrešić Kirin 2007; Previšić 2019, 2020). From an international point of view, Tito's refusal to submit to Cominform exposed the country to the risk of a military reaction from the colossus of the East, and at the same time turned Yugoslavia into a useful pawn for the Western powers in the struggle against Soviet Communism. Internally, the break with the USSR unleashed a fierce struggle between the internal fractions of the Yugoslav Communist Party, with the swift elimination of a considerable part of the communist cadres, who were replaced by a massive influx of new members. It was also necessary to uproot the cult of Stalin, which had been widespread in the population until then, and replace it with the cult of Tito.

Official documents identify 55,663 *ibeovci*, of whom 15,737 were arrested, but it should not be forgotten that the documents were partly destroyed (to what extent?), especially after the fall

of Aleksandar Ranković (Previšić 2020: 256). Ranković, a Serb, was the number two in the Party and the all-powerful head of the secret service from 1944 until 1966, when it emerged that he had been spying on Tito himself.

In fact, his removal marked the second major internal purge within the Party, after that of 1948 (the third one took place in 1971–72 following the so-called Croatian Spring).

The place of detention that was most notorious for its unspeakable torture was Goli otok (Barren Island), a system of camps on the small Croatian island between the coast and the island of Rab, run by the federal secret service for internal affairs, the UDBA, which, according to Previšić's data, imprisoned around 13,000 people.

Goli otok is an island on the Adriatic coast of Croatia, measuring approximately 4.5 square kilometers. Geologically speaking, it is made entirely of rock and has no natural water source. This, together with its harsh climate, has caused it to remain uninhabited. The internees of the camps, with rudimentary and unsuitable tools, were forced to build several stone and wooden buildings on the island, along with a few pathways, and planted some, albeit sparse, vegetation.[1]

The 'Goli otok system' existed from July 1949 to 1956, with four labour camps for *ibeovci* political prisoners,[2] alleged supporters of the 1948 Resolution and of the USSR (for men, women, military personnel and for 'diehards'),[3] and was then reorganised for common criminals and placed under the control of the Croatian Republican UDBA (the prison was decommissioned in 1988). The prisoners in the various camps never came into contact with each other.

The particularity of the system was that it was run by the prisoners themselves and this method was adopted shortly after the opening of the first camp on the island.[4] In theory, the police

[1] The creation of the few green areas that still exist today was also a form of torture, as the prisoners had to protect the little seedlings with their bodies for hours in order for them to take root.

[2] The camps of Sveti Grgur, Ugljan and Ramski rit were run in the same way.

[3] Women were mainly interned on the small island of Sveti Grgur (St. Gregory, in which the same methods were used and the same activities performed as Goli otok).

[4] This began with the arrival of the so-called *Bosanci* (Bosnians), a large group of 'prisoners' from the central prison in Sarajevo, some of whom were common criminals (apparently, also ex-SS and Chetniks) and former UDBA agents,

had a merely supervisory function, while all activities, including torture and abuse, were left to the prisoners, who were divided into categories according to their level of docility and readiness to abjure their 'misguided' political convictions and expose other cominformists (whether real or not).

The camps were also productive, and the work there focused mainly on the exploitation of the island's stone, but also on processing wood from the Croatian coast and, as time went by, on a variety of craft activities. Thanks to the brutal exploitation of the prisoners, the international trade in raw materials and products from the island was highly lucrative for the UDBA.

In theory, the system was supposed to politically re-educate the prisoners; in practice, however, the sort of self-management carried out there, intended to dehumanise the prisoners and turn them into docile tools in the hands of the secret service. 'Re-education' was only achieved when the prisoner 'reviewed his position' (usually under torture) and agreed to 'complete the report', the statement (given in the pre-trial prison after arrest, again under torture). This meant joining the UDBA's information network, exposing other alleged *ibeovci*, often without any grounds, and participating in the beatings of other prisoners, in order to escape the violence and terror. It should be noted that, according to many former prisoners, the so-called 'investigators' were undercover agents, sometimes criminals, often sadists. The essence of self-managed concentration camps, a sort of hybrid of Nazi, Stalinist and Yugoslav monarchist prison methods, consisted in making prisoners the torturers of their fellow inmates through a variety of practices, turning them into 'informers' (the so called *revidirci*), i.e. people who had realised the seriousness of their betrayal of the Party, had reformed and agreed to work against the enemies of the state through violence and informing. In order to regain their freedom after their re-education, prisoners had to sign a statement that committed them to never reveal the existence of the camp and to collaborate with the secret services in the future. After leaving the

trained and/or with an inclination to perform all sorts of violence. They mingled with the common prisoners and took on the management of the camp's various activities, supervising the 're-education' of the prison population from a privileged position through slave labor, beatings and both physical and psychological torture, with the aim of breaking down all possible resistance.

camp, along with all the difficulties caused by the impossibility of finding suitable employment and the destruction of their families during their absence, thanks to the persuasive and dissuasive action of the secret police, former prisoners remained under surveillance for years and years.

The world of concentration camps extended far beyond the island: there were prisons and labour camps in the various republics, where political prisoners were treated appallingly. The most notorious prisons for the detention of so-called cominformists included those of Ramski Rit, Glavnjača (Belgrade, Serbia), Stara Gradiška (Croatia, formerly the site of a concentration camp during the Ante Pavelić regime), Zabela (Požarevac prison, central Serbia), Stolac (BiH, Herzegovina), Ugljan (an island opposite Zadar), Bileća (BiH, Republika Srpska, eastern Herzegovina).

The regime's repression of dissidents and 'disobedients' continued even after the camps were closed (Antić 2016; Gruenwald 1987; Cvetković 2019).

The truth about the labour and re-education camps was carefully concealed from the population by the authorities, also partly thanks to the mandatory silence of the ex-deportees, although there were in any case secret rumors of their existence. As argued by Đurišić Bečanović (Đurišić Bečanović 2022: 54–55), for decades, the authorities made Goli otok a 'ne-činjenica' ('non-reality') and forbade semiotization by preventing it from being discussed. Meanwhile, the break with Stalin provided Tito with great advantages in international politics, as much in terms of financial support from the West, the United States and the International Monetary Fund above all (Ceh 2015), as in terms of political credibility, which made it possible for Tito to lead the creation of the Non-Aligned countries Movement.

After 1980, the year of Tito's death, it became possible to speak more freely about the most controversial topic in the history of socialist Yugoslavia, Goli otok, and literary accounts of former prisoners, memoirs and works on the subject began to be published.[5] Pseudo-historical and other types of

[5] On literary accounts before the 1980s, see Kadić 1978; Gruenwald 1987. A number of films on the subject were also released in the early 1980s. These were followed by several documentaries, starting with *Goli život* (Bare existence) shot by Danilo Kiš in Israel with director Aleksandar Mandić and aired as a series in 1990, which showed the Yugoslav general public the horror of Goli otok through the accounts of two former prisoners (Beganović 2006).

texts also appeared, often with the intention of justifying what had taken place, but for a long time there was a lack of in-depth scientific studies, partly due to the prolonged closure of the UDBA archives. In short, 'zaboravljanje golootočke traume bilo je dugoročno i relativno uspešno sprovedena strategija socijalističkog režima' ('forgetting the trauma of Goli otok was a long-term and relatively effective strategy of the socialist regime', Đurišić Bečanović 2022: 56).

Many more works on the subject of Goli otok were produced in the 1990s, along with numerous articles in magazines and newspapers (Moscarda Oblak 2007: 74). However, the great interest in Goli otok that spread throughout Yugoslavia in the 1980s was short-lived. The period during which the subject became public knowledge explains the rapid decline of the general public's attention from the 1990s onwards. The country fell apart in a decade, with new wars and the creation of new concentration camps, as well as new national states, which led to the reshaping of the collective memory of the communities involved.

In the countries that succeeded Yugoslavia, the communist victims of the communists were no longer of interest, especially because they could not be integrated into the nationalist public discourses prevailing at the time. This was due to the fact that the persecution of dissidents was not ethnically based, since in theory it was founded on ideological issues. In actual fact, it was founded on internal struggles at the top of the Party and the paranoia generated in the powerful leadership group by the clash with Cominform.

The Croatian island as an important place of remembrance for various national communities has long been the subject of debate, but it has not yet been 'memorialised',[6] or institutionalized as such (Badescu 2019).

2. Dragoslav Mihailović

Dragoslav Mihailović was born in 1930 in Ćuprija, in the Morava River region of central Serbia, a place that often features in his works with its cultural and linguistic connotations. During his

[6] Associations of prisoners, their relatives and supporters of remembrance demand that the island be turned into a memorial. In Croatia, it is important to mention the Goli otok 'Ante Zemljar' association and the Documenta center for confrontation with the past (Centar za suočavanje s prošlošću Documenta). Similar associations are also present in other former Yugoslav republics (Badescu 2019: 391–94).

high school years, he was a member of the Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia, a youth branch of the Communist Party, until its dissolution at the end of 1948, when he applied to join the Party. In 1950, after finishing high school, he was arrested as an *ibeovac* – without any real proof – in his hometown Ćuprija. He was subsequently transferred to other prisons (Kragujevac, Ada Ciganlija), ending up in the Goli otok 're-education' camp, where he spent 15 months, until the end of spring 1952. Following his release, he endured financial difficulties for a long time and was unable to find suitable and stable employment due to his past. He began publishing short stories in 1958, and literary fame arrived in 1967 with his first collection, *Frede, laku noć*, which won an award in the same year.[7] He then published his first novel, *Kad su cvetale tikve*, the first literary work in Yugoslavia that alluded to the repression against the *ibeovci* without, however, mentioning either them or the island, which immediately became a cult book. However, the play based on the book in 1969 was so explicit that it irked the Party's top leadership. It was pulled from the stage after five performances, albeit without explicit official censorship, confirming the preventive effectiveness of the police's deterrence measures against citizens, who were led to punish themselves to avoid incurring the reaction of the authorities (Perić 2012: 95). Following this event, which deeply disturbed cultured society, the book also disappeared from the bookshops and was therefore effectively banned, for nine years.

From 1971 Mihailović devoted his time to his literary activities, and received numerous prestigious prizes and awards for his books, screenplays and collections of short stories over the years. He was still controlled by the secret service however, until 1990, and was only rehabilitated in 2006. In the early 1990s he was one of the founders of several Serbian associations that exposed and studied the repression perpetrated by Tito's regime. He died in 2023 (Ninić 2017: 10–12).

2.1 Mihailović was a 'paradigmatic' figure of Serbian narrative

[7] According to the author, the prize was awarded due to a kind of misunderstanding, facilitated by the brief relaxation of police control following the deposition of Ranković, as the jury did not apparently know about his past at Goli otok (quoted in Hodel 2021: 16–17).

neorealism from the 1960s.[8] His literary works (mainly novels and short stories, but also dramas) often contain a significant autobiographical element. This 'latentni autobiografizam' ('latent autobiographism', Pantić 2009: 21), was due both to the frequent and distinct setting of his narratives in his home region, with its linguistic and cultural characteristics, and to the repetition of themes and motifs. Critics have repeatedly observed how, in his long literary career, the writer often returned to settings, character types and themes, even developing his short prose into novels, and the same applies to his theatrical works.[9]

Allusions to imprisonment and internment had already appeared in his earliest works, but only in the 1990s was there a substantial change with respect to his previous fiction (Ilić 2012). His experience in the concentration camp became an explicit and central theme, while his literary writing began to be considered as 'documentary prose' (auto-fiction, *fictio documentaria* or 'Goli otok prose') which fixed his personal memories of his camp life in literature.

The theme of the camp had actually been part of Mihailović's work for a long time, and in 1978 he began secretly contacting former prisoners and tape-recording 'conversations' with them.[10] It was only in 1990 that he published the first volume of a large collection of witness accounts, which was to grow to five volumes and around 2,600 pages, *Goli otok* (I, Mihailović 1990; II, Mihailović 1995; III, Mihailović 1995; IV Mihailović 2011; V, Mihailović 2012).

[8] 'Lični ton ispovesti i iluzija govorenija nametnuli su se kao nova paradigma' ('The personal tone of the confession and the illusion of the spoken word have imposed themselves as a new paradigm', Jerkov 1991: 121). Jerkov (Jerkov 1991) is very critical of the narrative of this new realist wave in Serbian literature and also as part of Mihailović's work. Miroslav Pantić (Pantić 2009: 23) has a different opinion, but equally describes Mihailović as a 'paradigmatic figure'.

[9] 'Skoro svaki njegov roman nalazi analogiju u nekom aspektu njegovih kraćih proznih djela. Isti je slučaj kad je reč i o dramskom opusu' ('Almost every one of his novels finds analogies with his shorter prose in some aspects. The same also applies to his dramatic work', Perić 2013: 705).

[10] Mihailović says that, for 25 years, he thought he was not up to the task of tackling a subject that would require Dostoevskii's skills. This was until the death, in 1978, of a former prisoner, considered to be a kind of living memory of the reality of Goli otok, which prompted him to start collecting the accounts of the victims (Mihailović 2016: 13–19).

After his first step in documentary writing, with the first volume of *Goli otok*, Mihailović's personal experiences of the concentration camp, as well as those of other former prisoners, appeared clearly in Mihailović's fiction with the collection of short stories *Lov na stenice* of 1993, which was followed by other literary works on the subject of Goli otok. The fate of the victims, but also the fates of their persecutors – equally tragic in their own way – remained central to his literary production.

The *Lov na stenice* collection is a hybrid work which combines autobiographical and historical testimonies in nine short stories linked by the main first-person narrator, who participates in or witnesses the events narrated, and by the space and time of the repression against real or presumed *ibeovci*, including pretrial prisons, labour camps and the widespread practice of torture (Aćimović 2018: 87–111; Kecojević 2021). The book includes parts of the memories of Mihailović and his fellow prisoners, and all the characters, both victims and persecutors, appear with their real names, which emphasizes the testimonial value of the work (Jeremić 2007).[11]

The actualization of the individual and collective trauma of the 1950s, using the tools of oral history, preceded and accompanied the literary transfiguration of the traumatic reality that continued throughout the last narrative phase of Mihailović's production.[12]

In his process of elaborating his trauma, documentary evidence and historiographic research turned out to be necessary, and expressing his traumatic experience (and his fellow prisoners' personal experience) in a literary form was also necessary (Ilić 2012: 73). Writing was no longer simply a place for condemning and preserving the memory of what those who endured the suffering *cannot* forget and what society *must not* forget, but also a place where the tormenting memory of trauma is reprocessed, which may provide at least partial relief. Mihailović's literary narrative was now essentially autobiographical, a sort of

[11] It is worth noting the negative opinion of the work expressed by Jerkov (Jerkov 1994).

[12] On the relationship between documentary and strictly literary (fictional) writing in Mihailović's oeuvre, see Aćimović, who argues there is no clear dividing line between the two, due to the presence of the same creative processes in both (Aćimović 2009).

'fikcionalizacija jastva' ('self-fictionalisation', Zlatar Violić 2009: 40) which returned the powerless victims, narrator and characters, performativity in the narration.[13] Narrating crime means reporting and condemning, 'ja koji iskazuje, promatra i sudi onom ja u iskazanom' ('the narrating self observes and judges the narrated self', Lerider 2009: 131).

Goli otok is a hybrid work, ranging from journalism to non-fiction literature and memoirs, but above all it is a documentary work, a collection of witness accounts compiled with the methods of oral history (Portelli 2014), accompanied by Mihailović's historiographic or journalistic texts (introductions, long notes) and numerous other documents (letters, lists of victims and witnesses, etc.). In the notes, especially, and in the introduction to the individual accounts, Mihailović painstakingly reconstructs the infernal trajectory of the repression of the Yugoslav regime. The author studied historiographic sources and collected all sorts of data over several decades, attempting to penetrate its intricate sociological, cultural-historical and political-historical aspects. For Mihailović, as well as for his interlocutors, the recovery of the traumatic memory of the concentration camp after decades of silence has a strong testimonial ethical value as a report against a regime and an era, in defense of the victims. Such an action takes responsibility for them as well as for the culture of the community they belong to (Zlatar Violić 2009: 42), and functions as a reminder for future generations. As Mihailović himself points out (Mihailović 2018: 184) at the end of a particularly intimate and rich 'conversation' full of Mihailović's observations and memories between the author and his friend Fedor Pifat (the first to agree to record a witness account), the mnemonic and narrative recovery of the trauma for them, as participants and victims, also serves as 'neku vrstu izlečenja' ('a kind of healing').

3. Memory, Trauma, Memories

In order to highlight the relationship between the memory of trauma and literary writing, I am going to examine the introductory text to the first volume of *Goli Otok* entitled *Kruna na zločinoj glavi* (*The Crown on the*

[13] 'Autobiografsko govorno lice postaje performativni subjekt' ('The autobiographical narrator becomes the performative subject', Smit 2009: 99).

Head of Crime, Mihailović 2016: 5–46), and in particular the first and last sections,[14] which differ dramatically from the rest of the text in terms of form and content, as well as from the author's subsequent literary writings dedicated to the theme of the camp. The first part of this book (Mihailović 2016: 5–13) is neither documentary nor journalistic; it is an autobiographical memoir, narrated in a literary style and can be defined as a 'literary expression of a dreamlike memory'. Various themes are touched upon in the text, starting with how, 25 years later, in 1978, the author decided to collect the witness accounts, and on what criteria he based his choice of interlocutors (high moral standing and sincerity, extensive experience and knowledge of the subject, and, finally, good expressive skill). Many of the former prisoners he contacted refused to cooperate, because they were unable or unwilling to speak difficult truths about events 'izvan humanističke istorije sveta' ('outside the humanistic history of the world', Mihailović 2016: 20). The readers of the book are also characterized in a certain sense: 'ovo nije knjiga za ljude koji rigidno drže do svog visokog mišljenja o ljudskoj vrsti' ('it is not a book for people who are rigidly attached to their high opinion of the human race', Mihailović 2016: 20). Many pages are dedicated to the criticism of official historiography on the subject, many to historical events and Yugoslavia's relations with Eastern European countries from 1948 onwards. The West is also criticized, since it supported Tito's Yugoslavia economically for its own political interests, because it was anti-Soviet, without taking into consideration the real lack of democracy in the regime. Moreover, there are reports about the national composition of the population of prisoners and numbers concerning the various types of repression, data that are not and cannot be confirmed by documents. The last part of the text (Mihailović 2016: 44–46) abandons the journalistic-historical tone once more, without, however, qualifying as a memoir, and, together with the first part, forms a 'literary' frame that offers many insights into literature as an expression of trauma.

3.1. 'Muči me jedan san, za koji znam da nije san' ('I am tormented by a dream that I know

[14] The book is divided thematically into several parts separated by spacing. Ilić (Ilić 2012: 72) highlights its 'čista literarna forma' ('pure literary form'), without however analyzing it.

is not a dream'): this is the opening sentence of *The Crown on the Head of Crime*. It is a memory that is not recognised as such, a memory that is rejected but cannot be eliminated and is always lurking in the shadows, as is common in traumatic memory. It is almost completely forgotten (Mihailović 2016: 13), and the narrator reconstructs it with his narrative memory, rationalizing it (with expressions like 'mora biti', 'nije moglo biti', 'it must have been' or 'it couldn't have been'), but which fails to emerge fully from emotional memory. It is the memory of the island seen from the sea, from the boat taking a large group of former prisoners back to the mainland after they have served their sentences and completed their 're-education'.

The autobiographical subject does not remember the exact circumstances of his release and the journey back to life 'outside', and some elements are also absent from the memories of many other former prisoners:

> *Zašto se polaska sa Golog toliko slabo sjećam? (Mihailović 2016: 5).*
> *Koliko nas je tu? [na brodu] Pripremajući ovu knjigu, to pitanje sam postavio, sigurno, više hiljada puta i valjda nijedanput nisam dobio odrešit odgovor (Mihailović 2016: 9).*
> *(Why do I remember so little about leaving the island?*
> *How many of us are there? [on the ship] While I was putting this book together, I must have asked this question several thousand times and probably not once did I receive a straight answer. Mihailović 2016: 5–9)*

The feelings that accompanied that journey are forgotten too: 'Da li sam se prema onima koji ostaju možda osećao pomalo i kriv?' ('did I perhaps feel a certain amount of guilt about those left behind?', Mihailović 2016: 5). In the memory, the place was 'potpuno nestvarno. Onog časa kad se odmaknem od njega, znao sam, više neću verovati da je takvo mesto zemaljska kuga uopšte mogla poroditi. A on je ipak ostajao upravo tamo' ('completely unreal. The moment I left it, I knew I would never again be able to believe that such a place could have been generated by the terrestrial globe. And yet it was still right there', Mihailović 2016: 5).

Some memories of people and events that took place on the island delay the description of a

crucial scene. In the crowded boat that slowly sails along the coast, no singing (frequent and compulsory on the island) can be heard and the atmosphere is heavy. Everyone is burdened by having been obliged to sign a pledge to become an informer for the UDBA, everyone has a shattered life behind them and a totally uncertain future, no one feels joy about their return to freedom. The narrator is also convinced that he will soon be sent back to the island.

He feels isolated and stares blankly into space. Until he catches sight of something: 'I onda sam to ugledao' ('And then I saw *it*', Mihailović 2016: 9, all italics in the quotations are mine, R.M.).

A dazzling white scree is described as swaying slightly (a projection of the boat's movement) and 'haotičan kao da je skrkan odnekud s neba' ('*chaotic* as if it had fallen from somewhere in the sky', Mihailović 2016: 10). Once past the rock, a 'work brigade' appears on the shoreline, which the narrator knows can consist of anywhere from a few dozen to a couple of hundred people spread out along three or four hundred meters. He wonders if they can see them, although he knows with certainty that they can. For the first time, the narrator looks from the outside at the world he had been a part of just a few hours before and the impression it makes on him is totally alienating.

The group of people on the island looks 'na pomalo neobičnu vojsku' ('like *a rather odd army*', Mihailović 2016: 10). Due to their ragged, torn greyish clothing, the men look greyish too. They are scorched by the sun, unshaven, dirty, their faces perhaps marred by something else, they look like 'nepoznate dvonožne prašnjave bube' ('unknown two-legged dusty insects'), skinny, with long arms and legs, 'štrkljasti i neskladni' ('*lanky and discordant*'), 'rade u paničnom uzbuđenju' ('working in convulsive agitation'), 'pokretima koji su odsečni, kratki, brzi, kao drveni' ('with sharp, short, quick, almost wooden' movements). No one is standing still, except for those who are pick-axing the stone; the others, in pairs, are picking up huge boulders and carrying them, hurrying all over the place, as if driven by 'mitraljeski rafali' ('machine-gun fire', Mihailović 2016: 11), then running back to pick up another boulder. It is 'kao u nemoj pozorišnoj predstavi' ('as *a silent theatrical performance*', Mihailović 2016: 12). The narrator watches, completely estranged (dissociated), although it is

something he knows very well: 'Tek usredsređeniji, primećujem da i u trčanju s teretom ima nesklada' ('*only when I concentrate more*, do I notice that, in the running with the boulder, there is *discordance*' (Mihailović 2016: 12). Some slip, sometimes the person at the front of the pair is pushed by the one at the back or pulled by others with a kind of halter. This continuous and discordant motion along the whole line looks like a 'skakutav, iskrivljen balet' ('ungainly, jumping ballet', Mihailović 2016: 12). There are moments when the running stops, as if someone is refusing to work. The narrator knows that this is not possible, that no one would voluntarily refuse, and yet, totally disassociated, he asks himself: 'Pitaju li se oni to: šta je sad opet?' ('Are they wondering what is happening again?', Mihailović 2016: 12). Then everyone stops, drops their load and goes to where the interruption happened, until the person who caused it disappears from view, while the men gathered around h i m agitate their hands and feet. It is a beating. Meanwhile, on the other side they scurry around even more furiously, as if – according to the narrator – the others want to distinguish themselves from those who have thoughtlessly caused the interruption.

'Dva-tri minuta brod se vuče kraj tog prikazanja; ali i kad ga mimoiđe, ja se kao omađijan osvrćem za njim, i za sve to vreme otuda ne dođe ni jedan jedini glas' ('For two or three minutes the ship slowly advances alongside that *vision*; but even when it has sailed past it, I turn to look at it as though bewitched, and *all this time not a single sound can be heard*', Mihailović 2016: 12). At times, the subject has the impression that he can see gaping mouths, faces which have actually become purple from screaming, but 'ne, ništa od toga. Ona su sasvim bezoblična i mrtvački ozbiljna i deluju kao da im glasno izražavanje osećanja, prosto, ne priliči' ('no, there is none of this. The faces are completely *expressionless and deadly serious*, giving the impression that *expressing emotions out loud is simply not appropriate for them*', Mihailović 2016: 12).

As the boat sails away, that frenzied performance of wooden puppets remains completely silent in the distance, and silence reigns on the ship as well.

That silent scene, watched from outside in slow motion and with an absolute sense of extraneousness, clearly expresses his dissociation from his emotional memory.

This sort of 'dreamlike memory' contrasts with the flat, realistic style of the narrative memoirs that appear in the writer's literary works. The silence of the distant gaze, emphasized repeatedly, is in stark contrast with the memories of many survivors who talked about the infernal din of shrieks, beatings, moans, chants and slogans that accompanied their existence at Goli otok.

Despite the enormous amount of documentary material published, the theme of Goli otok remains constant in Mihailović's literary writing, as if due to some sort of obsessive compulsion. We know that trauma remains indelibly etched upon the victims, but also that 'Telling the story is important; without stories, memory becomes frozen; and without memory you cannot imagine how things can be different' (Van der Kolk 2014: 220).

3.2. 'Potekao iz politike, zločin Golog otoka se samo politikom ne može objasniti' ('Triggered by politics, the crime of Goli otok cannot only be explained by politics'): this is the incipit of the last part of the text examined, which delimits the literary 'frame' of *The Crown on the Head of Crime* (Mihailović 2016: 44).

Here the Mihailović's gaze extends to the anthropological and ethnological dimension of Goli otok and its memory. From the very first stories whispered by survivors to a few trusted individuals, the Goli otok phenomenon turned into the subject of an underground popular narrative, and quickly became part of the cultural heritage of the peoples of Yugoslavia. A secret story yet known to all which, changing through oral transmission, spread unstoppably, like a kind of popular belief, encouraged, rather than obliterated, by forty years of complete official denial.

As with all stories of extreme trauma, 'užas koji je vejao iz onog šapata bijo je do te mere nestvaran' ('the horror that emanated from that whisper was so unreal', Mihailović 2016: 45) that it could only resemble ghost stories.

> Istina o tom užasu bila je toliko fantazmagorična da je svako izdvojeno, određeno kazivanje o njemu ispadalo pomalo lažno. Istina o neuhvatljivom može biti jako neistinita. (The *truth about this horror* was so *unreal* that every single story about it was inherently a bit untrue. The *truth about what is inconceivable* can be really *untrue*, Mihailović 2016:

45).
Bol, patnja i užas na Golom otoku bili su toliko nestvarni da ih dobro može iskazati jedino potpuno slobodna imaginacija narodnog predanja.
Pristupajući radu na ovoj knjizi kao svedok, žrtva i učesnik, i tražeći kao saradnike druge svedoke, žrtve i učesnike, znao sam da ćemo svi zajedno, a ponajpre ja, biti nedostojini istine o kojoj želimo da govorimo. [...]
Zato mislim da se prava istina o Golom otoku nalazi u legendi o njemu. [...] Tek tamo, negde u udaljenoj, mračnoj visini, nalazi se mračna, žalobna istina o nama

(The pain, suffering and horror at Goli otok were so unreal that they can only be properly expressed by the completely unfettered imagination of folk tradition.
As I set to work on this book as a witness, victim and participant, and sought out other witnesses, victims and participants as contributors, I knew that all of us together, myself first and foremost, would be unworthy of the truth we wanted to speak about. [...] That is why I think *the real truth* about Goli otok is to be found in the *legend* about it. [...] Only there, somewhere in the far dark heights, lies *the dark mournful truth* about us, Mihailović 2016: 45–46).

Those who study trauma, record the immense difficulty patients have in talking about a reality that is unacceptable, unbelievable, unreal: 'the essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable' (Van der Kolk 2014: 196). For much of his life, through his narrative, documentary and journalistic writing, Mihailović countered the unspeakable essence of evil (historical, political and anthropological) that dominated the experience of Goli otok as a whole, with its premises and consequences, which aimed to erase the individual and his humanity. The unspeakability of trauma is what Mihailović translates as 'unreality' and entrusts to legend.

The research presented in this article was conducted within the framework of the PRIN 2022 PNRR project “Literature of Socialist Trauma: Mapping and Researching the Lost Page of European Literature (LOST)”, ID: P2022Z45X8, CUP: B53D23029360001, Principal Investigator: Andrea Gullotta (University of Palermo). The project was funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research (MIUR) under the 2022 PRIN PNRR Call for Proposals, Directorial Decree No. 1409 of September 14, 2022. The present article was translated into English from Italian using the project's funds.

Bibliography

Aćimović 2009: Aćimović, Mileta Ivkov. 2009. ‘Istorija, biografija i priča. O ličnom i narativnom identitetu u nefikcionalnoj prozi Dragoslava Mihailovića’ in *O delu Dragoslava Mihailovića*, ed. by Dejan Ajdačić and Zoran Momčilović, (Vranje: Učiteljski fakultet, Centar za izdavačku delatnost), 32–38

Aćimović 2018: Aćimović, Mileta Ivkov. 2018. *Proza Dragoslava Mihailovića, doktorska disertacija* (Beograd: University of Belgrade) <https://uvidok.rcub.bg.ac.rs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2650/Doktorat.pdf?sequence=2&isAllo-wed=y> [accessed: 16 April 2024]

Antić 2016: Antić, Ana. 2016. ‘The Pedagogy of Workers’ Self-Management: Terror, Therapy, and Reform Communism in Yugoslavia after the Tito-Stalin Split’, *Journal of Social History*, 1(50): 179–203

Badescu 2019: Badescu, Gruia. 2019. ‘Entangled Islands of Memory: Actors and Circulations of Site Memorialisation Practice Between the Latin American Southern Cone and Central and Eastern Europe’, *Global Society*, 33(3): 382–99 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2019.1598946> [accessed: 24 March 2024].

Banac 1988: Banac, Ivo. 1988. *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press) https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv75d52q [accessed: 18 July 2024].

Beganović 2006: Beganović, Davor. 2006. 'Jugoslavenska varijanta stal'inizma: Goli otok i Goli život', *Zbornik Matice srpske za književnost i jezik*, 2(54): 115–37

Ceh 2015: Ceh, Nick. 2015. 'Under the iron heel of western financial institutions: the collapse of communist Yugoslavia', *The Saber and Scroll Journal*, 1(4): 71–88

Cvetković 2019: Cvetković, Srđan. 2019. 'Delovanje 'unutrašnjeg neprijatelja' u Srbiji 1968–1975', *Istorija 20. veka*, 2(37): 239–56 https://istorija20veka.rs/activity-of-inner-enemies-in-serbia-1968-1975/ [accessed: 19 March 2024].

Đurišić-Bečanović 2022: Đurišić-Bečanović, Tatjana. 2022. 'Zaboravljanje traume – Goli otok u jugoslovenskoj semiosferi', *Kultura Słowian. Rocznik Komisji Kultury Słowian Pau*, XVIII: 53–65

Gruenwald 1987: Gruenwald, Oskar. 1987. 'Yugoslav Camp Literature: Rediscovering the Ghost of a Nation's Past- Present-Future', *Slavic Review*, 3–4(46): 513–28 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2498101> [accessed: 10 July 2024]

Hodel 2021: Hodel, Robert. 2021. 'Politički konteksti stvaralaštva Dragoslava Mihailovića' in *Književno stvaralaštvo Dragoslava Mihailovića, Naučni skup Književno stvaralaštvo Dragoslava Mihailovića*, ed. by Emir Kusturica (Višegrad: Andrićev institute), 11–27

Ilić 2012: Ilić, Branko. 2012. 'Narativni model dokumentarne proze Dragoslava Mihailovića', *Uzdanica*, 2(IX): 65–77

Jambrešić Kirin 2007: Jambrešić Kirin, Renata. 2007. Šalje tito svoje na ljetovanje!: ženska trauma i arhipelag Goli, *Treća*, 1(IX): 9–38

Jeremić 2007: Jeremić, Ljubiša. 2007. '*Prizivanje priče iz istorije u Lov na stenice*' in: Jeremić, Ljubiša, *O srpskim piscima* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga), 192–97

Jerkov 1991: Jerkov, Aleksandar. 1991. *Od modernizna do postmoderne. Pripovedač i poetika, priča i smrt*, (Priština – Dečje novine, Gornji Milanovac: Jedinstvo)

Jerkov 1994: Jerkov, Aleksandar. 1991. *Stenice i istine* [prikaz knjige], *Borba*, 20. januar, III

Kadić 1978: Kadić, Ante. 1978. 'The Stalin-Tito Conflict as Reflected in Literature', *Slavic Review*, 1(37): 91–106

Kecojević 2021: Kecojević, Milica. 2021. '"Lov na stenice" kao oblik pripovednog venca' in *Književno stvaralaštvo Dragoslava Mihailovića, Naučni skup Književno stvaralaštvo Dragoslava Mihailovića*, ed. by Emir Kusturica (Višegrad: Andrićev institute), 125–50

Lerider 2009: Lerider, Žak [Le Rider, Jacques] (2009), 'Pamćenje i zaboravljanje – Sigmund Frojd i "izlečenje kroz pisanje"', *Polja*, LIV(459): 119–32 <https://polja.rs/2009/459-2/> [accessed: 30 April 2024]

Moscarda Oblak 2007: Moscarda Oblak, Orietta. 2007. Le memorie contrapposte di Goli Otok-Isola Calva, *Quaderni*, 1(XVIII): 69–101.

Mihailović 2016: Mihailović, Dragoslav. 2016. *Goli otok I* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik)

Mihailović 2018: Mihailović, Dragoslav. 2018. *Goli otok IV* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik)

Ninić 2017: Ninić, Marina. 2017. *Bibliografija radova akademika Dragoslava Mihailovića u čast osamdeset pet godina života* (Beograd: SANU)

Pantić 2009: Pantić, Mihajlo. 2009. 'Pripovetke Dragoslava Mihailovića. Slike iz turobnog doba', in *O delu Dragoslava Mihailovića*, ed. by Dejan Ajdačić and Zoran Momčilović, (Vranje: Učiteljski fakultet, Centar za izdavačku delatnost), 20–25

Perić 2012: Perić, Jelena. 2012. 'Politička pozadina drame Kad su cvetale tikve Dragoslava Mihailovića' in *Ćorovićevi susreti (22–25.9.2011). Srpska proza danas. Književno djelo Dragoslava Mihailovića. Naučni skup Hercegovina pod austrougarskom okupacijom od 1878. do 1918. godine*, ed. by Nikola Asanović (Beograd: SPKD Prosvjeta, Bileća–Gacko, Fond Svetozar i Vladimir Ćorović), 92–99

Perić 2013: Perić, Jelena. 2013. 'Skupljač današnjeg političkog pozorišta', *Letopis Matice srpske*, 189, 5(491): 705–12.

Portelli 2010: Portelli, Alessandro. 2010. *Un lavoro di relazioni: osservazioni sulla storia orale*, www.aisoitalia.org, n. 1, gennaio https://www.aisoitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Alessandro-Portelli-Storia-orale-un-lavoro-di-relazione.pdf [accessed 19 May 2024].

Previsić 2019: Previsić, Martin. 2019. *Povijest Golog otoka* (Zagreb: Fraktura)

Previsić 2020: Previsić, Martin. 2020. 'Izvorima protiv kontroverzi – slučaj Golog otoka' in *Arhivska građa u teoriji i praksi*, ed. by Srđan Cvetković (Beograd: Arhivističko društvo Srbije), 251–65

Smit 2009: Smit, Sidoni [Smith, Sidonie], 2009. 'Performativnost, autobiografska praksa, otpor', *Polja*, LIV(459): 99-106 <https://polja.rs/2009/459-2/> [accessed: 30 April 2024].

Van Der Kolk 2014: Van Der Kolk, Bessel. 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Viking Press)

Zlatar Violić 2009: Zlatar Violić, Andrea. 2009. 'Autobiografija: teorijski izazovi', *Polja*, LIV(459): 36–43
https://polja.rs/2009/459-2/ [accessed 30 April 2024].