A New Home, A New Beginning, A New Identity

Old Age, Life Narrative and Self-Presentation in the Novel *The Real Captain's Sea* by Zvonko Todorovski

Marija Geiger Zeman, Zdenko Zeman, and Mirela Holy

A Place for New Beginnings: Physical Aspects and Sociocultural Meanings of Homes for Older and Infirm Persons

In the article "The Retirement Home, Alive with Intrigue," written on the occasion of the publication of Jill McCorkle's novel *Life After Life* (2013), Paula Span notes that in recent years the topic of aging has become more visible in popular culture, with "senior communities, nursing homes and assisted living facilities playing a variety of roles." Since the middle of the last century, the organization of seniors' and nursing homes, as well as the daily lives of their residents and employees, has become the subject of numerous influential anthropological and sociological studies. Some of these studies have revealed extremely poor living conditions in these institutions (Gubrium xiv; see Zeman and Geiger Zeman 74). Research based on ethnography and qualitative methodology often refers to the well-known concept of "total institutions" developed by Erving Goffman. The interpretative paradigm developed by Berger and Luckmann and inspired by symbolic interactionism is very useful for our analysis, as is the "dramaturgical" approach of Goffman himself. These authors inspired anthropologist Rene Somera, who in the 1980s carried out ethnographic research in a Philippine "home for the aged, an institution designed for elderly living" (1). We fully accept Somera's statement that this kind of institution is a physical and social space that can be analyzed in terms of geographical, physical, and social categories (Somera 9; see Zeman and Geiger Zeman 74, 75). A home for older and infirm persons is an extremely interesting, multi-coded institution that is always located in a real, physical, and geographical locality, yet it has a complex, multilayered meaning for those who live in it as well as for their families, for its employees, and for society at large. Stephen Katz argues

that the "nursing home" is "a micro-complex of architectural, administrative, financial, clinical, familial, symbolic, and emotional interactions and power relations" (204).

The plot of the 2008 novel *The Real Captain's Sea (More pravog kapetana)* by Croatian writer Zvonko Todorovski (1960–2010) centres on a home (hereafter "the Home") for older and infirm persons in Varaždin (see Somera 1997),[1] a medium-sized town in northwestern Croatia.[2] From his description of the Home, it is evident that Todorovski was very familiar with public institutions for older people in Croatia, and especially with their architectural design, interior design, and spatial layout – that is, with their "physical setting" (Somera 61). The interior of the Home suggests pleasant, almost hotel-like accommodation: a spacious lobby with a reception desk, a large "horseshoe-shaped" bar and "club seating," a "glazed lounge" reminiscent of a conservatory, a smaller room with an outdated TV and comfortable armchairs, and a pleasant restaurant dominated by warm colors and serving delicious food (even catering for the nutritional preferences of the guests; there are, for example, dishes for diabetics and vegetarians) (Todorovski 18, 20, 29).[3] A corridor to the left of the entrance leads to the office units, while the upper floors house both single and double rooms for residents, which can be reached by an elevator or stairs. There is a small kitchen on each floor where residents can prepare hot drinks and meals (Todorovski 29). It is important to note that residents can arrange their rooms according to their wishes. Thus, for example, the room occupied by the male protagonist, Franko Perić, is lined by bookshelves and so resembles a library (Todorovski 46). In addition, each room has a balcony where residents can grow flowers, and they can also enjoy the lawn and trees behind the building (Todorovski 29, 45).

The overwhelmingly pleasant interior design convincingly refutes the widespread belief (held by Franko himself) that homes for older and infirm

1 | Institutions specialized in the provision of care to older and disabled people in Croatia are called "homes for older and infirm persons." These institutions provide half-day and full-day care services and also offer help or care to older persons at their private homes (Šostar and Fortuna 40; translated by Barbara Katić). In the case of full-day care, residents receive complete services that include permanent "accommodation, food, personal hygiene mainteinance, health care," organized work activities and opportunities for the active "use of free time" (40). Almost every such institution accommodates older persons in a residential area (similar to a hotel) and runs an intensive care unit that resembles a hospital facility. The story in the novel analyzed here takes place in the residential area of the home for older and infirm persons.

2 | We are grateful to our friend and colleague Jadranka Pintarić for her recommendation that we read this book.

3 | Parts of the novel *The Real Captain's Sea (More pravog kapetana)* by Zvonko Todorovski cited in the article are translated by Barbara Katić.

persons are "dark," desolate, and sad places (Todorovski 19). In Croatia, where such institutions are frequently equated with public housing for the poor, a very gloomy image of homes for senior citizens has dominated for a long time (Geiger Zeman et al.). The family is traditionally regarded as the primary care provider for its older members, and moving to a home for older and infirm persons was considered a disgrace for both the older person involved and for his or her family members, especially the children. However, social, economic, and cultural changes as well as changes in relationships within the family have gradually led to shifts in perceptions and attitudes toward homes for older and infirm persons. Today, more and more older people decide to move into an institution of this type (Geiger Zeman et al.), resulting in excessive demand, especially in the larger cities where accommodation facilities are insufficient. For this reason, in the capital of Zagreb, ten-year waiting periods for single or double rooms in certain institutions are not unusual (Geiger Zeman et al.; Žganec et al. 182). In *The Real Captain's Sea*, both Franko (whose sister Lucija helped him obtain the accommodation in Varaždin) and Slavica Pavletić, Franko's friend and the female protagonist, face this problem.

In this context, the question about the relationship between society/social reality and art, specifically literary work, arises. From the position of the "reflection approach," art ("fine," popular, folk, etc.) "contains information about society" or "tells us something about society" (Alexander 21). On the other side, the "shaping approach" or "shaping theories" are based on the idea that "art can somehow put ideas into people's heads" or that "art has an impact on society" (Alexander 41). Both approaches show that links between society and art (or a specific literary work) are not linear and simple but multilayered, complex, and dialectical (Alexander 33). Any work of art (novel, film, painting, music video, etc.), as a "cultural product" (or cultural text), "reflects and shapes the social world in which we live" (Sutherland and Feltey vii). Sociological reading/watching of literary or cinematic fiction includes detecting, identifying, and analyzing "social experiences, institutions, and the theoretical perspectives within them" (Sutherland and Feltey xi). This argument is in perfect harmony with the statement of the famous American sociologist Lewis A. Coser, as presented in the book *Sociology through Literature* (1972):[4]

> Nothing human ought to be alien to the social scientist; if a novel, a play or a poem is a personal and direct impression of social life, the sociologist should respond to it with the same openness and willingness to learn that he displays when he interviews a respondent, observes a community, or classifies and analyzes survey data. (xvi)

4 | About dialogue between sociology and literature, see Geiger Zeman and Zeman 227, 228.

In this chapter, we turn to a novel that offers "a personal and direct impression" of an extremely important aspect of contemporary social life that we have studied in homes for older and infirm persons in Croatia using qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, participant observations, focus groups, etc.). In *The Real Captain's Sea*, Todorovski skilfully combines elements of fiction with descriptions of the specific social, cultural, and economic contexts in which older people live in Croatia, organize their lives, and spend old age in institutional settings. This novel is thus very useful for reading through a sociological lens.

The basic prerequisite for the successful adaptation of older persons to a new and institutional environment is their autonomy to make decisions and their free will to move to a home for older and infirm persons (Geiger Zeman et al.). In the novel, Franko and Slavica, like their friends Professor Bučić and Doctor Lipovac, come to the Home in Varaždin voluntarily. Although readers do not learn about the factors that motivated Bučić and Lipovac, it is evident that Franko and Slavica each had different reasons for moving to the home.

The main reasons behind Slavica's arrival at the Home were intergenerational misunderstandings and disharmonious relationships within her immediate family. Unlike Franko, who has no children, Slavica is the mother of two adult married sons, Dalibor and Vladimir, who take care of her "as much as they can" and help her financially (Todorovski 74). However, she does not consider living together with them and their families to be a viable long-term option (Todorovski 74). Until now, Slavica has spent her life in Vinkovci, a small town in eastern Croatia. As her house was devastated during the Homeland War (1991–95), she lived with her son Dalibor for some time. The situation was bearable while her grandchildren were small and she was taking care of them, but as they grew older she began to feel that she was a burden in the small apartment where they all lived, and the relationship with Dalibor's wife was far from harmonious (Todorovski 75). She then went to stay with Vladimir, but since the situation there was even worse, she decided to move to a home for older and infirm persons until her house was rebuilt. Due to very long waiting times for a place in a home for older persons in the nearby town of Osijek, she came to Varaždin, where she was able to obtain a single room after only two months (Todorovski 75). Her new home accommodates people whose "children do not want to live with [them] anymore" as well as those left alone (Todorovski 57). The novel does not discuss the reasons behind people's arrival at the Home; the important thing is that the novel's characters are fully aware of the fact that some of the Home's residents have good pensions or are financially supported by children and/or grandchildren (Todorovski 19, 20), allowing them to stay in this institution and easing their lives there.

Chronological age as a dividing line between youth and old age is reflected in the spatial settings of the novel: some of the locations are determined by

the age structure of their permanent and occasional users and visitors. For example, the café in the center of town is described as a space dominated by young people, while the Home appears as its opposite. It is an institution, a place intended for people aged over 65; Todorovski describes it as a kind of "island" that is actually "only a seemingly isolated place because it could be reached as well as any other place in town whenever one wished" (45). However, the Home is a segregated locality where older people are separated from the younger and where the physical accessibility of the residents does not annul a certain existential discontinuity between them and the rest of the world (Stone 63). As an institution determined primarily by the age of its residents, the home for older and infirm persons produces common images that reflect different age stereotypes; this is evident even in the official name of such institutions. As mentioned above, in Croatia this type of institution is officially called a "home for older and infirm persons." The name implies that old age and infirmity – and in Slavica's opinion, also solitude – are "the core of powerlessness" (Todorovski 21). They are inextricably linked and mutually conditioned. The noun *infirmity* is often defined as a mental or physical failing or weakness, and it is frequently erroneously associated with older age alone.[5] Therefore, the very name of the institution permanently confirms this stereotype and the unfounded "commonsense" belief of the mutual conditionality of old age and disability (Stone 62, 63).

If we focus on the social aspects of everyday life in the home for older and infirm persons, it is evident that many people are involved – from residents to employees and visitors (for example, family, volunteers, students, and so on) (Somera 74). Todorovski deals mainly with the relationships and social interaction of the residents, primarily Franko and Slavica, giving only fleeting and partial information about the other types of relationships inside the Home, but even these few episodes provide a deeper insight into the network of social relations within this micro-social universe. As in every institution, the people interacting there are of different backgrounds and have diverse experiences and lifestyles, while their relationships and daily lives are guided by certain formal rules laid down by the Home. However, it is clear that some of these rules are not consistently enforced; indeed, their non-compliance is tacitly tolerated (for example, although smoking is prohibited, some residents still smoke) (Todorovski 105). Another important aspect of life in the Home is routine (Geiger Zeman et al). In fact, as Berger and Luckmann observe, "all human activity is subject to habitualization" (70), since activities that we frequently repeat form patterns that can be reproduced with little effort, liberating us from the burden of choice and thus bringing psychological relief (70, 71). It is important to point out that routine and the predictability of life in the Home, as

5 | "Infirmity." *Vocabulary.com*, https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/infirmity.

is emphasized by Todorovski, should not be understood as the performance of actions that have lost sense for the individual. As Berger and Luckmann clarify, "habitualized actions" have meaning for individuals, yet their significance is not constantly redefined anew but is rather "taken for granted" (71). Todorovski points out that along with the formal, externally imposed rules of the Home, life there is also managed by old age as the supreme master whose laws and regulations the residents must obey (73). Age and youth, past and present, are themes that pervade Franko's and Slavica's everyday conversations and lead us into the social subworlds and friendship networks that exist within the social reality of the Home, also revealing an intriguing aspect of their interpersonal relationship.

Past and Present as Youth and Old Age

In their daily communication and life narratives, Franko and Slavica discuss, among other things, universal human themes, the past and present, old age and youth, truth and lies, authentic and inauthentic life, and friendship. The novel is interesting primarily because it reflects these important philosophical (for example, transience of life), anthropological (for example, identity issues and the narrative dimension of identity), sociological (for example, the organization of institutional care for older persons, friendship, and social relations within an institutional context), and gerontological (for example daily routines of older persons) topics, demonstrating their deeprootedness in the context of personal biographies and the broader sociocultural framework in which the protagonists are embedded.

These themes of youth, old age, and the transience of life are present in Slavica's and Franko's recollections of people in the past as well as in their interpretations based on idealized images of youth. This indicates two important things: first, youth and old age are constructed categories imbued with different meanings, and second, individual interpretations of youth and old age are rooted in everyday and commonsense knowledge, which often implies and supports age-related stereotypes and reductive collective narratives. This helps to maintain "the binary opposition of 'young' and 'old'" (Kriebernegg and Maierhofer, "Ages" 9). Slavica's perception of old age is not static. At first, she is predominantly negative and pessimistic, caught in a narrative of "loss" (Baars 106, 107) and "human decline" (Wangler 114) rooted in her personal biography and the lived experience of sacrifice, loss, personal unfulfillment, and dissatisfaction with both her current and her previous life. From her contemporary viewpoint, the past was pleasant and good, though it did not seem so at the time. Resigned and disappointed, she no longer wants or expects anything from life. She believes that old age is "a time when there is no more present"

(Todorovski 21) and when the only things left are memories of the "good old days."

Franko's position and his interpretation of old age are more complex and ambivalent because they are composed of elements that suggest an understanding of "aging as a dialectic of loss and gain" (Baars 106). To Franko, old age is a time for a "new beginning" (Wangler 115) or "a positive opportunity to embark on a new life" (Grebe et al. 89). Released from numerous restrictions and previous responsibilities, he now has the opportunity to occupy himself with self-realization and the realization of many of his previous aspirations. He responds to Slavica's (age) pessimism with a positive image of "old age as superiority" (Wangler 115), that is, a time marked by maturity and wisdom (Todorovski 21). On another occasion, Franko, in conversation with Doctor Lipovac (after it is revealed that Professor Bučić actually holds a PhD in physics), defines old age as a period in which interests and priorities are changing (for example, titles and status are no longer so important) (Todorovski 64). Nevertheless, though he would no longer want to be a young man of 20, a story about events lived in the past is a reminder of youth, good times, and "the good old days": "Youth is a damn beast. And what is worst, the older you get, the more beautiful it seems" (Todorovski 54). Alongside youth and old age, the important reference points around which the story develops are the complementary coordinates of past and present. For Franko, his change of residence opens the opportunity to view his past from the present position of his older years.

The Brief History of a Friendship

Friends occupy an important place in the lives of people of different ages. Specific forms of interpersonal relations have different meanings for individuals, and in academic literature, there are various definitions and diverse approaches to the study of social relationships of this type. Precisely these insights suggest that the category of friendship is very wide and flexible. Scholars distinguish between different types of friendship, for example, "simple friendship" ("associate, useful contact, favour friend, fun friend") and "complex friendship" ("helpmate, comforter, confidant, soulmate") (Spencer and Pahl 60). According to Graham Allan, "normative definitions of friendship" highlight some of the crucial features of this relationship: egalitarianism, reciprocity, and symmetry (qtd. in Policarpo 174). Thus friendship is determined primarily as "person-oriented" and bringing "intimacy and enjoyment" to all parties involved (Policarpo 173). In the broadest sense, friendship pertains to informal relationships between people who visit each other, spend time together, discuss (usually personal) issues important to them, consult or support each other mutually or even materially (Claude S. Fischer, qtd. in Policarpo 172; Spencer and Pahl 59).

In a narrow sense, friendship involves "closeness and intimacy" (Malcolm R. Parks and Kory H. Floyd, qtd. in Policarpo 172). Of course, these two qualities of friendship are complex. "Closeness" covers a wide range of "emotional, cognitive" and even physical intimacy (Policarpo 172), while "intimacy" involves "self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, unconditional support, physical contact, trust, (sharing) activities and sexual contact" (Michael Monsour, qtd. in Policarpo 172). Real friendship relations, of course, deviate from this somewhat idealized definition. Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl define friendship as a kind of "personal community" with different forms (32) and functions for the people involved. In their study, they offer an answer to the seemingly simple question, "What is a friend?," establishing that friendship is a relationship with a specific quality: it is chosen between persons "who have something in common" (for example, "the same sense of humour or similar interests," place of residence, lifestyle, etc.); these individuals "enjoy each other's company," visit each other, go out, communicate directly or indirectly (by mobile phone, telephone, email, social networks, etc.) or perform certain activities together (for example, exercising, walking, painting, learning foreign languages); they give each other practical and "emotional support," feel comfortable together, confide in each other, and feel a mutual obligation to one another (Spencer and Pahl 34, 59).

Like life itself, friendship is not a static form. It is, rather, a procedural, fluid, and changing relationship. In this respect, Spencer and Pahl talk about "friendship career" or the "history of friendship, that … can follow a number of different" and unpredictable "trajectories" (72). Franko and Slavica's friendly relationship undoubtedly falls into the category of "complex friendship" (Spencer and Pahl 60) and can be traced through three basic stages: the establishment, termination, and restoration of the relationship.

Friends are "chosen because of the need to reflect our own image in the other. Friends are perfect mirrors of ourselves" (Todorovski 57). Slavica and Franko's friendship commences with Franko's arrival at the Home and their encounter at lunch in the Home's restaurant. Their friendship is triggered by a very simple fact: Slavica is thrilled by the sea, although she has never seen it, while Franko comes from Split – a town on the Adriatic coast – and introduces himself as a retired sea captain (Todorovski 25). In this way, "one side could easily give what it had in abundance, something the other side was so painfully lacking" (Todorovski 27). Slavica, when she first sets eyes on Franko, imagines that he has spent his working life as a bank director or senior bank official (Todorovski 34). The fact that friendship indeeds plays an important role in the lives of older persons is underlined by the effect of this friendship on Slavica who, before Franko's arrival, spent her days in the Home in predictable monotony. During this time, she did not establish a close relationship with any resident. Her contacts amounted to polite greetings, participation in organized parties (at which she pretended she was having a good time), and reading, "the

only true entertainment" (Todorovski 20). It is precisely the arrival of Captain Franko that transforms Slavica from someone locked in a constant struggle with her memories into an enthusiastic and cheerful person. Her friendship with Captain Franko and his stories of ships and distant voyages allow her to compensate for the frustration caused by her being unable to realize her lifelong dreams: to visit the coast, enjoy the sea, and travel to distant countries. She believes that through her meetings with Captain Franko she will accomplish all that she has ever dreamed of (Todorovski 30). Moreover, sometimes while listening to his adventures she feels a "friendly envy" because she would like to have similar stories to tell (Todorovski 41). However, the friendship is based on the fact that Captain Franko is her opposite: "His experience transcended the majority of the books she had read. She admired the wisdom derived from real life, and Franko was just such a man. His outlooks were shaped by experience unattainable to her" (Todorovski 38). Slavica and Captain Franko are different in several respects, making evident that their characterization is linear and based on traditional binary gender divisions and double gender standards. Franko's appearance corresponds to the stereotype of the charming and physically handsome older man: gray hair, blue eyes, a flat stomach. A blue captain's uniform with golden buttons and golden-brown braids on its sleeves contributes further to his charm. In contrast, Franko's sister Lucija, one year his junior, is described as "looking older." Her completely gray hair suggests the kind, proverbial grandma, while Franko's hair, which appears almost silver, lends him a "striking appearance" (Todorovski 12). The same gender pattern is applied to Slavica's appearance. She is described as a petite, shy old lady, rosy-cheeked and with a pageboy haircut (Todorovski 21). Her stature resembles that of a 14-year-old girl, leading Franko to (patronizingly) call her "Bambina," which she adores (Todorovski 21, 41). He is, in contrast, extroverted and charming. He compliments women and kisses their hands, makes lavish declarations, and does not allow them to pay for drinks – a repertoire of behavior representing a form of "soft patriarchy" (but not in the sense as interpreted by William Bradford Wilcox[6]). In the case of Franko's relationship to Slavica, we see a form of gendered behavior in which the man takes a paternalistic and protective role characterized by elements of a traditional heterosexual relationship: flattery, making compliments, using his masculine charm, courting, treating women to drinks, and so on.

In contrast to the free, unpredictable, "real," and authentic life of Captain Franko, Slavica's life has been predictable, linear, and static. Their life narratives are imbued with so-called "spatial metaphors" (Bruner 703), which in this

6 | According to Wilcox, the term "soft patriarchy" describes "'new men' who take a more egalitarian approach to the division of household labor than their conservative peers and a more involved approach to parenting than men with no religious affiliation."

case have a gendered component. Slavica has spent her life in the domain of a predictable and safe home, "restricted by duties and bored" (Bruner 703) and in constant self-denial. The sphere of "home" included not only the private sphere of the household and family but also her monotonous job at a local library. The first tragedy to change her life was the sudden death of her husband, Andro, at his workplace, while the second was the complete devastation of the family home – the house she and her husband had built together with enormous sacrifice – during the war in Croatia (1991–95) (Todorovski 38). Among the things destroyed at that time were all photographs taken in her youth – the symbolic testament to the fact that she had once been young: "Without them, it seems as though I was never young" (Todorovski 76). Slavica learned from life experience and circumstances that "many things in life turn out against our wishes" (Todorovski 38). Thus her wish to visit the coast had remained forever unrealized as she and her husband invested their money in building a house, educating their children, and paying for their children's holidays. Now, she has no one to travel to the seaside with and no longer even feels like going. One of the reasons for this – unmistakably suggesting another internalized gender stereotype – is the belief that women cannot (or should not) visit the seaside alone (Todorovski 39). Observing and evaluating her life trajectory, Slavica cannot avoid the conclusion that (her) life is unfair and stupid (Todorovski 77), and comparing her experiences to those of Captain Franko, she concludes that all his "amazing stories" have been incomparably lovelier than her ordinary life: "It's like [comparing] *The Arabian Nights* and work in a warehouse" (Todorovski 76). The anecdotes from the life of Captain Franko represent what Bruner calls "the real world": an external, "demanding," "dangerous," "unpredictable" world, a "special place" of "excitement and opportunity" (703).

Slavica and Franko's relationship takes a radical turn quite by accident. One day, Franko's sister Lucija arrives unexpectedly for a visit just as Slavica is going to her room to fetch the figs she and Franko and had planned to enjoy with some dessert wine *(prošek)* (Todorovski 88). Slavica returns after some time, and Franko appears relieved that the two women did not meet. However, a big surprise follows: Slavica tells him of her chat with the Home's employee Snježana, which Franko at first interprets "as typical female gossip" (Todorovski 91). Here it is unnecessary to emphasize the gender stereotype produced by a patriarchal pattern that interprets every conversation between women (only) as an opportunity to exchange gossip. However, Slavica rejects his misconception, telling him that Snježana has told her that the Home is expecting a new resident: a retired sea captain, Jure Barić, from the coastal town of Šibenik. Slavica is especially excited about this news as she is looking forward to the three of them sharing stories about the sea voyages and the captain's adventures (Todorovski 92). This is the moment when Franko must admit that he is not a real sea captain after all; in fact, he has spent his working life as a

bank clerk and later as a post-office employee (Todorovski 93, 94). Slavica is devastated by this confession for two reasons: first, she has been lied to by the first man she had grown to love after the death of her husband (suggesting a romantic aspiration in her relationship with Franko), and second, it turns out that the stories she had so enthusiastically been listening to were actually all in his mind (Todorovski 95). He also admits to her that his nephew Jerko, who supposedly has been sending him figs and *prošek* wine, does not exist. Rather, Franko himself had bought them at the market and a local wine shop (Todorovski 96). After an argument and putting an end to their communication, Slavica finds herself in unbearable situation – just like Franko, who yields to depression and despair (Todorovski 99). But she finally decides to step out of the role of a shy and invisible old woman and to meet a real sea captain and hear "true, real stories of the sea" (Todorovski 101).

She approaches Captain Jure Barić while he is watching the news in the TV room and begins to question him about his sea voyages, the ports he has visited, and the adventures he has experienced. However, she is disappointed by the drabness of Jure's "maritime experience" (Todorovski 104). In his terse responses there are no signs of colorful adventures: he captained the ferry between Ancona and Split and was neither impressed nor inspired by the sea, nor did he yearn for long sea voyages or for other, distant seas. Moreover, Captain Barić does not even really look like a captain (for example, he does not smoke a pipe) (Todorovski 104). After this disappointing conversation, Slavica concludes that Captain Barić's job had actually been as monotonous and boring as her own in the library. An unexpected intervention follows on the part of Professor Bučić and Doctor Lipovac, Franko's two friends, who from the beginning have doubted the authenticity of Captain Barić. Since Captain Barić is the exact opposite of Captain Franko and diverges from accepted notions of a real sea captain – he has no stories to tell about his sea voyages nor "words of praise" for the sea; he does not sway when walking or have opinions on political issues – they conclude that he has a "dubious past," is a "murky creature" and charlatan who they decide to debunk (Todorovski 106, 107). Here, a traditional gender stereotype again becomes evident: the duo accuse Slavica of "treachery" toward the man she loves, and they interpret Slavica's "disloyalty" (Todorovski 106) again in a patriarchal frame: "a woman's heart never owned the criterion of objective assessment!" (Todorovski 108).

These events ultimately lead to the restoration of friendship between Slavica and Franko. She approaches him with the idea that she needs him and must return to him because "Barić's sea is no good" (Todorovski 113), despite the fact that Franko's stories were just a figment of his imagination. However, the restoration of friendship returns a balance to their lives, and in the end this odd couple goes to the seaside together, which is significant in multiple ways: Slavica will finally get to see the sea, and their friendly relationship will enter a new phase.

Let Me Tell Your Story: Narratives about the (Re)invented Past

As human beings "we are made up of, engage in, and are surrounded by stories," or more simply put, "our worlds are stories" – just like our lives (McLean et al. 262). As Kearney (3) writes, "food makes us live" but stories "make our lives worth living." Stories of all kinds (fictional and non-fictional) and narrative forms (novel, autobiography, etc.) are instruments for creating meaning and bringing order to chaos (Kearney 3). Storytelling "is an integral and consequential part of daily life," and narratives of all kinds are "significant sites of communication" because through making and telling stories, "people make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations" (Langellier and Peterson 1). Therefore, narratives and storytelling have multiple functions (psychological, social, philosophical, ontological, for example); stories operate "as an expressive embodiment of our experience, as a mode of communication, and as a form for understanding the world and ultimately ourselves" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 1).

Indeed, telling stories is a basic human activity: through a story, individuals explain themselves both to themselves and to others, thus providing themselves with an individual and communal identity (Kearney 3). Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that "without a story, there is no identity, no self, no other" (Lewis 505). The "case" of Captain Franko is interesting to look at more closely because it raises some important questions about the relationship between the (re)construction of identity and the (re)creation of self-narrative. It is unnecessary to especially underline here that identity is one of the key categories in modern theoretical considerations and empirical interventions in the social sciences and humanities. Identity is a "central point of human personality" (Glińska 22), as well as a "social category that is understood as the self-definition of human being" (Glińska 20). Many contemporary sociological theories clearly show that individualism – as one of the fundamental values of modernity – has enabled the individual to "become the creator of his own biography (identity)" (Glińska 22), while postmodernity, stressing the importance of constant change and the uncertainty that accompanies it, has shown "that nothing in the world is finished, closed, finally defined" (Glińska 24). However, this volatility generated by continuous change does not hinder the tendency of identity to at least temporarily rest on some choices. Moreover, according to Zygmunt Bauman, it is precisely flexibility, volatility, ambiguity, and ambivalence that allow individuals, like tourists, to autonomously and freely decide when and with which fragment (personal or external) of the world they will get in touch (qtd, in Glińska 26).

Identity and narrative are tightly connected. In their presentation of the history of the development of narrative theory, Brockmeier and Carbaugh high-

light the important contribution of the theoretical considerations of Mikhail Bakhtin, especially of his study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1999). Bakhtin draws attention to the "multi-vocal and polysemic nature of narrative" and to the "structural analogies between novelistic discourse, life stories, and autobiographical memory" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 7). For example, a "special sense of temporality, polyphony, and intertextuality" is characteristic of the modern novel but also of "the narrative construction of a life" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 7). When we discuss the identity dimension of a narrative, many questions certainly arise, but one of them is especially significant when analyzing Franko's character: What type of personality did Franko create in the life narrative that he daily recounted to Slavica?

After having considered Franko's biography and his motivation for creating a new identity rooted in an imaginary (professional) past, we conclude that it would be too simple (and superficial) to declare him an ordinary liar (which does not mean that we would justify any form of misrepresentation). Franko's situation is somewhat more complex. Namely, after spending his working life as a bank clerk and post-office employee, retirement intensified the issue of identity that was so important to him. Dissatisfied with life in Split, as well as with the fact that he had lacked the courage to realize himself professionally by becoming a sea captain, Franko decides to finally resolve the crucial life conflict between his "'surface' and 'under-the-surface' selves" (Berger and Luckmann 184) that made him spend most of his life in an ambivalent way: "I'll be what I always wanted to, and couldn't: a sea captain! But because of my age, I'll be a retired sea captain" (Todorovski 95). Retirement encourages him to create an alternative subjective reality in which he is able to realize his full potential and create a new identity based on playing the role of a ship captain. Franko's role is based on an idealized and romanticized – almost naïve – notion of a sea captain's appearance and behaviour, and what his (professional and personal) life should look like.

The invention of a new identity is a form of identity strategy that relieves Franko of his feeling of dissatisfaction stemming from the inauthenticity of his existence and also allows him to establish and maintain a friendly relationship with Slavica (as will be discussed below). Bakhtin believes that every narrative has the potential for a "different story," which is why there is a dynamic relationship between "actual stories about real life with possible stories about potential life" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 7). The identity of Captain Franko is diametrically opposed to the identity of Franko the clerk. Captain Franko's life is not trivial: he participates in the freedom and authenticity of "the real world" (Bruner 703) and experiences adventure, excitement, and suspense. His reinvented past stresses individualism and variations of a hegemonic masculinity: he is a courageous and well-paid sailor, a hero who navigates the world "according to ancient charts" (Todorovski 27), a loner dedicated and committed

to the sea, for which reason he has no family. As such, he is a sort of liminal persona, a wanderer always somewhere in between, who in direct contact with the infinity of the sea and the starry sky reflects on the human condition and his own position in the world. On the other hand, the narrative of his experienced and lived life is rooted in the contrasting sphere of "home" (Bruner 703): the monotonous and predictable life that Franko, at the moment of his confession, will call "stupid and boring" (Todorovski 94).

The narrative of his actual and truly experienced life reveals the average life of a clerk finally left by a wife tired of his stories and constant dreaming about sea voyages and ships (Todorovski 95). The lives of clerk Franko, librarian Slavica, and even of captain Jure Barić closely resemble each other, but there is one important difference: Barić never wanted anything else beyond what he had. He was not attracted to freedom, suspense or adventure, nor did he miss distant seas and unknown ports. On the other hand, unlike Slavica, who came to terms with her unfulfilled life with difficulty, though she was successful in her stoicsim, Franko's "subjectively chosen identity" became "a fantasy identity, objectified" in his mind "as his 'real self'" (Berger and Luckmann 191). The identity intervention of rewriting personal history, made real through Franko's appearance and his stories, represents a conscious switching of worlds (Berger and Luckmann 176) – the world in which Franko was a clerk giving way to the one in which he was a captain. However, in order to "confirm" this (in reality unrealized) imagination-based identity, public performance and its external recognition and validation were required. Franko had to (and could) only get the latter in a new environment where his true identity was not known. The Home offered such an environment, far from Split, where he consistently performed his new identity with the help of invented strategies of self-presentation (for example, smoking a pipe, wearing a captain's uniform, serving dried figs and *prošek*, reading books about ships, keeping a sailor bag for his clothes) and through telling his life story. This literary figure demonstrates how "listening to and telling stories" is not only "a human communication practice" but also a *"performance"* (Langellier and Peterson 2). Berger and Luckman point out that "subjective identity is a precarious entity," dependent on relationships with "significant others" (118). In Franko's time in the Home, Slavica is the leading "significant other" (occupying "a privileged position") (Berger and Luckman 171) with whom he talks mainly about his sea voyages, while to a lesser extent Doctor Lipovac and Professor Bučić also play this role.

The collapse of Franko's identity as Captain and of his imaginary world – in which he, like a mythical hero, sailed distant seas, struggled with pirates in Burma, and got into a fight with drunken Portuguese sailors (Todorovski 53, 54) – occurs when Slavica learns that all his stories were fabricated and, unsurpisingly, feels cheated. Franko bases his defense on three arguments:

1. he wanted to be a sea captain as an expression of his authentic self;
2. he had told her things that she herself had wanted to hear based on her discontent and longing to indirectly participate in the fullness of the free and authentic sailor's life (proving that the goals of storytelling are connected with the "preferences of listeners" (McLean et al. 268): "In creating stories to please listeners, people create a certain kind of self in that moment that may have a lasting impact on the self" (Monisha Pasupathi et al. qtd. in McLean et al. 268); and
3. he raises the question of the relativity of truth and lies in everyday life, which seems to refer to the famous Thomas theorem, according to which "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (W.I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, qtd. in Merton 380).

The story also reveals that it is not only Franko who has secrets. For example, Slavica eventually admits that she has been living in the Home for ten years. Although she permanently repeats that her destroyed house is under reconstruction and she will be moving out of the Home in the following year, in reality the house has "long been restored" and she has not returned to Vinkovci out of fear of loneliness and due to the emotionally difficult truth that there is no place for her in the lives of her children (Todorovski 119). Professor Bučić, meanwhile, reveals to everyone that he has been posing as a philosophy teacher while he actually has a PhD in physics (Todorovski 62). While his roommate, Doctor Lipovac, thinks this a manifestation of "the highest arrogance" clad as false modesty, Professor Bučić explains that he had hidden his title to distinguish himself from Doctor Lipovac, as he believed that the life of "two doctors in the same room, would not be good for … the polemic relationship" on which their friendship was based (Todorovski 129).

When in the end all secrets are revealed, Slavica and Franko restore their friendship and thus also Franko's identity as a sea captain and the world of his adventures, which it has been shown were of existential importance to both. Slavica concludes: "If all your life you wanted to be a captain, then be one, because you are. When will you be one, if not now? To me, only you are a real captain and only your sea is the right sea" (Todorovski 116, 117). This decision can be interpreted as a kind of emancipatory act, freeing the character of Slavica from the socially imposed norms, discourses, and limitations affecting the perception, decisions, and way of life of the individual. In making this decision, Slavica becomes an autonomous subject because – by accepting her "internal freedom" (Bakhtin 12) – she emancipates herself from the constraints of the external environment. The process by which we create a narrative of our lives (or some of its aspects), and thus shape our identity, answering for ourselves and others the fundamental question, "Who am I?," is neither simple nor easy. On the contrary, it is always about a dynamic, unstable, changeable, (spatially

and temporally) contextualized, relational, and partial construct in which lived experience and imagination, self-actualization and potentiality, past and present are intertwined, thus enabling us – from a freedom within – to communicate and present ourselves to ourselves but also to (in)significant others.

Translated by Barbara Katić

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