

Books and Leeches: Conspiracy Theory in Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literatures

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Conspiracy and Crisis

When Reinhart Koselleck published his influential study *Kritik und Krise (Critique and Crisis)* in 1959, it was immediately clear that it would open a new chapter in Western European historiography. The complex argumentation developed in the book is difficult to summarize without weakening its validity and expressiveness. Still, there are some moments in it that could be stressed and taken out of its overarching context in order to approach general questions concerning societal conditions in nineteenth-century Europe. Koselleck writes: “European history has broadened; it has become world history and will run its course as that, having allowed the whole world to drift into a state of permanent crisis.”¹ He finds the origin of that crisis situation in the period of transition from absolutism to Enlightenment. The enlighteners are those who rose up against the royal power and caused a crisis by doing so. According to Koselleck, this initial situation is conditioned by the European Enlightenment’s utopian belief in the unity of the world. While absolutism can be understood as one, almost necessary, reaction to the atrocities of civil war, the political theory of the Enlightenment was

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- 1 Koselleck 1988: 5. “Die europäische Geschichte hat sich zur Weltgeschichte ausgeweitet und vollendet sich in ihr, indem sie die ganze Welt in den Zustand einer permanenten Krise hat geraten lassen” – Koselleck 1973: 1.

formed as a reaction to the aberrations of that same sort of absolutism itself. The political theory of the Enlightenment is particularly directed at reducing state power to single persons. This is a situation in which the crisis of society seems to be inevitable. According to Koselleck, the enlighteners understood the crisis in this manner and criticized it in their publications. His main thesis is as follows:

[T]hat the critical process of enlightenment conjured up the crisis in the same measure in which the political significance of that crisis remained hidden from it. The crisis was as much exacerbated as it was obfuscated in the philosophy of history. Never politically grasped, it remained concealed in historico-political images of the future which caused the day's events to pale—events that became so much less inhibited in heading for an unexpected decision.²

Koselleck's thesis was already understood as an expression of cultural criticism.³ However, one of the book's dimensions went unnoticed for quite a long time. It was Dieter Groh who first drew attention to the fact that Koselleck's book can be read using a different code. He stresses:

Critique and Crisis is a highly sublime form of conspiracy theory. The book propagates, in seductive formulations, the conviction that the critique by enlightenment philosophers, the process that they strove for in the name of reason, and in secret circles against the absolutist princely state and their *arcana imperii* led causally to the crisis of the *Ancien Régime* and aggravated it further. Eventually, the French Revolution, with which the pathogenesis of the bourgeois world begins to be universal, is itself a consequence of the crisis initiated through the critique. Considering the findings of political and social history, this derivation, based on historico-philosophical premises of Carl Schmitt, seems to be exaggerated.⁴

2 Koselleck 1988: 9. “[D]er kritische Prozess der Aufklärung hat die Krise im gleichen Maße heraufbeschworen, wie ihr der politische Sinn dieser Krise verdeckt bleibt. Die Krise wird so sehr verschärft, wie sie geschichtspolitisch verdunkelt wird; sie wird nie politisch erfaßt, sondern bleibt verborgen in geschichtspolitischen Zukunftsbildern, vor denen das Tagesgeschehen verblaßt: umso ungehemmter konnte dieses auf eine unerwartete Entscheidung zusteuern” – Koselleck 1973: 5–6.

3 Cf. Müller 2003.

4 “*Kritik und Krise* [ist] eine höchst sublime Form von Konspirationstheorie ... Das Buch propagiert nämlich in bestechenden Formulierungen die Überzeugung, die Kritik von Aufklärungsphilosophen, der Prozeß, den sie im Namen der Vernunft und im geheimen Zirkel gegen den absolutistischen Fürstenstaat und dessen *arcana imperii*

The crisis caused by the critique is a part, moreover a central component, of the conspiracy that the enlighteners forged against the absolutist state. That is the core of Groh's interpretation. In this sense, he incorporates the element of crisis in the intellectual activity of criticizing and transfers the achievements of philosophers to an overarching conspiracy which is, in a concrete historical event, realized as an activity, an occupation almost, by conspirators who are actually the revolutionaries.

Yet there are some more moments connecting the crisis with conspiracy that should be taken into account. "Times of crisis are times of conspiracy,"⁵ emphasizes Wolfgang Wippermann in his pertinent book *Agenten des Bösen (The Agents of Evil)*. Unlike Koselleck, he does not say that the conspiracy theories are indeed the cause of the times of crisis. To the contrary, he thinks, and this is a reversal much more appropriate for our epoch, that the conspiracy theories can serve as an explanation for precarious conditions we are witnessing nowadays because of the already existent crisis. Wippermann states:

'Conspiracy theories' or 'conspiracy myths' always have an ideological character. Therefore they can be appropriately denoted as 'conspiracy ideologies'. The origin of every conspiratorial ideological thought is the belief that the absolute evil—the devil—is responsible for every malady in the world. But the devil—the personified, incarnated evil—cannot do all of the devils work on his own. He needs accomplices: the agents of evil.⁶

Koselleck writes accordingly of one mild conspiracy that is, in the strong sense of the word, not a conspiracy at all. Conversely, Wippermann postulates unambi-

angestrengt haben, hätte die Krise des Ancien Régime ursächlich herbeigeführt und dann weiter verschärft. Letztendlich sei auch die Französische Revolution, mit der die Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt universal zu werden beginne, Folge der durch die Kritik initiierten Krise. Angesichts des politik- und sozialgeschichtlichen Befundes erscheint eine solche, auf geschichtsphilosophischen Prämissen Carl Schmitts basierende Ableitung jedoch übertrieben" – Groh 1992: 278.

5 "Krisenzeiten sind Verschwörungszeiten" – Wippermann 2017: 160.

6 "'Verschwörungstheorien oder 'Verschwörungsmythen' haben immer einen ideologischen Charakter und sind daher treffender als 'Verschwörungsideologien' zu bezeichnen. Ausgangspunkt allen verschwörungsideologischen Denkens ist der Glaube, dass für jegliches Übel in der Welt der Böse schlechthin – der Teufel – verantwortlich ist. Doch kann der Teufel – das personifizierte, das leibhaftige Böse – nicht alles Teufelswerk allein tun. Er braucht Helfershelfer: die Agenten des Bösen" – Wippermann 2007: 7–8.

guous theses about cancerous conspiracy theories that, like a real plague, are infected with examples drawn from different parts of the world. Can we find a position that is able to unite the two positions or makes them at least compatible? I think that it is possible. To prove this, I will take an example from Yugoslavia and Yugoslav literatures. Moreover, I will use two different periods in the country's historical and political development, from the two respective lands that were created in its aftermath. In a sense, Yugoslavia is a litmus test to show how the conspiracy theory could be entangled in a web of lies and how the conspiratorial arrangements can be revealed as, not necessarily world-shaping, but still existent and thoroughly effective.

If one follows the history of Yugoslav disintegration, it is almost immediately obvious that its history is comprised of a sequence of narratives representing a continuous line of cumulating political and economic crises. They exploded in an apocalypse that had a devastating effect, for those involved at least, followed by a discourse of criticism that was to be found in every spectrum of political theory, from nationalism to leftist liberalism. This history offers an open field for conspiracy theories that deliver an alleged explanation, albeit the most prominent one, for catastrophic occurrences. The most pronounced conspiracy was the one purportedly created by the Vatican and Freemasons against Serbia. It is not necessary to emphasize that this theory was used as a pretext for starting the war against Croatia. But this theory was only one, if most prominent, of many that were brought into circulation during the late eighties to late nineties of the last century. Even after the official end of hostilities, conspiracy theories could be observed all over former Yugoslavia. Literature reacted to this development in society with unique vehemence.⁷ In the following sections, I will concentrate on two texts, written at different times, but which are capable of delivering a plausible clarification for the proliferation of conspiracy theories in Yugoslavia and states that emerged in the wake thereof.

The first text that I will deal with here is the story “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (“The Book of Kings and Fools”) from the collection *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (*Encyclopaedia of the Dead*, 1983) by Danilo Kiš. In a broader context it could be considered to have anticipated the attempts at conspiracy theories mentioned previously in Yugoslavia from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Kiš takes the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as his starting point. In so doing, he does not refrain from transforming it into a text with universal meaning. He uses them as a universal metaphor, as an original text, of an all-encom-

7 On the role of literature in disintegration (and integration too) of the Yugoslav society see Wachtel 1998.

passing conspiracy theory. At the same time, it serves as a projection surface for the broadening of his specific literary practice and correlates with the role of the document in literary text. Here it is important to note that Kiš recognizes the fact that conspiracy theories are inevitably connected with production of scientific discourse which is eventually revealed as a pseudo-scientific discourse. “The fact that the conspiracy theories often use a considerable inductive safeguarding suggests the suspicion that for them it is important to retain at least the outer semblance of scientificity.”⁸ Kiš’s literary representation of conspiracy theory applies a pseudo-scientific method (documents as a paradigm of historicity) to call into question this very method, or to show how its abuse can lead to pure falsification and deep falsehood.

The second text that I will deal with in this essay was written by David Albahari, a representative of the new generation of Serbian-Jewish authors. Unlike Kiš, who died in 1989, Albahari was personally affected by the catastrophe of the disintegration to a large extent. Therefore, he draws on an alternative literary procedure. His novel *Pijavice (The Leeches)* written in 2006 is set in the Zemun district of Belgrade. From there, the allegedly Jewish conspiracy spreads around the whole world. Its roots are to be sought in the deeper layers of history, in Ottoman Hapsburg times specifically. Back then, the local Jews gained their wealth in trading leeches from the Danube. This story examines the twentieth century to determine if there is any possibility of saving the world from the mischief that threatens to destroy it. The good conspirators are, however, confronted by the evil that wants to annihilate the fine social fabric of the world and throw it off course. Consequently, Albahari multiplies the possibilities of the expansion of conspiracy theories and intensifies the literary analysis of their devastating results, but at the same time asks if there is something positive we can gain from their impact. In short: Is there a benign conspiracy, a conspiracy that could lead to something that is ultimately good?

Examples from these two texts will help me to show how conspiracy theories played a role in the process of Yugoslavia’s destruction and became extremely powerful as well how they managed to substitute the foundation of society, grounded on the socialist belief in the strength of science and in its ability to explain everything, with a new foundation made of prejudices and, last but not least, based on pseudo-scientific conspiracy theories.

8 “Die Tatsache, dass Verschwörungstheorien oft mit einer umfangreichen induktiven Absicherung aufwarten, legt den Verdacht nahe, dass ihnen wenigstens der äußere Anschein der Wissenschaftlichkeit wichtig ist” – Hepfer 2015: 69.

Conspiracy Disguised as a Book

As I have mentioned previously, the book *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the urtext of the modern conspiracy theories, provides the foil for Kiš's story that tries to reveal the core of the way of thinking in the mode of conspiracy. The book itself has long since been exposed as a forgery, but it is still vehemently accepted and received as veritable.⁹ Kiš denotes the book as *Zavera* (*Conspiracy*) and the title "The Book of Kings and Fools" is a periphrastic signature. Hidden behind this disguise is deep irony, probably even sarcasm, against a text that is suitable for all kinds of readers, regardless of level of education. At the same time, it indicates that no one can be safe from being fooled by this forgery. Kiš uses a strategy of shortening and omitting, which accelerates the narration and offers a summary of the genesis and dissemination of the book, in order to represent this forgery in a plausible way in literature as well. Svetlana Boym describes Kiš's literary procedure in the following way:

Kiš ... insists on the need to return to self-reflexive modernist literature and the practices of estrangement and perspectivism in order to think through ethical ways of confronting the absurdity of evil and politics of paranoia that haunted much of Eastern European writing and life.¹⁰

What Boym here denotes as "self-reflexive modernist literature" can be, in Kiš's case, understood as "postmodernism." Kiš produces the estrangement effect addressed by Boym through the application of a non-literary practice within a literary text—a strategy that can be identified with metatextuality. Kiš had previously applied it masterfully in his *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976).

To explain the conspiracy theory *par excellence*, he narrates the history of that theory in a manner that is in itself strangely distorted or, to use Boym's terminology, estranged. The estrangement emerges out of the hybrid mixture of diverse styles within the text. The parts written in a pseudoscientific style collapse because they collide with parts of the text that are marked as strongly lyrical. Those parts are displaced in their own right, put unexpectedly in brackets

9 Numerous books revealed the fictional character of the book, found its sources and showed the ways in which it emerged from the marginal position to unbelievable prominence in the anti-Semitic circles. The most important of which are Cohn 1970 and Ben-Itto 2005.

10 Boym 1999: 99.

or in footnotes. Here is an example of the first discursive structure, the characteristic pseudo-scientific style:

We shall now try to investigate the origins of this text, glancing briefly at those who created it (endowing my insolent procedure with the prerogatives of divine anonymity), and, finally, pointing out the devils that followed from it.¹¹

And here is the one determined by lyrical literariness: “When chance, fate, and time meet in a favourable constellation, their point of intersection shall fall on that book and, like a sunbeam, illuminate it ‘with a great light’ and save it from oblivion.”¹²

If we now compare these two modes of literary discourse, we will see that the first one tends to be impersonal,¹³ while the second operates with an increased amount of rhetorical devices that are prone to the production of pure literary discourse.¹⁴ The result is astonishing and harrowing. On the one hand, there is the objectivization of something that withdraws from that very objectivity. On the other hand, there is the subjectivization of something that cannot be explained in terms of subjectivity. The impact of the intention hidden behind this technique of mixing different discourses cannot be easily explained at first glance. Svetlana Boym stresses that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* would

11 Kiš 2015: 110. “Ovim tekstom pokušaćemo da istražimo njeno poreklo, da bacimo jedan letimičan pogled na one koji su je stvorili (pridavši svom bezočnom postupku prerogative božanske anonimnosti) i, najzad, da ukažemo na pošasti koje su proistekle iz ovog gesta” – Kiš 1983: 150. The neutrality of discourse is slightly disorderly in the translation due to the introduction of the possessive pronoun “my” which is not present in the original and implementing “the devils” on the place of “pestilence” in original.

12 Kiš 2015: 130–31. “Kada se slučaj, sudbina i vreme nađu u povoljnoj konstelaciji, presek tih sila pašće na tu knjigu, osvetliće je kao sunčana zraka ,svetlošću jakom’ i izbaviti je od zaborava” – Kiš 1983: 176.

13 The best proof of impersonality is of course the use of the first person plural which is the marker of scientific objectivity. On the general role of tenses in “The Book of Kings and Fools,” their change from present to future and past, see Beganović 2007: 174–75.

14 The indications of this, even in this short passage, are numerous. For example, the inversion “svetlošću jakom” or the mixture of “chance, fate, and time” find themselves in astronomic constellations and are capable of enlightening the book and saving it “from oblivion.”

remind somebody more of a premodern than of a modern collage, written “in Borgesian fashion.” Nevertheless, “their ‘translator’/publisher Nilus is a modern author who appropriated contemporary means of technological reproduction in order to propagate a radically antimodern message.”¹⁵

Kiš’s narrative strategy is to be found exactly here. He dismantles a modern text that stages itself as premodern. The new interpretation emerges from this exposure. It clearly (and very persuasively) represents the clarified backgrounds of the cruel forgery and incredibly bold plagiarism in a new and illuminating light and does so multiple times. The story is situated at the threshold between the fictional and factual.¹⁶ It maneuvers between two poles and, in so doing, unfolds the possibility of retelling the old and well-known story in an innovative way, so innovative that it can experience unknown and hitherto unforeseen hermeneutical turns. Kiš’s provocative and ironic narrator acts as if he himself does not realize whether he operates in fiction or writes about the facts only. On the one hand, he writes a scientific explanation of the conspiracy; on the other hand, it seems to him that historiography itself became unreliable and consequently unable to deliver a plausible explanation of the improbable, even fantastical events. The scientific or documentary discourse is shaken by the introduction of obviously fictional characters who appear in the enumeration of conspirators as well as parts of the story constructed in narrative mode.

From the treasury of its ‘irresponsible and occult organization’ comes funding for such adversaries of law and faith as Voltaire, Rousseau, Tolstoy, Wilson, Loubet, Clemenceau, Eduard Sam, and Lev Davidovich Bronstein. Among those who fell prey to its intrigues are Tsar Alexander II, General Selivortsov, and Archduke Ferdinand. Its members, the executors of its will, include Machiavelli, Marx, Kerensky, B. D. Novsky and Maurice

15 Boym 1999: 105.

16 Renate Lachmann emphasizes the importance of mixture of fact (document) and fiction in Kiš’s texts as follows: “In Kiš’s prose we are dealing not only with a more or less transparent combination of factography and fiction, but also with the complicated semantics of fabricated documents, originating from the knowledge about the factual; it has something to do with the production of an artefact” – Lachmann 2011: 107 (“Es geht bei Kiš nicht nur um eine mehr oder weniger transparente Kombination von Faktographie und Fiktion, sondern auch um eine komplizierte Semantik fingierter Dokumente, die dem Wissen ums Faktische entstammen, und es geht um die Herstellung eines Artefakts”).

Joly himself (a pseudonym, an anagram in fact, whose origins are easily decipherable in the name Maurice).¹⁷

The characters from Kiš's previous texts found their place in the present one. Eduard Sam is the father from the *Family Trilogy* and Boris Davidovič Novski is the hero of the title story in *Tomb of Boris Davidovich*. The effect is ironical in two directions. The book, *Conspiracy*, is made ridiculous; but at the same time the narrator directs his irony to the supporters of the conspiracy theory, showing them how unsubstantiated their worldview is.

Two distinctly fictional characters operating in the factographic part of the story are Mister X. and the German officer Wirth. Mister X. is a white emigrant who bought the private library of the white officer Arkadij Ipolitovič Belogorcev in Istanbul. Belogorcev himself was an agent of the Russian Secret Service. In the library he finds two books—one is without a front page and the other is the *Antikhrisť* by Father Sergei Nilus. The first book is of course, *The Protocols*. Through meticulous philological analysis, caused by accident, Mister X. discovers that the book by Nilus is a forgery of the second one. Only through their parallel existence in the personal library of a stranger—that leads to simultaneous reading—can he be sure that these two books remain in ominous relation to each other. He confides this discovery in a journalist from the London *Times*. The actual conspiracy that involves the plagiarism is in that way finally revealed. The second book, the one without a front page, is the anti-Napoleonic script *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* by the Belgian Maurice Joly which was mostly destroyed by French police who hindered its smuggling into France. One copy left was subsequently used by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service in order to construct the alleged Jewish conspiracy, the ostensible aim of which was to rule the world. Kiš conveys his overarching idea in concealed form: although it is clear that the book is a plagiarism, it is nevertheless accepted and received with enthusiasm and credulity by adepts. That is exactly the central paradox of all texts at whose core there is a conspiracy theory. The more their falsehood is revealed, the more they are taken for truth.

17 Kiš 2015: 141. "Ta 'okultna i neodgovorna organizacija' plaća iz svojih mračnih fondova rušioce vere i zakona, na njenom spisku vode Volter, Ruso, Tolstoj, Vilson, Lube, Klemanso, Eduard Sam, Lav Davidovič Bronštajn. Kao žrtve njenih intriga pali su car Aleksandar II, general Selivestrov, nadvojvoda Ferdinand; njeni su članovi i izvršioći njene volje Makijaveli, Marks, Kerenski. B.D. Novski, pa i sam Moris Žoli (to je lažno ime, anagram, čije je poreklo lako dešifrovati u imenu Moris)" – Kiš 1983: 193.

How is the circle of conspiracy closed in this multi-layered and extremely complex narrative? In the end, one character appears who was until then not mentioned at all. He is introduced without warning, obviously without any direct contact with previous events represented in the text. This character is the German officer Wirth. His function in the narrative economics of the story lies in the final fusion and negation of the documentary and factography. He confirms the book's double structure, its fictionality and facticity. In a sense, he makes a holy object of it, something that reaches its fulfilment in a higher mission. Wirth carries the book as an amulet:

In the middle of it all stands Captain Wirth. And in the upper left-hand pocket of his tunic is a leather-bound copy of *The Conspiracy* published by Der Hammer in 1933. He has read somewhere that the book saved the life of a young non-commissioned officer on the Russian front: a bullet fired from a sniper's rifle stuck in its pages, just above the heart. The book makes him feel safe.¹⁸

The "truth" of the conspiracy theory finds its verification in the applicability of the book, as an object *nota bene*, in the salvation of human life. In an inverted ethical position, the narrator, who is once more revealed as highly ironic, removes any doubt that the book, *The Conspiracy*, is authentic. Its authenticity is achieved through utility. Moved back from the abstract world of conspiracy, the book has arrived in reality. It becomes the symbol of survival, the saving object, in the literal as well as figurative sense. That is a sad conclusion embedded in the generally pessimistic attitude of the *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*. In the all-encompassing tragic structure of the book, "The Book of Kings and Fools" appears as the climactic moment of revelation: the power of conspiracy that uses a forged conspiracy as a *carte blanche* for its misdeed is unabated, steady, and more stable than ever. And if we realize that Kiš wrote his story in 1983, we can see that he reports about the old evil book, predicting the future of the history of the world. We are now inhabiting this future and know that his prophecy has become truth.

18 Kiš 2015: 146. "Na sred kruga stoji kapetan Virt. U gornjem džepu vojničke bluže, na levoj strani, drži primerak *Zavere* u kožnom povezu, izdanje *Der Hammera* iz 1933. Negde je pročitao da je ta knjiga na ruskom frontu spasla mladog podoficira: metak ispaljen iz snajperske puške zaustavio se između stranica, tik iznad srca. Ta mu knjiga uliva sigurnost" – Kiš 1983: 195.

Conspiracy in the Aftermath of Yugoslavia

David Albahari writes in another epoch. He paradoxically arrived in the bleak future that was proclaimed and expected by Kiš in the eighties, and conspiracies and conspiracy theories had become a part of everyday life. Yugoslavia has disintegrated, existing only in vague and dazzled memories. Serbia finds itself in the middle of the dark era of Milošević's government. The starting point of *The Leeches* is 8 March 1998. On that day, the narrator goes for a walk in Zemun along the Danube riverside. He witnesses a peculiar incident there: a young man slaps a young woman across the face without any visible reason. The narrator's curiosity is piqued; he follows her through the entangled lanes in the inner town. He loses sight of her during the pursuit, but resumes his stalking on the following day. While stalking her, he discovers various traces that suggest her presence. The main point of reference is one button. "The button was still there, in the exact same spot. I picked it up, then noticed a little sign under it, probably written with a felt tip pen: a triangle inscribed in a circle, and inside it, another triangle pointing the other way."¹⁹ The narrator becomes obsessed with the sign. He loses control of his conduct and tries to discover the secret meaning behind it. At the beginning of the novel the suspicion is already aroused that the slap was not accidental but happened with the purpose of bringing him into play. He suspects a conspiracy behind this act but is still not sure, what it might be about. He mentions this possibility to his friend Marko. Marko plays the part of the sceptic and is therefore not suitable to offer help in the complex situation. For he thinks:

People who buy into conspiracy theories ... have a void in their head and don't know what to do with it. So they fill it with junk, and sooner or later, they become victims of sketchy plots, secret organizations with one goal only: to drag that person into something that promises to undermine the very foundation of the world.²⁰

19 Albahari 2012: 5–6. "Dugme je ležalo na istom mestu. Vratio sam se i podigao ga, i tada sam ispod njega ugledao mali znak, napisan verovatno flomasterom: krug u koji je bio upisan trougao sa obrnutim trouglom upisanim u njega" – Albahari 2006: 9.

20 Albahari 2012: 17–18. "Svako ko veruje u teoriju zavere ... ima praznine u glavi sa kojima ne zna šta da radi, pa ih onda popunjava zakukuljenim pričama u kojima, ranije ili kasnije, postaje žrtva nekih nejasnih okolnosti, nekih tajanstvenih organizacija koje imaju samo jedan cilj: da tu osobu uvuku u nešto što preti da podrije temelje strukture sveta" – Albahari 2006: 20.

The text's essentiality is defined from the very beginning. From this moment on, the whole structure of the novel develops as one construction that is completely directed towards the conspiracy, its potentials, and the realization of exactly those potentials. Everything else is overshadowed.

The events and signals amass that indicate that the narrator is increasingly blundering into something that eludes common sense. He receives secret messages that he has already deciphered using advertising sections of different newspapers and a manuscript entitled "The Well" (serb. "Bunar") reaches him in a clandestine way. But it is not just him. The origin of the text, and the way it was treasured, testify to its special nature. It originated in seventeenth-century Zemun and has had a special function in the Kabbalistic tradition from the beginning of time. The manuscript was found in the legacy of a Belgrade Jew whose wife donated it to the local Jewish museum. The title was given because the first word in the manuscript, which was delivered without its front page, was "bunar."²¹ "Bunar" materializes as the second stream within the novel. In itself, it is an intricate text that ultimately is constrained in two narrative threads: The history of the Jewish community in Zemun on the one hand and "a collection of several Kabbalistic threads that kept tangling and untangling"²² on the other. The origin and the significance of the manuscript are discovered only later, according to the interpretation of Margareta, the young woman who had been slapped and who explains the manuscript's importance to the narrator. An examination of the text leads the narrator to the contemporary Jewish community in the town. But this activity is not without consequences. He feels that he is being observed and is

21 "In that case, Margareta told me she'd read me a part of the translation of the text, which, as she had mentioned, began with the words 'The Well', words that, it bears saying, no matter what changes appeared in the text, always were first. It is not entirely clear to me what they mean, but perhaps, she said, the initial mechanism is concealed in those words, a given sequence of letters or sounds that set in motion what we have described as the program that changes the text" – Albahari 2012: 232–33 ("U tom slučaju, rekla je Margareta, može da mi pročita deo prevoda teksta koji, kao što je pomenula, počinje rečju 'bunar', rečju koja, treba to naglasiti, uprkos svim promenama u tekstu uvek ostaje prva reč. Nije sasvim jasno šta to znači, ali može da se pretpostavi, rekla je, da se u toj reči na neki način sakriven inicijalni mehanizam, određeni raspored slova ili glasova koji pokreće ono što smo nazvali programom koji modifikuje sam tekst" – Albahari 2006: 216).

22 Albahari 2012: 35. "Skup nekoliko kabalističkih niti koje su se stalno zaplitala i rasplitala" – Albahari 2006: 35.

confronted with anti-Semitic watchwords written on the walls of his house. His friend Marko comments on his condition as paranoid.

Renate Lachmann has emphasized the relation between conspiracy and paranoia in a pointed way: “The complot figure as a deceptive meaning or as a meaning phantasm in literary texts, in the psychopathographic text as delirium or paranoia.”²³ The topic of paranoia becomes particularly interesting if one assumes that the literary text does not necessarily have to be fantastic in order to represent a paranoid plot that is actually a complot. The narrator of *The Leeches* seeks the help of another friend, the mathematician Dragan Mišković, to solve the riddle of the mathematic form that follows the appearance of the signs.²⁴ He successfully explains to him the mathematic dimension of the riddle, but answers the question of how everything is related to everything else, with a clear denial of further explanation: “It is late for a conversation about paranoia.”²⁵ The narrator has been, thereby, already designated as potentially paranoid by two textual instances.

One question still remains. Why is this Jewish alliance in Zemun so important, important enough to suppose conspiracy behind it? Even to forge one? This is precisely because of the fact written in the manuscript:

Today, it says in this chapter, somewhere in Zemun is a place where the forces of good and evil intersect, and where it is possible, if a person knows the right words, to pass from one world into the other, and even to move into the realm of endless possibilities, or into the realm of endless worlds that emanate from ten divine Sephirot, endlessly multiplying and forging anew the reality we dwell in.²⁶

Its Kabbalistic nature becomes more than clear. Here a mixture of two possible

23 “Als Trugsinn oder Sinnphantasma figuriert das Komplott im literarischen, als Delirium oder Paranoia im psychopathographischen Text” – Lachmann 2002: 140.

24 It will become clear, only later in the novel and very slowly, that Mišković himself is a part of the “positive” conspiracy, the one aiming to save the world.

25 Albahari 2012: 45. “Kasno je za razgovor o paranoji” – Albahari 2006: 44.

26 Albahari 2012: 53. “I danas, piše u tom odeljku, negde u Zemunu postoji mesto u kojem se ukrštaju sile dobra i zla, i gde je moguće, ukoliko čovek zna prave reči, preći iz jednog sveta u drugi, pa čak i stupiti u područje bezbrojnih svetova koji zrače iz deset božanskih sefira, neprekidno se umnožavajući i iznova stvarajući stvarnost u kojoj prebivamo” – Albahari 2006: 52.

conspiracies takes place that I can denote as “positive” and “negative.”²⁷ On the one hand there are Jews from Zemun who supplied the narrator (who himself, and this is crucial for their plans, is not a Jew) with a manuscript; on the other hand there are Serbian racists who are unhappy with his activities (especially with journalistic articles that condemn anti-Semitism in Serbia) and who threaten him physically. Are they conspirators too? Marko is once more the one who negates the possibility of a conspiracy in Serbia. He increasingly assumes the role of *advocatus diaboli* who transfers the narrator back to reality, but whose statements produce insecurity too, especially because they are often induced under the influence of drugs. The danger that the trust between them would deteriorate, that the narrator’s confidence would be diminished, that he would follow the signals indicating that Marko is probably on the other side, the side of evil, that he himself is maybe part of the complot, is hidden by Marko’s central position as an adviser and auxiliary in the narrator’s life. Again one has to pose the question whether the narrator is becoming increasingly paranoid or if his perception is in accordance with reality. Again, it is impossible to answer the question unambiguously. It remains a matter of “hesitation” (to use Todorov’s terminology).²⁸

The narrator increasingly addresses the distance between the narrated time and the time of narration. The narrated time covers a period of approximately six years, stretching out between the events and their representation in the narrative. The narrator conveys the impression of prudence and authenticity that is able to take away suspicion from the recipient of the narrative, concerning the latter’s version of the conspiracy theory. This suspicion should be furthermore authenticated by the manner in which the narrator slowly advances to the secret of the “conspiracy.” As he peruses the clandestine text, the conspiracy becomes increasingly clear to him—which means that truth is conveyed in written form. However, the text also results from the perception of the conspiracy through Margareta’s reading out loud—which means that the conspiracy stems from one

27 Again, one important fact must be mentioned here. If I talk about a “positive” conspiracy, I find myself on a slippery slope. Namely, the “positive” side of conspiracy is almost always related to the weak. But how can the weak be the bearers of such a powerful action as a conspiracy? “The weak and marginalized are rarely seen as able to pull off a successful conspiracy. If they are, it is because they are assumed to have much more power than they actually have” – Uscinski 2018: 235.

28 As is well-known, Tzvetan Todorov (1975) defined fantastic literature as a moment of hesitation between the marvellous and uncanny that can be determined by the reader as well as the narrator or characters. For a potential reading of the “Book of Fools and Kings” as a fantastic text, see Beganović 2007: 173.

person transmitting it orally. Consequently, a mixture of media is produced that retains the conspiracy. The obvious result is a hybrid confrontation with a reality that additionally complicates, but also emphasizes and amplifies, the interpretation of the narrator's possible paranoia. Margareta's explanations deviate slightly from the manuscript, its archaic structure, and move in the direction of the present time. The endangered Jewish community must find a savior, the precise one that was described by the anonymous author of "The Well." Therefore, the slap was meant to serve as bait²⁹ that should have led the narrator to the corresponding person. This person, the savior, is the narrator himself. His non-Jewish status helps to prepare him as an ideal candidate for this responsible role.

But, as I have stated previously, we can now see that here is the clue to the entire novel. Parallel with this "positive"³⁰ conspiracy, which aims to save the Jewish people, the "negative" conspiracy proceeds in Serbia, led by local fascists who aim for the eradication, or at least expulsion, of those same people. According to the expectations founded on symbols within the text, the negative part wins the day and the pessimistic interpretation of history prevails once more.

29 *Mamac (Bait, 1996)* is the name of an important autobiographic novel by Albahari in which he describes the destiny of his family during and after WWII. *Bait* is often a strong symbolic lure that involves an attraction to some object, person or event which is then used to manipulate the victim of the bait and lead him/her in the desired direction.

30 The narrator summarizes one more time here: "Finding an enemy in such places is a favourite pastime, relished in equal measure by ordinary people, the political elite, intellectuals and artists. There is nothing better than a well laid-out conspiracy, for everyone except those singled out as the conspirators, whose repeated denials are seen as proof of the very opposite intentions. [The more you defend yourself, the more you prove that something is out of order, why should you defend yourself so frantically if you were not guilty. – *This sentence is left out in the translation; the translation here is mine, D. B.*] Of course it's one thing to practice this as a theoretical discourse and another to be part of it at the crossroads of converging hatreds" – Albahari 2012: 264 ("Nalaženje neprijatelja je u takvim okruženjima najomiljenija zabava, kojoj se s podjednakom strašću prepuštaju običan svet, politička elita, intelektualci i umetnici. Ništa nije lepše od dobro pripremljene zavere o postojanju zavere, izuzev za one koji su izdvojeni kao nosioci navodne zavere, i u čijim se poricanjima pronalaze dokazi suprotnih namera. Što više se braniš, time u većoj meri dokazuješ da nešto ipak nije u redu, jer zašto bi se toliko grčevito branio ako nisi kriv. Naravno, jedno je znati to kao teorijski diskurs, a drugo je biti deo praktične razrade i naći se na vetrometini mržnje" – Albahari 2006: 242–43).

The narrator is forced to flee, first in the underground then in exile. The newspaper for which he worked, and where he supported minority rights, was attacked and its offices destroyed. His Jewish friends went underground. Some of them were killed. The conspirators who fought against the real conspiracy, as well as the narrator who was promoted from journalist to the book's author, leave the country. Nothing else remains for him but to write his story from Canadian exile and to convince his readers that he was not paranoid and that he did not become paranoid. But before he departs, he must accept still one more disappointment: towards the end of the novel, Marko disappears in a mysterious way. The narrator does not want to believe in his departure and makes a call to his apartment. He sees lights and hears the voices there. The local fascists threaten him again and after this scene he goes to the studio of one of the conspirators, a painter by the name of Jaša Alkalaj, only to find that he has been murdered. Two hooded men leave the rooms. One last time the narrator goes to Marko's apartment:

I could hear footsteps and laughter. Marko opened the door and squinted, as if trying to make me go away. Behind me, on the coat rack, hung a black hooded sweatshirt. From inside the apartment a man's voice asked who was there. No one, said Marko, and opened his eyes wide. We stared at each other for a few moments, then he slammed the door with all his might. Crumbs of plaster sprayed the floor, the light in the hallway went out, I sprinted down the stairs in the dark and didn't stop until I was back at my apartment.³¹

It is obvious that Marko was either one of the killers or that the killers are in his apartment. Marko's treason is the pivotal point of the text; there is no longer anything to be narrated, but there is nothing to be learned either. The only exit for the narrator is exile in Canada. From there he writes his book about the conspiracies.

The crisis that haunted Yugoslavia, from the historical point of view, and since the beginning of the 1980s, climaxed in the bloody wars of the 1990s. That crisis produced a multitude of conspiracy theories that found their way into

31 Albahari 2012: 307–08. “Čuli su se koraci i smeh, a onda je Marko otvorio vrata i, ugledavši me, zažmurio, kao da bi to učinilo da nestanem. Iza njega, na čiviluku, visio je crni duks sa kapuljačom. Iz unutrašnjosti stana muški glas je pitao ko je došao. Ni-ko, rekao je Marko i polako raširio kapke. Gledali smo se još nekoliko trenutaka, potom je on svom snagom zalupio vrata. Mrvice maltera pale su na pod, svetlo u hodniku se ugasilo, u mraku sam strčao niz stepenice, i nisam stao sve do moje kuće” – Albahari 2006: 283.

literature as well. Conspiracy theories, according to Fredric Jameson, possess a collective character. It is necessary to examine them “to test the incommensurability between an individual witness—the individual character of a still anthropomorphic narrative—and the collective conspiracy which must somehow be exposed or revealed through these individual efforts.”³² In the two texts that I explored, the discrepancy between the individual effort to overcome thinking in terms of conspiracy theories or to reveal them in their falsehood, and the collective unwillingness to accept these endeavors, cannot be overstated. Yugoslav literature triumphs in the representation of conspiracy theories and their disastrous consequences. However, this is a rather sad success, since literature cannot do anything to prevent these consequences. In the beginning, there was a long-lasting political and economic crisis. It was followed by a strong critique of the all-encompassing situation. The people who brought it up came from diverse societal strata. In the end, the nationalists prevailed and brought about the demise of society. At least some signals indicate that there was a real conspiracy behind their actions and deeds. Still it would be too simple to say that conspiracies destroyed Yugoslavia.³³ There was enough potential within it to resist the acts of destruction. Conspiracy, or some variation thereof, was just one of them. The “task” of literature was to describe this. And it accomplished that task in an effective, even brilliant way.

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33 For more on these matters see Jović 2009: 36–37.

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Abstract

Following Koselleck’s thesis that every critique is at the same time in crisis, in this chapter I try to prove the ways in which these concepts correspond with the assumption that the Enlightenment itself aimed at the production of crisis. Koselleck’s thesis was already taken up by Groh who concludes that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were themselves apologists of conspiracy theories. The historical conclusion could be that times of crisis are times of conspiracies. I take examples from two texts from Serbian literature—the story “The Book of Kings and Fools” by Danilo Kiš and the novel *The Leeches* by David Albahari—to show that the time of crisis in Yugoslavia was ripe with conspiracies. These two

texts help to show how conspiracy theories became extremely powerful in the process of the destruction of Yugoslavia and how they managed to substitute the foundation of society, which had been grounded on the socialist belief in the strength of science's ability to explain everything, with a new belief in prejudices based on pseudo-scientific conspiracy theories.

