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ESSAY IN EXILE AND EXILE FROM THE ESSAY: EDWARD SAID, NURUDDIN FARAH AND ALEKSANDAR HEMON

LORENZO MARI – *Università dell'Insubria*

Nel panorama transnazionale della produzione letteraria contemporanea in lingua inglese, la relazione tra la scrittura saggistica e la condizione di esilio dell'autore si presenta come un nesso fecondo, producendo, nel rispetto delle differenti peculiarità ravvisabili in ciascun caso, scelte stilistiche e posizionamenti ideologici analoghi. E. Said descrive alcuni aspetti di questa relazione nella sua opera – in particolar modo, in *Reflections on Exile* (2000) – sottolineando come il compito del saggista sia quello di rappresentare la sua nazione d'origine e, al contempo, tutti quei gruppi e quelle istanze sociali che altrimenti risulterebbero dimenticate o censurate. Altri autori, come lo scrittore di origini somale N. Farah, in *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000), e l'autore, nato nella ex-Jugoslavia, A. Hemon, in *The Book of My Lives* (2013), hanno ulteriormente elaborato questo posizionamento, indagando a fondo la loro effettiva capacità di rappresentare le loro comunità di appartenenza, sia all'interno dei confini nazionali sia nella diaspora. Tuttavia, pur aderendo ad alcune caratteristiche formali del saggio, la loro scrittura risulta anche ibridata da alcuni elementi del genere autobiografico e di altri generi di *non-fiction*, al punto che la loro può essere definita anche come un'esperienza di “esilio dal saggio” stesso. Inoltre, tutti questi autori scrivono in una condizione di esilio da nazioni definite ‘fragili’ o che non esistono più, entrando così in una relazione produttiva con la portata transnazionale dell'impegno politico dell'intellettuale contemporaneo, proposto da Said in *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals* (2001) e altrove.

Although taking on always different nuances each time, the relationship between exile and essay writing in transnational contemporary literature in English is based on similar stylistic features and ideological positions. E. Said describes some aspects of this relationship in his work – namely, in *Reflections on Exile* (2000) – emphasizing that the essay author tackles the task to represent his original nation as well as those social groups and instances which are otherwise either forgotten or censored. Others, such as the Somali-born writer N. Farah, in *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000), and the Yugoslavian-born author A. Hemon, in *The Book of My Lives* (2013), further elaborate on this position, questioning their capacity to represent their communities both within the national borders and in exile. While sticking to some formal characteristics of the essay, however, their writing is also hybridized with autobiographical and other non-fictional elements to such an extent that they could be argued to experience ‘exile from the essay’ itself. In addition, Said, Farah and Hemon write while in exile from fragile nation-states or nations officially not existing anymore as such, thus being in a productive relationship with the transnational commitment of the contemporary intellectual proposed by Said himself in *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals* (2001) and other essays.

I SAUL'S QUEST. EXILE WRITING AS LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE EXOTOPY

As Edward W. Said's essay *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals* appeared on the US magazine *The Nation* on the 17th of September 2001, it was largely overlooked, at the time, due to the traumatic events which had taken place in the United States a week before its publication. His positive assessment of the public role of intellectuals was based on a dialectical and oppositional conception of the cultural production:

The intellectual's role generally is dialectically, oppositionally, to uncover and elucidate the contest [between a powerful system of interests on the one hand and, on the other, less powerful interests threatened with frustration, silence, incorporation or extinction by the powerful], to challenge and defeat both an imposed

silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible.¹

He also argued that «for the American intellectual the responsibility is greater», since «[t]he USA after all is the only global power»,² but this position was paradoxically neutralized, both in the public and the academic debate, by the impact of 9/11. This passing reference to the role of the American intellectual, however, was only a minuscule portion of Said's treatment of the intellectual as a transnational figure, in stark contrast with the retreat of contemporary intellectuals from the public arena in Europe and North America, which had rapidly increased since the boom of postmodernist culture in the 1980s.³

As late as in 2010, Peter Hitchcock could still argue that Said's contribution had been widely underestimated, while, on the other hand, «its analysis of intellectual responsibility as a transnational imperative has gained in prescience».⁴ In particular, Hitchcock emphasizes Said's definition of the «precarious exilic realm»⁵ which «connects the writers and the critical paradigm»⁶ as the basic condition for intellectual positioning. Hitchcock expands on it, dealing with «a condition that does not entail actual exile to fathom its logic but a notion of outsideness, or exotopy, a sometimes literal but more insistently figural border sensibility».⁷

Although Hitchcock argues that exotopy is first of all a fundamental feature of serial writing – as trilogies and tetralogies of novels enact that transnational “long space” on which he focuses his eponymous essay, titled *The Long Space. Transnationalism and the Postcolonial Form* (2010) – this notion seems to be particularly apt in dealing with essay writing. It recalls, in fact, György Lukács' notorious definition of «transcendental homelessness», as discussed in *Theory of the Novel* (1920),⁸ and, more specifically, the metaphorical description of the essayist included in *Soul and Form*: «[...] just as Saul went out to look for his father's she-asses and found a kingdom, so the essayist who is really capable of looking for the truth will find at the end of this road the goal he was looking for: life».⁹

In line with this description of essay writing as “quest”, or “trial” – both meanings can be attached to one of the possible German translations for ‘essay’, *Versuch* – Lukács also conceived the main goal of the essay as a genre in terms of «a judgment», where «the essential, the value-determining thing is not the verdict [...] but the process of judging».¹⁰ The essayist, thus, establishes a judging court where literary forms are processed

1 EDWARD W. SAID, *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals*, in *The Public Intellectual*, ed. by HELEN SMALL, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002 [2001], pp. 19-39, p. 31.

2 *Ibid.*

3 FREDRIC JAMESON, *Postmodernism and the Market*, in «Socialist Register», xxvi (1990), pp. 95-110, p. 98.

4 PETER HITCHCOCK, *The Long Space. Transnationalism and the Postcolonial Form*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2010, p. 259.

5 SAID, *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals*, cit., p. 36.

6 HITCHCOCK, *The Long Space*, cit., p. 8.

7 *Ibid.*

8 GYÖRGY LUKÁCS, *Theory of the Novel* [1920], London, Merlin Press, 1971, p. 41.

9 GYÖRGY LUKÁCS, *Soul and Form* [1911], New York, Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 27.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

in order to anticipate and revitalize the cultural and political system, rather than simply applying it. Essay writing cannot be used to test the applicability of preconceived ideas; it should be linked, instead, to the possibility for the essayist to go outside and get back to oneself, producing, thus, the critical distance which is needed to issue critical judgments.

When applied to exile intellectuals as essayists, this process involves, in Lukács' terms, a notion of "life" (as biographical narrative, mainly) which appears to be linked, in the first place, to the notions of "home" and, on a different level, "nation". From a political perspective, this complicates the "transnational imperative", which is related, for Said, to "intellectual responsibility", as it also reinstates the importance of the nation as a conceptual and material framework. To use Hitchcock's terms, in fact, the "border sensibility" of exile intellectuals is both "figural" and "literal": while essays about migration or written by migrant authors directly focus on borders, leading to a deconstructive take on this concept – with the poetics and politics of *mestizaje* of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) as its most intriguing and sophisticated example – the essays written in a condition of political exile often engage with "borders" in a tight relationship with the meanings which can be attached to one specific "nation". In recent times, this preoccupation with the nation, as placed in a transnational context, seems to be questioned by two different phenomena – such as the increasing transnationalization of the Anglophone literary market and the focus, in political analysis, on "failed nations" – stemming from the cultural and political processes of neoliberal globalization. Exile intellectuals have thus responded in new and peculiar ways to these phenomena, especially when writing in English and trying to define their public role.

On the one hand, the transnational reach of Anglophone fictional and non-fictional literature has had a clear impact on essay writing in English. In particular, it has brought to the standardization and boom of "personal essay" as a genre: while Lukács' position shows that there has always been a strong involvement of the author's "life" in essay writing, "personal essays" have been celebrated as such only in the last two decades,¹¹ especially in the United States.

According to Theresa Werner's discussion of the personal essay in *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, one defining feature of this genre is the fact that, unlike the autobiographical essayist, the personal essayist «does not place himself firmly center stage».¹² George Core makes a similar point when he stresses the fact that the personal essayist is «in the middle of things» without being the crucial focus of the analysis being suggested, as «[...] the world of the essayist is often simply a small part of the world outside that is being contemplated».¹³ Harriet Malinowitz summarizes this as follows: «[The] essence [of the personal essay] is subjectivity, not autobiography».¹⁴

11 See PHILIP LOPATE (ed.), *The Art of the Personal Essay. An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, New York, Anchor, 1994.

12 THERESA WERNER, *Personal Essay*, in *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. by TRACY CHEVALIER, London, Fitzroy, 1997, p. 655.

13 GEORGE CORE, *Stretching the Limits of the Essay*, in *Essays on the Essay. Redefining the Genre*, ed. by ALEXANDER J. BUTRYM, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1989, p. 218.

14 HARRIET MALINOWITZ, *Business, Pleasure, and the Personal Essay*, in «College English», LXV/3 (2003), pp. 305-322, p. 317.

In their Saul-like quest, however, contemporary exile writers and intellectuals go beyond the limits of this peculiar genre, combining elements from autobiographical and personal essays, while looking, at the same time, at a bigger world than theirs. The essays written by those exile authors who are also authors of fictional texts, for instance, often have a penchant for literary analysis, within a frequently implicit, sometimes unintentional, canonizing or self-canonizing move. In line with the transnational reach of the essays being written in English, these individual suggestions of new “canons” are often based on the idea of a transnational literary corpus. This does not downplay the role of each national canon, refashioning it, instead, within a transnational perspective, as perhaps exemplified at best by Nabokov’s two mutually completing collections of essays: *Lectures on Literature* (1980) and *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981). Neither the Greco-Latin roots of the Western canon are always dismissed as such by non-Western authors, especially when literary references are related to the experience of exile, as the examples of the *Odyssey* and Ovid in Hisham Matar’s recent personal-cum-autobiographical essay *The Return: Fathers, Sons, and the Land in Between* (2016)¹⁵ might aptly show.

This de-territorializing/re-territorializing take on literary canons finds its theoretical grounds in Edward Said’s oeuvre. As a matter of fact, in his analysis of European canons as part of colonial cultures (as paradigmatically exposed in his 1993 essay *Culture and Imperialism*), Said adopted a “contrapuntal reading” of literary texts which was aimed at the disclosure of the ideological attachments of these texts to colonial discourses. In addition to the evident musical metaphor, “contrapuntal reading” was explicitly linked by the author to the “contrapuntal awareness” produced by the (figurative as well as literal) experience of exile:

While it perhaps seems peculiar to speak of the pleasures of exile, there are some positive things to be said for a few of its conditions. Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimension, an awareness.¹⁶

This contrapuntal awareness might be also applied to political commentary, concerning, in particular, the concept of “failed nation”. This label has become quite popular in political analysis since Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner’s 1992 article *Saving Failed States* (1992), leading, in 2005, to the annual publication of a quantitative index, called “Failed States Index” (“Fragile States Index”, since 2014), on *Foreign Policy*. While «sometimes a neocolonialist notion»,¹⁷ the definition of “failed nation” has been widely used in the last two decades to deal with nation-states which have been affected by severe

¹⁵ HISHAM MATAR, *The Return: Fathers, Sons, and the Land in Between*, New York, Viking Press, 2016, pp. 15, 234.

¹⁶ EDWARD W. SAID, *Reflections on Exile*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 186. The internal quotation is generally attributed to Hugh of St. Vincent (or Hugh of St. Victor), a Catholic theologian living in the 12th century.

¹⁷ RUTH GORDON, *Saving Failed States: Sometimes a Neocolonialist Notion*, in «American University International Law Review», XII/6 (1997), pp. 903-974, p. 903.

institutional disaggregation. Being a symptom of the strong pressure of neoliberal globalization and violent conflicts on the nation-state, the concept of “failed nation” adds a particular twist to the intellectual engagement of exile writers, as the latter are forced to deal with a highly precarious nation – reinstating and at the same time dismissing it – in their quest as essay writers.

To a variable degree, this is the case of: Edward Said, coming from Palestine, a fragile nation-state, partially unrecognized as such by the UN members; Nuruddin Farah, coming from Somalia, a nation-state ranking in the first places the Failed/Fragile States Index since its establishment; Aleksandar Hemon, coming from Yugoslavia, a nation which does not exist anymore but that he could appreciate during his early life in all its fragility. These authors have all written essays in English from their exile in the United States, combining the autobiographical narrative, or the narrative crafting of the subjectivity, with a focus on literary and cultural phenomenon – ranging from Said’s essays, as deeply rooted in the academic debate which he hugely contributed to, to Hemon’s mostly autobiographical essay. Far from telescoping their biographical experiences and their national attachments into literary criticism, their essays written in exile appear nevertheless to be in exile *from* the essay itself, according to Lukács’ metaphor of Saul, They introduce, in fact, notable variations in the canonical tradition of essay writing, as well as in relationship with the now hegemonic form of personal essays in English. In addition to this, and recalling Said’s notion of engagement in the contemporary cultural and political debate, in Said’s *Reflections on Exile* (2000), in Farah’s *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000) and Hemon’s *The Book of My Lives* (2013), the “intellectual responsibility” of these authors is constantly displayed in their reflections about the representativeness of the intellectual for their original national community and for “those who cannot speak”¹⁸ in it – acting, thus, both on a national and transnational level.

2 *MUNDUS TOTUS EXILIUM EST: SAID AND THE WORLDLINESS OF EXILE*

In his passionate and critical tribute to Edward W. Said, published more than one year after his passing, Vinay Lal wrote that: «[...] Said demonstrated his mastery over literary texts before he acquired a wider reputation as an unflinching advocate of Palestinian rights and an exponent of secular humanism».¹⁹ While this was probably intended to emphasize Said’s huge contribution to the academic debate in a number of fields, it might be fairly argued that Said’s political interest and engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had been almost coextensive with his whole cultural produc-

¹⁸ The expression is built upon a widely used expression to talk about subaltern groups, as popularized, in the academic debate, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (cfr. GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by CARY NELSON and LAWRENCE GROSSBERG, Champaign-Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313).

¹⁹ VINAY LAL, *Enigmas of Exile. Reflections on Edward Said*, in «Economic and Political Weekly», I (2005), pp. 30-34, p. 30.

tion, as it is also stressed in his *Introduction to Reflections on Exile*.²⁰ This preface, giving an autobiographical, as well as self-reflexive, account of Said's 35-year academic work, is the only previously unpublished contribution (together with the final essay *The Clash of Definitions*) to the collection of essays issued in 2000: it allows to reconsider the whole group of essays – originally conceived as academic essays and dedicated to prominent writers and intellectuals such as Giambattista Vico, Joseph Conrad, György Lukács, or George Orwell – in the light of an approach rooted in a peculiar subjectivity. It corresponds, therefore, with the main features of the genre of personal essay. As for the political commitment deployed in this anthology – regarding, in particular, Said relationship with Palestine as a fragile, partially unrecognized nation – it should be recalled that Said always held the same political position (even when he adopted tactically different choices, shifting, after the 1993 Oslo agreements, from the advocacy for the two-state solution to the support for the one-state solution).²¹ He always greeted with harsh criticism both the apartheid policy enacted by the Israel government and Arafat's leadership of the PLO, stressing the need to consider the Palestinians' as «the most extraordinary of exile's fates: to have been exiled by exiles». ²² Though most overtly siding with them, Said did not conceive the idea of a Palestinian nation as the ultimate goal of his public commitment as a Palestinian exile intellectual. He was equally aware that his support for the Palestinian cause should avoid becoming a nationalist discourse, knowing that «[a]ll nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement». ²³

As late as in 2002, he would write: «I still have not been able to understand what it means to love a country». ²⁴ Consequently, Said's disagreement with the Palestinian as well as any specific nationalist discourse might be well read as a consequence of his individual “inability” to consider one land as his own land. Said's opinions and taste as an individual, however, are not decisive: given that the *Introduction to Reflections on Exile* and the eponymous essay²⁵ might be read as close to the definition of personal essay, the consequent crafting of a «scrupulous subjectivity»²⁶ which is not perfectly coincident with the autobiographical voice leads to a conclusion which ultimately differs from his autobiographical penchant. His role as a public intellectual, in fact, is not only to side with the Palestinian cause, but also to avoid the reinforcement of the “us vs. them” opposition, which nations are always built upon. This is a symptom of a larger commitment for the outsiders of the (mainly national) “us vs. them” dichotomy, which might eventually inform any political struggle.²⁷ This acknowledgment comes from the experience of exile itself:

20 SAID, *Reflections on Exile*, cit., p. 3.

21 See EDWARD W. SAID, *From Oslo to Iraq and Road Map: Essays* [2004], New York, Vintage Books, 2005.

22 SAID, *Reflections on Exile*, cit., p. 178.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

24 EDWARD W. SAID, *Israel, Iraq and the United States*, in «Al Ahram Weekly» (10-16 October 2002), <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2002/607/focus.htm%20A1%20Ahrm%2010-16>.

25 SAID, *Reflections on Exile*, cit., pp. 176-187.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

27 Edward Said always cultivated an academic and political interest into the field of Subaltern Studies, where the already mentioned essay by Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, comes from, though in a polemic way (cf. RANAJIT GUHA (ed.), *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1988).

[...] it is apparent that, to concentrate exile as a contemporary political punishment, you must therefore map territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of exile itself. You must first set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created. You must think of the refugee-peasants with no prospect of ever returning home, armed only with a ration card and an agency number. [...] As you move further from the Atlantic world, the awful forlorn waste increases: the hopelessly large numbers, the compounded misery of undocumented people suddenly lost, without a tellable history.²⁸

By «mapping territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of exile itself», Said distances himself from his individual experience and look at the huddled masses whose existence falls outside of perception. The exile intellectual “must think of” them – as Said strongly repeats – as they are placed next to his/her position in an experiential and political continuum that Said himself has contributed to describe²⁹ and they constantly call for the intellectual’s engagement in their favour. The representation of the “precarious exilic realm” as a continuum, which Said would later mention in his essay *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals*, shows that Said considered exile from a materialist perspective, avoiding that fetishization of the exile intellectual that had been violently censored by a renowned postcolonial scholar, Aijaz Ahmad, in the essay *Orientalism and After* (1992). While it might be argued that Said conceived the exile as a «permanent state»,³⁰ rather than a transient stage, it should be noted, following Vinay Lal’s argument, that such a conception is due to a contrapuntal, rather than essentialist, reading of exile itself: «The idea of exile, then, must be read (in Said’s language) contrapuntally, that is against the grain, in intersection and conversation with thoughts that might be construed as the very opposite».³¹

The reference to exile as a “construed” world is very significant, as it resonates with this declaration by Said:

I was drawn to figures such as Conrad, a man of two or three traditions, and to men like Vico and Swift who made a conscious effort to appropriate the world to themselves [...] it was the notion that people make their own worlds; you don’t fell that your nation is the heart of anything but the individual is, and it is the individual that makes history.³²

Exile is, thus, an exercise in “worldliness” – a key term in Said’s works, representing his secular humanism – where “worlds” are not given in fixed, essentialized forms, but need to be construed day by day. The perspective resumed in the quotation *Mundus totus exilium est* (“the entire world is a foreign land”) is then stripped of the transcendental quality included in the original use by Hugh of St. Vincent (or Hugh of St. Victor),

28 SAID, *Reflections on Exile*, cit., p. 176.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

30 EDWARD W. SAID, *Power, Politics, Culture: Interviews with Edward Said*, ed. by GAURI VISWANATHAN, London, Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 56.

31 LAL, *Enigmas of Exile*, cit., p. 33.

32 *Edward Said: Bright Star of English Lit and P.L.O.*, in «New York Times» (22 February 1980), www.nytimes.com/books/99/10/03/specials/said-star.html.

pointing, instead, to the public engagement of the intellectual, working day by day to make his or her position of outsidership, or, in Hitchcock's term, "exotopy", representative of all those who are excluded from perceptions, being part of the "uncountable masses".

In light of this, it is possible to re-read the picture causing the possibly most important scandal about Edward Said's public figure, with the publication on the *New York Times*, in 2000, of a picture of him hurling stones from the Lebanese border at Israeli soldiers. So said the caption, actually, but Edward W. Said defended himself time and again saying that his gesture was neither practicing nor supporting any idea of violent Intifada, but showing a «symbolic gesture of joy»³³ for the end of Israel's occupation of Lebanon. It could not have probably been otherwise for an anti-nationalist intellectual like him, whose main political concern, during life, had not been siding with Intifada, but assessing the public role of intellectuals in relationship with those people whose oppression is continuously silenced.

Ironically enough, that picture worked as a further commodification of the Intifada movement into its symbolic gestures – as Said had frequently denounced, in articles and interviews³⁴ – just like his subsequent article on *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals* was paradoxically silenced by the traumatic impact of the 9/11 events. Nonetheless, with all his essays, including a paradigmatic text such as *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said could set the critical framework in which contemporary exile intellectuals test their representativeness and their public engagement, as the analyses of Nuruddin Farah's and Aleksandar Hemon's texts are going to show.

3 TAPPING AT THE WINDOW: NURUDDIN FARAH'S *YESTERDAY, TOMORROW. VOICES FROM THE SOMALI DIASPORA*

As directly implied by its title, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, Nuruddin Farah's text is concerned both with the temporal framework of the contemporary Somali diaspora (as related to the ongoing Somali civil war, which started in 1991) and the collection of "voices" – in the forms of interviews, mainly – of the members of this transnational community. The oscillation between a proper essayistic goal, as the location of Somali diaspora in history, and the multiplication of perspectives determines the instability of the genre which *Yesterday, Tomorrow* may belong to: partly an autobiographical essay – including episodes from the author's and his family's lives – partly a personal essay – where the authorial subjectivity replaces the autobiographical voice – this hybrid text is also open to the polyphonic dissemination of interviews.

As for the autobiographical elements, the book opens with Nuruddin Farah's visit to part of his family, living in a refugee camp in Mombasa, Kenya, after fleeing from the

33 KAREN W. ARENSON, *Columbia Debates a Professor's 'Gesture'*, in «The New York Times» (19 October 2000), <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/20/29/nyregion/columbia-debates-a-professor-s-gesture.html>.

34 PETER CHILDS and PATRICK WILLIAMS, *Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* [1997], London/New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 109.

conflict. This implicitly points at his own condition: he has been in exile from Somalia since 1976, as a consequence of his opposition to Siad Barre's regime (1969-1991).³⁵ The awareness of his privileged status – which will inform other parts of the text – compared to the one of refugees, does not prevent him to quarrel with his family about the historical grounds of the ongoing conflict. Nuruddin Farah attempts to criticize his father's explanation of the conflict as a clan-based war:

I said, 'Somalia's clan spectrum has more colors in the rainbow of its affiliations than an anthropologist might suggest. And for all we know, the warring clans may be fewer in number than the peace-loving ones, the Somalis who pursue sedentary vocations. It is those of the nomadic stock who are more vocal, and who claim to be the prototype Somali. These are the bellicose beasts, forever at each other's throat, beasts who remain mistrustful of one another's intentions. What is more, we are unscientific about a number of things, including how many of us there are.'³⁶

His father does not accept his argument, looking instead at a loss and degradation which could be better described in moral terms: «For my father was now in a rage. He was half-shouting: 'Mogadiscio has fallen into the clutch of thugs, no better than hyenas, who have no idea what honour is, what trust is, what political responsibility means'». ³⁷ While not desisting from the quarrel, Nuruddin Farah will partially agree with his father's position in the rest of *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, where he criticizes «blamocracy», a neologism he himself coins, stressing Somali generalized unwillingness to accept responsibility, «incriminating *others* as accomplices in the ruin of the country, as culpable». ³⁸ Such an attitude involves a peculiar twist on the idea of Somali civil society:

That Somalis keep alluding obsessively to families is beside the point. What is true is that [...] they are doing something else: they are avoiding referring to themselves as individuals. The generic references to their clan identities serving as mere markers, many of the self-identifiers are intent on subsuming their individual identities in the larger unit, thereby not sharing in the censure. Implicit in the idea is that the self is not to blame, but that civil society is!³⁹

This fragility of Somali civil society may well correspond with the fragility of the nation as a whole, but what can be stressed here is the consequent shift in the figuration of Nuruddin Farah's own audience (as his writing *Yesterday, Tomorrow* in English also shows). Interlocutors have to be found in the whole transnational scenario of Somali diaspora, as the interviews included in the text aptly show, being recorded in Kenya, in the United States, in the United Kingdom, in Sweden and in Italy.

It also involves Nuruddin Farah's intention to extend his focus beyond the limits of the cultural and political debate about Somalia as a nation, as it can be also read in the

³⁵ NURUDDIN FARAH, *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, New York, Cassell, 2000, p. 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. II (italics in the original).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Interlude section. This part opens with a James Joyce's epigraph – «I will not serve what I no longer believe in [...] – silence, exile and cunning» – taken from *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915), in an implicitly self-canonizing move which also serves as the point of entry into the main argument of the section. The crucial question of this *Interlude*, in fact, is:

Still, I must ask what becomes of a man or a woman upon whose sense of imaginative being, upon whose night, no moths tap at the window to the universe of his or her creativity. [...] [W]hat happens to a people who cannot go back to the hypothetical reality of their homes, nor to their actual residence? Is this the clay out of which refugees are molded?⁴⁰

Resorting to a subjective, rather than autobiographical, “I”, Nuruddin Farah introduces a difference between himself as a fictional and non-fictional author and the masses of Somali refugees which do not display the same “sense of imaginative being”. Consequently, he indirectly agrees with Edward Said's emphasis on the “world-making” ability of exiles, but he excludes refugees from the same exilic continuum, almost essentializing their position, if not for the final question mark («is this the clay of which refugees are molded?»).⁴¹ While this might appear in line with the literary treatment of subalterns in Nuruddin Farah's novels, such as, for example, *Sweet and Sour Milk*,⁴² it also corresponds with Nuruddin Farah's own will not to become a spokesperson for any Somali community.

This is emphasized also through an autobiographical episode being recounted later in the text: «We must have cut tragic figures, Sigrid and I, as we spoke to a room filled to capacity with Somalis interested not so much in what either of us had to say as they were in my interpretation of what was happening in Somalia».⁴³

Nuruddin Farah's refusal to be identified with an intellectual who can act as a spokesman – to be combined with his frequent negation, in many interviews, of his status as an “exile” tout court⁴⁴ – might be considered as a further acknowledgment of his privileged status as a transnationally acclaimed writer and globetrotter. It does not imply, however, that he refuses any public role of the intellectual, as his effort in *Yesterday, Tomorrow* also includes strong political statements – ranging from his critique of the Somali civil war as a clan-based conflict to the indictment of Somali “blamocracy”. In a hybrid text such as *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, his engagement must be also considered in the light of his decision to give room to “those who cannot speak” through interviews: these conversations are certainly filtered and mediated by a strong authorial intervention; on the other hand, they look at the Somali national history, but they also give different glimpses on the world

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴¹ Differently from Said, Nuruddin Farah also quotes from Joyce, whose literary oeuvre, as mentioned, is excluded from the priorities of the exile political subjectivity in *Reflections on Exile*.

⁴² See JOHN WILLIAMS, ‘Doing History’: Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial Trajectory of Silence*, in «Research in African Literatures», XXXVII/4 (2006), pp. 161-176.

⁴³ FARAH, *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, cit., p. 189. According to the information provided in the text, “Sigrid” is Sigrid Segersted, a Swedish human-right activist.

⁴⁴ HITCHCOCK, *The Long Space*, cit., p. 92.

of those “outsiders” previously represented through the metaphor of moths tapping at the window to the universe of creativity.

4 FROM UNREADING TO WRITING: ALEKSANDAR HEMON’S *THE BOOK OF MY LIVES*

Looking at its title, Hemon’s *The Book of My Lives* seems to be very distant from the analysis being suggested here, as the title apparently involves a strong and constant autobiographical narrative. Actually, by multiplying the latter into a kaleidoscopic perspective enabled by a fragmented book structure – where the individual chapters both stand alone and link to each other, in a fluid but unsystematic way – and constantly shifting from the constitution of an autobiographical voice and the conception of authorial subjectivity, *The Book of My Lives* (2013) might be located in the precarious position between autobiographical and personal essay adopted also in the other works being considered here. Therefore, in contrast with Aaron Thier’s review, considering *The Book of My Lives* as «what used to be called a volume of occasional writing» and, consequently, «not a book, properly speaking, in its own right»,⁴⁵ the hybrid nature of Hemon’s book seems to be based on a very specific *qua* trans-generic response both to the cultural and political demands of essay writing in exile and the pressures of the transnational publishing industry.

This shift in perspective, allowing to consider the whole book as closer to the genre of essay (a term which is nonetheless thirteen times used by Thier in his review) than to other writing forms, sheds a different light upon at least one of its sections, titled *The Book of My Life*, which the title of Hemon’s own book is consequently built upon. This chapter mainly focuses on Nikola Koljević, Hemon’s former literature professor at the University of Sarajevo. Koljević, whose main scholarly reference was the New Critic Cleanth Brooks, taught a course in which he asked students to focus their attention to «the inherent properties of a piece of literature, disregarding politics, biography, or anything external to the text».⁴⁶ Later, Koljević became one of Radovan Karadžić’s closest associates and one of the most prominent ideologues of the Serb Democratic Party.⁴⁷ In view of this, Hemon seeks to distance himself from an attitude to the essay about literature which could be linked to New Criticism, supporting a different, more committed conception of “art” (here used as a synecdoche for “writing”):

Now it seems clear to me that his evil had far more influence on me than his literary vision. I excised and exterminated that precious, youthful part of me that

⁴⁵ AARON THIER, *And Darkness Comes: On Aleksandar Hemon*, in «The Nation» (24 April 2013), <http://www.thenation.com/article/and-darkness-comes-aleksandar-hemon>.

⁴⁶ ALEKSANDAR HEMON, *The Book of My Lives*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Radovan Karadžić has been a major figure of Yugoslavian civil war, serving as the first president of Republika Srpska (one of the three political entities now forming Bosnia and Herzegovina) and leader of the Serb Democratic Party. Sometimes nicknamed in Western media as the “Butcher of Bosnia”, he has been convicted of several war crimes after the end of the conflict.

had believed you could retreat from history and hide from evil in the comforts of art.⁴⁸

Whereas Hemon does not explicitly link New Criticism to the policy and the military action led by Karadžić, he nevertheless criticizes and eventually abandons it, re-reading in a new light what he had read during his university years. While he calls the latter attitude “unreading” and “unlearning”, he concludes: «I’d been mired in close reading, impressionable and unaware that my favorite teacher was involved in plotting a vast crime. But what’s done cannot be undone».⁴⁹ Therefore, Hemon acknowledges that he could not retreat anymore from history – implicitly supporting, thus, the public role of writers and intellectuals, that is, their engagement with history – but he also admits that his unlearning does not correspond to an effective “undoing” of the past. Consequently, the most important change has to take place within his writing, also in the attempt to overcome other aspects of this legacy: «Because of Professor Koljević, perhaps, my writing is infused with testy impatience for bourgeois babbling, regrettably tainted with helpless rage I cannot be rid of».⁵⁰

While “helpless rage” finds its literary transformation in the wildly ironic prose of Hemon’s novels such as *The Lazarus Project* (2008), the refusal of any symbolic affiliation to Koljević informs the whole *Book of My Lives*: this title, in fact, is also a reworking of *The Book of My Life*, the title of the childishly bizarre life-writing project started at five years old by Koljević’s daughter.⁵¹ In light of this, *The Book of My Lives* cannot be deemed as a “volume of occasional writing”, as it gives essential ethic and aesthetic reasons for Hemon’s writing as a whole. In this sense, it also involves a feeling of over-determination which becomes, on some specific occasions within Hemon’s oeuvre, guilt and anxiety.

The former is the case of the following section in *The Book of My Lives*, titled *The Lives of a Flaneur*, including a meditation both on the loss of Sarajevo and the discovery of Chicago as the geographical location of his exile. Chicago is, in fact, the first city of Hemon’s exile from Yugoslavia: he landed there in 1992 thanks to the International Visitors Program organized by the United States Information Agency⁵² and he has continued to live in Chicago also after the end of the war. In his condition of «low-wage, immigrant flaneur»,⁵³ Hemon starts a comparison between Sarajevo – a city where he «possessed a personal infrastructure»,⁵⁴ knowing how to move and what to do – and Chicago – a city where he feels that there isn’t any difference «between freedom and isolation, between independence and selfishness, between privacy and solitude»⁵⁵ – in order to fully relocate himself.

He is a flaneur in a way which is only apparently reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s

48 HEMON, *The Book of My Lives*, cit., p. 129.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146.

Baudelaire.⁵⁶ On the one hand, the constant comparison between Sarajevo and Chicago builds a ghostly image of the former underlying the image of the latter. This ghost carries about the guilt of having fled from the sieged city of Sarajevo, as it fully emerges when the Chicago neighbourhood where Hemon lives, Edgewater, begins to be flooded with Bosnian asylum seekers: «It was as if they had come looking for me in Edgewater».⁵⁷ On the other hand, Hemon feels the need to replace Sarajevo with Chicago not just as the reverie of a flaneur, but as a psychiatric necessity: «Converting Chicago into my personal space became not just metaphysically essential but psychiatrically urgent as well».⁵⁸

However, his condition of migrant flaneur does not stop at border sensibility and its psychic consequences; it also hints at the disappearance of Yugoslavia as a nation, producing, thus, a ghostly image of Sarajevo which is not only related to the author's individual imaginary, being also reflected in the whole national history. This brings to Hemon's anxiety, which leads him to «obsessively pars[e] the details of the catastrophe to understand how it could have taken place»,⁵⁹ being "catastrophe" the civil war leading to the disaggregation of Yugoslavia. While avoiding any kind of *Jugonostalgija*⁶⁰ – as it can be appreciated in the sections of the book recalling Hemon's juvenile literary and artistic activity as opposed to the official hegemonic culture of the Yugoslavian Socialist regime – Hemon focuses on issues of identity and belonging. As the ethno-nationalism causing the conflict thrives on fixed and essentialist identities, the latter need to be aptly deconstructed, as it happens, for example, with the contrast between the author's belonging to a *raja* (a city baby gang, often without criminal aims, in Sarajevo), in his childhood, and national and ethnic identity: «My primary loyalty was to my *raja* and any other collective affiliation was entirely abstract and absurd. Yes, we were all Yugoslavs and Pioneers and we all loved socialism, our country, and its greatest son, our marshal Tito, but never would I have gone to war and taken blows for those».⁶¹

These reflections lead to a harsh criticism of the ideological discourse behind multiculturalism in the US, as based on the crystallization of the 'us/them' dichotomy, which the author's own experience has taught him to consider as contingent: «The funny thing is that the need for collective self-legitimization fits snugly into the neoliberal fantasy of multiculturalism, which is nothing if not a dream of a lot of *others* living together, everybody happy to tolerate and learn. Differences are thus essentially required for the sense of belonging: as long as we know who we are and who we are not, *we* are as good as *they* are. In the multicultural world there are a lot of *them*, which ought not to be a problem as long as they stay within their cultural confines, loyal to their roots. There is no hierarchy of cultures, except as measured by the level of tolerance, which, incidentally, keeps Western democracies high above everyone else».⁶²

56 See WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project* [1927-1940], Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988.

57 HEMON, *The Book of My Lives*, cit., p. 154.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

60 The term *Jugonostalgija* describes the contemporary sentiment of nostalgia for the cultural and political scenario associated with Yugoslavia, as spreading after civil war and the disaggregation of the former Yugoslavian Republic into different nation-states.

61 HEMON, *The Book of My Lives*, cit., p. 7.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

This refusal of any confinement into a community belonging based on an ‘us/them’ opposition does not preclude a reflection about the representativeness of the author, which paradoxically emerges into the final and most autobiographical section of the book, titled *The Aquarium*. Hemon deals with the loss of his daughter Isabel (whom the book is dedicated to), due to an incurable disease. Facing this traumatic experience, Isabel’s sister, Ella, starts inventing stories about an imaginary brother, as a way to cope with the work of mourning. Listening to Ella, his father acknowledges that he has been doing the same with his many lives and “avatars”, both in his fictional and non-fictional works, in order to cope with the traumatic loss of his nation. Ella teaches him that «[n]arrative imagination – and therefore fiction – is a basic evolutionary tool for survival». ⁶³ As «[w]e process the world by telling stories and produce human knowledge through our engagement with our imaginary selves», the author does not only eulogize fiction as a tool for survival, but he also implicitly includes the present text in the lot, despite its hybrid nature of essay writing, by quoting again the many «lives» ⁶⁴ also included in its title. Furthermore, the allusion to narrative imagination as an ability potentially shared by every member of mankind, including Ella and his father, seems to break the barrier between the author and the “moths” still at work in Farah’s essay. It hints, instead, at the possibility for the intellectual – face to the loss of a national community – to be nonetheless representative for all those who can (and cannot) speak: they are all part of the same human community and they all have the ability to invent stories to cope with loss. A writer makes it only slightly more evident through his publication.

5 WITHIN AND BEYOND ESSAY WRITING

At the same time within and beyond their essay writing, the public commitment of exile intellectuals such as Edward Said, Nuruddin Farah and Aleksandar Hemon can be perhaps best exemplified through symbolic images: Said’s hurling of a stone at the Lebanese border, Farah’s image of moths tapping at the windows of creativity and the mirroring of Hemon’s narrative imagination in his daughter Ella’s stories. Involving three different postures about the dialectics between the individual subjectivity and the external world (from internal to external, from external to internal and the mirroring of the two), they are an index of their representativeness as intellectuals.

According to the “transnational imperative” described by Edward Said, these intellectuals do not intend to represent their national communities: while exploring in full detail the history of Palestine, Somalia and former Yugoslavia, they acknowledge the fragility or the death of such national entities and call for a wider engagement with “those who cannot speak”, both within and without national borders.

This is aptly reflected in their approaches to essay writing in English, manipulating the hegemonic form of the personal essay: Said’s combination of academic and personal essay in *Reflections on Exile*, the hybrid and heterogeneous form adopted by Nuruddin Farah in *Yesterday, Tomorrow* and the play on autobiographical essay by Aleksandar

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Hemon in *The Book of My Lives* all represent “essays in exile” which are as well (following Saul’s quest in Lukács’ description) “exiles from the essay”.

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PAROLE CHIAVE

Essay; exile; failed nations; personal essay; Edward Said; Nuruddin Farah; Aleksandar Hemon; György Lukács.

NOTIZIE DELL'AUTORE

Lorenzo Mari is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Università dell'Insubria, with a research project on failed-state fiction in the Somali and Nigerian diaspora. He holds a PhD in Modern, Comparative and Postcolonial Literature from the University of Bologna, and in 2015 he was beneficiary of the “Fernand Braudel IFER-Incoming” Fellowship, hosted by the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and the LabEx TransferS (CNRS/Paris 3). He has recently published his first book, *Forme dell'interregno. Past Imperfect di Nuruddin Farah tra letteratura post-coloniale e world literature* (Aracne, 2018), and co-edited an anthology of essays (in collaboration with Paolo Desogus, Mimmo Cangiano and Marco Gatto), titled *Il presente di Gramsci. Letteratura e ideologia oggi* (Galaad, 2018).

marilorenzo6@gmail.com


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I CONFINI DEL SAGGIO.

PER UN BILANCIO SUI DESTINI DELLA FORMA SAGGISTICA

a cura di Federico Bertoni, Simona Carretta, Nicolò Rubbi

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