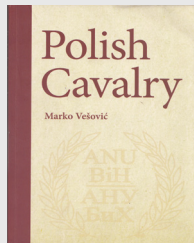




The compulsion to repeat

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Polish Cavalry

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Review Title:
The compulsion to repeat

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Marko Vešović was born in 1945 in Montenegro, and has studied and worked in the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Author of several works of poetry and fiction as well as collections of essays and translations, Vešović's *Poljska konjica* first appeared in 2002. In 2004 a second, expanded edition followed. *Polish Cavalry*, the English translation by Zvonimir Radeljković and Omer Hadžiselimović, was published in 2011.

In this volume, Vešović revisits the Bosnian war, in particular the almost four year long siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s. He draws on the words of others who, like himself, experienced the trauma; and presents these various accounts, including his own, in texts which approximate poems and occasionally short stories containing rich details of specific events, circumstances, places and people.

Although the present edition includes a foreword by Vešović himself on the genesis and purpose of this volume and a very helpful postscript by Marina Bowder, I was still left feeling like an outsider, unable to bring to my reading appropriate sentiments and insights. Even those who lived through it all, like Vešović, find it difficult to explain what really happened. As Bowder points out in the postscript, Vešović shares with many a sense of utter disbelief at the events in Sarajevo.

Yet, the history of that particular war speaks to the world about the horrors and devastation that rivalling nationalism is capable of unleashing. Unfortunately, humankind tends not to learn much from history; and is therefore inclined to repeat its self-destructive behaviour, its past mistakes, as expressed in the first few lines of 'Things', one of the concluding poems of the volume:

Look at this: wholesale looting again!
People are cattle without tails. They are, God help us!
They failed to learn a thing from the war.
They are three times fouler than before: greed gapes from them.

Reading the eloquent accounts contained in *Polish Cavalry* of very specific and very real atrocities and of human foolishness, is indeed a harrowing experience. T.S. Eliot has observed: 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality'. The reader may therefore be tempted to somehow explain away or dilute the unflinching claim of these texts through reference and deference to a (pre-approved) theory. In fact, in literary studies one often encounters a tendency to play matchmaker for theories and literary texts. The particular artistic text is often dissolved in a very general and superficial presentation of a well-known, powerful theory. Or a reading is not accepted unless it can be validated with recourse to the 'higher' authority of theory. Such an approach, in my opinion, serves neither the cause of literature nor that of theory.

In the case of *Polish Cavalry*, some professional readers may, for example, conclude that a reading in terms of Freud's views on Eros and Thanatos is inescapable. Such a reading seems plausible, as Freud had observed in his patients a compulsion to repeat with regard to loss and the trauma of war. This seemed to him at odds with the Pleasure Principle (the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain), as one would then question the reason for the patient wanting to return to the terror (in therapy or dreams).

Freud also postulated that Eros is counterbalanced by the death drive, Thanatos. Thanatos refers to the drive in the (human) creature to forsake its specific and afflicted life in favour of a return to the indeterminate, the inanimate, and the pre-organic. There seems to be ample evidence of this force in *Polish Cavalry*; most notably perhaps in 'The stump', the poem which, according to Vešović in his foreword, constituted the genesis of this volume. It tells the story of a woman who had lost everything, including her religious identity and her exceptionally handsome lover: 'I saw, Oh God, instantly that he would die / though the comrades swore to me he would not.'



She recalls: 'I'd walk down the street with him and the girls would / look closely at him so what can I do for you / says I and they just smile'. Toward the end of the poem the speaker concludes: 'What am I now take a look at that stump over there/ And you will know instantly who and what I am'. In the very last poem of the volume, 'The cat', the speaker recalls feeding and petting 'nobody's cat' when a thought 'surged' through the back of his or her head: 'if you had a drop of luck, you would not have survived this war'. He or she:

looked deep into the feline eyes as if I was looking
far out over open sea: it was empty all the way from here
to childhood. The soul is – the devastated
church of St. Francis from Matavulj's novel.
And to live is as depressing as dandruff on the shoulders
of old bachelors.

And in the same poem: 'When you look closely / into feline eyes you can see far, it seems, / all the way to your first cry. Even farther, to the candle / on your own deathbed'.

Indeed, this reading may seem conclusive, but in my opinion there resides a compulsion to repeat also in resorting to theory (repeatedly the same old theory) – this may relate to the death drive in that by doing so one snuffs out the unbearable charge of the particular instance or text. Man cannot do without his reveries (Lacan), but what the terror of war makes one realise is that life 'is a nightmare with a stone beneath your head. / My ecstasies as ridiculous as the gait of people/ in silent movies' ('The cat').

Much of this volume deals with the problem of truth, as formulated for example in 'I know as much as I am told': 'How could it be, dear colleague, the whole truth / in a land where all truths are fractured into three?' War also brings about dramatic shifts in one's view of God, causing total rejection in some instances and in others a whole new conception: 'God isn't a little owl that always / perches on the same branch' ('Once upon a time when God was incognito'). This collection probes the contours of stark disillusionment: with oneself, one's fellow human beings, country and God. Indeed, the war did bring something that peacetime seemingly could not. Following the war, woods 'no longer rustle with / Any ancient truth. Nor secrets. Bird screams are sharp / As icicles'. Consider the compelling conclusion of 'Full moon in water':

Who knows, until this war, I never learned anything important about
anybody. In former life I never did anything but doze as if the whole world
were a waiting room on a narrow-gauge railroad. In Ustiprača, say.
You are born, doze away your lifetime and never get to know

what anybody is really like, under the skin. Only doomsday
reveals it all, down to bare bones. To try in peacetime,
to get to know your fellow-man is like trying your hardest
to hit the moon in water with a stone.

Insights such as these are bestowed on those who speak of real lived trauma. Failing to hit the moon may in poetry constitute actually hitting the mark.

However, in my understanding of Freud, the compulsion to repeat does not refer to the mere recollection, the remembering, of past events, but rather a reliving, a re-enactment of those events as if they were happening right now, in the present. The latter does not occur in *Polish Cavalry* and therefore the application of this particular theory of Freud has limited usefulness for this volume. The narratives reach us at double remove via the poet. In most instances the speaker is consciously reflecting on the past, even in those texts in which he or she recalls awaiting the next shell to explode or in which the past is as recent as yesterday (compare, for example, 'Mice'). The language of the texts – searching and overtly metaphorical – underlines this fact.

One of the most attractive features of this volume, artistically speaking, is the use of metaphor. Most of these compelling metaphors had been invented by those whom the poet listened to very carefully (compare the second poem in the volume 'I know as much as I am told'). Much rather than bridging the divide, the metaphors here foreground distance (from the real, the truth). Consider in this regard, for example, the title poem of the collection. This poem evokes one of the most enduring myths of the Second World War, according to which the Polish cavalry during the September Campaign of 1939 attacked the German tanks with no more than sabres and lances. Though this myth has been thoroughly dispelled by fact, in the present volume it may serve as metaphor for lasting human foolishness. This metaphor may also hint at the problem of engaging with the real, of 'attacking' a matter with appropriate tools, instruments which may actually hit the mark, reveal something. The second stanza of 'Polish cavalry' consists of the following rather pessimistic statement: 'History is the jaws of a lion whose hunger cannot be sated / by any metaphor'. The fact that this disavowal of metaphor inadvertently contains a metaphor, underscores the bleak view of language that eventually arises from this collection.

Polish Cavalry ought to be read undiluted.