



Luka Bekavac – Croatia

Viljevo (2013)

Publishing House **Fraktura**

Biography

Luka Bekavac, born in 1976 in Osijek, is a writer, translator and literary theorist. He teaches at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb University (Comparative Literature Department) and has contributed articles on philosophy, literary theory, music and literature to a number of magazines, radio programmes and peer-reviewed publications, including *Performance Research*, *Frakcija*, *Filozofska istraživanja* and *Književna smotra*. He has translated works by Martin Amis, Jonathan Franzen, Alberto Toscano, Naomi Klein, Aleksandar Hemon and others, and worked as an editor for *Quorum* literary magazine (2004-2006), focusing on links between popular culture, experimental music and philosophy. His critically acclaimed novels *Drenje* (2011) and *Viljevo* (2013) were nominated for a number of regional awards. *Viljevo* won the Janko Polić Kamov Award in 2014.

Synopsis

Viljevo is a novel about memory, trauma and transcommunication: a triptych of different voices, weaving together historiography, speculative fiction and highly-stylised prose.

It opens with 'August', a monologue transcribed from a corrupt reel-to-reel tape, inviting readers into virtually uninhabited Slavonian plains. This poetic and fragmentary narrative, removed from any recognisable timeline, revolves around the themes of solitude and recollection, nature and technology, the final stages of decaying civilisations, as well as the possibility of transcommunication – contact with the 'beyond'.

'After Midnight' is a raw and intense document of such an attempt at channelling the unknown: a sequence of questions and answers between the characters of 'August' and their obscure counterparts. Reading as a strict interrogation, this section resolves certain ambiguities of the introductory monologue, while introducing new doubts about the basic framework of the story.

The final chapter, 'Marković', brings about a change of pace and context. Set in occupied Osijek in 1943 and written as part memoir, part painstakingly constructed (para)scientific article, it revolves around the activities of an illegal anti-fascist radio station. Mysterious technical difficulties that keep obstructing its work are gradually revealed, providing a captivating backdrop to the entire book: they offer a series of new explanations, ultimately leaving the final interpretation open.

Viljevo

Luka Bekavac

Događaji koje ću opisati zbivali su se u Osijeku tokom ljeta 1943. godine.

Pamtim te mjesece kao gluho vrijeme: na svjetskim je frontama rat bio u punom zamahu, kao i u unutrašnjosti Hrvatske, tada u savezu sa silama Osovine, no u samom Osijeku, prijestolnici Velike župe Baranja i Kammerhoferovom sjedištu, buka je zamrla. Katarina Garaj, Ignac Šlezinger i ja, kao izolirana ćelija u samom središtu grada, vodili smo radiostanicu koja je tjedno emitirala proglose, a dnevno održavala kontakt s oslobođenim teritorijima. Od sredine lipnja pa sve do početka rujna radili smo iz velikog četverosobnog stana na trećem katu Ustaške 9. Stan je, koliko se sjećam, prije toga pripadao obitelji Korsky ili Kohn. Ne znam što se poslije dogodilo s njima. Deportacije Židova počele su još u proljeće 1941., nakon spaljivanja sinagoge, a sredinom kolovoza 1942. oko tri tisuće Osječana, zajedno s desecima obitelji protjeranih iz drugih gradova, odvedeno je u Auschwitz ili Jasenovac. Nakon toga sam se često pitao ima li borba za ovaj grad još uopće smisla.

Ono o čemu bih ovdje htio govoriti počelo je više-manje neprimjetno, krajem srpnja ili početkom kolovoza. Ne mogu ulaziti u detalje vezane za naše poslove; mogu samo reći da smo primijetili prve klice te pojave upravo za vrijeme ilegalnog djelovanja. Nažalost, ne sjećam se više o čemu se točno radilo: o jednoj od naših emisija ili šifriranoj transmisiji prema našim drugim grupama; sjećam se samo da je jedne večeri netko čuo kako se zvuk na djeliće sekunde prekida, izrešetan kratkim periodima tišine, kao da dolazi kroz pokvaren zvučnik koji

negdje gubi kontakt. Provjerili smo svoju opremu; činilo se da je sve u redu, ali smetnja se već sutradan ponovila, no ovoga puta usred dnevnih emisija Krugovala. Činilo se da netko pokušava sabotirati njihov signal. To je trajalo satima.

Pokušali smo saznati nešto o tome od drugih ćelija, ali bez rezultata. Preostalo nam je samo opet rastaviti, provjeriti i sastaviti opremu. Međutim, nismo pronašli nikakav kvar, a smetnja se narednih dana pomalo pojačavala: postajala bi posebno intenzivna za vrijeme naših emisija, zbog čega smo opet pomislili da se radi o nekoj novoj tehnologiji ometanja signala, ali trajala je čak i između programskih frekvencija, u šumu radiovalova. Tada se netko sjetio magnetofona: snimili smo oko trideset minuta te buke između stanica, tamo gdje je smetnja bila najjača i takoreći najčistija. Dok je mikrofon bio okrenut prema zvučniku, razgovarali smo potpuno slobodno i nevezano o događajima tih dana, o nevažnim sitnicama koje su nam, dok nismo emitirali, sačinjavale svakodnevni život, takav kakav je bio, sličan zatvoru ili samostanu.

Kad smo nekoliko sati kasnije preslušali snimku, doživjeli smo dva zasebna šoka.

Prvi šok je nastupio kad smo pojačali zvuk tako da se bolje čuju intervali tišine, odnosno smetnje koje su proteklih dana onemogućavale svu aktivnost na radiju. Ispostavilo se da to nije tišina: svaka smetnja je bila obrazovana kao kratak udarac, nalikovala je škljocaju neke vrste sklopke za kojim se, nejasno i sasvim tiho, čulo nešto što je zvučalo kao ženski glas.

Drugi je šok bio mnogo jači ali i slojevitiji. Gotovo u istom trenutku shvatili smo, prvo: da se neke riječi i rečenice, ponekad krnje ili jedva raspoznatljive, ponekad jasne i povezane u niz od jedne ili dvije misli, mogu povezati s temama o kojima smo razgovarali dok je magnetofon snimao; drugo:

da se neke od tih rečenica mogu shvatiti i kao “odgovori” na pojedina pitanja koja smo upućivali jedni drugima tokom snimanja.

Priznajem da je u tom trenutku privremeno zavladao panika. Pomisao na to da nas netko prisluškuje značila je sigurnu smrt: ratni sud u Osijeku imao je ovlaštenje za likvidaciju svih koje bi optužio za sabotaze ili propagandu. Međutim, pometnja je ipak trajala kratko. Shvatili smo da bi onaj tko nas prisluškuje, da je imao zle namjere, već odavno djelovao. Nametnula se sljedeća hipoteza: to je još jedna od naših ćelija, opremljena tehnologijom čije nam karakteristike nisu poznate, koja se pokušava probiti do nas. No bilo je nemoguće opravdati tu pretpostavku zbog izostanka svakog protokola; kontakt se uspostavljao i nestajao naizgled stihijski, bez formalne najave i odjave, ton govora je bio krajnje neprirodan, kao da se radi o mašinama, ali je sadržaj poruka bio prijateljski, bez posebnih zahtjeva osim toga da odgovorimo, svakodnevno ponavljane molbe da komuniciramo, da se javimo.

Kad smo sve to utvrdili i zbrojili, ostalo je očigledno da zapravo ne znamo ništa o onome što se događa: tko stoji iza transmisija, kako ih tehnički organizira, zašto se javlja na tako neobičan način i s kojom svrhom. Tada smo počeli intenzivnije razmišljati o tim “smetnjama”, snimati ih i proučavati. Pokazalo se da je dovoljno uključiti magnetofon da bismo primili poruku. To nije funkcioniralo uvijek, no više nije bilo potrebno češljanje šuma radiovalova između stanica – mogli smo jednostavno ukopčati mikrofon u magnetofon i početi sa snimanjem. Mi ne bismo čuli ništa, ali glas bi, sasvim tih i slabašan, ipak ostajao na traci, bez obzira na to što u sobi nije uključen niti jedan radioapar, bez obzira na to što u sobi nema nikoga.

* * *

Nema kraja. [24 cm oštećeno] nikada ne počinje niti završava... a ako [smetnje 1 minuta 48 sekundi] što nema fizičkog kanala prema njima... samo ti brojčanici... ali kako uopće to objasniti nekome ako to nisu brojčanici telefona ili sefova, nešto što se može uhvatiti rukom... navigiranje u gustoj magli, neprozirnoj, bez koordinata, plovidba prema izvoru signala koji ne šalje nikakve poruke, koji te samo... ugađa, zateže te i otpušta, kao žicu, postavlja na pravu frekvenciju, u slobodni koridor... i to odbrojavanje, takoreći, prije nego što se otvori druga strana... izletjela sam iz kreveta kad je progovorio, isti kao bilo kakav drugi glas, kao da je u kutu sobe živ muškarac, samo možda sakriven, u zasjedi... psi su bili nervozni cijeli dan, mogla sam misliti da se nešto događa... uvijek je zvučalo tako, tih prvih par trenutaka, uvijek je počinjalo bilo kada, bilo gdje, bez uvoda, bez ikakvih predosjećaja, bez mrmljanja ili šaptanja, bez šumova koji bi se pretvorili u govor: jednostavno je odjednom bio tu, potpuno običan, kao bilo čiji glas, samo se nikome nije mogao pridružiti, i nitko ga nije mogao [smetnje 16 sekundi] poslije ponoći je druga zemlja, s potpuno drugim zakonima... ne mogu ništa, tamo sam na milosti i nemilosti, poslije ponoći nemam izbora, od mene ostane samo prolaz, kao cijev ili kabel prema nečemu što zapravo nikada nismo vidjele... kao prostor u kojem više ne postojim, ali ne postoji ni ona, niti taj netko treći, ili koliko ih god već ima, legija [smetnje 48 sekundi] uopće ne prestaje, kao da nikad ne spava, udarci najprije dolaze s tavana, cijelu noć, dok smo još zajedno, a onda po cijele dane iz salona, kao oklopni kukac, nekakvo ratoborno, diluvijalno čudovište... udara rilom po tom zidu koji nas je nekim čudom zaštitio... sigurno se bolje osjećala onda, na bijegu, kad se stalno nešto događalo, kad je bila korisna, glavna, neslužbena prvosvećenica našeg kola,

kad smo pokušavale sve druge izvući iz vatre, dok je i nama prijetilo spaljivanje... sada mi je teško sve to zamisliti, kao da se nikad nije [10 cm oštećeno] prijelazno vrijeme, dok ovdje još nije bilo nereda, ali se sve više govorilo o tomu da se Zapad već srušio, da cijela Europska unija izgleda kao Sibir [smetnje 8 sekundi] teritorij poslije nuklearne eksplozije... na kraju se zid prema njima podigao toliko visoko da se više nitko nije usuđivao [šumovi 3 sekunde] televizijske slike, fotografije ili svjedočanstva koja bi potvrdila sve na što se sumnjalo... dok je nisu konačno uklonili iz svih trgovina i spalili, vjerojatno iza neke osječke periferije, sva takva roba je nosila naljepnice s upozorenjem, *OPREZ: ovaj proizvod sadrži sastojke europskog podrijetla...* ali mislile smo da su to i dalje preuveličavanja, jednostavno nismo mogle zamisliti slom koji bi vratio Europu u nekakvu feudalnu zimu, a [smetnje 39 sekundi] oduvijek bili provincija, na rubu zbivanja, zaostali i zaboravljeni... relativno sigurni zbog drugih centara u regiji koji su još uvijek bili aktivni u eteru, iako su stvarali tolike probleme i izazivali strah stotinama kilometara oko [15 cm oštećeno] počelo nešto veliko, nešto ozbiljno... opet bježati, sada, nakon svega?... zapravo, mislila sam da je ovo, ova kuća, to *nakon svega...* sve je bilo gotovo davno prije nego što smo se skrasile ovdje, i stvarno se činilo da je... da je time sve završeno, riganje vatre, smrt i uništenje, mislile smo da je došao kraj, da se ždrijelo zatvorilo... ostale su samo te naplavine katastrofe, misija čišćenja ruševina, na nebu i na zemlji, barem je tako [šumovi 7 sekundi] u bijegu, bez hrane, bez prenoćišta, to je već bilo previše, mislila sam da ću poludjeti, i kad su prestali, još dugo nakon što su prestali, i dalje sam osluškivala, čekala sam da ponovno počnu... jedan sasvim mali dio [nerazgovijetno] radar, u stanju pripravnosti, uvijek budan, i pročešljavao eter, provjeravao ne čuje li se ipak negdje netko... ali stvarno

više nije bilo nikoga... ne znam što mi se dogodilo u međuvremenu... možda je *ovo* odgovor na [smetnje 18 sekundi] s takvima, *naplavljenima*, taj potpuno suh, mehanički govor, muka ga je već i slušati, kao da dešifriram zvukove nekakvog stroja... doduše, niti *ja* tamo nisam [smetnje 58 sekundi] na kojem bi one visoke frekvencije, iznad onih koji su *preživjeli* katastrofu, mogle i dalje djelovati na sve ispod neba, onda bi to mjesto moralo imati ime kao Viljevo... pojma nemam je li to zbog ovih ruševina ili [šumovi 5 sekundi] energetske efluvije koji se povlači po ravnici, ali samo to ime, *Viljevo*, čim smo prošle pored ploče s tim natpisom... teško je reći [nerazgovijetno] pseudonim za nešto drugo, nešto što uopće nije ime naselja... ne znam što je [nerazgovijetno] tisuća mikroskopskih lampica u potpunom mraku, ili ubod stotina minijaturnih igala po cijelom tijelu, ime [smetnje 12 sekundi] iskri i kad je ovako oblačno, žari [nerazgovijetno] najjačom kišom... *Viljevo*... kao da znači *ovdje počinje*... ili *aktivirano je*... [tišina 9 sekundi]... ili *otvara se prozor*... [tišina 9 minuta 15 sekundi]... nešto se događa.

Viljevo

Luka Bekavac

Translated from the Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The events I'm going to describe took place in Osijek during the summer of 1943.

I remember those months as a time of deafness: on the world front, the war was at full swing, just as it was in inland Croatia, then in alliance with the Axis powers; but in Osijek itself, the capital of the Great Parish of Baranja and Kammerhofer's headquarters, the noise stopped. Katarina Garaj, Ignac Šlezinger and I, members of the isolated cell in the very heart of the town, were in charge of a radio station that transmitted weekly proclamations and kept daily contact with the liberated territories. From mid June to early September we worked out of a large four-bedroom apartment on the third floor of 9 Ustashe Street. The place, as far as I remember, used to belong to the Korskys or the Kohns. I don't know what happened to them. The deportations of Jews began back in the spring of 1941, after the synagogue had gone up in flames, and by mid August 1942, around 3,000 people in Osijek, together with dozens of families banished from other towns, were taken to Auschwitz or Jasenovac. After that, I often asked if fighting for this place made any sense at all.

What I'd like to reflect on here began more or less inconspicuously, in late July or early August. I can't go into details about our business. I can only say that we noticed the first spark of this occurrence precisely at the time of our illegal activities. Unfortunately, I no longer remember what it was exactly: one of our shows, or an encrypted transmission to

one of our groups. I remember only that one evening someone heard brief interruptions in the sound, lasting for only a fraction of a second, machine-gunned with short periods of silence, as if coming from a broken speaker, losing contact somewhere in the wiring. We checked all of our equipment; everything seemed all right, but the disturbance came up again the following day, this time in the middle of Ustashe National Radio's daily program. Someone seemed to be trying to sabotage the signal. It lasted for hours.

We tried to get some information on it from other cells, but to no avail. The only thing we could do was to disassemble, check, and reassemble our equipment again. However, we found no glitches, and in the days to come the disturbance gradually amplified and became particularly intensive during our program, which made us think that it was some new technology of signal distortion, but it went on even between program frequencies, in the crackle of radio waves. Then a tape recorder came to someone's mind: we recorded about 30 minutes of that noise between stations, where the disturbance was the strongest and, one might say, the purest. While the microphone was turned towards the speaker, we conversed freely and without mention of the events that took place those days, about unimportant trivialities, which, when we did not transmit, made our everyday life similar to that in a prison or a monastery.

Several hours later, when we played the tape, we experienced two separate shocks.

The first shock came when we turned up the volume to enhance the intervals of 'quiet', that is, disturbances, which in the past few days made any activities on the radio impossible. It turned out this was not silence: every disturbance was in

fact a short jolt, resembling the clicking of a switch of some kind, after which another sound could be heard – similar to a woman's voice.

The second shock was much stronger and had more layers. Almost at the same moment, we realized two things. Firstly, some words and sentences – sometimes fragmented or barely comprehensible, sometimes intelligible and linked into a series of thoughts – could be connected to the topics we were discussing while the tape recorder did its work. Secondly, some of these sentences could be understood as 'answers' to particular questions we directed at each other during the recording.

I admit that at that moment panic temporarily struck. The thought that someone was listening in on us meant certain death: court martial in Osijek had the authority to liquidate all those accused of sabotage or propaganda. However, the confusion was short-lived. We realized that those listening in on us, if their intentions had been ill, would have acted long ago. The following hypothesis ensued: this was one of our cells, equipped with technology whose features were unknown to us, trying to reach us. But it was impossible to confirm this assumption due to the nonexistence of any protocol: the contact was established and broken seemingly at its own volition, without previous warning or announcement, the tone of the speech was completely unnatural, as if these were machines, but the content of the messages was friendly, without any special request but to answer, a daily repeated request to communicate, to respond.

When we accounted for all of this, it became obvious that in fact we didn't know anything: who were the people behind the transmissions, how they organized them technically, why

they called in such an unusual way and with what purpose. Then we dedicated ourselves more intensively to these disturbances, recording and studying them. It turned out that it was enough to turn on the tape recorder to receive the message. This did not always work, but we no longer needed to comb through the noise of the radio waves between stations – we could simply plug in the tape recorder and start recording. We would not hear anything; nevertheless, the voice, quiet and feeble, remained on the tape, regardless of the fact that no radios were turned on in the room, regardless of the fact that there was no one there.

* * *

No end... [*24 cm damaged*] it never starts nor ends... and if [*1 minute 48 seconds of disturbance*] because there's no physical channel towards them... only those dials... but how to explain this to anyone if these aren't phone or safe dials, something you can't put your hand on... navigating in a thick fog, impervious, without coordinates, sailing towards the signal's source that sends no messages, that only... tunes you, tightens and loosens, like a wire, sets you to a right frequency, into a free corridor... and that countdown, so to speak, before the other side opens... I flew out of my bed when he spoke, the same as any other voice, as if a living man were standing in the corner of the room, only perhaps hidden, waiting in ambush... all day the dogs were nervous, I could've sensed something was going on... it always sounded like that, those first few moments, it always began whenever, wherever, without introduction, without premonition, without mumbling or whispering, without noise that turned into speech: just like that, it was suddenly there, plain, a voice that could belong to anyone, but it could not join anyone, and no one

could [16 *seconds of disturbance*] after midnight it is a different country, with completely different laws... I can't do anything, I'm thrown at their mercy, after midnight I have no choice, only a passage remains of me, like a pipe or a cable leading towards something we've actually never seen... like a space in which I no longer exist, neither does she, nor that third person, or however many there are, a *legion* [48 *seconds of disturbance*] never stops, at all, as if it never sleeps, first knocks come from the attic, they go on, the whole night, when we're still together, and then from the salon, lasting for days, like an armoured beetle, some belligerent, diluvial monster... pounding with its proboscis against the wall, which by some miracle protected us... she must have felt better then, on the lam, when something was always going on, when she was useful, in charge, the unofficial prioress of our circle, when we were trying to get the others out of the flames, when the incineration had not yet threatened us... it's so hard to imagine it all now, as if it had never [10 *cm damaged*] transition time, when chaos hadn't yet set in, but when the word went around that the West had already collapsed, that the whole of the European Union looked like Siberia [8 *seconds of disturbance*] territory after nuclear explosion... in the end the wall in front of them rose so high that no one dared [3 *seconds of noise*] TV images, photographs, or witness accounts that confirmed everything that had been suspected... until they finally removed it from all stores and burned it, probably on the outskirts of some Osijek periphery, all such merchandise had labels saying, *WARNING: this product contains ingredients of European origin...* but we still thought all of that was just an exaggeration, we just couldn't imagine a breakdown that would send Europe back to some feudal winter, and [39 *seconds of disturbance*] we've always been a province,

the edge of everything, backward and forgotten... relatively safe because of other centres in the region that were still active on the air, even though they created so many problems and spread fear for hundreds of kilometres around [*15 centimetres damaged*] something big, something serious began... to go on the run, again, now, after everything?... actually, I thought that *this*, this house, was *after everything*... everything had finished long before we settled here, and it really seemed as if... as if it all ended, the spitting of fire, death and destruction, we thought an end had come, that the gorge had shut... what remained was the washout of disaster, the mission of clearing out the ruins, in the heavens and on earth, at least that's [*7 seconds of noise*] on the run, without food, without place to sleep, that was too much, I thought I'd go mad, and when they stopped, for a long time after they'd stopped, I still listened, waited for them to start again... one tiny portion [*inaudible*] radar, on alert, always awake, combing the radio air, checking if someone could be heard somewhere, after all... but there was no one, not any more... I don't know what happened to them in the meantime... perhaps *this* is the answer to [*18 seconds of disturbance*] with such, with the *washouts*, this completely dry, mechanical speech, I feel sick from listening to it, as if I'm deciphering sounds from a machine... to be fair, *I'm* not there either [*58 seconds of disturbance*] where those high frequencies, above those who *survived* the catastrophe, could still affect all those under the sky, then that place should have a name like Viljevo... I have no idea if these ruins cause it or if [*5 seconds of noise*] energy effluvium dragging along the plains, but that name, the very name, *Viljevo*, the moment we passed the sign bearing that name... it's hard to say [*inaudible*] a pseudonym for something else, for something that's not a name of a place... I don't know what it is

[*inaudible*] thousands of microscopic lights going off in total darkness, or a tingle of hundreds of miniature needles all over your body, the name [*12 seconds of disturbance*] sparkles even on a cloudy day like this, burns [*inaudible*] with the torrential rain... *Viljevo*... as if it means *it all begins here*... or *it is activated*... [*9 seconds of silence*]... or *the window opens*... [*9 minutes and 15 seconds of silence*]... *something is happening*.



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

2015

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Viljevo

228 pp, 2013

Translations: The book has not been translated yet.
(*Last Update – March 2015*)

Publishing House **Fraktura**

Bregovita ulica 7, Ivanec Bistranski – 10290 Zaprešić – Croatia

Tel. +385 1 3357863

www.fraktura.hr

Contact: Simić Bodrožić – fraktura@fraktura.hr

ISBN: 978-9-53-266483-6

EUPL / FEP-FEE – Rue Montoyer, 31 – B-1000 Brussels – T. +32 (0)2 770.11.10
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