

# Memory of Power Transformed

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**Abstract:** This essay is focused on the phenomenon of power. Special attention is paid to the past understanding, research and explanation of what *power* is, and how it has been understood throughout history. Traditionally, power has referred to authority, influence, control. The research of literary works, however, has led me to the realization that the notion of *power* is understood in different terms in literature in comparison to how it is explained in philosophy and the social sciences. In order to contribute to the broader understanding of *power* from a literary point of view, this essay examines many questions concerning this phenomenon, such as: how does the past understanding of power determine how it is accepted and interpreted in the present? How are the success of the present efforts and initiatives affected by the memory of *power*? The essay attempts to show that the memory of the notion of power is not and cannot be fixed and given once and for all. Therefore, the literary examples provided demonstrate how the definitions of power given in the past are transformed and transfigured by present literary works, which show how we may "forget" what we know about this phenomenon, and define it from a new perspective.

**Keywords:** power, literature, social sciences, influence, will, Urosevic, Mihajlovski

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of this essay is the contribution of literature to an understanding of power which is different from the one offered by philosophy and the social sciences. The text deals with the past research and explanation of what *power* is, and how it has been understood throughout history by various philosophers, anthropologists, political and cultural analysts, whose legacy has contributed to the present understanding of this notion. Traditionally, power has referred to authority, influence, control. The research of literary works, however, leads to the realization that the notion of *power* is understood in somewhat different terms in literature and literary theory and criticism in comparison to how it is explained in philosophy and the social sciences.

The topic of power is an extremely sensitive, even controversial, one, as we all recognize the power which has its effects in society, and we know how

destructive it can be: through wars, weapons of mass destruction, as well as the state apparatuses of enforcement in time of peace. Undoubtedly, in any situation where the life or the economic existence is threatened, it seems, perhaps, inadequate to talk about the power discourse in literary works and the manner in which the phenomenon of power functions there. It is not in vain that the French writer and philosopher Jean Jacques-Rousseau shouts with pain and irony: "Barbarian philosopher, come read your book on the battlefield!" (Pyco, 2000: 70).

Understandably, in periods of crisis, where the power relations rule, literature may seem irrelevant. In a world in which there are "60,000 nuclear war heads, of which many have a capacity a thousand times greater than the bomb which destroyed Hiroshima" (Eagleton, 1997: 169), in a world in which global warming threatens to erase thousands of plant and animal species and to seriously threaten human life, it may seem that literature does not play a major part in life. My research of power, a section of which is represented in this essay, has resulted from my conviction that such a view is not entirely justified. Perhaps literature does not have such a direct role in everyday life as political or economic factors do, but it certainly cannot be immune to the world around itself, the external discourse which penetrates its tissue, and, affected by the environment, it inevitably influences in turn its environment. I consider, therefore, that literature can have a great role in relativizing the existing understanding of power precisely because it is not a product of isolated imaginative minds who are not influenced by any political or economic events, but, on the contrary, it is a product of writers whose characters inevitably contain the experiences of their

authors, who have unquestionably felt the functioning of power in the real world.

The American literary critic Elaine Showalter points to perhaps an unexpected fact, which has very much surprised her. Namely, after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, when thousands of people were killed, a "spontaneous renewal of poetry" (Showalter, 2003: 63) took place, and the number of poems sent by email increased incredibly – Shelley's "Ozymandias", Auden's "1 September 1939", Yeats' "The Second Coming". Far from not playing any role in social life, literature offers its views of the essential meaning of the power relations and the possibility of reassessing their value.

#### DEFINITIONS OF POWER

Definitions of power from various disciplines show that this notion can refer to many disparate phenomena: physical and mental abilities of an individual or a social group, influence, authority, control, even the energy of natural forces.

Power is frequently defined as a measure of the capability of an entity to control his/her environment, including the behavior of other entities. A large number of definitions in many variants repeat the same thesis. On the other hand, there are definitions which belong to something I have separated as another group of definitions of power, ostensibly similar to the former one, according to which, power represents the prospects of a person or a group of people to implement their will against the resistance of the others. Why "ostensibly" and on the basis of which criterion I have divided these two groups – I shall explain in a moment.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, power is explained through its various expressions: control, capability, government, authority, influence, energy. When it is understood as control, power is defined as the ability to control people or things (Wehmeier, 2003: 1029). In that sense, it can mean political control of the leadership of a county, or control of one state over others. When it is related to capability, it is defined as the possibility to do something, referring to an individual's capacity to fulfill a desire, which does not have to include a relationship with other people. As a subdivision of the meaning *capability*, power can refer to the capability of the body (for example, to climb a mountain) or the mind (for example, to draw a conclusion from certain premises).

As authority, power refers to the right of a person or a group to do something (Wehmeier: 1030). This includes the division into executive, legislative and judicial power because its representatives have acquired authority to carry out tasks in their areas. When it is defined as influence, then power refers to the possibility of an individual or a group of people to convince other individuals or groups of the validity and correctness of his/her/their attitudes, as is frequently the case with the media. When it comes to energy, then power refers to the forces of nature.

Defining power, the German sociologist and political economist Max Weber says that power is "the probability that one actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber, 1997: 152). This is just one among numerous definitions, but it reflects the essence of power the way it is felt by the characters in the works which are going to be analyzed.

The American economist John Galbraith offers a thorough analysis of the phenomenon of power. He considers that there are constant features behind every kind of power, which are not immediately visible. He attempts to discover what those constant features or attributes are – he tries "to identify the sources of power in: the person, the property and the organization, and reveal the instruments through which power acts and is implemented (Галбрайт, 1995: 10). The questions he asks about power in politics and the economy are also relevant for the relations between the characters, ideas and situations in literature, and the following is but one example: how do some more than others manage to impose their will and cause others' submissiveness – is it through "physical punishment, promise of financial reward, is it a result of conviction, or is there another, more profound reason which forces the people who are target of power to leave their personal aims and accept somebody else's?" (Галбрайт, 1995: 17).

The American political analyst Andrew Haywood divides power into two types: authority and power. Authority is defined as legitimate power, so that "power is *capability* to affect the behavior of others, whereas authority is the *right* to do that" (Хейвуд, 2009: 5). Apart from *authority*, other notions which are closely related to power are *force*, *manipulation* and *influence*. In the broadest definition of Heywood, power is ability to achieve the desired result. It is precisely this broad definition which enables many of the characters in literary works rightly to be called powerful, although, according to stricter definitions, they are usually much more powerless than powerful. This contradiction is largely due to the ambiguity and complexity of the notion of power, which is exactly why it is important to indicate various definitions of

power to see where the conclusion that seemingly powerless characters can be considered powerful comes from.

Another author who thoroughly analyses the phenomenon of power is Michel Foucault, who, in his text "The Order of Discourse", says that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over chance events" (Foucault, 1992: 221). It entails the existence of a certain order of things, which continually strives to sustain itself. In the course of that process, power is in the hands of those who retain the existing system and they have at their disposal certain procedures which could delimit the potentially destructive discourse.

Society retains the existing order through what Foucault calls procedures of exclusion: first, prohibition, when laws or moral regulations clearly define what may and what may not be said or done; second, division, in which case there are two sides: on one side rests what is acceptable, and on the other – what is excluded; and, third, the context, which means that words (or behaviors) should always be adequate to the context in which they have been enunciated. Beside these external exclusion procedures, Foucault also identifies so-called internal procedures – when the discourse is controlled not by someone from outside, but the discourse controls itself through classifications, hierarchies, distribution. Almost every society has texts which are graded, classified distributed depending on their importance: from everyday speech, when words disappear as soon as they are pronounced, to discourses which, for literary,

religious or other reasons, are continually repeated and remembered.

#### LITERATURE'S DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE OF POWER

Literature also discusses the phenomenon of power and its characteristics, but it usually does it indirectly, through the story, and not with definitions and categorizations, as is the case with the social sciences. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the research of power in literary works indicates that literature offers interpretations which undermine the common views of power – through the relation of the characters with their environment, through the linguistic style in which the works are written, as well as through the topics they deal with. They interpret power as an ambiguous, polysemantic term, pointing to situations in which it is not clear where power is situated and pointing to the fact that this phenomenon can be explained only depending on the context and point of view. These are situations in which the characters simultaneously have and do not have power, where they do not have power but they do have authority, where they do not have influence but they do have capability, where they show resistance in spite of their weaknesses.

The resistance against power is certainly a characteristic which is dominant in literary works. That resistance, as it is much weaker than political, economic or military power, is, of course, presented in different ways, not as a direct opposition against and conflict with the more powerful entities. Literature has its own, somewhat unique methods to show its resistance to power.

One literary strategy for undermining power is for the characters not to recognize its importance and

influence, that is, power here is not something which is desired or demanded, but something which is despised and underestimated. In such a way, literature gives an alternative interpretation of this phenomenon.

Another way for the characters to oppose power is to not show resistance, but to avoid its influence through creating an alternative dimension in which power cannot touch them or harm them. Here, the fight against power is not displayed through a direct conflict, but through not fulfilling the obligations imposed in the given environment and withdrawal into an intimate world.

One more possibility that literature uses to minimize the effects of power is to simply ignore power through creating an idealistic image of the world in which either those who have power are not considered to be relevant actors in any events, or else power is used by the characters only for noble causes.

As all these methods are mutually connected, they can all be seen in greater or lesser degree in the two examples analyzed here: Vlada Urosevic's stories in his collection of stories *My Cousin Emilija*, and Dragi Mihajlovski's stories in his prose work *My Skenderbei*.

In Urosevic's collection of stories, the ambiguous sense of power is noticeable – the protagonists do not succeed in any moment to impose their influence on others, but in the alternative world, which is known only to the narrator, a young man, and his cousin, the younger-than-him girl Emilija, and occasionally to the grandfather Simon, they fulfill their desires. Here, as Urosevic says in his theoretical work *Underground Palace*, “the freedom of imagination will find shelter in the spaces of the irrational” (Урошевиќ, 1987: 43), and the irrational is that alternative world where children can fulfill their wishes.

The context of the first few stories is the Second World War, the bombing of the city, hiding in shelters, poverty which is so intensive that people frequently cannot even buy bread. A large family features in the stories, whose members live in a small cottage, which becomes even smaller in winter because they all have to gather in the kitchen, the only room which is heated. In this terrible and miserable situation, the main characters are completely helpless, even more so because they are children who cannot even affect the events at home. But they feel they have enough power to get away from this world and enter another, parallel world in which their actions will mean something, will have certain consequences. At the very beginning of the first story, the narrator shows resistance to the war, whose power is horrible and devastating, by eliminating its importance in his memory. At least there, if nowhere else: “I was young then, and the events in my memory have dimensions that do not correspond to reality: there, finding a small box takes more space than the destruction of whole residential areas in the town” (Урошевиќ, 1994: 5).

The characters in these stories have their macrocosm in which the power relations, as they appear in their ordinary environment, are banished. That microcosm may be, as in the story “Three Wishes”, behind the last houses at the edge of the city, in “the kingdom of periphery fields, the desolate no man's land of the prickly plants” (Урошевиќ: 10). All wishes are easily fulfilled there. The narrator wishes to see elephants, and the enormous creatures immediately appear in front of his eyes. The children can see live elephants that they could only see on photographs in their primary, real world. Real, magnificent, serious elephants walk through the bushes of the city of Skopje, scared because of the shooting of the machine guns

and the noise coming from the military planes. As soon as the narrator wishes for the elephants to disappear so that they would not be shot by the soldiers aiming at them, the wish immediately comes true. The narrator, however, cannot embrace this other irrational world completely; instead, he is searching for some logical explanation of the event: perhaps the animals escaped from the zoo. But when, many years later, he comes upon the book *History of the Skopje Zoo*, he reads there that during the war, there were not elephants in the zoo. This convinces him of the truthfulness of the alternative world, for in one way or another, literally or symbolically, that world exists, so the narrator claims, "I am fully convinced I have seen them [the elephants]" (Урошевиќ: 14) as that is a world in which dreams come true, and which is the foundation of pleasure and joy.

Or that microcosm is the ship from "The Ship Called Skopje", which mysteriously and inexplicably floats through the city of Skopje during the foggy November nights. On such nights, grandpa Simon opens the old sea maps. In the family house, full of aunts and uncles, the narrator is not allowed to say anything. The alternative world is forbidden there because everyone is aware of the power relations in reality, everyone is aware that poverty is the reality, and that a group of privileged people rule their lives. That is why they are not listening to the ship horn sounds. For them, the horn is the sound of the wind or the sound of someone knocking at the door. But not for the narrator and Emilija – for them, it is the sound of the ship. As soon as they get out of the family house, the two children enter their microcosm, the ship, filled with old worn out suitcases, flower pots with faded plants, floatation belts. According to the adults, the narrator and Emilija have entered the school gym, and the adults do not see

the ship the children see. Here, the children can fulfill their wishes: to see what they want to see – not the old cottage, the extremely cold bathroom where water is frozen, or the aunts who reprimand them because they have misbehaved, but objects that may represent something other than that, something more interesting, in accordance with the desires of the observers:

We discovered that behind the dirty and dusty glasses of the framed photographs, there are no snapshots of school picnics and family gatherings: when we wiped the glasses, there were groups of people dressed in clothes that many years ago were called traveling clothes; other people in navy uniforms, with parts of ship equipment were standing next to them. For a moment we thought we recognized in one of them, the one who was holding a spyglass, grandpa Simon, when he was young. ...

(Урошевиќ, 1998: 110)

This desire to see grandpa Simon as a seafarer is fulfilled here, while in the other world grandpa Simon is just an ordinary resident of Skopje. Despite the poverty in the real world, here the narrator and Emilija discover valuable treasure: compasses, quadrants, barometers.

The most striking expression of power that the protagonists gain in the alternative world is present in the story "Old Woman-Cockroach". While there is increasing lack of bread in the house, the number of cockroaches appearing from the dark holes in the wall also increases. Here, the powerlessness of all characters, children and adults alike, in regard to their environment, is greatly emphasized. They are desperate, they run out of food, and as soon as they hear the sirens announcing bombardment, they are forced, in this miserable situation, humiliated and

scared, to run to the underground shelter if they want to save their own lives. Emilija decides to change this situation and assume influence and control. Therefore, in the alternative world, Emilija assumes power to affect an old woman that she meets in the shelter, an old woman that resembles, in Emilija's eyes, an evil cockroach. One night, Emilija succeeds in catching a cockroach in the empty box of matches, which manages later to escape and save itself. This move from the alternative world is reflected in reality. During the next bombardment, the old woman-cockroach arrives in the shelter later than everyone else, saying that her family locked the door of the flat thinking that she had already gone out. The next test, in which one of the cockroach's legs is torn out as it escapes the box of matches, is also successful – the old woman has a broken leg the next time she arrives at the shelter. Finally, in order to exercise the power which she lacks in reality, Emilija burns the captured cockroach in the box of matches. That power is transferred in reality, at least that is how the event is interpreted by the narrator and Emilija, whose lips, when they see the burnt body of the old woman in her flat because she did not manage to reach the shelter in time and was hit by a grenade, "spread into a horrible, evil, content smile (Урошевиќ, 1994: 29). The whole story displays the helplessness of the people in a situation when bombs are falling on them from the sky, but the accidentally related circumstances, the coinciding of the fates of the old woman and the cockroach enables the two protagonists to interpret their power in the alternative world as influence on the others, and not just as fulfillment of desires that do not have any consequences on the environment.

The helplessness of the individual in the story "The Reader" from *My Skenderbei* is expressed through the

grammatical form "would" – Ilija Klape, nicknamed The Reader, *would* enter the shortlist of any competition which *would* be organized in Macedonia for the greatest literature lover, etc. It is precisely *would* that points to the fact that it has neither happened nor would ever happen. Thus, The Reader, who has 14,535 books, of which he has read at least 14,000, "is permanently stuck" in the job of an administrative officer for public defense, where he "ends up" until his retirement. Stuck in a "disgusting administrative office", the Reader starts to fulfill his unfulfilled desire by constructing an alternative world, in which "would" will be eliminated, and what is only a potential possibility shall become reality. After the retirement, Ilija Klape turns the arge living room of his parents' house into the largest private library in the country. That library becomes the world in which the external laws are banished, and Ilija Klape gains the power he's always wanted to have – the power to read books, interpret them, discuss them.

The further developments are due to the conflict between the world in which Ilija does not manage to accomplish anything and the world in which he gets used to being happy because there he gained the power to fulfill his wishes – buying and selling books. In contrast to his introvert nature, he starts going to all literary events, trying, tragically, to replicate the alternative world of the large living room of his parents' house into the outside world. He thus reproduces his power outside his closed world: he asks questions at the promotions, round tables and literature gatherings which he frequently goes to; he does not get upset when he realizes that nobody understands his words about literature from the depths of his soul; he leaves content that he "showed to the ignorant" as he calls the others who are present.

## CONCLUSION

The protagonists from *My Skenderbei* or *My Cousin Emilija*, according to the majority definitions of power, are completely powerless to resist the political ideology or the context in which they live. This fact indicates that the definitions given by the social sciences are not necessarily comprehensive as they do not manage to explain the power that these characters, in fact, have, but which is not as obvious as the power of the great economic and political factors.

I hope it becomes apparent in these stories why I have divided the definitions of power into two groups; namely, there is a difference between the definitions that identify power as *capability of an entity to control his/her environment, including the behavior of other entities*; and those definitions that describe power as *the prospects of a man or a group of people to carry out their will despite the resistance of others*. Namely, according to the first group of definitions, Ilija Klape – The Reader or Emilija and her cousin have no power whatsoever. The Reader, for instance, is ridiculed at all literary events, he does not gain any money or friends, he starts writing but he does not receive any literary rewards, so that not only does he not influence his environment, but he does not even obtain any benefit for himself. According to the other group of definitions, however, he does have power, and his power is visible in the fact that he manages to carry out his will against the resistance of the others –in accordance with his desires, he reads, writes, goes to literary events, asks questions, expresses his opinion, and nobody can prevent him from doing it. Emilija and her cousin, though children who live in poverty and whose lives depend on the war developments, succeed in boarding

a cruise ship in the middle of Skopje and controlling the hated old woman through a cockroach.

Literary works, then, open the possibility for redefining the notion of power, showing that, apart from the traditional understanding of power as state apparatus, control, political or economic influence or as use of force, power also exists as a more comprehensive, even if more ambiguous, and dynamic phenomenon that marks other things: power to build your own world in which your will shall be carried out, the power to resist the stronger ones even at the cost of losing; the power of knowledge and the sense of happiness derived from it even when it is useless in a pragmatic sense.

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