

 [HTTP://ORCID.ORG/ 0000-0003-1754-8171](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1754-8171)

DOMINIKA KANIECKA  
Jagiellonian University  
dominika.kaniecka@uj.edu.pl

Translated by Katarzyna Bazarnik

## The Happiness of Sisyphus or the Need to Revise one's Own Engagement: The Case of Ivan Lovrenović

**Abstract:** The subject of my analysis is a review of the public engagement of Sarajevo writer and intellectual, Ivan Lovrenović. I am primarily interested in his transition from engaged interventionism to explaining the milieu of postbellum Bosnia and Herzegovina, evident in his writings, and his self-reflection on his own particular engagement. Essential for my analysis is the moment of the author's transition from a phase of active participation in the public debate regarding the form of the state, i.e., Bosnia and Herzegovina and its cultural community, to the position of an outsider by choice, i.e., withdrawing to the sphere of "good solitude". This stage, however, does not mean resignation from the attitude of the committed intellectual and complete abandonment of activism for change within the social and political space. In my opinion, Lovrenović does not turn away from the world in which he lives, nor does he rid himself of a sense of responsibility. Rather, he gradually shifts from journalism towards literary fiction. The main interpretative material spurring the present analysis is Lovrenović's *Sizifova sreća* [Sisyphus's Happiness, 2018], which overall offers an interesting example of the revision of his public engagement, while a broader timeframe of my reflections covers the years 1994–2018.

**Keywords:** engagement, Ivan Lovrenović, journalism, Bosnia and Herzegovina, literature of Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Abstrakt:** Przedmiotem mojej analizy jest rewizja zaangażowania sarajewskiego pisarza i intelektualisty Ivana Lovrenovicia. Interesuje mnie przede wszystkim widoczna w tekstach zmiana interwencji na wyjaśnianie rzeczywistości i autorefleksja intelektualisty na temat własnego zaangażowania. Istotny dla rozważań jest moment przejścia autora z fazy aktywnego uczestnictwa w debacie publicznej na rzecz kształtu państwa (Bośni i Hercegowiny), jego wspólnoty kulturowej, do pozycji autsajdera z wyboru, do strefy dobrej samotności. Etap ten nie oznacza moim zdaniem rezygnacji z postawy intelektualisty zaangażowanego i całkowitego zaniechania działań na rzecz zmiany w przestrzeni społecznej i politycznej. Lovrenović w moim przekonaniu nie odwraca się od swojej epoki, nie uwalnia od poczucia odpowiedzialności. W wymiarze tekstowym jest to stopniowe przechodzenie od publicystyki do fikcji literackiej. Głównym materiałem

interpretacyjnym, a także mobilizacją do takiego ujęcia tematu jest książka Lovrenovića *Sizifova sreća* (*Szczęście Syzyfa*) z roku 2018, która w całości stanowi ciekawy przykład rewizji jednego z etapów zaangażowania. Szerszą ramę czasową dla moich rozważań stanowią lata 1994–2018.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zaangażowanie, Ivan Lovrenović, publicystyka, Bośnia i Hercegowina, literatura Bośni i Hercegowiny

This article focuses on Ivan Lovrenović (1943-), a writer and intellectual engaged in the discussion on the shaping of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its cultural community. I am interested in the moment of his transition from engagement in this particular field to, in his own words, “good solitude”<sup>1</sup> and the accompanying self-reflection. My point of departure is a close reading of one of his recent journalistic books with the telling title *Sizifova sreća* [Sisyphus’s Happiness, 2018]. An analysis of this collection of articles, essays and interviews will help me trace the evolution of the writer’s attitude towards his own engagement. The stages and types of Lovrenović’s involvement are, of course, a direct result of the local context and cannot thus be considered without foregrounding that he is himself an intellectual from Bosnia and Herzegovina, or, more precisely, a Croat from Sarajevo.<sup>2</sup> In *Sizifova sreća*, I look for traces of the following stages of his engagement: writing motivated by the conviction that intellectual’s activities intended to bring about change make sense, writing marked by scepticism (in which intervention is replaced by the need to explain), and quitting journalism altogether. The final stage, i.e., the author’s withdrawal from direct participation in the public debate, does not, in my view, signify the end of his systematic efforts to bring about change within the local social and political space. I draw this conclusion from the ways in which the writer revises his own involvement.

Since the beginning of his career as a writer, Ivan Lovrenović has been expressing himself both through literature (beginning in 1975 with a volume of poetic prose), and journalism (he started writing for the press in 1976). For years, he has been describing and explaining his milieu, originally through editing significant press titles such as a cultural magazine *Odjek* and a news weekly *Dani*. Even before the break-up of Yugoslavia, he took up, primarily in his essays, the ever-topical question of the (im)possible unity of culture in a country marked by so many ethnic, religious and other divisions. His opinions relate to his experience as the editor of various series on cultural heritage for important publishing houses such as Veselin Masleša and Svjetlost before the breakup of Yugoslavia, and currently, for Synopsis. Lovrenović’s ethically-engaged journalism emerged as a natural consequence of the reality of the brutal war (1992–1995), and dominated

<sup>1</sup> The term was first used by Lovrenović himself, responding, in an interview, to another attempt at confining him within the narrow-minded framework of identity (Jazvić and Lovrenović 2014); it is now used by scholars researching his work.

<sup>2</sup> On his entanglement within a regional context, which also contains a systematized overview of Ivan Lovrenović’s intellectual activities, see Kaniecka 2019.

his other forms of writing for over a decade. It was in his journalism (but also in numerous speeches, comments and interviews) that he posed important questions about the political system of his country, challenged dominant narratives, and relentlessly critiqued representatives of the elite, both political and intellectual. As a consequence, he has been ostracised and marginalised, resulting in his decision to posit himself as an outsider. In an analysis of all of Lovrenović's journalism, Bosnian literary scholar Enver Kazaz distinguishes two periods: hope and scepticism. In differentiating between his wartime and post-war ethically committed journalism, Kazaz locates a phase of opposing dramatic circumstances, followed by a phase of reflective explanation (Kazaz 2019, 90), with the year 2006 indicated as the major turning point.

As a typical committed Sartreian writer, Lovrenović bears witness to his own era, reveals the realities of the world in which he lives, and thus changes it, for "to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change" (Sartre 1949, 23). And he is not alone in this process of change, if one treats the act of writing as a kind of appeal to the reader for cooperation (Sartre 1949, 43). However, the question arises: what happens to enthusiasm when such an appeal appears to go unheeded? Reflecting on his own engagement, Lovrenović likes to draw on another French thinker, Albert Camus, and in particular, a quotation from his essay "Helen's Exile": "Yet what a temptation, at certain moments, to turn one's back on this bleak, fleshless world! But this time is ours, and we cannot live hating ourselves" (Camus 1969, 184), which he uses as the motto for his book *Imela i stablo* [Mistletoe and tree, 2011].<sup>3</sup> In this quotation, Camus was responding to Saint-Exupéry's declared hatred of his own era; here Lovrenović expresses his attitude towards the times in which he lives. Indeed, Camus's philosophy has inspired many aspects of Lovrenović's work, especially in *Sizifova sreća*, as we shall see.

Of significance for my immediate argument is a particular reflection made by Michel Foucault. Writing on morality, ethics and politics, he advocated adopting a demanding yet cautious attitude, confronting what we think with what we do and who we are (Foucault 1984, 374). Foucault's interpretations of the moral principles of ancient philosophy point to a connection between self-care and the need to know oneself better (Foucault 2005, 248), which is only a step away from the affirmative paradigm of a reflection on solitude. Since, in Lovrenović's case, giving up engagement means choosing a solitary path, "good solitude" also requires clarification. Leaving aside any psychological dimension, here I focus on its anthropological and philosophical contexts. In his extensive research, Piotr Domeracki identifies as the essence of solitude a belief or sense of alienation correlated with a belief or sense of not belonging to any significant frame of reference (Domeracki 2018, 25). However, solitude can manifest itself in different ways; in the deepest sense it can mean simultaneously "being oneself," seclusion,

---

<sup>3</sup> The book comprises a selection of articles published in the cult Belgrade publishing series „XX vek” [20<sup>th</sup> Century]. The series was created on the initiative of Ivan Čolović in 1971, and contains essays and scholarly dissertations by such authors as Eric Hobsbawm, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz and Maria Todorova.

loneliness and alienation (Domeracki 2016, 51). All these aspects are relevant to Lovrenović's situation: he does not relinquish his personal views (he remains himself), but rather he ceases all public activities and consciously chooses the role of an outsider. However, in so doing he also experiences ostracism and remains "isolated in Bosnia" with regard to certain issues (Jergović 2010, 9–32). Therefore it seems useful to additionally emphasize the difference between the depressing loneliness understood as being abandoned by others, and the uplifting experience of reclusion (solitude) (Kulig 2019, 20 and Szpunar 2022, 52), which Lovrenović calls "good solitude".

The time frame for the following reflections is 1994–2018, although I will also make reference to the era of the former Yugoslavia. I begin in 1994, since this is when Lovrenović's ethically engaged journalistic writings were first published in book form in Zagreb: *Ex tenebris, sarajevski dnevnik* [Ex tenebris, Sarajevo diary], its expanded version appearing a decade later (2005), supplemented by additional texts and conversations from 1990–2004.<sup>4</sup> It is also structurally similar to *Sizifova sreća*, the main focus of my analysis.

The collection of texts gathered under the title *Sizifova sreća* was published by two presses: Sinopsis (Sarajevo-Zagreb) and Otvoreni kulturni forum (Cetinje). It consists of four parts: Part I, entitled "Moćni smo u zlu" [We are strong in evil] consists of chronologically-arranged interviews from 1989–2018; Part II, "Zemlja grobalja" [Land of graves] consists of „chronicles” (journalism and essays from 2015–2016); Part III, "Dijalog" [Dialogue], is an extensive conversation from 2009 with Enver Kazaz; Part IV, "Prilozi" [Additions], consists of a variety of texts intended to complement or update topics covered in previous chapters (these date from 1991 to 2017, and are referenced in footnotes). The volume opens with a brief commentary on the decades covered by the texts, a period of profound changes in author's both personal and public life. The introduction also includes his reflection, expressed in the third person:

Having experienced these changes and breakthroughs himself in both his private and public life, today the author can state just one thing with conviction. Instead of the certainty with which (as long as one was a witness and participant) he thought he knew everything that needed to be known and should be testified to, today resignation has seeped in, and instead of the overbearing tone with which he once uttered what needed to be uttered, now doubt and self-irony have slipped in. This does not mean, however, a change of stance on key events, roles, and policies. Rather, it stems from a sense of failure and the sheer futility of making an effort, whether it be for oneself or others, in case absolutely nothing changes on the path of an all-encompassing absence of social sense and rationality. And more and more often, a new voice speaks within him, which, secreted away, whispers skeptically: doesn't the new reality give you a reason and authority to verify everything you once wrote and said? (Lovrenović 2018, 9–10)<sup>5</sup>

The need to review the author's engagement, as expressed in the introduction, prompts him to take a closer look at the entire collection, including its structure. Lovrenović selects, rereads and edits his writings on the Bosnian-Herzegovinian

<sup>4</sup> The expanded version of 2005 has the abbreviated title *Ex tenebris*.

<sup>5</sup> Relay translation: from the original into Polish by DK, into English by KB.

experience, in order to create out of them a possible answer to his own doubts. His introduction suggests a certain approach, but the book should in fact be viewed as the conclusion to a long-term process in which the author resorts once again to the strategies he had already used to create new versions of his texts. A similar combination of interviews, journalism and essays, dated and arranged in chronological order, can be found in the previously mentioned collection, *Ex tenebris* (2005). Another of Lovrenović's key publications, *Unutarnja zemlja* [The Inner Country], was also the result of a similar revision process. Its latest, "revised and supplemented" fifth edition, appeared in 2017.<sup>6</sup> In the afterword to *Sizifova sreća*, the author assures us that this time he has not edited any of his previously published texts. Yet the volume itself is formed from a variety of different articles and conversations presented in chronological order, supplemented with explanatory footnotes and cross-referenced to other texts; thus revision occurs at a conceptual level.

The first part of the volume, entitled "Moćni smo u zlu" [We are strong in evil], contains eleven conversations, mostly press interviews, the majority dating from 2014 to 2018. Only the first two were published before 2006: "Bosna je teška zemlja" [Bosnia is a difficult country], the 1989 interview with Majo Otan, and the 2002 interview with Rade Dragojević "Jezik je sve što imamo" [Language is all we have]. The pretext for conducting some interviews was book premieres, so it's not surprising to find topics addressed by Lovrenović in his essays and prose being discussed in these conversations. One particular interview was carried out soon after he had received a prestigious literary prize for his essay on Ivo Andrić's work. The interviews feature questions on national culture, writing, being a Croat from Bosnia, the responsibility for crimes and war traumas. There are also references to current politics: the 2018 interview with Branka Lazarin is the last such extensive press commentary by Lovrenović on current events.

The content of the interviews makes it easier to set the journalism included in the collection within the context of Lovrenović's biography and bibliography. I am primarily interested in his reflections on engagement, which constitute the basis for his decision to choose the path of "good solitude." The oldest of the interviews ("Bosna je teška zemlja"; Bosnia is a difficult country) opens with a question important for the relationship between intellectuals and power. Lovrenović emphasizes that in order for intellectuals to maintain necessary independence, a critical attitude to one's own activities is crucial. Like Foucault, he does not look for the key to a personal political stance in ideas, but rather in an individual's ethos. However, noting the peculiarities of his particular regional context, he adds that the philosophical climate in Yugoslavia was never conducive to critical thinking and independence; "it was anti-intellectual *par excellence*" (Lovrenović 2018, 14). As an example, Lovrenović points to the complicated fate of various local

---

<sup>6</sup> *Unutarnja zemlja. Kratki pregled kulturne povijesti Bosne i Hercegovine* [Inner country: A Brief Overview of the Cultural History of Bosnia and Herzegovina] is an extended version of *Labirint i pamćenje* [Labyrinth and memory]. The essay for the journal *Odjek* from the late 1970s was published twice in book form (1989 and 1994), and was eventually published as a wide-ranging monograph in 1998, titled *Unutarnja zemlja* [Inner country].

figures in authority in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Miroslav Krleža, Tin Ujević, Ivo Andrić, all of whom (due to their ideological predicaments) he describes as following the tragic practice of *kitmān* (*ketman*<sup>7</sup>). In the interview he explains his wary attitude towards his membership of literary circles and his involvement in the Association of Independent Writers. Lovrenović confesses his intense interest in Bosnia and reveals that in each of his texts he has tried to get closer to answering the question regarding the source of such interest. The questions Majo Otan asked Lovrenović in 1989 (shortly after the publication of his book *Labirint i pamćenje* [Labyrinth and memory]) were also influenced by his then clear, uncompromising attitude towards – and disagreement with – defining Bosnian-Herzegovinan culture and identity in political and national terms.

The inclusion of the interview in *Sizifova sreća* enables us to understand Lovrenović's introduction more fully. The changed political circumstances (disintegration of the state, war, and disappointment with the new order) affects him, but does not alter his attitude. Also relevant, for the same reason, is an interview from the early 2000s ("Jezik je sve što imamo"; Language is all we have), which followed the publication of *Bosanski Hrvati. Esej o agoniji je evropsko-orijentalne mikro-kulture* [Bosnian Croats. An essay on the demise of a certain European-Oriental microculture, 2002]. In the interview, Rade Dragojević asks about the use of a common language (whose variants nevertheless mark the dividing line between Croats in Bosnia and those in Croatia), Zagreb's policy towards Bosnian Croats and the role of the church during the war, problems resulting from the new order in the state and the involvement of the international community, i.e., all topics repeatedly discussed by Lovrenović (both in his socially engaged journalism and in public debates), including those in the collection analyzed in this article. This interview also includes Lovrenović's significant, oft-repeated (and increasingly controversial) declaration: "Being a Bosnian does not make me a deficient Croat just because I am not exclusively a Croat" (Lovrenović 2018, 29). It is impossible to ignore the fact that in the above-mentioned interviews, conducted between 1989 and 2002, dramatic circumstances occurred both in Bosnia and Herzegovina itself, as well as in the writer's personal life. All the texts in *Sizifova sreća*, apart from the first interview, refer to a reality marked by the war (1992–1995) and its consequences. The post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina is a (systemically, politically and socially) dysfunctional state, stemming from the terms of the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995). For years this dysfunctionality has been both an interesting object of research for scholars and a real problem for its citizens. For Lovrenović himself, this state of affairs could also be perceived as a personal failure, since at various stages of the debate he was among the intellectuals who argued and negotiated with politicians regarding the shape of the new state (in 1994, for example, he co-founded the so-called Sarajevo Initiative<sup>8</sup>).

<sup>7</sup> Kitmān is an Islamic term for the practice of renouncing one's religious beliefs. In reference to the mentioned writers, it was used to emphasize the preventive silence of their political beliefs.

<sup>8</sup> In February 1994, Ivo Komšić, Luka Markešić, and Ivan Lovrenović, as representatives of the Croatian National Council of BiH, acted as a part of an initiative to develop a proposal for a state

There is another dividing line between the interviews under discussion and the moment when the remaining texts were written – marked by the events of 2006. Indeed, the literary scholar Enver Kazaz designates that year as the moment a change in the tone of Lovrenović's journalism can be perceived. It was at this moment that hopes for improving the general political situation, as a result of the package of constitutional reforms, were falling apart. According to some intellectual circles (and Lovrenović himself), the "April Package" offered a real chance to lead the country out of the impasse it found itself in (Kazaz 2019, 87). However, the proposed changes were rejected, as was any social dialogue based on rational argumentation. Lovrenović began to be treated with hostility by both the outspoken opponents of the constitutional reform and the various groups seeking changes, mainly because of his participation in subsequent discussions about the model of power-sharing in the state (Kazaz 2019, 88). Thus, the next stage in Lovrenović's journalism is associated with the prevailing sense of resignation within the public sentiment, but partly also because of the reorientation of the media landscape. In 2008, the independent political-satirical weekly, *Feral Tribune*, to which Lovrenović contributed, was closed down. In 2010, the profile of the *BH Dani* magazine also underwent a radical change. A year later, Lovrenović moved his journalistic activities to the internet and began posting most of his comments on current events on his website. It should be stressed that the number of such comments has been steadily decreasing since 2016. The dynamics of Lovrenović's withdrawal from the field of journalism is also confirmed by the electronic archive of his journalistic texts.<sup>9</sup> Opening his own website marks another turning point in his transition towards solitude, although he does not entirely renounce the idea of community. In relation to the dialectical polarity of human existence, Seneca the Philosopher, and his praise of solitude, a private online space can be seen simultaneously as both a retreat into isolation and a hiding place as a result of alienation (Domeracki 2018, 233–242).

Let us, however, return to our reflection on engagement and the interviews selected for *Sizifova sreća*. In Lovrenović's 2009 interview with Željko Ivanković ("Esej udomljuje sva pisma"; The essay accepts any type of writing), when asked about his own involvement, he replied:

There is a paradox here, the essence of which I can't fully understand, and nor do I even try to understand. This is due to the fact that I am a skeptic, someone who does not believe in the possibility of any preplanned change in society or in the world, especially not for the better and not in any ethical sense. At the same time, though not accepting silence as an attitude that would necessarily result from these feelings, I now communicate using the form that you've called "socially engaged texts" (...) (Lovrenović 2018, 43–44).

---

order without radical territorial divisions and resettlements (including a detailed map). The proposal was never implemented. See Komšić, Lovrenović, Markešić 1994, 4–11.

<sup>9</sup> According to data available in the Infobiro search engine, between 1994 and 2006, 422 journalistic texts authored by Lovrenović appear in the press, and his name is mentioned in 335 articles printed in the press at the time. Between 2007 and 2018, 157 of his texts are to be found, and he is mentioned in as many as 601 publications. In the latter period, the undisputed majority of texts were published up to 2011 (150 of his original texts, 460 texts about him or where his name mentioned). Source: infobiro.ba (accessed 2 March 2023).

He stresses that he has always demonstrated such an attitude, and concludes:

So we are talking here about some kind of responsibility without hope, which is undeniably paradoxical. Perhaps it is simply a need for dignity? A kind of determination to accept one's world without complaining and without any expectation that such acceptance will bring any value or satisfaction. I wish I could call it courage (Lovrenović 2018, 44).

Lovrenović finds a noble and relatively optimistic conclusion to this way of thinking in Camus's essays, more specifically in the closing statement of "The Myth of Sisyphus": "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 1969, 124). In this conversation, he also reminds us of the already quoted attitude of accepting the times one lives in (Lovrenović 2018, 44). The significance regarding this paradox and of responsibility without hope should be read in the context of the changes taking place in the writer's outer life. After 2006, the dysfunctionality of the state further contributed to the deepening of the divisions in Bosnian-Herzegovinian society. As a result, Lovrenović gave up any thought of intervention, but still continued to explain the complex reality in his writings.

The subsequent interviews reveal a number of themes associated with the Bosnian Croats' culture and political background, which makes it possible to point out Lovrenović's involvement in this field. First of all, he has never stopped writing about it, in particular defining the specificity of the cultural microcosm of the smallest ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina (e.g. in "Bosanski Hrvati" [Bosnian Croats]). In a 2016 interview with Amila Kahrović-Posavljak, entitled "Život, književnost" [Life, Literature], he stated that the Croats have lost their authenticity and, in abiding by the opinions of the (ecclesiastical and political) elites, have culturally given up on Bosnia (Lovrenović 2018, 84). Other forms of involvement relate to the writer's presence and activity within the public sphere. For example, he intervened to express his opposition to the policy pursued by Franjo Tuđman during the war by participating in talks and in an open letter to the then president of Croatia. Asked in 2014 by Dejan Jazvić whether, in hindsight, such a gesture did not now seem naive to him, and whether he would change anything in the letter, he replied that he would only mute slightly the protesting tone but did not question the need for intervention itself (Lovrenović 2018, 57). Another similar conversation, with the significant title "Dobra samoća" [Good Solitude], concerns Lovrenović's activities within parapolitical organisations (e.g., the Croatian National Council), where he postulates an institutional autonomy for Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in opposition to the idea of territorial autonomy dominant among this national group), as well offering a discussion on his conflict with Luka Markešić.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, these issues became so important that the book version of the interview in *Sizifova sreća* includes a footnote explaining his participation in the work of the Council, as well as a cross reference to the supple-

<sup>10</sup> The conflict between Lovrenović and Markešić concerned the manner of operation of the Croatian National Council of BiH and the public humiliation that Lovrenović suffered at the hands of Markešić, who heads this organization. The argument ended with Lovrenović's resignation from the organisation. It is worth remembering that both men cooperated in the Sarajevo initiative in the 1990s.



ment in the final part of the volume. In the section entitled “Prilozi” [Additions], Lovrenović included only one article that he did not author: a critical essay, “Fra Luka između vjere i nevjere” [Brother Luka between faith and unfaith], written by Miljenko Jergović, which refers to Lovrenović’s disagreements with the eponymous, politically active clergyman mentioned in the interview. The interview with Jazvić closes with a question asking the writer to clarify his own identity, and it is in response to this that Lovrenović points to “good solitude” as the most comfortable environment for him (Lovrenović 2018, 60), thereby indirectly inspiring a reflection on Foucauldian self-care and how to present himself within the culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Lovrenović has carefully monitored and described the activities of political figures important for his country and the region as a whole (and not just those active in Croatian politics). In an interview carried out by Boris Pavelić in 2017, “U Bosni se čuvajte prevelikih inicijativa!” [In Bosnia, beware of initiatives that are too grand!], he was asked for the first time about his recent lack of political engagement and giving up journalism. Lovrenović admitted that he had felt exhausted and fatalistic throughout the years of describing the aporia of the Dayton agreement as a perfect mechanism for maintaining the status quo, yet he did see the sense of those actions as long as there was positive inertia, with enclaves of free-thinking media, and friendly groups, that is until the regression occurred (which he locates between 2006 and 2010). Once his reputation in the public sphere had started shifting from a position of authority to a position of an enemy, he decided to cease commenting on current events or describing the dynamics of an ever-worsening situation. He comments on the circumstances and consequences of moving to the sphere of “good solitude” as follows:

During the war and the siege I wrote about the dangerous parallels between patriotism and ideological exclusivity, the nature of which in Bosnia and Sarajevo is still nationalistic no matter how much it appears under the banner of good citizenship or left-wing politics; paradoxically, at that time it still seemed bearable. Now, it is over, and for myself, as far as journalism is concerned, it has resulted in a period of non-writing, and indeed a period of absence in general. Yet occasionally there are moments when I think to myself, not without irony – wouldn’t it have been better if such a state of affairs had occurred a long time ago (Lovrenović 2018, 105).

In Foucault’s reflections on self-care, an intellectual is compared to a good athlete who learns how to become resistant to outer circumstances, and not to succumb to strong emotions. I draw attention to this comparison here because I am interested in what the intellectual requires in order to face up to reality. In Foucault I find the following answer: “Now what do we need in order to keep our control in the face of the events that may occur? We need ‘discourses’: *logoi* understood as true and rational discourses” (Foucault 2005, 498). In the face of marginalization within the Bosnian-Herzegovinian public space, therefore, the choice of a virtual retreat or hiding place seems even more justified.

The interviews located at the beginning of *Sizifova sreća* offer insights into Lovrenović’s beliefs, his experiences, as well as his journalistic and literary craft, and lead to the chapter explaining his socio-political reality. Compositionally,

Lovrenović first presents his most recent thoughts, providing evidence that the revision of his own involvement suggested in the introduction is a process that has been ongoing on for some time.

The second part of the volume, called “Zemlja grobalja” [Land of Graves], consists of sixteen “chronicles.” These texts (except one) appeared during 2015–2016 in the Croatian magazine *Telegram*, and subsequently featured on the writer’s website under the heading “Sarajevski dnevnik” [Sarajevo diary].<sup>11</sup> All of them represent Lovrenović’s responses to current events of that period and were inspired by such themes as the status of the Bosnian language, news about the construction of a giant necropolis, reactions to the ban on wearing religious symbols, information on the death of a famous historiographer, the verdict of the Hague tribunal regarding the trial of Radovan Karadžić, the anniversary of a still-disputed war crime, the citizens’ initiative „I sam muzej” [I am a museum myself], and publications of both important and unusual books.

These texts on various topics, written and published over the course of many months, are arranged chronologically in *Sizifova sreća*. As a chronicle of a specific time (but also of a place, as most of them concern Bosnia and Herzegovina), they allowed for an in-depth reflection on a number of topics, including complex biographies, the abuse and questioning of authority, the difficulty of engaging in academic debate with people of a different worldview, and a determination to protect endangered cultural heritage. There was also room for the important topic of the ongoing war. Lovrenović constantly reminds us that the provisions of the Dayton Peace Agreement stopped the armed conflict but did not solve its root cause. Indeed, he had addressed this issue elsewhere, resorting to the form of an appeal and subsequent discussion within the public sphere. The volume under discussion here is mainly concerned with the consequences of this state of affairs, which allows us to better understand Lovrenović’s attitude.

During the years 2015–2016, the public mood in Bosnia and Herzegovina was directly influenced by the ongoing trials of the war criminals. Here, Lovrenović refers to two specific issues. He writes about the trial of Ratko Mladić, focusing on the testimonies of a specific witness, Milorad Dodik, the most important Serbian politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He provides a detailed commentary on the content and performative aspect of the testimonies in favor of the “butcher of the Balkans,” which gives him an opportunity to reveal the brutal character of Dodik’s presence in the public sphere. And although criticism of this politician (also present in interviews) is extremely robust in the article, the title itself was toned down for the sake of the book publication. It first appeared with the title “Dodik Srbin, pa čovek” [Dodik, first the Serb, then the human being],<sup>12</sup> but in this volume the title was changed to “Nacionalna aksiologija” [National Axiology] without any changes in its content.

In another article, Lovrenović comments on the Radovan Karadžić verdict, positioning it within the context of social expectations, and doubting whether it

<sup>11</sup> All of them are available at: <https://ivanlovrenovic.com/clanci/kategorija/sarajevski-dnevnik> (accessed 20 February 2023).

<sup>12</sup> It is under this title that it is accessible on the writer’s website.

will bring any catharsis. As he explains, the moral reconstruction of society will be long and arduous because of all the distressing facts lurking in the shadow of those trials. There are many more potential perpetrators of war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina; yet their faces do not appear in the media but in everyday life because they are the faces of “ordinary citizens and neighbors” (Lovrenović 2018, 217–218).

The writer also describes other effects which have arisen as a result of maintaining the status quo, including an atmosphere favorable to projects able to manipulate the culture of collective memory. Chapter 2, for example, contains articles about the neglect and abuse of victims. Here, we read about the still-unaccounted-for crimes committed by Croats on other Croats during the last war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and about the construction of a symbolic necropolis to commemorate, in principle, the victims of all totalitarian regimes. The “Peace Cemetery,” a large-scale initiative of the Catholic community gathered around a specific Croatian political party, raises questions about the selectivity of collective memory. Lovrenović does not rule out the fact that the Peace Cemetery itself may fall victim to the irony implicit in its name (Lovrenović 2018, 166).

It is worth noting how patiently Lovrenović responds to changes in scholarly discourse, and more specifically, to publications in which new voices present evidence of the many falsehoods in Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature (specifically in the case of Selimović and Andrić<sup>13</sup>). He draws attention to the danger present in such attempts and the resulting Herostratic fame (Lovrenović 2018, 194). He develops the argument further, but without interfering with the original structure of his article “Lažni pisac Meša Selimović” [The Fake Writer Meša Selimović]. It is the only article in this part of the volume that contains a cross reference to “Appendices” (in which Lovrenović makes three additions, corresponding to the issues raised).

*Sizifova sreća* is in essence a collection of regional narratives. Although they also include universal topics such as violence in monotheistic religions, the deadly effects of nationalism, political discourse that ignores facts, terrorism and wars waged in defense of the so-called universal values (with reference to the events of autumn 2015 in Paris), they are dominated by reflections on Lovrenović's own milieu. Regardless of the topic, above all else his articles focus on facts, including less convenient ones. Lovrenović supplements his spontaneous journalistic responses with just a few minor footnotes (mainly clarifying personal data); apart from the previously mentioned change of one title, he refrains from interfering with their original structure. This last batch of his regular journalism is characterized by a high level of attention to detail, readability, a balanced tone, and restraint in explaining the realities about a given period, as well as in revealing his own personal thoughts.

The third part of the volume comprises Lovrenović's extensive interview with literary scholar Enver Kazaz, an active political participant, as well as his close

---

<sup>13</sup> In the newest interpretations of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian literary classics, there is alleged evidence that Dobrica Ćosić commissioned Ivo Andrić two popular novels, which Meša Selimović signed with his own name, as well as accusations regarding racist content in Andrić's own work.

friend. The interview originally appeared in 2009 in *Sarajevske sveske* [Sarajevo notebooks], a magazine serving as a platform for exchanging ideas between intellectuals from the former Yugoslavia, following the country's breakup.<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, many passages of this conversation remain relevant today and can be treated as a kind of reference point or even a summary of the other texts in the volume. Kazaz opens their conversation with a question on the position of the intellectual in a period of breakthroughs. Lovrenović draws attention to the fact that all the intellectual circles of the former Yugoslavia entered the new, post-war situation unprepared. His point is that, habitually, disputes are usually accompanied by extreme forms of antagonism, sometimes even a type of Manichean dualism, which ultimately comes down to a fight between good and evil. He stresses that it was not easy for him to realize that the engagement of the intellectual must presuppose a different approach, opening up new areas for discourse (Lovrenović 2018, 228). He finds inspiration in Camus's writings, as he explains:

What, therefore, does Camus reveal to me? To paraphrase and simplify, he reveals how exclusivity is evil, and how nothing which is exclusive can bring about a good outcome. Camus says how out of all the virtues, the one he cherishes the most is the one that rejects nothing from life.

(...) We are taught to reject, passionately, that which is not "ours" and to affirm that which is "ours." The quintessence of nationalism! (Lovrenović 2018, 230)

Their conversation tackles many subjects, including writing, personal engagement, the intricacies of culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the war, well-known and high-profile initiatives in which Lovrenović was involved (such as the above-mentioned open letter to Tuđman), and those little-known, but groundbreaking experiences he endured (both reportorial, but also the literal discovery of a mass grave).

The discussion between these two intellectuals in a dialogue format creates an opportunity to confirm or identify some common ground in Lovrenović's engaged writing about Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2009, despite his skepticism and critical attitude, the writer reminds his interlocutor that he speaks as a man who has always supported his country with all his heart, who never ceases to find inspiration in its cultural, aesthetic-sensual dimensions, and is capable of love even when it brings so much misery (Lovrenović 2018, 258). In this conversation with Kazaz, as well as in other interviews and accounts, he mentions political elites who seem to have a completely different attitude. A new reality, in response to which Lovrenović is prompted to revise his previous actions, evokes a different type of relationship between knowledge and power, or perhaps even makes such a relationship impossible. When asked by Kazaz about the new post-war Bosnia, he describes the difference between the world of those who strive for understanding and try to draw conclusions from the past, and corrupt politicians devoid of any historical reminiscences, but who are equipped with a perfect sense

---

<sup>14</sup> The project commenced in 2001 on Vojka Smiljanić-Đikić's initiative. A total of 51 issues were published (all of them are available at <https://sveske.ba/bs>). Lovrenović was invited to participate in the project only once, as an interlocutor in the regular "Dialogue" column.

of the moment (Lovrenović 2018, 258). The interview with Kazaz reminds us that Lovrenović, “a chronicler of social disaster” (Kazaz 2019, 86), juxtaposes civic engagement with the power apparatus of the dysfunctional state. According to researchers, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, political parties and their programmes are still legitimized only by ethnicity and nationalism (Zdeb 2022, 307), and elites emerge as a consequence of the production and reproduction of conflicts and enemies (Ćurak 2009, 45).

In *Sizifova sreća*, Lovrenović approaches his “time of not writing,” summarising his arguments, and confirming that choosing “good solitude” is the right decision for him. In addition to taking care of oneself, his preparations are accompanied by the need to take care of what has been said and written so far. The volume offers a timely reminder that until 2006 he had commented on current events in his journalism, never avoided difficult questions, taken part in discussions, met with politicians, and appeared in the media, all such interventions being arranged in chronological order in the volume itself. After 2006, for at least a decade, his activities centered on carefully explaining reality as he saw it, before finally giving up journalism altogether. Presented in this way, the volume proves that, in accordance with Camus’s message hinted at in the title, Lovrenović did not turn away from his times, and the methods he used to communicate with his own milieu were undertaken with a sense of responsibility. If we were solely to focus on the efficacy of his forms of engagement, we might get the impression that the author’s efforts were futile, and that standing firmly by his views has resulted in arguments and polemics with representatives of intellectual circles (indeed, insights into a number of such issues and one complete polemic can be found in the fourth part of the volume). In my opinion, however, it is still too early to make a final assessment of Lovrenović’s efforts and to unequivocally consider his choice of a solitary path as the lesser evil.

More interesting conclusions can be drawn from a comparison between Lovrenović’s more recent activities and the latest of his ethically engaged journalistic texts. Since 2008, he has published two novels, a volume of poetic prose, three travelogues, and a monograph devoted to a unique form of tombstones, which has always fascinated him. As an editor, he has prepared a multi-volume series devoted to the heritage of the Bosnian Franciscans. In his writing, he has returned to the Bosnia he had wanted to discover before the arrival of the new reality – to the Bosnia which remains primarily a mystery to him, as he mentioned in the introduction to the second edition of his book *Labirint i pamćenje* (Lovrenović 1990, 7). The period of doubt concerning his sense of engagement and isolation has provided Lovrenović with a spur towards creativity. From a philosophical angle, solitude and contemplation can be perceived as two sides of the same coin, both necessary if one wants to be oneself and to live in truth (Domeracki 2018, 146). Lovrenović’s return to literary fiction certainly distanced him from Bosnian-Herzegovinian everyday life, but did it free him from his sense of responsibility? I do not think so. After all, the entire oeuvre of this “Sisyphus” of Sarajevo, i.e., the systematically accumulated texts on Bosnia and Herzegovina, are still a way of explaining his own reality, even if he chooses to distance himself

from it. The selection of interviews and articles gathered in the collection *Sizifova sreća* constitutes a kind of closure of one stage of Lovrenović's life, marked by an absence of active participation in public debate, acting as a defender of common sense, and quitting journalism. Remaining in the sphere of "good solitude" has helped him to revise his personal engagement, encouraged him to change his strategy, yet it has in no way reduced his involvement in the issue and project that is Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## References

- Camus, Albert. 1969. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Knopf.
- Ćurak, Nerzuk. 2009. *Politička elita u BiH i EU: Odnos vrijednosti*. Sarajevo: Fakultet Političkih Nauka.
- Domeracki, Piotr. 2016. *Rozstaje samotności. Studium filozoficzne*. Kraków: Nomos.
- Domeracki, Piotr. 2018. *Horyzonty i perspektywy monoseologii. Filozoficzne studium samotności*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK.
- Foucault, Michel. 1984. "Politics and Ethics: An Interview." In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 373–380. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 2005. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the College De France, 1981–82* Translated by Graham Burchell, edited by Frédéric Gros. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jazić, Dejan, Lovrenović, Ivan. 2014. "Politika Hrvatske prema BiH i danas je talac Franje Tuđmana." *Večernji list*, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2014. <https://www.vecernji.hr/premium/politika-hrvatskeprema-bih-i-danas-je-talac-franje-tudmana-932598> (access: 7 March 2023).
- Jergović, Miljenko. 2010. "Sam u Bosni." In Lovrenović Ivan, Jergović Miljenko. *Bosna i Hercegovina. Budućnost nezavršenog rata*, 9–30. Zagreb: Novi Liber.
- Kaniecka, Dominika. 2019. "W obronie jedności kultury bośniackiej. Ivan Lovrenović – intelektualista totalny z Sarajewa." *Stan Rzeczy* Vol. 16, fasc. 1: 125–144. <https://doi.org/10.14394/srz.16.5>.
- Kazaz, Enver. 2019. "Ivan Lovrenović – pisac eseističkih uzleta i hroničar društvenog poraza." In *Ivan Lovrenović. Djelo*, edited by Amir Brka, 9–97. Tešanj: Centar za kulturu i obrazovanje.
- Komšić, Ivo, Lovrenović, Ivan, Markešić, Luka. 1994. "Sarajevska inicijativa." *Erasmus* 6: 4–13.
- Kulig, Agnieszka. 2019. *W poszukiwaniu sensu samotności. Studium kulturowe*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauk Społecznych i Humanistycznych UAM.
- Lovrenović, Ivan. 2011. *Imela i stablo: eseji i kronike*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek; Čigoja štampa.
- Lovrenović, Ivan. 1990. *Labirint i pamćenje*. Sarajevo: Oslobođenje.
- Lovrenović, Ivan. 2010. "Dvadesetjedna teza." In *Bosna i Hercegovina. Budućnost nezavršenog rata*, edited by Ivan Lovrenović, Miljenko Jergović, 147–233. Zagreb: Novi Liber.

- Lovrenović, Ivan. 2018. *Sizifova sreća*. Sarajevo-Zagreb: Sinopsis, Cetinje: Otvoreni kulturni forum.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1949. *What Is Literature*. Translated by Bernard Frechman. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Szpunar, Magdalena. 2022. "Antropologia samotności." *Ethos* 35: 50–70.
- Zdeb, Aleksandra. 2022. *Ordynarna demonstracja władzy. O zarządzaniu konfliktem w Bośni i Hercegowinie*. Kraków: Universitas.