

The Shipwreck and the Wreath. Dissolution of Identities in Ruta Sepetys' *Salt to the Sea*

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Abstract. The article presents a reading of Ruta Sepetys' novel *Salt to the Sea* in the context of the philosophical proposal of Hans Blumenberg, who tried to capture the dynamics of European cultural and intellectual history through the metaphor of shipwreck. This pessimistic theory of modernity as a cycle of catastrophes is counterbalanced by the new vision of transcultural becoming and the theory of dissolution of cultures proposed by Wolfgang Iser. The analysis of Sepetys' literary vision of the end of the Second World War accentuates the element of deconstruction of monolithic identities and their manipulative potential. Instead, individual decisions and responsibility come to the fore. The metaphor of the Saint John's Night traditional wreath, expressing the idea of the intermingling of minor identifications and the plurality of origins, is suggested as a substitute for the ominous metaphor of shipwreck proposed by Blumenberg as a key for the understanding of a new epoch of European history.

Keywords: Ruta Sepetys, transcultural literature, identity, displacement, shipwreck.

Sudužęs laivas ir vainikas. Lydžios tapatybės Rutos Sepetys romane *Druska jūrai*

Santrauka. Straipsnyje, pasitelkiant Hanso Blumenbergo sudužusio laivo vaizdinį kaip Europos kultūrinės ir intelektualinės istorijos filosofinę metaforą, analizuojamas lietuvių kilmės amerikiečių autorės Rutos Sepetys romanas *Druska jūrai*. Kritinę atsvarą pesimistinei Blumenbergo modernybės, kaip pasikartojančių katastrofų, sampratai teikia Wolfgango Isero mąstymas apie lydžias tapatybes ir transkultūrinį tapsmą. Sutelkiant dėmesį į literatūrinę Antrojo pasaulinio karo viziją romane *Druska jūrai*, straipsnyje akcentuojama, kaip pasakojime sureikšminama asmeninė atsakomybė ir dekonstruojamos vienybės tapatybės bei jų destruktivūs potencialai. Sudužusio laivo metaforą romane keičia tradicinio Joninių vainiko tropas, siūlantis kultūrinį pluralizmą paremtą žvilgsnį į Europos istoriją.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Ruta Sepetys, transkultūrinė literatūra, tapatybė, dislokacija, laivo sudužimas.

Introduction

In 1979, German philosopher Hans Blumenberg published *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher (Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence)*, an essay in which he attempted to express the dynamics of the European history of ideas through maritime metaphors such as navigation, shipwreck, and the con-

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dition of the castaway. As Blumenberg maintains, metaphor is a major conceptual tool permitting us to grasp the general outlines of the current reality in order to understand our epoch and its peculiar logic; the maritime catastrophe is for him such a metaphor with a great potential of generalisation. Ruta Sepetys' English-speaking novel *Salt to the Sea*, published in 2016, brings the metaphor back to the brink of the literal meaning, evoking the sinking of *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a giant cruiser which was to serve the German evacuation of Baltic refugees under the pressure of the offensive of the Red Army in 1945.

As Blumenberg claimed, the character of every period or new epoch in cultural and intellectual history may be detected from the change of perspective or attitude in relation to catastrophe. For example, early modernity, the age of tragedy, admitted a viewer who could remain in the margins of the catastrophic event, experiencing a catharsis through the sheer spectacle of the metaphorical shipwreck. The modernity of the great world wars, however, was marked by the involvement of everyone, without exception, in the catastrophic event; no one could remain in the margins as a mere spectator. The philosophical *Zuschauer* prone to the meditation on the shipwreck of others, trying to gain a deeper insight into the human condition or wisdom based on the depersonalised rethinking of the catastrophe, is no more (Blumenberg, 1996, p. 59). Indeed, Ruta Sepetys writes about a catastrophe without a witness, a catastrophe that went unreported. The topic of her novel is one of the most neglected shipwrecks in maritime history: *Wilhelm Gustloff*, the ship torpedoed by a Russian submarine on the 30th of January, 1945 while transporting wounded German soldiers and the refugees from the Baltic countries fleeing the approaching Red Army, had more than 10,000 passengers on board. Some 9,400 of them perished – statistics that exceed several times the number of victims of other great catastrophes, such as that of the *Titanic* (Prince, 2013). But at the time, apparently no one paid attention. The losers of the Second World War had no right to compassion; this is why the tragedy had been silenced, remaining in the shadow of the well-known catastrophes of those on the right side of history, such as the sinking of the *Lusitania*, a British ocean liner torpedoed by a German U-boat during the First World War. Not only was the shipwreck of the *Lusitania* used extensively by the propaganda of the time, but it also occupied a lasting place in collective memory and popular culture. By contrast, the sinking of *Wilhelm Gustloff* remained silenced for many years. This unreported shipwreck has become an appropriate subject to speak about only quite recently; or in other words, only recently has a way of speaking about such catastrophes been found. Does it mark an epochal shift in the cultural and intellectual history of Europe? In my article, I will try to argue in favour of such a thesis and to show what distinctive features this emergent period may present.

The modernity that led to the two global conflicts was an epoch of monolithic identities. It produced exacerbated nationalisms in which collective identifications required absolute fidelity. Indeed, a mass shipwreck that does not leave anyone in the safety of the dry land and does not tolerate the position of a distanced observer seems to be a very pertinent metaphor for the spirit of the time. The individuals whose personal biographies introduced an element of mixture, blurring the clarity of distinctions, were forced to choose sides or were eliminated. Significantly, it was also an era leaving little or no place for entire

populations marked by complex, unclassifiable ways of belonging. It was thus a bad time for regions forming a mosaic of small nations, origins and local identifications such as those of the Baltic countries. Later on, despite the tragedy of the Second World War, the Cold War decades were dominated by great empires and the monolithic identities they imposed. It is curious to observe that even the post-colonial thought, apparently introducing a contesting potential, remained in the mental orbit of clean-cut identities. It was to the great metropolises that the rest of the world was expected to “write back”, just to quote the well-known metaphor used in the title of the book by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989). Also at this stage, the dominant currents of the epoch brought no significant paradigm of speaking about minor nations, such as those of the Baltic countries, Ukraine or Poland. In the general landscape of international academia, little time and attention were dedicated to the exploration of what was seen as Europe’s insignificant margins. They were deemed to be able eventually to join the flow of the mainstream humanities, defining themselves as Russia’s colonies, but such an approach, although repeatedly attempted by the Polish-American scholar Ewa Thompson (2000), to name one, never fully succeeded and the discourse of the postcolonial school never became predominant in the discussion of Eastern Europe. Currently, the focus on the autonomy, efficiency and resilience of the under-represented rather than their subaltern relations with the dominant, imperial forces is becoming the predominant option.

Industrial modernity, as defined by Blumenberg, created not only the paradigm of shipwreck, but also the dynamics of the eternal return to the catastrophe, cyclically brought about by the impulse of the unrevised reconstruction of our old cultural ships. In the end, the philosopher – who suffered in person the atrocities of the Second World War as he was detained in a concentration camp, – offered little or no optimism, except the eventuality of a radical jump from the deck. Certainly, the metaphor of the ship of modernity reconstructed after each catastrophe covers a plurality of meanings. One of them could be that of the crystallised, unyielding, eternally rebuilt and reinforced national identities that include some human beings into the circle of solidarity and keep others away. Exacerbated nationalisms were among the main causes of both the First and the Second World Wars. The Blumenbergian invitation to perform a radical jump from the deck, to become just salt to the sea, may look like a suicidal option. Nonetheless, the multiple traumas of the modern age, whose consequences the Europeans still feel today, offer even such a radical solution as an object of rethinking and literary exploration. Little more than a decade later, German-speaking philosopher Wolfgang Iser defined this new condition of man using another concept close to the chemical metaphor of the soluble: *Auflösung der Kulturen* – the dissolution of cultures (Iser, 1992).

The new epoch I want to speak about, which may be thought of as transcultural, with all the make-shift and imprecise meanings that the term implies, dissolves, in the first place, the abusive, monolithic constructs of identity, such as the Germanness compromised in the Second World War. In Sepetys’ novel, this monolith splits into Prussian, Baltic, Latvian, German aspects at odds with Germanness, a plurality of individual destinies in which various identifications criss-cross, coincide, and intermingle. They may also

form a confluence in a single individual. At the same time, all the available identifications become conditional, circumstantial, and open to wilful or imposed change, while the emerging cultural landscape is characterised by ever-increasing interconnectedness, instead of the clearly defined borders and boundaries that the European modernity at the time of nationalisms strived to delineate and reinforce.

Narrating the Dissolution of Identities

The contemporary world, which may be defined both as post-modern and trans-modern in the sense of overcoming modernity regarded as a crisis, is marked by multiple displacements and generalized deterritorialisation. The new condition of man, who no longer remains inscribed in a single culture and clearly defined identity, is reflected in transcultural writing. Ruta Sepetys' biography meets the transcultural criteria defined by Arianna Dagnino: she is one of those "culturally mobile" writers who "expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities. While moving physically across the globe and across different cultures, they find themselves less and less trapped in the traditional migrant/exile syndrome and become more apt instead to embrace the opportunities and the freedom that diversity and mobility bestow upon them" (Dagnino, 2012, p. 2). Sepetys was born in Michigan as a daughter of a Lithuanian refugee and often accentuates her Lithuanian belonging. She received not only American awards and distinctions such as the Carnegie Medal in 2017, but also the Cross of the Knight of the Order by the President of Lithuania, which is a sign of her inscription in the cultural universe of the Baltic countries. Yet it is an inscription based on choice and free will, as is characteristic of the new, transcultural epoch in which various options remain open to the individual who may accept or reject them, choosing a life of identitarian indifference.

Salt to the Sea is an example of young adult literature presenting and explaining the most difficult, traumatic aspects of history. The construction of the novel is adapted to this aim. The horror of the war, experienced by young persons between their childhood, early teens and early twenties, is broken into short sections which present the characters' personal voices, speaking of a single situation or its recollection, as if the impact of the war could be absorbed only gradually, with frequent pauses and interruptions. At the stylistic level, the novel remains minimalist. Nonetheless, each of the voices offers a distinctive, clearly individualised perspective. As Kate Quealy-Gainer pertinently observed in her review of *Salt to the Sea*,

With the shaky nervousness of a scared rabbit, Emilia's narration is by far the most heart-breaking, serving as a proxy for the victims of mass rapes perpetrated during the war. Alfred's posturing gives voice to a rabid apostle of the Nazi cause, while the romance that blooms between Florian and Joana offers a shimmer of optimism in the sea of misery. (Quealy-Gainer, 2016, p. 326)

The young people are exposed not only to the trauma, but also to lies and manipulation; no wonder that they make mistakes and succumb to the temptation of false values. The

accentuated aspect, nonetheless, is their resilience, their will to survive, their internal complexity and the sparkle of good in them. Such a complexity is observed even among those who might be directly identified as Nazis. The character who is most heavily involved in the Nazi ideology, the sailor Alfred, is presented as a victim of manipulation which appeals to his sense of inferiority and his desperate need to distinguish himself by gaining a whole pile of medals he constantly dreams about. He cuts a figure of an overzealous idiot, an eternal subaltern. The undeniable crime he had committed denouncing the Jewish father of his girlfriend is derived from his extreme stupidity. He deliberately abstains from his free will, declaring that the wisdom of the Führer, with whom he seems to connect almost telepathically, fills him "with an indescribable command" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 280). Meanwhile, Alfred's young age and deficient intelligence appear as mitigating circumstances.

Ironically, Alfred is an idiot who comes from Heidelberg, the traditional centre of German intellectual life. Similarly, a highly gifted man, Florian Beck, a young assistant of a museum curator in Königsberg, also discovers his own naivety and the fact that he had been manipulated by his presumed master and teacher, Dr. Lange. Pretending a great spiritual affinity to and appreciation of Florian's talent, he made the young man complicit in the theft of countless works of art, including the legendary Amber Room. Florian recollects with anger:

Lange must have considered me an easy target. I was so eager, captivated by all the old paintings, staring at them for days until they confessed their secrets to me [...]. What an idiot I was. If I could detect a flawed painting so quickly, why had it taken me so long to see the truth about Dr. Lange? (Sepetys, 2016, p. 88)

Included against his will in the theft of the Amber Room, Hitler's most desired treasure, Florian decides to take his private revenge, for himself and for the death of his father: he steals a beautifully carved amber swan, the crowning piece without which the puzzle of the Amber Room would remain incomplete. The Führer would never receive his coveted prize.

Overall, the catastrophe of *Wilhelm Gustloff* no longer deserves to be silenced and neglected, because the ship is presented as the salvation of a great crowd of people who are compromised by Nazi ideology only in a partial, infinitesimal way. Their victimhood is much more striking than their guilt or complicity in crimes. Even their German ethnicity is diluted. Sepetys evokes a much more complex reality of the Baltic region. Among the passengers, there is Emilia, a Polish girl from Lwów, who bears a child conceived in a collective rape committed by Russian soldiers. There is also Joana Vilkas, a Lithuanian nurse, who assists her patients without paying attention to their ethnic identity. Florian, the compromised assistant art curator, is presented as a Prussian, a Junker rather than a German, reminding us that the Prussian Junkers, like Florian's mapmaker father, organised an attempt to assassinate Hitler. The fifteen-year-old Emilia instinctively identifies him as a protective figure able to save her child. All together, independently of their exact origin, identity, and ideological compromises, the characters participate in the common fate of the region dwarfed by two monolithic powers:

For the past four years, the two countries had committed unspeakable atrocities, not only against each other, but against innocent civilians in their path. Hitler was exterminating millions of Jews and had an expanding list of undesirables who were being killed or imprisoned. Stalin was destroying the people of Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltics. (Sepetys, 2016, p. 21)

Finally, the order of evacuation liquefies the population into a human river rolling through a snowy terrain: “A massive procession of people and carts created a long column, as far as the eye could see” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 98).

Each character, even the subaltern sailor Alfred who intimately identifies with Hitler, is haunted by specific, torturing emotions: guilt, shame, fear, regret or the sense of a menacing, ineluctable fatality. At the opposite end of the spectrum in relation to Alfred, the nurse Joana, acting as a saviour angel to all those in need of her services, also bears a burden of guilt, having caused, by a letter recklessly sent to her friend, the deportation of her whole family to the Soviet camp in Siberia. This event in the background of the plot of *Salt to the Sea* evokes Sepetys’ novel *Between Shades of Grey* (2011), which dealt primarily with the collective trauma of the deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia. Being a second-generation Lithuanian American writer allows her to speak of the collective trauma in a more nuanced way, bringing the events out of silence, not only the silence imposed by Soviet authorities before the independence of Lithuania, but also the silence of the unnarratable deriving directly from the depth of the wound in the collective psyche caused by the deportations. As Ingrida Eglė Žindžiuvienė relates, many Lithuanian reviewers initially perceived Sepetys’ novel as controversial, claiming that “the atrocious events can hardly be fictionalized” (Žindžiuvienė, 2015, p. 298). Yet the minimalism of the prose of the Lithuanian American writer enables an evocation that does not risk the force of a literary simulacrum which might obliterate the historical facts.

Overall, *Salt to the Sea* goes in a different direction than *Between Shades of Grey*. Narrating the collective trauma of a given community is no longer the main objective. The accent shifts to the trans-communitarian and trans-identitarian aspect of the catastrophe. I would argue that the stake of the literary imagination here is no longer the trauma itself, but the way the catastrophic events strip the characters of their sense of belonging. Instead of the identity imposed upon them by birth, they can choose one themselves, even steal one from someone else, like Emilia, who is forced to use the documents stolen from a dead Latvian woman. Although initially she violently rejects the hypothesis of doing so, she ends up accepting the necessity of using false documents as a means of survival. Even if in the end some of the characters reaffirm their fidelity to the worlds left behind, their reconquered sense of belonging acquires quite a new depth and value. To use a chemical metaphor, their identities dissolve and recrystallise in a novel shape.

The process of the dissolution is by no means instant or easy. On the contrary, the novel, especially in its initial sections, is replete with dialogues centred on the question of identity. The urgency of establishing clear distinctions, of knowing who is who, appears as a primary, crucial necessity. The young people portrayed in the novel have been educated to structure their intimate world around their clearly defined and clearly named identity;

they were brought up to act according to it: “You are Prussian. Make your own decisions”, Florian’s father used to say (Sepetys, 2016, p. 3). No wonder that identity immediately erects a wall between the characters at the moment of their encounter: “He was German. I was Polish”, says Emilia (Sepetys, 2016, p. 11). “She’s clearly in trouble. And she’s Polish”, Eva says about her with a mixture of pity and contempt (Sepetys, 2016, p. 31). “I’m Lithuanian. Is that a problem?”, asks Joana (Sepetys, 2016, p. 33). And in fact, identity is a problem: the massacres are carried out on the basis of the ethnic criterion. Also, wrong identity papers make boarding the evacuation ship extremely difficult, if not impossible. On the other hand, belonging to an imposed category expands and universalizes the condition of guilt, the involvement in crime: “Hitler was pushing out Polish girls like Emilia to make room for ‘Baltic Germans’, people with German heritage. Like me”, muses Joana (Sepetys, 2016, p. 30), before reaching her excessive, yet nonetheless torturing conclusion constantly whispered by a voice inside her head: “*It’s all your fault*” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 31, italics in the text). This obsession with identities progressively fades away, until Alfred’s delirious and grotesque monologue at the end of the novel. Immediately before his death of hypothermia, he confesses to the ever-present shadow of his beloved Hannelore the fault of having revealed the Jewish identity of her father: “Do you understand that I was trying to help, Lore? [...] I ran out onto the sidewalk as they were taking you away. I told them that half of you was part of the master race” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 359).

The outcome of the war results in the destruction of the worlds the characters knew and loved. The maps accompanying the novel, strategically placed at the beginning and at the end, illustrate the dissolution of the old pattern of borders. The flux of refugees described in the text shows yet another dimension of that dissolution. The historical reality of the Baltic region is virtually liquefied, put in the state of flux. The title of the novel, which evokes the taste of maritime salt, may also be interpreted in these terms: the bitterness and trauma initially connected to individual, locatable belongings is dissolved in the all-encompassing catastrophe in the open sea, which erases all distinctions related to roots or earthly belongings. This is what justifies a more radical theoretical approach, rather than speaking, as Žindžiuvienė did, of the cross-cultural dimension of the experienced trauma (Žindžiuvienė, 2018, p. 66). Sepetys’ novel deals with something more than just the interwoven destinies of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It speaks of a catastrophic destruction of their identity and their inner sense of belonging, just as the intimate worlds they have left behind are totally erased. The war, culminating in the sinking of the ship as their last hope of salvation, leaves the survivors in a state of absolute cultural nakedness.

The Condition of a Castaway

Evacuated populations are purged of more than just their material belongings; the communitarian connectivity is also brutally destroyed. Instead of a loyalty to a group or an ideology, the crucial thing is to avoid becoming a “traitor” of one’s “soul” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 107). The characters are repeatedly forced not only to ask themselves the question “who

am I?”, but even more crucially: “who do I want to be?”. Such an open question emerges at the moment of forging the boarding pass enabling their access to the ship, and even more crucially, at the moment when the survivors are rescued, without any papers or belongings, after the shipwreck (Sepetys, 2016, p. 371). The catastrophe no longer imposes on them the duty of loyalty to a country. Instead, they are confronted with the requirement of self-definition. The anchorage in a clearly defined identity they once possessed is destroyed; the loss of documents and forging or stealing new ones is only a symbol of a deeper, more intimate shift. This aspect brings about the thought of yet another modern thinker who anticipated the identitarian dissolution of our times, Emmanuel Levinas. This French-speaking Jewish philosopher of Lithuanian origin did not only anticipate the transcultural, displaced biography so typical of the present-day world. He also thought about war as a major ontological event disrupting the illusion of identity:

[It is] a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity [...]. But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action [...]. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same. (Levinas, 1969, p. 21)

Contrary to the religious perspective of Levinas, who saw the other man as a sign of the living presence of the absent God and treated the appearance of the human face as an epiphany, in Sepetys’ novel there is no such promise of transcendence. There is no hope of supernatural salvation; no such thing as trust in God; prayer is not an option. Yet just like in Levinas’ philosophy, in the absence of God, the characters of Sepetys’ novel are called to take responsibility for one another. The Jewish philosopher once said that Auschwitz marks the beginning of an epoch in which miracles are no longer expected (Levinas, 1972, p. 38). But it remains for us to ask, if the miraculous disappears after Auschwitz, what it is that disappears – or on the contrary, what appears – after the catastrophe of *Wilhelm Gustloff*. The characters of Sepetys’ novel die for each other in a less conspicuous, less heroic way than, for example, the Franciscan friar Maximilian Kolbe, who volunteered to die in place of another man in Auschwitz. Their sacrifice is not eligible for beatification, yet they do die. Certainly, their deaths do not purge “the German guilt” in any way; neither does Sepetys pose such a problem in her novel. Dying for others simply happens in the margins of history, unreported, unobserved, unheroic, just like the death of the blind girl Ingrid who offered herself to open the path through the fragile ice field of the frozen Vistula lagoon, arguing that her senses, made acute by her inborn blindness, qualify her as the best candidate for the job. As she disappears under the ice, shot from a Russian aircraft, her death is as quick as it is silent: “Ingrid’s frantic hand suddenly went slack. Her fingers softened, slowly curled, and disappeared beneath the ice” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 132). After her death, it is an old shoemaker that takes her place ahead of the group. He will also give his life for another, at the moment of the shipwreck, when he offers his life vest to Florian. Finally, Emilia too sacrifices her life, by offering the last remaining place

in the lifeboat to an orphan boy. Joana appreciates the grandeur of her simple and equally silent gesture. There is no verbosity, no grandiloquence even in her subsequent comment; everything remains at the minimalistic level of the essential: "Most would have fought to be 'the one.' They would have insisted they ought to be 'the one.' But Emilia had pushed the wandering boy into the boat, sacrificing herself for another" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 357).

The news of the shipwreck of *Wilhelm Gustloff* were silenced both by the Nazi propaganda and by the Allies. No one was interested in speaking about it, quite unlike the catastrophe of the *Lusitania*, which was exploited in the propaganda that justified the inclusion of the United States in the First World War. The presence of 124 children, including 35 babies, on board of the destroyed ship was used to stir the public opinion. But according to present-day estimations, there were also some five thousand children on board of *Wilhelm Gustloff*. It is their image that haunts Emilia on her raft: "Bobbing all around us were tiny children. The weight of their heads, the heaviest part of their bodies, had flipped them over in their life vests. With each wave, small corpses knocked against my raft. I was surrounded by hundreds of drowned children, heads in the water, their little feet in the air" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 351).

The Author's Note accompanying the novel situates the fictional text in a larger context of historical events and the private biography of the writer. Overall, Operation Hannibal included many more ships than just *Wilhelm Gustloff* and more than two million people, representing a great mixture of origins and ethnicities, were successfully evacuated. The writer's father was among those refugees who survived and who waited for half a century for their opportunity to return to Lithuania. On the other hand, the shipwreck of *Wilhelm Gustloff* was not the only maritime catastrophe during this operation. Thousands perished on board of other bombed and torpedoed ships. The novel narrates only a part of the history; the rest still remains in the shadows.

Paradoxically, under such extreme circumstances, when the usual norms and cultural paradigms are no longer valid, otherness becomes a safe heaven, especially if it takes a fantastic shape, such as the figure of the Teutonic Knight that Florian becomes in the eyes of the traumatised Polish girl. It is, of course, only an imaginary role in which, much against his will, she casts the young man just because of his intervention after she had been raped by a Russian soldier. Emilia exchanges her treasure (the child) for his treasure (the backpack containing the amber swan) in the hope that it could be a gage permitting each of them to later recover their cherished belongings. The reality proves to be more tragic: the Pole freezes to death on her raft. Nonetheless, she ends up being received by strangers, the Danes who offer her symbolic hospitality on the island of Bornholm in the form of a grave in the best part of their rose garden. This hospitality might have been experienced as something gruesome and traumatic, with the Danish people suddenly having to deal with a corpse landing right on their private beach, the sandy backyard of their home. Emilia arrives almost like a ghost "softly knocking, asking would we please allow her in" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 376). Yet her presence is generously accepted.

The boundaries dividing the Baltic identities become utterly permeable. What the sinking of *Wilhelm Gustloff* makes possible is a great melting of the Baltic, in which the

identities, till then frozen solid, are liquefied and put into movement. Nonetheless, it is necessary to observe that there still remains an external border of this transcultural area. It is significant that none of the main characters of the novel is Russian. The Russians represent a faceless, almost elemental force. They are the menace, the danger from which everyone tries to flee. People imagine them wearing “necklaces made from the teeth of children” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 19). The only person who speaks for the humanness of the Russians is the wise shoemaker, who claims having had Russian friends before the war. But, significantly, nowhere in the novel, is there a face-to-face encounter with any Russian, not even during the rape suffered by Emilia. She faints and her recollection of the traumatic event is reduced to the image of the groves made in the earth by her talons and the mushrooms marking the way as she is dragged to a cellar, presumably with her back turned to her aggressors. She does not remember having exchanged as much as a glance with any of the men who might be the father of her child; the faces of the Russian aggressors are described as “dead”. Florian, who kills the Russian rapist, does not see his face either: “I stood in the forest cellar, my gun fixed on the dead Russian. The back of his head had departed from his skull. I rolled him off the woman” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 9). In this horrific recollection, the killed enemy remains forever faceless. On the other hand, the various attacks suffered by the refugees are carried out by distant or surreptitious means, such as bombs falling from a soaring aircraft or, to an even greater degree, the stealthy attack of the invisible submarine. This makes of the Russians almost a non-human, elemental force, coming from beyond the boundaries of the Baltic world as an *oecumene*, the space conceived as open for human presence. They are not the salt of that sea. As inclusive as this new Baltic born out of a catastrophe might be, an exteriority remains, pregnant with the yet unknown future dangers.

On the other hand, the hope of a better world is born out of the faculty of imagination which permits to conceive the idea of an individual that soars above the modern categories of ethnicity and nation. As a significant detail, it is the pregnant girl, whose motherhood epitomizes the future, that is the bearer of this imaginative capacity. She projects it on the figure of Florian. He is the first character in the novel to get rid of his limiting and falsified identity and to act in a fully individualised manner. As Emilia defines him, “his race was his own” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 17). At the same time, she projects upon him the old legends of her own childhood: “For me he was a conqueror, a sleeping knight, like in the stories Mama used to tell. Polish legend told of a king and his brave knights who lay asleep within mountain caverns. If Poland was in distress, the knights would awaken and come to the rescue” (Sepetys, 2016, p. 17). This imaginary interpretation makes absolutely no sense if it is taken in the categories of the Second World War. The Germans are by no means the expected knights miraculously coming to save Poland. At best, the teenager’s version might be seen as a distorted, inverted echo of yet another lie, suggesting that the Russians, who occupied the eastern part of Poland as the fulfilment of the secret clauses of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, were to “protect” the local population. But Emilia’s imaginary story starts to make sense in a strictly individualised perspective of liquefied identities, even if the salvation remains merely symbolic: Florian the sleeping knight

arrives too late, when Poland, epitomised by a lone, defenceless girl, has already been raped. Nonetheless, as the final part of the plot reveals, he is still in time to catch the baby that Emilia throws into the lifeboat.

The teenager inscribes the young man into a larger symbolic landscape of her inner reality. She recollects a midsummer night's celebration where a disturbing accident took place: her wreath, thrown into a stream and expected to be retrieved by a boy she might marry in the future, caught fire from one of the candles and burned in the middle of the river. Since that moment, Emilia has considered her fate as sealed. Yet meeting Florian seems to bring a new hope into her life, changing retroactively the significance of the omen: "But now, I began to think that maybe the sign had been wrong. I had fought so hard and overcome so much. Something changed when the knight arrived. Maybe he truly saved me, had pulled my burning wreath from the water. After all, in Poland, Saint Florian was fighter of fire" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 301). Eventually, the ominous presentiment seems to come true with the young girl's subsequent death. Meanwhile, it is Florian's mediation that reconciles Emilia with her own child, rejected at birth. He improvises a sort of novel ritual, covering the baby with the mother's characteristic pink cap: "The knight dug through and retrieved the knit cap. He then gently lifted the baby and tucked the hat over her like a blanket" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 261). The gesture creates the missing link between mother and child.

At the bottom line, Florian is a beautiful young male with a gift for art restoration and for a sort of magic that harmonizes destinies. In a sense, he incarnates what remains of East Prussia, a country that has disappeared from the map of Europe. He also stands for the remainder of the world that deserves to be preserved, just as the spirit of the multicultural Lwów is symbolically bestowed upon Halinka, Emilia's daughter, even if the way of transmitting this crucial legacy is unclear and uncertain: "How would she know the truths from the untruths? Would she believe that Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Armenians, and Hungarians had all coexisted peacefully in Lwów before the war? That I often made tea and doughnuts with Rachel and Helen in our kitchen?" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 268). Be that as it may, in the middle of chaos, with the Russians just around the corner, the old shoemaker, the novel's figure of supreme wisdom, claims the crucial victory: "Yet amidst all that, life has spit in the eye of death" (Sepetys, 2016, p. 275).

Conclusion

The dark side of history cannot retroactively change its ominous significance; it does come true just like the omen of the burning wreath on St John's Eve that finds its fulfilment in the death of Emilia. The Blumenbergian vision of the eternally repeated shipwreck implies the cyclical concept of time that modernity did not obliterate. Yet quite another, positive concept of cyclical time is implied in the immemorial European rituals evoked in the novel, such as those of the solstice celebration; they create space for resilience and rebirth. The wreath of interwoven, intermingling identities may be reconstructed and launched on the water as a luminous sign of harmony. Instead of the Blumenbergian

metaphor of the eternally repeated, ghostly winter shipwreck in the Baltic, a wreath, thrown into a quiet summer river, could become a new metaphor for European cultural and intellectual history. Will the Blumenbergian, pessimistic vision prevail, announcing yet another turn of the screw of history? Should the young European generation of today remain faithful to the vision of the solstice and to the legend of sleeping knights coming in time to retrieve the wreaths from fire, or get ready for yet another mass evacuation? It is beyond the power of literature to answer such questions. Sepety's novel is an anticipation of both: the catastrophe and the resilient survival.

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