On suffering in literature: The poet versus suffering. Xhevdet Bajraj's *Lëngu i trëndafilave* (*Rose Water*), a test case of Kosovo's Albanian literature

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Abstract: This article aims to address the universal phenomenon of suffering in literature. From the vicious circle in which good and evil counter each other as distinct entities, in principle suffering emerges as a product of the latter. The subject of widespread and profound discussion throughout the history of human thought, the notion of suffering still may provoke significant questions. This article will strive to offer a perspective on the nature of suffering in literature, which will enable a discussion around the perception of suffering in different phases bound up with human consciousness and the human condition, and thereby dig deep into its true meaning. On this level, the chief question has to do with the meaning of suffering in terms religious, philosophical and aesthetic. The discussion will go on to develop a thesis that art in the end is not simply individual, because it channels the fate of others, and will conclude with a concrete illustration of suffering in literature, in the shape of Xhevdet Bajraj's poetical work *Lëngu i trëndafilave* (*Rose Water*).

Keywords: suffering in literature, poet, poetry, homeland, exile, Xhevdet Bajraj, *Rose Water*, Albanian literature of Kosovo

Introduction

"Life may betray me, but never poetry. And I cannot betray poetry; it would be like betraying my own sorrows" (Bajraj in Kosovo 2.0, 2018). These two sentences, taken from one of several interviews given by Xhevdet Bajraj, set out clearly an idea widely elaborated in his poetry. The author creates an equivalence between poetry and sorrow (suffering), declaring them the same. Poetry is thus a synonym for suffering, and the language of suffering. The last war in Kosovo

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obliged Xhevdet Bajraj – seizing the opportunity given by the International Parliament of Writers and its programme for persecuted writers – to emigrate, first to France and then to Mexico, where he spent the rest of his life. The experience of war and its repercussions left ineradicable marks on Bajraj, widely reflected in his verse. In this way, his poetry emerges as a poetry of suffering for Kosovo, his homeland. In the same interview, Bajraj puts it thus: "I want to be worthy of the title "poet", and to lend my voice to those in need" (Ibidem). The phrase further reinforces the sense of his empathy for the other, and helps us to understand more profoundly what it is that he strives to express in his writing. The experience of war, and the fear of it, are manifested in Bajraj as a perpetual anxiety and are key to reading and interpreting his poetry. As well as a deep pain, what he went through kindled in him an empathy for the collective fate, one that closely resembles his own: "The storm that caught us up during the last century has left terrible consequences, and we can feel that it might rise again. My experiences, and those of the people I've known, the pain that I and my people have felt, have led me to feel the pain of each of them" (Ibidem).

Finding himself away from home, far from Kosovo, Bajraj speaks with nostalgia and deep emotion. But, here are there, there are also indications of a despair about Kosovo's fate even after the end of the war. Freedom has not worked out as he dreamed it might: he sees the misery of lost hope, and of the fear of tomorrow. Accordingly, Bajraj blends his own pain into his poetry, becoming one with the destiny of all – a mark of a deep empathy.

In 2015, the Nobel Prize for Literature was given to the Belorussian author Svetlana Alexievich "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time", with reference to her book *Voices from Chernobyl*, which speaks of the terrible history of Chernobyl, a great catastrophe that stunned the whole world. Svetlana gives life to this notorious event by means of voices telling of their experiences, and she does not write as herself: she speaks in their voices – indeed, she takes their personal histories and combines them within the work – becoming one with their suffering. Those unfortunate souls refuse to leave one in peace, and are heard echoing from a thick fog of desolation and confusion. Whenever you open the book, they are there, ready to articulate the terror that penetrated to their very bones. This chronicle of suffering tends to demonstrate literature's great power in explaining the universality of suffering on

the philosophical level. Among other things, it may be said that literature is the path that leads to the other, that links to them and prompts to feel with them. In the end, how could otherwise be explained the above-mentioned work? It is a bridge that makes us one with the suffering of another, and rouses in us a dormant empathy.

Confronted with the question of what literature can do, Tzvetan Todorov (2007, 65-66) takes upon himself the mission of arguing the nature and self-sufficiency of literature and replies:

> Literature can do many things. It can stretch out a hand to us in our deepest despair, guiding us towards other the human beings around us, enabling us better to understand the world and helping us to live.

If the starting point is the premise that “the goal of literature is to represent human existence” (Ibid, 75), then a possible conclusion is that literature and humanity (or more precisely that which humans represent by their nature) are bound by unbreakable bonds. Their point of conjunction is human life, reflected in all its nuances in literature and art. Through literature people are led to become one with each other, in their pettiness and greatness, in the sufferings and challenges of existence, in triumph and in trial. To put it more compactly, people contrive to establish a process of communication across distance, by which human life in its entirety offers itself an answer. Thus, Todorov’s definition, that literature fills the real world with meaning, it is really worthy at this point: “We are all made up of that which other human beings give us… those who surround us. Literature endlessly opens up this possibility of interaction with others, and enriches us without measure” (Ibid, 15).

Literature may serve as a kind of vessel into which passions and sufferings are poured. As such, it is linked directly with the discontents of human existence and its context. In a substantial majority of cases, literature is written as an attempt to escape reality, to be liberated from the burdens troubling the writer’s spirit: he or she is suffering from something overpowering, and this suffering finds satisfactory expression in literature. At this point the reader comes into it, experiencing the writer’s suffering – either finding themselves, or feeling empathy for the plight of another – and together they complete one another.

As a universal phenomenon, suffering has been addressed philosophically ever since antiquity, and even now the debates allow gaps for further discussions on the topic. The dilemmas that have been

stirred up relate to what suffering really represents, what it means to suffer, the meaning of suffering, and what is or should be a human answer to suffering. This article will attempt to analyse the phenomenon of suffering in literature, touching first of all on certain basic premises that attempt to define suffering, before moving on to its concrete and practical appearance in literature. To illustrate the latter point, this article shall devote close attention to a poetical work by the Kosovar author Xhevdet Bajraj.

Bajraj (1960-2022), a distinguished figure on Kosovo's cultural scene, was a poet, translator, dramatist and professor of literature in the Academy of Literary Creativity in the Autonomous University of Mexico City. His poetry has been translated into several world languages (including English, Spanish, Turkish, German, Slovenian, Hungarian, Danish and Polish) and he won many prizes. From 1999 until his death in 2022 he lived in Mexico City. The work to be considered is entitled *Lëngu i trëndafilave* (*Rose Water*), and as an example it corresponds ideally to the essence of our enquiry, because it is a work in which the depiction of suffering finds extraordinary form, and it is fertile ground for seeking landmarks in this *terra incognita* of the human psyche.

Suffering is meaningfully dominant in Bajraj's poetry: his verses are the most powerful legacy of this, and he says it explicitly. When asked about Kosovo – for him a *perpetually open wound* – and his migration to Mexico, he put it thus: "… I brought Kosovo with me; for me it was an open wound, a wound from which the blood still flowed, a wound continuing to leak pain and sorrow, and these naturally nourished my poetry" (Bajraj in Epoka e Re 2019) . It is accordingly his feelings about Kosovo that will not leave him in peace, and that stir his poetic pulse. In consequence, his poems are poems of pain, of nostalgia, of trauma for his homeland – so far away, and yet borne deep within his heart. At the fork in the road between homeland and migration, Bajraj describes the idea of return in highly poetic terms, again a reflection of immeasurable impact on him: "When I come to Kosovo, with my very first step on that soil I feel like a child, so happy, so excessively happy, and I stay a month or so and when I'm parted from the country, I'm a sick old man" (Ibidem). Ricardo Romero Vallejo (2018, 69), a researcher of Bajraj's poetry and in particular of poetic imagery in his verse, takes care to emphasize the close link Bajraj had with Kosovo, even though he lived away from the country. He writes of this link: "He belongs to Kosovo, and he is

forever returning there, to his own soil, where he has a home. More than a home, he has a homeland… It is the home that comes back to him in dreams, the home of his childhood, the home of happy times."

Having in mind the above context, the focus of this article will be the manifestation of suffering in literature and, beyond this, the relationship between the poet and suffering – the latter being what prompts him to write. The discussion will be guided by the notion of suffering in religious and philosophical terms, and by the idea that art is not always 'narrowly individual'.

The poet versus suffering: Xhevdet Bajraj's *Lëngu i trëndafilave* (*Rose Water*) as synonym for profound suffering

Xhevdet Bajraj conducted a substantial part of his creativity outside Kosovo, and the heavy burden of living far from his homeland weighed on his spirit until his death. When asked about this, Bajraj emphasized:

> In any case, I carry my homeland with me wherever I go, like a traveller escaping a foundering boat who has one leg on his native soil, and now we are together everywhere, together with the living and the dead (Bajraj in ExLibris 2021, 2).

The fact that Bajraj lived his life in two different countries, two cultures very far apart from each other, makes his notion of patria more complicated than it appears at first glance. He was convinced that the homeland is something sublime, created and also carried with one:

> You create and carry the homeland. Sometimes I snatch it up eagerly, sometimes it pushes me forwards. Even if I went back to Kosovo, it wouldn't change anything, because now Mexico is a kind of homeland for me. Before I started to feel like this about Mexico, I thought that I was like some tree that they'd transplanted into a part of the world with very promising conditions, but that had been created for Kosovo and couldn't flower or produce fruit far from Kosovo. After all these years in Mexico, and even if I were to return to Kosovo or Mexico, the same feeling would follow me. (Ibid, 4)

But however much the manifestation of this phenomenon allows room to declare the poet some kind of *citizen of the world*, this question has deeper roots. Bajraj seems to follow an anxiety that won't leave him in peace either in his homeland or in exile: he is hostage sometimes to one, sometimes to the other. Nevertheless, from what may be read in his poetry, the conclusion is clear: his heart beats with his homeland,

and this is the source of his soul's suffering. Even his muse berates him for not being in his own country:

> The muse drives me mad
> saying that the poet shall sleep no more
> without taming the wild lands
> without returning to his own shore (Bajraj 2017, 41)

Life far from home is described in his verse as a "silent film", and while survival becomes possible anywhere, flourishing can only happen in one's native soil. Bajraj's bond with Kosovo is a distinctive characteristic and it blossoms throughout his poetry.

Flicking through the pages of *Lëngu i trëndafilave* (*Rose Water*), the reader walks with the author through anxiety, gloom, pain and suffering – which becomes a collective name for the rest. All these phenomena colour the poetic sky grey, and this serves to emphasize the sense of melancholy. The cities, the people, the dreams, the smiles, the songs, the houses and the graves are all grey; the doves are grey and so are 364 days of the year – while the 365th is the death which, amid all the suffering, is the only form of escape and the gateway to peace (in the poem *The Hummingbird*). The way that everything keeps on turning is empty, and this emptiness causes the poet to vent his bile in dissatisfaction and suffering.

What kind of life is this/ in which the void is painful– are the opening lines of the poem Emptiness, which depicts a condition of stagnation in which people dwell in *life's black waters*, an image that summarizes the bleak landscape of existence. Once again grey predominates, representing melancholy, suffering, Baudelerian *spleen* and death. Death as a concept pops up all over the place in the work. In a world of suffering, everything is predestined to die. Even death itself. Life and death, these two chief entities, die; the human being is forgotten and departs in the company of a death that devours itself:

> Childhood dies
> First love
> Youth
> And then the days and nights die
> The colours of the rainbow die
> Birdsong
> The bird itself dies
> Dreams die, and age
> And even
> Life dies

And then a little time passes
And because it has nothing else to
Do
Death dies (Bajraj 2017, 52)

This poem, like the one entitled *Traces*, which expresses the angst of the threshold of death, is a burst of resounding despair. On behalf of his own people, the poet suffers *because we were not created to live life/ but death* (Ibid, 7). The lyric subject of the poem speaks as if overwhelmed by a state of sadness, which imposes the spirit of death and nothingness, in which life is reduced to just “a few remaining days”, carried in a sack as if they were the residue or surplus of time, and death seems predestined, a kind of curse established as companion to the subject and his people. In this poem the border between life and death, this being between the living and the dead, is fragile and almost transparent. In it three ages collide: the present, the past and the future – that which has been, that which is and that which is to come. In the poem *Three kinds of poet*, Bajraj classifies poets as those who look into the past and find it capturing their gaze, those who observe the corruption of the present and find it looking back at them, and those peer look into the future and perceive death smiling, “sitting cross-legged and smoking a peace-pipe for an unravelling peace”. These three kinds of poet are united by one thing: they are three dying as they write. Slavery pains the poet, but so too does freedom: he dies a little more each day, in disquiet, persecuted by the memories of the most recent war in his country. This condition finds its climax in the verses:

I have been dead for some time
but I have the impression
that I am dreaming what I write (Ibid, 24)

In the poem *The Refugees' Baggage*, Bajraj describes a personal saga of endurance, his own history as a refugee who flees into another country where he might be free. But complete freedom remains utterly elusive:

You took the telephone numbers of the dead
rivers mountains hills
the sky over the homeland
love and fear
in a plastic bag
and arrived in a new land
to live forever free (Ibid, 16)

– everything that might be carried is put in a plastic bag that will suffocate everyone, along with the person himself who is suffocated by suffering. He compares this predicament with the "winter of life" he feels himself: a lost liberty described in syntagm as "lost sun", "the black light of the sun" or "the sun of night". There is further critical evidence that, in thematizing the constant burden of war and terror, Bajraj begins in the personal and attains the universal. It is said of his poetry that: "Flowers, doves, apples and verses are generally, in his poetry, wild and dark. They depict death, in the homeland that war and violence have not managed to erase from history, the earth or humanity…" (Matoshi 2022). Wherever he looks it is cold, and the cold has overcome everything. The debris of the past aches fiercely in his spirit and everything that remains to him is included in a testament, the poetry itself, the weapon with which he might save the world, or at least himself. The poem *Sun of the exile*, characteristic of this discourse, he relates to the concept of freedom, something beyond the physical and taken as a category for spiritual liberation:

> The freedom that surrounds me
> is a beast
> that devours me
> under the sun of two worlds (Bajraj 2017, 13)

Just as the exile's sun does not warm him at all, so likewise does freedom not satisfy him.

Kosovo is a land of flowers without scent. The past that has held him in a doorway waters the future with sewage. The poet suffers this, and his existence incorporates a state of serenity where nothing stirs, and a silence like that of the grave smothers the world around him: the sky has no colour, the river does not flow any more, the mountain is empty, the oak is dead, the snow is black, the flower has withered, the dog waiting for its master to come home is transformed into a phantasm and the doves are merely shadows – the veil of suffering enfolds this whole tableau with its images of death. A condition in which human wretchedness predominates and where an endless night is forever falling. And it is precisely this wound that infuses the poet's verse.

The geography of Bajraj's suffering is not parochial; it has nuances beyond the local – as far as the universal:

The history of humanity
is the same as the bleating of

a sheep running after its lamb
to the slaughter (Ibid, 26)

The poet empathizes with those who share a dark destiny: their lament is embraced in his own. He thus adopts the idea that we cling to the human, the humane, what is most noble in humans. To present this idea most clearly, in his poem *Humane* he writes:

We were all angels
then the Goddess sent her shadow
to put in our heads
just a tiny spoonful of brains
With that dose
hard to perceive
we become people
who eat people (Ibid, 9)

A world where cold reason reigns disturbs the poet, who returns to the traces of the primordial to frame a condition in which, as the famous maxim puts it, *man is wolf to man*.

In this harsh tussle with life, Bajraj huddles naked against the loneliness that overwhelms him and immerses him in suffering; he walks in darkness and sweltering heat as he gathers thistles in an attempt to kindle life once more, seeking the right word for the misfortune that leads humans towards suffering. His poem *The Coffin* is his edict, in the form of a testament for the reader:

When I die I hope they shall look for
the box of my black life
among my verses (Ibid, 80)

– a call to read and understand the poet through his poetry, uttered against inhumanity, the dehumanization of humans, war, injustice, oppression and above all against forgetting. He offers a plea that memories "not melt with the snow", at risk as they are of being forgotten, because with forgetting human beings themselves disintegrate. Bajraj suffers and on behalf of this suffering he expresses his resistance. Such at least is the conclusion demonstrated by a reading of his poetic work *Lëngu i trëndafilave* (*Rose Water*).

Suffering as philosopheme (the semantic burden of suffering)

Seen from different perspectives, suffering can be explained as a universal phenomenon. It has been discussed in diverse tones across the centuries, and the definitions of it have varied according to the

basis of discussion. It has been apparent from the outset that suffering is an intrinsic element of humanity –in terms not physical (suffering from pain or sickness) but philosophical. In this sense it is bound up with the human spirit, and as such is challenging to explore. Discussion on suffering, in most of the cases, is related to its positive and negative aspects. From what is recognized as the genesis of human existence, suffering has been discussed in philosophical terms. In striving to give meaning to it, human beings have often linked it with the metaphysical sphere. According to the particular phase of human thought, the perception of suffering has altered relative to human consciousness and the human condition. According to the religious aspect, suffering has been portrayed as something that humans can never avoid. Through this prism, one suffers evil and good. From the religious perspective, suffering – sometimes also the consequence of sin – may take the form of a test. This latter definition can on occasion give the impression that the experience fills the metaphysical or existential gap caused by human suffering. Through this religious perspective on its origins, humans have found in scripture the consolation that suffering may principally be explained as a purging of sin or a trial that will be rewarded with peace in another world. Such at least is the message in the Muslim holy book, the Quran, which promises ease after suffering:

> 2. Have We not opened for thee thy bosom, 3. And removed from thee thy burden 4. Which had well nigh broken thy back, 5. And We exalted thy name? 6. Surely there is ease after hardship (*The Holy Quran*, 94:2-3-4-5-6).

In extreme circumstances, indeed, suffering is inevitable. In most such cases the individual turns to God for solace, or rebels against him. This can be seen in two concrete examples. The first concerns the Argentinian writer Ernesto Sabato: confronted with the death of his son, he gives himself to faith, parapsychology, esotericism, but none of them helps, and he says explicitly that "I wasn't seeking God as affirmation or negation, but as someone who would save me, who would take me by the hand like a suffering child" (Sabato 1998, 97) The second, the antithesis of the first, is represented in the novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel; horrified by the extreme suffering of the concentration camp, he wrote: "'For God's sake, where is God?' / And from within me, I heard a voice answer: 'Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows'" (Wiesel 2006, 90).

Buddhism, on the other hand, closely bound up with the idea that life is a cycle of unending suffering, teaches the concept of *dukkha*, translated as "suffering or the impossibility of satisfying all our desires (in Pāli, dukkha)" (Suzuki 2021, 37) – thus a condition in which not all of our desires are met. *Dukkha* – suffering – is one of the three recognized keys to life of Buddhism, and seen as a universal truth which is epistemologically self-explanatory. The notion of *dukkha* is linked to the dissatisfaction that leads to frustration, and thence results in an existential void, or in other circumstances a mere absence.

Seeking potential meanings for suffering, Stan Van Hooft begins his journey in ancient Greece with an explanation of how at the time it was linked to divine justice: that is to say, a situation in which divine law intervenes in human lives and punishes people with whom the Gods are dissatisfied; from there he moves on to the concept as seen through a religious prism, and specifically Christianity, the discussion starting with the idea of inherited sin – original sin, indeed – for which the one price was suffering. Christ himself was subject to this, his experience seen as "a paradigm of positive suffering" (Van Hooft 1998, 15). So, more or less, develops the idea that through the Messiah humanity is freed from original sin, and furthermore the Christian faithful are summoned by that sacrifice and share in the suffering, which is thereby given meaning. For Van Hooft, in consequence of that conviction "the Christian believes that salvation is achieved through suffering, whether their own or that of Christ" (Ibidem). In moral terms suffering is translated as a sacrifice designed by God for the achievement of salvation. Against this he sets another idea found in Christian doctrine, that suffering may turn into agony and "the victim of affliction is reduced to being a thing completely determined by the blind forces of causality" (Ibid, 16). Van Hooft also considers the subject from the point of view of the secular age, with the thesis that suffering has no providential meaning and has no kind of categorical link with theology. This divorces suffering from the idea of something preordained and inherently meaningful, so that whatever circumstances people find themselves in are coincidental and without divine purpose, thereby conclusively rejecting the transcendental character of suffering. At the end of his tour through the different phases of human thought – from Greek antiquity, through Christianity, taking in the stoics and Nietzsche whose attitude to suffering was acceptance (stoicism), ending in postmodernism which categorically separates suffering from the former definitions and sees it as bound up with a

crowd of circumstances that cannot be avoided because they do not depend on the individual – Van Hooft concludes:

> Our own suffering awakens us to what the other is going through and thus creates in us the compassion through which relieving actions can be motivated. In this community of suffering, a meaning might yet be found for our own suffering. Perhaps all the meaning that suffering can have is that it teaches us to care for others. (Ibid, 19)

The explanation of suffering in philosophical terms is associated, to say the least, with two eminent names: Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. Nietzsche is widely recognized as a harsh critic of previous morality and insistent that the existing chart of values should be torn up, because as he put it: “moral philosophy is the scabrous period in the history of the spirit” (Nietzsche 1968, 232). When he speaks of suffering, Nietzsche denies categorically its relationship to any kind of transcendental meaning. His attitude towards suffering is atypical, in the sense that the prism through which he sees it is unusual. While he accepts the existence of suffering and sees it all around the world and in every human, he believes that the confrontation with suffering shapes the human spirit. He thence concludes that “profound suffering makes you noble” (Nietzsche 2002, 166). Instead of giving oneself up to suffering, Nietzsche strongly suggested finding an alternative means of surviving in a world ruled by it. In this way, he seems to seek a kind of stoicism in the human faced with suffering. The notion that pre-existing morality needed to re-evaluated, if not rejected wholesale, inevitably confronts humanity with suffering, “and when the Western world realizes this meaninglessness and purposelessness of human life it will be faced with nihilism” (Van Harvey 2016).

The attitudes of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer are along the same lines when it comes to the idea that suffering is the entity that governs the world. Schopenhauer saw suffering as something necessary, which could not in any way be avoided because the very nature of human beings is such as to always be seeking something more, and the gap caused by that “something more” creates a void within humans, who must then be submerged in the waters of suffering. In any case, he does not see suffering stripped of meaning, and he does see a kind of positivity and purpose in it, unlike Nietzsche who treats it as bare of all meaning. In the context of suffering as a definition, Schopenhauer (2018) writes:

> Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it comes, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule.

Having embraced the idea that suffering is unavoidable, humans have claimed to invest it with meaning, seeing it as an integral part of life. In the end, “if there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete” (Frankl 1992, 76).

Having emigrated, Bajraj experiences the fate of the *patria* more deeply, and his life (for which read: his poetry) is wholly imbued with suffering. The poem *Marathon* (*Maratonë*) reinforces this idea, revolving as it does the idea of war, its consequences, and suffering in general, without mentioning suffering explicitly and instead obliging the reader to find it themselves:

> I naturally got involved in sport
> in the last spring of century
> XX/ I ran a marathon and
> More
> with more paramilitary police and
> soldiers
> at my back
> What’s terrible is
> I’m running still
> more alive than many dead
> I’m looking for the right word
> to define
> human misfortune (Bajraj 2017, 81)

And what better word to fulfil Bajraj’s quest than *suffering*? His poetry finds space for bitter memories of the war, which continue to disturb him and which, were it possible, he would escape. His poetry can accordingly be read in particular contexts as testimony about what happened in Kosovo. The poem *Nineteen executed in Pedalishtë* (*Nëntëmbëdhjetë të ekzekutuar në Pedalishtë*) may be read in this light, rendering in verse as it does a real event from that war:

> Mrs Lirije Imeraj testifies to
> the Hague Tribunal
> about how they killed nineteen members

of the Imeraj family
among them her husband and
her youngest son
Afrim was only two
when the solder hacked off his arm with
a bayonet
at that the child began to
cry and yelled
daddy
this man has taken my hand (Ibid, 70)

Depicted here is the terror imposed by the hegemonistic Serb occupation of Kosovo, which prompted the world to react and assist Kosovo's liberation. Scenes such as this are forever occupying the poet's mind and eclipsing his happiness, leaving him perpetually becalmed in suffering and melancholy – sometimes expressed figuratively, sometimes declaratively in his verse. In writing of Bajraj's poetry, Hector Carreto (2010) considers it "direct and everyday, uninfluenced by linguistic ornament". This assertion of his matches well with the volume of poetry under consideration, given that war and its consequent terrors can hardly be expressed in the decorative wording of language embellished with poetic devices.

This all tends to the observation that in Bajraj's poetry is widely manifest the notion that, in the end, 'art is not narrowly individual', preoccupied as it is – though sometimes the expression is nuanced – with the fate of the other, which resembles the fate of the individual.

The problematics of suffering as a phenomenon are elaborated in, and occupy the greater part of, Bajraj's poetry. His language is poetry, and poetry is the language of suffering, the strongest shield for an unendurable reality. Confronted by reality, Bajraj – with his 'closed heart', as the title of one poem puts it – suffers an immeasurable pain that has overwhelmed everything. War and then its consequences have left the poet incapable of peace and fulfilment. His verses, accordingly, are full of pain and misery:

Pain comes over us
as if it were the only thing that
we deserve (Bajraj 2017, 7)

Javier Vargas De Luna (2022), a scholar who have focused on Bajraj's work, have emphasized the idea that the last war in Kosovo, and what ensued, left its mark on the poet's identity and, furthermore, in his poetry too. In speaking of the man and his writing, Javier Vargas De

Luna writes: “The Balkan wars began to have another connotation for him; in fact, the conflict left extraordinary roots in the harsh lucidity of his poetry”.

The war in Kosovo, which Bajraj endured himself, engraved itself indelibly on his psyche; the traumatic experiences that followed captivated the gaze of the poet, who out of his pain speaks and versifies in lines that resonate with the echo of his suffering. With freedom proving unsatisfactory, because here and there in his homeland he perceives indications of a hopeless future, the poet writes:

> … while a new mother
> her blood frozen
> has these eighteen years
> in the middle of the Balkans
> had a serpent suckling her breast
> swollen with the milk of freedom (Bajraj 2017, 37)

The reference spans the period between the war and the publication of the collection, 1999-2017. The reader is to understand that the new mother – a figurative allusion to Kosovo, geographically at the centre of the Balkan map – has been left with frozen blood, paradoxically incapable of being nourished by liberation.

Bajraj’s suffering is doubled, because he is far from his homeland – an anguish that he feels in his very heart. He accordingly alleviates his pain by putting the homeland in his poetry, poetry seen as the language of the soul, for the sake of which he confronts his own suffering. Peace is impossible, while he is physically in Mexico and spiritually in Kosovo: “I have a home here/ and I have a home there/ and in both places/ human happiness/ is illegal” (Ibid, 56). Bajraj thus dwells between *here* and *there*, Mexico and Kosovo, and cannot find happiness; instead, he languishes in suffering. This being a spiritual condition for him, he aches to return to his childhood – in other words, the time when he was truly happy – but he can no longer find the way:

> I long to return to
> my childhood
> but the breadcrumbs that I left
> behind me
> so that I could find the path
> (nourishing myself with acacia flowers)
> have been eaten
> by the doves
> that for some time now

have rested in peace (Ibidem).

Symbolized on the one hand is an era of innocence and peace (doves, acacia flowers), correlating to the idea of childhood and the desirable journey of return to that era, one which was to be overwhelmed by the poet's sufferings; and on the other is a human condition transfixed by suffering and pain. Plunged in suffering, the poet finds the path of return impossible, and is condemned to flounder in the boundless woeful waters.

"There is no narrowly individual art"

In one of his short commentaries of a philosophical nature, Ernesto Sabato (1964, 259) declares that "there is no narrowly individual art". By this syntagm he aspires to expose the symbiotic relationship between the writer and the world that surrounds them. In principle, the writer takes from the world and gives to the world. Sabato believes that a writer's literary work is first of all the product of that writer's consciousness – or an element of it, at least – which links directly or tangentially with the external world. "Given that outside a person there is not only the material world of things, but also the society in which they live, art is – as antonomasia – social and communal" (Ibidem). For Sabato, in consequence, one cannot be limited to a description of art as merely individual, because of the kind of coexistence that exists between the artist and the world around. For this reason, he concludes that the artist is entirely complete at the point where they become one with the "shock" of their own people. This is possible where we manage to see and recognize our reality of similarities, to feel what another feels – in short to empathize with them. The link between the writer and those similar is close, and continues to generate a vivid communication. If the matter it is considered sociologically, then it is reached the viewpoint that somehow "a writer inevitably expresses his experience and total conception of life" (Wellek and Warren 1949, 90). In the relationship between the writer and society, "the writer is not only influenced by society: he influences it" (Ibid, 97) because "art not merely reproduces life, but also shapes it" (Ibidem).

There is a symbiotic relationship, then, between the writer and society, which brings to light literary works as the final product of intercommunication. Schiller was not wrong when he declared that "the artist is the child of his time" (Schiller 2004, 42). The writer is the voice of their time, the voice that plumbs the depths of its own epoch and, making subject matter out of what is familiar and all around,

becomes a kind of spokesperson for the time. In developing his discussion of art and literature, and addressing the question of the creator and fantasy, Sigmund Freud (2015, 5) speaks of the curiosity that animates whatever the writer, whom he terms a strange personality, takes as subject matter and of “how he manages to touch us with it”. A potential answer, by analysing the example of the poet at the heart of this discussion, shall be given on the following.

As has been accepted, there are themes that link with the world that surrounds the writer and themes that link with their interior. In the first case the writer maintains links with their practical social context, and in the second they are preoccupied with what is within themselves. Xhevdet Bajraj draws the raw material for his writing chiefly from reality, and it is simple enough to connect the experiences of Kosovo society in a particular period of time with his poetry, which turns on a particular pivot: suffering. In this context, Bajraj himself writes:

> I live in the birthplace of magic realism and within it it bears all the scars of the Albanian lands, especially those of Kosovo, and most especially those of Rahovec. From that pain my poems are born. They raise their heads as seedlings, and flowers of pain bloom with the face of the universal human (Bajraj in ExLibris 2021, 2).

Bajraj’s poetry hangs on concrete circumstances, but in every case, it attains universality. It begins in the particular and goes to the general: it begins in the homeland and goes to the cosmos. The progression is established in steps: he begins with the nation, passes through his state and concludes in his birthplace. Having been displaced from his homeland since 1999, and migrated to Mexico – which he terms “the birthplace of magic realism” – he keeps wrapped in his soul the burden of pain about his own country, and from this his poetry is born. Bajraj is not shut in an ivory tower, preoccupied with himself and the problem of existence; he turns current reality into material for his writing and – more than his inner concerns – he articulates the collective experiences that have influenced him and others around him. But this does not render his literature social, much less political, and it would be a grave error to seek such a thing from a generalized version of his work. So, in this case, Sabato (1964, 147), in addressing the question of the writer as witness, writes:

> Nothing is more mistaken than the search for social or political testimony in literature. One should write magnificently: just that, without any other attribute. Because in order to be profound the artist must unavoidably be for

> themself, for the world where they life and for the human condition of the people of their time and of their circumstances. And because man is a political, economic, social and metaphysical animal, in as much as his document will be profound, it will likewise be a document of the conditions of practical existence of his time and place.

The poetical work *Rose Water* echoes the sufferings that followed the last war in Kosovo, which did not allow the poet (for which read: people like him) to feel satisfied with the freedom that had been secured. Transformed into a psychosis, the war incessantly generates bitter memories, which do not permit spiritual peace. It has penetrated every dimension of human existence to the marrow, and in consequence spiritual ataraxia turns out to be impossible. In this way – whether as an attempt to create poetry as a drive to liberate himself from the anxieties of war, or as an appeal through the medium of poetry that the *experienced* can never be erased from life – Bajraj draws a portrait of the world of war, with dark nuances of an *ashen aesthetic*, representing a kind of spiritual spleen. As a result of this condition, in his fierce confrontation with life, Bajraj (2017, 31) would write: “Only the artists get their teeth into life/ when it tries to trample them down”.

In its depiction of life, now seen from the position of a survivor pursued by those bitter memories that can not be dissociated from his *persona*, Bajraj’s poetry captures humanity in its entirety, devoting attention not least to its most sensitive dimension: the world of childhood. Through this prism, two diametrically-opposite worlds confront each other: a bloody and unjust world created by war, and an innocent and gentle world which resonates with the spirit of the child. The poem entitled *The Smile* makes this clear:

> When the shooting stopped
> the girl dropped her bicycle and ran
> to her father
> There she was then
> wiping the blood from his head
> While he
> so as not to alarm
> his daughter
> gave up the ghost
> with a smile on his face (Bajraj 2017, 6)

The verse above delineates the contours of the contrast between the world of war and the world of childish innocence, with an intermediary

character – the *father*. He strives, even on the brink of death, with his last breath, to conceal the terrible truth of war from his daughter; he dies smiling. The image of the poem displays two opposite worlds, each with its own particular elements: the world of childhood depicted in the little girl playing with her bicycle, and the world of war represented by the girl's father, who finds himself taking the last gasp of life – a victim of pitiless conflict. The poem recalls, to some extent, the theme of Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful*, in which – by means of a fine and intelligent humour – the main character makes his son see *war* as a *game*.

The idea may be seen embodied elsewhere. The poem *The Doll* again echoes the notion of the two worlds in confrontation:

> Although the occupying army has
> withdrawn from the city
> a six year-old girl
> takes her doll
> which is missing one leg
> and shuts its eyes with her hand (Ibid, 11)

Again we have a child *character*, and childhood, with a characteristic element: a game with a doll. Figuratively, Bajraj versifies a terrifying situation precisely by emphasizing play truncated: the doll with a leg missing, the girl closing its eyes to represent death, etcetera. Everything speaks of the horror that accompanies war, even for the world's most innocent – children.

A liminal situation such as war is closely linked to another extreme: death. Accordingly, throughout Bajraj's verse death secures a certain predominance, becoming one of the most frequent motifs – if not the most. For what else should a human being think, faced with such a cataclysm as war? In the determination to render this idea in poetry, in *The Rooster of Death* Bajraj establishes a situation of inversion – creating, through metaphorical figures, a world turned upside down:

> A rooster
> heralding the day
> was then dumbstruck
> because
> no one was roused
> from death (Ibid, 36)

Thus there is the figure of the *rooster*, which in the normal order of things heralds the new day, and accordingly the waking from sleep,

consequently a situation where life and vitality triumph. But in this poem the situation is back to front: the rooster does not manage to herald the new day, for all its efforts, because there is no one to wake: the war has put an end to everything. The reader is prompted to ask: how might a poetic idea be created through the normal order of things when war has turned everything backwards? Bajraj himself seems to saying this, by means of the poem.

These are the recollections that pursue the poet in his life of lives, and he has no way to evade them. In his own words he is the *hunted*. The poem that takes this as its title outlines an over-burdened spiritual and emotional situation: the subject, an *emigré* because of the war, suffers from a spiritual barrenness which deprives him even of the will to live. This condition of spiritual inertia leads him to doubt his own humanity, assailing him physically as well as spiritually:

> In the morning he did not know himself in
> the mirror
> he lacked the desire to live
> his dreams had coloured with
> drools of white
> one by one every hair
> on his head (Ibid, 66)

The poet's voice, hoarse with the dark visions that haunt him, emerges as a mere sigh, reflecting his spiritual condition, weary and apathetic. Bajraj best renders this sterile and hopeless state in the poem *Sigh*:

> Colour abandoned the sky
> the river stopped
> the mountain struggled for life hollow inside
> a withered flower was still
> standing
> and all of this gives life
> to the sigh of death (Ibid, 69)

The atmosphere conveyed in these lines denotes a general wilderness: the sky is without colour, the river pauses its own flow, the mountain is empty, the flower is withered and, above all and paradoxically – contrary to what it ought to represent – the sigh of *death* gives *life* to this whole tableau.

From all of this, it is apparent that the poetry of Xhevdet Bajraj is a poetry of suffering, founded on concrete circumstances and striving to universalize a specific human condition. Bajraj writes verse because

reality pains him – in his words: “I write poetry to protect myself from life, from the pain that it causes me; I write because I don’t like reality. Since I can’t change it, I try to be shielded from it by art, by poetry” (Bajraj in Telegrafi 2021). Poetry, accordingly, is a kind of philosophy for saving himself from the bitter reality oppressing his country and, by extension, oppressing his inner self. For him, then, poetry is the only means of/ saving this world/ or at least/ oneself (Bajraj 2017, 21).

Conclusion

In conclusion, seen through a religious and philosophical prism, suffering emerges as a phenomenon with universal contours, being an intrinsic aspect of human existence. As such it is unavoidable and, because it is recognized as an integral aspect of life, humans are resolved to deal with it consciously, whether by philosophizing about it as idea or concept, or by exploiting it as a spring from which poetry (literature) may pour. The depiction of suffering in literature thus leads us towards the notion articulated by Ernest Sabato, who declares that ‘there is no narrowly individual art’ – a syntagm emphasizing the relationship between the writer and the world around, and the coexistence between them. The writer sees and feels the reality of the other, the resemblances, and becomes one with the other’s suffering; literary works emerge as a distinctive sign of empathy for the other.

The theoretical consideration of suffering as a concept linked directly to the essence of humanity aims to get to the core of the idea of suffering as a philosophical principle, thence attempting to reflect the depiction of suffering in literary, aesthetic terms through analyzing the poetry of Xhevdet Bajraj, a contemporary poet of Albanian literature whose creative activity was conducted in parallel in Mexico and Kosovo. In his poetry, consistent with the discussion above, it is apparent that the representation of suffering is bound up with aspects of actuality, which are the consequence of the war he experienced and its repercussions. A state of conflict – which brings identity to a crisis, risking its utter assimilation – undoubtedly has grave consequences for everyone. It is especially so for a poet, who sees the world differently, penetrating to its essence through profound philosophical and poetical meditations.

Suffering is often and justly defined as “soul pain” (Coulehan 2012, p. 227). Accordingly, the problem of suffering, like other problems bound up with what is called the soul and is thought to exist independently of the body, is complex and in need of broad

exploration – starting with the very nature of human beings. Humans are by nature vulnerable. The ephemerality of life and the elements that make up the constellation called life cause human existence to be incorporated in a suffering that sometimes becomes existential. Nevertheless, suffering should as much as possible be simply accepted, and a meaning should as much as possible be drawn from that. Perhaps it is precisely suffering that makes us human and reveals our true nature as beings. It may be that through suffering people comprehend each other and rouse empathy within themselves; that people are thereby encouraged "to reach another's pain and to turn life into an absolute" (Sabato 2011, 144). For human courage disappears when we are isolated as beings in our pain, but reappears if "we plunge so deep into the reality of others that we cannot get out again" (Ibidem).

Bajraj sees the world with his heart; he perceives his age in its darkness. He recognizes Kosovo's pain, and feels it in himself. So, he suffers and, to assuage his suffering, he writes poetry. Poetry is the language of pain and suffering; perhaps it is even impossible that it could emerge from a state of complete ataraxy. Bajraj gives himself to poetry with all his being as a path to the revelation of the Absolute, and through it there speaks the suffering of the deepest existential abysses inherent to life, "because poetry is the human being's purest answer to the fundamental questions of life, love and death" (Bajraj in ExLibris 2021, 4). Confronted with the war against life, the poet chooses poetry, without worrying too much about success or the reader. Through his poetry he strives to be liberated from the burden he bears on his shoulders, in a quest to penetrate the darkness that has enwrapped his soul. So, in conclusion, his suffering emerges as a form of resistance and non-forgetting, and his poetry as a sky in which suffering and human empathy alternate, validated in a symbiotic relationship.

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