Time and the Vanities of Existence in Antun Šoljan’s Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of hope and hopelessness in a selection of Antun Šoljan’s stories and novels and how the author creates in his heroes an interior atmosphere of inquiry that is paradoxically laden with uncertainty and the human instinct to move forward. A “parabolic moralist” (as Davor Kapetanić has called him), Šoljan depicts the world as more than a simple continuity of events, political, personal, private or public. His major concern is to make sense of man’s existence in a universe that confronts him with both linear time and a repetitive or circular series of events. Examining the apparent contradictions of linear vs. circular existence, the author often places his characters “out of time” and analyzes any given life by finding its important events, actions and desires. While Šoljan’s heroes often conclude that temporal things are of little lasting value, he leaves his philosophically and psychologically battered heroes with at least a small possibility of hope.

Antun Šoljan, the undisputed voice of conscience in Yugoslav and Croatian literature for four decades after World War II, was a tireless writer of essays, plays, translations, novels and short stories. Because of its preoccupation with human existence in the midst of an oppressive political and social regime, his fiction is most often associated with that of the great existentialist writers of the mid-twentieth century. Yet Šoljan’s fiction is more than a mere exposé of the futility of fighting any one political ideology: his novels and short works constitute a lifetime series of parables that place the great questions of man’s existence against a “timeless” backdrop and center human mores and morals in a hopeful, albeit enigmatic, universe. By presenting often confused but always dynamic characters and by drawing a picture of existence that transcends a world in which political, personal, private or public events are parts of a mere chronological continuity, Šoljan attempts to bring some understanding to the questions
of man’s existence in a universe fraught with confrontation. While he often concludes that temporal things have little lasting value, unlike the defeated anti-heroes of most of the existentialist writers, Šoljan leaves his battered narrators looking for a small ember of hope.

As with many dissident writers of the twentieth-century European socialist states, much of Šoljan’s fictional works can easily be read as a commentary on the political and social climate of his native land and era. On a certain level, works like A Brief Excursion (Kratki izlet), Traitors (Izdajice), The Port (Luka) and even his very late stories, like “How I Met God” (Kako sam upoznao boga), are transparent political allegories about the condition or the demise of Yugoslavia. Indeed, early critical studies tended to emphasize the socio-political allegorical character of Šoljan’s works. Thus, critics characterized his works variously as radically innovative, anti-utopian and even lacking in artistic merit.\(^1\) The author himself, however, in his retrospective essay “A Brief History of A Brief Excursion,” insisted that there was no political charge in the novel, in spite of its being written while he was out of favor with the Yugoslav authorities (Šoljan 1990).

On a different level it is easy to agree with contemporary critic, Branimir Donat, that Šoljan’s fiction has a more widespread application and appeal than mere political commentary and that Šoljan’s moral dilemma exceeded those of his times. As Donat himself asserts, “Politics passed him by” (Donat 2004). Indeed, the passage of time and the passing of the communist Yugoslav regime have demonstrated that Šoljan’s concerns, far more than being simple criticisms of a political system repressive of individual freedoms, center on the deeper questions of human existence in an enigmatic universe. Thus, later studies tend to analyze Šoljan’s output as inheriting traditions from the Croatian moderna to Western existentialism.\(^2\) Donat himself characterizes Šoljan’s prose as a journey that “leads nowhere outside itself,” and

\[\ldots\text{ is directed toward a kind of center hidden within, an existentially motivated walk and escape, that most often leads to an uneasy understanding that at the end there lurks only a horor vacui (Donat 1987:19).}\(^3\)

While it is certain that the influence of twentieth century existentialists’ themes of absurdism and the existential fear of futility have their place among Šoljan’s literary motifs, it is has been more productive in my investigations to examine his novels and stories with a broader understanding of how his moral and ethical vision goes beyond

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\(^1\)See the representative studies by Predrag Protić, “Šoljan pripovedač;” Vuk Krnjević, “Preuranjena sigurnost;” and Radovan Vučković, “Staro i novo.” These articles and others can be found in Branimir Donat’s helpful compilation of critical pieces on Šoljan’s works (Donat 1998).


\(^3\) ...ne vodi nikamo izvan: usmjerno je prema nekom središtu skrivenom unutar te egzistencijalno motivirane skitnje i bijega, koji najčešće vode u mučnu spoznaju da na kraju verba horor vacui.
the starker worldviews of political allegory and existential nihilism. The current paper looks at how Šoljan’s seeming pessimism is often lightened by the main characters’ relentless need either to do something or, more tellingly, to accept with some hope the ever present possibility of future accomplishment, however remote. Šoljan creates for his heroes an interior atmosphere of inquiry that is simultaneously laden with philosophical and psychological uncertainty and the human instinct to move forward. Much like the teacher/narrator of the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, this motif of hope and hopelessness exposes both the vanities of human existence and the internal human tendency to entertain a modicum of hope even in the face contrary evidence.

In his monograph on Šoljan, *The Richness of the Garden (Bogatstvo vrta)*, Donat rightly admonishes the reader not to credence dated interpretations that better suited the Yugoslav political climate of the 1960’s and 1970’s (Donat 2000:100). Given the monumental political and social changes of the 1990’s, the critic continues, Šoljan’s work requires a new interpretation that understands that readers’ concerns historically hinged on the politically oriented question of whether man should have the right to an individual rather than collective fate. “All of this was brought about by the specific existential conditions that were forcefully supported by the social reality.” In Donat’s opinion, Šoljan’s *A Brief Excursion* provides a vision of society beyond the mere political. The main character, Roko, musters together a group of young "researchers" to seek out a rumored series of frescoes, located at a remote monastery. The frescoes are purported to be of unsurpassed beauty and value. As the group journeys by bus and on foot in oppressive heat through the wastelands of central Istria their numbers are incrementally decreased as the members fall prey to exhaustion, seduction and boredom. In the end only Roko and his staunch colleague, the story’s narrator, find the place of the frescoes in an underground vault, only to have the valuable paintings deteriorate instantly as the are exposed to the atmosphere for the first time in centuries. The narrator returns to his home, but loses contact with Roko and forgets the very name of the place they journeyed to. Depressed, but determined, he vows to “do something” to find either the lost place or Roko or both.

Given the fantastic tone of the novel, Donat concludes that Šoljan’s

… charming text tried to present reality through a fable about the impossibility of being content, happy and perhaps even honorable... The vigilant watch-keepers of the socialist ideal were motivated by the fact that in *A Brief Excursion* they were looking for hidden evidence of everyday and, especially, generational participation in withdrawal from society. Furthermore, *A Brief Excursion* carries with it a vital moral, psychological and above all ideological currency (Donat 2004).  

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4 Sve je to bilo uvjetovano osobnim egzistencijalnim situacijama koje je snažno potkrepljivala društvena zbilja. Šoljan nije od ove problematike učinio gnjavatsku knjigu. Njegov šarmantni rukopis zbilju je pokušao dati kroz bajku o nemogućnosti da se bude zadovoljan, sretan, pa čak i čestan. Budne je čuvare socijalističke idile smetalo u "Kratkom izletu" to što su u romanu isčitivali skriveno svjedočanstvo svakodnevice i naraštajnog suučesništva u odustajanju. "Kratki izlet" i dalje nosi u sebi vitalnu moralnu, psihološku, a nadaseve misaonu aktualnost (Donat 2004).
Šoljan’s concerns about the individual’s existence in a strong political community are as relevant now as they were thirty years ago, even if they need to be reinterpreted in a post-Yugoslav society where the ideals of the socialist commune are no longer politically required.

Although Donat avers that the question of society as community has become less important with the passage of time (ibid.), Davor Kapetanić considers the theme of separateness vs. unity to be entirely constant in Šoljan’s works and therefore appealing to a universal audience. Indeed, he sees the narrators of Šoljan’s fiction as a series of “antiheroes” that the author had begun to create early in his career (Kapetanić:252). Notwithstanding the often romantic overlays found in Šoljan’s novels, he affirms, the grammatical use of “we” (or “I”) versus “they” emphasizes the separateness of these extraordinary characters, strange personal admixtures whose “fundamental situation includes both estrangement and communion.” In spite of this refugee status in his own society, however, Šoljan’s “antiheroic” narrator does not become a nihilist (ibid.:253).

Kapetanić’s classification of Šoljan’s narrators as antiheroes is an uncomfortable one (Šoljan’s ethical stance allows for heroes of a different type than those depicted on post World War II Yugoslav propaganda posters), but the critic is essentially correct in his assumption that Šoljan’s heroes are non-conformists for the sake of living their own lives, and not the lives that others dictate. Kapetanić concludes that this philosophy is harmonious with the existential literature of Camus and Sartre (ibid.:253). Yet, this purposeful participation on the part of Šoljan’s heroes in the pursuit of personal goals and, above all, their awareness that such pursuits are invariably carried out against the background of a broad sense of time, counter the dark purposelessness of existence delineated by the French authors. Kapetanić also acknowledges the limits of the French existentialists’ influence on Šoljan’s writing. While agreeing that although some of Šoljan’s works develop “on the foundation of the philosophy of existentialism present in the works of Sartre and Camus,” (ibid.:253) the critic nevertheless cautions against concluding “that Šoljan simply copied the ideas of Sartre and Camus. His [heroes] unlike Meursault in The Stranger will never come to the realization that nothing matters…” (ibid.:258 note 5). Similarly, Velimir Visković emphasizes how Šoljan’s existentialism is not nearly so radically nihilistic as that of other existential writers of the same era (Visković in Donat 1998:447).

One can clearly see the marked difference between Šoljan’s more passive and pacific version of resigned acceptance of human existence and the violent finale of works like Sartre’s “The Wall” and Camus’ The Stranger. Condemned to death after he cold bloodily murders a local Arab and shows no remorse, Camus’ Meursault’s final moments before his execution are marked paradoxically by a violent outburst

Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Croatian are mine, except for those from A Brief Excursion and Traitors which are from Elias-Bursać’s English versions (Šoljan 1999).
against the priest sent to give him absolution and an incongruous calm in the face of death. Yet in spite of this apparent inner peace and acceptance, the final lines of the tale betray the condemned man’s desire for violent anger:

De l’éprouver si pareil à moi, si fraternel enfin, j’ai senti que j’avais été heureux, et que je l’étais encore. Pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul, il me restait à souhaiter qu’il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu’ils m’accueillent avec des cris de haine (Camus 1955:138).5

Likewise, the final horror for the narrator of “The Wall” is based on an internal violence brought on by a horrific realization. Condemned to death during the Spanish Civil War, the prisoner Pablo attempts to reprieve himself from execution by informing on the rebel leader, Gris, and making up a story about where he might be hiding. He tells the interrogators that his friend is secreted in the cemetery, assuming that Gris would never choose such a place to avoid the authorities. At the time appointed for the execution, however, Pablo is surprised to find himself reprieved until he discovers that what he had thought was a fabricated tale is in fact true and that his comrade has been arrested. The story’s concluding sentence reveals the ironic and despairing horror that overcomes Pablo: “Tous se mit à tourner et je me retrouvai assis par terre: je riais si fort que les larmes me vinrent aux yeux” (Sartre 1939: 35).6 Even though the execution will not occur, this final laughter to the point of tears is as violent as Meursault’s call for the hatred of an angry crowd to see him hanged.

As I shall show below Šoljan’s characters do not exhibit such resignation to violence, even if they do recognize an absurdity to life. Although it will all end in oblivion, turning oneself over to the inability to understand the temporal and physical universe is accompanied more by quiet acceptance than violent resignation, a resignation that does not explicitly deny the possibilities of the future.

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Critics have recognized Šoljan's stature as a teller of contemporary parables who places his characters in fantastic if unbelievable and even untenable situations. Kapetanić thus sees Šoljan as “the parabolic moralist for whom the world is only a collection of taboos, a series of myths, both ideological and personal, which he does not want to accept. He disposes of them in the name of authentic life which these myths and taboos deny” (ibid.:254). Yet Šoljan is both rejective of and coy about

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5 “Experiencing something like myself, so brotherly in fact, made me feel that I had been happy and was still happy. For everything to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that was left was to hope that on the day of my execution there would be a crowd of onlookers and that they would greet me with cries of hatred.” (Translation mine – DC)

6 “Everything began to spin and I found myself sitting on the ground: I laughed so hard that tears came to my eyes.” (Translation mine – DC)
defining this “authentic” life, especially the life that exists beyond the bounds of the artificial Arcadias in which he often situates his characters.

Set thus in a “different” place and time (i.e. different from the place and time of their “normal existence”) virtually all of Šoljan’s fictional characters, and especially the narrators, are confronted with the paradoxes of a chronological existence that is, at the same time, repetitive and circular. Adding to the sense of indeterminate time is the frequent “atemporal” setting in which the time of normal existence is either ignored or somehow set aside. Indeed Šoljan’s narrative structure often reflects this narrative sensibility to time as both straight and circular. Zlatko Kramarić has shown how the linear and spiral form of the narration help define the narrative “I” of Šoljan’s novel *Traitors*. A collection of eight closely tied stories, which Šoljan himself labelled a “novel,” each tale is told by a first-person singular narrator whose voice contributes to the cohesiveness of the cycle. There is in these tales, Kramarić writes, a reduction of the narrative time-line, of the characters, and of the semantic complex. The nucleus of the spiral is the narrative “I” with all its collective life experiences (but it is important, too, to note that individual elements of this experience remain contemporaneous and are not arranged in chronological order, being grouped, rather, according to their own value, so that the narrator sets forth his entire life’s experience at every moment) and the spiral itself (like the endless row of points that are all equidistant from the spiral and that rotate on the curving axis) make up the novel, just as they do the body of the text. This means that the movement of the novel’s text on the curving axis activates varying temporarily distant experiences of the narrative “I,” where one experience provokes another and then moves on to another, building the spiral text… The novel *Traitors* in its development, then, builds a circle that does not close, since its beginning and ending stories are temporarily parallel but are not “adjacent” stories (Kramarić 1987:722).

By recognizing both the forward and spiral motion of the narrative, Kramarić hints at the existence—in *Traitors*, at least—of both a rectilinear and circular temporal movement. Indeed, Šoljan’s fiction in general presents tensions between the linear time (the *chronos* in which individual humans live by default) and the circular nature of individual and generational human existence, that is, of the existence of the entire human race within history. Donat’s assertion (Donat 2000:100) that the group’s wandering in *A Brief Excursion* is not in vain because, it turns out, there exists a real goal to be reached (which everyone doubted, especially the narrator) underscores the linear nature of the events of human existence:

The last remnants of the town--the fences, the orchards, the occasional wooden shed--moved by us, and we were walking now throughout monotonous, dry landscape that did not change at all. The hills were each identical to the last, the stone walls and fields were so similar to one another that it seemed as if we were going around in circles. (*Šoljan* 1999:52)

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7 Posljednji ostaci mjesta--ograde, voćnjaci, poneka daščara--promakli su mimo nas, i hodali smo sada jednoličnim suhim krajolikom koji se uopće nije mijenjao. Brežuljci su bili jedan kao drugi, gromače i polja toliko nalik jedno na drugo da se činilo da se stalno vrtilo ukrug (*Šoljan* 1987:209).
The countryside around us was constantly the same. We seemed to be walking along a moving stage, in the direction it was turning. The scenes didn’t change at all, as if we kept nearing a turn into some other world but not quite reaching it. Were we going around in circles? (ibid.:63)³

When he and Roko reach the monastery the narrator is confronted with the ultimate circularity of his life, with the realization that lives, or at least parts of lives, repeat. The narrator reflects:

I remember; a flock of doves used to flay to the water. I know all that as if from a vast distance in time. I am remembering something I had seen long ago and had half forgotten.

And then, in that fantastical light, half aglow still from the passing day and half already in moonlight, in the frozen moment, I know with almost crystal clarity: I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE AND NOW I AM RETURNING. (ibid.:68-69)⁴

Although the narrator sees the repetitiveness, real or imagined, of his own life, he is to a certain degree situated outside of his own life chronology in “the frozen moment.” By establishing an environment “outside of time” Šoljan undermines the existentialist conclusion that existence is primary, which presupposes that time is only linear and only chronological. Šoljan’s insistence that time is linear only for those who participate in it, but that time is an infinite series of points on a sphere to those who observe it, removes the necessary existential requirement that cause and effect is always bound to the chronos. The narrator-hero of A Brief Excursion finds the need to repeat what he has done before (and what he had done before, according to the monk at the monastery).

Thus, the linearity and circularity merge in a symbiosis of types of existence within time, intertwine and make each other possible. The repetition of deeds and the completion of deeds are not mutually exclusive. In fact the repetition of deeds is as unavoidable as their individual conclusions; if a linear period of time (rok in Croatian, echoing the name of the journey’s leader, Roko) is needed to complete the deed, then all journeys and all deeds can be observed from outside themselves and in the context of all time and can be seen as occurring at once (much like the marching army, noted below). At a crucial point in A Brief Excursion the narrator realizes that linear time, the linear journey, is a threat to neither his own individual existence nor to others’. At first despairing of his liberation from the monastery (“All that was left for me was to live out my time until my physical end in this gray, mute, opaque world” [ibid.:104]), he almost immediately concludes with a hopeful cauda:

³ Pejzaž oko nas bio je neprestano isti. Činilo se da koračamo po nekoj pokretnoj pozornici, u smjeru vrtnje, i da se scena uopće ne mijenja, kao da neprestano sustižemo zaokret u neki drugi svijet ali nikako da ga stignemo. Zar se vrtimo u krugu? (ibid.: 216)

⁴ Sjećam se: jato golubova znalo je nekoć dolijetati na vodu. Znam sve to, kao da iz velike vremenske udaljenosti prisijecam nečega što sam već vidio napola zaboravio. I tada, u tom fantastičnom osvjetljenju, napola još od sudnevnice napola već od mjesečine, u zaustavljenom trenutku, znam gotovo s kristalnom jasnoćom: OVDJE SAM VEĆ JEDNOM BIO I SADA SE VRAĆAM (ibid.: 220).
But then my eyes gradually got used to the light, no matter how weak a light it was; no matter how those eyes were desirous of deception, they pierced the fog of mugginess and the moonlight, and I saw clearly, more and more clearly, how I had arrived at the same world from which I had set out. I saw that I was standing at the heart of the landscape, at the very center of a circle, and I realized that I was nowhere else but precisely in my own place (ibid.:104).  

The narrator can not help but see and eventually comprehend the circular nature of the repetitiveness of existence as it affects all individuals of all times and binds them to an experiential whole. There is a similar sudden cognizance of the congruence of time and place in the stories of *Traitors*, as for example, the narrator’s realization that the darkness in “The Third Team” is common to all things, which, he senses, he and his companions have always experienced:

But the darkness that now surrounded us was the same darkness that had surrounded us since the beginning of time. A darkness with no phantoms, no secrets, apparitions or creatures—uninhabited, a precise darkness from which we had been stealing life for generations now...(ibid.:207)

The desire to “return to what was” is not so much a desire to “return to a past deed” or to regain a “lost past,” as it is a desire to share in the circularity of human existence, to first recognize and then personally encompass the generational history of humankind. This realization is decisively expressed in *A Brief Excursion* as the narrator places his own experience within the framework of all of human experience:

…then I hear how my steps are joined by the sounds of many invisible feet. I know that I have company. I am no longer alone… an entire silent army marching alongside me without a sound. They are all around me in the dense darkness that teems with life. I feel I am with them, I begin to recognize them in the dark: these are my ancestors all around. My two grandfathers who created for me the land and the sea—one a farmer, the other a sailor—my father, maybe and many others, many dear departed, some of whom are still in fur or animal skins, some in surka coats or under a busby, some in armor, among them kings and poets, all my ancestors who passed through this same dark passage in some time in ages past… (ibid.:100-101)

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10 Ali onda su mi se oči postupno privikle na svjetlost, ma kako da je slaba bila svjetlost; ma kako da su oči bile željne obmane, pronikle su maglu od sparine i mjesečine i vidio sam jasno, sve jasnije, da je svijet u koji sam stigao isti onaj svijet iz kojega sam krenuo, vidio sam da stojim na rotoru krajolika, u samom središtu kruga, i shvatio sam da nisam nigdje drugdje nego na svome mjestu (ibid.:244).

11 A mrak koji nas sada okružuje isti je mrak koji nas je okruživao od samog početka svijeta. Mrač bez sablasti, bez tajni, bez prikaza i čudovišta—nenapućen, egzaktan mrak kojemu smo postupno, pokolenjima otimali život… (ibid.:91)

One can also note here the sense of constant return to the same place in the title story of *Traitors* and most certainly in “How I Met God”.

12 Ali onda čujem kako se mojim koracima pridružuje zvuk mnogih nevidljivih nogu. I znam da imam društvo. Nisam više sam... Cijela jedna šutljiva vojska maršira uz mene bez glasa.

Svuda su oko mene u gustom mraku koji vrvi od života. Osjećam s njima njenu zajednicu. A onda, i ne videći ih, prepoznajem ih u tami: to su moji preci oko mene. Moja dva djeda koja su za mene stvorila kopno i more—jedan ratar a drugi pomorac—moj otac možda, i mnogi drugi, mnogi dragi pokojnici, neki od njih još u
In Šoljan’s fictional works time, like the movement of the plot, is at once circular and linear: linear to the one pursuing it and circular to those who are able to sit outside of it and observe the ever enlarging concentric circles that time draws. Set against this background of ”false time” are the impermanent and perhaps foolish endeavors and pursuits of Šoljan’s characters.

While allowing the characters to “rise above the deception of unreal existence” (Kapetanić 1980:256), the motif of the idleness of a false Arcadia appears in both Traitors and “How I Met God” as well as in Šoljan’s essays, and is represented in A Brief Excursion by the “summer vacation” atmosphere of the title and the action itself. This theme hints at the sense of the “timeless” as represented in the ancient Hebrew wisdom literature by the Qoheleth (the “Teacher” or “Ecclesiastes”) of the renegade wisdom book of the Old Testament. In particular, the book of Ecclesiastes plays out against a background in which both chronos (linear time) and kairos (the proper time for all things) are only “vanities,” i.e. of no more substance than the wind itself. Indeed the famous passage from Ecclesiastes that enumerates the proper time for all things is set against the backdrop of the ancient Hebrew conception of time. Thus the Qoheleth understands time as of “indefinite duration” or the “timeless” (ha ‘olam). It is precisely because man cannot understand this sense of the “timeless,” but which he has in his nature, that he can neither comprehend nor make sense of the purpose of his labors (Brown 1968:536). Moreover, the Qoheleth sets everything against the assumed background of a divine order to things, while Šoljan’s stories are set against the background of an indefinite “something” a possibility; Šoljan’s backdrop to the universe (always set outside of “normal time”) is a timeless and infinite void, a place where chronology doesn’t matter, where the characters try to figure out the reason why certain events, things and happenings, have a kairos, that is, a proper or correct time for their performance. Both the Qoheleth and Šoljan’s fiction agree that there is no particular reason for understanding why there is time, or why it is linear in one part of

krznu ili kožuhu, neki u surki ili pod kalpakom, neki u oklopu, kraljevi i pjesnici među njima, svi moji preci koji su ovuda, istim tamnim hodnikom, prošli nekoć davno isti neizvjesni put… (ibid.:242)

13 While we do not necessarily suggest a direct influence of the text of the Biblical Ecclesiastes on Šoljan’s fiction, the intertextual coincidences allow us to pursue our discussion. The book of the Hebrew Qoheleth (“teacher”) dates to the third or fourth century B.C. and is incorporated into the Judaic and Christian scriptures. It is sharply critical of the ancient Hebrew wisdom movement, eschewing the human certainty of virtuous wisdom encouraged by the other wisdom authors (Brown 1968:535).


I use the terms kairos and chronos here as a convenience since the distinctions made in the Greek are not available in English.

15 v. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, beginning “All things have their season, and in their times all things pass under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted” and so forth.
life and circular and repeating in another. Thus, for Šoljan’s players, set artificially into an Arcadia where chronological and proper time have little immediate meaning, there is no need to understand the purpose of human labors.

Šoljan, however, would “stop” time so that his narrators and heroes can make sense of it by observing it obliquely. On the other hand, neither the narrator of *A Brief Excursion* nor the obese god of “How I Met God” (indeed, the disgusting deity of “How I Met God” suggests that viewing life from the side is the only solution to the enigma of existence), nor the heroes of *Traitors* or *The Port*\textsuperscript{16} can make sense of the paradoxes of time and simply accept time as a necessary condition because there is nothing else. As the Qoheleth suggests, humans can no more understand the purpose of their existence than the nature of Yahweh’s time and therefore must accept that faith and hope in the divine plan are the key to existence (Eccl. 11.1-6).

Šoljan’s expansion of the nature of time to include all events at once allows his characters to ask, “If time distorts our vision of existence, what then is the point of things?” against an aequential backdrop. As with the Qoheleth, Šoljan’s characters deny a permanence to anything earthly. Yet this impermanence does not make goals elusive—they are obtainable to those who persist—but does make them *almost* pointless. This oblique view gives the characters a skewed perspective that allows them to ask just exactly what is the proper time for things, or if deeds and events are even bound to time. Ultimately the characters and the reader are left with the question: What is the purpose of deeds and events if time and existence end? As Kapetanić has pointed out, for Šoljan’s characters the world “is only a collection of taboos, a series of myths, both ideological and personal, which [they do] not wish to accept” (Kapetanić 1980:254).

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In a broad sense these myths and taboos are the mere “gusts of wind” that characterize all human endeavors. The notion of the uselessness of temporal items is reminiscent of

\textsuperscript{16} One of Šoljan’s darkest tales, *The Port* centers on the protagonist’s (Dragan Despot) charge to build a port in the fictional seaside town of Murvice to transport an anticipated harvest of crude oil from a purported windfall gusher. Despot, who has had some experience in this town, arrives and begins convincing the locals to sell their homes in anticipation of the new facility. There is increasing resistance, however, and, as the plot turns, Despot meets and has a scandalous affair with the daughter of one of the locals who strongly resists the port. When Despot is ordered to destroy a cherished chapel, for the first time he doubts the outcome of the mission and resists destroying the chapel. He is unsuccessful despite his calling in preservationists from Zagreb. Knowing of his affair, Despot’s wife (who has influential friends and has secured his job for him) arrives from Zagreb with the news that the project is to be abandoned since there are, in fact, no crude oil deposits. She suggest that he resign his position before it is too late. He refuses out of pride and his wife leaves. The story ends tragically as Despot’s lover’s father is trampled to death as he resists the destruction of his own house. The building site is gradually abandoned. His lover leaves him and Despot is left alone, drinking heavily and finally sinking into madness.

About the story line of “How I Met god” see below.
the Qoheleth’s litany of vanities.\textsuperscript{17} Like Šoljan, the Qoheleth criticizes man for over emphatically relying on things and events to define himself: things and events that have no real substance except in a world bound to a false sense of time and in which everything is impermanent. Thus themes of the ultimate uselessness of beauty, the ineffectiveness of toil to improve one’s life, the wastefulness of leisure and the seeming futility of seeking lasting refuge from bleak existence recur throughout Šoljan’s fiction.

Indeed, like the Qoheleth, Šoljan’s characters quickly realize how small are the comforts of existence. In \textit{A Brief Excursion} the grotesque “sirens” who tempt the men to leave the party represent a beauty that exists only in that particular time, place and set of circumstances. “Something irretrievable finally snapped in the atmosphere, and we saw that we ought to keep going” (Šoljan 1999:42)\textsuperscript{18} laments the narrator as they realize that the attraction of the outsized beauties is false and the temptation dangerous. Indeed, among the vain pursuits listed by the grotesque deity of “How I Met God” is human—and in particular, feminine—beauty, which becomes an object of disdain. As the Qoheleth insists, beauty exists only in its own context (“He has made everything beautiful in its time...” Eccl. 3:11) Everything has the ability to be beautiful but only in its own proper time and place, so that, as Šoljan’s god explains, “On a deserted island even the ugly witch is the greatest beauty. This beer is the best because there isn’t any other” (Šoljan 1992:65).\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, the narrator of “A Garden of Nightingales” in \textit{Traitors} directly expresses the relativity of beauty:

\begin{quote}
We watched our neighbors for a bit. One of the women was pretty, quite pretty. Or rather: she was pretty compared to her friend, or to the general state of affairs in town, but I would not say that she was beautiful in some remarkable way. You have to look at things within a given situation. (Šoljan 1999:119)
\end{quote}

For Šoljan beauty and good taste are as much the products of the proper time as any individual event. Even if a particular beauty no longer exists or never existed in the first place, Šoljan’s characters recognize that beauty is always possible in its proper setting.

Ineffective also is toiling to improve one’s life. The Qoheleth concludes, “Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I toiled to achieve everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (Eccl. 2:11).

\textsuperscript{17} For the sake of convenience, we use the single term “vanity” here in its Latin sense: a temporal, fragile and non-permanent deed, event or entity. The Hebrew term \textit{Hebel} is a favorite of the Qoheleth. Meaning “breath” or “vapor,” its traditional translation in English comes through the Latin \textit{vanitas}, although it is now commonly translated more literally. The Hebrew word is used throughout the wisdom literature to indicate something that is ephemeral and worthless. For a discussion of the use of the term in the Hebrew literature see Brown 1968:535.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{I konačno, u atmosferi je nešto nepovratno puklo, i vidjeli smoda moramo dalje} (Šoljan 1987:201).

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Na pustom otoku i najveća je gadura ljepota. Ovo je pivo najbolje, jer nema drugo.}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Malo smo promatrali naše susjede. Jedna od žene bila je zgodna, vrlo zgodna. To jest. Bila je zgodna kad se uspoređi sa svojom prijateljicom ili s općom situacijom u gradu, ali ne bih rekao da je inače bila lijepa na neki iznimno primjetljiv način} (ibid.:13).
The fat god of Šoljan’s story and the Qoheleth both hold great power, both seek to improve the life lived (Eccl. 1:12-2:11) and both come to the same conclusion. As the god states, “Was all of it worthwhile? Could we have lived differently? I don’t know and it doesn’t interest me any more” (Šoljan 1992:66). This resignation to the futility of action is acutely seen in “The Third Team” (Traitors) in an incident in which the narrator, about to reach the goal of climbing a high pole and win the prize, simply stops.

Many had tried: many had climbed and many had fallen. -- what was their reward? The victor and the vanquished are in an empty string of years in which there was no victory or defeat, no ascent or fall, in the selfsame gray sequence, containing only memory of equal successes and failures, a presentiment of one and the same finale (Šoljan 1999:199).

In fact, throughout the novel the narrator and others constantly strive for goals that are never reached; here most poignantly, the protagonist realizes that the conventional thought that human achievement is highly desirable, is ultimately empty. Whatever may constitute the achievement, it is vain because it is measured by others’ standards and is therefore unstable (Kapetanić 1980:254).

There is vanity in the pursuit of possessions. Thus, the players in the “Garden of Nightingales” unendingly renovate their new townhouse; in A Brief Excursion Ivan’s newly purchased farmhouse is a throwback to his childhood, a building out of its proper time and, above all, a shambles and a ruin.

The house was … in a state of disrepair. The farm buildings out back were dilapidated. There was no glass in the windows, the stucco had crumbled away and whole sections of the roof were missing tiles. The fields around the house were overgrown with weeds. The low stone wall along the road had collapsed in spots, on it the board gate was askew, sagging, blackened. (Šoljan 1999:56)

The narrator sees Ivan’s purchase as the catalyst for the ruin of the expedition. Moreover, Ivan’s decision, far from being a move toward stability and settling down, is destructive of the purpose of existence:

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21 Je li sve to bilo vrijedno? Jesmo li mogli živjeti drukčije? Ne znam i ne zanima me više.
22 Mnogi su pokušavali: mnogi su se popeli i mnogi pali—kakva im je nagrada? I pobjednik i poraženi u praznom nizu godina u kojima nema ni pobjede ni poraza, ni penjanja ni padanja, u istom sivom toku, noseći u sebi samo sjećanje na jednake uspjehe, slatnju o istom kraju (ibid.:85-86).
Suddenly it seemed to me, in a panic, that Ivan, standing as he was by the gate to his new estate, was the last man on earth I would ever see… I knew that the expedition had fallen apart and we were the only two left: where would we go and why? (ibid.:62)

Left alone with Roko, the narrator is forced to wonder if they are traveling in circles, if the expedition is “not all in vain” (ibid.:63). Overt and inordinate reliance on ephemeral possessions rips away the ability to see the ultimate goals of existence.

In spite of their questioning nature, all of Šoljan’s major characters share the sense that there is something beyond the monotony of ordinary existence. If the ending of A Brief Excursion ultimately justifies the poetry of the search then it is decidedly not existential in Sartre’s or Camus’ sense: there is a goal and so there is, ironically or perhaps by unseen design, hope. But neither the narrator of A Brief Excursion nor the obese god of “How I Met God,” nor the protagonists of Traitors and The Port can make logical sense of a world in which deeds and goods are as ephemeral as time itself. Similarly, the Hebrew Qoheleth warns that we can no more understand the purpose of our existence than the nature of God’s time, and concludes that faith and hope in the divine plan are the key to bearing existence (Eccl. 11).

In many senses the Qoheleth’s conclusions are both similar to and different from those of Šoljan’s heroes. On the one hand, the pole sitter’s refusal to attain a trivial goal, the Brief Excursion narrator’s realization that all things eventually decay—but that all things are also repeated, though at their fixed times (cf. Ecclesiastes 3.1-13)—and the seaside narrator’s acceptance of the presence of his disgusting god and his desire to ignore him—because he is a powerless and false god—all propel the main characters in unexpected but purposeful directions. Yet the direction has a vagueness to it that is as unclear as the sfumato afternoon landscape of seaside resorts or the seemingly endless road to illusive and crumbling frescoes. In contrast, the Qoheleth argues for faith and hope: “Anyone who is among the living has hope…” (Eccl.9.4).

Šoljan, of course, rejects anything like the faith in a deity that the Qoheleth espouses and is either quite silent in the matter or quite vocal about the futility of inventing gods as succor to our human miseries. In A Brief Excursion he subtly but decisively reveals the powerlessness of the likes of the ancient and frail friar to preserve the grand artistic achievement and monument to faith that the decayed frescoes once represented. No match for the march of time and change, the monk wraps himself ever more tightly in his habit as if thereby to protect himself from his inner consumptive cough. As the narrator thinks to himself, “If he wraps that habit any tighter… he will get so thin he may vanish altogether” (Šoljan1999:81), it is evident

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24 Odjednom mi se učinilo, panično, da je Ivan, onako kako stajao uz ogradu svoga novog imanja, posljednji čovjek na svijetu, kojeg ču vidjeti... Shvatio sam da je ekspedicija raspala i da smo ostali samo nas dvojica: kamo ćemo dalje i zašto? (ibid.:216)
25 Zar sve je ovo bilo uzaludno? (ibid.:216)
26 Ako se još jednom stegne, pomislio sam, utanjit će se toliko da će nestati (ibid.:228).
that the friar, too, like his fellow monks and their monastery will pass the way of all vanities, unprotected by any appeal to a divine plan.

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Nowhere is Šoljan’s rejection of the falsity of created gods more evident than in the similitudinous “How I Met God”. The narrator of this short story, another of Šoljan’s ubiquitous “I’s,” relates a simple, allegorical tale that takes place over successive years at an unnamed seaside resort. Every year the narrator – a typical summer visitor to the seaside from the city - notices an obese figure, whose resemblance to Buddha is not unremarkable, sitting at an outdoor café, observing the passers-by. After a number of years the narrator realizes that everything he had come to like at the seashore has changed for the worse. Late in the summer the unpleasant but unavoidable god-like figure addresses the narrator and pours forth a monologue about his circumstances and his superiority over others, since he is impotent and therefore able to see life and its twists and turns with greater clarity from his oblique perspective. The narrator resists the cold analysis of life that the god presents and ends his summer in the realization that he will forever return to this place and to the eternal presence of the god-like observer.

The disgusting and disdainful god of Šoljan’s summer resort is a false god, one constructed by a society that needed a “god of socialist politics,” who is one that easily loses his power and even his knowledge. Šoljan taunts us to ask: “What sort of god is impotent and not omnipotent?” (Šoljan 1992:66), and “What sort of god loses his omniscience?” (“I wanted to change it, but now I no longer know if it was this way from the beginning or if I made it this way” [ibid.:66]).

Both the narrator of “How I Met God” and the Qoheleth resign themselves to merely watching the world, noting its bleakness and its evil and recognizing that the same fate is destined for all (“As it is with the good man, so it is with the sinner...” Eccl. 9:2). Both would bury the idea of a hope within their pessimism (“Anyone who is among the living has hope...” Eccl. 9:4). Šoljan, however, does not reject hope or some kindred virtue outright. While his characters struggle with the obvious lack of purpose in the universe, they can not avoid the ever lurking sense that something lies beyond the meaninglessness of diurnal existence. Each one wrestles with the question of man’s ultimate lot. For the Qoheleth, the ultimate miqeh, the ultimate lot designed for all, is death. While Šoljan’s people do not directly access the question of death, all are acutely aware of it. This is especially so of the aging narrator of “How I Met God”. This view beyond the ages of life has its expression in a number of the works in question, however tentative it might be at times. Šoljan’s people—whether timidly or

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27 Htio sam ga mijenjati, a sad ne znam više je li ovakav bio od početka ili sam ga ja ovakvim napravio.
decisively–openly try for or inadvertently display a sense of possibility. “Something always remains in the world of possibilities, some deed will remain unrealized. It leaves a feeling of emptiness, failure and loss. But curiosity is next. Hope. Search.”

Nor is the word “hope” alien to Šoljan’s other characters. An extensive expression of this hopefulness is found in *A Brief Excursion* in two interrelated contexts, as Roko and the narrator arrive at their destination. In this scene hope plays as a way out of the monastery, which was originally for the *fratelli* an escape route from danger, and as a “discovery” of the sought for frescoes. These two objects of the narrator’s hopes are symbolically joined by the circumstances of the two men’s presence at the monastery. Ironically the ancient tunnel of escape becomes the more successful means of hope for the narrator, a fact he recognizes before the two set sight on the wall that once was covered with magnificent art. When the narrator first tries to comprehend the escape route he experiences an epiphanic moment:

> Once long ago it led to safety, I thought, they knew a simple path to safety... But later they forgot. We are discovering it again. That is why we have come. And the hope that had died out in me when I had seen the ruin of the monastery now began to burgeon, a furious little flame. ([Šoljan 1999:79])

Yet a third expression of hope, one personal to the narrator, appears as part of the story’s final paragraphs. Confronted with his return to “normal” time, that is away from the Arcadian summer’s action, he is compelled to find the forgotten monastery’s name. He is not successful, but remains steadfast in his pursuit:

> I often think about placing an advertisement in the papers: there is always a shred of hope to cling to. But I know: I no longer have the strength even for that. And yet, don’t be angry with me if, after all this talk, after carrying on so, I tell you that tomorrow, chances are tomorrow, I will put an ad in the paper. I will do something. ([ibid.:108])

If even a vague hope plays a large thematic role in the *Brief Excursion*’s endgame, then in “How I Met God” written at the end of the author’s life, the sense of the uselessness of existence is acute. By the time his endlessly bleak summers draw to a close, Šoljan’s narrator, nearing the end of his own life, finds himself in the semicircular tourist prison trying to ignore the false and disgusting god of his past. Yet each of them, including the god himself, find the need to peer into an indistinct distance, as if looking for something (“He glanced up over the passing heads for a moment as if he were pining for some far-away place” [Šoljan 1992:65]).

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29 Neko je vodio spasu, pomislio sam, znali su jednostavan put u spas... Kasnije su zaboravili. Mi ga sada opet otkrivamo. Zato smo došli. I nada koja je zamrla u meni kad sam bio vidio ruševine samostana se ponovno se počela radati, bjesomučni plamičak ([Šoljan 1987:227]).
31 Načas se zagledao iznad prolazničkih glava, kao da čezne za nekom daljinom.
matter that it is the god defeated by the vanities of existence who has the greatest need to search the horizon for something. All of Šoljan’s characters find the smallest of light in the hope that something exists beyond the incomprehensible and often miserable circles of human time.

Far from being a series of diatribes on the futility of existence in a dictatorial society, Šoljan’s fiction presents a consistent world view by depicting characters in their struggle to transcend the vane trivialities of every day life. While Šoljan’s attitudes toward the fleeting things of life are consonant with those of the twentieth-century existentialist writers, there is a significant difference in their respective attitudes toward time. A true artist of human morality, the author depicts the human milieu as more than a simple linear continuity of deeds and events. By placing his characters “out of time” and therefore within the context of all time, they are able to extract the essence of what is important to human existence. For the Croatian author, the sense of repetition that humans may experience and their desire to reach a goal that has somehow always been there opposes the existentialist’s assurance that existence must precede essence. Thus, although his protagonists come to realize that temporal things are of little lasting value, they also realize that to despair of human existence is equally futile and, unlike the defeated antiheroes of the existentialist writers, are left embattled, but with a smoldering ember of hope.

References