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Araştırma Makalesi

**THE ABSENCE OF A VILLAIN IN ZÜLFÜ LİVANELİ'S NOVEL SERENAD A
STRATEGY TO AVOID THE PARADOX OF NARRATIVE EMPATHY AND AN
INVITATION TO SELF-REFLECTION***

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Abstract

This article examines the narrative strategy employed by Zülfü Livaneli in *Serenad*, arguing that the novel does not eliminate antagonism but deliberately relocates it from the figure of an individualized villain to impersonal and collective antagonistic structures such as bureaucracy, social indifference, and ordinary complicity. In contrast to many internationally acclaimed literary and cinematic works inspired by the atrocities of the Holocaust, where perpetrators are frequently represented as individualized and often pathologized figures, *Serenad* refrains from constructing a singular, morally legible villain. Drawing on Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy and Anna Lindhé's concept of the "paradox of narrative empathy", this article argues that Livaneli's narrative choice prevents the reader's affective investment in hatred toward a singular evil figure and instead redirects empathy toward the exercise of ethical self-reflection. Through this strategy, the novel reinforces the didactic and ethical dimensions of the reading experience by inviting readers to reflect not only on victimhood and suffering, but also on historical responsibility, social complicity, and the ordinary mechanisms through which violence becomes possible.

Keywords: Paradox of narrative empathy, diffuse antagonism, collective responsibility, Holocaust, ethical reading.

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**ZÜLFÜ LİVANELİ’NİN SERENAD ROMANINDA
KÖTÜ KARAKTERİN YOKLUĞU ANLATISAL EMPATİ
PARADOKSUNDAN KAÇINMA STRATEJİSİ
VE ÖZDÜŞÜNÜME DAVET**

Öz

Bu çalışma, Zülfü Livaneli’nin *Serenad* adlı romanında başvurduğu anlatı stratejisini incelemekte ve romanın antagonizmayı ortadan kaldırmak yerine, onu bireyselleştirilmiş bir kötücül figürden bürokrasi, toplumsal kayıtsızlık ve sıradan suç ortaklığı gibi kişisel olmayan ve toplumsal karşıtlık yapılarına bilinçli olarak taşıdığını ileri sürmektedir. Holokost’un vahşetlerinden esinlenen ve failerin çoğu zaman bireyselleştirilmiş, hatta patolojikleştirilmiş figürler olarak temsil edildiği uluslararası ölçekte tanınmış birçok edebî ve sinematik eserin aksine, *Serenad* ahlaki açıdan açık ve tekil bir “kötü” karakter yaratmaktan kaçınır. Suzanne Keen’in anlatısal empati kuramı ile Anna Lindhé’nin “paradox of narrative empathy” – anlatısal empati paradoksu – kavramından hareketle bu çalışma, Livaneli’nin söz konusu anlatı tercihinin okurun duygusal yatırımını tekil bir kötücül figüre yönelmiş nefretten uzaklaştırdığını ve bunun yerine empatiyi etik özdeşleşim pratiğine yönlendirdiğini savunmaktadır. Bu strateji aracılığıyla roman, okuma deneyiminin didaktik ve etik boyutlarını güçlendirerek okuru yalnızca mağduriyet ve acı üzerine değil, aynı zamanda tarihsel sorumluluk, toplumsal suç ortaklığı ve şiddeti mümkün kılan sıradan mekanizmalar üzerine de düşünmeye davet etmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Anlatısal empati paradoksu, merkezless antagonizma, toplumsal sorumluluk, Holokost, etik okuma.

Introduction

Contemporary Turkish literature often engages with themes of history, memory, and identity, frequently situating individual stories within broader historical contexts. At the same time, Holocaust literature provides an important framework for discussing the representation of extreme violence, moral responsibility, and the ethical challenges of narrating trauma. *Serenad* can be situated within this tradition, as it engages with both modern Turkish literary concerns of memory and identity and the broader ethical questions raised by Holocaust literature.

Zülfü Livaneli’s novel *Serenad*, published in 2011, belongs to the category of historical novels and is primarily inspired by a lesser-known tragedy of the Second World War: the disaster in which approximately 800 Romanian Jews lost their lives following the sinking of the Struma ship, which was transporting them from Romania to Palestine in an attempt to escape the Nazi threat. The ship was torpedoed and sunk by a Soviet submarine in the waters of the Bosphorus on 24th of February 1942, the shipwreck resulting in a single survivor (Stoian, 1995; Ofer, 1997). Within the fictional framework of the novel, the university professor Maximilian Wagner, the husband of Nadia –one of the victims of the shipwreck –returns to Istanbul several years after the tragedy, only to discover that the wounds of the past have not yet healed. Wagner’s personal tragedy is revealed later in the novel through a framed narrative entitled *Maximilian ile Nadia’nın Hikâyesi* –“Maximilian and Nadia’s Story”–which takes the form of a confession delivered by the elderly professor to the protagonist Maya Duran, a young employee of the prestigious University of Istanbul, tasked with assisting him during his stay in Türkiye.

Serenad can be interpreted also as a love novel that explores a form of love which refracted through the lens of a tragedy is experienced as suffering. The tragic love story further emphasizes the theme of social injustice (Seferoğlu, 2017, p. 216-217) and its harmful

consequences for both the individual and society, highlighting the ways in which historical conditions can profoundly shape, and ultimately distort, human lives and relationships. The young German Maximilian Wagner, a university assistant at the Faculty of Law in Munich, falls in love with a Jewish woman during the years in which the Nazi regime was consolidating its rise to power. After marrying, the couple moves from Munich to Heidelberg, where Nadia's Jewish origins were unknown to those around them – a cvasianonymity that ultimately proved insufficient to protect her from the Nazi threat, due to a series of factors that will be examined in the following sections.

This article situates Livaneli's *Serenad* within the broader field of narrative ethics and Holocaust-related studies, where questions of representation, responsibility, and readerly affect have been widely discussed. While existing research has explored themes of family, memory, historical representation in the novel (Onaran, 2014; Kayalar, 2017), the specific narrative mechanism through which antagonism is constructed – or deliberately depersonalized – has received limited critical attention. The central research question of this study is why does Livaneli avoid constructing an individualized villain in *Serenad*, and how does this narrative choice reshape the reader's empathetic and ethical positioning. Methodologically, the article combines textual analysis with concepts drawn from narrative theory and ethical criticism. In particular, it engages with Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy and Anna Lindhé's notion of the paradox of narrative empathy as its primary analytical framework. Additionally, the study draws on Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" which provides a crucial lens for understanding how ordinary individuals, through thoughtlessness and bureaucratic conformity, may become implicated in the production and normalization of large-scale violence.

The article argues that rather than presenting evil as embodied in a singular villain, *Serenad* constructs a narrative universe in which antagonism emerges through ordinary social relations, institutional mechanisms, and passive participation. It contends that this strategy is central to the novel's ethical project, as it transforms reading into an exercise in cognitive empathy and self-reflective critique.

1. Livaneli's Strategy of Avoiding the Paradox of Narrative Empathy

Unlike other novels or cinematic productions that address the tragedies of the Second World War and feature characters who commit *hybris* –for instance, the fictional representations of SS commandant Rudolf Höss in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979) and Martin Amis's *The Zone of Interest* (2014), or, in cinema, the portrayals of Amon Göth in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994), and the fictional character Hans Landa in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) –in *Serenad*, Livaneli does not construct a clearly individualized villain or a singular face of evil. In the novels and films mentioned above, antagonistic force is often concentrated in stereotypical sociopathic or psychopathic figures who are, regrettably, sometimes also endowed with a form of dark charisma. In such cases, historical violence becomes legible through the figure of a personalized perpetrator. Yet atrocities are not committed solely as a result of the extreme actions of such abominable individuals; rather, they are embedded within broader social and historical structures. The reason we may infer for this kind of construction is that the horrors of the Holocaust seem to require a commensurate representation of the aggressor, often materialized in the figure of a recognizable villain.

Livaneli, by contrast, does not construct an antagonist embodied in a demonic figure. Instead, the narrative disperses antagonistic force across impersonal and collective structures, thereby avoiding the localization of evil in a single character. In this sense, he does not portray the demonic facet of evil –one that, under certain circumstances, comes to dominate a person, turning him into a master of manipulation and ultimately, leading to dehumanization –but rather suggests its diffusion within ordinary social and institutional mechanisms. A legitimate question would be why Livaneli resorts to such a strategy and whether a more concrete representation of evil might not be more useful for fully understanding the ways in which malice manifested itself in the context of the Holocaust. When analysing the novel from the perspective of narrative empathy, however, such an approach risks encouraging a form of emotional alignment that is too heavily dependent on the personalization of evil, which may, in turn, reinforce counter-empathic responses and reduce the reader's capacity to engage with broader structures of complicity and responsibility.

Suzanne Keen defines narrative empathy as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition” (Keen, 2015, p. 155). Therefore, this theoretical framework foregrounds the reader's interpretive and affective engagement with the literary text. A significant point to note is that Keen expresses skepticism regarding the claim that narrative empathy leads to prosocial behavior (Keen, 2007, p. 16-28).

As we have argued in another article (Roman, 2021), Zülfü Livaneli transforms the novel *Serenad* into an invitation to empathy by employing several strategies identified by Keen in her book entitled *Empathy and the Novel* (2007). We further contend that the absence of a clearly individualized villain also functions as a strategy for eliciting narrative empathy, operating on two distinct levels.

First, as Anna Lindhé argues, a reader's empathic response toward a vulnerable character may be triggered by, or dependent upon, antipathy toward another character (Lindhé, 2016, p.20). If narrative empathy is thus bound up with its opposite –if, in other words, it emerges against a background of negative feelings toward other characters –then what is created, according to the author, is a „paradox of narrative empathy”. „If literature creates an understanding of the Other [...] it simultaneously creates an Other –or the Other's Other –towards whom less favorable feelings may be directed” (Lindhé, 2016, pp. 20–21), a dynamic that may call into question the ethical effects of reading. Lindhé further maintains that the „empathy-altruism hypothesis [...] needs to be qualified by the possibility that readers, compelled to do so by narrative strategies, then also practice being «non-empathetic» during the reading experience” (Lindhé, 2016, p. 21).

A close reading of the *Serenad*'s narrative structure confirms that it does not construct a singular, clearly identifiable antagonistic figure. By choosing not to depict an individualized villain, Livaneli spares the reader the paradox of narrative empathy and the potential risk of experiencing negative emotional alignments that may run counter to the novel's overarching ethical and didactic message. Rather than constructing a narrative framework that would actively encourage aversion, moral condemnation, or emotional hostility toward a clearly defined villainous figure, the author instead deploys narrative strategies that direct the reader's attention more intensively and consistently toward the lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and affective conditions of the victims themselves. In this sense, the narrative economy of the novel

is deliberately reoriented away from the personalization of evil and toward the amplification of suffering as an ethical and empathic focal point.

A good example in this regard is the opening scene of the framed narrative entitled “Maximilian and Nadia’s Story”. We observe from the very beginning a sustained narrative emphasis on Nadia’s vulnerable condition, as a law student who is subjected to hostility and physical aggression by a group of fellow students with Nazi sympathies:

Ortalarındaki genç kız ise bir eli saçlarında, diğer eli boğazında, hacmini küçültmek ister gibi orada öylece duruyordu. Saçını çekip duran ellerden ve omzuna, boğazına bastırılan sert parmaklardan kendini korumaya çalışırken yaptığı son hareketle aldığı pozisyonu koruyordu. Dağınık siyah saçlarıyla kızaran yüzünün arasından, öfke ve korku dolu bakışlarla bakıyordu (Livaneli, 2021, p. 272). – “The young girl in the middle, meanwhile, stood there with one hand in her hair and the other at her throat, as if trying to make herself smaller. She was holding on to the position she had ended up in with her last movement, while trying to protect herself from the hands pulling her hair and from the rough fingers pressing down on her shoulder and throat. Through her disheveled black hair and flushed face, she was looking on with eyes full of anger and fear.”¹

The narrative lens remains firmly fixed on Nadia’s corporeal and emotional state, thereby reinforcing a victim-centered perspective. This scene, which appears to resemble a Renaissance painting, is marked by the extreme tension that envelops the protagonist. Although it could have been rendered through a sequence of dynamic actions, it is instead depicted as a static tableau, in an apparent temporal suspension, thereby generating a potentially stronger affective impact, as attention is directed toward each individual detail of the victim’s vulnerable condition. The aggressor, in contrast, is not individualized but is instead constructed as a collective narrative entity, referred to in the novel under the designation *Nazi öğrencileri* (Livaneli, 2021, p. 272) – “the Nazi students”– thereby functioning as a depersonalized representation of antagonistic force rather than a singular character. Also, the representation of this group does not appear again in the novel. This brief episode featuring a collective aggressor, whose portrayal is not further developed, does not allow it to be perceived as an antagonistic presence *per se*. The reader is not afforded the narrative space to develop counter-empathic responses toward this collective figure but is instead guided toward a limited affective stance characterized at most by moral distance and critical awareness. However, this scene anticipates instead the novel’s broader strategy of displacing antagonistic agency away from individualized figures and toward a more diffuse configuration of social hostility.

Nevertheless, even if it has been argued that Livaneli does not depict a singular, clearly identifiable face of evil within the novel, it remains necessary to account for the presence of a threatening or harmful element, given that the existence of victims presupposes some form of opposing force, whether explicit or implicit. This raises an important analytical question concerning the nature and location of antagonistic pressure within the narrative structure. Rather than disappearing, this threatening dimension is redistributed across a wider field of social, institutional, and historical relations, thereby complicating its identification as a single agent.

¹ The translation of the excerpts into English is our own, as the English-language edition of the novel does not provide a complete translation of these passages - see Livaneli, 2019 (trans. Brendan Freely).

2. Depersonalized Representation of Antagonistic Force. Literary NPCs

After the events of *Kristallnacht* (9-10th of November 1938), the danger had increased considerably, and the circle was closing in on the Wagner family in a suffocating manner. Nadia was unable to overcome her anxieties, despite her husband's efforts to present the situation and events on a smaller scale than their actual magnitude. Nadia's anxiety gradually emerges within the narrative, reaching its culmination in the acceptance of the conclusion: *Artık Almanya'da barınmaları çok zordu* (Livaneli, 2021, p. 289). –“It had become very difficult for them to find shelter in Germany”. In order not to attract attention to herself or to dispel any possible suspicions from those around her, Nadia is compelled by circumstances to perform the Nazi salute during a university ceremony held in honour of her husband. She executes the gesture with a deliberately dissimulated determination so as not to leave any room for doubt regarding her supposed loyalty to the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler. Although this act may be interpreted as a pragmatic gesture, as the most reasonable means available to keep danger at distance, the performative force of the words *Heil Hitler* and the profound symbolic weight attached to what appears to be a simple extension of the arm exert a significant emotional impact on Nadia. The outcome of her action, as observed by Max–Gözlerinden yaşlar akıyordu. Maximilian Wagner, titreyerek gergin bir şekilde duran karısına yaklaştı (Livaneli, 2021, p. 287). –“Tears were streaming down her face. Maximilian Wagner approached his wife, who stood trembling and tense”– suggests the amalgam of negative emotions with which Nadia is confronted at that moment. The predominant feeling, which gradually becomes a constant in the lives of the Wagner couple, and especially in Nadia's life, is fear, understood both in its general sense and more specifically as fear of concentration camp, of death, and of separation. This fear is further intensified by the fact that Nadia is now pregnant, which activates her heightened sense of maternal vulnerability, as she is now responsible not for one, but for two lives.

Another feeling that seems to afflict Nadia is loneliness. The young woman is unable to establish any friendship ties with the people around her, as she conceals her identity out of fear of being exposed. Just as the group of students who attack Nadia at the beginning is not individualized through any distinctive traits, functioning instead as an episodic collective character, the individuals Nadia encounters in Heidelberg are not identifiable by name or by individual features, but only –if at all –by the positions they occupy –*rektör* “the rector”, *üniversitede görevli bir kadın* “a woman, employee of the university” (Livaneli, 2021, p. 286). The only defining characteristic attributed to them is their overt ideological allegiance to Nazism, without any clear indication of what this allegiance entails for each of them individually, how it manifests in practice, what motivates it, or what concrete actions it produces. We are given only general information, such as their admiration for the supreme leader and the fact that fellow Jews have disappeared from among them. Loneliness becomes increasingly pronounced as the young couple begin to be avoided: *Kaygıları ve korkuları giderek artıyordu. Üniversitedeki arkadaşlarının kulaklarına bir şey gelmiş olmalıydı ki, teker teker onlarla ilişkiyi kesiyorlardı* (Livaneli, 2021, p. 289). –“Their anxieties and fears were steadily increasing. Something must have reached the ears of their university friends, as they, one by one, were gradually cutting off contact with them.”

The life of the Wagner couple within a German society intoxicated by Nazism resembles a bas-relief: two sharply contoured figures set against a gray background. Their features are rendered with far greater clarity than those of the people with whom they interact, whose human dimension remains not so much underdeveloped as deliberately flattened as we argued above. To account for this type of representation, we propose the term “literary NPCs.”² We use this term to designate characters who contribute, to some extent, to the construction of the narrative world, yet whose role remains primarily functional rather than psychologically elaborated. They do not emerge as fully developed characters, but rather as narratively flattened social agents whose presence serves to foreground the vulnerability of the protagonists and to render visible the ideological atmosphere in which they are forced to exist. Taken together, these figures form a collective and largely impersonal antagonistic presence: a set of “literary NPCs” who function less as individualized characters than as representatives of a society contaminated with Nazism. Their presence generates fear and anxiety in Nadia precisely because *they* are the ones who could expose her and thereby set in motion the bureaucratic mechanisms that would lead to her deportation.

In this way, the novel conveys a message worthy of closer attention: namely, that atrocities are not always solely the result of exceptional cruelty or diabolical genius, but are carried out, above all, through the contribution – intentional or otherwise – of ordinary individuals who either support the aggressor, comply with the dominant ideology, or adopt a posture of passivity and fail to resist. For a clearer understanding of this dynamic, a brief contextual consideration of the role played by German society in relation to the activities of the Gestapo is necessary, particularly since this dimension is central to the novel’s moral framework.

3. The Role of German Society in the Effectiveness of the Gestapo

From its establishment in 1933 until its dissolution in 1945, the Gestapo was one of—not the primary—tools of oppression employed by the Nazi regime. Notorious for the brutality with which it operated and endowed with discretionary powers, the organization perpetrated atrocities on a large scale, focusing on the elimination of elements deemed undesirable by the regime, such as political opponents, and above all, those groups which, from the perspective of Nazi doctrine, were seen as threatening the social and cultural “purity” of the “Aryan”: people with disabilities, homosexuals, Roma, and Jews.

In his study entitled *The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case Files* (1988), Robert Gellately demonstrates, among other things, that the Gestapo, as the political police, was deeply feared, and that this climate of fear was instilled among the population through a technique also employed by other totalitarian regimes—namely, persuading citizens that the police were everywhere, that they had “eyes and ears” omnipresently and at all times. The aim was to sustain feelings of anxiety and paranoia that would compensate for the fact that, from a logistical standpoint, the Gestapo did not possess sufficient human resources relative to the size of the population (Gellately, 1988, p. 657). Thus, it was not their physical presence that ensured their effectiveness—this was due largely to rumors and fears (Allen, 1984, p. 189). Given their limited number of officers, the Gestapo would not

² A non-playable character (NPC) is a term originating from video game culture, used to describe characters controlled by the computer, whose behaviors may have a certain impact on the game.

have been able to carry out its missions, not even in collaboration with other institutions, had it not benefited from the cooperation of certain German citizens who, for various reasons, submitted denunciations. Anxiety stemmed from the possibility that an ordinary citizen might file a denunciation, sometimes even based on mere suspicions (Gellately, 1988, p. 657-658). This type of denunciation constituted an integral part of the political police's activity, "especially in dictatorships where police authority is virtually beyond control and where the citizen is often without any legal protection" (Gellately, 1988, p. 660). The author further maintains that "the work of the Gestapo was deliberately shrouded in secrecy; uncertainty about the sources that moved it to act helped convey an impression of omnipotence" (Gellately, 1988, p. 660). Although police operations were classified, an equally significant fact is that civilian collaboration with the institution was widely known at the societal level. What might have appeared to be a vulnerability –a security breach –was, in fact, an integral part of the strategy of population control, as it fueled citizens' fear of being denounced and of being summoned, as Gellately puts it, "for the purpose of answering some questions" (Gellately, 1988, p. 661) by an authority of proverbial ferocity. Another component of this strategy was the encouragement of denunciations, insofar as the regime generally responded positively to any form of delation, regardless of how petty the accusation was, how dubious the source, or how self-serving the informant's motives might be. At the same time, it allowed the population to be aware of the existence of collaboration between certain members of society and the political police. Friedrich Ziepfel, cited by Gellately, observed that the totalitarian regime thus succeeded in intensifying the isolation of the citizen: individuals no longer knew whom to trust and became aware that they could not defend themselves against a danger that was impossible to identify (Gellately, 1988, p. 660). As a result, almost no one felt safe anywhere.

We can thus observe that some of the most harrowing events in recent history were made possible through the variously motivated complicity of ordinary people with the authorities, who in turn attained a sense of omnipotence by exploiting the vulnerabilities of certain members of society. These non-individualized figures constitute the harmful element in Livaneli's *Serenad*; they are the source of Nadia's fears and anxieties, and to a certain extent, the ones who bear responsibility for her tragedy.

4. The Reader's Moral İmagination and the "Banality of Evil"

During the act of reading, the readers can put themselves in Nadia's shoes and grasp her ordeal; yet, through a more intense exercise of imagination –which admittedly requires a higher degree of intellectual maturity –they may also identify with the ordinary citizen whom Nadia fears, precisely because this figure, being non-individualized, could be anyone. In this way, the reader is prompted to reflect on how they themselves might respond in a situation where they could no longer rely on the something that Thomas Nagel describes as "moral luck"³ and would be compelled to test their own moral mettle under comparable circumstances. The non-individualized representation of the source of fear can thus be a particularly suitable choice in this context, a point that becomes clearer when considered through a contrasting comparison: in *Schindler's List*, observing the demonic ease with which Commandant Amon Goeth shoots

³ A philosophical concept that describes the situation in which a person is judged for the consequences of actions influenced by certain factors beyond their control. Thomas Nagel gives as an example the case of German society under the Nazi regime, which failed the test of morality by not opposing the regime. However, citizens of other countries were not subjected to the same test, benefiting from moral luck; therefore, it is impossible to know whether they would have behaved the same way as some members of German society at that time (Nagel, 1979, p. 34).

prisoners in the camp yard from his balcony –like in a classic hunting banquet –demonstrates his extreme sadism, and we may assert that any person in full possession of their mental and emotional faculties would feel horror at the act and compassion for the victims. Imagining oneself in the position of a sadist like Goeth would be a difficult exercise, precisely because he represents an extreme case, one that does not emerge suddenly, but typically develops through successive stages –from minor, seemingly harmless moral compromises to the apex of cruelty –particularly in a political climate, such as that of Nazi Germany, which encouraged such behavior toward Jews, whether through coercion or propaganda. A spectator cannot consciously accept –or even entertain the thought–that they themselves might commit an equally monstrous act under similar circumstances. The mere idea that within one’s own self there could lie a latent sadistic potential, capable of surfacing under the right conditions, is inconceivable to the spectator, at least from the perspective of the instinct for self-preservation.

From this perspective another merit arises from the author’s decision not to depict evil as the face of a monster. Were the reader confronted with a specific portrayal of the harmful element, they might erroneously conclude that such destructive capacity can exist only in a pathological mind, and that only such a mind could single-handedly perpetrate large-scale atrocities. The novel’s message, by contrast, is that the potential manifestation of a dark aspect inherent in human nature need not take the form of abominable acts to produce devastating consequences, for such outcomes are often the result of what might at first appear to be minor, seemingly insignificant attitudes and actions on a large scale –a phenomenon conceptualized by Hannah Arendt as the “banality of evil”.

While attending Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem in 1962, Arendt formulated the hypothesis that ordinary people can become capable of repugnant acts when circumstances allow it and when they know there will be no repercussions. In analyzing Eichmann’s statements and behavior –Eichmann being the architect of the “Final Solution”–Arendt found no “diabolical or demonic profundity” in the former exterminator (Arendt, 2022, p. 287). However, she identified other ingredients necessary for transforming an ordinary person –her primary focus being on the category of bureaucrats –into a malevolent instrument: the capacity to execute orders and follow procedures with blind obedience (Arendt, 2022, p. 133), coupled with “sheer thoughtlessness –something by no means identical with stupidity” (Arendt, 2022, p. 287), possibly seasoned, at times, with self-interest.

5. Conclusion

The strategy of omitting a negative character adopted by Livaneli thus has the potential not only to spare the reader the paradox of narrative empathy but also to guide them toward a form of self-reflection, making them aware that, under certain circumstances in which they might lack “moral luck”, they would not necessarily become an Amon Goeth, yet could still occupy the role of the “rector” or the “university employee” –those narrative figures whose quasi-anonymization renders them generalized. As noted, this is an exercise that demands a higher degree of intellectual and emotional maturity and therefore appeals primarily to the cognitive component of empathy. Through this lens, however, the dichotomy of victim and aggressor becomes more fluid: the reader does not only inhabit the victim’s perspective but can also envision themselves as part of the other category, realizing that power is not fixed and that, at any moment, the mere evolution of circumstances may invert the roles. From the perspective of empathy, offering the reader the possibility of visualizing themselves as part of a harmful

element destabilizes any potential belief in the impossibility of a latent dark side existing within themselves – a belief that, as noted, can develop based on instincts of emotional self-preservation. In this way, the narrative world created by Livaneli in *Serenad* becomes an inverted Mirror of Erised: it does not show you in an idealized, longed-for form, but rather as you would never wish to see yourself – a confrontation as harsh as it is useful, heightening awareness of one's own actions.

Declarations

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