Artis Ostups
Mg. phil., literary scholar;
Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia / University of Tartu
Mg. phil., literatūrzinātnieks;
Latvijas Universitātes Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts / Tartu Universitāte
E-mail / e-pasts: artis.ostups@lulfmi.lv
ORCID: 0000-0003-2570-5579

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Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis' *18* and Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama*

Cildena vēsturiska pieredze, epifāniski brīži un melanholisks stāstījums Paula Bankovska "18" un Dušana Šarotara "Panorāmā"

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Summary This article engages with Frank Ankersmit's philosophy of sublime historical experience to explore how contemporary fiction challenges and deconstructs the notion of homogeneous time, thereby reshaping the relationship between the past and the present. The discussion revisits Ankersmit's traditional distinction between narrative and experience, arguing that a sense of historical presence can be conveyed through specific formal techniques, such as epiphanic descriptions of time and space and melancholically meandering narrative structure. By situating Ankersmit's ideas alongside those of Jean-François Lyotard and Dominick LaCapra – both of whom address the nuances of encountering intense sensations – the article serves as a unique intersection of the philosophy of history and literary analysis, supplementing perspectives from trauma and memory studies. Focusing on Pauls Bankovskis' *18* and Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama*, the article examines how these works of contemporary European fiction approach painful historical experiences, developing new conceptions of history that transcend a strictly chronological and sequential understanding of time.

Kopsavilkums Šajā rakstā aplūkota Franka Ankersmita filozofija par cildenu vēsturisko pieredzi, lai izpētītu, kā mūsdienu daiļliteratūra izaicina un dekonstruē homogēnā laika jēdzienu, pārveidojot attiecības starp pagātni un tagadni. Rakstā tiek pārskatīts Ankersmita tradicionālais naratīva un pieredzes nodalījums, argumentējot, ka vēsturiskās klātbūtnes sajūtu var nodot caur specifiskiem formāliem paņēmieniem, piemēram, epifāniskiem laika un telpas aprakstiem un melanholiski plūstošu stāstījuma uzbūvi. Novietojot Ankersmita idejas blakus Žanam Fransuā Liotāram un Dominikam Lakapram – abi pievēršas niansēm, kas saistītas ar spēcīgu sajūtu piedzīvošanu – raksts kalpo kā unikāls vēstures filozofijas un literatūras analīzes krustpunkts, papildinot traumas un atmiņas studiju skatījumus. Koncentrējoties uz Paula Bankovska "18" un Dušana Šarotara "Panorāmu", raksts analizē, kā šie mūsdienu Eiropas prozas darbi pievēršas sāpīgām vēsturiskām pieredzēm, attīstot jaunas vēstures koncepcijas, kas pārsniedz stingri hronoloģiska un secīga laika izpratni.

Positioning Sublime Historical Experience

This century has witnessed a steady return to the notion of experience in discussions on history. Within this tendency – which includes phenomenological perspectives (Carr 2014) as well as a psychoanalytically inspired conceptualization of the "presence of the past" (Runia 2014; Ostups 2023) – Frank Ankersmit's major work *Sublime Historical Experience*, published in 2005, offers the most extensive account of what it means to experience the past as both chronologically absent and affectively present. So far, Ankersmit's ideas have been explored by philosophers of history who rightfully categorize them as a radical alternative to the narrativist and constructivist views on history, represented, ironically enough, by Ankersmit himself, most notably in his books *Narrative Logic* (1983) and *History and Tropology* (1994). These works show indebtedness to Hayden White's perspective on the historical work as "a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes" (White 1973: 2). Meanwhile in his later work Ankersmit transitions from an analysis of linguistic performativity to such fleeting phenomena as feelings, moods, and impressions, triggered by the past and challenging representation. "It was precisely through such historical experiences," writes Peter Icke in his critical investigation *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause*, "that a relationship with the past could now be established without having to break through those distorting 'thick crusts' of textualism, representation, linguistics, facticity, and so on" (Icke 2012: 153).

This turn toward direct experience of the past seems to be at odds with narrative form as such, which functions as a means of diminishing authentic retention, as one infers from Ankersmit's earlier thesis that "[n]arrative interpretations *apply* to the past, but do not *correspond* or *refer* to it" (Ankersmit 1994: 33). This article rethinks this dichotomy by reflecting on those moments in Ankersmit's theory which imply the possibility of negative representation of powerful sensation. I suggest that it is rewarding to transfer Ankersmit's conception of sublime historical experience to an interpretation of contemporary fiction, where narrativity-weakening strategies such as epiphanic descriptions and melancholically meandering storytelling are used to signal the overwhelming presence of a haunting past event. This appropriation is endorsed by Ankersmit's brief and somewhat cryptic remark that novels can articulate "the pains, the moods, and feelings of a civilization," to make "experience speak" without being subjugated to the discourse of objective truth (Ankersmit 2005: 197). Thus, I intend to demonstrate how sublime historical experience, far from being

a simple antithesis to narrative, can actually manifest through formal means and expand our theoretical grasp of literary approaches to history.

The criticism against Ankersmit's notion of sublime historical experience ranges from seeing it as an example of sheer mysticism (Roth 2012: 145–154) to suggesting that it belongs more to memory studies than to the philosophy of history (Icke 2012: 149). However, my goal here is not to defend Ankersmit against his critics, but rather to briefly outline how his proposal relates to the traditional understanding of historical experience. As noted by Martin Jay, there are two broad possibilities of how experience relates to historical discourse:

> …the experience either of those whose history is being recounted or of those who are doing the recounting. That is, the task of the historian can be construed as somehow getting access to and representing what was 'experienced' by men and women in the past; or it can be understood as something that happens to us now when we think historically about those residues of the past that are manifest to us – or that we construe as manifested – in the present. (Jay 2015: 218; cf. Carr 2014: 8–30)

Since Ankersmit is speaking exclusively about feelings, moods, and impressions, his idea of sublime historical experience is close to the second understanding of historical experience which foregrounds the effects of the past. But the crucial difference is that Jay still emphasizes the aspect of construction, previously underscored by Michael Oakeshott (1986), while Ankersmit views sublime historical experience as existing prior to coherent comprehension and functioning as a force that impacts our historical consciousness, social identity, and linguistic structures.

Ankersmit claims that historical experience, as it is given to a romantically minded writer of history, is constituted by the "complementary movements of the discovery (loss) and the recovery of the past (love)" and that "[t]he sublimity of historical experience originates from this paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past" (Ankersmit 2005: 9). Critics clarify this complex relationship by calling it a nexus of presence and absence, meaning that the past is absent from explanatory narrative frames, but is present as an intrusion into our consciousness (Froeyman 2012: 398; Jay 2018: 436). This take on the sublime historical experience is supported by Ankersmit's later proposal "to consider presence as an aspect or manifestation of the sublime" (Ankersmit 2012: 172). Ankersmit's idea of historical experience goes against the grain of historicist thinking, which treats the past and the present as ontologically irreducible temporal domains. His approach is much closer to the presentist reconceptualization of historical time, that is, to the recognition that the present is temporally heterogeneous, allowing for a survival of the past as being integrated in a certain now, which has been described in such terms as

"multitemporal" (Tamm and Olivier 2019) and "polychronic" (Fareld 2022). The overcoming of linear, irreversible, and progressive time, of course, is not just a matter of contemporary philosophy of history, but rather characterizes a broader cultural practice, especially when considering how time is distorted in literature. The basis for a dialogue between presentism and fiction invested in history is there: postmodern fiction is said to open the past "to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon 1988: 110), and more up to date works, depicting the lasting presence of traumatic past events, continue these experiments, both reacting to and forming "the emergence of a new historical sense," which, as Peter Boxall claims, is characterized by "multiple temporal confusions" (Boxall 2013: 43). Overall, what I find valuable in the connection between presentism and fiction is the possibility to uncover how narrative structure drives particular conceptions of history.

When Ankersmit advocates for "a rehabilitation of the romanticist's world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past," he is addressing primarily philosophers of history who until his intervention allowed the historical experience to be completely "filtered out" by cognitivism and rationalism (Ankersmit 2005: 10). However, he makes this transition from rationalism to romanticism by what he himself admits to be a literary category – that of the sublime – and thus, in turn, offers his reasoning for further appropriation which would pursue historical experience in prose. In other words, we could examine those profound moments in fiction when an affective presence of the past is not just thematized but also enhanced by the form. Evidently, Ankersmit would be somewhat skeptical about such a conceptual perspective since, for him, there is an unavoidable trade-off between language and experience (Ankersmit 2005: 11). Be that as it may, literary analysis, particularly in the wake of trauma studies, holds the necessary tools to interpret instances when the crust of representation and the forward movement of plot disintegrates revealing traces of sublime experience.[1] A good example of an overwhelming presence of the past comes from James Joyce's story "The Dead" (1914), at the end of which the narrative pace slows down and we have a scene with Gabriel Conroy close to tears, losing himself to the world outside his room:

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1 Anton Froeyman has argued, with regards to Eelco Runia's concept of presence, that "[p]resence needs language, but only as a vehicle, and the "thinner" the linguistic and representative crust that language places over the past, the better "presence" has a chance of breaking through" (Froeyman 2015: 166). Runia mentions that this sense of presence is implied also in Ankersmit's sublime historical experience (Runia 2014: 57), providing the ground for pondering the link between sublime sensation and narrative form.

> His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling. (Joyce 1991: 255)

Characteristic of a sublime historical experience, the protagonist of Joyce's story is deeply disturbed – he finds himself in a state of limbo and dissociated from his identity. As Ankersmit would say, he is reduced to "just this feeling or experience" (Ankersmit 2005: 228). Here, the epiphanic manner of narration contributes to the sense of the sublime, rather than simply erasing experience, and I will explore similar examples in more detail later.

Monika Fludernik famously connected narrative and experience in her *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) where she states that narrativity is constituted by experientiality, "namely the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'" (Fludernik 1996: 9). Close to Fludernik's approach is the research done by Jonas Grethlein who addresses the gap between experience and narrative, as it pervades presentist writings, and succeeds in reconciling the two phenomena by focusing on the re-experience of the past, enabled by the referentiality and the "temporal openness" of the plot (Grethlein 2010: 332). Grethlein, in one of his recent essays, asserts that "the temporal unfolding of a story" can imitate the real-life experience of memories and expectations (Grethlein 2018: 282). While I subscribe to the need of reconciling experience and narrative, I intend to accomplish this complicated task by attending to a particularly disruptive kind of experience that can be felt not through plot progression, which would disperse its power, but through virtual connections among passages and on the level of narration, when it registers the tension between representation and the unrepresentable. Thus, my article will contribute to the current theoretical discussions on historical experience, particularly to the idea of language as an effective, though not unlimited, mediation of experience (Bouton 2022: 536; see also Palmié and Stewart 2019). To exemplify my claims, I will analyze how the sublime presence of the past is shown in two works of contemporary European fiction: in Pauls Bankovskis' historical novel *18* (2014), which deals with the events of the First World War in Latvia, and in Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama* (2014), a deeply melancholic meditation on exile and time. Both novels challenge the traditional dichotomy of past and present while guiding the reader toward accepting a non-linear and effectively mediated conception of history. But before I turn to these works, let me first elaborate more on Ankersmit's notion of sublime historical experience and how it might be grasped through narrative means.

Sublime Effects in Narrative

In Ankersmit's account, sublime historical experience has a truly shocking quality. When we feel a sudden and intrusive presence of the past,

> our cognitive instruments, whether language or our epistemological schemes, have demonstrated their inadequacy – and the result is that we stand face to face with reality itself in an encounter with reality that is direct and immediate since it is no longer mediated by the categories we normally rely on for making sense of the world (Ankersmit 2005: 285).

Standing outside of language, proper sublime historical experience can be felt through moods and feelings, which means that it is an essentially affective phenomenon (Ibid.: 308). In the middle of his book, Ankersmit specifies his view on moods and feelings by saying that they are beyond our influence and will: "We do not possess or own them, as we can be said to own our knowledge; rather, if anything, they seem to own us" (Ibid.: 225). Sublime historical experience thus is the brief and epiphanic moment when we feel ourselves being reduced to those moods and feelings which are triggered by the past. Peter Icke usefully points out that sublime historical experience "comes unannounced and ordinarily relies for its reception on the historian's particular sensitivity to an aura which can be reasonably assumed to be attached to whatever cultural object from the past effects such experiential transmissions" (Icke 2012: 108–109). However, following the way this kind of experience is depicted in literature, I propose that we set aside professional historians and consider other subjects of the presence to be of the past as well. After all, if a sublime historical experience is said to exist apart from conventional and learned epistemological schemes, then it can affect anyone who is either directly involved in some historical rupture or who experiences its prolonged aftermath. Tellingly enough, Ankersmit eventually links sublime historical experience to trauma, to an affective experience that is characterized precisely by its afterness in relation to shattering past events and that radically challenge our representational capabilities.

Ankersmit defines the sublime as "the philosophical equivalent of the psychological notion of trauma" (Ankersmit 2005: 318), and it is relevant in the context of historical transformations when forgetting the old world order is "accompanied by feelings of a profound and irreparable loss, of cultural despair, and of hopeless disorientation" (Ibid.: 324). Emblematic examples include the French Revolution and the World Wars – dramatic and foundational events that have changed how people understand history. Trauma and the sublime overlap in a sense that in both cases "we have to make do with an experience of the world that is too terrible to fit within the matrix of how we 'normally' experience it" (Ibid.: 334), and thereby they both produce an epistemological crisis. Expanding on this, Ankersmit notes that trauma and

the sublime are simultaneously "extremely direct" and "extremely indirect", meaning that in experiencing them we are directly struck by a powerful sensation circumventing "the protective mediation of the cognitive and psychological apparatus", and we can speak of this encounter only indirectly because "we cannot face this directness" without a dissociation (Ibid.: 336). But can we still find the means to express sublime historical experience somehow? Jonathan Menezes in his article on Ankersmit's late philosophy of history suggests that to answer this question we need to keep in mind that Ankersmit is invested in paradoxical thinking: "he is looking for a language to undo language" (Menezes 2018: 59). Examining Ankersmit's book, we can identify some intriguing iterations of this idea, although they appear instead like remarks toward a more nuanced conceptualization, especially if we reflect on their potential conjunction with narrative representation. Now, as mentioned earlier, Ankersmit claims that literature makes experience speak; he is also aware that "language itself can be the source of the sublime," when it transgresses its own limits in the attempt to represent the unrepresentable: "Only language can bring us to a stage where we can see what we have lost by entering the Symbolic order and by being satisfied with the substitutes of the Real it offers" (Ankersmit 2005: 237). Hence, to move from experience to the text, we need "a kind of 'negative heuristics'" (Ibid.: 284), and this strategy calls for representing the presence of the past as if in absence. Transposed to narrative, it means to study those passages when the narrative pace slows down in describing the epiphanic realization that the present is heterochronic. In such passages, narrativity is weakened and the experience shines through language.

This point becomes clearer if we recall how the relationship between the sublime and representation was conceived before Ankersmit's contributions. French postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard memorably compared the Holocaust to an "earthquake [that] destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly" (1988: 56). The Holocaust here appears as a sublime rupture in the historical continuum illuminating the lacuna between the representation of the traumatic event and the event itself. Cultural historian Alon Confino rightfully remarks that there are also other instances in modern history such as the experience of Verdun or the expulsion of Germans from Eastern Prussia and Czechoslovakia at the end of the Second World War, that have been described by the participants as being beyond representation (Confino 2012: 80). In his 1984 essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", Lyotard indicates that sublime events will always remain hidden in artistic representation and that we can sense them only indirectly through negative presentation when the expression functions primarily as "the actualization of a figure potentially there in language" (1991: 101). Sublime historical experience, I believe, should be approached similarly – it

should be recognized by the ripple effect it causes on the surface of representation.[2] Ankersmit's own convincing analogy with trauma further supports this perspective. According to classic trauma theory, trauma in narrative is represented metonymically through "gaps, silences and fragmentations, symptoms of 'disremembering,' thus suggesting that it cannot be grasped straightforwardly (Arnold-de Simine 2018: 141). While in the case of Bankovskis and Šarotar, the narrativity is not destroyed, only impeded at times, there is still a sense of something unrepresentable at hand when the past and the present come together in an affective constellation. In other words, there is an uncertainty about the reference point of particular poetic descriptions, as if the narrators, for some reason, could not externalize the event itself. Simultaneously, the past event is experienced by the narrators as part of the present.[3] One could say that the sublime historical experience in their accounts is represented through deeply melancholic narration, a strategy worthy of its own conceptualization.

Melancholic narration embodies a specific relation to the past characteristic of the psychological understanding of melancholia as it is aptly defined by Dominick LaCapra: "the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed" (LaCapra 2001: 70). Here we encounter the same motif – the presence of the past – as in the idea of sublime historical experience, and this structural correspondence, to my mind, allows the viewing of melancholic narration as a net cast over an unrepresentable sensation. LaCapra elsewhere stresses also the importance of style and form when it comes to analyzing the representation of melancholically experienced past events (LaCapra 2013: 29). Following in this direction and acknowledging the nature of Bankovskis' and Šarotar's narratives, I want to emphasize the link between the melancholic perception of the past and the inner structure of poetic, meandering and occasionally epiphanic descriptions. Such descriptions of temporal and spatial configurations intensify one of the basic aspects of descriptions, which Mieke Bal defines as the process of slowing down narrative time to "better explore its fundamental heterogeneity" (Bal 2006: 97). A critical writer of

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2 This idea could be compared with Runia's view on presence, which, though, seems even closer to the case of trauma: "It can move you, but you can only tell from its wake that it has been there" (Runia 2014: 92).

3 Narrative theory has so far addressed sublime sensation of something that is at the same time present and absent in the form of cognitive sublime, or the state of bafflement in which "the experience of unknowing is textually induced, [while] the unknown itself is still with us when we close the book" (Abbott 2009: 132). Sublime historical experience in narrative is sensed in a similar fashion to this extratextual unknown with the difference that it is tied primarily to some haunting past phenomenon.

melancholic passages and thinker of presence is W. G. Sebald whose influence looms large within Bankovskis' and Šarotar's understanding of time. Sebald manages to overcome the linearity of time and to demonstrate the experience of the past as part of living through a storyworld; in his narrator's melancholic voyages "every moment of the past," to quote Carol Jacobs, "has the potential of opening out onto others of another time," thus evoking a strong feeling of vertigo (Jacobs 2015: 131). Bankovskis and Šarotar integrate this idea into their own descriptions of space as an uncanny sedimentation of time, thereby engaging with the sublime historical experience. I now turn to their respective novels to show how this is established through narrative form.

Photographic Connections

History has been the main interest of Pauls Bankovskis' fiction, from his first books, published in the mid-1990s, to his last novel, *The History of the World* (2020). Similarly to other postmodern writers, Bankovskis freely juxtaposes different past events, creating montage-like structures that disregard the rules of strict causality. History in his works, as one critic put it, resembles an illusion (Kuduma 2019: 125), which is established by loose or solely virtual plot connections and an intense fascination with networks, hyperreality, intertextuality, labyrinths, and modern visual media. Bankovskis seems particularly interested in the temporal dynamics of photography, wherein the merging of presence and absence acquires a truly perplexing quality. Damian Sutton has argued that photographs are transhistorical, meaning that they "always disrupt our sense of time and history since they make the remote event current or they make the present immediately historical" (Sutton 2009: 212–213). Consequently, photographic images can trigger melancholic attachments to the past. Bankovskis explored this essential aspect of photography earlier in his historical novel *Secrets* (2002), where he reproduced actual images in the manner of W. G. Sebald, and, more recently, in *18*, which incorporates photographic temporality as a structural principle. This second text combines two parallel storylines narrated by two different narrators: the first consists of a journal, written by a Latvian soldier who flees the army in 1917 amidst the chaos of the Russian Revolution and wanders by foot across Latvia, ruminating on such themes as space, time, and freedom. The second represents reflections on those same questions by an unnamed intellectual living in Latvia after the war in Ukraine has broken out, raising fear and anxiety in other former Soviet bloc countries as well (Bankovskis directly addresses this geopolitical context in the epilogue of his novel). Since there is no explicit connection between the two storylines, the coherence of Bankovskis' novel depends heavily on the reader's interpretation of specific episodes and observations which can be fully appreciated by recognizing their virtual relation to corresponding events in the other storyline as they pertain to historical experience.

This recognition takes place through old photographs, found by the contemporary narrator at the beginning of the novel and suggesting a possible presence of the past.

In his recent book, *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives,* Brian Richardson notes that double plot works face the problem of "how far apart the separate story strands are allowed to diverge and, once separated, how they can be effectively brought together as part of the same plot" (Richardson 2019: 65). Richardson then goes on to mention some already accomplished strategies for connecting two or more storylines, including the thematization of "this compositional drama" in the narrative itself, the dialectics of alternating perspectives, and the gradual joining of diverse consciousnesses to the main plotline (Ibid.: 66). Bankovskis' novel deals with the same challenges, but contrary to these more direct approaches, it relates the storylines based on thematic and poetic similarities. Or, more precisely, the connection is made by the reader at the end of the novel when he or she has worked through all the leitmotifs and repeating subjects and has noticed that photography in this text is far from just an object of melancholic descriptions, but that it actually might help to solve the double plot problem as defined by Richardson. In her reading of Proust's work, Mieke Bal discovers a photographic mechanism "at work in the cutting-out of details, in the conflictual dialectic between the near and the far, and in certain 'zoom' effects" (Bal 1997: 201). Meanwhile, Bankovskis, through his use of photography, goes even beyond focalization and employs it to construct narrative time. Specifically, the relationship between the two storylines, during particular epiphanic passages, can be seen as moving closer to each other in the same way the past and the present align in the interchronic moment of photographic depiction when, according to Ronald Kay, both temporal spheres "enter into a reciprocal relation of citation and become, on the basis of this relation, generally quotable" (Kay 2013: 129). Simply put, photography here calls for two-way projections in reading the double plot. On a philosophical level, this kind of appropriation of photography corresponds with the complex temporal structure of sublime historical experience, which, interestingly enough, has been discussed by Ankersmit in respect to Eugene Atget's uncanny photographs that retain an aura of the past (Ankersmit 2005: 182).[4] Ankersmit thus finds a connection between historical experience and visual sensation.

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4 Cf. Martin Jay's suggestion to think of sublime historical experience in terms of *studium* and *punctum*: Roland Barthes' distinction between coherent meaning and highly subjective and affective experience of an image "helps us to understand what Ankersmit is getting at in his advocacy of sublime historical experiences, those unusually intense, emotionally laden encounters with the past that refuse, like the *punctums* of photographs, to be contained in conventional explanatory or hermeneutic frames" (Jay 2018: 439). Coherent meaning can be extracted rather from analyzing factual information about the lost past.

Bankovskis' novel begins with an unnamed narrator, probably a version of the author himself, spending time at his country house, where he accidentally comes across an old camera that belonged to his grandfather and contains strange images. The narrator quickly recognizes that these images have been taken near his house. The first photograph represents "something that looked like a small white human figure, but it may have been just some optical illusion or technical defect" (Bankovskis 2017: 6). The next five photographs depict similar obscure shapes, described as "a tall person in a light-coloured dress," a blurry silhouette that "was clearly a human or human-like creature," and "something greyish and bulky" supposedly "looking our way" (Ibid.: 8). Finally, there is a short and grainy video fragment where "something flashed brightly in the centre of the frame, yet the source of light could not be discerned" (Ibid.: 9). This looking "our way," though being out of focus, could be interpreted as a gaze that comes from the past and intrudes into the present to capture the attention of the living. Later in the novel, after we have read a chapter on the army defector's experience, the contemporary narrator resumes telling his story about the found photographs, which he now revisits by carefully exploring the actual places they seem to portray. Crucially, these investigations are supplemented with an idea of space having its own memory and a deeply melancholic characterization of the photographic medium: portraits of dead relatives preserve not the lost people, "but the non-existence of these people, an unfillable void, a feeling of irreversible loss and the suspicion that we are not there, not in that time to which we would have wanted to return" (Ibid.: 91). The narrator is unable to reconstruct the photographer's viewpoints since they are now occupied by lime trees and oaks, concealing the origins of the disorienting images. On a philosophical level, this inability signifies the otherness of past experiences that nevertheless leave their traces in the present and can thus be described as sublime. The narrator then decides to take his own pictures with an automatic night camera. Still, the results happen to be equally confusing since they include a blurry silhouette, standing "[i]n the dark brushwood on the other side of the fence" (Ibid.: 106). Consequently, although the narrator himself is hesitant to draw daring conclusions, the reader might reasonably interpret that fuzzy shape as a ghost from the past who, in classical Derridian fashion, "exceeds the ontological oppositions between absence and presence, visible and invisible, living and dead" (Derrida 2002: 110), ultimately inviting one to ponder the survival of historical experience and its demands toward the present.

These passages must be read in conjunction with the novel's historical plotline. Toward the end of the work, the army defector, who had previously found no reason to fight for an independent Latvian state, but had still experienced some traumatic encounters during his wanderings, returns to Riga to witness the last days of

World War I. He attends the proclamation of the new republic and afterwards, walking through a completely dark park, experiences a spectral vision that transforms into an epiphany. He first sees "perhaps human figures, moving in the inky darkness," but soon they gain resolution and he notices that some of them are missing limbs and even heads, while others, who lack any visible wounds, "instead of eyes had black, empty sockets". "They were all my comrades," he finally cries out, "who had fallen at different times. These were men who had gone to fight and meet their death without knowing or hoping that this wonderful day for our people would arrive" (Bankovskis 2017: 146). Characteristic of sublime historical experience, the past here suddenly intrudes into the present and reduces the subject of this temporal confluence to just the sensation.[5] The narrator then realizes that he wants to assure the dead that "their deaths were not in vain," but there is no "speech that allows us to communicate with the past." Immediately after this epiphanic moment, during which the pace of the narrative slows down, dissolving linear time "into an eternal present" (Gingrich 2018: 367), the narrator's ghastly vision is "interrupted by a flash of blinding light" (147). Considering that a similar flash in space occurred at the beginning of the novel, I contend that this particular episode signifies that the narrator's experience is captured as if in a photograph and thereby becomes potentially meaningful to future generations. This would allow the reader to view the ghost of the contemporary plotline as the army defector who not only brings together both narrative strands but also symbolizes the value of independence during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a series of atrocities that, as Bankovskis asserts in the epilogue of his novel, reanimate traumatic past experiences.

The appearance of the flash, of course, brings to mind Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, which in this context allows us to recognize the deeper implications of Bankovskis' text. Benjamin wrote:

> The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again… For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image. (Benjamin 2006: 391)

The use of the image metaphor emphasizes the incompleteness of the past and, consequently, its fundamental openness to new constellations of chronologically separated moments in time. As noted by Sigrid Weigel, "[t]he flash-like image – a sudden, ephemeral coming-to-appearance – becomes a mode of cognition that operates outside of the linear temporality of historiography and narration"

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5 Ankersmit writes of the sublime feeling "that we *are* our feelings and moods," when we become overwhelmed by affects which originate in the past (Ankersmit 2005: 225).

(Weigel 2015: 348). In the above-quoted passage from Bankovskis' novel, the epiphanic image of dead soldiers functions like a rupture through which the past returns to the present, and, on a broader level, it introduces a specific version of historical thinking that deals with the past as a virtually corresponding time that creates a sublime effect when actualized.

The Singing Past Even more than in Bankovskis' novel, the experience of place in Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama* involves the disintegration of linear historical time through spectral and melancholic encounters with the past that seem uncanny and often unspeakable. Šarotar's work is hugely influenced by W. G. Sebald in that it too includes long and meandering paragraphs, black and white photographs without captions, and a narrator who travels around Europe listening to the stories of others that are related to some traumatic past reality, which, at crucial points in the narrative, is felt as ever-present. Similar to Sebald's fiction, the place in Šarotar's novel resembles an epiphanic event; it is "an upsurge, a visitational taking-place rending the surface of a temporally and spatially complex *milieu* composed of exiles, crossings, digressions" (Wylie 2007: 181), and this quality makes it into a potential realm of sublime historical experience. *Panorama* begins with an unnamed narrator, whom the reader will probably see as an alter ego of the author himself, traveling along the Western coast of Ireland, around the town of Galway, where he is accompanied by an Albanian immigrant named Gjini. As Gjini takes the narrator on a tour, they immerse themselves in reflections on loss, time, migration, language, the ocean, love, and war. Still, it is exile that is the primary source of Gjini's melancholy, which, as in Bankovskis' novel, encloses a void:

> …the immigrant, this eternal guardian but also suppresser of his own language, knows that the loss, the void, the dissolved malt of forgetting within it, which he tenaciously envelops and fills with learning, which is the only vaccine against loneliness, despair and madness, is nevertheless irreplaceable, painful and incurable. (Šarotar 2016: 49)

However, melancholy in Šarotar's text is more than just a theme, as it is elevated to the level of narration, the dreamlike flow of the novel, thus providing the necessary structural framework to give the reader a feeling that the past never entirely vanishes.

The proclivity for melancholic narration is yet another feature that Šarotar borrows from Sebald, who, as Ann Rigney notes, slows down his narrative to allow the reader to sense better "the realities depicted in the literary work" (Rigney 2019: 133). Šarotar accomplishes this effect, much like Sebald, through uninterrupted paragraphs that often read more like essays or travelogues than a traditional fictional

narrative and include deeply poetic descriptions which, although serving such conventional functions as creating "the illusion of authenticity or verisimilitude of the narrated story" (Nünning 2007: 113) and establishing the mood of the narrative, also leave something unsaid, something that, as the reader assumes, is related to resounding past events. The connection between slowness and heterogeneous time has been previously acknowledged by Lutz Koepnick, who views it as a contemporary cultural tendency. Because historical time, after the end of modernity, as argued by many presentist thinkers, is not rushing toward the future anymore, the individuals and collectives "live in multiple times and spatial orders at once, in competing temporal frameworks where time often seems to push and pull in various directions simultaneously" (Koepnick 2014: 3), as it also happens in Šarotar's novel when he aligns the slow rhythms of nature and memory with meandering narration to signify a haunting loss. Gjini's stories frequently mention his friend Jane, whom he has lost for an unspecified reason, and who appears to be the most melancholic person in the whole narrative. Consider the passage in which Gjini recalls the words of Jane, who returns in his stories, making them unsettled:

> At times, when an invisible breeze suddenly shifts the drawing paper on my worktable in front of an open window, or a random gust of wind turns a page in an open book during my afternoon drowsiness, it occurs to me that this same wind will eventually, after its long journey across the Atlantic, touch land again right here, beneath these cliffs, Jane said; how I wish sometimes I could sit for hours and hours — which, in fact, are coursing through me, inaudibly — sit motionless in front of an empty sheet of paper all day until night comes, and travel with the Gulf Stream, walking on the waves, as in some tangible, true dream, where in the end I touch these cliffs and shatter on the rocks in the waves, in the roar and thunder, which perhaps I am actually remembering, or maybe this earliest memory, the source of my inspiration, is something I merely invented, pictured in my imagination, so I would have somewhere to go, an escape from my own oblivion, Jane told me, Gjini said as we slowly climbed the steep, windswept plain. (Šarotar 2016: 80)

Neither Gjini nor the narrator is sure of the precise source of Jane's sadness. However, it nevertheless leaves a mark on the entire narrative as they travel through Ireland, whose "people are still surrounded by ghosts and fantastic creatures, as if the country was still waking up from sleep, from a midnight nightmare" (Ibid.: 103). Eventually, this perception of place evolves into a more comprehensive understanding of time as a multifaceted reality intertwined with the traumatic events of the twentieth century. This is evident when Gjini recounts the time Jane spent in Flanders, where she visited the sites of World War I atrocities and experienced profound historical sensations. She describes Flanders as a "gorgeous landscape stained with the blood of the innocent." It is there, in this eerie environment, that "something was speaking to me, whispering from the land, although I had never imagined – but now

I know – that this, too, somewhere here on this plain, could be my home" (Ibid.: 120). By saying that this place could be her home, Jane presents herself as melancholically attached to the traumatic past, which for a moment completely absorbs her existence:

> I wanted to touch the North Sea, she said, to cool off, drown, disappear even, Jane said; I left the bike in the high dunes the moment I saw the sea in the distance, the moment I heard the waves, and ran through the tall, dry grass to the wide and sandy shore, which went on for miles, she said; it was a lonely place, a terrible wind was blowing, the sea was grey, low, with even waves; I sensed it coming slowly towards me, I knew the tide was coming in. I hid in the dunes, lay in the sparse clumps of dry grass and curled into a ball, she said. All was quiet again; I am not here, I have not been born yet, I thought, Jane said. I'm not sure but it was as if the wind carried it in from the sea; it hovered in the silence, somewhere deep inside me, not a song, but the singing of angels; the dead were still singing, Jane said, Gjini said; I was hearing again the exalted, hope-filled singing of the boys, still almost children, who were lying in the cold, muddy trenches, Jane said; it was Christmas Eve in the year 1914, the first year of the terrible war was passing… (Ibid.: 121)

Characteristic of sublime historical experience, as it is defined by Ankersmit, the subject in the quoted passage is dissociated from herself to the point of disappearing, signaled here clearly by the words "I am not here, I have not been born yet". In sublime historical experience, the haunted subject dies "a partial death" since "all that we are is then reduced to just this feeling of experience" (Ankersmit 2005: 228). In Jane's description, the sublime historical experience seems mystical, as if she indeed was visited by the ghosts of the fallen soldiers. In this sense, corresponding to Ankersmit's idea that sublime historical experience exists beyond the realm of truth (Ibid.: 233), it illuminates the role of poetic imagination in capturing such fleeting and epiphanic moments that would otherwise remain entirely unnarratable. A similar technique is used by Sebald in his novel *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) when his narrator visits the place of the Battle of Waterloo and is affected by the past: "Only when I had shut my eyes, I well recall, did I see a cannonball smash through a row of poplars at an angle, sending the green branches flying in tatters" (Sebald 1998: 126). However, in the passage where Jane lies in the dunes, the presence of the past seems even more overwhelming and temporally more complex than in Sebald's narrative. More generally, the poetic description of Jane's experience speaks to the fact that we usually need figurative and metaphorical language to communicate unruly experiences of time, including sublime historical experiences, especially given Ankersmit's argument that they can be expressed only indirectly.

Conclusion

The departure point for this article was the tension between sublime historical experience, as defined by Ankersmit as a combination of loss and love in our relationship with the past, and narrative means, which supposedly filter out experience. Despite this, one could say that Ankersmit has pointed out that, if anywhere, it is in literature and art that we can gain a sense of the sublime historical experience. Since his book is concerned more with the historian's access to the past and the critique of textualism in historiography, he did not specify what kind of literary narrative could resonate with the subjective experience of being reduced to one's feelings and moods triggered by some past reality. Still, Ankersmit noted that to capture this experience, we need language that is aware of its own limits in the face of an overwhelming sensation. In my attempt to supplement Ankersmit's idea with a more nuanced understanding of literature, I suggest that slow narration, which includes particular epiphanic and melancholy-inducing episodes, enables us to approach the sublime character of history more closely. As I have demonstrated through my readings of Bankovskis and Šarotar, the presence of the past as a theme can be effectively supported and made more tangible by describing ghostly apparitions, which entail a responsibility toward the dead, and the melancholic incorporation of past victims. I have demonstrated a direct correlation between these temporally complex phenomena and the dreamlike flow of the narrative; that is, the slowing down of narrative pace contributes to our understanding of heterogeneous time, which has become a primary characteristic of contemporary cultural experience.

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