

**"PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF":  
SALVATION THROUGH ART IN HOMEL'S  
*THE SPEAKING CURE***

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**Abstract.** *The paper will explore various forms of art perceived by the narrator of Homel's novel The Speaking Cure. The setting of the novel is Belgrade in the turbulent 90s where seemingly there was no room for art. However, an acute observer, a Canadian experiencing the times from a more objective point of view, discovers a whole range of artistic forms, from surrogate to fine art, in different layers of the society. The paper will focus on them as the means of self-expression, survival and salvation following the main protagonist, a psychologist who resorts to literature in an attempt to deal with the reality.*

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In her review of Maggie Helwig's novel about the massacres in East Timor *Where She Was Standing*, Susan Gingell reminds us that "the last part of the twentieth century is a horror story of multiple strands – the disappeared of Argentina, the genocides of Rwanda and Bosnia, the torture chambers of any number of repressive regimes..." (Gingell, 148) However true, this account is faulty for not being distinctive of the quoted period. It is more likely that all periods of human history represent an endless horror story in instalments, as recognised by poets:

There are no "New Wars," only episodes  
Of that same crude, ancestral fever. (Heighton, 55)

Some episodes, such as the war in Vietnam, took many years to read through, some were very short, like the chapter on the Gulf War. The end of the twentieth century was marked by a three-month bombing of a European country, the twenty-first began by the 2002 war in Afghanistan and the still going on war in Iraq of 2003.

On the other hand, one must agree with Susan Fisher that "war, which is destructive of so much else, is strangely fertile for literature." (Fisher, 198) This certainly applies to the two world wars of the twentieth century which produced the war book boom, especially after WW1.<sup>1</sup> As our interest in wars has recently been systematically replaced by a growing interest in terrorist attacks, so has accompanying literature flourished. Fisher informs us that only one literary journal received more than 12,000 poems lamenting September 11<sup>th</sup> in the three weeks following the monstrous event. This clearly contradicts Adorno's point that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Quite the opposite seems to be closer to the truth as is recognised, again, by the poets such as Atwood. Though the world is a place "where the word *why* shrivels and empties itself", she still urges:

The razor across the eyeball  
Is a detail from an old film.  
It is also a truth.  
Witness is what you must bear. (Atwood, 357)

It is for this reason, most probably, that a Canadian author, David Homel, took an interest in what was going on in Yugoslavia in the 90s and wrote a novel set against the backdrop of political, social and moral break-up. The plot proves the words of one of the characters, Milos Nedic, who says: "Fact is stranger than fiction." (301) It may be a prose reworking of the lines by Atwood quoted above in which a horror scene from a work of art only faintly mirrors even more gruesome scenes from the real life "you cannot imagine". The narrator, Aleksandar Jovic, is trapped deep in such a reality, rendered passive and helpless by it, with only one thought that occasionally flickers through the stupor of alcohol and drugs: "I was badly in need of saving." (316) Salvation indeed comes, but from the quarters least expected. After briefly surveying the relationship between art and science, the present paper will explore various artistic forms which in *The Speaking Cure* represent the means of self-expression, survival or salvation following the failure of science.

It may be curious that in our modern times essential help is offered by art when it is customary and even axiomatic that one turns to science for relief of any sort. The last period when science was very much integrated with the culture, and therefore art, of its age were the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> A century and a half later, in his study *Science in Culture*, Cannon illustrates "the fundamental difference in the role of science between early Victorian times and our own day." (qtd. in Chapple, 144) Science was for

<sup>1</sup> In his article "The Soldier as Novelist: Literature, History, and the Great War", Jonathan Vance gives a very informative survey of Canada's participation in WW1 from the standpoint of soldiers turned authors. Regarding Canadian literature, an even more interesting article in the issue of *Canadian Literature* dedicated to Literature & War is "The Study of War" by Susan Fisher who discusses the fact that Canadian students are obviously (since war literature is not represented in their syllabi) no longer expected to learn about the nation's wars through the medium of literature. Fisher deplores this absence believing that war literature can install certain values, such as to teach students to become better Canadians, "more committed to maintaining civil order, more ready to contribute to the common good, more determined to preserve our national patrimony... to cherish peace and quiet life, and to forget neither the men and women who died nor the human folly that caused their deaths." (Fisher, 14)

<sup>2</sup> In his remarkable study, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Chapple traces the relationship between science and literature in five systematically organized chapters in which he illustrates current scientific ideas quoting excerpts from works of art. He also informs us that the very first use of the word *scientist* cited in the Oxford English Dictionary was in 1840! It seems that the beginning of the dissociation between science and literature is also marked by the same date.

them the norm of truth equally present in literature while for us it stands for power or, at best, progressive knowledge that is superior to creative writing. For an educated Victorian, science, among many other things, represented "the constant desire to find a basic unity of forces and dynamic laws that reconcile or transcend opposites." (Chapple, 4) War campaigns mentioned above indicate the failure of science in this respect. In the case of *The Speaking Cure*, the war in the background proves that the opposites are neither reconciled nor transcended but rather fostered: that war is a failure of reason. Thus in the novel science is shown as either ineffective or abusive.

It is significant that all the main protagonists but one are scientists. Aleksandar Jovic is a clinical psychologist, his lover Tania is a forensic pathologist, his wife Zlata a university teacher of psychology and her lover Popovic a researcher. They should be the pillars of the modern society, examining the minds of the living and the bodies of the dead to find cures for mental and carnal ailments. Yet they all fail. Jovic is a psychologist as much in need of help as many of his patients. His family life is full of tension due to unresolved problems: defective relationship with his son suffering from a kidney disease, and fits of jealousy towards his voluptuous red-headed wife. Mild by nature and eager to be a good father and a reliable husband, he is constantly frustrated by his failures to please those he loves most. Nor is he more successful at work. As a professional, Jovic is not respected by his colleagues who appreciate only his patience but deride his persistent and out-moded personal involvement with the problems of his patients. He also breaks the law by keeping private practice after his working hours and charging his patients for it. Worst of all, he breaks the rule of professional ethics, falls prey to counter-transference and starts a love affair with a female patient who turned to him for help. All these prove that Jovic dismally failed as a clinical psychologist though, on the other hand, they may be interpreted as signs of his unextinguished humanity. He is a man in whom emotions are not critically suppressed by practical reason.

On the other hand, his wife Zlata seems to be less than human in her lack of emotions. The only human contact she needs is in the form of sex and he compares her to a hugging machine, a mechanical device designed for autistic people. Being incomplete in this sense, she can hardly make a very good university teacher who is supposed to act as a role model. Furthermore, she is well placed in the Faculty which implies that she is too close to government policy and therefore not autonomous as a scientist. The fact that Dr Popovic is her lover only amplifies her shortcomings. In the guise of a scientist, he is a regime man who recruits for the psychological division of the government's military machine. His research efforts have become absurd since he wants to devise a mathematical model for mental disorder which must mean the death of science. As for his own psychological profile, it is telling enough that he neglects his own children after divorcing their mother.

Finally, there is the case of Tania Komadina, a forensic pathologist who is probably forced by the authorities to manipulate the dead bodies at the front and make them tell a different story, more suitable to the regime. This is a really far cry from science as merely ineffectual or indifferent. She actively abuses science violating its sanctity by violating the bodies of the victims. Likewise, Jovic is turned into an unknowing spy whose telephone therapies are bugged for the purpose of detecting and punishing complaining soldiers. He is soon made to realise that he and Tania "are a man and woman of science whose knowledge had been made to serve a corrupt and murderous regime" (41) and his resentment is bitter:

But now science was dead. The State had killed it. Science had been hijacked by Milan Popovic. The murder of science was worse than all the individual murders the regime had presided over, or let occur. And me? I was an accessory to the crime. (59)

At this point, Jovic becomes representative of an average citizen in all parts of Yugoslavia who is involved in deception and fraud in the turbulent 90s. That is the danger inherent in all non-democratic, totalitarian states, where "war ravages the souls of all who find themselves caught in its grasp."<sup>3</sup> History in such circumstances inevitably compromises our lives and causes the feelings of impotence and frustration. A possible way out of political confusion lies along the path of creativity. Adrienne Rich recognises the importance of the interplay between poetry, science, and politics referring to the present day United States:

This impulse to enter, with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world, is poetic at its root as surely as it is political at its root. Poetry and politics both have to do with description and with power. And so, of course, does science. We might hope to find the three activities – poetry, science, politics – triangulated, with extraordinary electrical exchanges moving from each to each and through our lives. Instead, over centuries, they have become separated – poetry from politics, poetic naming from scientific naming, an ostensibly "neutral" science from political questions, "rational" science from lyrical poetry – nowhere more than in the United States over the past fifty years. (Rich, 6-7)

If politics and science so dismally fail the modern man, being severed from one another or misaligned, the only option remaining to him is the one of creativity, whether of love, religion or art. It seems that Homel opts for art treating it as the only possible response to barbarism. Indeed, Jovic is "free of religion" (33), he never learned to believe thanks to his father, "a born socialist" (34), and he is likewise denied true love, the act of mutual sharing, communication, even with his lover, the manipulative Tania, though he believed that "Love is our revenge." (98) Art, therefore, appears to be the last resort, providing an outlet for frustrated emotions at the least, or endowing life with meaning and saving man at best. There seems to be evidence for these different roles of art on every page of *The Speaking Cure*.

The book opens with a rather sarcastic view of art. It is war time, one of those periods which are "now widely acknowledged historical traumas whose legacies remain ongoing and unresolved" (Briggs, 171), like the Vietnam War. The massive trauma suffered by the people finds its expression in an endeavour which cannot be formally classified as art. Jovic, as the narrator of *The Speaking Cure*, describes it as "the fine art of getting through the day" (2) implying the wide-spread traumatic effect of the war. Everybody has to practice "the art of living with the damage done" (2), since nobody is spared some kind of physical or psychological injury. This sarcastic reduction of art to the skill of making ends meet and preserving one's sanity testifies to the toughness of the times which de-

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<sup>3</sup> Erna Paris in a review of Maggie Helwig's second and highly acclaimed novel *Between Mountains* which also deals with the break up of Yugoslavia, now in a Bosnian setting.

mand another skill that Jovic calls "the art of helping people." (90) He refers to psychology as his own profession thus linking it with art and giving us a hint that he will turn a true artist in the end.

The artistic potential is present in everyone, making Jovic representative of the whole nation. The forms of expression, though, vary a lot. The range starts from the surrogate art of polishing one's nails: "Your hands are works of art," (271) Jovic tells a secretary, or fetishising clothes: "Zlata treated every article of clothing as if it were a work of art" (262) to turning oneself into an attractive work of body art "in the passive-aggressive art of seduction." (269) These examples illustrate the misused artistic potential in case of women who devote time and energy to futile activities and objects in an unconscious attempt to deny the harsh reality. For them, everything is all right with the world so that make-up and clothes matter now as much as before. This form of surrogate art is a sort of survival technique, a way of coping with the unsatisfactory reality.

Then, along the same lines, there is the art of interior decoration. Jovic himself is very careful in decorating his office, placing "the tasteful art" (2), an icon of Saint George laying low the dragon, on the wall in order to create a reposing surrounding for his patients. His friends, Marko and Maja, turn their small apartment into a comfortable museum, decorated with innumerable photos from their holidays, blow-ups of the covers of Marco's books, and fat cushions on the floor. The place is their sanctuary which protects them from the hell outside, it is their family haven to which they retreat every evening to find peace and love. Tania's place, on the other hand, is deprived of the fine touch of the "feminine arts," (94) choked with piled furniture and dirty clothes, reflecting the state of mind of its owner: a woman who is morally confused, a victim who becomes a criminal. In her life there is no room for ennobling art, she sees only stark reality, and exploits its potentials by harvesting body organs from prisoners, both dead and alive. Therefore it is not surprising that she is as far removed from any art as possible.

Another form of art practised by ordinary citizens, though illegally in the streets, are graffiti<sup>4</sup>. Walking the streets of Belgrade, the narrator perceives various witticisms inscribed on convenient surfaces all over the town. They belong to political art as an expression of dissatisfaction or criticism. One of them says: "War – what is it good for?" (18) The question is written on a church wall, probably to juxtapose religious to political solutions, and it indicates the depth of public anxiety. The wisdom of common people seems to be superior to the expertise of corrupted politicians, so that such questions certainly appeared in all parts of the country. Similar in content is the statement "There are no good parties any more" (49) which is a reflection of disillusionment and disappointment with the political situation at that moment. The break-up of the Communist Party did not immediately release productive political options so that the future was perplexing and worrying. Not to mention the other, more common, reading of this graffiti which laments the lack of fun in those war years.

Besides being expressions of uneasiness, graffiti sometimes offered comic relief. "Let me out of here" (26) was written on a dumpster which was by everybody understood to

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<sup>4</sup> The scope of this paper does not allow any elaboration on graffiti art which dates back from the time of ancient sepulchres and is nowadays recognized as an urban art form, though usually illegal. Theories and use of graffiti by avant-garde artists has a history dating at least to the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism in 1961. The Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 is the latest anti graffiti legislation to be passed in Britain which only testifies to its presence and vitality. Significantly, a graffiti artist is known as a 'writer,' another proof of its closeness to 'serious' art.

symbolise the country itself. It is a fact that a great number, especially of young people, did leave the country during those precarious years of brain drain in search of political stability and personal happiness. The graffiti emphasises the need to leave and the underlying difficulties related to it. Another graffiti is also witty in its combination of practical everyday life activities and geo-political awareness: "Can I paint my apartment, or are you going to bomb us?"(186) The comic element is a reflection of the resiliency which the people developed trying to manage the unfavourable circumstances. Likewise, this period was marked by hilarious jokes, featuring not only black humour, but the healthy one as well despite the war context, helping people preserve their sanity and spiritual vitality. A more intellectual strain of graffiti art may be illustrated with this graffiti question: "Why didn't you stay home, Christopher Columbus?"(186) suggesting that the war conflict was caused by the interference of the States and therefore would have never appeared if it had not been for Columbus and his explorations. Finally, though political art, some of the graffiti manifest deep wisdom that is not related to daily politics. "Death only hurts a little"(95) is ironically written on a tank. There may be more painful ways to die than to be squashed alive under tank tracks but it takes an effort to imagine them. However, death itself is not the most painful experience that can hurt man. By contrast, it must be life there and then, that was worse than death, and this graffiti is very rich in its existential and literary implications. The practising of graffiti art is, therefore, a form of self-expression giving vent to the tension caused by either defiance or despair, or both, for the purpose of survival.

As political art, graffiti have always been used as a form of fight with opponents. Murals, on the other hand, are surprising in war-time since painting artistic images on wall surfaces takes much more time, and is consequently more dangerous than inscribing short messages. However, a mural does appear in *The Speaking Cure* and on a wall of a mental asylum of all places. It is made by the inmates who refuse to leave the hospital after it has been hit and partly destroyed. The mural is a combination of verbal and pictorial messages in an originally artistic manner. The letters of the words "Here, we are punished only by God!" (186) are composed of a myriad of tiny landscapes and figures: "Men with their uniforms on fire, a burning pavilion that could have been this one, creatures that were half vegetable and half animal and that would have given Hieronymous Bosch a run for his money, faces composed of faces, species of fish that had not been discovered yet, a man ploughing a field as fields had been ploughed before the invention of the tractor, except that the crop being harvested were human heads with scalps torn away and the minds exposed."(187) These images are not expressive of the sick minds that made them but rather of the sick times that produce madness. In her essay, *The Muralist*, Adrienne Rich refers to Marx's definition of "human power" as "the power to engender, to create, to bring forth fuller life" (Rich, 49) and in this sense "the crazies" demonstrate exceptional human power against the backdrop of war caused by "disintegrative, stifling, finally brutalizing" (Rich, 49) politics. They turn a ruin into a work of art proving that creative forces are ultimately more powerful than the forces of destruction. Homel puts a masterly touch by challenging the verbal part of their message: the soldiers come and rape one of the women, so it is not God only that punishes them, nor is madness an adequate safeguard against the cruelties of this world.

The artistic truth therefore remains in the strange images depicted on the mural since they are an expression of "the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self" as Trot-

sky says (qtd. in Rich, 45).<sup>5</sup> Without drugs to dumb them and without orders to inhibit their art therapy, their latent creativity is released to the fullest. Though all but abandoned by the society, they have faith in themselves and their own vision, to the surprise of a mental health professional like Jovic:

I stopped. Suddenly I saw what the mural was all about. The entire war was portrayed on it from the asylum's point of view. The tanks with predatory smiles, the civilians naked with zippers up their middles so the soldiers could open them up and remove or implant whatever they wished, battle scenes that showed soldiers with wheels instead of feet, as if they were Trojan horses or children's pull-toys.

Psychedelic, surrealist, phantasmagoric images are artistically mirroring the reality to the point of the removal of body organs, which Tania does. And this mural, as political art, is all the more valuable in artistic terms for being engaged.

The artistic response of the psychic patients is spontaneous and almost irrational since the asylum is deep in the country, far from the centres of power, and irrelevant in the constellation of war. Jovic's reaction to the brutalisation by war is exactly its opposite. He is an educated citizen of the capital, angry at the government for making its people live in hell, and resolute to fight back. The patriotic reasons come second, his personal suffering being the key motive for writing a psychiatric account of his former patient and present lover, Tania Komadina. His intention is to write a case history and to fight with science against the regime that kills true science along with many other things. Jovic realises there is "no vacation from responsibility,"(67) for being passive or neutral equally implies responsibility as active participation. Greenblatt is explicit on this issue of agency in his elaboration of the term "new historicism":

New historicism, by contrast /to the belief that processes are at work in history that man can do little to alter/, eschews the use of the term "man"; interest lies not in the abstract universal but in particular, contingent cases, the selves fashioned and acting according to the generative rules and conflicts of a given culture. And these selves, conditioned by the expectations of their class, gender, religion, race and national identity, are constantly effecting changes in the course of history. Indeed if there is any inevitability in the new historicism's vision of history it is this insistence on agency, for even inaction or extreme marginality is understood to possess meaning and therefore to imply intention. Every form of behaviour, in this view, is a strategy: taking up arms or taking flight is a significant social action, but so is staying put, minding one's business, turning one's face to the wall. Agency is virtually inescapable. (Greenblatt, 164)

Not taking an active part in politics or academic life, Jovic believes, will spare him the trouble and hazard in the perilous times. However, he is good enough a psychologist to know that abdication of responsibility entails a denial of reality, equally dangerous in

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<sup>5</sup> The quotation in full: "The struggle for revolutionary ideas in art must begin once again with the struggle for artistic truth, not in terms of any single school, but in terms of the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self. Without this there is no art. 'You shall not lie' – that is the formula of salvation." (Rich, 44-45)

itself, so that he tacitly adopts Greenblatt's view on inevitable agency and performs his own "version of heroism." (154)

On the other hand, it is impossible to predict the consequences of his rational and deliberate act of writing a scientific paper that indirectly accuses the regime. They appear to be twofold. His ambition was to publish it in the *Journal of Psychiatric Studies*, but the editor refuses it as pornography, science fiction, fantasy, literature, all in all as lies. It becomes clear that he objects to the content of the case history which, in his interpretation, tells blatant lies about the government and its political strategies. The editor is one of those who refuse to act believing they hold a neutral position while they actually support the official policies, according to Greenblatt. The work is nevertheless published, but as fiction, not fact, on which the new publisher insists. His experience tells him that though the society needs the book, regardless of its being fact or fiction, it is still better to be on the safe side and proclaim it fiction with all necessary disclaimers. This is of no help and the book is banned and withdrawn immediately after publication, the author is arrested and interrogated, left jobless, his family disrupted and he psychologically wrecked. His scientific work is treated as a political pamphlet and Jovic unexpectedly suffers as an individual for opposing and subverting the political option of the government, though he believed he was extremely marginal.

The other unforeseen and much more favourable effect of his small-scale revenge on the system is in relation to the interplay between an individual and the society. According to Adrienne Rich and the theorists of socialism, the artist has to be a responsive and responsible member of the society, and *The Speaking Cure* delineates the evolvement of an artist. Jovic is far from a representative specimen of his nation, being fearful of people in power (Popovic, Nedic, Paskaljevic, his interrogator...), apprehensive of changes (leaving the country), unwilling to take risks (only one child, the asylum episode, the bookshop scene), puzzled by women (Zlata, Tania, the Petitioner's wife), weak and malfunctioning. He is clearly an ineffectual male, manipulated by all the people around him, but he is nevertheless responsive in the sense of perceiving and understanding the social reality, and responsible in the sense of reacting by writing about it. Rich clarifies this point:

To say that a poet is responsive, responsible – what can that mean? To me it means that she or he is free to become artistically most complex, serious, and integrated when most aware of the great questions of her, of his, own time. When the mind of the maker is stretched to the fullest by the demands of the time – not fads, vogues, cliques, chic, propaganda, but the deep messages of crisis, hope, despair, vision, the anonymous voices, that pulse through a human community as signs of imbalance, sickness, regeneration pulse through a human body. (51)

Almost despite himself, Jovic grows into an artist whose being becomes a resonator for social vibrations, and his mind capable of creating a valuable work of art. This is how science turns into art, *A Case History of Tania K.* changes into *The Trash Can Chronicles*, fact transforms into fiction, a psychologist becomes a dissident writer. His unflattering personal traits fade when confronted with his creative output and gradually the book acquires existential significance for him as "a token of my own existence." (273) In prison he holds on to the only remaining copy of his book realising it may be all that stands between him and non-existence. His personal response to the new horizons of



creative writing along with the government's repressive measures against the work and its author confirm the truthfulness of the bitter joke Jovic once made: "It proves that literature still matters."(235) The novel does matter, and not only in the abstract sense of offering spiritual cure, but also in the most pragmatic sense as illustrated by *The Speaking Cure*. One copy reaches the Western Media through the sympathetic people from PEN, Amnesty International or a similar organisation, Jovic is classified as an official dissident writer, and smuggled out of the country off to Canada and safety.

His case raises the question of the fate of art in politically unstable countries. On one hand, "Art is dangerous,"(210), "Art makes trouble for the artist,"(216) "It makes you stand out from the crowd,"(231) the artist is "A propagandist for the enemy. A saboteur of the Army. A NATO mercenary. Some guy who libelled the government. An ungrateful squealer."(289) On the other hand, art also stands for salvation as anticipated by one of the characters, Radovan Karadzic: "The only way you can get out of the mess you're in is to be considered a writer, with a writer's crimes."(267) That is exactly what happens. Following the dictum "Do or die"(327) Jovic saves himself spiritually by writing but risks his life only to be physically saved by his own art.

The presence of literature in *The Speaking Cure* is prominent and intentional. Homel mentions more than a dozen works of fiction including *Lord of the Flies*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *War and Peace*. His generals ask for novels at the war front, Nedic the hitman reads Emily Dickinson, books are published, and they matter. The words: "War isn't just hell, it's poetry"(212) refer back to the idea from the beginning of this essay, about war and literature that is produced by it. Written during the war or in its aftermath, this essentially anti-war literature is of crucial significance, for it bears witness to what must not be forgotten. To borrow the words of Pat Barker from her novel *Another World*, "you should go to the past, looking not for messages or warnings, but simply to be humbled by the weight of human experience that has preceded the brief flicker of your own days." (qtd. in Fisher, 204).

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**"DOKTORE, IZLEČI SE":  
UMETNOST KAO SPAS U HOMELOVOM ROMANU  
*THE SPEAKING CURE***

**Vesna Lopičić**

*Ovaj rad proučava različite umetničke forme koje uočava pripovedač Homelovog romana *The Speaking Cure*. Radnja romana se događa u Beogradu tokom burnih devedesetih godina kada je izgledalo da za umetnost nema prostora. Međutim, jedan pažljivi posmatrač, Kanadjanin koji taj period doživljava sa relativno objektivne tačke posmatranja, otkriva čitav niz umetničkih formi, od surogata umetnosti do lepih umetnosti, nastalih u različitim slojevima društva. Rad će se usredsrediti na njih kao načine samoiskazivanja, opstajanja i spasenja, prateći glavnog junaka, psihologa koji pribegava umetnosti u pokušaju da se nosi sa stvarnošću.*