

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Mathias Énard

Zone

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Mathias Énard's novel *The Zone* is written as the stream of consciousness of Francis Servain Mirković, a Frenchman of Croatian origin who, after a career in the secret service, takes confidential documents to the Vatican, later assuming the new identity of Yvan Deroy, a school friend who ended up in a mental institution, and continues his life with the Russian painter Alexandra.

On the train from Paris to Rome, Francis Servain Mirković recalls the cases he worked on, now listed in his bag as documentation of various wars and their participants in the 20th century and the activities of the secret services. Francis gained his war experience fighting in Croatia in the 1990s around Osijek, and later, in the secret service, he was indirectly connected to many conflicts in the area he calls the Zone. This framework narrative includes a short story by the fictional author Rafael Kahlo, which Francis reads during the train journey. The story takes place during the Lebanese Civil War with Palestinian fighters as characters. At its centre is the fighter Intissar, who is trying to reach the body of her fallen partner Marwan after his death under unexplained circumstances. This story is established as a parallel to the main narrative, enabling the protagonist to reflect on and comment on his own role in the text on a meta-level, and also to assume the role of the reader.

The autodiegetic narrator identifies two possible locations within the space he refers to as the Zone. Firstly, in strictly geographical terms, it could be the Mediterranean region, stretching from Spain through Lebanon to Morocco, where the novel is set. This is a geographically defined area whose centre is emptied, giving it the shape of a ring. In some respects, the novel itself mirrors this structure, bringing together war stories and experiences from each Mediterranean country within the protagonist's consciousness. In this way, we also encounter another possible interpretation of the Zone, understood more abstractly as a war zone. All the stories and fragments are linked by the wars that occurred in each Mediterranean country, whether the Spanish Civil War, the Algerian War of Independence, or the Lebanese Civil War.

This is why the politics of Énard's novel are found precisely in the abyss at its centre, which constantly eludes the reader. This is evident in the metastory of Palestinian fighters in Lebanon, which appears as a gap in the main narrative. These fighters are the result of cracks that have emerged from attempts to connect disjointed stories about many wars. The narrator tries to fill these gaps with the text he reads, which re-thematizes war. In doing so, he splits himself into two roles: one that presents the story to the reader of the novel *Zone*, and one that is himself the reader of the mise-en-abyme story, reading it alongside the novel's reader.

The destructive nature of war has a devastating effect on Francis and his storytelling ability. He tries to compensate for this by introducing additional war stories and attempts to overcome his inability to narrate with a new story that will further disable him. In these circumstances, the novel proves to be a literary genre capable of connecting and unifying a war story that has an abyss at its centre and seeks to fill it with similar war stories. It succeeds in this through its ability to embody both the reader and the narrator in the same person.

As a reader, Francis identifies with the characters he encounters in the fictional story, considers them his own comrades, compares himself to them, and sympathises with them. This reflects a specific relationship to the text, based on the reader's identification with the narrator and characters who have the potential to bridge the aforementioned gap, but does so in a way that is inherently unliterary—that is, relying on categories external to the text. In contrast, the reader of the framework text, the novel *Zone*, has a different experience. Here, the reader is presented with a professional soldier, a probable war criminal who trades spy secrets for a new life. Énard thus offers two reading approaches: one based on the reader's identification with the text, and the other that radically rejects all identification and positions the reader in opposition to the text, which is the fundamental situation of reading.

The conflict between the two reading policies is enabled by thematising war and using the novel form, which can absorb different types of narrative and texts, thus offering readers various reading strategies and questioning some of them, especially those more dominant in contemporary literature but not useful for the literary texts themselves.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

This title was not censored before publishing