The first two decades of the twentieth century, ushering in the “new” movements in the arts, summarized under the umbrella term “Modernism,” were a time of unprecedented cultural ferment among the South Slavs, to be united, in 1918, in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. After a century of liberation wars against the Ottomans and active state building, the newly-emerged Kingdom became the historical prototype for the various Yugoslavias – the monarchist Yugoslavia of 1928, the Communist Yugoslavia of 1944, and the so-called “rump” Yugoslavia of the 1990s. With the birth of the new kingdom – a kind of proto-federation – the arts in Serbia and Croatia (and to a lesser extent in Slovenia) acquired what could be called a “European voice.” This was distinct from the muted regional voices of the nineteenth century, such as Senoa’s call, in the 1860s, for a Croatian realist prose, or Svetozar Markovic’s delayed echo of the Russian Natural School aesthetics. While writing in a “small language,” which would not be read by the majority of the Europeans, or at least not immediately, the Yugoslav writers and poets of the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Krleza, Andric, Crnjanski and a Pleiad of others, assimilated the poetic genres of the new European cultural paradigm of Modernism which would at least potentially assure them an equal place amongst the Modernists of the “major” European languages – Whitman, Przybyszewski (writing in German), Hauptmann, Verlaine, Mallarme, the Scandinavians, Maeterlinck, and the Russians.

It is with this European cultural baggage that two of the greatest Serbian Modernists (although one of them was born a Croat) of the period between the two wars survived World War II to form a constitutive part of the literary and cultural scene of post-war Communist Yugoslavia. Andric returned from his Royal Yugoslav diplomatic post in Berlin to spend the war years in occupied Belgrade, writing his major novels – The Bridge on the Drina, The Spinner, The Chronicle of Travnik. Crnjanski led a paranoid and depressed existence in exile, in London, until Tito’s government persuaded him to return
and allowed him take up a more or less independent position amidst a literary scene dominated by a repressive ideological culture, still being promulgated for the masses.

Thus these two elitist and non-Communist writers, along with Miroslav Krleza and Dusan Matic, whose declared leftist persuasion did not detract from their artistic elitism, formed the backbone of post-WWII Yugoslav culture.

It was thus in the laboratory of the European/Yugoslav Modernists, with its universal discourse of desire and transgression, that the younger generation of Yugoslav writers — those born at the end of World War II — was aesthetically formed. Milisav Savic belongs to this generation, and has been a representative of a Yugoslav Postmodernism in the making since the early 1970s, along with such writers as Danilo Kis, Borisav Pekic, Milorad Pavić, Branimir Scepanovic, and many others.

As a Postmodrn writer, Savic belongs to the European canon. His novels and stories, which are being translated into some of the “major” languages, present a fragmented picture of reality and a stylistic heterogeneity which is characteristic for postmodern writing in all the major Western literatures of the second half of the twentieth century.

On this score, Savic should be grateful to Andric and Crnjanski for their respective inputs into post-World War II Yugoslav literature, which allowed the writers of Savic's generation to avail themselves of the great European universal tradition of Modernism. From the point of view of his 1990s reader, Savic’s prose owes much to the Modernist techniques of both Andric and Crnjanski, particularly to the latter. Not only does Savic’s prose constitute a symbiosis of genres, such as autobiography, diary, chronicle, and historical novel, rendered in a pastiche of both realist and surrealistic (absurd) modes of representation; it also foregrounds self-reflexivity as a language game played out between the subject’s conscious and unconscious.

However, this inheritance is not enough for Savic or rather for his narrator-hero in Scars of Silence. He (or rather his narrator) has a grudge against his mentors, and particularly against Andric, for the silence which they, but particularly Andric, maintained in the face of the repression of the student protest movement of 1968, in which Savic and his literary hero were both participants. This grudge gives the title to his novel — Scars of Silence — and forms its major manifest theme: the political and, by extension, moral responsibility of the writer to society. The posthumous “trial by letter,” to which the novel subjects Andric and Crnjanski (literally, through inserted “letters to the editor” of the daily Politika), does not end with a “sentence” for the two Modernists. Instead, they, and their wives, are reunited in death with the narrator, who also turns out to be a dead man or a ghost, and the silence which eclipsed their lives is transformed into a dialogue beyond the grave,