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NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN FICTION

Abstract: *The paper deals with nine authors of contemporary Serbian fiction which represent three narrative strategies: postmodern textual play, rewriting history, and obsessive confession. However, their common interest lies in the reinvention of reality. Dragan Velikić, Mileta Prodanović, Radoslav Petković, Sreten Ugričić and David Albahari manipulate facts and fiction in different ways, exploring the blurry border between the two, and the result of this playful trespassing is metafiction packed with actual events from either recent or remote history. Unlike their male counterparts, Serbian women writers explore the pursuit of happiness as their main motif. Mirjana Novaković, Mirjana Đurđević, Jelena Lengold and Ljubica Arsić either twist master narratives or reinvent intimate stories in order to escape preestablished designs imposed by the male-oriented literary canon.*

Keywords: *Serbian literature, postmodernism, metafiction, history.*

Contemporary Serbian fiction could be described as an intersection of three narrative strategies: postmodern textual play, rewriting history, and obsessive confession. The greatest concern of the writers which will be discussed here, however, is the reinvention of reality. Both male and female authors whose work will be presented in the paper manipulate facts and fiction in various ways, exploring the blurry border that separates the two realms, and the result of this playful trespassing is metafiction packed with actual events from either recent or remote history.

In his novels *Destiny, Annotated* (*Sudbina and komentari*, 1993) and *The Perfect Remembrance of Death* (*Savršeno sećanje na smrt*, 2008) Radoslav Petković explores the ways war, revolutions and unrests shape up social and personal histories. The author twists and turns some lesser known historical facts so as to induce unexpected encounters of literary heroes and historical personages in time and space. Thus in

Petković's latest novel the Irish poet William Butler Yeats appears within a crumbling world of the 14th century Constantinople, in a vision of a young man whose meddling with magic will forcibly lead him into priesthood and provide him rescue in the form of the newly acquired identity: he will become Philarion. Since the authorities frown upon practical magic, even if meant to save the city from the impending Ottomite invasion, embracing religion will be Philarion's narrow escape of death. However, even as a dutiful monk, this young man will affront magic yet again, owing to his mysterious tutor, who is a philosopher and a wizzard. Abounding in mysticism, philosophy and juicy historical tidbits, *The Perfect Remembrance of Death* is both an esoteric thriller and an adventurous travelogue, as well as a bildungsroman of an enchanter.

In Petković's previous novel *Destiny, Annotated*, which received all Serbian literary awards, history is used as a material

to be subverted. The narrative is underpinned by a consistent current of irony and the narrator uses every opportunity to appeal to the reader by using generic statements drawing on a commonality of experience. Petković's history takes on a cyclical form instead of the more common linear conception, with historic events relegated to the margins of the narrative and turned into a backdrop against which the personal histories and private turmoils of the two main protagonists are presented. The first two sections of the novel deal with the 18th century Trieste and the third-person narrator whose identity remains unknown to the reader focuses our attention on Russian naval officer Pavel Volkov, who desperately tries to navigate his way among various national and religious communities of Trieste against the backdrop of the impending Napoleon's invasion of the city, unable to resist to the charm of the wife of a prominent Serbian merchant, Katarina Riznić, a fatal beauty who manipulates him both politically and sexually. The third section of *Destiny, Annotated* deals with the Budapest in the second half of the 20th century, where both the tone and the narrator substantially change: this part of the book is written in the form of autobiographical notes taken by historian Pavle Vuković, in which he describes his doomed relationship with Márta Kovács and his visit to Budapest during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Pavle is a Serbian intellectual who unwittingly got caught amid the 1956 revolution in Budapest, his destiny intersecting with the eventful life of his ancestor and namesake, a 19th century officer who had been entangled into strata-gems and schemes of seemingly benevolent people around him. Petković's multi-layered, intricate narratives are packed with both irony and suspense, having earned him a huge critical acclaim in Serbia and abroad, as his novels have been translated into Hungarian, French, German, Greek and Bulgarian so far.

On the other hand, Dragan Velikić has been warmly received in the German-speaking countries with his novels which mostly deal with personal quest for identity amid the turbulent scene of the south-eastern Europe. Inclined to investigate personal histories hidden behind the walls of European cities from the Mediterranean to the Central Europe, Velikić is deeply concerned with exile as the condition of the modern man. Thus his character Rudi Stupar from the much praised novel *The Russian Window* (Ruski prozor, 2007) travels from his hometown Szabadka further to the north in order to invent a new life, unburdened with ethnic animosities and war conflicts. A considerable part of the novel takes place in Budapest, where Rudi successfully resettles until the city turns into a „Serbian Casablanca“ with the flow of Serbian expatriates who have escaped the NATO air strikes. Velikić is at his best when he casts his elaborate sketches of the cities from Pola to Hamburg, which get to be much more than a mere backdrop to the characters' identity crises. His heroes are confident but dissatisfied lonely men who try to come to terms with their historical, cultural and intimate legacies, looking for their idols and friends among the figures of prominent artists who set the example of successful reconciliation of love, ambition and faith.

The inclination toward both the political and the fantastic can be observed in the fictional opus of Sreten Ugričić, which is positioned in between political allegory and a modern fairy tale with the element of the uncanny. As elsewhere, the intrusion of fantastic elements begins with the character's perception of reality as monstrous and perverted. Thus in his latest novel, *To the Unknown Hero* (Neznanom junaku, 2010), Ugričić skillfully combines the burning issue of Kosovo with dystopia and fable, turning the Serbia of the year 2014 into a bleak country packed with terror and ignorance, corruption and unrest, and the

only free media in such a dismal place is confined to – telepathy. The love story in such a dystopic world cannot but end in tears and tragedy, but even the much used convention of star-crossed lovers leads to an unexpected twist: the lovers die of gas poisoning after spending only one night together, and their lives end before they have even managed to become the principal narrative concern of the plot. Ugričić boldly uses history and politics as deconstructed metaphors in order to show that they suffocate love and life in general: an inscription on the wall, saying „Serbia kills“, turns from a simple reality bite into a concept of menace, which overflows the world of the novel.

David Albahari has obviously reinvented his fiction after having moved to Canada in the nineties, focusing upon a quest for faith, language and identity within a historical tapestry which is difficult to comprehend. Unlike Petković, who offers an elaborate historical background, Albahari is focused upon his character's claustrophobic world of intimate dilemmas. The character from the novel *Bait* (Mamac, 1996) is set within an environment which might not be hostile, but is irreparably indifferent: which is not dangerous, but is dangerously unable to tolerate the introspection and isolation of the expatriate hero who is trying to solve the puzzle of the identity, the history, and the homeland. Canada has turned into an estranged utopia whose slowness and simplicity are dreamlike, but also frightening and unnatural. Albahari is probably the only Serbian storyteller who successfully balances two landscapes and two wordscapes: living in Canada, he writes in Serbian for the Serbian audience, tackling the issues which are both local and global, as in his Nabokovian short novel *Ludwig* (Ludvig, 2008), which deals with the touchy subject of plagiarism and undeserved literary fame.

The motives of communication and confession are related in David Albahari's

Bait, a novel about exile, memory and inheritance. The audio tapes, brought to Canada from the Former Yugoslavia by the main character, contain his mother's personal history. The narrator hears his mother's voice speaking in his mother tongue „across time and outside of life“ (Albahari 1996: 93), equaling her voice to an urn containing the ashes and a substitute to reality. For the narrator's mother, „history had been a fact, a mallet that with inexorable precision had come down on her“ (Albahari 1996:20). Born in a small Bosnian town, she got married in Zagreb to a communist Jew from an Ashkenazi family, and converted to Judaism at the beginning of the Second World War. In order to escape the Holocaust that started in Zagreb, the family moved to Belgrade, but the father was sent to a concentration camp and killed. The narrator's mother has to represent herself as an Orthodox Serb again, in order to save the lives of her children, and her manipulations with her identity go on. „I never stopped being a Serb, nor did I renounce the Jewish faith then. In war, life is a document. What was written on the paper, and on all my papers, still said that I was a Serb“ (Albahari 1996: 28). At first forced to change her identity because she „did not exist“ for her husband's family, the narrator's mother had to revert to the „old“, abandoned identity which suddenly provided her with an existence in the historical context. The Balkan identities thus seem to be absolutely inconvenient: they are subject to change, they must be adopted and renounced, lost and found.

The impossibility of self-identification in the Balkans seems to be as absurd as the postmodern transfigurations of identity: the narrator's mother was born shortly before the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy and saw the birth of a new country, which first became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians (1918), then The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929), only to – shortly after World War II – turn into the

National Federative Yugoslavia, and then the Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia that fell apart in the 1990s. The changes of the name and the political system denied the possibility of the formation of a fixed identity. The disintegration of the private self is influenced by the social-political discourse in a tragic way. In the case of the identification of the Balkans the playfulness and experimental potential of the postmodern identities are irretrievably lost to a dismal threat of social exclusion.

Mileta Prodanović's collection of stories *Agnus Dei* (Agnec, 2009) revolves around the motives of miracle and penance, using transition as an emblematic condition of either the nation as a whole or the pursuit of an individual. Loaded with irony and grotesque, the stories resemble anecdotes or newspaper sketches, usually delivered in the colloquial and jovial tone of an objective, yet bemused reporter. For instance, the story „Patriotism“ tells of a religious order „Mary Magdalene“, whose duty is to provide sexual gratification to the soldiers in the First World War. On the other hand, fantasy, religion and parody are blended so as to stress the absurd elements in the world of today. Thus the story „Agnus Dei“ tells of a miracle which occurs where it is mostly needed, amid crude material concerns. The narrator is a businessman who made money on recruiting beggars, only to find out one day that his pack of paupers has inexplicably turned into a flock of sheep. Moral and religious hypocrisy results in a mixture of satire and catharsis after having provoked miracles of all sorts: either circus animals suddenly blurt out the startling testimony of atrocities committed in a small Vojvodinian village, or an elderly lady literally grows the new generation of „homo machiavellicus“ from plain tomato sauce. Hypocrisy, greed and blasphemy are frequent motives in the novels of Mileta Prodanović as well, such is the case with *Collection* (Kolekcija, 2006),

whose plot joins art history with criminal records, and postmodern experiment with newspaper scandals, in order to investigate the dangerous mystery of a collection of silver gone missing.

Both playful and confessional, either twisting the master narratives or sticking to intimate stories, Serbian women writers, unlike their male counterparts, all set to explore the pursuit of happiness along with its various, unexpected consequences.

Mirjana Đurđević's novel *Kaya, Belgrade and the Good American* (Kaja, Beograd i dobri Amerikanac, 2009) is a comic family saga and a fictitious docudrama describing Belgrade between the 1920's and the 1950's, with a wildly hilarious plot which combines melodrama, satire, and mystery. The novel partly reconstructs the history of Kalmyks, western Mongolic people whose Belgrade temple was the only Buddhist place of worship in Europe between 1929 and 1944. The author uses the scant historical records about a Kalmykian community which resettled in Belgrade after fleeing from the savage reprisals by Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution to weave a compelling story of cultural encounters. The principal narrative concern is a Kalmyk girl Kaya who bedazzles John Dyneley Prince, the US Ambassador to Yugoslavia and a renowned linguist, becoming his protégé, but also the instigator of either hilarious or dangerous enterprises, such as the robbery of church relics or willful participation in Nazi experiments. Kaya and the good American are closest friends to Serbian writer, Mica Đurđević, who is a humorous and self-ironic incarnation of the novel's author herself. Mirjana Đurđević casts a vivid sketch of her namesake – a writer, a fencing master and a former student of architecture who fights tooth and nail for the proper urban planning of Belgrade. Most of her stratagems or ideas turn awry, but she never gives up on instructing Kaya and selflessly helping the Kalmykian community. Mirjana Đurđević

uses the historical records to show both the abrupt changes in attitudes and outlooks as well as with the intention to deconstruct ethnic and gender stereotypes.

Mirjana Novaković inserts complex cultural and political issues into the frame of an either realistic or fantastic plot, telling her elaborate tales in a seemingly casual, jovial style. Her two novels, *Fear and Servant* (Strah i njegov sluga, 2000) and *Johann's 501* (Johann's 501, 2005) were short-listed for the NIN Award, earning critical acclaim and a wide readership. The novel had seven printings in seven years, which is considered a huge success for a contemporary novel in Serbia.

Fear and Servant is a paradox in itself: it is both a page-turner and a complex experimental novel with a rich referential frame containing political allusions and witty parodies of many authors and styles from Serbian, English and American literature. Set in XVIII century in Belgrade under Austrian administration, the narrative revolves around historical facts such as the 1725 arrival of the commission from Vienna to investigate vampires in Serbia. Allegedly, after the death of Petar Blagojević in the Serbian village Kiseljevo, several peasants claimed in their dying moments that late Petar was coming to them during the night to drink their blood. After the commission and the local priest had exhumed Petar's body, stabbed it with a hawthorn stake and burned it, the report about the arch vampire was sent to Belgrade and Vienna. Mirjana Novaković uses this trivial event as a trigger for her novel.

Fear and Servant tells two versions of the hunt for vampires: the *his-story* and the *her-story*. The he who tells his story is the Devil himself, under the assumed name of Otto von Hausburg, whereas the rendering of events from a woman's point of view comes from Maria Augusta, Princess of Thurn und Taxis, wife to regent of Serbia. Joined like Mulder and Scully and in much the same way drawn to each other, the prin-

cess and the devil set off on a vampire hunt in order to investigate the case, but also to redefine their beliefs and priorities.

While the seemingly carefree life of Maria Augusta revolves around her loveless marriage, Von Hausburg lives in a hell of self-depreciation and resentment. The Devil is both charming and childish, ruthless and cunning, robust and proud, yet melancholic and filled with self-loathing and self-reviling. The novel is packed with many vivid sidekicks, a considerable number of European kings, counts, generals and philosophers are mentioned in passing, and there are also sneering allusions to former president of Serbia Slobodan Milošević, who becomes „a handy lad from Požarevac“. The 18th century Serbia is a de-structured and de-centered community, wallowing in disorder and meaninglessness. The critical and satirical focus on the homeland shows how successfully and skillfully Novaković handles complex philosophical, psychological and scientific concepts.

Writing truly in the vein of minimalist fiction, Serbian writer Jelena Lengold explores American short story heritage in order to cast her own unassuming accounts of ordinary lives. Her stories focus upon the concept of everlasting love and its numerous triumphs and tribulations, telling of the many ways love can live and die: adultery, divorce, dysfunctional family record or passion dissolved into melancholy and loneliness, among other things. The characters' fear of happiness is almost as unbearable as their fear of death, while their intense awareness of love's fragility stems from their turbulent family histories. The novel *Baltimore* (Baltimor, 2003) portrays a woman in her forties, trying to cope with the marital bliss gone sour, to settle a strained relationship with her mother and to overcome the writer's block. The heroine develops an eccentric habit: at quarter past two every day she is at her computer, watching via web camera a man

in Baltimore heading off to work, quarter past eight his time. She names him Edgar after E. A. Poe, and promotes him into an imaginary friend and lover. She constructs his quotidian routine and emotional history, believing that the deepest bonds are created between strangers and that the most intimate friendship springs where people know nothing of one another. The other plane of the narrative tells of the character's visits to her psychoanalyst. Her personal history unwinds, not particularly stressful but marked with pain, melancholy and fears. The novel ends with a puzzling remark: „Nobody will ever know why I went away, where I went and what became of me. Some will try to find the clues in my first and last novel. They will start looking for me in Baltimore, but in vain.” The wordscape of the novel suggests that the search for love actually was only a part of the journey towards death, yet the search for the meaning of life might have resulted in the new novel, which the heroine is desperately trying to write all along.

For Ljubica Arsić, love seems to be a genuine rabbit-hole echoing with cynical and scornful laughter aimed at our secret dilemmas. Her fictional patchwork *Baby, do you love me?* (*Maco, da l' me voliš?* 2005) tells of how love descends into the darkness of routine by using a kaleidoscope of literary plots. The novel stems from the list of hundred sentences which regularly occur in lovers' discourse. Each triggers a narrative on what happens when love goes sour with everyday routine. The characters in Arsić's wordscape vary from the Serbian highwayman Hajduk Veljko to Fidel Castro, from Goethe to Batman, from Napoleon to Don Quixote. They are used in a rewriting of myths about love and devotion which is largely playful and experimental, but also deliberately packed with stereotypes taken from contemporary culture and media. Men and women in this string of narratives behave like natural elements, „warring for regiment” or killing each other for sport. In the end, all flee

from the battlefield of love, women „escape” back to the kitchen while men set off for the pub. Routine is a desperate game, according to Arsić, and her book actually accuses literature of having murdered the romance.

This short overview of narrative strategies used in novels and short stories collections written by nine contemporary Serbian writers intends not only to shed some light on their artistic practices, but also to serve as a modest proposal for their prospective translation. The focus of this article was predominantly upon those either already translated or translatable works of fiction, which might win the heart of the foreign reader with their narrative mastery.

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PRIPOVEDNE STRATEGIJE SAVREMENE SRPSKE PROZE

Rezime

Rad prikazuje recentni opus devet savremenih srpskih pisaca i njihove pripovedne strategije, koje se mogu svrstati u tri grupe: postmoderni tekstualni eksperiment, *preispisivanje* istorije (što podrazumeva i opis i interpretaciju istorijskih događaja) i isповедanje. Sve ove strategije povezuje motivacija ponovnog otkrivanja stvarnosti, a isto tako i potreba da se preispita fluidna granica koja razdvaja literarno od autentičnog. Dragan Velikić, Mileta Prodanović, Radoslav Petković, Sreten Ugričić i David Albahari pišu metafikciju čiji je otklon od realnog uvek usmeren prema postmodernističkom problematizovanju istorije, koja je fluidna i amorfna jednako kao literarni tekst, dočim Mirjana Novaković, Mirjana Đurđević, Jelena Lengold i Ljubica Arsić svaka na svoj način oblikuju i velike istorijske teme i male privatne priče, izmičući klasifikacijama koje uspostavlja književni kanon u kom dominiraju muški pisci.

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