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# POSTMODERNISM AS NIGHTMARE: MILORAD PAVIĆ'S LITERARY DEMOLITION OF YUGOSLAVIA

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The disintegration of Yugoslavia has attracted the attention of an unusually broad range of intellectuals, diplomats, and politicians throughout the world. Many studies have been produced in an attempt to explain this phenomenon, of course, and the best of them have demonstrated convincingly the political and economic processes that led first to paralysis and ultimately to collapse.<sup>1</sup> Far less attention has been focused on the cultural factors that contributed to the country's demise, which is somewhat surprising given the widely-shared recognition that particularist nationalism destroyed the country and that nationalism is, at base, a cultural issue. Even when cultural processes are considered, however, isolated aspects of the problem tend to be invoked with little or no attempt made to consider the problem from a long-term or theoretical perspective. In this essay, I will consider one of these theoretical perspectives: what, in fact, was the relationship between post modernist thinking and the breakup of Yugoslavia?

Naturally, it will be necessary to consider my delineation of postmodernist thinking, particularly since the term currently has attracted so many definitions that at times it seems to have become synonymous with everything created or thought for the past 30 years. For this study, the relevant theoretical point of departure is the view provided by Jean-François Lyotard, defined most succinctly in his essay *The Postmodern Condition*. "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity to metanarratives . . . To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements . . . there are many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches—local determinism" (xxiv).<sup>2</sup>

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There appears to be a belief shared by many (although certainly not by all) scholars in the U.S. and much of Western Europe that postmodernism so defined is, as a literary, cultural, and philosophical practice, a positive development. The metanarratives of modernism are seen by theorists not merely to have played themselves out, but to have been deceptions in the first place, used to provide intellectual and philosophical grounding for a particular (and exclusionary) worldview held by groups that benefited directly from them. By contrast, postmodernist cultural thinking, characterized by an appreciation of difference and particularity, an ironic attitude, a willingness to make use of the entire spectrum of cultural production by mixing what were formerly considered high and low genres is lauded for its role in breaking down the modernist value system in favor of a more democratic approach. As Lyotard himself puts it optimistically: "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable"(xxv). It must be recognized, however, that ideas of this sort are propounded in the world's most stable societies, societies in which the modernist metanarratives are most deeply ingrained, and in which artistic production and criticism are marginal activities. In this context it may well be true that the postmodernist critique is salutary, precisely because it can deflate the pretensions of modernist thinking and the legitimacy it has attained, without really threatening to bring the entire house of cards crashing down.<sup>3</sup>

In Yugoslavia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the social, political and cultural context into which postmodernist thought entered was significantly different than in the West. There the modernist metanarrative foundation as well as the political and social institutions underlying the state were considerably weaker, and so one should ask whether imported post-modernist thinking had more than ivory tower impact when it crossed the border. This is particularly worth investigating since not only did the dissolution of the country coincide with the appearance of postmodernist thinking, but the outcome of the breakup was the proliferation of mutually exclusive local narratives of legitimacy of precisely the type that postmodernist theory predicts.<sup>4</sup> That these local narratives proved far more morally problematic than the enlightenment-inspired metanarratives they replaced should, perhaps, give pause to overly optimistic views of the phenomenon.

A number of preliminary points must be made right away if we are to justify these seemingly extreme statements. The first is that in Yugoslavia, as was the case all over Eastern Europe, the production of literature was a high status activity. For many complex historical reasons, writers of imaginative literature rather than politicians, philosophers, or captains of industry, were expected to produce the paradigms by which the population as a whole (or a good part of it anyway) would live. This means, first and foremost, that a claim like "some work or works of imaginative literature

played a major role in triggering the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia" is by no means an improbable let alone an absurd statement (as it would be, for example, if it was made about the contemporary United States, England, or France).

The second, and more important point is that the very concept of Yugoslavia grew out of and was to a great extent dependent on the meta-narratives of the European enlightenment. To be sure, in the twentieth century there were a number of competing concepts of what Yugoslavia and its corollaries, the Yugoslav nation and Yugoslav culture, could mean, but any and all of them were linked to enlightenment narratives of unity and synthesis. The first Yugoslav state, formed in the aftermath of World War I, was originally called the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Although the country's name would appear to indicate that three distinct South Slavic peoples were understood to be constitutive members of the Kingdom, these groups were not in fact generally considered to be separate nations. For example, Prince Regent Alexander, in his speech promulgating the new state, proclaimed: "In accepting this communication I am convinced that by this act I am fulfilling my Royal duty and that I am thereby only finally realizing what the best sons of our *race—of all creeds and of all three names* from both sides of the Danube, the Sava and the Drina—began to prepare already under the reign of my grandfather" (Trifunovska 159; emphasis mine). Throughout the existence of the first Yugoslavia, in most official contexts, the existence of difference between the three constitutive groups was recognized only within the formulation "the three-named people."<sup>5</sup> Emphasis was generally placed on the original unity of the three groups, a unity that had by historical accident been severely frayed, but one that was to be reclaimed in the near future.

One could claim, in fact, that the relationship of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was seen as Trinitarian, analogous to Christian views of the relationship of God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who were, according to both Eastern Orthodox and Catholic dogma, simultaneously three and one. This formulation must have seemed a stroke of genius to those who coined it, for whatever the doctrinal differences that separated Orthodox and Catholic Christians, the concept of the trinity was familiar to all. Even the most backward peasant could be expected to understand his relationship to his compatriots under this formulation (which left comfortably ambiguous the question of which group should play which specific role in the trinity), and the sleight of hand that found unity in difference allowed worrisome questions about whether a unified Yugoslav nation really could or should be constructed to be pushed to the side.

As far as many leading political figures (particularly Serbian ones) were concerned, however, Yugoslav unity could be achieved by the creation of a strong centralized state. They considered the cultural problems of nation

building relatively unimportant.<sup>6</sup> Many intellectuals, however, disagreed, arguing that a successful Yugoslav state could be formed only in tandem with the creation of a Yugoslav nation. And they insisted that some form of supranational Yugoslav culture should come into being as a basis for this nation. For most, Yugoslav culture was imagined as an amalgamation of the best of each of the three peoples, and its success would be measured by the appearance of the Yugoslav: “not merely a new person, but a person of better physical quality, with more stamina, healthier, economically more progressive, with more material goods, and even more important, spiritually loftier, marked by more noble motives and sensations, with better habits, a stronger will and ability to act, greater intelligence and enlightenment” (Zubović 151).<sup>7</sup>

Opinions varied as to how this could be accomplished. Some groups felt that a supranational culture would have to be constructed primarily on the basis of existing national cultures, others sought in various ways to combine national with international trends, reasoning that a modern Yugoslav culture could not depend solely on its own resources and would have to find some rapprochement with modernist European culture. In all cases, however, the master narrative went something like this: the various Yugoslav peoples, who for centuries had been repressed by imperialist powers, had now freed themselves and were working to the creation of a national culture that would be, in essence, a recreation of their former and historically inevitable unity. This supranational culture would be created by the overcoming of difference, one that was superficial albeit obvious. In so doing, the Yugoslavs would merely be following the same developmental path that had been trodden by their European predecessors, most recently the Italians and Germans. Indeed, Yugoslav-oriented intellectuals frequently pointed to those countries, arguing that the differences among the various Yugoslav peoples were no greater than those that had until recently separated the Germans and Italians.<sup>8</sup>

In the post-World War II period, the unification narrative was rewritten. Now, the peoples of Yugoslavia were joined together under the banner of communism, and a Yugoslav culture was to be constituted under the internationalist aegis of world communism. The Communists “maintained that the creation of a new supranational ‘universal’ culture was fully compatible with the flourishing of individual ‘national cultures’ in a particular multiethnic country” (Cohen 22).<sup>9</sup> This was because supranational culture was seen as ideological rather than national, and it could in principle overarch the national cultures rather than eliminate them. The Communists’ favorite slogan, during and after the war, embodied this dualism; Tito and the partisans had fought for “the brotherhood and unity of the peoples of Yugoslavia.”

This formula was clearly meant as a symbolic replacement of the “three-

named people" concept that had dominated the Royal government's attitude toward the national question, and the new locution had a number of advantages. First of all, it could be interpreted as being more inclusive because the "peoples of Yugoslavia" were a far more diverse group than the Slovenes, Serbs, and Croats who had been the only recognized Yugoslavs in the interwar period. The national idea had now expanded at the very least to include Macedonians (officially recognized for the first time as a separate South Slavic people). Even non-Slavic groups were theoretically included, although the retention of the country's name must have called this into question. Second, the plural "peoples" rather than "people" implied a recognition of diversity. No longer was the goal of the country to be the recreation of a unified Yugoslav ethnos.

Again, there were many disagreements in cultural circles over just how all this would be carried out, but the desirability of some kind of supranational Yugoslav culture that would at first exist alongside the national cultures but would eventually supersede them at some future time remained. "Our ideal is that the culture of each Yugoslav people, while retaining its own characteristics, should simultaneously become the culture of all the others in a dynamic, united totality" (Veselinov 2). As opposed to the government's cultural passivity in inter-war Yugoslavia, in the first fifteen years after World War II the Communists played an extremely active role in formulating a Yugoslav cultural policy.<sup>10</sup> The specific bases for the officially encouraged post-war master plot grew out of a mythological interpretation of the partisan struggle. According to this view, members of all the Yugoslav nations had fought side by side for the partisan cause, struggling with foreign invaders and their proxies (Serbian Chetniks and Croatian Ustasas). This wartime narrative, which functioned as a kind of microcosm of the more general Yugoslav narrative, was propagated with great frequency and gusto in novels, films, memoirs. Again, however, and this cannot be pointed out too frequently, the foundation for this master plot was the belief that difference and particularity were essentially accidental, and could be overcome by properly motivated and enlightened individuals under the aegis of the vanguard communist party.

By the early 1960s, however, the communist leaders decided to abandon the supranational goals that had inspired their earlier efforts. Political and economic power was slowly devolved to the separate republics (which were for the most part nationally based), and the central tenet of the new cultural policy became "the right of every people and nationality in Yugoslavia to free development and their own cultural identity" (Majstorovic 29). The new political and cultural situation opened the door to challenges to any version of centralizing policy, and led eventually to Yugoslavia's disintegration.<sup>11</sup> In the cultural arena, two basic strategies were available to those who wished to challenge the bases for the existence of Yugoslavia and Yugoslav

culture. One was to subvert specific aspects of the brotherhood and unity myth. The other was to launch a broader-based attack on the fundamental principles of synthetic master narratives, whatever their provenance.

Although we will not discuss efforts of the first kind in any detail here, it is worth noting that they began with attempts to assert the existence of particular world views of the separate Yugoslav nations, an implicit attack on the idea that everything of value in Yugoslavia was shared by all the nations that made up the country. In particular, one might point to a series of novels by Serbian writers in the mid to late 50s and early 60s, particularly those of Dobrica Ćosić.<sup>12</sup> Even more damaging, however, were a series of novels, also by Serbian writers, that began to appear in the 1970s. These novels were war narratives, and hence directly recalled the earlier partisan narratives; but most of them chose to treat World War I, and they tended to emphasize the fact that in that conflict Croats, Slovenes, Bosnian Muslims, and Albanians had in many cases fought against their Serbian “brothers.” Such novels as Dobrica Ćosić’s tetralogy *Vreme smrti* (A Time of Death; 1978) and Danko Popović’s *Knjiga o Milutinu* (A Book About Milutin; 1985) can be cited in this context. These novels paved the way for a second series that were even more damaging to the image of “brotherhood and unity”, for they featured lurid descriptions of nationally-motivated massacres during the second World War itself: Vuk Drašković’s *Nož* (The Knife; 1983), Slobodan Selenić’s *Timor Mortis* (1989) and Vojislav Lubarda’s *Vaznesenje* (The Ascension; 1989) are among the most important.

In this paper, however, it is the second, more fundamental type of attack that will be of interest. It is here that I will consider Milorad Pavić’s famous *Dictionary of the Khazars*.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as it problematizes the basis for Yugoslav existence, *Dictionary of the Khazars* does not operate primarily at the level of plot—indeed, on the surface, the novel does not seem to be directly related to problems of nation building or nation breaking at all. Nevertheless, using some fairly basic postmodern narrative devices, Pavić endeavors to introduce to a Yugoslav context precisely the ideas Lyotard describes as basic to postmodernism—that the grand narratives of synthesis have no legitimacy and that they can be replaced only by various language games, each of which possesses “an irreducible singularity” and “its own delimited and delimitable rules.” Let us turn to the novel to illustrate the point.

On the surface, *The Dictionary of the Khazars* is an extremely complicated text. It purports to be a reconstruction of a book about the Khazars that was initially printed in 1691 and subsequently destroyed. We are given this information in an “author’s” introduction that precedes the text of the dictionary proper. The main text of the work consists of three sections (presented in the form of alphabetically-ordered encyclopedia-style entries) which present parallel Christian, Moslem, and Jewish versions relat-

ing to the question of how the Khazars changed their religion sometime in the 9th century AD as well as narratives about the efforts of certain people to investigate (or perhaps recreate) the events of the 9th century in subsequent periods. Because the "plot" elements are contained in the discrete entries, it is possible to read the book in any order one wishes, an aspect of the novel that was appreciated by Western critics who were quick to provide the novel with a genealogy that included Cortazar and Pynchon. The quotations that appeared as blurbs on the book's American jacket cover illustrate the initial reaction of Western readers quite well. "All its delights . . . the structural novelty and the comic inventiveness of the imagery . . . [are] an ebullient and generous celebration of the reading experience. (*The New York Times Book Review*)"

In fact, as is all too frequently the case with such novels, on closer examination the structure of Pavić's work proves more a gimmick than a true innovation, because no matter what order you choose to read the work in, the story remains the same. And it is this story, or rather its philosophical implications, that interests us. Ultimately, the plot of *The Dictionary* is that of a mystery novel, with two complementary mysteries—to which religion did the Khazars convert? and why at regular intervals do symbolic representatives of each of three religions come together in an attempt to solve the first problem? The twist, we discover, is that there is and can be no answer to the first mystery, and that the second contains its own—why do death and destruction haunt every attempt to reconstruct part one?

Let us begin with a consideration of the first problem—when and to what religion did the Khazars convert? But first of all, why the Khazars? The Khazars were a rather mysterious tribe that lived in the steppes north of the Black Sea and disappeared from recorded history (in which they had played only a vague role to begin with) sometime around the 11th century. According to the best available historical information they (or at least some portion of them) converted at some point in their history to Judaism, and these legends of a religious conversion presumably led Pavić to choose the Khazars as his central image.<sup>14</sup> However, the idea of a contest to determine to which of the monotheistic religions a nation should convert is by no means unique to the Khazars; it appears in its most detailed form in the *Primary Chronicle of Rus'*. The entry for the year 986 (6494 according to the Russian Church calendar) describes a delegation of Volga Bulgars who appear before the Rus'sian Kagan Vladimir and attempt to convert him to Islam. In the entries that follow we read of delegations of Christians from Rome, a Jewish delegation of Khazars!, and finally one from Byzantium. In the entry for 987, Vladimir sends out his own fact-finding missions to each of the religions, and finally, in 988, decides to convert his land to Orthodoxy.

Pavić thus retains the polemic between religions found in detail in the Russian chronicle, but moves it to an earlier period and to a people who



left no historical record of their own. The latter shift is most likely motivated by Pavić's desire to replace the certainty of the Rus'sians' conversion with uncertainty, one that is heightened by presenting the story of the conversion of the Khazars not through the purported records of the Khazars themselves, but rather from the competing points of view of those who attempted to do the converting. And, when we compare the Christian, Moslem, and Jewish accounts, what becomes apparent is that the novel does not allow us to know which religion the Khazars actually chose. This is because each religion is convinced that it was the chosen one. Thus, in the Hebrew account under the heading "Khazar Polemic" we find: "Hebrew sources cite this as the key event in the Khazars' conversion to Judaism. . . . it all took place under the reign of Kaghan Bulan, at the invitation of an angel, right after the capture of Ardabil (around 731). It was then, if this source is to be believed, that a debate on religions was conducted at the court of the Khazar kaghan. Since the Jewish envoy bested the Greek and Arab representatives, the Khazars adopted Judaism under Kaghan Bulan's successor, Obadiah" (260). This passage exemplifies the carefully produced vagueness of Pavić's historical presentation—even when strong claims are made they are almost immediately undercut or placed into doubt. Nevertheless, it would seem from this account that one thing is beyond doubt: the Khazars converted to Judaism.

Let us compare this entry with that to be found in the Moslem version of the *Dictionary*. Under the heading "Khazar polemic" we read: "Al-Bakri notes that the Khazars adopted Islam before other religions, and that this was in the year 737 after Isa [Jesus, AW]. Whether the conversion to Islam coincided with the polemic is a different question. It obviously did not. Thus, the year of the polemic remains unknown, but its essence is clear. Under strong pressure to adopt one of the three religions—Islam, Christianity, or Judaism—the kaghan summoned to his court three learned men—a Jew who had been expelled from the caliphate, a Greek theologian from the university in Constantinople, and one of the Arab interpreters of the Koran" (150). The entry ends with the information that after the Arab's successful presentation, "the kaghan embraced Farabi Ibn Kora, and that put an end to it all. He adopted Islam, doffed his shoes, prayed to Allah" (153).

The Christian version of the story itself contains two variants. Again we hear of a polemic and we are told: "The kaghan then turned away from the Jew and again found the most acceptable arguments to be those of Constantine the Philosopher. He and his chief aides converted to Christianity . . . According to another source, the kaghan, having accepted Constantine's reasons, quite unexpectedly decided to go to war against the Greeks instead of adopting their faith . . . He attacked them from Kherson and when he had victoriously completed his campaign he asked the Greek

emperor for a Greek princess to take as his wife. The emperor set only one condition—that the Khazar kaghan convert to Christianity. To the great surprise of Constantinople, the kaghan accepted the terms" (83).<sup>15</sup>

The point is that in the universe of this novel there can be no answer to the first mystery, for each religion is entirely convinced that the Khazars accepted each religion's own tenets. Pavić provides no Archimedean point from which to judge the accuracy of any claim, and no grand truth can be found by sifting the evidence provided by the separate narratives. All we have (and, apparently, all we ever can have) is a series of incompatible microtruths. To put the novel's plot structure in the terms used by Lyotard, there can be no metanarrative, only local language games.

In the context of Yugoslavia, such a radically relativized vision of historical truth was quite obviously problematic, for it implied that no agreement or mutual understanding could be reached among peoples who begin from different starting points. This, to put it mildly, was precisely the situation that obtained in the country as a whole. Pavić was most certainly aware of the danger of such implications, for they had been pointed out explicitly by Danilo Kiš—often seen as the last "Yugoslav" writer—who had identified relativism as the philosophical corollary to nationalism a decade before the publication of the *Dictionary*. "Nationalism lives by relativism. There are no general values—aesthetic, ethical, etc. Only relative ones. And it is principally in this sense that nationalism is reactionary. *All* that matters is to be better than my brother or half-brother, the rest is no concern of mine" (127–28).<sup>16</sup>

From what has been said to this point, it might appear that Pavić's novel should simply fall apart. The centrifugal force of three separate narratives which describe the impossibility of any reconciliation should lead to three separate, incompatible novels. That it does not can be attributed to the presence of equally strong centripetal forces which glue the work together. These forces are present most obviously in the sections of the novel devoted to events not directly surrounding the Khazars' conversion. As it turns out, the *Dictionary* is built on an overtly cyclical pattern and the bulk of the entries deal not with Khazars themselves, but with those who have tried to solve the Khazar mystery in two different periods: at the ends of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Each of these periods is marked by the same event: one representative from each of the religions who claimed to have converted the Khazars becomes himself possessed by a desire to discover everything that can be known about them.<sup>17</sup> He recognizes the impossibility of discovering the truth on his own, and this recognition leads him to intuit the existence of fellow sufferers from the other religions. In an attempt to fit the separate pieces of the Khazar puzzle together, he searches for the others through a complicated series of scholarly actions and dreams. Ultimately, the three individuals representative of

their religions succeed in coming together, but when they do, instead of discovering the truth they seek, all are destroyed.<sup>18</sup> The desire for synthesis, therefore, is seen as a utopian and foolhardy quest; for when it is achieved, synthesis leads not to perfect knowledge, but rather to immediate death and destruction.

The death of a few characters is by no means the only baneful effect caused by metanarratives of synthesis. It is also encoded in the very texts that have attempted to record the story of the Khazars—most prominently the so-called Daubmannus dictionary of 1691, the work on which this novel is said to be based (it is a “second, reconstructed and revised, edition”)—and it extends to all those readers, actual and implied, who have or will read the work. “In 1692 the Inquisition destroyed all copies of the Daubmannus edition, and the only ones to remain in circulation were the poisoned copy of the book, which had escaped the censors’ notice, and the auxiliary copy with its silver lock, which accompanied it. Insubordinates and infidels who ventured to read the proscribed dictionary risked the threat of death. Whoever opened the book soon grew numb, stuck on his own heart as on a pin. Indeed, the reader would die on the ninth page” (6). And although the narrator assures the contemporary reader that such a fate does not await him, this assurance is vitiated by the epigraph to the work as a whole: “Here lies the reader who will never open this book. He is here forever dead.”

If the whole attempt to recreate the story of the Khazars was nothing more than an elaborate and limited fictional mystery, the novel’s Yugoslav readers (as well as outsiders) might well have been able to ignore its broader implications. But Pavić makes it difficult to do this by his indications that the novel is meant to function not merely as a complicated hoax, but rather as an allegorical replacement for any attempt to reach perfect truth.<sup>19</sup> This can be seen most obviously in the “Story of Adam Cadmon,” a text that is interpolated into the life of Samuel Cohen. “The Khazars saw letters in people’s dreams, and in them they looked for primordial man, for Adam Cadmon, who was both man and woman and before eternity” (224).<sup>20</sup> The Khazars, as a result, possessed a kind of perfect knowledge that was lost after their conversion and disappearance. Consequently, the quest to discover the lost secrets of the Khazars is neither more nor less than an attempt to fuse earthly and heavenly knowledge through the recreation of perfectly transparent language, for “the letters of language already contain hell and heaven, the past and the future.” This is, of course, a utopian project that lay at the root of much modernist artistic practice—for example, the suprematism of Kazimir Malevich and the transsense language of the Russian futurists. In this novel, however, the punishment for human presumption to divine understanding is immediate death. As a result, the *Dictionary* does not merely express the postmodernist contention that separate language games are incommensurable, it also implicitly

claims that any attempt to combine them, to form an overarching meta-narrative, leads inevitably to disaster.

An indication of how destabilizing such a philosophical position must have been in the context of Yugoslav literary culture can be found by comparing Pavić's *Dictionary* to Ivo Andrić's celebrated novel *The Bridge on the Drina*. Like the *Dictionary*, Andrić's novel covers a long period of time (some five hundred years of Bosnian history), and is informed by cyclical repetitions. More to the point, Andrić also shows that every Bosnian group views historical experience in its own way, and that these views are frequently at variance with those of the others with whom their lives are intertwined. The narrator's description of how the Muslim and Christian townspeople interpret a barrow by the side of the bridge is exemplary: "That tumulus was the end and frontier of all the children's games around the bridge. That was the spot which at one time was called Radisav's tomb. They used to tell that he was some sort of Serbian hero, a man of power . . . The Turks in the town, on the other hand, have long told that on that spot a certain dervish, by name Sheik Turhanija, died as a martyr to the faith" (Andrić 18). Thus, as in Pavić's novel we appear to have irreconcilable claims, but in this work the narrator enters the text to explain the origins of these stories and to tell the reader the truth. First, he explains why such variants arise: "The common people remember and tell of what they are able to grasp and what they are able to transform into legend" (27). It is the narrator's job to separate fact from fancy, to explain to us some twenty pages later, for example, that Radisav was indeed a real person; he was not a hero of superhuman strength and ability, but a cunning Serbian peasant who sabotaged the bridge while it was under construction, and was eventually caught and executed in the cruelest of fashions. Thus, the narrator, standing outside of his own text, illustrates that the seemingly irreconcilable positions of "the common folk" can be overcome by the knowledge that history provides. If this is so, then there is undoubtedly hope that knowledge and enlightenment can overcome the differences that separate the groups that make up Bosnia, and, by extension, Yugoslavia.

In sum, the central features of Andrić's novel are 1) a cyclical view of time; 2) a recognition that what characterizes Yugoslavia at any moment in time is difference, but difference heightened by the unavoidability of intercourse among seemingly irreconcilably opposed groups; and 3) that difference is potentially surmountable on a mundane level through the actions of people in the world and in literary texts through the ability of the storyteller to know the truth and to unify the world through his work. And it is on this basis that Andrić constructs an imagined community of Yugoslavia. Coming back to Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, we see that it reproduces parts 1 and 2 of Andrić's "Yugoslav" equation, while completely rejecting the possibility of part 3 (which is, precisely the part in which a

Yugoslavia is imagined despite all the problems caused, particularly, by part 2). Where Andrić ultimately implied the hope that despite difficulties, difference can be bridged and history demystified, Pavić's *Dictionary* implies precisely the opposite. Pavić's novel can, therefore, be seen as a parodic reworking of the central themes and devices of Andrić's masterpiece. Pavić's book is an anti-Yugoslav novel in the same subtle and powerful ways that Andrić's novel was pro-Yugoslav. Considering that Andrić, at least from the time of his receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1961), was generally seen as a kind of unofficial Yugoslavian national writer, and *The Bridge on the Drina* was rated his most important work, a metonym for Yugoslav literature as a whole and a central statement of the country's cultural identity, Pavić's challenge to Andrić's legacy was quite significant.

Of course, it might well be asked at this point, even given that Pavić's novel encodes an ideological position that implies the unviability of the very philosophical bases on which Yugoslavia rested, what proof is there that it had any direct or indirect role in the destabilization of the country? Naturally, Pavić's novel was not held aloft by Serbian soldiers in battle, nor was it quoted copiously by the ideologues of nationalism. Nevertheless, there is evidence that it had significant effects, particularly on the thinking of Serbian elites.

Most obviously, it had a major effect on Pavić's own thinking. When the novel was published, its author was a respected but relatively obscure professor of literature at the university in Novi Sad. When asked by some obviously puzzled journalist to explain *The Dictionary*, Pavić pointed to his novel's universality, claiming that it was about "how a nation looks when it stands between great ideologies but does not belong to any of them" (*NIN*, 20 Jan. 1985, 8). In the context of the time, most Yugoslav readers would probably have felt that the "nation" to which Pavić was referring was Yugoslavia, not Serbia. Following this line of reasoning, they would have seen the book as an attempt to revisit one of the central post-1948 Yugoslav obsessions: the possibility of finding a unique place for itself as a land between, but not part of, East and West (refigured in the post-war period as the capitalist countries of NATO and the Soviet Union and its Warsaw pact allies).

By the 1990s, however, Pavić's interpretation of his work had changed dramatically. One can see this change clearly from an article published in the 1992 *Village Voice Literary Supplement*. Ken Kalfus (who appears to have derived his interpretation of the *Dictionary* solely from conversations with Pavić) notes: "In the global praise for the book (it is being translated into 26 languages), its political implications tying the fate of the no-longer-existent Khazars to that of the Serbs have gone largely unremarked" (22).<sup>21</sup> As evidence for the inevitability of the Khazar/Serb equation, he quotes Pavić, who claims: "I am a Khazar too because the fate of my family was very similar and in the end we went back to our original religion" (23).

Perhaps not surprisingly, by this time Pavić had become increasingly identified with the Serbian nationalist movement, playing an important role in providing intellectual support for the Milošević regime through his activities in the Serbian Academy of Sciences.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one can only view the collaboration of the erudite, highbrow Pavić and the decidedly lowbrow nationalist Dobrica Ćosić as a real-world example of postmodern practice.

That the *Dictionary* could well have had an influence on Serbian intellectual elites in general can be inferred from the broad popularity of Pavić's novel, which has been far and away the best received work of fiction published in Serbia in the past fifteen years. Upon publication, it easily won the *NIN* prize (considered the most prestigious literary award in Yugoslavia) for the best novel in Serbo-Croatian for the year 1984. And an indication that the novel has retained its influential position can be seen in the fact that in a poll to choose the best novel of the ten years from 1982–92 conducted by the respected Serbian publishing house "Dereta," *The Dictionary of the Khazars* topped both the readers' and the critics' lists (only one other book even managed to make both lists).<sup>23</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that readers and critics necessarily understood the novel as I have interpreted it. But there are indications that its subversive potential was recognized in Yugoslavia from the beginning, as can be seen from a review published in the leading Slovenian cultural organ *Naši Razgledi*. The review's author, the Croatian critic Zvonko Kovač, concerned himself entirely with the literary qualities of the novel, which he praised highly. But in the final two paragraphs he turned to the inevitable national question. "Others will speak more about ideologies and their power to establish false identities, particularities, and peoples. I need just mention that a specific Khazar national association is being embraced almost euphorically by a Serbian culture that is sensitized to nationalism; and we shouldn't forget about this external factor when discussing the value of this book." As far as Kovač was concerned, such readings are illegitimate, for they ignore what he saw as the basis of Pavić's *Dictionary*: "its exaggeratedly ironic rejection of the importation of any actuality in its reception." Nevertheless, he continued prophetically, "other nations will read the history of the lost Khazars through their own paranoid visions of the future" (188).

Ultimately then, there is no doubt that Pavić's dictionary could have been and in some cases was read by Yugoslavs both as a specific warning against Serbian assimilation into Yugoslavia, and as an attack on the very bases on which the country was constructed. And there is a great deal of theoretical and practical research indicating that the behavior of elite groups is crucial to the crystallization of nationalist thinking in a population at large.<sup>24</sup> Of course, as we noted before, in the context of Yugoslavia in the 1980s, high literary attacks on the country's foundations were seconded by

lower and middle-brow attacks on the substance of the myths of brotherhood and unity. The resulting two-pronged assault played a central role in delegitimizing the very concept of Yugoslavia. Together with the economic and political malaise that gripped the country in this period, dissolution was probably inevitable.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, postmodern thinkers from the former Yugoslavia have been loathe to place too much blame on fellow intellectuals, preferring to castigate political leaders and outsiders. In a discussion of who is to blame for the Bosnian debacle, for example, the Slovenian Slavoj Žižek asserted: “Gilles Deleuze said somewhere: *si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l'autre, vous êtes foutu*—if you are caught in another’s dream, you are lost. In former Yugoslavia, we are lost not because of our primitive dreams and myths preventing us from speaking the enlightened language of Europe, but because we pay in flesh the price for being the stuff the Other’s dreams are made of” (238). While no one would disagree that the Western powers bear some blame for events in Bosnia, in light of Pavić’s novel, Žižek’s statement feels quite ironic. For it is, in fact, a paraphrase of the *Dictionary*, one of whose central images is that of the “dream hunter,” another incarnation of the person searching for ultimate truth. “Dream hunters plunge into other people’s dreams and sleep and from them extract little pieces of Adam-the-precursor’s being, composing them into a whole, into so-called Khazar dictionaries” (166). As with all who aspire to synthetic truth in the novel, dream hunters are fated to die as soon as synthesis is achieved. Thus, for example, Yusuf Masudi is able to describe how Samuel Cohen becomes trapped in his dream of Avram Brankovich’s death: “Suddenly Cohen’s dream was as barren as a dry riverbed. It was time to wake up, but there was nobody left to dream Cohen’s own reality, as he had done during Brankovich’s lifetime. And so what happened to Cohen had to happen. Masudi saw how, in Cohen’s dream, which was turning into a death rattle, all the names of the all the things around him began dropping off like hats . . . that moment Cohen awoke in his death”(238). And having related this dream to the Turkish pasha, Masudi himself is killed.

The philosophical demolition job Pavić performed on the synthetic concept of Yugoslavia grew out of his own importation of a particular postmodernist mode of thought into Yugoslav discourse. But on Yugoslav soil, the Lyotardian vision of separate and incommensurable language games did not remain a metaphor. It was embodied, instead, in a series of nationalist micronarratives whose primary mode of communication turned out to be shooting. Like the characters in Pavić’s novel, many Yugoslavs were caught up in these nationalist dreams, and they have still not fully awakened from their postmodernist nightmare. The sooner this is recognized, the sooner South Slavic intellectuals will be forced to think about the real-world effects of their critiques, and the sooner their societies will escape their own

dream worlds. Whether, and to what extent, the processes described in this paper have implications for other societies remains to be seen. But, at least as regards the delegitimizing of the basic narratives on which our societies are based goes, the Yugoslav experience can remind us of the old maxim: "watch out what you ask for because you might get it."

## NOTES

- 1 Regarding the political aspect of the problem, see, for example, Magaš. For a stronger focus on economic issues, see Woodward.
- 2 I should add here that it has never been clear to me, on a theoretical level, why this process of delegitimization has to stop once the grand narratives have been eliminated. That is, what privileges the micronarratives of "local determinism," and why don't they themselves break up into an endless and ultimately incoherent set of even smaller games? Lyotard specifically refutes such a claim in *The Postmodern Condition*: "This breaking up of the grand Narratives . . . leads to what some authors analyze in terms of the dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown together into the absurdity of Brownian motion. Nothing of the kind is happening" (15). He explains why this is so by appealing to the inevitable linkage of the self to "a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before" (15). To be honest, I do not find this theoretical explanation very convincing. Nevertheless, as a pragmatic observation, it appears to be correct, at least if the case of Yugoslavia is relevant. It appears that, having given up grand narratives, individuals cling all the more strongly to the local synthesizing power of their micronarratives.
- 3 It should be noted, however, that there are some social thinkers who see in postmodernist thinking the beginning of the end for all societies based heavily on enlightenment meta-narratives. For the most thorough-going analysis of this type, see Mestrovic.
- 4 It would be wrong, of course, to conclude that any and all aspects of postmodern literary and philosophical practice on Yugoslav soil were pernicious. Later on in this essay I will note a number of examples to the contrary. What I have in mind is one specific type of thinking exemplified by the work of Lyotard.
- 5 It is unclear exactly where and when this formula was invented. In the pre-war period the belief that Serbs and Croats were a single nation was widespread (see, for example, the forceful use of this formula by Adam Pribičević in his defense of the Serbs accused of treason in Zagreb in 1909 [Novak 545]). I have not found the three-named people usage before the war, however.
- 6 Indeed, the first Yugoslavia had no consistent Yugoslavizing cultural policy. Its absence of was lamented frequently by Yugoslav-inclined intellectuals: "We have neither a unified strong cultural activity inside the country, nor do we have a unified, healthy well-organized cultural propaganda abroad. . . . Private initiatives, which in our country often occur in nice forms and with a great deal of good will and illusions, have still not disappeared but they are far from able to provide that which a well organized government initiative could" (Krklec 138).
- 7 A bit later in the same article, Zubović makes his eugenic point quite clearly: "There is no true unity without blood ties, without a mixing of the various Yugoslav elements. Such a mixing is necessary in order to soften and eliminate sharp differences, of blood and territory. That is why it must be complete, and cross all boundaries, of tribe and belief, of class, of region and of terrain. It is the basis for the laws of modern eugenics, according to



- which the mixing of various but nevertheless close elements creates physically capable types" (152).
- 8 This idea was stated most forcefully by Vošnjak.
  - 9 As Milovan Djilas put it, the Communist leadership "felt that Yugoslavia would be unified, solid, that one needed to respect languages, cultural differences, and all specificities which exist, but that they are not essential, and that they can't undermine the whole and the vitality of the country" (Quoted in Cohen 24).
  - 10 See, for example, Peković and Gabrič (1991 and 1995).
  - 11 For a detailed discussion of this complex situation, see Ramet.
  - 12 See, for example, his novels *Koreni* (Roots; 1954) and *Deobe* (Divisions; 1961).
  - 13 Pavić's novel was initially published in Serbia in 1984 as *Hazarški rečnik*. In this paper, all quotations from the novel will be given in the main text by reference to the English-language edition.
  - 14 The most extensive account of the Khazars can be found in Dunlop. This book, by the way, is mentioned as a source by Pavić, and the novelist clearly borrowed some of its stylistic peculiarities in addition to drawing on its factual content.
  - 15 This latter story is also borrowed from an account in the Russian *Primary Chronicle*, by the way.
  - 16 This text was originally published in 1973 and widely commented on in Yugoslavia. Danilo Kiš's own work is an excellent illustration of the fact that postmodern literary technique and the type of thinking characteristic of Pavić's novel do not necessarily have to go together. Kiš's novel *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, for example, uses an obviously Borghesian narrative voice not for the purposes of abstract literary game playing, but rather as a means to explore the truth about Stalinism.
  - 17 In the sixteenth century, these characters are Avram Brankovich, Yusuf Masudi, and Samuel Cohen. In the twentieth, they are Dr. Isailo Suk, Dr. Abu Kabir Muawia, and Dr. Dorothea Schultz. The following short narrative, taken from testimony regarding the life of Avram Brankovich, illustrates how Pavić sets up the quest for knowledge undertaken by his characters: "He does not believe that he is the only person interested in the Khazars, or that in the past no one outside the circle of the Christian missionaries who left behind information on the Khazars, no one from St. Cyril to the present day, studied them. . . . He presumes that aside from Christian sources on the Khazars, there also exist extensive Arab and Jewish sources on the same question and people, but something is preventing the individuals working on this from meeting and collecting their knowledge, which, if only it could be pooled, would provide a clear and complete picture of everything concerning this question" (47).
  - 18 Thus, for example, at the moment Brankovich is pierced by a Turkish lance on the battlefield. He looks up and sees Samuel Cohen. "That same instant, the pale young man collapsed into his own shadow, as though felled by Brankovich's look" (57). Masudi, who was watching the affair, is executed the next day.
  - 19 In this respect, it is interesting to compare Pavić's novel with *La disparition* (1969) by the French post-modernist novelist George Perec which it superficially resembles. In Perec's work, the key to the mystery plot is the absent letter "e". "It's a detective novel or at least a whodunit, with this twist: E done it, but we mustn't ever say that. We can't. When the characters get close to E, they get written out of the plot (maimed, shredded, fed to the carp)" (Kincaid 3). The difference between the novels is not merely that a plot about the impossibility of finding answers in France is merely clever and amusing, but in Yugoslavia it helped encourage people to shoot their neighbors. The point is not the plot alone, but the fact that the reader of Perec's novel is allowed to see it as just a plot, while Pavić's reader is led to see the plot as an allegorical attack on the bases of Yugoslav society.

- 20 Of course, the myth that at some prehistoric time distinctions between man and woman did not exist is common to many cultures as are desires to return to that time. Perhaps the most famous description of this myth is in Plato's *Symposium*.
- 21 Kalfus overstates his case here, for as early as 1988 Vasa Mihailovich had pointed out the novel's political implications. Indeed, the subtitle to his review of the novel reads: "The zany political culture of Pavić's Khazaria closely parallels the predicament of the Serbian minority within present-day Yugoslavia" (378).
- 22 For a thorough and scathing description of the role the Serbian Academy of Sciences played in whipping up public support for nationalist policies between 1986 and 1992 as well as numerous references to Pavić's active participation, see Milosavljević.
- 23 This information was printed on the flyleaf of David Albahari's novel *Tsink* which made the critics' list.
- 24 For the most convincing statement of this case, see Brass.

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