

## ELEMENTS OF MILORAD PAVIĆ'S POSTMODERN POETICS

Proclaiming Milorad Pavić's novels as postmodern is connected with an article by Andreas Leitner, Slavic scholar from the University of Klagenfurt, who in 1988 in the *Wiener slawistischer Almanach* gave the attribute "postmodern work" to the *Dictionary of the Khazars*.<sup>1</sup> Somewhat later similar definitions could be found in the works of theoreticians and literary critics (Radoman Kordić, Sava Damjanov, Aleksandar Jerkov),<sup>2</sup> who considered some elements of postmodern stylistic and poetic concept within the entire Pavić's prose and above all in his novels *Dictionary of the Khazars* and *Landscape Painted with Tea*.

In Europe, and especially in the German speaking region, voices equalizing Pavić and postmodernism have been growing stronger after the translation of *Landscape Painted with Tea*, so that recently Viennese *Allgemeine Zeitung* proclaimed this author as the "leader of European postmodernism", and professor Rolf-Dieter Kluge, from the Slavic Seminar in Tübingen, announced an international conference entitled *Pavić and Postmodernism*.

In the paper "Dream Hunters, Trialogues and Landscapes Painted With Tea: The Postmodern Poetics of Milorad Pavić,"<sup>3</sup> presented at the Conference of German Slavists in Berlin in 1990, Dagmar Burkhart, a Slavic scholar from Hamburg, exclusively dealt with the postmodern *procedee* of the author. There, Burkhart lists seven essential features of postmodern literature, which she subsequently analyzes on examples from *Dictionary of the Khazars* and *Landscape Painted with Tea*. I have decided, by adopting her basic formulations (to be more precise - those seven points), to try to concisely draw out some of characteristic features of Pavić's prose as a whole, which can be interpreted in a postmodern key, and thus enable possible further research in that direction.

The first feature of postmodern literature would be the *rejection to take an ideological stand*. Generally speaking such attitude of most postmodernists is seen in their opposition to logocentrism and rationalism as producers of ideological violence, which essentially speaks of threatening the very foundations and scope of our entire knowledge so far.

In Pavić's works this feature can, above all, be recognized as scorn and irony addressed to historical truth and historical experience.

The compromising of factuality carried out by formal means in *Dictionary of the Khazars* at the level of the particular and the general, could be reduced to an aphorism complementary to Pavić's joke "Truth is just a trick", and would read as - history is just a piece of gossip.

On the other hand, the use of the fantastic, ironic, allegoric and paradoxical for illustrating a world shows one's attitude toward that world as well. Thus the achieved distortion of reality (be it projected into the past, present or future), contains as well a strong critical dimension, but implicitly and subtly or non-typically expressed. For example, in *Landscape Painted with Tea* critically the most outstanding features are a distinctly nondescript attitude of the narrator toward the actions and "achievements" of Atanasije Razin, as well as the paradoxical turn when the devil, his survival being endangered by man, becomes the saviour of mankind (some Italian critics define this novel as postmodern reinterpretation of the Faustian myth).

*Intertextuality and citation at the level of genre and motives* is the next and probably the most typical feature of postmodern literature. By using different genres, models of narration and styles, by use of a game of combinations, a hybrid structure and a polyphone text are being created. This aspect gives rise to a doubt, similar to the previous one, regarding the ways of knowing reality and the world, by insisting on the fact that the world can be known only via texts, in fact their fragments, excerpts and traces. This is analogous to psychoanalytic therapy, which through free connection of detail, and apparently missing elements, wishes to enable a come back to the primeval forgetfulness and forgotten essentiality.

This, today classified as a postmodern feature, has been present in Pavić's literary work since his first poem collection entitled *The Palimpsests* because the meaning and stylistic stratification constitute the central characteristic of his expression and poetics.

By using many literary-linguistic models: myth, legend, hagiography, apocrypha, tales, history, etc. (in general old text as pretext), and at the same time using them also through reinterpreted or parodied forms, Pavić enriches his picturesque literary structure by all the achievements of the modern prose. Thus continuity and harmonization of different cultures is established and a synthesis between the old and the new is being accomplished.

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The third characteristic of postmodern writings would be *the absence of causal logic of the story*. This is achieved through the destruction of the realistic manner of writing and by abandoning chronological linearity and cause/effect relations of the story.

The mechanism of achieving this aspect in Pavić's works would require a deeper analysis, but it seems that the manner of its carrying out can be reduced to the use of various fantastic paradigms (Sava Damjanov calls this "postmodernization" of the fantastic), which are most frequently based on dream effects. Also, in the case of absence of causal logic of the story in this author's novels, I am inclined to think that it is in fact an illusion artificially carried out. Since in *Dictionary of the Khazars* the meaning is constructed by a reader himself, depending on the choice of the manner of reading, the logic of the story amounts to the logic of choice. Contrary to that, in *Landscape Painted with Tea*, whose meaning also depends on the reader's choice, but in a lesser degree than in *Dictionary of the Khazars*, this characteristic, in my view, is more obvious, although apparently *Landscape Painted with Tea* is closer to the classical novel pattern, with a stricter composition and more coherent story. The reason for such an impression is the existence of an apparent time chaos, which is connected with the next feature of postmodern literature: *dissolution of time/space relations*. This aspect is to a certain degree already contained in the previous one, because it is based on the destruction of the realistic and on the nonrecognition of the logical sequence of time/space relations.

This feature seems to me the most remarkable one in connection with Pavić's prose. By mixing and accumulating various temporal levels it creates a particular time, time of the text itself, which lends the impression of timelessness and of omnitemporality; by multiplying spatial characteristics, space itself is being eliminated, thus reaching a certain state of fluid space and moment. And it is precisely this experience which constitutes the basis for a special reception of the works by this author, which in the most radical aspect I would call a magical reception.

In *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the time/space strata are more apparent because they can be clearly recognized and monitored chronologically as "Khazarian", "baroque" and "modern" levels, while in *Landscape Painted with Tea* everything is performed in a more profound and subtle way, although effect is the same. I also think

that a study of poetics of time in *Landscape Painted with Tea* would be invaluable for literary theory and the theory of reception, although theoretical physics as well could use some parts of this novel as a confirmation for its attitudes or hypotheses.<sup>4</sup>

The fifth feature of postmodern literature would be a *trend toward openness instead of coherence in narration* which can essentially be interpreted as a desire to express the idea of rejection of ending by way of "open work".

The effect of endless story, which is present in the entire Pavić's prose, is construed by use of various formal and contents possibilities although the most apparent ones may be: in his stories, turns at the very endings; in *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the form of the novel; in *Landscape Painted with Tea*, its apparent incompleteness.

*The problem of a literary hero that does not function on a psychological level* is another feature of postmodern literary text and amounts to the fact that the absence of psychologization of personality eliminates the possibility of classical identification. Diffusion of the hero is achieved by simultaneous existence of various points of view and perspectives of the personality which can be at the same time the author, narrator and the hero himself, in view of the fact that their partition lines have purposefully been made vague and blurry.

In Pavić's works this characteristic is most apparent through one of the central preoccupations of his prose - through the problem of identity of personalities and of the author himself. All Pavić's heroes are in a state of quest for various types of identities - personal, sexual, generational, national, collective, cosmic. . . . At the same time, various duplications, metamorphoses and ambivalences are a sign of their belonging to a symbolic mythological-archetypal order, and not to an individual one.

The seventh feature of postmodern literature would be *autothematization*, or, to be more precise, the existence of metaliterary discourse which is the most remarkable when it belongs to the domain of poetic expression.

Metapoetic speech directed towards the reader in Pavić's prose constitutes an explicit application of this postmodern principle. Its goal is to establish a different manner of communication with a reader, and thus a changed aesthetics of reception. The formation of a creative reader enables a fuller realization of the plurality of mean-

ing and sense characteristic of Pavić's literary work. On the other hand, the existence of numerous implicit autopoetic textual fragments makes this phenomenon even more complex.

In this sketch-analysis of some possible elements in Milorad Pavić's prose which can be interpreted from postmodern point of view, my objective was to recognize, outline or generalize some problems which would demand a more profound and comprehensive analysis.

In a number of postmodern studies of literature, of which most can successfully be applied to the analysis of Pavić's literary works, it seems that Deleuze-Guattari's term "rhizome"<sup>5</sup> most closely corresponds to the structure and radiation of meaning in Pavić's novels.

Deleuze and Guattari write: "Strange is the book which becomes more coherent as it is more fragmentary. . ." Characteristics of rhizome they speak about are to be found in *Dictionary of the Khazars*. This novel is a dynamic model of an asymmetric knot of lines and dimensions, with several entrances, and without a central axis or the center itself; it is like an open living organism, continually growing and pulsating, where the spreading of entries engenders the multiplication of meanings; it is in a permanent relation toward itself, but also toward that which is outside it, or as Peter Vansittart says: "Basically it is a gigantic mass, an environment with evergrowing antennas, with mobile time and space, fact and guesses mobile as in dreams." The underground, the surface and the above-surface are in this book in a perpetual consistency and co-existence of the manyfold, enabled by decentralization and non-hierarchy.

In *Inner Side of the Wind*, however, there is no rhizome structure at first glance. However, only when both stories are read, Hero's and Leander's, or when they are read once and a half, the illusion of linear movement and structure falls apart. Only later, in reader's consciousness, like in the emptiness of the blue leaf found in the middle of the book, a new structure and meaning are created. Only then does the network start its underground activity uniting all the sprouts of sense sown throughout both stories.

While in *Dictionary of the Khazars* the principle of rhizome is happening in the very structure of the book and at the surface level (although its underground, conscious and unconscious activity is thus not being jeopardized), in *Inner Side of the Wind*, rhizome is realized outside the book structure and it seems that the changed relation toward the reader in entire Pavić's prose has thus become

even more expressive in this novel, because the activity and the division of work between the reader and the writer is most radically shifted toward the reader.

"Rhizome connects any given point with any other given point. . . rhizome is acentric, nonhierarchical and nonencoding system" wrote Deleuze and Guattari. In *Inner Side of the Wind* that breaking up of the center and spreading of meaning and sense in waves is carried out in the blue ocean of an apparent meeting of stories which is even more important later, at the moment when the reader closes his book.

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<sup>1</sup>Andreas Leitner, "Andrej Bitovs 'Puschkinhaus' als postmoderner Roman." In *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 1988, Band 22; pp. 213–26.

<sup>2</sup>Radoman Kordić, "Postmodernistička ukrštenica. Milorad Pavić: *Predeo slikan čajem i Hazarski rečnik*." In *Književna kritika*, III-IV, 1989, XX, 2; pp. 69–85.

Sava Damjanov, "Savremena (postmoderna) srpska proza i fantastika." In *Sveske*, XII, 1990, II, 6; pp. 85–91.

Aleksandar Jerkov, "Nova tekstualnost. Pogovor Sabranim delima Milorada Pavića." In the book *Anahoret in New York*, Poems, Vol. 7 (Beograd: Prosveta, 1990), pp. 175–227.

Jasmina Mihajlović, "Elementi postmoderne poetike Milorada Pavića." In the book *Priča o duši i telu. Slojevi i značenja u prozi Milorada Pavića* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1992), pp. 104–10.

<sup>3</sup>Dagmar Burkhart, "Traumjäger, trialoge und teelandschaften. Zur postmodernen Poetik von Milorad Pavić." Paper presented at the German Slavists' Convention in Berlin in 1990.

<sup>4</sup>Vladan Panković, *Kvantna teorija i barok u srpskoj književnosti* (Kruševac: Narodna biblioteka, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Rhizome*, Minuit, 1976.