

# The Serbian Novel After the End of Utopia: “Reconstructive” versus “Deconstructive” Writing?

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*Numerous Serbian novels of the 1980s and 1990s turned to the treatment of an older, allegedly forgotten history which encompasses the premodern period from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. It seems that this shift was accompanied by a political idealism and national-emancipatory zeal after the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia and its cultural politics. This paper will critically examine three extremely successful examples of historical postmodernism in contemporary Serbian literature: Milorad Pavić's Dictionary of the Khazars (1984), Radoslav Petković's Destiny, Annotated (1993) and Goran Petrović's Opsada crkve Svetog Spasa (The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation, 1997). This “historical turn” of historical postmodernism could be interpreted both as a deceptive attempt to return to the roots and as distinct archaeology with which writing seeks to examine the contemporary unsafe ground of the political, cultural and economic transition from the socialist system to democracy and capitalism. Actually, it seems that this kind of “reconstructive” novelistic approach, which can be seen as a deliberate postmodern double-coding, could be understood as a search for Serbian cultural capital that can be easily—perhaps too easily—found in the distant past. On the other side, the paper analyses “deconstructive” novels, like David Albahari's Bait (1996), Vladimir Tasić's Kiša i hartija (Rain and Paper, 2004) and Slobodan Tišma's Bernardijeva soba (Bernardi's Room, 2011). The novels from this camp demonstrate that the complexity connected with the demise of meta-narratives is not easy to represent in a work of literature. Through the figure of a weak subject, the “deconstructive” novel is able to imprint itself into the unknown, to disrupt codes, to cross the border and the wall of the symbolic order of capitalism and socialism and their production of desire. At the end of the paper, the paradoxes inherent in both these types of writing are presented.*

Keywords: literature and politics / Serbian literature / historical novel / nationalism / cultural identity / deconstruction / postmodernism / Pavić, Milorad / Petković, Radoslav / Petrović, Goran / Albahari, David / Tasić, Vladimir / Tišma, Slobodan

It is impossible to assess the issue of literary writing unless we consider what context it is related to. Contemporary literature is marked by changing processes of assimilation, revision, and rejection of reality in an attempt to strike a balance between the (often conflicting) demands of sociological consciousness and the postmodern aesthetic. Determining the dynamics and the metamorphosis of one literature or one genre within it, especially for foreign readers, is a complex and difficult process, because it has to conjure up continuities as well as breakpoints, and all that in our post-utopian age when determination of scope of cultural references has become a basis for clash of attitudes more than for their adjustment. There is no doubt that there was a strong literary field within socialist Yugoslavia – it meant literary traffic, publishing houses, literary evenings, programs and awards, a space where, for example, Danilo Kiš could have a circulation for *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* of currently unimaginable 100,000 copies and where it could legitimately be talked about in many more places and ways than today. It seems that a certain conception of literature (or a flexible notion of literature associated with various forms of emancipation) existed, which would allow writers to assume very different poetic, political and ethical roles (see Gvozden, “Pisanje posle”). The impossibility of such a plural literary field will be discussed in the paper, as well as the genesis (archeology) of this (im)possibility after the disappearance of the Yugoslav literary space and the making of a new space in which binary (not plural) working of novelistic discourse could be observed that may be called, for this occasion, “reconstructive” and “deconstructive” writing.

But first, one question must be answered: what does it mean to say that literature has something with emancipation, that is, what does it mean to say that literature has something to do with emancipation in the context of the socialist and/or postsocialist time? We begin by claiming that literature in the territory of the former Yugoslavia from the nineteenth century until the 1990s has continuously played an emancipatory role. Modern literature, in contrast to the traditional conceptions, developed in a regime within which its privileged position was threatened from the beginning, but the compensation for that vulnerability was the belief that every subject could become a creator and every object beautiful. Romantic and modernist literature expressed faith in the constitutive power of the imagination, building confidence in the ability of literature to impose order, values and meaning on the chaos and fragmentation of a rapidly modernizing society. The emancipatory moment of literature was indisputable: it evoked the horizon of generality and the possibility of privileging personal experience, the

interest in the depth of self, the intensification of the interiority of modern subjects, but still in the context of promised community. In the background of such emancipation lies the axiom of equality: literature works on the assumption that everyone speaks to everybody, that every form of discourse is, in principle, at the disposal of everybody. Modernity means the fall of the hierarchical, religious and metaphysical way of organizing. It legitimizes the new cultural order. In this context, the interconnection of equality and art is an indispensable topic, since one cannot talk enthusiastically about one without detriment to the other, and vice versa. Here the idea of the emancipatory potential of literature relies on the continuity between the equality of individuals in the political and the equality of structure, styles and themes in the field of literary art. Accordingly, the question of political and literary emancipation are two sides of the same coin of modernity. Leading writers and intellectuals of the nineteenth century, such as Balzac, Dostoevsky, Zola, Dickens, or Ibsen, give a sovereign image of modern society, which gives them an important role in the regimes of social or political visibility. Therefore, although an advocate of individuality, the writer was in a “natural” relationship with the nation (state, society, community), which served as a valid bridge built between the extraordinary individual and the community, based on the idea of a common language, cultural identity, heritage and the like. The nation is, of course, understood differently, in terms of the symbolism of the place, folklore, tradition, loyalty, ethical and political commitment and (especially) projection of future achievements.

In the period of both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and later, in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the disposition of the writer was inseparable from that of another socio-political disposition – the intellectual. Christoph Charle argued that the term intellectual has been used in a new way since 1880 to refer to the ambitious elite of well-educated (or at least above-average) educated people who sought to use the possibility of publishing in print and in other media to exercise “symbolic power” and thus compete with other elites to control social and political images. It seems that, thanks to socialism, such disposition made the intellectual last longer in Eastern than in Western Europe. If the intellectual field (previously created by several important types, such as the *litterati* in the eighteenth century or the *savant* in the nineteenth) in Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century was going through a crisis caused by the expansion of liberally educated citizens and uncertainty about the role which they should play in society, then the situation in postwar Yugoslavia contained something of that

crisis, in the sense that a one-party society opened the field to express criticism or unconventional lifestyles through art, especially through literature. Similar to bourgeois society in Zola's time, the writer (usually male) in socialism was counting on a relatively homogeneous and well-educated audience. For the most part, the subject of the debate was not the general direction in which society went – partly because the existence of the direction was not questionable, as it is today.

According to the nineteenth-century model, but in a different context, the intellectual in the Yugoslav socialism played an important role in the modes of social visibility: namely, people still believed in political utopia (that faith is immanent to socialism), so most debates had to be about the workings of various social and artistic forces inside the socialism itself. This refers first to the various aspects of naturalism and realism, then to the cracks within utopian political projects, the idea of civilization, self-determination, the problems of family, women, children, workers, as well as the interpretation of history. The public sphere in Yugoslavia was paradoxically more transparent than it is today because public access was more restricted; there were different distinctive magazines and newspapers. Yet, despite the differences, there was a common fragile hermeneutic horizon. The old type of intellectual was building his edifice on three pillars – ideology, addressing the broadest audience of the literate, and the need for subsidization (Fleck 5). In SFRY, all three conditions were undoubtedly met.

These three pillars built in the socialist period remained stable until the end of the 1980s and until the dissolution of Yugoslavia, after which they rapidly collapsed. Paradoxically, in the 1950s, and especially since the 1960s, the religion of art had been preserved in socialism, one that could overcome the fragmentation of experience, restore art to its spiritual place beyond the reach of the commodity world and the world of commodity, and enable a new, harmonious human community, or at least preserving the vibrant space of sublime discussion. As rightly pointed out by Aleš Erjavec, in line with the legacy of Enlightenment and Romanticism, “art and culture and their development” were seen “as essential for any authentic socialist or communist society” (Erjavec 9); art was seen “in terms of bringing important truths and deep insights” (Groys 56). One type of desire was related to the modernist dream of creating a vibrant democratic culture in which the knowledge and practices of the informed elite could become universal. In this sense, art requires that the rest of the culture follow it and develop a vocabulary that would serve that purpose; it also explores the links between aesthetics, ideology, commodity culture and the state; criti-

cizes existing knowledge paradigms to increase the readability of the modern experience and the potential of human creativity. However, what Herbert Marcuse will describe as the “affirmative character of culture” has been severely criticized by the early avant-gardes during the second and third decades of the twentieth century (Raunig 115). After World War II, ideologies lost their appeal, mass culture took over the audience and made it inhomogeneous in terms of commitment (but not in terms of spending); economic crises destroyed the material basis for subsidies. With the establishment of the SFRY and its specific status within the bloc division, this process was delayed: as it looks today, in Yugoslavia the downfall was only skillfully delayed.

We associate emancipation with the various forms of perception of the construction of human society on rational self-transparency, free from mystification – whether or not we are in agreement with the goals and content of emancipatory practices that have changed throughout history. When we say different forms of perception, this means that emancipation, whose symbol in socialist Yugoslavia was literature, could refer to very different contents: it could refer (often) to nationalism, as much to internationalism; to realism as much as fantasy; to objectivity, that is, to the community, as much as to individualism, that is, to escape from the community; to preserve the symbolization of the bourgeois society in the socialist era, as well as to a better and purer socialism than the existing one. To put it bluntly, Dobrica Ćosić and Danilo Kiš were equally legitimate within the same literary field. In short, the compensatory power of literature in Southeastern Europe in the decades following World War II was enormous. In that sense, literature itself as a socio-cultural phenomenon could be seen as a means of emancipation, while secretly (though not always) it was contributing to various mystifications or even intellectual confusion, the consequences of which are still felt today. The most significant of these confusions is the idea that one can be immune from politics, that is, that literature can be the true and pure political face of the community against the “dirty hands” of political elites in the narrow sense of the word. But there were also other forms of attitude toward the political: in certain literary movements, especially in modern poetry, from the 1970s and 1980s there was an immanent awareness of the “end of utopia” that has been in operation since 1989. Finally, we must never forget that it is easy, or at least it seems easy in early 2020, to be clever about something that happened decades ago.

According to Roland Barthes, “modernity begins with the quest for an impossible literature” (Barthes 36). One has to pose a question: are we still capable, and in what extent, after the death of literary, cul-

tural, political, and economic utopias, to recognize and affirm the literary strivings towards the impossible, the dislocated, the perverted, the reabsorbed, the inhibited, that is – towards a new utopia? Or are we to reduce the writers into political, economic, religious, and ethnical concepts? In this sense, no matter how it might seem pointless, we always have to search for a new reality. When the socialist utopia came to an end, one of the privileged places to search for such a true reality is the past. Thus, the past seems to have become a new utopia.

One line of Serbian novel of the 1980s and 1990s turned to the treatment of older, allegedly forgotten history which encompasses the pre-modern period from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. This shift was accompanied by a political idealism and national-emancipatory zeal after the break of the socialist Yugoslavia and its cultural politics. This “historical turn” could be interpreted both as a deceptive attempt to return to the roots and as distinct archeology with which writing seeks to examine the contemporary unsafe ground of political, cultural and economic transition from the socialist system to democracy and capitalism. Actually, it seems that this novelistic approach, that can be seen as a deliberate postmodern double-coding, could be understood as a search for Serbian cultural capital that can be easily – perhaps too easily – found in the distant past. We will briefly examine three extremely successful examples of historical postmodernism in contemporary Serbian literature: Milorad Pavić’s *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984), Radoslav Petković’s *Destiny, Annotated* (1993) and Goran Petrović’s *Siege of The Saint Salvation Church* (1997) (see Gvozden, “Magical”).<sup>1</sup>

All three novels take historical events and processes as the basis of their archaeological narratives, but they are also questioning the notion of history which itself is, of course, historical and political. *Dictionary of the Khazars* is a reconstruction of a lost encyclopedia dealing with people who lived around the Black Sea before they disappeared from his-

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<sup>1</sup> All three novels were among the best-received works of fiction published in Serbia in the past decades. Upon publication, every novel won the NIN prize which is considered the most prestigious literary award in Serbia. However, only Pavić gained a significant international reputation, his novel has been translated into more than thirty languages, including the English translation by Vintage Books, New York. The English translation of *Destiny, Annotated* was published in Belgrade and has not received any significant reception abroad. Goran Petrović’s novel has not been translated into English, but there are translations into French, Spanish, Macedonian and Russian. In 2002, the Serbian popular magazine *Blic News* organized a poll in which thirty writers, literary critics and readers chose the best postmodern novel written in Serbian language. First place went to the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the second to the *Destiny, Annotated*, while the *Siege of the Saint Salvation Church* won the seventh place.

tory in the tenth century. The story has three layers: the medieval time of the Khazars and Khazar controversy, the time of the first edition of *Dictionary of the Khazars* in the seventeenth century and the moments of renewal of interest in the Khazars and the publishing of the second edition of dictionary in twentieth century. *Destiny, Annotated* tells the story of the fate of a Russian of Serbian origin Pavel Volkov, a naval officer at the time of the Napoleonic wars who is going to a secret mission in Trieste to spy colonization and conquest of the Balkans. But the narrative of Pavel Volkov parallels the story of the historian Pavle Vuković, who has found himself in the midst of turmoil of the Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet intervention in Budapest, and the story of historical figure Đorđe Branković (1645–1711) who wrote in medieval manner *Slavo-Serbian Chronicles* in five volumes as a history of Southeastern Europe, primarily focusing on the Serbs and the search for their political legitimacy in modern circumstances. In *Siege of the Saint Salvation Church*, the main story deals with the siege of Žiča monastery, located near Kraljevo in Serbia, that happened in the late eighteenth century. But this story also intertwines with the story of the siege and fall of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade and the story of the Serbian troubles in the period of the 1990s. It is obvious that these novels take us in different historical periods, but they do that in order to (re)connect our contemporary time with the past, implying that the past is important and that it can be viewed as a kind of warning for us today. That is why I call them “reconstructive,” but with question marks indicating certain reservations about this label. There are two reasons for this: the first is that I want to differentiate between these novels and the typical traditional historical novels that are still being written; second, as we shall see, the reconstruction they seek to achieve seems to be related to a certain deconstructive interest in their performance, but not in their ultimate outcome or effect.

What qualifies these “reconstructive” novels to be classified as historical postmodernism? We could agree with Erjavec’s idea that “politicized art of the postsocialist era employed many of the characteristic techniques of postmodernism” (Erjavec 37). Pavić’s novel – Petković and Petrović are his direct followers in this sense – utilize the ideas famously articulated by Jean-François Lyotard at the end of the 1970s. As the main sign of the postmodern condition, Lyotard sees the “incredulity to metanarratives,” or the fact that grand narratives of synthesis have no legitimacy. Thus, we live the time of various, irreducibly singular language games (see Lyotard). Only five years later, in the fictionalized preface of his book, Pavić turns the incredulity to metanarratives

into the main principle of reading of the novel, which “can be read in an infinite number of ways” (Pavić 11). *The Dictionary of the Khazars* is presented as “an open book” that “can acquire new writers, compilers, and continuers” (Pavić 11). In the preface, we also learn that the main text consists of three sections structured as alphabetically-ordered encyclopedia-style entries. Consequently, Pavić invokes the plurality of interpretations, the possible existence of multiple versions of the same events thanks to the reader’s freedom to make his or her own way through the text.

Petković successfully uses the device of commentary – the literal translation of the title of his novel in English would be *Destiny and Commentaries* – as the model that challenges the credulity in metanarratives. This can be interpreted as obsessive need of the postmodern literature for the comments, because it is the only possible verbal approximation of the object in which – as we read in the subtitle of the Chapter XIII of *Destiny, Annotated* – “the narrative continues to wander somewhat like Der fliegende Holländer, through times and places other than those of our tale” (Petković 44). Having in mind that our experience of the world is relative and changeable, Petković includes different kinds of paratextual and textual comments in his book: from the title of each book and the title of every single chapter to metafictional chapters and set pieces within the narrative. Of course, such an approach is known from the novels written in the period immediately preceding the one referred to in first two books of the novel – that is, the eighteenth century, the century of Enlightenment, in which the comment was a leading intellectual way of addressing whether in the form of long chapter titles or in the writer’s direct remarks to the reader. However, it seems that in this case, the comment is more important than the story itself: there is no metanarrative of destiny, but only comments of the unreliable narrator which should be taken with caution: “What the writer says is also to be taken with a grain of salt, for writers themselves are prey to temptation and all too easily confound their own feelings and experiences with the hero’s” (Petković 26).

The main theme of Goran Petrović’s novel is Serbian national history and it raises the uncomfortable question of whether literary relativization of history means its absolutization as a national story in the manner of Romantic myth. This issue will be analyzed later in connection with the politics of magical realism. When we come to the national (hi) story, Petrović’s novel sees the siege as its global metaphor. The history is seen as a vertical of various sieges, from the Crusades, through the Bulgarian attack on Žiča monastery, to NATO bombers over Bosnia.



The politics of the novel says that the Serbian nation is directly exposed to various sieges and that it has to live a difficult history directed by the powerful empires and states. This is quite trivial since it in advance sees the people as passive rather than active participants in political life. However, what makes the novel interesting is its form, and that is where its postmodernism really works. The novel was told by different story-tellers: sometimes narrates ordinary man from the people, sometimes a historical figure (Saint Sava, his father Simeon, the Venetian Doge Enrico Dandolo, King Milutin, King Dragutin), sometimes the story comes from an unidentified voice, and in one moment we even read impersonal newspaper with the latest information. The novel is fragmentary, full of numerous blank spaces that the reader should fill out. The depicted events are sometimes motivated and sometimes completely unmotivated, giving the impression of the chaos of political history. It is important to mention that Petrović's ambivalent novel is usually interpreted in two opposite ways. On the one hand, it is seen as a symbolic effort in spirit of ethical advantage of story over history, as an attempt to exchange political history of one nation by history of story and language, in other words by its cultural history that act as a new cohesive element of the national community (see Vladašić). On the other side, it has been argued that the novel accepts the postmodern strategy of writing just to invoke the paranoid topic of the abstract threat to the Serbian nation and its language and history (see Ilić).

For now, it is enough to tell that these novels could be unproblematically labeled as "historiographic metafiction," because of their allowing for different voices and alternatives, plural histories to subvert usual accounts of the events that they refer to. According to Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is a self-conscious work of fiction concerned with the writing of history. In these novels we are always reminded that history is not "the past," but a narrative based on documents and other material created in the past and discovered today. In their attempt to challenge the dominant vision of history, Pavić, Petković and Petrović in a similar way view historical experience as repeatable, layered, palimpsestic. Therefore, it seems that the basic premise of these writers is that we live in a world of oblivion. Information is more available than ever before, and yet we witness the unprecedented acceleration of forgetfulness. It must be admitted that this idea about history is rooted in the atmosphere of the end 1980s and 1990s in Serbia when the challenge of nation-building after the break of Yugoslavia was seen by many as the most important task of an intellectual. However, it is very interesting that this novelistic approach

also successfully merges global and local trends. As Fredric Jameson argues, “postmodernism is the attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Jameson 3). Locally, it was perceived that real Serbian history was forgotten during the socialist period and that now it must be somehow retrieved. Of course, fiction appeared probably as the best way for this restoration, because it allows postmodern plurality, a very good political tool in turbulent times. Therefore, it would seem that these novels represent double-coded postmodernism in which historical references come into play in order to challenge existing assumptions, not in the name of petrified meaning, but in catching the global trends. However, the critical remark follows: what are the assumptions? This is not easy to answer. A skeptic must question what is the content of the dominant, because the dominant is a matter of perception and it is often a “strawman.” It should be said that the problem is not what is dominant interpretation, but rather the crisis of the possibility of the dominant interpretation of history. So it seems that these novels – albeit in an excellent literary manner – just ride the wave that they want to skip.

Is this kind of reconstructive writing simply a case of escapism or does it voice a concrete political idea? It seems they offer both possibilities, and it must be admitted that it is really hard to say whether this is deconstructive or reconstructive writing, since it apparently accepts relativism, especially at the level of metafiction, but at the level of historical interpretation speaks about history as “our” metanarrative. These novels were seen as postmodernist, because in postsocialist countries eclecticism is characteristic and numerous appropriations “become legitimate and even desirable” (Erjavec 19). It appears that these three novels confirm Mikhail Epstein’s interpretation of contemporary (Russian) culture where “communist future has become the thing of the past, while the tender and bourgeois ‘past’ approaches us from the direction where we had expected to meet the future” (Epstein xi). Epstein’s approach can help to explain the paradox of these novels: they give the past “the attributes of the future: indeterminateness, incomprehensibility, polysemy, and the ironic play of the possibilities” (Epstein 330). This kind of politicized postmodernism demonstrates “resistance to, subversion and reconfiguration of what may be termed ‘modern Western epistemology’” (Ouyang 16), but it often seems that idea of the culture invites the power relations it wants to subvert. While all these novels focus “on the magical, supernatural subtext operating within the visibly real level of the human condition” (Hart 3), these are also fictional worlds that resembles one we live in, but it must be noted that the burden of history and its “atavistic

archive” (Hart 3) – when we look from today’s perspective that includes local and global politics – seems to be outweighed in them.

On the other side, there are “deconstructive” novels, like *Bait* by David Albahari, *Rain and Paper* by Vladimir Tasić and *Bernardi’s Room* by Slobodan Tišma, for example.<sup>2</sup> Within the existentialist layer of their writing, Albahari, Tasić and Tišma spoke convincingly of the crucifixion of a world that built its identity on fragile historiographical edifices and uncomfortable political naivety. This fragmentation, like Danilo Kiš’s, was often tied to the family triangle, to the memory of father and mother, to unraveling the secret of family history, to testify to wanderings within historical darkness in which every story can gain significance at any moment. The novelistic world these writers create contradicts the logic of the supermarket, in which everything is based on a supposedly endless free choice. These three writers raise a profound and important question: in this day and age that celebrates the possibility of choice as our surest ideological fruit, how much are our choices truly ours? If we are so free, why are we witnesses and creators of paranoia inflation? If life is a gamble, what form of bet do you choose?

Meaning is a dubious term, and the truth is, someone will say, the illusion of paranoid. Yet, in an empty space of desires, places are expensive. How is the fight to find the meaning of life in an age where life has become so terribly cheap? Every desire, as Schopenhauer would say, arises from a deficiency, therefore: from suffering. David Albahari writes, aware of Walter Benjamin’s words in “The Storyteller,” that the cost of the experience has fallen. Therefore, both the reader and the narrator face frustration, with an inner voice framing fateful discomfort and existential disharmony. The effect of style is to create the impression that things have gone in a certain way, beyond the reach of the reader. Literature like this refuses to develop a plot because the epic side of truth, wisdom, as Benjamin said, is extinct, that is, in Albahari’s case, much like Thomas Bernhard’s, it is dead – it is the loser’s true loss. It is at the same time an assault on art because, as we admire the external form, we forget the lasting internal traumas.

In his award-winning speech, Albahari, quoting a very old book, Vuk Karadžić’s *Serbian Dictionary* (1818), revealed one of the foundations of his own storytelling. These words are very simple, but for many they will sound more like street speech than something that is at the core of the Serbian literary language. Namely, as an illustration of the dictionary entry “story,” Karadžić stated a saying: “For a story,

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<sup>2</sup> All three novels also won the prestigious NIN award: *Bait* in 1996, *Rain and Paper* in 2004, and *Bernardi’s Room* in 2011.

brother!” Indeed, there is no story, there is only an intention to talk, to speak, to address somebody, language seduces us, political unconsciousness shapes us – the reader, as well as the text, is not a normative category, they are created by language, in the language they are. There is no story in rudimentary form, but something is or is not for the story. Albahari is constantly exploring the possibility of language to tell a story in those moments when all our reliable knowledge betrays us. In that sense, his storytelling is deconstructive.<sup>3</sup> And this seems to be true of Tasić and Tišma as well.

After the collapse of Yugoslavia and his mother’s death, the narrator of *Bait* lives in a self-exile in Canada. He is listening to a series of tapes he recorded of his mother years before. Through these “historical” records, the narrator wants to turn the feeling of losing his mother into a sense of gain, but he continues to cast doubt on the writing itself – the subject truly constitutive of Albahari’s writing – which immediately undermines faith in the commemorative power of literature. On the one hand, the narrator defends the right of literature to give form to the words and thus to the possibility of reification one who is gone; on the other hand, the past cannot be fully recovered, it cannot be the basis of present happiness, because it always contains gaps and flaws. The main mother’s “restored” thought is that life does not exist for someone else to live it instead of us. From the room of life one cannot escape, life is not a fiction that opens up endless possibilities, and a nomadic life without a place is a mere phrase. The story reveals that the mother’s thin and simple thread of philosophy of life is actually something that the narrator himself fails to reach. But his privileged interlocutor friend Donald, a Canadian of Ukrainian descent, also fails to reach any kind of philosophy of life. Donald considers himself a determined man, and he constantly criticizes skeptic Europeans who doubt their actions. Yet, when he carefully reads the narrator’s manuscript about his mother, Donald, paralyzed, remains without his characteristic smile.

What kind of experience is it? In spite of the mother’s resilience, life is diminishing in her story. Although without any background in theory and philosophy, the mother is the undisputed critic of human-

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<sup>3</sup> “Each time that I say ‘deconstruction and X (regardless of the concept or the theme),’ this is the prelude to a very singular division that turns this X into, or rather makes appear in this X, an impossibility that becomes its proper and sole possibility, with the result that between the X as possible and the ‘same’ X as impossible, there is nothing but a relation of homonymy, a relation for which we have to provide an account ... For example, here referring myself to demonstrations I have already attempted ..., gift, hospitality, death itself (and therefore so many other things) can be possible only as impossible, as the im-possible, that is, unconditionally” (Derrida 300).

ism and *a fortiori* historiography: for one who claims that all humans are the same, there are no individuals. The narrator is forced by the narration to laugh at the expense of the ruling ideology of endless choice, to a life perceived as a series of possibilities. The narrator's initial belief that art was more than life becomes suddenly meaningless, because how to create sublime art when there was nothing sublime in what his mother told him? But neither can the narrator be responsible for history being banal and of telling a story from post-historic and post-utopian times, immersed in reflections on a former country where everyone spoke the same language, which is a form of Babylonian but also Job's destiny. Knowledge is, however, also possible in the absence of light. The narrator – as we find out, by profession is a translator and writer who has previously written long poems that no one wanted to publish – suspicion, thankfully, inherits from his mother, including self-doubt, marked by conditioning: “If I could write ...” The story is like a Chinese box: the novel is written by an educated writer (who read Schulz, Kiš, Nabokov ...) who is not a writer and is a writer, but even his “rude” writing is disturbed by “earthquakes caused by the incursions of parallel realities.” Therefore, in *Bait* we are reading an emerging story that refuses to present itself as a finished work (see Gvozden, *Romanopišćeva opklada* 24–26).

The similar “deconstructive turn” is visible in the novel *Rain and Paper* (2004) by Vladimir Tasić. The outlook of the novel is calibrated to reveal the widespread presence of filtering, refraction, inversion, deformation (Smethurst 66; see also Gvozden, “Postmoderni hronotop”). Tasić's characters seek out the authentic, living emotion under the surface of social roles, circling of information, purple sensations, neon spectacles, rampant competition, omnipresent rhetorical flights. The novel speaks convincingly of a desire, as deep as it is difficult to satisfy, for finding moments in which the simulation of the space-time of the postmodern present becomes its true creative and epistemic sublimation. Narrator Tanja, born in the author's home town of Novi Sad, grew up with a father in an atmosphere that she could not even clearly determine: “When I think about my family, I, strictly speaking, do not think. I arrange pictures and impressions. Usually, as in a silent movie, the word ‘madmen’ appears in the shot, which initially referred to my father but over time spanned a whole generation or two” (Tasić 17). Of course, the mirror-image is only part of Tanja's self-perception, of her sexuality, of her playing the role of an attractive woman, that is, she herself is part of a simulation that would only be perfect if it were not destroyed by strong self-reflection. In one important layer, the novel is

an elegant story of the fatal growth of melanoma of Tanja's self-awareness, of spreading her knowledge of father, mother, ancestors, own city, friends and the world as it is weaved in our own isolated, but also mediated, all-pervading images. The growth of corrosive self-awareness is accompanied by an obsessive knowledge of myths, which, of course, have long been deprived of their original role in time and space, but which are a form of giving current, local meaning to an action. In addition, the reference to mythic stories in the postmodern world is a warning addressed to the erasure of people, worlds, memories in time and space. The novel is made up of voices, of the sociolects, of the former worlds enchanted through the buzz of language, through symbols and stereotypes, short-lived myths, variable wavelengths of thoughts and memories. But that side of the novel, that present-ness and not past-ness of history, in the sense that the present shapes our experiences of the past, can carry cheerfulness, even laughter that makes sense of existence in time and space.

How to find a place in contemporary time and space? Liminal existence seems, at one point, to the heroes of *Rain and Paper* as the best solution, that is, a life composed of stories, of confessions, of music, of echoes of myths, psychology, history, astrology, films, popular culture, scientific knowledge ... The characters in this novel seek the life-giving emotion in the depths of the ocean that lurks beneath the foam of social roles, the circulation of information, the pink sensations, neon spectacles, universal competition, ubiquitous rhetorical momentum. During narration, in addition to conjuring up the surface of the flux of modernity, the narrator draws parallels of meaninglessness in one temporal vertical of fear, manifested in the fates historical figure of Soviet inventor Leo Termen (Five) and her grandmother (Two), which serve to illustrate not so much the impossibility of escaping history as the present-ness of history, a possible leap from the time-space of modernity, the deceptiveness of alternatives, failure of projections of meaning to the past as a form of emancipation, but also to the future, as the carrier of utopian resolution. In a pursuit of a better world, only the distinctly individual, marginal hope of the narrator remains, the hope she cannot share with anyone, and which can only find a place in the final pages of the novel that are, in the narrative inversion of linearity, its true beginning (chapters in the novel range from number 10 to number 1). The deceptive, fragile consolation for the superficiality and cynicism of the contemporary world is, in addition to the friendship of young people that led to the performance of "Clio and Terpsichore," the idea that one day there may be a world that will marvel at this, our world, as

Tanya wondered in childhood when she first heard the expression from her grandfather – “the eyes are the mirror of the soul” (Tasić 24). More figurative than discursive, *Rain and Paper* is a painful and hard-to-digest tale of the contemporary world, because it implies that the comfort to this world might come not from a utopian past but from a hard-to-imagine different world, somewhat resembling the imagined creation of Renaissance wizards, created by the fusion of faith and knowledge.

Slobodan Tišma’s novel *Bernardi’s Room: For Voice (Countertenor) and Orchestra* (2011) has a striking beginning, the title of the first chapter “In the Shell” is poetic and ambiguous in a way that hints at an interesting reading. In the novel, the main emphasis is placed on self-communication (I–I communication), which is a type of communication that is unduly neglected in semiotic models of interpretation. At stake is one more story about the subject’s memory, which includes a family triangle in which the father is the embodiment of cruelty and discipline, while the mother abandoned the father and married a hippie when the storyteller was ten years old. The leitmotif is the story of Bernardo Bernardi (1921–1985), a famous Croatian designer from the period of socialist Yugoslavia. Bernardi became the protagonist of the narrator’s dreams and, in fact, his fascination (or rather a phantasm) at the level of projection of the symbolic order. After all, the description of the alleged room designed by Bernardi is full of contradictory feelings, but it is a kind of *tabula rasa* of the narrator’s existence. Probably this place is a product of the writer’s desires and the logic of the storytelling, though it remains unclear what the problem of this prose is: the writer Pišta himself says that he is not an authority, like his father, that he is not particularly neat, that is, for example, he did not bathe in puberty for months; for fear of loneliness, he is surrounded by people who, like him, are “humiliated and offended,” but he himself lives in the wreck of an old Mercedes that is located in front of his building (so, again, he escaped into the loneliness and fear).

The narrator is haunted by the memory of a drive along the Adriatic Highway, in which a car accident occurred, of which he knows little, but is constantly reminded of the Mercedes shell in which he lives. Pišta does not like to learn, but he likes to think; he has its own delights, such as witchcraft, magic, occultism and, above all, art. This human egg does not like himself, and often even imagined himself as someone else, and even wished to change its asexual gender. In the first part of the novel, the narrator is and is not aware of the truth about himself, he would really like to be exalted, but some heavy loads, of which he is semi-conscious, are pulling him down. The big change comes abruptly

as a *deus ex machina*: Pišta has to move out of the apartment, and now his biggest preoccupation is where to put the Bernardi's room. Then the mother reappears, informing him that his dad has died; after that point, we witness the reinfantilization of the narrator. Now the story tells a cosmic egg on the waves of the ocean, which will end up in police custody from which his mother will deliver him. His former world is wiped off with an eraser so he could find himself in a completely different world. In the last chapter, an anonymous narrator tells the biography of Pišta Petrović, a device known from Gogol's *Dead Souls*.

On the one hand, the most valuable thing in the novel has to be emphasized: the narrator is intentionally superficial, which really sounds fresh in the contemporary Serbian prose scene full of jokers, omniscientists and judges. On the other hand, at times it seems that the alleged non-conformism of narrator Pišta is, in fact, a disguised conformism and that being an artist is an alibi for protected existence. In *Bernardi's room*, as in his earlier works, Tišma moves along the edge: the self is meaningful only in context, but the decay of the real world is also the disintegration of any adequate theory of the self. Is this theory only possible in literature? And then, is art just a deceptive and contentious consolation to the inability to act in the real world? The impression is that, touching on the key problems of modernity, Tišma shows that both something ludic and accidental, in the end, are forms of capitalism, its instruments rather than something that could liberate consciousness and change one's life. The shallow and flimsy idea of Pišta's personality symbolizes the concept of a fragmentary subject that is determined in ways that he or she does not understand (see Gvozden, *Novosadski roman* 114–116).

Now we shall return the crucial paradox of the politics of narrative characteristic for the so-called "reconstructive" novels: it seems that they share the belief that there is the center of the nationhood but that this center is deeply hidden from its members and that its revealing has the value by itself. The center of these allegories is obviously the idea that Serbian culture is something that is above history and politics and that the function of the novel is to recuperate that idea from the oblivion. Actually, this belief of the specific cultural real in the middle of magic probably plays a crucial role in their seductive fictions. All three novels promote palimpsestism as a form of knowledge, but it appears that this whole enterprise lacks irony – and self-irony – based on knowledge of the ideological criteria for inclusion and exclusion mechanisms that determine the resistance or acceptance, or the re-vision of the past. In the level of expression, these novels have challenged the ability of one



truth, but then they contain a suspicious attitude about the one truth that lies behind everything be it ahistorical disappearing from history, eternal siege, or resistance to abstract destiny. This is the attitude that threatens to reduce the multiplicity of political, intellectual, cultural and literary phenomena to easy and cheerful detection of sense, or “destiny.” Of course, it is not enough just to say no. The prerequisite for simple change of destiny – to know the truth – unfortunately is not at all simple to accomplish in the world of plurality we live in. Really, if there is a multiplicity of historical perspectives – clearly stressed by the narrators of the novels – how to give validity to each one and still be suspicious about metanarratives? But the idea of truth is the necessary foundation of any truly practical and political action towards a better world. Therefore, instead of nostalgic evocations of truthfulness, here we are missing the wrestling about what people, in general, can see within the horizon of possible truths about themselves and the world, so it seems that a “deconstructive” novel with its desire to represent contemporary fragmentation is a more plausible approach to an impossible reality.

The novels from the “deconstructive” camp demonstrate that complexity connected with the demise of meta-narratives is not easy to represent in a work of literature. Unlike the novelists from the so-called “reconstructive” camp, “deconstructivists” such as Albahari, Tasić and Tišma “almost never succumbed to the imaginary outlet supplied by nationalism” (Erjavec 14). For the culture, in Mikhail Epstein words, is designed “to liberate a person from the very society in which he is doomed to live. Culture is not a product of society, but a challenge and alternative to society” (Epstein 6). This means that there is also a duality typical of the “reconstructive” camp among “deconstructive” authors, because the books discussed, in addition to the critical tones, contain romantic myths about the spontaneity of desire, and this is most often manifested through the supposed isolation of the aristocratic author’s subject from the undifferentiated surrounding world. But this belief was also reinforced by a sense of the decline of metaphysical values that underpinned the hope that the correspondence between the subject and the world could be reached through socialization and a common hermeneutical horizon. Through the figure of a weak subject, the “deconstructive” novel is able to imprint itself into the unknown, to disrupt codes, to cross the border and the wall of the symbolic order of capitalism and socialism and their production of desire. The impression is that these novels meet the social modes of production not by forging and aestheticizing them, but by expressing them in terms of flux that is difficult, if not impossible to escape. In the end, we must rephrase the

question posed in the middle of this text: Is this kind of “deconstructive” writing simply a case of escapism or does it voice a concrete political idea? It seems these novels also offer both possibilities: it must be admitted that they also accept relativism at the level of metafiction, but at the level of historical interpretation they are looking for reconstructing the subjective experience or even subjective utopia that could be a valid force for a search not only for a possible literature, but also for an (im)possible community. Paradoxically, the “reconstructive” postmodernity, by writing novels without a hero, seeks to locate the common ground in the distant utopian past, while the “deconstructive” postmodernity is still trying to rich the common ground by narrating the hero’s (im)possible contemporary autonomous subjectivity.

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## Srbski roman po koncu utopije: »rekonstruktivno« proti »dekonstruktivnemu« pisanju?

Ključne besede: literatura in politika / srbska književnost / zgodovinski roman / nacionalizem / kulturna identiteta / dekonstrukcija / postmodernizem / Pavić, Milorad / Petković, Radoslav / Petrović, Goran / Albahari, David / Tasić, Vladimir / Tišma, Slobodan

Številni srbski romani osemdesetih in devetdesetih 20. stoletja so se obrnili k starejši, domnevno pozabljeni zgodovini, ki obsega predmoderno obdobje od srednjega veka do razsvetljenstva. Zdi se, da so ta obrat spremljali politični idealizem in narodno-emancipatorična gorečnost po razpadu socialistične Jugoslavije in njene kulturne politike. Ta članek bo kritično raziskal tri izjemno

uspešne primere historičnega postmodernizma v sodobni srbski literaturi: *Hazarski slovar* (1984) Milorada Pavića, *Usoda in komentarji* (1993) Radoslava Petkovića in *Obleganje cerkve svetega Odrešenja (Opsada crkve Svetog Spasa*, 1997) Gorana Petrovića. Ta »zgodovinski obrat« historičnega postmodernizma je mogoče pojasniti tako kot zmoten poizkus povratka h koreninam kakor tudi kot posebno arheologijo, s katero skuša pisanje raziskati nevarni sodobni temelj politične, kulturne in ekonomske tranzicije od socialističnega sistema k demokraciji in kapitalizmu. Zdi se namreč, da ta tip »rekonstruktivnega« romanesknega pristopa, ki ga je mogoče videti kot namerno postmoderno dvojno kodiranje, lahko razumemo kot iskanje srbskega kulturnega kapitala, ki ga je mogoče zlahka – morda kar prezlahka – najti v daljni preteklosti. Članek pa analizira tudi »dekonstruktivne« romane, kot so *Bait* (1996) Davida Albaharija, *Dež in papir (Kiša i hartija*, 2004) Vladimirja Tasića in *Bernardijeva soba* (2011) Slobodana Tišme. Ti romani pokažejo, da kompleksnosti, povezane z zatonom metanaracij, v literarnem delu ni lahko prikazati. »Dekonstruktivni« roman prek figure šibkega subjekta lahko vtisne sebe v neznano, prekinja kode, prečka meje in zid simboličnega reda kapitalizma in socializma ter njune produkcije želje. Na koncu članka je prikazano, kateri paradoksi so inherentni obema tipoma pisanja.

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