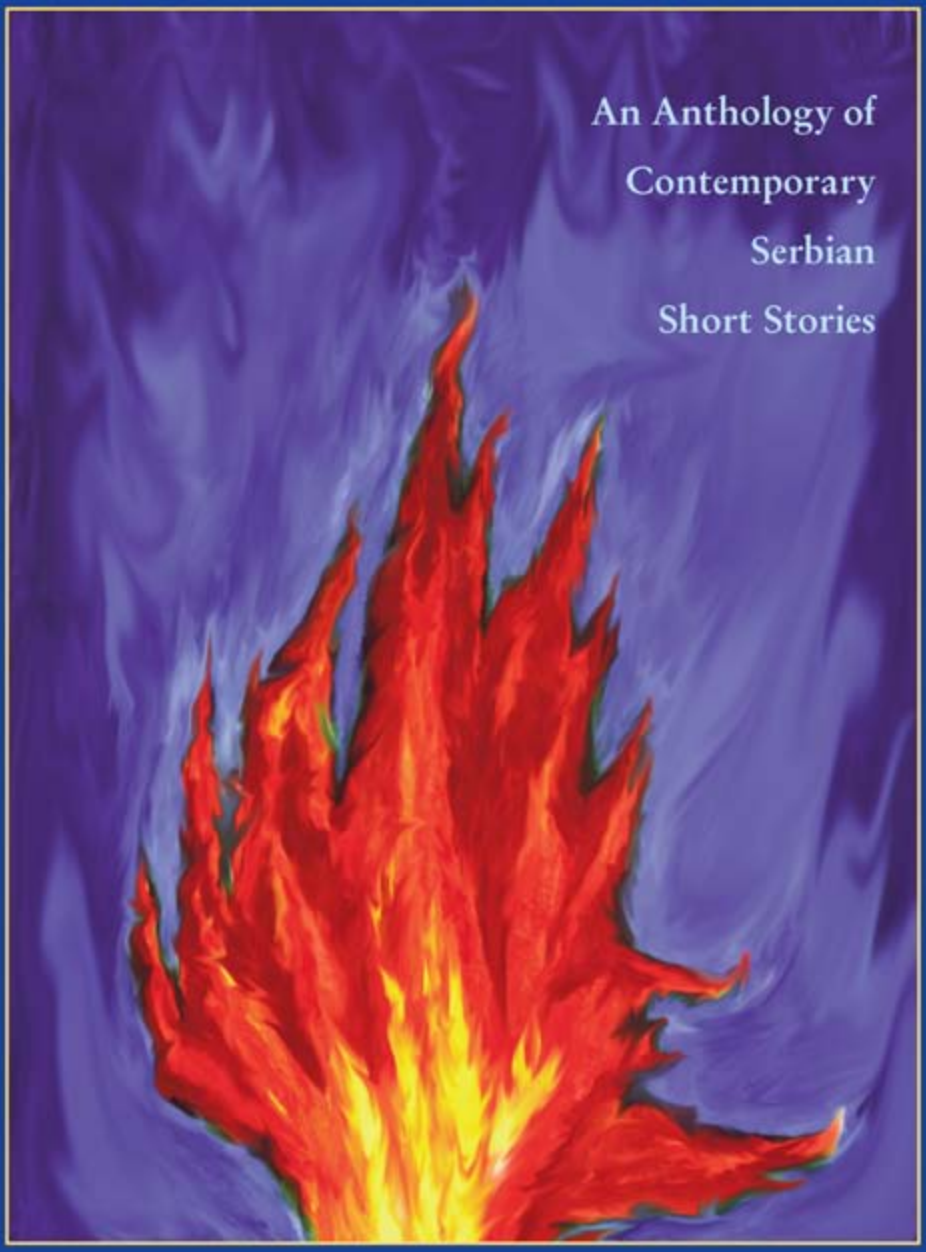
The Prince of Fire



Edited by Radmila J. Gorup and Nadežda Obradović

With a Foreword by Charles Simic

THE PRINCE OF FIRE

PITT SERIES IN RUSSIAN AND
EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES

THE PRINCE OF FIRE

An Anthology of Contemporary Serbian Short Stories

Edited by Radmila J. Gorup
and Nadežda Obradović

With a Foreword by Charles Simic

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The authors of these stories have graciously consented to have them translated and included in this anthology.

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FOREWORD

Ah, the Serbs! Until recently no one knew very much about them in the United States, and now almost everybody has opinions, which like all opinions that have their source in newspapers and television broadcasts, are not only superficial, but often plain wrong. A book of contemporary Serbian stories ought to make things clearer, or more likely, it may make their historical predicament even more baffling for the reader. That is as it should be. The difference between journalism and literature is that the first specializes in simplifying complex issues while the latter makes complex issues even more multifarious. Given the political, religious, and ethnic history of the Balkans, how could it ever be any different?

The primary problem any literature confronts is how to go about representing reality. If that reality includes two world wars, several civil wars (depending on how you count), communism, fascism, nationalism, genocide, and occupation by foreign armies and a dozen other horrors and atrocities to choose from, then the writer is faced not only with an aesthetic, but also a moral problem. To live in such times and to attempt to convey, by whatever literary means one has at one's disposal, what it is like to experience the unimaginable and the unthinkable, is the issue here.

The narrative strategies employed by the writers included in the anthology range between the following two positions:

On one hand, there are writers who roughly continue the long realist tradition, which in Serbia, as elsewhere, had its beginnings in the late nineteenth century. I have in mind here writers like Pavlović, Šćepanović or Mihailović, and a few others, whose stories almost all take place in a

rural setting and are distinguished by a strong feeling for a particular region, its local dialect and customs. They differ from socialist realists of an earlier epoch in that they do not idealize peasant life. In fact, what we have is a violent, blood-and-guts vision of rural life. Theirs is a harsh realism verging on the grotesque. Bad conscience, evil done to the innocent, and powerlessness to change the world are frequent subjects. There's never any doubt in most of these stories that their characters live in a time of astonishing cruelty and injustice. Here's a realism that holds up a funhouse mirror to the world and believes that only its terrifying distortions can be trusted to represent accurately what one has seen and heard.

At the other extreme, we find writers like Pavić, Albahari, Basara, Kiš, Pištalo, Mitrović, Prodanović, and Savić, who practice a Serbian version of magic realism. They mix reality and fantasy in the same story with an irreverence and exhilaration that often reads as a deliberate critique of realism and its claim to tell the truth. These writers have obviously studied and have been influenced by the works of Borges, García Márquez, Schultz, Gombrowicz, Bulgakov, Cortázar, Barthelme, Pyncheon, and Coover. Dream, myth, and folk tale play as much a part in their stories as the experience of living in the city, going to movies, and listening to jazz. Elaborate experiments with form are characteristic of their writing. They've been called postmodernist, and in the last couple of years they have been engaged in a fierce polemic with their counterparts, the so-called traditionalists. The issue, as always in literature, is the choice of tradition, local or foreign, and the divergent ways in which stories can be told. The traditionalists tend to believe in the possibility of an unconscious, native genius, while postmodernists see the writing of stories as a self-conscious act, an act of criticism of the "reality" in realism. Nevertheless, their intention, too, is a more truthful representation of the world they find themselves living in.

Readers of this anthology are lucky to have both. What William Trevor says is true: "Of all literary forms, the short story belongs most unequivocally to the twentieth century." The richness and variety of the stories in this collection may be the result of this polarization and passionate intellectual argument, but is equally due to the amount of sheer talent present on all sides. Regardless of their aesthetic premise, this is a collection of well-told stories that can stand with the best short story collections

anywhere. Danilo Kiš and Milorad Pavić already have international reputations. Svetislav Basara, David Albahari, and a number of others deserve the same. They create literature in the most difficult of historical circumstances and have done so, as we discover here, in many original and memorable ways.

Charles Simic

INTRODUCTION

The genre of the short story has a long and important tradition in Serbian literature. Serbian writers courted this medium before attempting to master the novel, and consequently the novel developed more slowly than the short story in Serbian letters.

The life of the contemporary Serbian short story is associated with the avant-garde journals in which stories are usually published. Consequently, the genre is perceived as a testing ground for new narrative techniques. In that sense, the contemporary Serbian short story is a genuine reflection of contemporary Serbian literature as a whole. Moreover, every author included in this collection has also written poetry or novels or both.

Serbian literature did not experience a revolutionary break with its past traditions, even though it had to exist under a communist regime after World War II. Before the war, there was a strong surrealist movement in Serbia, whose proponents made up the prewar leftist avant-garde. Many of these leftist prewar poets and writers, like Dušan Matić and Marko Ristić, survived the war and were able to take up positions in the postwar literary establishment in Yugoslavia. The political repression that marked other spheres of postwar life made a loop around the arts, and the doctrine of socialist realism never took root in Yugoslavia on the same scale as in the USSR and the other East European countries.

In the wake of Yugoslavia's break with Stalin in 1948, Yugoslav writers began to enjoy greater creative freedom. In subsequent years, a large number of Western literary works were translated and appeared in

Yugoslav journals. Since the 1950s, Yugoslav writers have been able to follow Western literary trends and Western critical theory.

The works of Miodrag Bulatović and Antonije Isaković represent a turning away from the uniformity of themes and styles of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Bulatović combined realistic prose with elements of fantasy, and that freed the author from the requirement of providing realistic descriptions or respecting cause and effect in his narratives. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new trend emerged called the New Style Prose. A synthesis of the traditional and the modern, this prose attempted to present the changes in society by employing the style of documentary realism and by exploiting the language of various milieus and regions as a poetic device. This generation of writers finally consolidated the ties between contemporary Serbian literature and its prewar tradition.

Starting with the mid-1970s, modern Serbian writers have shown a tendency toward subjective prose. Good prose, according to Henry James, reproduces life. Contemporary Serbian writers do not wish to reproduce life, at least not in the traditional fashion. They shun the realistic story. Instead of employing a prose style that relies on observation, a linear narrative, and psychological motivation, they emphasize narrative form itself and the process of narration. Many writers use a technique that spans the real and the imaginary, relying on the language of dreams, lyricism, and the phantasmagoric.

Younger writers, only a few of whom are included in this anthology, are responding to the challenges of modern media and film. They show a preference for the very short, plotless story that has neither a rigid structure nor a fixed stylistic profile.

Ever since the 1960s, the quality of the Serbian prose has been rising steadily. The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of several internationally recognized writers: Bulatović, Kiš, Kovač, Pekić, and Pavić. But the group of outstanding talents is much larger than those just named.

Thus the contemporary Serbian short story is characterized by impressive achievements and an astonishing variety. Everyone seems to be telling a story in her or his own way. There is no single dominant model of storytelling. Like contemporary South American literature, Serbian prose today represents a felicitous synthesis in which postmodernist and traditional elements interact. It deserves to be made accessible to a larger Anglophone reading public.

The past always informs the present, and even after so many years, the traumatic events of the last world war weigh heavily on the conscience of the Serbian writers presented in this anthology. The Serbs, numerically a small nation, have experienced a disproportional share of historical tragedies, and the memory of these experiences is assimilated in contemporary literature. The tragedy of the present-day civil war in the former Yugoslavia makes it even more poignant.

While history in this selection is not presented in an objective and epic fashion, it is nevertheless there, internalized and deconstructed on the level of individual protagonists. Events taking place in the Balkans for several years now are presented on international television and newspapers daily. Public curiosity about the Serbs in particular has been fanned by a variety of conflicting media reports on the past and present of the Serbian nation. Stereotyped images have been established about the Serbs in the public consciousness. An anthology of contemporary Serbian short stories may help restore a more realistic and differentiated view about the region and about its present tragic conflict among the reading public.

A majority of the authors selected for the anthology belong to the generation born between around 1930 and 1960. The older writers of the group include those who appeared on the literary scene in the 1960s and became well known, nationally and internationally, in the 1970s and 1980s. The younger ones, who started to publish in the late 1970s, are beginning to gain wide recognition. While the cutoff point is to some extent arbitrary, the editors believe that the present anthology can serve as a continuation of *The New Writing in Yugoslavia*, edited by Bernard Johnson (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970). However, even though we have tried to include the most prominent contemporary writers, for a variety of reasons some very well-known writers could not be included.

This project took several years to accomplish, and many individuals deserve credit for it. I first would like to thank my dear friend and coeditor Nadežda Obradović for all of her help, primarily for encouraging me to undertake this work. My thanks also go to all the authors and their families, who granted us free copyright so that this project could be realized. I would like to express my deep gratitude to my colleagues and friends who translated the stories, some more than one. They are Bogdan Rakić, Dragan Milivojević, Stephen M. Dickey, Paul M. Foster, Christina

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Finally, it has been a pleasure to work with the University of Pittsburgh Press and the editors Catherine Marshall and Jane Flanders.

Radmila J. Gorup

THE PRINCE OF FIRE

Aleksandar Tišma

Aleksandar Tišma (b. 1924) is a poet, prose writer, and essayist. He has published several collections of short stories: *Wrongs* (1961), *Violence* (1965), *Dead Angle* (1973), *Return to Peace* (1977), *The School of Atheism* (1978). His novels are entitled *Following the Black-Haired Girl* (1969), *The Book on Blam* (1972), *Fugitives* (1981), *Oaths and Plots* (1983), *Capo* (1987). *The Wide Door* (1988), and *Those We Love* (1990).

In his best works Tišma successfully accomplishes a synthesis of tradition and modern writing techniques. The essence of his prose is an atypical narrative about typical, ordinarly occurrences, while the historical is always given indirectly and without an epic perspective.

THE WHOLE SELF

True, my uncle was an overproud genius of sorts, but he was not crazy. I say this despite the interpretations the family is wont to dole out with the conventional dispiritedness of those confronting something that transcends the bounds of ordinary understanding. In doing what he did, Uncle was obeying a monstrously overdeveloped conceit and, in my view, an inordinate sense of compassion.

When he was introduced to my aunt, at a party for young ladies during the holidays, she was already engaged to a very ambitious director of a sugar refinery just outside town, a man who would later become a member of Parliament and who, in World War II, would be hanged by the Germans from a post in front of the administration building of the very company he had run so successfully for two decades. Uncle bore no resemblance whatsoever to this adroit businessman, with his quick little eyes and movements. Uncle was a giant of a man, not tall so much as broad-shouldered, with a big head of unruly curly hair that would have made him look quite wild had it not been for the steady, calm, round brown eyes peering out from underneath, between the high arched brow and fleshy cheeks with the short straight nose. He was very quiet, but there really was no need for him to talk much. He told Aunt that he was thinking of abandoning his theology studies in order to devote himself to his "own writing," and he recited a couple of verses of what at the time was modern French poetry, thus enhancing the impression that nature had been so generous in creating. After seeing him several times, Aunt announced to the family that she was breaking off her engagement.

The family found this hard to accept. My grandfather was a wholesaler

and could not imagine having a twenty-year-old theologian for a son-in-law—and that was before he knew that the fellow was planning to leave the priesthood without ever actually joining it. The girl was subjected to the full range of pressures known to the middle classes at the time: she was whisked off to a spa, forbidden to see him, cajoled, threatened, slapped, and her freedom of movement restricted. The pressure continued for four and a half months—all of that summer and early autumn—whereupon Aunt swallowed twenty sachets of sleeping powder. They found her unconscious in her white room upstairs in Grandfather's house, and it took days of stomach pumping, injections, and shock treatment to revive her. The poisoning left her with a damaged and weakened heart for the rest of her short life.

The family was frightened for her, naturally, but then, after the exhausting battle to save the sinful woman's life, they were disgusted by her. They now handed her over to her seducer without objection, discarding her like something that upon first use, as it were, had proved perishable and therefore worthless. Uncle left the seminary and the capital, and rented a room for the two of them on the outskirts of town. Thereafter, and until the end, he supported my aunt by giving foreign language lessons, devoting all his free time to his "own work."

Today it is impossible to say anything specific about that work because Uncle never published any of it, and whatever he had in manuscript he ultimately burned. All we have to rely on, therefore, is what we were occasionally told by Aunt, who, after a certain punitive rupture in relations, was invited back into the homes of some of the more tender-hearted members of the family, including my mother. But even Aunt had no real facts to offer—she was so sure of the worth and future success of Uncle's work that all you could get out of her were exclamations. Did her faith in something that was never to be indicate a certain blindness, even a certain limitation, perhaps? She was no expert on literature, of course, but she did have a good clear head on her shoulders—as absolutely everyone in the family acknowledged—and she was blind only to the extent that she transposed her confidence in Uncle's human worth and character unreservedly onto his deeds. Rightly so, too, in my opinion, because what else lends value to a work if not the character of its creator? There are instances, of course, where the personal element, even when bolstered by a strong will, is not enough, but the exception merely proves the rule.

Given its initial attitude, which it felt it had to justify, the family was

naturally skeptical about Aunt's effusiveness. As an ever present member of the family, I was forced, as it were, to follow from various vantage points how Uncle's work was, or was not, progressing.

In response to my mother's usually repeated invitations, Aunt would come, fragile and beautiful, looking girlishly youthful, despite the pallor caused by her infirmity. She would sit down on the edge of the armchair, casting a dreamy, yearning look over the back of the chair, sipping her café au lait and chatting breathlessly—even animated conversation was a strain on her lungs—and then, often for no particular reason, as if unable to suppress a thought that had been weighing on her mind the entire time, she would burst out with: "Ratko is working on a play now." And then, closing her blue, always slightly wet, compassionate eyes, she would add: "I'm sure it will be wonderful!"

And months or years later, Father would suddenly ask Mother, not without a bite to his words: "What ever happened to that wonderful play of Ratko's?" He did not expect an answer, of course. In the meantime, Aunt had long since stopped mentioning the play, announcing some long story or poem instead.

So much for Aunt. What about Uncle? How did he bear the nonfulfillment of his ideas? That is to say, if he did bear it, because of the grumbling (as he did for nearly fifteen years); was he not then really crazy? I think his silent perseverance shows the opposite to be true. It is maniacs who impatiently, unscrupulously, often even cunningly, push their products—their patents or poems or prophesies—onto the community of normal men, attributing failure to the unreadiness of that same community to accept them, seeking a remedy not within themselves but in the guise of new patrons. Uncle, however, did not foist his writings onto anyone; he never even showed them—except once, and that was the first time and the last and not done for his own sake; no, he himself rejected his writings, all of them, one by one, thus proving himself to have a very critical eye. But why then, if he kept rejecting everything, did he not give up sooner? Again, part of the answer can be found in Aunt's incidental comments, and still more, I think, in her boundless faith as victim and invalid, which left him obligated. "Ratko doesn't care when he will succeed. He doesn't even care whether he will succeed. He just cares about finding the right form in which to express himself."

To express himself. But which self? The self of the apostate and pen-

niless language teacher, the self of the uncorrupted worker and uncorrupted husband in the midst of a pack of filthy egotists, the self of the handsome, strapping zealot surrounded by provincial gnomes, or the self of a man helpless in the face of society's needs and those of nature? Probably all of them together, the whole self at once, because Aunt, who kept changing the descriptive genre of his writing, finally began talking about "the work" without indicating anything more, a big book requiring long years of labor.

At this point, the burden of effort that went into this strangely uncommon marriage began to leave visible traces on Uncle himself. He was still enormous, strong, and handsome, even though his mop of hair was streaked with gray—he had passed the thirty-five-year mark. In other words, he was strong and good-looking, but underneath that external frame, that shield of armor, that sculpting, there seemed to be a growing hollowness. He still wore the suits of his youth—he had no money to buy new ones—and though they hung lightly and spotlessly from the unchanged gigantic frame of his body, they looked as if they had been worn so thin from the friction of the same repeated movements that they would disintegrate like cigarette ash. He walked down the street ramrod straight, marching like a wound-up toy soldier, his earthy dark face towering above the heads of passers-by, his big chestnut-colored eyes fixed on a sight visible to him alone. He often failed to recognize us, and we would turn around to look at him.

Aunt alone still saw him that way, but she obviously did not see how others saw her: impoverished and enfeebled by a confined life, a life without respite for the irrevocably captured former beauty. Admittedly, even when the conversation turned to more mundane matters, she did not hide the fact that theirs was a hard life, which meant it was getting harder because of rising costs, because of the dwindling number of students, because of the various formal obstacles the authorities placed in their way. But in describing their difficulties, it was as if she was vaunting them—her eyes shone feverishly bright, her short breath was convulsed with emotion. Ratko works terribly hard. Ratko makes up for lost time at night. Ratko is burning himself out. Masked as concern, was this not the best possible news, a step toward accomplishing the supreme and only important goal?

My aunt's slightly comic courage, by now tedious and even unnoticed

by us, was shattered by a crime. His pupils banged on their teacher's door in vain; the neighbors—whose narrow lives made them suspicious—broke in only to find Aunt in bed with her head smashed, and Uncle, fully dressed, lying on his back next to her bed, with his veins slashed. And lots of blood on the floor and lots of ashes by the stove.

Needless to say, the incident left the public shocked—as anyone can see who cares to leaf through the November 7 and 8, 1938, issues of our local paper, the *Herald*. But the articles—which, while not particularly detailed, were written in the cheapest kind of journalese—also showed a total absence of any real surprise or doubt, a response that was entirely in keeping with my own recollections. For fifteen years, Uncle's haughty yet unfounded ambition had astonished people, and now, in hindsight, it seemed dreadful but natural that the only way this continuing mania could have ended was in the very worst paroxysm of self-destruction. Of course, there was also another victim here: Aunt, who had no eccentricity other than being blind to his; but was that not sufficient to condemn her to ruin as well? In a fit of deep, dark despair, when he decided to cut short his life, this madman dragged down with him whoever was close to him—indeed, the only person close to him: my aunt.

Only one detail jarred slightly with this generally accepted picture, as witness the closing paragraph in the *Herald*'s first report, which mentions the conclusions of the police investigation. There was a certain deliberateness about the scene in which the dead couple was discovered: the woman's head smashed with a single calculated swing of the axe, obviously delivered while she was peacefully asleep; the burning of the papers and slashing of the veins, which requires the utmost resolve on the part of the suicide, because it gives him time to reconsider even after having taken the fatal step. All this seemed to call into question the theory of suicide in a moment of despair, taking the life of the other person as well; it pointed to a different, unknown, but deliberate motive.

But since the facts of the drama and distribution of the roles were so vividly clear, the investigation did not make any detailed examination of what was a purely academic contradiction; in its second report, the *Herald* did not even mention it. It merely published the statements of those questioned: my father and my mother's brother, both of whom enumerated Uncle's offenses, which had been so fatal for my poor aunt; then the neighbors, who talked mostly about the couple's financial straits;

and finally one of Uncle's childhood friends, a singing teacher in the local school, a bachelor and closet alcoholic who had moved to our town long after Uncle and had developed the habit of visiting him every Saturday afternoon, his last remaining friend. He was the only person to offer, apart from general, already known information, something new. Two months earlier, Uncle had entrusted him with a fragment of one of his huge literary works in progress, which he asked his friend to send, under his name, to a publisher he knew for an expert opinion. Four days before the tragedy, the friend had told Uncle of the publisher's negative reply. He told him the news in his own apartment and had returned the manuscript. This detail simply confirmed the accepted view: suicide out of despair, which in a moment of insane resolve had necessitated taking the life of the innocent, peacefully sleeping woman as well.

Many years later, however, I learned from a nephew of that same friend (by then deceased)—the nephew being a man my own age whom I chanced to meet on the coast—one other detail which I think confirms the hypothesis that this had been a crime of mercy—or to be more precise, that Uncle had not been in the grips of anger or despair, with himself as the main target, but rather that his primary goal had been to kill Aunt, with suicide playing only a subordinate role as the by-product of that main act. It was she, not himself, that Uncle wanted to spare the humiliation of failure. Long before the event, he had probably begun to doubt his own ability to accomplish this "all-embracing work"—as shown by his touchingly helpless move to submit it for an opinion under someone else's name. Finally, by the time he had spilled her blood and his own, he had already known the reply for four days. But I have yet to report what detail it was that, during my conversations with the nephew of Uncle's friend—those long evening talks which I arranged apprehensively—leaped out like a white stone popping out of a clenched fist in the dark, shining for a second in the moonlight, only to hit the floor, showing how close all things are to the ground. The detail in question was the fact that the deaths had taken place on the night before Saturday, which was the day of the weekly visit of Uncle's friend, who certainly had no idea of the effect of his news on my aunt and thus might repeat it in front of her.

Now you may wonder: why, instead of killing the woman he faithfully loved, as well as himself, whom she faithfully loved, didn't Uncle

simply ask his friend to hold his tongue and forget the whole story regarding the publisher? The reason, I think, was that he had an overriding inner need for purity. And also perhaps he was afraid of how Aunt would be affected not so much by the news itself as by his own now listless, indifferent acceptance of that news—an acceptance he would be unable to conceal—and she would then have to realize something that hitherto even he had only begun to understand, something he might have been able to bear on his own: that their splendidly sacrificed life was a delusion.

By killing her before she came to realize this, by killing her while she was asleep, he could tell himself that he was finishing something she herself had bravely attempted to do fifteen years earlier, and that by connecting the two acts, hers and his own, into their final irreversible outcome, he was annulling that failure, that delusion shared between them, for which he himself bore the blame.

Translated by Christina Pribićević-Zorić

Milorad Pavić

Milorad Pavić (born in 1929 in Belgrade) is the best-known contemporary Serbian prose writer. Pavić is also a poet, as well as expert on the Serbian baroque and symbolist literature, theoretician, translator, university professor, and member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Pavić began his university career at the Sorbonne and the Jagić Institute for Slavic Philology in Vienna. He currently teaches at the University of Belgrade. Pavić first published his scholarly works and poetry, then moved to prose fiction. He has published ten studies in literary history, several books of poetry and four collections of short stories: *The Iron Curtain* (1973), *Saint Mark's Horses* (1976), *Borzoi* (1979), *New Belgrade Stories* (1981), and *The Inverted Glove* (1989); and five novels: *The Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984), *Landscape Painted with Tea* (1988), *The Inner Side of the Wind* (1991), *The Last Love in Constantinople* (1993), and *The Hat Made of Fish Skin* (1996). In 1993 Pavić published a play, *For Ever and a Day*, which appeared in English in 1997.

Pavić's works are greatly respected both at home and abroad. *Landscape Painted with Tea* was translated into eleven languages, and *Dictionary of the Khazars,* a best-seller in France and England and one of the year's seven best works of fiction in the United States in 1988, was translated into twenty-three. *The Inner Side of the Wind* was published in the United States and several European countries in 1993.

Pavić's prose is characterized by the increasing inclusion of the fantastic into the realistic narrative. This gives an impression of an inexhaustible text and it is highly regarded by writers of hyperfiction.

THE WEDGEWOOD TEA SET

In the story you are about to read, the protagonists' names will be given at the end instead of the beginning.

At the capital's mathematics faculty, my younger brother, who was a student of philology and military science, introduced us to each other. Since she was searching for a companion with whom to prepare for Mathematics I, we began studying together, and as she did not come from another town as I did, we studied in her parents' big house. Quite early each morning, I passed by the shining Layland-Buffalo car, which belonged to her. In front of the door I would stoop down and look for a stone, put it in my pocket, ring the doorbell, and go upstairs. I carried no books, notebooks, or instruments; everything stayed at her place and was always ready for work. We studied from seven to nine, then we were served breakfast and would continue till ten; from ten to eleven we would usually go over the material already covered. All that time, I would be holding the stone in my hand. In case I should doze off, it would fall on the floor and wake me up before anyone noticed. After eleven she would continue to study, but not I. So we prepared for the mathematics exam every day except Sunday, when she studied alone. She very quickly realized that I could not keep up with her and that my knowledge lagged more and more behind hers. She thought that I went home to catch up on the lessons I had missed, but she never said a thing. "Let everyone like an earthworm eat his own way through," she thought, aware that by teaching another she wasn't teaching herself.

When the September term came, we agreed to meet on the day of the examination and take the exam together. Excited as she was, she didn't have time to be especially surprised that I didn't show up and that I did not take the exam, either. Only after she had passed the exam did she ask herself what had happened to me. But I didn't appear till winter. "Why should every bee gather honey, anyway?" she concluded, but still asked herself sometimes, "What's he up to? He is probably one of those smile-carriers, who buys his merchandise in the East, and sells it in the West, or vice versa . . ."

When Mathematics II was on the agenda, she suddenly met me one morning, noticing with interest the new patches on my elbows and the newly grown hair, which she had not seen before. It was again the same. Each morning I would come at a certain hour, and she would descend through the green and layered air, as if through water full of cool and warm currents, open the door for me, sleepy, but with that mirror-breaking look of hers. She would watch for one moment how I squeezed out my beard into the cap and how I took off my gloves. Bringing together the middle finger and the thumb, with a decisive gesture I would simultaneously turn them inside out, thus taking them both off with the same movement. When that was over, she would immediately go to work. She made up her mind to study with all her strength, which happened daily. With untiring will and regularity, she delved into all details of the subject, no matter if it was morning, when we started out fresh, after breakfast, or toward the end, when she worked a bit more slowly but not skipping a single thing. I would still quit at eleven, and she would soon notice again that I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing, that my looks grew old in an hour, and that I was behind her again. She would look at my feet, one of which was always ready to step out, while the other was completely still. Then they would change positions.

When the January term arrived, she had the feeling that I could not pass the exam, but she was silent, feeling a trifle guilty herself. "Anyway," she concluded, "should I kiss his elbow to make him learn? If he cuts bread on his head, that's his own affair . . ."

When I didn't show up then either, she was nevertheless surprised, and after finishing the exam looked for the list of candidates to check whether I was perhaps scheduled for the afternoon or some other day.

To her great surprise, my name wasn't on the list for that day at all—or any other day, for that matter. It was quite obvious: I hadn't even signed up for that term.

When we saw each other again in May, she was preparing Concrete. When she asked me if I was studying for the exams I had not taken before, I told her that I, too, was preparing Concrete, and we continued to study together as in the old times, as if nothing had happened. We spent the whole spring studying, and when the June term came, she had already realized that I would not appear this time, either, and that she wouldn't be seeing me till fall. She watched me pensively with beautiful eyes so far apart that there was space between them for an entire mouth. And naturally, things were the same once again. She took and passed the Concrete exam, and I didn't even bother to come. Returning home satisfied with her success, but totally puzzled as far as my position was concerned, she noticed that, in the hurry of the previous day, I had forgotten my notebooks. Among them she caught sight of my student's booklet. She opened it and discovered with astonishment that I was not a student of mathematics at all, but of something else, and that I had been passing my exams regularly. She recalled the interminable hours of our joint study, which for me must have been a great strain without purpose, a big waste of time, and she asked the inevitable question: what for? Why did I spend all that time with her studying subjects that had nothing to do with my interests and the exams that I had to pass? She started thinking and came to one conclusion: one should always be aware of what is passed over in silence. The reason for all that was not the exam but she herself. Who would have thought that I would be so shy and unable to express my feelings for her? She immediately went to the rented room where I lived with a couple of people my age from Asia and Africa, was surprised by the poverty she saw, and received the information that I had gone home. When they also gave her the address of a small town near Salonica, she took her Buffalo without hesitation and started off toward the Aegean coast in search of me, having made up her mind to act as if she had discovered nothing unusual. So it was.

She arrived at sunset and found the house she had been told about wide open, with a great white bull tied to a nail, upon which fresh bread was impaled. Inside she noticed a bed, on the wall an icon, below the

icon a red tassel, a pierced stone tied to a string, a top, a mirror, and an apple. A young naked person with long hair was lying on the bed, tanned by the sun, back turned to the window and resting on one elbow. The long ridge of the spine, which went all the way down the back and ended between the hips, curving slightly, vanished beneath a rough army blanket. She had the impression that the girl would turn any moment and that she would also see her breasts, deep, strong, and glowing in the warm evening. When that really took place, she saw that it was not a woman at all lying on the bed. Leaning on one arm I was chewing my moustache full of honey, which substituted for dinner. When she was noticed and brought into the house, she could still not help thinking of that first impression of finding a female person in my bed. But that impression, as well as the fatigue from a long drive, were soon forgotten. From a mirror-bottomed plate she received a double dinner: for herself and her soul in the mirror: some beans, a nut, and fish, and before the meal a small silver coin, which she held, as did I, under the tongue while eating. So one supper fed all four of us: the two of us and our two souls in the mirrors. After dinner she approached the icon and asked me what it represented.

"A television set," I told her. In other words, it is the window to another world which uses mathematics quite different from yours.

"How so?" she asked.

"Quite simple," I answered. "Machines, space crafts, and vehicles built on the basis of your quantitative mathematical evaluations are founded upon three elements, which are completely lacking in quantity. These are: singularity, the point, and the present moment. Only a sum of singularities constitutes a quantity; singularity itself is deprived of any quantitative measurement. As far as the point is concerned, since it doesn't have a single dimension, not width or height or length or depth, it can undergo neither measurement nor computation. The smallest components of time, however, always have one common denominator: that is the present moment, and it, too, is devoid of quantity and is immeasureable. Thus, the basic elements of your quantitative science represent something to whose very nature every quantitative approach is alien. How then should I believe in such a science? Why are machines made according to these quantitative misconceptions of such a short lifespan, three, four or more times shorter than the human ones? Look, I also have a

white 'buffalo' like you. Only, he is made differently from yours, which was manufactured at Layland. Try him out and you will see that in a way he is better than the one you own."

"Is he tame?" she asked, smiling.

"Certainly," I answered. "Go ahead and try."

In front of the door she stroked the big white bull and slowly climbed onto his back. When I also mounted him, turning my back to the horns and facing her, I drove him by the sea, so that he had two feet in the water and the other two feet on the sand. She was surprised at first when I started to undress her. Piece by piece of her clothing fell into the water; then she started unbuttoning me. At one moment she stopped riding on the bull and started riding on me, feeling that I was growing heavier and heavier inside her. The bull beneath us did everything that we would otherwise have had to do ourselves, and she could tell no longer who was driving her pleasure, the bull or I. Sitting upon the double lover, she saw through the night how we passed by a forest of white cypresses, by people who were gathering dew and pierced stones on the seashore, by people who were building fires inside their own shadows and burning them up, by two women bleeding light, by a garden two hours long, where birds sang in the first hour and evening came in the second, where fruit bloomed in the first and there was a blizzard behind the winds. Then she felt that all the weight from me had passed into her and that the spurred bull had suddenly turned and taken her into the sea, leaving us finally to the waves that would separate us . . .

However, she never told me a word about her discovery. In the fall, when she was getting ready to graduate and when I offered to study with her again, she was not the least bit surprised. As before, we studied every day from seven until breakfast and then until half past ten; only now she did not try to help me master the subject I was doing and also stayed after ten-thirty for half an hour, which separated us from the books. When she graduated in September, she wasn't surprised at all when I didn't take the examination with her.

She was really surprised when she did not see me any more after that. Not that day, nor the following days, weeks, or examination terms. Never again. Astonished, she came to the conclusion that her assessment of my feelings for her was obviously wrong. Confused at not being able to tell what it was all about, she sat one morning in the same room in which we

had studied together for years; then she caught sight of the Wedgewood tea set, which had been on the table since breakfast. Then she realized. For months, day after day, with tremendous effort and an immeasurable loss of time and energy, I had worked with her only in order to get a warm breakfast every morning, the only meal I was able to eat during those years. Having realized that, she asked herself another thing. Was it possible that in fact I hated her?

At the end, there is one more obligation left: to name the protagonists of this story. If the reader has not thought of it already, here is the answer. My name is the Balkans. Hers, Europe.

Translated by Darka Topali

Borislav Pekić

Borislav Pekić (1930–1992), one of the most popular writers in Yugoslavia, was born in Podgorica, Montenegro. As a high school student in Belgrade, Pekić was sentenced to fifteen years in jail for his democratic ideas. He served five years. After graduating from the University of Belgrade, he worked as a film script writer. He began to publish in the 1960s, after which he left for London. For the rest of his life, he shared his residence between London and Belgrade.

Pekić was a prolific writer, an immaculate and rich stylist. He left a large opus that includes, in addition to plays and essays, novels and short story collections: *Time of Miracles* (1965), *The Houses of Belgrade* (1970), *The Rise and Fall of Icarus Gubelkijan* (1975), *The Defense and the Last Days* (1977), *How to Quell the Vampire* (1977), *Rabies* (1983), *The Years Devoured by Locusts* (1988), *The Golden Fleece* (1978–1986), *The New Jerusalem* (1988), and *Atlantis* (1990).

Pekić was a member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. His works appeared in many world languages. *The Time of Miracles* and *The Houses of Belgrade* were published in English in 1976 and 1978.

MEGALOS MASTORAS AND HIS WORK

1347 A.D.

> The Muses gave us one more life,
> Only let us not praise them to excess,
> From one illusion creating two.
>
> Anonymous Greek poet

There are some men whose lives are traces of hot iron impressed into the ground. Wherever they walk, the ground burns beneath their feet. Long after they have passed, the smoke of scorched earth still hurts one's eyes. Each resembles a star, the birth of which we see—but do not hear—millions of years after it has gone out. The death of an old sun resembles the birth of a new one; the death of such a man is always the birth of something new and unknown.

They are creatures of Fire. Fire is their Element. It is their nature and destiny.

Demetrios Kyr Angelos, *kallitechnes*—an artistic woodcarver from Alea, the ancient Arcadian Tegea, on the Peloponnesus, was one such man. His legend lives on anywhere Greeks live, from Epiros in the north to Crete in the south. And in the Woodcarvers' Guild it can be heard in the shabbiest workshops in the dying Hellenic colonies of Ionia. Had he belonged to a more humble, less proud race, it might not have survived so long. But since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, when the protectress of the last Roman Empire, Divine Mother Maria Theotokos, abandoned them to the Mohammedan infidels, the Byzantines, like the ancient Israelites,

have preserved their history and lived it in their hearts, where no one can find it or persecute them because of it. Along with it, in their secret hearts, they keep rare tales that preserve their frozen history far below another, alien one.

All conquerors hope to write palimpsests, but rarely does one succeed in playing the Creator and beginning the world from Alpha to Omega. No matter how one scrapes the parchment, something inherited from an earlier life always remains. Defeated peoples live on, like cryptograms. Through that which is seen, deep under the contours and marks of a visible history there flows the invisible history of extinct races and dead tribes, which knows no end.

Thus was preserved the tale of Demetrios Kyr Angelos, the master woodcarver from Tegea.

All that remains of Tegea, the birthplace of Atalanta, heroine of the Argonauts and the divine illegitimate daughter of Artemis, are some excavated ruins scattered over a plateau in the heart of the Peloponnesus. And memories of the glorious battles with the Persians at Thermopylae and Plataea, as well as more shameful memories of the Peloponnesian wars at Leuktra and Mantinea, in which the Tegeans first participated on the side of the Spartans, and later against them. In the fifth century A.D., Alaric's Goths destroyed Tegea, but the Byzantines rebuilt it under the name Nikli. The resurrected city was the business center of Morea at that time. During the Latin invasion, in 1202, it was the location of the barony of the crusader Geoffroy de Villehardouin. Today the town bears the name of Alea. I have kept the oldest of the names, since the tale has something of the charm of the old Gothic sagas.

As in other tales that exist in more than one version, our story—like all good tales of old—strives to include events that, strictly speaking, do not belong in it, since they cross over into the domain of other legends. (It is as if someone wanted to tell the entire past in one and the same narrative breath, or as if the forced unification of unconnected images were the product of the past itself, when it returns and speaks for itself—thus resembling a naïve writer, who, in an attempt at all-inclusiveness, embellishes a tale with everything of any importance in life; soon, forced to choose, he realizes the impossibility of creating such a tale, not so much because there are too many diverging paths, but because they are mutually exclusive—one path deprives another of its significance—and so he

finishes with the even more naïve conviction that none is of any real importance, and his universal story remains the blank sheet of paper he began with.) Nevertheless, in this story one can discern elements that undoubtedly belong to Kyr Angelos's artistic career. And given a little patience and familiarity with the monstrous Latin-Ottoman-Byzantine structures of the fourteenth century, these elements can be sifted out of the apocryphal residue of time and the Greek tradition of exaggeration.

We will not be concerned with the archeological evidence. *Megalos mastoras,* the great master of woodworking, whose works would be prized possessions in the chambers of Hellenic aristocrats inhabiting the Fanari quarter of Constantinople, and who worked conscientiously for all—the heathen sultan's harem, the Latin usurpers, and the Regency of Christ in the Patriarchate—with an exalted freedom and unconcern stemming from his God-given talent, represents an accidental, incidental find in the course of my research in preparation for writing *The Golden Fleece.*

We will accept as truth all that I heard at the Hagios Nikolaos (Saint Nicholas, a church not far from the ruins of the temple of Athena in Alea) from an old monk, a hermit who went blind seeking the still unknown sins of his people, who had at first brought the Latins and then the Turks to the Greek Hellespont. Why would I choose, from among more believable, sober, and even more reliable tales I heard during a long fasting dinner in the cell of Father Pamphilios, to remember the most unusual and improbable? When the tale no longer belongs only to Kyr Angelos's life (whatever it may have been) but also to me, his first and undoubtedly his only biographer, you will understand my reasons more clearly.

At the beginnings of art, when it still possessed some meaning, the only people who knew how and who were allowed to tell stories were prophets and temple priests. At that time, tales came from the gods. They were messages transformed into the Word. Eternal and unchanging, they determined the lives of men. When the gods fell silent, the prophets and priests continued for some time to speak in their name. But the tales no longer had the power of destiny. They became false, although they had a certain charm lent to them by the falsehoods that lived on, which became the art of storytelling.

I heard things from Father Pamphilios of the Hagios Nikolaos that I had never heard from anyone else, although all other experts on Kyr

Angelos's life, including the curators of the museums in Alea and Athens, agreed that there was a mystery connected with the master's death.

His death was a long and painful one, but a joyful one as well, which is a contradiction. His last days were spent in a chair of his own making, although he had not yet reached an age that required rest; this is also a contradiction. He refused to confide in anyone about the reasons for his odd behavior, nor did he go into the details if anybody bothered him about it—which for the Greeks is more than a contradiction. When he died, he was cremated together with his chair, and I do not know how to characterize that.

Let the story speak for itself.

It was the Year of Our Lord 1347. A hundred and six more would pass before the fall of Constantinople and the demise of the Holy Byzantine Empire, and one hundred and forty-five more before the voyage of Christopher Columbus, which would open up the western routes to silver and gold.

But before Europe would be seized by "gold fever," she would have to survive another illness, fearfully called the Black Plague.

When, according to the Franciscan Michele de Piazza, twelve Genoese galleons brought the plague from Constantinople to Messina in Sicily in October 1347, it was not yet black. The putrid flesh of the sick did not darken. Rather the body, especially the face and lips, turned blue, and the French were correct when they named it *La mort bleue,* the Blue Death. The term *black* certainly came from a black comet which, heralding the demise of the Second Roman Empire, happened to be crossing the European sky at that time, or from a literal translation of the vulgate *atra mors*. The word *ater* denoted something black, later horrible or terrifying. The poetic color supplanted the other figurative meanings, but it told as little about the plague as each of its other names.

In 1333, fifteen years before Kyr Angelos's story begins, a terrible disaster struck ancient Cathay. All five elements—Fire, Water, Earth, Metal, and Air—turned on the yellow race. A drought in the form of a gaunt woman with dry breasts, who nourished herself with her own flesh, devastated the fertile valleys of the Kiang and Hoai, while heavy clouds gave birth to multitudes of locusts that utterly ravaged the regions of Houkuang and Honan. The Chin Chou mountain fell apart; another, Ki Ming Chan, dissolved, leaving in its place a lake formed by the