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THE NOVELS OF DRAGAN VELIKIĆ: FROM “YOUNG SERBIAN PROSE” TO THE LITERATURE OF MEMORY

Abstract: The paper analyzes Dragan Velikić's novelistic oeuvre, starting from his early novels from the late eighties and early nineties (*Via Pula*, *Astragan*), leading up to his later and more recent works which were created in the first and second decade of the 21st century. Velikić's early novels are viewed in the context of the so-called “young Serbian prose,” that is to say a form of postmodernist poetics which played an important role in our literature during the eighties and early nineties. After these early prose works, the paper looks closely at the poetic transformations in Velikić's subsequent novels (*Severni zid*, *Danteov trg*, *Slučaj Bremen*), the ways in which he abandons the poetics of the young prose and the ways in which he opens up to current social topics. Velikić's novels which were created at the crossroads of the first and second decade of the 21st century are seen as narratives in which the phenomenon of memory plays a central role (*Dosi-je Domaševski*, *Ruski prozor*, *Bonavia*, *Islednik*).

Keywords: Dragan Velikić's novels, postmodernism, young Serbian prose, literature of memory

A Part of “Young Serbian Prose”

“Accidentally or intentionally, everything is made up. There is only the reality of books.” With this sentence Dragan Velikić ended his novel *Khamsin 51* [*Hamsin 51*] from 1993, and with it he provided perhaps the best summary of his literary trajectory up to that point along with his own literary and poetic orientation during the eighties and nineties. This

prominent contemporary Serbian novelist's poetic orientation of that period—toward literature that draws from previously written texts—was in line with the works of other writers of his generation, which were referred to by critics as members of “young Serbian prose” during the eighties. They were an informal group of young authors, many of whom were critics themselves, in which, besides Velikić, the critics also included, among others, Svetislav Basara, Radoslav Petković, Mihajlo Pantić, Sava Damjanov, Đorđe Pisarev, Milenko Pajić, Vladimir Pištalo, Nemanja Mitrović, and others. David Albahari, a writer who promoted postmodern literature in the Serbian and Yugoslav scene of the time, not only with his literary works but also with his translation and editorial works, was a kind of predecessor to these writers.

One of the most remarkable features of this group of then up-and-coming authors was their autoreferentiality and metatextuality, that is a focus primarily on literary experiences, according to one of the first critical summaries of their achievements written by Mihajlo Pantić, who was the most prominent critical voice amongst them (cf. Pantić 1987: 154). These authors were of Alexandrian orientation, who “to a greater or lesser extent came from libraries,” and at the same time abandoned explicit referentiality (Pantić 1987: 156). The texts from the Serbian prose writers of this generation invoke literary experience in different ways, whether by citing, pastiching or parodying different famous literary works.

The emergence of such poetic positions in the youngest generation of Serbian writers during the eighties can also be seen as a reaction to what was in this period increasingly becoming the mainstream of our literature, a literature that tried to address some taboo questions of communist Yugoslavia and simultaneously expose to criticism the already decades-long ruling ideology. Predrag Palavestra marked this tendency of contemporary literature as one of the forms of “critical literature,” which “in the name of freedom in a wider scope, actively and critically relates to the objective historical reality of the era and which, through literary means, performs an aesthetic transcendence of the existing from the point of view of the possible” (Палавестра 1983: 144). This form of prose, and especially the novel, Tihomir Brajović defines as “new-historical” and defines as its core characteristic the orientation toward “reexamining, re-framing, and reevaluating previous truths, official facts and beliefs in the light of current events and their understanding” (Брајовић 2009: 69).

On the opposite end, the generation of the youngest, up-and-coming writers, sought refuge in literary and fictional spaces exclusively. According to Silvija Novak Bajcar “they publicly came forward with the postulate of freeing literature from its social tasks” (Novak Bajcar 2015: 47). As a sort of response to the narratives about the recent traumatic past, the young writers were offering their worlds of fantasy. Their role models were writers like Borges and Nabokov, who were perhaps the most radical in their efforts to separate their artistic worlds from reality.

In comparison to some of his other peers, like Svetislav Basara and Radoslav Petković, as well as other poetic companions a few years younger, Dragan Velikić affirmed himself on our literary scene a bit later. After two collections of stories, *Wrong Move* [*Pogrešan pokret*] (1983) and *Greenhouse* [*Staklena bašta*] (1985), this author received greater attention from critics and the public only at the end of the ninth decade with his debut novel *Via Pula* (1988), which was shortlisted for the *NIN* Award, received the “Miloš Crnjanski” award, and would be printed in several editions.

The novel in question provides a cultural and historical overview of the city of Pula, which, starting from this first longer work of Velikić, positions itself as a privileged space for his novelistic prose, remaining so to this day. The book provides a history of this Mediterranean city, starting from the Roman period and its founding, up to the changes the city went through in recent centuries. The last chapter in this city’s long and rich history are the changes which occur after its accession to the communist Yugoslavia—the departure of the Italians and the arrival of the new residents from different parts of the communist state, one of the arrivals being the father of one of the heroes and narrators of the novel. The writer and the main narrator have ambitions for the novel to be “a point from which the layers of the city can be seen, a black box in which everyone who passes through the city is recorded” (Velikić 1988: 113).

Given that we are led through the journey of Pula’s chronotope by the main protagonist of the novel, the psychiatrist Bruno Gašparini and his out-of-mind patients, the residents of Pula’s asylum, the question of the credibility of the story is raised. In the stories of Istria’s most famous city, fiction intermingles with what actually happened. Gašparini, who himself was a patient in Pula’s asylum at one time, and his patients do not distinguish between waking and dreaming. In this way, Pula becomes a mythical space, which is situated between the real and the dreamed, between historical facts and legendary stories.

As is the case with the works of some other Serbian postmodernists from the eighties, oneiric fantasy plays a significant role in *Via Pula* as well.¹ A significant part of the novel covers the dreams of Bruno Gašparini, who is in this book also known as “the Master of Dreams,” which is also the title of the chapters dedicated to the contents of his dreams. In addition to this oneiric component, Velikić’s novel also contains an erudite one. That is to say, the author weaved into the text of his book numerous references to the personalities, as well as their works, who were connected to the city in one way or another in the course of history. According to the writer himself, the book about the city of Pula was at first imagined as a collection of stories about artists, “from Dante, Michelangelo and Casanova, to Stendhal, Cankar, and Joyce,” who had resided in Pula for some time (Velikić 2010: 12). From this lineup, the novel retains reminiscences about Stendhal and Cankar, but primarily about Joyce. The famous Irish writer and his family are substantial characters in the novel’s gallery, and at numerous times there are allusions to the places from his prose.

Velikić’s next novel, *Astrakhan* [*Astragan*] (1991), was evaluated, when it appeared, as a work with which this author “further strengthens the already firmly established postmodern paradigm of recent Serbian prose” (Пантић 1994: 189). In the manner of postmodernist literary-centricity, the novel places the character of a writer and his work at its center while simultaneously communicating with numerous other literary texts. The novel’s main character is an aspiring writer, Marko Deliћ, who is in search of usable literary topics.

Although it is easy to determine the focal point of *Astrakhan*—as we previously said, this work is of a pronounced literary-centric and metatextual orientation—even his early critics felt that it was a book of “asymmetrical and arrhythmic structure” (Пантић 1994: 189). And indeed, it seems that Velikić did not remain immune to some literary trends that dominated the last years of socialist Yugoslavia. So, the very first sentence, “All happy communists are alike, each unhappy communist is unhappy in their own way” (Velikić 1991: 11), hints at the aforementioned

¹ To learn more about the role of dreams in the works of the members of “young Serbian prose” see, for example, Татаренко 2008: 166-178.

duality of the novel.² In addition to the play on one of the most famous novel openings in world literature, the above sentence, which is also the beginning of the novel that Marko Delić is starting to write, suggests that this fictional book will also delve into the current topic of the end of communism. In fact, the novel that Delić intends to write is meant to be a novel about a vanished Belgrade and its citizens:

But a careful promenade will not lose sight of the little oases of silence in the old town, which has since the war been falling apart due to old age and neglect. In the yards invisible from the street, old Belgraders dwell as some kind of extinct species, hidden away in reserves, far from the sight of crowds whose gazes gnaw at the already dilapidated facades. Marble staircases grin with the icy ribs of radiators that heated the clean hallways before the war. Rundown elevators drag between floors.

A lover of majestic houses will ponder in wonder: Where are the people who built endowment buildings, theaters, churches, and hospitals?

Let us not haste! It is exactly these benefactors that our hero wants to write about, as he whispers the insistent sentence from the beginning of the novel on a hot August afternoon and cautiously moves away from the agitated crowd. (Velikić 1991: 14)

After this beginning, it seemed that in his second novel, Velikić and his hero Marko Delić would turn to narrating about a defeated class of citizens. Such were the novels of that time, written by Svetlana Velmar Janković and Slobodan Selenić. It seemed that *Astrakhan*, just like *Dungeon* [*Lagum*] and *Fathers and Forefathers* [*Očevi i oci*], would be another novel from which, after so many years, the members of this defeated and suppressed social class would speak out, after being pushed to the margins or off the stage of life by the belligerent newcomers.

Like the novels of the above-mentioned authors, Velikić's novel also dealt with topics that were taboo until just a few years ago. One such theme was the perishing of Belgrade's and Serbia's youth on the Strymian Front:

² Perhaps it is worth noting that Nabokov's novel *Ada* also begins with a paraphrase of Tolstoy's famous sentence, given how Nabokov was one of the key influences on our postmodernist writers.

That same night, a division of Belgrade students armed with wooden rifles set out for the first battle. Shallow trenches, hastily dug with the inexperienced rifles of the city's youth, provided little cover.

The great experts of military strategy chose the Sarmian plain as an ideal firing range for the killing of the Belgrade youth in face-to-face combat with an enemy that was falling back. The Sarmian Front swallowed up that inescapable opposition of students of all ages, who would expose the perfidious games of the partisan government after the war. There were other reasons as well. Cynics say that the percentage of those killed on the battlefields throughout Yugoslavia in clashes with the enemy was catastrophically small compared to the enviable number of victims of the fratricidal clashes. The Sarmian Front somewhat mitigated such disproportions.

Many years later, the stories of the survivors spread through the conspiratorial whispers at the family *slavas*, which were reminiscent of surrealist visions. However, there were surrealists among the partisans as well. (Velikić 1991: 127)

Nevertheless, as the novel progresses it moves further away from the story of Belgrade and its vanished class of citizens. The story continues to expand spatially, and so we follow the main character's travel and stay in London, on a language learning course, only for him to return to Pula and take over the inheritance left by his mother's cousin, which takes the story in a completely different direction. Along with moving to Pula and accepting the inheritance, Marko Delić gives up trying to write a novel about Belgrade and its citizens. By doing this, the novel itself takes on quite a different form. The collateral relative with whom Velikić's hero establishes a close relationship during military service in Pula, and from whom he receives an inheritance after a few years, was a member of the Istrian branch of the secret society of walkers and connoisseurs of dandelions. During his stay in Pula, the main character himself gets subtly recruited by this society to become a member. And so, in its second half, *Astrakhan* becomes a tale about a secret society, which is one of the topoi of the postmodernist novel.

In addition to using the postmodernist topos of a conspiracy, Velikić took care to fill his novel with reminiscences of numerous writers and quotes from a range of multifarious literary texts. Vladimir

Nabokov—who himself spent his childhood vacation days on the Adriatic coast, and whose changes of address, language, and identity serve as a kind of role model to *Astrakhan*’s main character—emerges as one of the most prominent literary figures in Velikić’s novel. Joyce also makes an appearance in this novel, and the novel’s plot encompasses most of the toponyms, namely Pula, Trieste, and Zurich, where the life of the author of *Ulysses* unfolded. In addition to places tied to Joyce, the novel encompasses toponyms that are tied to Miloš Crnjanski, like London and Jan Mayen. Moreover, Crnjanski and his report about Adriatic beaches are quoted at one place in the novel, and the novel is abundant with quotes from Andrić, Krleža, Njegoš, Handke, Borges, that are more or less functional in its literary fabric. From the above, one can conclude about a certain eclecticism of *Astragan*, as well as its author’s desire to emphasize as much as possible the textual nature of the novel, which is built from quotes, allusions, and well-known plots. Thus, it is not unusual that the ninth part, which is the last, holds the title “Palimpsests” [“Palimpsesti”].

Between Two Poetics

By entering into the nineties, the postmodernist prose model of the young prose type seemed to be now—in the radically changed circumstances of the state collapsing and the bloody conflicts, which were, in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav contexts deemed as the return of history with a capital H—non-current and inadequate to respond to the challenges of the new age. The model’s “denial of the impact of current history, and history altogether [...] contributed to making the local postmodern literature seem wholly old-fashioned in the light of new circumstances” (Tacić 2009: 49). Hence, numerous postmodern writers sought new paths for their art. As the most illustrative example of this, critics most often use the so-called Canadian novels of David Albahari, like *Snow Man* [*Snežni čovek*] (1995), *Bait* [*Mamac*] (1996), *Götz and Meyer* [*Gec i Majer*] (1997), and *Globetrotter* [*Svetski putnik*] (2001), in which this author turned to recent historical and political topics, connecting them with traumatic events which played out half a century ago on Yugoslav soil, that

is to say, during World War II.³ Velikić's peer, Svetislav Basara, also made a change in his prose, mainly by embedding unambiguous allusions to current historical events into his literary works that were built following the postmodern model, like *Cursed Land* [*Ukleta zemlja*] (1995). In the second and third decade of the 21st century, this writer, with the help of satire and sarcasm, would turn to novels bordering on journalism, which have dealt with current political events, along with themes from the past that were more or less recent.

As he gained affirmation from his generational peers later, Velikić seemed to be slower in abandoning the poetical heritage of the eighties and early nineties when compared to the authors listed above.⁴ His third novel, *Khamsin 51* (1993), from which originates the quote with which we started this paper, largely repeats some of the patterns from *Astrakhan*. It also has a writer for its main hero, to be more specific, the poet Nikola Gavrić, who also wanders through time and space trying to find his true inspiration. Although it contains echoes of the current events and the recently started war (the novel's story begins in the summer of 1991), and the increasing number of young intellectuals going into exile, the hypothetical and fanciful prevail here over the real and tangible, just like in Velikić's previous novel.

The current topic of newer Serbian emigration that was hinted at in *Khamsin 51* becomes the dominant one in Velikić's next novel, *North Wall* [*Severni zid*] (1995). However, although it features a handful of young Belgrade intellectuals that were, due to the well-known historical circumstances, more or less involuntarily settled in Vienna, again Velikić

³ In her study *Mape vremena*, which is dedicated to the noted changes in Serbian post-modern prose that clashed with the new turbulent events in the last decade of the 20th century, which she illustrates with the examples from several writers (Albahari, Petrović, Petrović), Silvija Novak Bajcar states, "The experience of the chaos and destruction of the borders of Yugoslavia acquired its most radical form in the prose of David Albahari [...] who *explicite* summoned previously discarded history on the pages of his novelistic works. This change was all the more surprising because it was related to a belief (new in his writing) that it was precisely history that constitutes and determines human fate" (Novak Bajcar 2015: 259).

⁴ Not all members of the young prose of the eighties changed their poetic orientations in the decades that followed; some like Milenko Pajić, Nemanja Mitrović, and partly Đorđe Pisarev, stayed true to their literary affinities from the eighties for much longer.

in this part gives priority to literary patterns and grand literary figures like Joyce, Cavafy, and Pessoa. The novel is also filled with quotes and allusions to their texts. Significant attention is given to the story of Joyce and Nora, and their days spent in Pula and Trieste, a story which parallels the contemporary story of newer Serbian emigration. Although carried by the storms of contemporary political events, Velikić's main heroine, an academic researcher of Joyce, remains mostly focused on the literary worlds of the aforementioned modernist classics.

Velikić, in his next work, continued this movement between the worlds of fiction and contemporary events, but also between the different poetic orientations. The work in question is *Dante's Square* [*Danteov trg*] (1997), which we can define as yet another of his "asymmetrical" and "decentralized" novels. The different tones which can be observed in the novel here also stem from the artistic crossroads of the era in which it was created, but from the poetic indecision of the author himself as well. In *Dante's Square*, as was the case with his previous novel, the theme of exile also intersects with literary heritage and the narrative about writers and readers, with the exception that the novel's literary aspect is even more emphasized here, than it was in *North Wall*. This component, which connects the novel with the heritage of the eighties and Velikić's prose works from that period, is particularly expressed in the character of Damjan Savić, who is one of the main protagonists of this novel. Velikić presents this character mainly as a reader, and that makes him a typical figure from young prose narratives. By education an Italianist, fascinated with Dante, he is also a librarian constantly surrounded by books, assigned to the warehouse of the National Library. For this Odysseus-like reader there is no experience outside the one that has been written or read, all the knowledge there is can be found in books, everything that could happen has already happened:

If all the books containing the divine substance suddenly exploded, there would be a terrible explosion and the universe would expand even more. If I had the power to use the words in every moment, whole pages, paragraphs, and chapters which I have sucked from the lead letters, I would expand like a universe, I would become God, no one could resist me. There is no more need for thinking, everything has already been thought about, created, and written down [...] All of the future has already happened in the past. (Velikić 2017: 127)

Moving through, among others, the prose and poetry of Orfelin, Baudelaire, Borges, Nabokov, Kiš, Flaubert, Andersen, Janko Polić Kamov and many more, whose quotes we also find in Velikić's novel, Damjan identifies with them.

The second key character of Velikić's novel also comes from the world of literature. But he is not (only) a reader, he is a writer as well. The character is Labud Ivanović, who was born in Belgrade, who grew up in Pula, and whose life will end in exile in a small Bavarian place during the nineties. His legacy becomes the possession of the National Library, and Damjan Savić is put in charge of taking care of it. It is at this point that the destinies of these two characters intersect. Damjan will also edit his unpublished manuscripts, which we find out from the footnotes of the fourth part of the novel which offers a biography of Labud Ivanović, possibly penned by the American professor Rosenberg. In this part, again in Borgesian fashion, many paragraphs are quoted, especially in footnotes, from Labud's fictional manuscripts—from his posthumously published diaries, from the last and most extensive novel *Šizma* etc. Thus, the syntagma *Dante's Square* in the novel's title can also be understood as the novel referencing back to its literary nature and origin, a square bearing the name of the great Italian poet, whom Damjan devotedly reads and studies, can only be a square of literature.

However, as the novel progresses, its other tendencies and layers become increasingly apparent, and Damjan Savić goes from being one of the main characters with whom the novel begins, to increasingly becoming just a name from his footnotes. Velikić weaved into his novel, as we already mentioned, the current themes of exile; but in *Dante's Square* he also provides a vision of Central Europe and Central European intellectuals, as a response to the end of socialism and the dissolution of some former socialist countries. Velikić seems to offer this transnational cultural identity as an alternative to former multinational socialist countries that fell apart. In his novels, this writer, starting with *North Wall*, increasingly turns to the area of Central Europe, which joins the Mediterranean one, and thus also becomes a recognizable feature of his prose.

In the novel, this cultural conception of Central Europe is established with the character of the American professor Adam Rosenberg, who himself is of distant Central European heritage, and who also uses his research and pursuits as a way of establishing his own identity. This literary

historian came up with the idea of writing a hybrid book about three writers from Central Europe: the Hungarian Oto Koranji, the Serb Labud Ivanović, and the Romanian Kornel Buze. Though they were of different nationalities and wrote in different languages, all three of the authors were a part of the same cultural circle, which their common themes confirm, they had a deep mutual literary understanding and identical life paths—all three of them will end up in exile. All three of them, Koranji, Ivanović, and Buze, were the product and incarnation of the same archetype found in this area. To support his vision, Velikić uses a lot of quotes from the range of writers that we most often associate with the area of Central Europe, for example Broch, Musil, Canetti, but also Danilo Kiš, who primarily stands as a model for these fiction writers of Velikić, and from whose novel *The Hourglass* [*Peščanik*] the last name Rosenberg is taken from. Also, Velikić's vision of these Central European writers has its roots in Kiš's essays.

At the end, in spite of numerous efforts, travels, and meetings, Rosenberg does not succeed in his intention, his ideas disintegrate, the imaginary hybrid study remains unfinished, and the finale of Velikić's novel takes on a different meaning. The last parts of the novel bring forth a culmination of memories about a few generational friends from Pula, one of whom was Labud Ivanović. What brings together again the friends who are still alive and causes memories to reemerge is the promotion of the Croatian edition of Labud's last novel in Pula, but also the success of the play *Furešt*, by Rinaldo Klemen, who was one of the members of the group of these once young men. The finale of *Dante's Square* is precisely in the spirit of what Klemen's drama is about, which is to shine light onto some forgotten stories from Pula's recent history that intertwine and intermingle with the author's early memories.

The "Epilogue" of Velikić's novel also deals with the sense of lost time. In it, we find a list of objects that were found in the "Dante" antique shop, which is located at the former square of the same name in Pula. Each of these objects—a photograph, a pocket watch, a home scale, a glass stand, a chest, a newspaper holder, a lamp, a stamp, and a ring—holds a story that helps these things come alive, just like a madeleine from Proust's novel. Thus, Velikić's novel traverses a path from its very own literary square in the first part of the novel to the antique shop in which a hidden past dwells, and which can only be reached by writing and storytelling.

These multifarious tendencies, albeit much more subtle, can be found in Velikić's next novel *The Bremen Case* [*Slučaj Bremen*] (2001), which is significantly more compact. On one hand, the surname of its hero, Ivan Bazarov, a history dropout, which was inspired by Turgenev's famous novel, and on the other hand the surnames of some of the other characters in the novel, testify to Velikić's inclusion into the network of other literary texts. In addition, the hypersensitive Bazarov from this novel looks to the past, as Klemen does. He actually uses his imagination to fill the lacunas of history, like the one about the disappearance and fate of his own father at the end of World War II. Thus, his attitude toward history is shown as ambivalent and "false-bottomed." His history studies, which remained unfinished, also attest to this duality of his.

Like many other Velikić's heroes, Ivan Bazarov is an exile in a way, only his exile is internal. With the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia, he quits his receptionist job and retreats to his apartment, communicating with the outside world only rarely and when necessary. This withdrawal of his is at the same time a refusal to take any part in the events that are going on around him, not even to bear witness to anything that is happening. Namely, Bazarov, as a receptionist in the Bristol Hotel, and someone interested in history, was in a good position to be a medium who would listen to the stories of military refugees who, with the beginning of the wars, started coming to that accommodation in the capital city. Thus, the stories of the military personnel forcibly and "temporarily" housed in this hotel, as well as other events from this period, generally remain outside of Velikić's novel.

In this demonstrative turn of Ivan Bazarov from the political and war events that are unfolding before his eyes, one can perhaps see the final turning point of the novelist, Velikić himself, not to subordinate his literature at any cost to the depiction of historical events that had just ended—although some stories, such as the one about the refugees from the Bristol Hotel, "offered themselves" to him—as some other writers did who stressed the necessity of engaging with events as they occurred and after they had all happened.⁵

⁵ Velikić conveyed and realized this aspiration toward direct engagement with the written word in his essays, publishing several books of collected columns and essays, which

Novels of Memory

After the different poetic dilemmas presented themselves in Velikić's novels of the last decade, with the ushering in of the new millennium, the direction of his fictional works very clearly started taking on a different course. The dilemma of choosing between either lived experience or literary experience seems to have finally been resolved. From this point of view, his novel *Russian Window* [*Ruski prozor*] (2007), which is one of his most successful, for which he received his first NIN Award, is a work in which the writer outlined his new understanding of literature, which was quite different from his young prose starting points from the eighties.

It seems that in the case of this novel, Velikić brought to light the poetic dilemmas that were present in the contradictions of some of his previous books. As was the case with most of his previous works, the main protagonist of this "omnibus novel" is also a writer. In *Russian Window*, or rather, primarily in its largest central part, entitled "Vozovi", we encounter a novel about an artist of a modernist type, in which we follow his inner maturation.

What is most important, the thing that leads Rudi to artistic achievement, is the life experience he gained, because "art is not invented, art is observed" (Velikić 2012: 232). As one of Rudi's teachers on that journey says to him:

True experience is not invented [...] Only at high temperatures do processes occur. The soul of a writer is like a blast furnace. First, you have to light the fire. And never put it out again. I've never envied professional writers. Because what does that mean? What are these professionals going to write about? Fictional stories that they have never experienced? Role-playing. Yes, but only within the framework imposed by a bare life. Stories are always cages for me. I have a right only to the story in which I move. It is my only world. (Velikić 2007: 211-212)

have as their subject the immediate social reality, its problems and neuralgic moments. Such focus of this part of Velikić's oeuvre is already indicated by the titles of some of his books of essays, such as: *Yu-tlantis* [*Yu-tlantida*], *Landfill* [*Deponija*], *The State of Things* [*Stanje stvari*] and so on.

That is why we follow Rudi Stupar's life journeys and wanderings, from his little Pannonian hometown, through his studies in Belgrade, to leaving the country and living in Budapest, Munich and Hamburg. During his many years of wandering, Stupar tries to live as many different lives as possible. He works in various occupations (from a waiter, to a walker of the disabled, to a translator, to a morgue worker), he enters into relationships with numerous women, where he also traverses the path from an innocent and insecure guy to a man who uses the services of port prostitutes, and meets and associates with different people, because "a writer who has no insight into the foundation and the hidden parts, into the background of the things he writes about, remains at the level of form, at the level of creative writing courses" (Velikić 2007: 212). It is necessary to experience the "bare life," as the novel states. Although he fails to fulfill his first desire to study acting and become an actor, Rudi, moving through life and various experiences, discovers the ability to write and finds fulfillment in another profession that allows him to be someone else, to speak in different voices, and to live the lives of other people. Velikić uses the good old metaphor of life being a journey to represent Rudi's maturation and growth. After he gains enough experience, he returns to his country to fulfil his destiny as a writer.

Although the novel very clearly gives priority to literature that stems from life experience, this novelistic consideration of the birth of a writer is not without dialectics. On his journey, Rudi Stupar meets various advisors, one of whom is Danijel Majstorović, a paralyzed conductor whose confession to Rudi is entitled "Notes from the Life of a Petty Bourgeois" ("Zapisi iz života malograđanina") and constitutes the first part of the novel. Unlike Rudi, who is constantly on the move and gathering different experiences, Danijel is his static antipode ("I've spent whole afternoons in the chamber of my own room, in that mobile cinema where the repertoire changed over the years, so that exteriors in my puberty were replaced by interiors." (Velikić 2007: 50)), who welcomed with relief the accident that freed him from movement. He is a person who advocates inventing one's own biography, and who prioritizes imagination over experience. That is why his favorite childhood writer was Karl May, who "created distances while being surrounded by the walls of his house" (Velikić 2007: 63). It is not unusual then that Danijel's confession is the part of the novel with the most noticeable literary allusions, primarily to Dostoevsky's *Notes from*

Underground, whose first sentences he evokes at the beginning. However, Rudi achieves his goal and his novel precisely because he is the complete opposite of Danijel ("He is not Danijel. He is Rudi. He doesn't sit, he moves. That's why his last name means to move" (Velikić 2007: 257)). Thus, Velikić unequivocally gives preference to the type of literature that is born from experience and from contact with bare life; only such literature can communicate something.

An important component in literature created by the main hero of *Russian Window* is memory, because "writing is unearthing, the work of archaeology" (Velikić 2007: 181) as stated by another teacher, the writer Konstantin Ivanić, whom he seems to follow on the path of his maturation. Also, in his own words, "writing is always a look back" (Velikić 2007: 183). However, although Rudi's literature stems from memories about events and sensations he felt, because "only a small fragment of our memories [is] linguistically processed and it forms the spine of an implicit life story" (Asman 2012: 23), some questions remain unanswered. Thus, the novel poses questions like: "What kind of caprice of memory preserved that moment? Why were those words the ones that got noted in Rudi's memory?" (Velikić 2007: 133).

The theme of memory is also prevalent in some other Velikić's novels that were published in the 21st century, like *The Domaševski Dossier* [*Dosije Domaševski*] (2003) which, although published before *Russian Window*, was actually started after it, according to the testimony of the author himself; then *Bonavia* (2012) and finally *The Inspector* [*Islednik*] (2015) for which the writer received his second NIN Award, and which is probably the most consistent representative of this new poetic orientation of the writer, according to which literature increasingly becomes memory and the writing of memory. In them, Velikić asks questions similar to those pondered by some contemporary scholars of the phenomenon of memory: "Can we trust what memory provides us? Can we allow ourselves not to trust? Is it part of human nature to constantly struggle to live without memory only to be eternally trapped in its tentacles or lost in its nebulae?" (Blajt 2015: 320).

It is not unusual that the earliest published novel in the series that focuses on this major theme, *The Domaševski Dossier*, also represents a kind of dialogue with Velikić's first published novel from the eighties, *Via Pula*. The wink back that the writer made at his first novel in the later text

is also achieved through the passing mention of the main character of *Via Pula*, the psychiatrist Bruno Gašparini, as well as by developing the motif of the architect and constructor Domaševski, who is only briefly mentioned in the first novel. Of course, there is also Pula, the privileged city of Velikić's prose that is at the center of both novels, as well as the asylum for the mentally ill, as one of its most striking buildings. Although many things call back to each other, everything is, in fact, different. Unlike the first novel, which was populated with eccentric characters, and permeated with oneiric fantasy, in *Domaševski Dossier*, the main character of the novel, Adam Vasić, returns to his hometown ten years after his last stay for the thirtieth anniversary of his graduation with the intention of withdrawing the last remaining money from his recently deceased father's account. These reasons for returning become a good motive for using the short stay in the beloved city as an opportunity to relive the days gone by, from early childhood to his first sexual and romantic experiences and high school graduation, after which he went to study in Belgrade. Since "memory is often united in objects, places, monuments" (Blajt 2017: 324), Pula's toponyms represent a trigger for their convincing activation. The space of this city becomes ideal for opening up different "horizons of memory" of the main protagonist:

The excitement grows in front of the tailor's shop window, where Adam regularly stops on his way home. He can still taste Sandra's kisses in his mouth. A miniature model of a *Singer* sewing machine, a piece of fabric with a row of buttons along its edge, a needle that passes through the stitch so quickly that it seems not to come out of the perforation of the tiny stand. The light is near. The window of the tailor's shop disappears. Slowing down, stopping in front of the next window. A grocery store, rows of bottles. An exciting shape. In a moment a cork will fly out. A jet of foam takes one's breath away. Adam, huddled over Sandra's body, loses track of the shops. Kupelwieser's palace. The cold marble of the hallways. And ice. Paul Kupelwieser, ice manufacturer, founder of the city. Thick sideburns foreshadow a hairy body. Like the body of a gym teacher on the beach of Valsalina. The final moment has been stopped. Not thinking. Immersing in a forest of glued bodies. The cemetery wall disappears into the darkness. Lisette under the canopy of the mound. Red lanterns in front of the door of the brothel. All bodies are now one body. Sandra's body. (Velikić 2014: 46)

Yet, “the memory of the individual encompasses far more than what is contained in the treasury of irreplaceably personal experiences. In him, as an individual, collective and individual memory always intersect” (Asman 2011: 21). Therefore, Pula’s spaces through which he moves also reveal the rich past of this largest of Istrian cities. Adam’s attempt to revive his own past is at the same time removing the cultural deposits of this ancient place. All these centuries and different administrations left traces on the face of the city and indirectly shaped the main character of *Domaševski Dossier*, since “memory depends on the social environment” (Albvaks 2013: 9).

In comparison to *Domaševski Dossier*, the novel *Bonavia* is a significantly more complex and voluminous prose work.⁶ In his novel, Velikić follows several heroes—the romantic couple Marko and Marija, Marko’s father Miljan and Marija’s best friend Katarina—from Belgrade, through the Central European cities of Vienna and Budapest, all the way to Boston. Just like the main character of *Domaševski Dossier*, all of the heroes of *Bonavia* find themselves in a moment from which they view and confess their own past and take stock of their current lives. As in the previously mentioned novel, their personal memories are intertwined with many fateful events from the recent or somewhat distant past of the Yugoslav and Serbian society. Thus, Katarina decides to leave Serbia for America after the assassination of the Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, while Miljan’s personal story is part of a much wider tale about the first generation of Yugoslav emigrants, for whom the authorities of socialist Yugoslavia secretly opened a door to leave the country. His son, on the other hand, moves through Central Europe, evoking certain elements of the Habsburg heritage that still exists in that area, creating his retrospective utopia, which he contrasts with the chaos of the present in the South Slavic area. Also, through the character of Katarina’s lover from her youth, the poet Raša Borozan, who was undoubtedly inspired by the personality of the poet Raša Livada, Velikić also paid a kind of homage to the Serbian poetry of the seventies and the movements on the art scene at that time.

⁶ A fun fact: the name of the hotel Bonavia, whose name is given to the novel, is mentioned for the first time in Velikić’s novels all the way back in *Astrakhan*.

Building the character of Borozan, but also of Marko, who is a kind of unaccomplished would-be writer, Velikić uses the opportunity to talk about the role of literature in this text. Just like the various objects and cultural layers of the cities through which his heroes move, literature is a guardian of the past, only more permanent and authentic, a place where various events and impressions from the well of time are preserved. According to Borozan, "There is no life without verse. The tilled over graveyards. The lament on the tombstone. Art is the only memory" (Velikić 2012: 44). Marko has a similar intention with his still non-existent work, aiming to preserve in it the most diverse impressions from his own as well as the social past, as he says, "That's right, I want to make notes. The dark days of Belgrade in the nineties [...] Yes, I would love to make notes of them all [...] To make notes of the waiting lines for bread. Of everyone who stood in the lines for bread and when they stood. [...] To make note of thousands and thousands of wasted hours" (Velikić 2012: 114). Probably for that reason, as has been remarked in theory long ago, "memories related in storytelling and often repeated are best preserved" (Asman 2011: 24). For Marko, as for Borozan, writing and creation are almost the same, "Memory and a knack for analogies, it's genius [...] I don't want to remember. It's stronger than me" (Velikić 2012: 114).

The last chapter of the novel confirms that *Bonavia* is firmly grounded in the personal experiences of its writer, and that in this creative phase, even for Velikić, writing begins where fiction ends. In this part of the novel, which comes after the end of the story about the mentioned heroes, the book turns into a personal confession and memory of the author of the novel. What unites several stories and generations in the book is the motif of the unwanted and abandoned son, whom his father abandons and leaves to avoid living a life that is predetermined and precut for him. This was done by Miljan, and this family pattern was later repeated by his abandoned son Marko. Unlike the rest of the novel which is narrated in the third-person, here the writer speaks for himself, bringing his personal story of a (possible) unwanted child, whose father was also possibly on the verge of abandoning him. Thus, in this autobiographical epilogue of the novel, the author reveals the personal motivational core for his writing, as well as the true basis of the fictional stories just narrated. As in Velikić's other late novels, here too a document plays a significant role in the reconstruction of the personal past, the long-hidden marriage certificate

of his parents, as well as the space of the hotel in Rijeka to which the novel owes its title. This represents a personal mnemotope for the writer/narrator, who as a grown man happened to be there by chance, and which was most likely the place of his conception more than half a century before.

Where he left off with *Domaševski Dossier* and *Bonavia*, Velikić continued with the novel *The Inspector* (2015) which, in a peculiar way, summarizes his entire writing up to that point. The story of this novel is known from the already mentioned *Domaševski Dossier*. The narrator and main character of the novel, a writer on the threshold of old age, very close to the real author (with whom, in addition to his profession, he shares the same first and last name), returns to Pula, the city of his childhood and youth, to try to recover and refresh his memories of that period of his life, before they disappear forever before the looming danger of senile dementia and potential Alzheimer's disease. During his two stays in Pula, the protagonist visits places from the past that help trigger the mechanisms of memory. These two journeys bring encounters with the toponyms, but also with the people whom the hero of the novel knew in his youth, and whose stories and sentences also activate the aforementioned mechanisms.

After being mentioned in *Russian Window*, *Domaševski Dossier* and *Bonavia*, the motif of dementia as something opposed to memory develops here as one of the main motives for the narrator to approach the investigation of his own past life. Although the main character of the novel, on the threshold of his seventh decade of life, has been running away from these memories for a long time, also scared by his biological family heritage, he decides to finally tell the story of his mother and his "true" childhood and youth ("To reveal, on the threshold of old age, that which was silenced and repressed, everything that for one whole life was deepest shame" (Velikić 2015: 177)). It is the last hour to do so, because senile dementia and Alzheimer's will swallow it all up in a few years.

The aforementioned decision brings with it a definitive abandonment of the world of fictional stories. His mother gave him instructions for this style of storytelling ("I don't like how you make up things. A real writer doesn't make up. [...] It has to come from inside you." (Velikić 2015: 41)) but so did the writer Aleksandar Tišma ("The weight of the untold must at some point be unloaded." (Velikić 2015: 144)) who is one of the important characters of *The Inspector*, whom the protagonist of the

novel occasionally met at literary congresses and other gatherings, and who turns out to be one of his important literary teachers. It is interesting that this reference to Tišma, a writer who often built his prose on a documentary basis and on giving shape to recent historical events, as the main literary role model takes Velikić very far from his literary idols from the beginning of his literary career.

However, trying to tell the “true story” of one’s own life becomes quite a difficult task, due to, as it turns out, the unreliability of memory. Some things are forever forgotten, while those that memory remembered as such, at least according to what his own archive of documents tells him—family photos, personal diaries—never happened. Thus, in the second part of the novel, the narrator has to return to the third person, that is, to come to terms with the fact that memory also contains elements of fiction. Also, the novel’s epilogue—i.e., the letter to his deceased mother with which it ends—testifies to the porosity of memory; its loss and disappearance, both in the face of the physical deterioration of material traces that support the durability of memory, and also due to the collapse of mental functions in the face of the coming disease of dementia. The islands of memory then necessarily remain surrounded by the ocean of oblivion.

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First published: *Зборник Мајинце српске за књижевност и језик*, год. 72, св. 2 (2024): 567-588.

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