

## Magical realism and the politics of narrative: historical postmodernism in the contemporary Serbian novel

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It is well known that the Serbian novel of the 1980s and 1990s turned to the treatment of an older, allegedly forgotten history which encompasses the premodern period from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. This shift was accompanied by a political idealism and national-emancipatory zeal after the break up of socialist Yugoslavia and its cultural politics. This “historical turn” could be interpreted both as a deceptive attempt to return to the roots and as a distinct archaeology with which writing seeks to examine the contemporary unsafe ground of the political, cultural and economic transition from the socialist system to democracy and capitalism. Actually, it seems that this novelistic approach, which can be seen as a deliberate postmodern double-coding, could be understood as a search for Serbian cultural capital that can be easily – perhaps too easily – found in the distant past. In an attempt to grasp the connections between magical realism and the contemporary politics of narrative about the past, this paper will critically examine three extremely successful examples of historical postmodernism in contemporary Serbian literature: Milorad Pavić’s *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984), Radoslav Petković’s *Destiny, Annotated* (1993) and Goran Petrović’s *Opsada crkve Svetog Spasa* (The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

All three novels take historical events and processes as the basis of their archaeological narratives, but they also question the notion of history which itself is, of course, historical and political. *Dictionary of the Khazars* is a reconstruction of a lost encyclopaedia dealing with a people who lived around the Black Sea before they disappeared from history in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The story has three layers: the medieval time of the Khazars and Khazar conversion, the time of the first edition of the *Dictionary of the Khazars* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the moments of renewal of interest in the Khazars and the publishing of the second edition of the dictionary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Destiny, Annotated* tells the story of the fate of a Russian of Serbian origin, Pavel Volkov, a naval officer at the time of the Napoleonic wars, who goes on a secret mission to Trieste to spy on the colonization and conquest of the Balkans. But the narrative of Volkov parallels the story of the historian Pavle Vuković, who found himself in the midst of the turmoil of the Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet intervention in Budapest, and the story of the historical figure Đorđe Branković (1645–1711) who wrote, in medieval style, the *Slavo-Serbian Chronicles* in five volumes as a history of southeastern Europe, primarily focusing on the Serbs and the search for their politi-

cal legitimacy in modern circumstances. In *The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation* the main story deals with the siege of the Žiča monastery, located near Kraljevo in Serbia, which happened in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. But this story also intertwines with the story of the siege and fall of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade and the story of the Serbian troubles in the period of the 1990s. It is obvious that these novels take us to different historical periods, but they do that in order to (re)connect our contemporary time with the past, implying that the past is important and can be viewed as a kind of warning for us today.

What qualifies these novels as historical postmodernism? Pavić's novel – Petković and Petrović are his direct followers in this sense – utilize the ideas famously articulated by Jean-François Lyotard at the end of the 1970s. As the main sign of the postmodern condition, he sees the “incredulity towards metanarratives”, or the fact that grand narratives of synthesis have no legitimacy. Thus, we live at a time of various, irreducibly singular language games (1984). Only five years later, in the fictionalized preface of his book Pavić turns incredulity towards metanarratives into the main principle of the reading of a novel, which “can be read in an infinite number of ways” (1989, 11). The *Dictionary of the Khazars* is presented as “an open book” that “can acquire new writers, compilers, and continuers” (11). In the preface we also learn that the main text consists of three sections structured as alphabetically ordered encyclopaedia-style entries. The three books of the dictionary – *Red*, *Green*, and *Yellow* – expose Christian, Islamic and Hebrew “sources” or versions relating to the question of the religious conversion of the Khazars. Consequently, Pavić invokes a plurality of interpretations, the possible existence of multiple versions of the same events thanks to the reader's freedom to make his or her own way through the text.

Petković successfully uses the device of commentary – the literal translation of the title of his novel in English would be “Destiny and Commentaries” – as the model that challenges the credulity in metanarratives. This can be interpreted as an obsessive need of postmodern literature for commentary, because it is the only possible verbal approximation of the object in which – as we read in the subtitle of the chapter XIII of *Destiny, Annotated* – “the narrative continues to wander somewhat like *Der fliegende Holländer*, through times and places other than those of our tale” (2010, 44). Bearing in mind that our experience of the world is relative and changeable, Petković includes different kinds of paratextual and textual comments in his book: from the title of each book and the title of every single chapter to metafictional chapters and set pieces within the narrative. Of course, such an approach is known from the novels written in the period immediately preceding the one referred to in the first two books of the novel – that is, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the century of the Enlightenment, in which the comment was the primary intellectual means of address whether in the form of long chapter titles or in a writer's direct remarks to the reader. However, it seems that in this case the comment is more important than the story itself: there is no metanarrative of destiny but only the comments of the unreliable narrator which should be taken with caution: “What the writer says is also to be taken with a grain of salt, for writers themselves are prey to temptation and all too easily confound their own feelings and experiences with the hero's” (26).

The main theme of Goran Petrović's novel is Serbian national history, and it raises the uncomfortable question of whether the literary relativization of history means its absolutization as a national story in the manner of Romantic myth. This issue will be analysed later in connection with the politics of magical realism. When we come to national (hi)story, his novel sees the siege as its global metaphor. The history is seen as a trajectory of various sieges, from the Crusades, through the Bulgarian attack on the Žiča monastery, to NATO bombers over Bosnia. The politics of the novel say that the Serbian nation is directly exposed to various sieges and that it has had to endure a difficult history directed by powerful empires and states. This is quite trivial, since it in advance sees the people as passive rather than active participants in political life. However, what makes the novel interesting is its form, and that is where its postmodernism really works. The novel was told by different storytellers: sometimes narrated by an ordinary man of the people, sometimes a historical figure (Saint Sava, his father Simeon, the Venetian Doge Enrico Dandolo, King Milutin, King Dragutin), sometimes the story comes from an unidentified voice, and in one moment we even read an impersonal newspaper with the latest information. The novel is fragmentary, full of numerous blank spaces that the reader should fill in. The depicted events are sometimes motivated and sometimes completely unmotivated, which gives an impression of the chaos of political history. It is important to mention that Petrović's ambivalent novel is usually interpreted in two opposite ways. On the one hand, it is seen as a symbolic effort in the spirit of the ethical advantage of story over history, as an attempt to exchange the political history of a nation with the history of its story and language, in other words by its cultural history, which acts as a new cohesive element of the national community (Vladušić 2010). On the other hand, it has been argued that the novel accepts the postmodern strategy of writing just to invoke the paranoid theme of an abstract threat to the Serbian nation and its language and history (Ilić 2006). At the end of the article we will have to return to this discussion about the political use and abuse of postmodernism in all three novels.

For now it is enough to say that these novels could be unproblematically labelled as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1989, 92), because of their allowing for different voices and alternative, plural histories to subvert the usual accounts of the events that they refer to. According to Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is a self-conscious work of fiction concerned with the writing of history. In these novels we are always reminded that history is not "the past" but a narrative based on documents and other material created in the past and discovered today. In their attempt to challenge the dominant vision of history, Pavić, Petković and Petrović in a similar way view historical experience as repeatable, layered and palimpsestine. Therefore it seems that the basic premise of these writers is that we live in a world of oblivion. Information is more available than ever before, and yet we witness the unprecedented acceleration of forgetfulness. It must be admitted that this idea about history is rooted in the atmosphere of the late 1980s and 1990s in Serbia when the challenge of nation-building after the break up of Yugoslavia was seen by many as the most important task of the intellectual. However, it is very interesting that this novelistic approach also successfully merges global and local trends. As Fredric Jameson

argues “postmodernism is the attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (1991, 3). Locally, it was perceived that real Serbian history had been forgotten during the socialist period and that it had to be somehow retrieved. Of course, fiction appeared probably as the best way for this restoration, because it allows postmodern plurality, which is a very good political tool in turbulent times. Therefore, it would seem that these novels represent a double-coded postmodernism in which historical references come into play in order to challenge existing assumptions, not in the name of petrified meaning but in catching global trends. However, a critical question follows: what are these assumptions? This is not easy to answer. A sceptic must question what the content of the dominant is, because the dominant is a matter of perception and it is often a “straw man”. It should be said that the problem is not what the dominant interpretation is, but rather the crisis of the possibility of the dominant interpretation of history. So it seems that these novels – albeit in an excellent literary manner – just ride the wave that they want to skip.

For our purposes it is also important to stress that “historiographic metafiction nevertheless engages seriously with one of the crucial dilemmas of postmodern aesthetics: the relation between the real and that which seeks to represent the real” (Nicol 2009, 105). This is the point of intersection of historiographic metafiction and magical realism. Namely, historiography has become seen as a prothetic science, which is constantly searching for a reliable means by which to restore memory and utter the final word about the past. Fiction does not believe in the power of the final word about the past, but it is not mere fantasy. Pavić, Petković and Petrović know that the darkness of history requires aids in the form of various comments, pictures, dictionaries, archive or even musical notes. These novels should be seen in the context of a broader movement within the literary field of the 90s of the last century, which marks the search for possible ways of intervening in the rhetoric of fact. This intervention is needed to reinvent, regain, or at least partially confirm, the function of art as cultural memory still capable of overcoming singularity and death. Therefore, in the novels there are multiple but often parallel stories, historical and contemporary: Pavić’s multiple dictionary, Petković’s parallel stories, Petrović’s idea of history repeating itself. The events described in these novels are separated by a long period of time, but through parallelisms an impression of repetition is achieved, although it is more important to speak – when it comes to the structure of the novel – about their complementarity without the final outcome.

Of course, intervention in the rhetoric of facts implies a huge awareness of the tradition, knowledge and ideologies that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so that the quest for a different path is almost entirely meaningless in advance. However, it seems that our writers know very well, as “postmodern” people, that literature cannot conceive, nor defend, the one and unique truth, whether it comes to the aesthetic relation (form, structure, style...) or to an intervention in cultural memory. The outcome is that these three novels express the curious clash of the aesthetic imperative and the intervention in cultural memory. On the one hand, these writers enter a dialogue with the contemporary political moment, which makes their novels suitable for a politi-

cal reading (see Wachtel 1998; Damrosch 2003). On the other hand, they succeeded in to the pursuit of their own alphabet, which, combining epistemological insights about the limitations of the understanding of the past with the traditional idea of telling a story at the same time, achieves the impression of continuity and disruption, knowledge and ignorance, necessity and coincidence. And the device that helps their literary endeavours is definitely magical realism.

What qualifies these novels to be viewed in the context of magical realism? Often compared with Jorge Louis Borges, Pavić is already seen as “an enthusiastic admirer of magical realism” who renders “his stories through the characteristic entwining of the mythic and the historical” (Bahun-Radunovic 2008, 223). Undoubtedly, Petrović is Pavić’s direct successor, while Petković uses limited elements of magical realism’s repertoire, especially dreams, and he quotes Borges’ words about gardens and music at the beginning of chapter IX. All three novels merge fact and fiction, fantasy and reality. They are repositories of quasi-facts and dreams, and they use a multitude of myths, folklore and pseudo-folklore legends, beliefs and incantations. However, the tone of the novels is different: Pavić and Petrović render their novels in a subtly comic tone; Petrović presents a serious story about historical suffering almost without any trace of irony or humour. But the style of all three writers definitely shows certain similarities: they use rhythm patterns, unusual metaphors, and unfamiliar imaginary and poetic devices. In short, these writers are perceived as having a “baroque” sense for narrative detail. This is not surprising if we know that in 1970 Pavić authored the voluminous *History of Serbian Literature of the Baroque (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)*. The curious heroes of Pavić’s history – engraver and poet Zaharija Orfelin (1726–1785), poet and prose writer Lukijan Mušicki (1777–1837) and diplomat and writer Đorđe Branković (1645–1711) – became important characters in Petković’s *Destiny, Annotated*. At last, Baroque is already seen “as one more branch of our magical-realist family tree” (Parkinson Zamora 2005, 40) based on richness of narrative details, and sensuous, ornate, dynamic and theatrical texture. We can find all these elements in the complex style of *The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation*. It must be admitted that in these novels sometimes we witness too much of everything, an excess characteristic of Baroque representation that is meant to diminish the material specificity of objects or to achieve the “metamorphosis of the object” (Paz 1988, 53). Therefore, here exists the “Baroque connection” (Parkinson Zamora 2005, 28-29) based on the tension between nature and artifice, sensuality and spirit, absence and abundance, surface and depth. Like in Borges, here the idealizing strategies subvert the magic of the material world in favour of magic of “secondary” objects (44).

It seems that Wendy Faris’ framework of magical realism – containing five primary characteristics of this narrative mode – could be unproblematically applied to our examples:

First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of the events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (2004, 7)

The “irreducible element” of magic is omnipresent in these novels and it is mostly connected with the role of dreams and the permanent undermining of empirical time. In Pavić’s case this is the central issue that drives the whole novel: the Great Kahn of the Khazars has a dream that nobody understands. Therefore, the Khan invites the representatives of the three great religions to interpret the dream, promising to convert his tribe to the religion whose explanation is most convincing. The “irreducible element” can be seen most obviously in the Borgesian “Story of Adam Cadmon”:

The Khazars saw letters in people’s dreams, and in them they looked for primordial man, for Adam Kadmon, who was both man and woman and before eternity. They believed that to every person belongs one letter of the alphabet, that each of these letters constitutes part of Adam Cadmon’s body on earth, and that these letters converge in people’s dreams and come to life in Adam’s body. (Pavić 1989, 224)

Similarly, in Petrović’s novel dreams are a kind of parallel world: people meet, go hunting or fall in love in dreams that are sometimes more real than life in reality. Does magic inhere in the objects, or does it precede objects and generate them? The characters of these three novels live in reality and a parallel world that is however not only unequal to reality but has an even greater significance for them than the reality they live in. Thus it seems that at the beginning, there was magic above the reality: the Khazars possessed a kind of perfect knowledge that was lost after the “reality” of their conversion and disappearance; in Petrović’s novel there is the secret language of the birds behind the empirical history. Although it seems that our writers sometimes invest too much in the story, it is also true that documentary realism, when present, does not function as transparent, but it is just (ab)used in order to undermine the idea of the availability of human experience that is always based on certain narratives: “Nothing in this world existed, nor will it ever seriously exist, if it had been not previously narrated in detail” (2002, 219: translation V. G.). Everything is an integral part of the story, which means that it gets some sense only if it exists in the story. Magical realism assumes that something strange really happened (Bowers 2004, 19) – the impossible existence of the Khazars that live nowhere and everywhere; the curious life of Pavel Volkov that does not end in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but leads on to our time; the medieval siege of an orthodox monastery that never ends. In David Damrosch’s suggestive phrase, all three novels “may resemble certain Khazar mirrors, made of polished salt, which come in two varieties, slow and fast, reflecting past or future events rather than the present” (2003, 265). In *The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation* we even hear the words of a medieval trader who boldly shouts in the middle of the market place: “I trade with time! I buy every now, even the shortest one! For the past I give the future, and the future I exchange for what used to be” (2002, 21; translation V. G.). The way of undermining empirical time through developing the kind of rhetoric that tends to blur distinction between the marvellous and the ordinary is characteristic of Pavić and widely used by Petrović and to a lesser extent by Petković, who uses magical elements, events and images within a strong realistic matrix, often exposing central issues in a text through dreams and illusions. By using the idea that an event in the past has direct impact on the present, without any gap between these two instances, these writers attempt to undermine not only the empiricism

of the world but also the empiricism of the text. They tend to disrupt the logic of cause and effect connected with common notions about the realistic novel, including unusual onomastics, with names that sound totally strange – and probably irritating – to a contemporary Serbian speaker (for example names like Pribil, Aleman, Isailo, Filipa, Joanikije, Tihosava, Družana, Ikonija /*The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation*/; Isailo, Petkutin, Kalina, Gelsomina, Nikon /*Dictionary of the Khazars*/). Therefore, magic can mean anything that disregards empiricism, and that includes personal names, religious beliefs, superstitions, myths, legends, the fantastic, but also something that looks like the pure imagination of the author.

The novelists manage to create a vagueness of historical presentation; in Andrew Baruch Wachtel's words "even when strong claims are made they are almost immediately undercut or placed into doubt" (1998, 212). The magic realist approach to time and temporality shows that no grand truth really exists. In Petrović's novel *Saint Sava's anchor hold in the Žiča monastery* has four windows that cover not only four sides of the world, but also four directions of time: through the first window it is possible to see only what is happening now; through the second and third window it is possible to see the past and the future respectively, while the fourth window also shows what is happening now, but not what is happening here, but a few kilometres away (2002, 30). Pavić merges different realms; many entries in the *Dictionary* deal not with the Khazars themselves but with characters that attempt to solve the Khazar question in two different periods: at the ends of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Similar is the case of Pavel Volkov in *Destiny, Annotated*. His story does not end with his life, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the figure of the historian Pavle Vuković. In a metafictional peace, the narrator warns the reader that he will be required to leap over a wide gap of time:

The reader must be aware that a story's occurrence in time is far from simple. Take any cross section of time: in it, several stories are taking place concurrently. Mixed together. Some of those stories are truly connected, others only apparently. (...) Very rarely will an entire story have its beginning, middle and end in that single slice of time. More commonly, the story extends over a longer period, different divisions of time. (Petković 2010, 243)

When we look at the destinies of Volkov and Vuković, it seems that cruel – but all too human – coincidence prevents them from achieving the fullness of existence embodied both in the love story and in the epiphanic moments related to the world of everyday life and its categories of success, beauty and what is preferable. Instead of a one-sided picture of the phenomenal world, there is interest in human destiny, which is revealed in the immediate reality that finally leads to the depths of meaning which fills a gap in us. In contrast to the emptiness and banality of the world, but also against the idea of the literature of exhaustion, Petković creates a novel with unusual skill and poetic talent, especially in the story of Volkov – because the story of Vuković seems to contain today a well-worn discussion of communism, and could serve as evidence of the immoderate hopes Eastern European intellectuals had in a better tomorrow, based on idealizations and the neglect of the complicated relationship between democracy and capitalism, as well as on the naive faith that the latter is not just another widespread and not overly compassionate ideology. The story of

Volkov manages to move us from closed microworlds into the rich world of the story without creating the illusion that the lives of hero and narrator can easily rule the “world” or “destiny”. Regardless of whether we always side with the ideology of his novel, Petković is truly a writer because he reveals essential things in details, as in the falling rain, dreams, the dematerialized description of the narrow streets of Trieste, or in the shadows walking the city. In the last pathetic sentence of *Destiny, Annotated* we learn that the forest should be transformed into the garden “to see the real truth, the deepest truth of things, to see no more the shadowy play, the things that people clutched at, and once and for all to summon the wisdom, the strength to face your destiny and to say no” (2010, 360). In short, the true literature in *Destiny, Annotated* is more related to magic than to the real, in the sense that magic makes an implicit criticism of the real. And this is also true for the *Dictionary of the Khazars* and *The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation*.

All three writers cleverly incorporate fiction into cultural and political history by opening doors and windows for unusual symbolic chaining that mixes a wide variety of real and possible biographies. Fiction involves the use of miracles, but it is also a distinctive type of redistribution of causes and effects that hijacks fiction from history, understood as the most ordinary empirical sequencing of events. It would seem that this prose does not deny the intention of truth, at least not completely, because it keeps undermining the contract between reader and writer, and in fact it constantly duplicates the intention – this is a novel but it is not totally fictional; this is fiction but it is not a story about “pirates”, but about the historical figures Judah Halevi, Saint Cyril, Saint Sava, King Milutin or Đorđe Branković, whose fictional life – as well as real life – is immersed in a multitude of historical facts, and verbal and visual representations. It is important to stress that all three writers use the plot of a mystery novel. The question of the Khazars’ conversion is open; the destiny of Volkov is unclear; the reasons behind the monastery siege remain hidden. There are no answers to the implied mysteries and the reader could be confused. In the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the reader tries hard to reconcile not two but three contradictory understandings of the events, for each religion is entirely convinced that the Khazars accepted its own doctrine. Petković’s novel entirely challenges the possibility of displaying someone else’s destiny so that the reader at the end is confronted with himself and left to think about the nature of representation. Petrović’s novel takes us to the liturgy in the monastery of Žiča, and the reader remains uneasy about the uncertainty of whether history is repeating itself or allows new beginnings. Therefore, it could be said that these novels attempt to produce “a sense of time as a kaleidoscope rather than a line of succession from Genesis to Apocalypse” (Hart 2005, 9).

In our world (or in our worlds) the line between reality and fiction is not always easy to determine – that usually entails from literary fiction the blurring of the line between document and fiction, and the equipping of all sorts of inventions and imaginary reconstitutions with the “guarantee” to make them appear as authentic documents. But there are real facts that are so extravagant that they resemble the best fictional creations. Pavić, Petković and Petrović fragment their story to find the appropriate way to combat the banality of the present reality in their literature. They

create a quasi-fictional framework for their storytelling, which is bestowed with the ambiguous authority of historiography and the elegiac lover's discourse. The space fills the void in human souls, so what sets off the miraculous adventure story might be the journey from Russia to Trieste and the return to the Hungarian plain, the flight from Israel and the landing in Venice. In short, the geography of these novels is also important for their magical realism.

Maggie Ann Bowers argues that magic realism is often adopted due to its transgressive and subversive properties (2004, 63), while Stephen Michael Hart stresses that magical realism encompasses both technique and social practice and ideology (2005, 5). This is also true in the case of the novelists with whom we are dealing. All these novels invite magical realism as a possible way out of history, or even better, a way into a "new" history. In all three novels the narrators accept both realistic and magical perspectives of reality at the same level, but they are also associated with the modernist disruption of linear narrative (by using the form of lexicon, metafiction, chronicle etc.). Their magical realism construes narrative in order to provide a realistic context for the magical events of fiction. However, these novels are also forms of allegory, but the question is what the political significance of these allegories is. It seems that they prove the political nature of magical realism: authors count on the transgressive and subversive qualities of magical realism, and they simultaneously attempt historical revision. But, is this revision also a form of the escapism it criticizes, or a gesture towards a metapolitical or even metafictional position aimed at the (national) community? Can we talk about the reformulations of magical realism in the Serbian context in terms of the search for metapolitics understood as a position of immunity from the "dirty" and oppressive contemporary political world as it was perceived in the 1980s and particularly in the 1990s?

It seems that Pavić, Petković and Petrović developed a politics of narrative characteristic for the "political" branch of magical realism: its optics is focused on revelatory narrative, or on the commemoration of those things that the official truth was hiding, with the ambitious aim of changing the form of cultural memory itself. Therefore, we have to take into account the context of the 1980s and 1990s, when nationalism needed a new "imagined community" ready to deal with the challenges of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, postcommunism, capitalism and power politics. For example, Wachtel reads the *Dictionary of the Khazars* as a novel that provides a new worldview to replace the synthetic ideal of Yugoslavism based on a specific mixture of Romantic myths and attempts at modernization (1998, 210). Instead of criticisms that attack their nationalism as such, we might offer slightly different critical remarks about these novels, based on the understanding of politics as the partage of the sensible in a chaotical world, not in a world of absolutely transparent moral agents. Therefore, let us see, in conclusion, how the idea of historicity and the idea of destiny that marked the discussion of these three novels could be understood from a contemporary perspective.

It is said that magic realism has great political possibilities and that its Latin American branch often captures the perspective of people who lack political power (Bowers 2004, 31). Ouyang rightly concludes that contemporary "magical realism

and fantasy seem equally haunted by imperialism and empire, nationalism and nation-state” (2005, 19). This is also true for the Serbian novelists that we analysed in this article. The question of power politics is present in the figure of the Khazars, in the character of Volkov who enters diplomacy just to be catapulted from history, and through the story of the “eternal” siege of the Žiža monastery by Bulgarians and Cumans. These novels invite a particular reading strategy “to interpret a particular instance of magic in an otherwise realistic fiction as nothing more than allegory” (Faris 2004, 20). The world(s) of our novels are deeply fissured, characterized by a deep divide between West and East, powerful and powerless, and by different versions of Christianity. However, this particular fondness for (political) allegory really can be seen as a return of the grand narrative because the lines they draw could be disputable: these lines are ethnic without any doubt, so it seems they too easily transfer modern nationalism in the past, forgetting that the “traumatic” kind of nationalism is rapidly becoming obsolete in the contemporary world.

And here we come to the crucial paradox of the politics of the narrative characteristic of these three novels: it seems that they share the belief that there is a centre of nationhood, but that this centre is deeply hidden from its members and that its revealing has value in itself. The centre of these allegories is obviously the idea that Serbian culture is something that is above history and politics and that the function of the novel is to recuperate that idea from oblivion. Actually, this belief in a specific cultural reality in the middle of magic probably plays a crucial role in their seductive fictions. All three novels promote palimpsestism as a form of knowledge, but it appears that this whole enterprise lacks irony – and self-irony – based on knowledge of the ideological criteria for inclusion and exclusion mechanisms that determine resistance or acceptance, or a revision of the past. At the level of expression, these novels have challenged the possibility of a single truth, but then they contain a suspicious attitude about the one truth that lies behind everything, be it the ahistorical disappearing from history, an eternal siege or resistance to abstract destiny. This is an attitude that threatens to reduce the multiplicity of political, intellectual, cultural and literary phenomena to an easy and cheerful detection of sense, or “destiny”. Of course, it is not enough just to say no. The prerequisite for a simple change of destiny – to know the truth – unfortunately is not at all simple to accomplish in the world of plurality in which we live. But the idea of truth is the necessary foundation of any truly practical and political action towards a better world. Therefore, instead of nostalgic evocations of truthfulness, here we are lacking a debate about what people in general can see within the horizon of possible truths about themselves and the world. Really, if there is a multiplicity of historical perspectives – clearly stressed by the narrators of the novels – how do we give validity to each one and still be suspicious about metanarratives?

Is this kind of writing simply a case of escapism or does it voice a concrete political idea? It seems it offers both possibilities, and it must be admitted that it is really hard to say whether this is deconstructive or constructive magical realism, since it apparently accepts relativism, especially at the level of metafiction, but at the level of historical interpretation speaks about history as “our” metanarrative. Magical realism

indeed shows “resistance to, subversion and reconfiguration of what may be termed ‘modern Western epistemology’” (Ouyang 2005, 16), but it often seems that the idea of culture invites the power relations it wants to subvert. While all these novels focus “on the magical, supernatural subtext operating within the visibly real level of the human condition” (Hart 2005, 3), these are also fictional worlds that resemble the one we live in, but it must be noted that the burden of history and its “atavistic archive” (3) – when we look from today’s perspective that includes local and global politics – seems to be overemphasized in them.

## NOTES

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

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### Magical realism and the politics of narrative: historical postmodernism in contemporary Serbian novel

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Magical realism. Politics of literature. Allegory. Historiographic metafiction. *Destiny*. Community.

The paper critically examines three extremely successful examples of historical postmodernism in contemporary Serbian literature: Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984), Radoslav Petković's *Destiny, Annotated* (1993) and Goran Petrović's *The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation* (1997). All three novels take historical events as the basis of an archaeological narrative, but they also question the notion of history which itself is, of course, historical and political. Therefore, we have to (re)construct the context of the 1990s when nationalism needed a new "imagined community" ready to deal with the challenges of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, postcommunism and capitalism. Thus it seems that these novels invite magical realism as a possible way out from history, or even better, a way into a "new" history.

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