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TWO EXAMPLES OF GENDER-CONSTRUCT IN BALKAN LITERATURE: KOSTAS TACHTSIS, DRAGOSLAV MIHAJLOVIĆ

Two male authors, in two different contexts, imagined their female protagonists: Kostas Tachtsis, a prolific Greek author and himself a homosexual, wrote a novel on a woman's endurance in the challenging and dangerous Greek political urban context over a period of some 50 years, under the title *Third Wreath* ("The Third Wedding Wreath", 1962); Serbian author Dragoslav Mihajlović, a former pro-soviet sympathizer and political prisoner on *Goli Otok*, at the half-way point to his present-day nationalism, wrote the novel *Petria's Wreath* (1975), in which a rural female protagonist is a suffering icon – beaten, ill, poor, abandoned, widowed, a metaphor for collective, people's suffering. In both cases, a feminine *persona* is supposed to deconstruct, construct, or destabilize the ruling/serving female prototype. In both inventions a shadow-male is inscribed into the proposed female model. In both cases, the female protagonist serves as a screen for criticism of the correspondent local male-dominant model. Both authors voice a kind of (male) de-centered gender position, or, put more simply, an endangered sexuality: a sexually instable voyeur, a homosexual, a traumatized/tortured former prisoner. Women's criticism of Balkan men's attitudes does not correspond fully with this: in women's writing men are usually accused of selfishness, inclination to war and violence, and power-struggle. The quest for a similar de-centered gender presentation could revive the debate on gender of the author, somehow lost in the late 70s.

Keywords: Balkan 20th century literatures, gender, nation

An exceptional coincidence, exploration and knowledge, arbitrariness or ignorance? Two novels, one by a Greek author (*Trito stephani* [The Third Wedding Wreath] 1962) its first real reading only begun in 1970, along with its translation into many languages, including Serbian (*Treći venac* 1988); the second by a Serbian author (*Petrijin venac* [Petria's Wreath] 1975) with similar titles containing the same connotations (wreath--wedding, three marriages-relationships, three men): the Serbian term

"venčati se" is the semantic translation of the Greek original *stephanono* (cf. Slapšak 1987:49). Both novels have the unusually similar thematic framework of a "life story", and utilize similar narrative strategies. It is probably not possible to give an answer to the aforementioned question. Neither one nor the other author belong, or belonged (Tachtsis was killed in 1988 in unclear circumstances, probably the victim of a lover) either to the academic sphere, or to a circle of theorists where the practice of communicating with other, especially "small" literatures, would be more cultivated. In fact, Dragoslav Mihajlović wrote his work in succession with which he, during the flourishing of Serbian nationalism in the past twenty years, earned the status of member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences – – with his undoubtedly public nationalist engagement. But this is an example of reception, and not of the developed poetic reflection of the author. From the point of view of Women's Studies, that is, of women's writing, these two examples are neither exceptions nor rare examples. The speech of the collective through a woman's voice is a known narrative strategy, which builds an ideological essence in the unquestionable field of the most wide-spread social practices. The status of the implicit victim of history, that is, of the prevailing patriarchal social structures, is easy to situate in the space of deliberation and "negotiation" between the sexes and their domains of power, that is, in the space of controlled economy of women's visibility in society. Woman as the end victim of history does not have to evoke any emancipatory ideas. In a certain sense, her account/fate is confirmation of the patriarchal behaviour and social relations. The specificity of literature and art of Central Europe and the Balkans from the era of the construction of a national identity would be in that the ordinary procedure of female = abstract shifted towards female = abstract/collective = national. Endangered virgins and martyr-like mothers were often the non-individualized figures of the national collective, the shadow of the individual hero, the imaginary screen in the background onto which flashbacks of the hero's collective were projected. Tachtsis and Mihajlović follow this model, with more or less emphasized subversions. What, then, from the perspective of Women's Studies, can the analysis of such – if there are any – subversions in pre-fixed gender narrative models bring? The pinpointing of the reading technique, above all. Followed by a possible insight into the procedures for gender presentation in certainly the most interesting code, full of (gender) ambivalence, in the murmurs of power which alternate to the extreme, in the obstructing of the message at every degree in the change of tone. I am deliberately pointing out "acoustic" frames of reference here, because the important stylistic effect in both cases is the inscribing of voice and story, the presence of the invisible tape recorder. The pragmatic criticism of entering into such "works" would be the shifting from necessary research of a mainly unknown, non--established and unclassified canon of women's literature, women's culture and women's history. The politicized reverse of such criticism, again, would be that this kind of "presentation" of gender closes more than opens

up the paths towards examining women's identity, creating new, crafty and intricate stereotypes. The appropriateness of researching the fictive women's voice-as-collective in that case can be found in fact in the deconstruction of the stereotype: the case of two unintended thematically, structurally and stylistically related approaches appear as a royal paradigm. Dragoslav Mihajlović creates his Petria as a "naïve" witness, who, to the reader, by definition the wiser/omniscient, reveals how things looked like from there below, from a woman's perspective, from the standpoint of a noble savage/perceptive child, not from another continent, but of another sex. The savageness of the Serbian rural milieu, the social and ethical destruction from the side of the communist regime is attributed to the other – for instance, to the " Bulgarian" mother-in-law, to communism--addled men, and in the narration the negative other, Roma, is always present. What is projected on that screen is the "truth" of the *noble savage*, Petria, in contrast with her first/real identity. The tying in of the *noble savage* with a fetish in the anthropological sense of the word (White 1978), as suggested by Hayden White, seems convincing in the case of the construction of Petria's character: the fetish shows a type of pathological "repositioning" of the libidinal occupation which we ordinarily tie in with forms of racism, which depends on the same idea of "wild people" (ibidem:194). Petria is in some form of seductive co-dependence with her invisible listener, the carrier of the tape recorder, the author of the written text. Their relationship has the undeniable features of seduction: together they drink *rakija* [plum-brandy] and coffee and smoke, "he" induces her to speak, the form of speech is "lame" dialogue where the listened to Petria responds to the unspoken, from-the-responses-surmised questions of her author/educator, the master of writing. The speech is in the first person, or this is a statement of the present witness of the "first person"; often it is a *mise-en-abîme* narrative approach of placing the individual story in an historical framework (mixing of the private and public chronology, placing the personal, "frame of mind" in wider ideological patterns). Tachtsis' Nina does not have some sort of special relation with an invisible listener. Her story is intended for the "all-Greek" listener/reader, without an individual go-between. Tachtsis is a self-reliant author, who does not hide his writer's illusionism. This would be confirmed by the constant addressing of Nina, and more so Ekavi (a story within a story), to the Greeks and their mentality. In both cases, the voice is that of a woman, the voice of the *other* in history, who carries on a continuous dialogue primarily with the male authority. This male authority is sometimes substituted with that of the mother – the female authority permissible by patriarchy – and which is often in conflict with that of the female (daughter's) authority non-permissible by patriarchy. When the dialogue on the part of the male authority stops, the woman's voice speaks a monologue of presumed uncensored women's history. This *mise-en-scène* offers several channel guides for understanding: 1. the fate of women is eternal, atemporal, non-contextual; 2. *pars pro toto* – women "think" that

what the speaking voice thinks; 3. *per analogiam*, women's thought is fragmentary and decentralized; 4. women's perception is a "mirror" of the first, ruling perception, the view of the strong subject. The " mirror" is shattered, and can give an insight into the invisible aspects of the first, ruling perception. Tachtsis' work was read in '70, during the time of the colonel's dictatorship, as an account of the life and views of the petty--bourgeoisie, its porosity for fascism or communism. It is later interpreted also from a gender standpoint, as an attempt at mixing/confusing gender stereotypes, like a homosexual carnivalization.

In both cases, it is about the complicated and wise system of acoustic and optic concealment, masking, substitution and seduction. It would be a mistake to think that on the other side of this dissected strategy there is something that we could call a straight-forward women's discourse about the self. But what is certain is that in social practices of proclamation and reception there are enough available examples that women's discourse on the self is published and accepted infinitely with more difficulty, whatever kind of strategies are used, and however similar they may be to these mentioned. Perhaps this is precisely the strongest reason for the analysis of texts by Tachtsis and Mihajlović from the standpoint of Women's and Gender Studies.

Invisibility of the body

Both of the female protagonists, Tachtsis' Nina and Mihajlović's Petria, have very little or almost no body in the texts. The imprint of non--corporeality is enhanced by the acoustic effect of the text (the grammar of the spoken language, hyperurbanisms in Nina's, and dialectisms in Petria's case). The absence of the woman's body is inscribed in one very old European tradition. The ancient poet Simonides of Ceos, following one already existent poetic genre (*ehoja*, a woman's catalogue), left the descriptions of "bad" women (those unsuitable for marriage) which are identified with animals – bitch, female ape, mare. The only one worthy of marriage is the bee, a voice with a neglected body, a worker without demands for food or words, nor probably for sex (cf. North 1977; Lefkowitz 1981; Bain 1983; McLeod 1991; Behrmann 1997). Tradition can be read all the way to the Middle Ages, in the teachings of, let's say, Agrippe von Nettesheim, who explains how the body of a woman is lighter than that of a man (Agrippa 1996), and we find this later, in Shakespeare's description of Ophelia floating in the water, or in Verdi's Rigoletto – "La donna e mobile, tal' pium al'vento". This visual/material negation of the body coincides with, in a direct sense, the procedure for the abstraction/symbolization of the woman's body: watching the presentation of the woman's body, we read the inscribed text of culture which directs us to the fact that it is a term, that is, to the real meaning of the abstract (for instance, Victory, Truth, Justice, Muse) because it is embodied by a woman, a non-existing body. The procedure is so legible that it saliently marked

the sculptural and pictorial decoration of public, mostly secular places in Europe in the past three centuries – with a heritage from antiquity, naturally. The body, be it whether we define it as invisible, "on the outside" or as an emptied out body in the works of Tachtsis and Mihajlović, endures very little unspecified pain (Nina's headaches, Petria's hand). There is no menstruation, and childbirth is divested of any detailed descriptions. The description of Petria's friend Milijana's abortion, full of pain and blood, is inscribed clearly with Petria's (the author's) message on the immorality of killing a foetus. Sickness and pain are always in/on the body of the other, most often males – from Petria's just-born son to the dying husbands of both protagonists. The message of the suffering male body is extremely ambivalent: the male body suffers visibly, with precise descriptions and diagnoses, which on the one hand indicates the endurance (that is, the social and cultural invisibility) of all that is female, while on the other hand indicating the endurance of pain as a gender-social construct. In this narrative model what can also be inscribed is the absence of the need for a woman to speak of her pains, clear ideological suggestions rising up from the culture in which the protagonists live. The confirmation for this may be that both protagonists cry a lot, but mostly when they are alone: once again, the culture in which they live does not accept complaints or criticism in the form of women's crying. The demand to women in this type of reading could then perhaps be for them to hide their voice, that is, to relinquish it to a more competent representative.

On the side of satisfaction, both female protagonists seem satisfied with their rather average than pronounced sexual attractiveness. The sexual promiscuity of other women in their surroundings, or their sexual conquests incite negative marks with Nina and Petria. *Three* is the number that appears as the magical/acceptable number for the number of sexual relationships which a woman can express during her lifetime: Nina admittedly has an unrequited adolescent love and three marriages, and Petria has two marriages and one longer common-law relationship, but in both cases *three* can be understood as the canon number. One could pose an entertaining rhetorical question here: after how many love affairs does the genre of women's writing/confession pass into, let's say, pornography?

Deregulation of motherhood and writing

Nina and Petria are not successful as mothers: both of Petria's children died, her son because of the insufficient knowledge of childbirth and the breakdown of the system of women's solidarity, her daughter from an illness. Nina has one daughter, conceived with a hateful homosexual--husband. We could probably understand Nina's motives for her hatred towards her daughter, but in Tachtsis' realistic illusionism it is difficult to understand such a superficially created character such as Marija, Nina's daughter. She functions as a chalkboard on which is written, whatever falls to mind, all women's sins and weaknesses: laziness, untidiness, voracity,

selfishness, hidden lust, exaggerated piousness, bad taste in reading and dressing, the absence of looking after oneself, even the desire for beautifying oneself, banality, inappropriateness, self-conceit… It would be difficult to put together a full list. Marija operates as a collage of everything that is the worse that can be prescribed to a woman, or more precisely, as Nina's fabrication – a negative construction. The justification for such a character can be seen in Tachtsis' realistic illusionism, in his poetics in which there is certainly enough room for enlightening paradigms. In this case, the grotesque Marija might carry the leitmotif of Nina's homophobia. Petria's weak and sickly children and Nina's disfigured Marija function absolutely in their narrations as a clear sign of the deregulation of motherhood. Both female protagonists suffer because of their children, dead or lost for them, consequently they cannot suffer culpability for having rejected motherhood. In that sense Petria is more open, with her statements on the immorality of abortion. Nina thinks about abortion only after discovering her husband's homosexuality, but does not go through with it. For both motherhood has been "taken" in some way. What is given to them in return? A possible response here would be – – confession in fact. In contrast to other "normal" mothers, who transfer their identity onto their children, Petria and Nina have a narrative surplus of their identity, of their story. Their unsuccessful motherhood might be a metaphor for the "unsuccessful" collective – both Serbian and Greek. In that metaphor the collective gives birth to history, for which it is not responsible, but which nonetheless determines its fate and "fulfilment". It is not difficult in the procedure to recognize some of the main elements of "plot" in the narrations on collectives – the peoples of the Balkans: the losers of history, without a good status which would contribute to great offspring, undeservedly underestimated. The immediate semantic connection between the banal rhetorical self-pity in public discourse and the fictional women's fates is clouded by the narrative procedure. For this reason I would add one more semantic connection here, which we can read in both texts: instead of motherhood: Nina and Petria have a voice, therefore, not their own, but borrowed writing. This is precisely the narrative core of their tragic quality, and the likelihood of giving the subheading *My Tragic Story* for both books. The exchange of "successful" motherhood, that is, the measure of a woman's "normality, is not possible with anything else (cf. Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1991), with neither voice nor writing, just as with a tragic collective identity it is not possible to express through culture, but rather only through history.

Doppelgänger: Milijana and Ekavi

The doubles of Petria and Nina – Milijana and Ekavi – function in relation to the body and motherhood in the text, they exist only in their discourses, in a doubled speech. What is their function? Addressing the "note-taker with the tape-recorder", the master of writing, most certainly mars the

effect of a woman's confession. Mihajlović utilizes it at the beginning of his book, and then less and less. Tachtsis does not use it at all. The doubles, above all, fulfill the function of the second person in speech. Their "you" which refers to the female protagonists in both texts, fills in the blank space of the other in the note-taking, of the absent and uncommunicative master of the letter. The intimization – cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1996) of Petria and Milijana, and Nina and Ekavi, marks women as the other race or tribe (Loraux 1978), another culture, a different behaviour. This distancing by the author, the master of the text, as well as the agreeing to the stereotypical thoughts of all that is female – however much it be based in the main patterns of European high thought from antiquity to the Enlightenment – more than clearly limits that what we would be able to determine from the first surface reading as the "getting into" the other sex. Indeed, the story within a story clearly restores the relatively monotonous narrative speech code ("I") into the tape-recorder. Different narrative strategies are thus crossed with different ideological (gender) discourses. But this does not exhaust the function of the doubles. In both cases, the doubles are a "a bit more" female, a bit more of representatives of the collective, a bit more inscribed in the social framework, a bit more of an anthropological object of interest to the master of the text – a bit more of a tribe deeper in the jungle, about which the noble (enlightened), tape--recorder and authority-directed savage-heroine gives her account, translating/interpreting a more hidden meanings of the woman's world. The hierarchical structure uncovers the colonial intent: Petria and Nina are the result of acculturation, aides who are in the position to uncover and show the layers to which the master of the text does not have access. In contrast to the invisible bodies of the main female protagonists, Milijana and Ekavi bleed (literally), suffer, lose their husbands because of other women, revenge themselves, lose themselves, die. Through Petria's and Nina's tamed gender voices, what is given is supreme recognition for the heroism of survival: this is not the case with Milijana and Ekavi. The status of the bodies and the status of the voices of the doubles do not completely follow this binary structure: Milijana is an incomparable subject of inserted narration, her voice is less "heard" than Ekavi's. In the other case, the relation of Nina and Ekavi is complicated by the fragmentation of Ekavi's discourse – the direct, with the use of "you", the indirect (Nina's quote), or the confession of the third person Nina, about Ekavi. While Milijana functions as a transparent *exemplum*, Ekavi is provided with all the more interwoven strategies in the text. The mythological recording of Ekavi (Hecuba, the tragic Trojan queen and mother, victim of war, brutal avenger) gives the narration elements which are lacking in Milijana, not only the possibility of linking to the story (Euripides, and modern European theory with the question: "What is Hecuba to us?"), but also the possibility of detachment from the story, estrangement, non--correspondence with the culturally fixated myth. The shaky boundaries of the fixation of myth (versions) therefore offer the possibility for a

repeated inscribing of the meaning: in one version, because she carried out her deregular (inhuman – women's) revenge Hecuba turns into a bitch at the end, a creature of the Underworld, and the lowest classified type of woman in ancient catalogues (cf. North 1977; Lefkowitz 1981; Bain 1983; McLeod 1991; Behrmann 1997). The three names of Ekavi which I mention can also be a new inscription into meaning: Ekavi is a new-Greek form, mainly disregarded in translations into other languages, where the ancient Greek form of Hekaba is retained, or the Latinized version, Hecuba. To speak of Ekavi then becomes a mark in the journey, which points towards the Balkans and the infinite problematics of good and bad cultural translation.

The doubles construct Petria's and Nina's discourse as "antennas", as transmitters. As there is no mention made in the texts about Petria and Nina writing or jotting down anything (Petria is illiterate to add), the antenna-like discourse can be understood as a privileged women's discourse in the world of texts and gender superiority in the public/male world. The communication framework of the doubles is limited by gender: they only understand women, while discussing politics with men, gaining or (more often) losing in their wishes and demands. Thus the narrative strategy of the doubles allows the protagonists, Petria and Nina, to create "separately" on the projected picture of the common type of gender relations which are carried out (performed) by Milijana and Ekavi, which further reinforces the semantic link between the deregulated motherhood and writing. Far be it that Milijana and Ekavi be "happy" mothers: contrary to this, the examples of their life stories only confirms the arbitrariness of the power of motherhood in the shaping of people/humankind. Is there hiding behind this whole multilayered staging of talking, a one and only, powerful and successful creator of the world – a father? Is not his absence the cause of the unhappiness of the woman's world? Did the women not drive him away from the world he created? Where is the man's blame for the world being like it is? All these questions become legitimate during the reading of the texts by Tachtsis and Mihajlović, and however much the possible answers may be simplified and banal, what needs to be pointed out is the possibilities of reading, that is, more on the staggering unreadability of both texts within their cultures and, in Tachtsis' case, in the international cultural and academic spheres. The local popularity of Mihajlović's work, and the visual attractiveness of the film produced from the book[1], clearly responds more to the hardcore-folklore model (film) and to the nationalistic phantasm of the suffering woman.

On the basis of these three narrative strategies, the protagonists' testimonies are defined as reliable (credible) reporters from the world of women. Thus the colonial scheme is confirmed as the basic semantic code of speech. Now we can turn to the forms and content of the reports.

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[1] *Petrijin venac* [Petria's Wreath], directed by Srđan Karanović, 1980; film appeared as a TV series.

As in the majority of reports on "tribes", the genealogical approach seems to be the most appropriate, in the absence (or neglect) of history. The anthropological and gender status of the master of the text is especially clear in the case of Mihajlović, where the female protagonist repeats the questions which are posed to her by the invisible interviewer/researcher, opening up a new theme or a new chapter of her life. The question is often interposed with objects and animals from Petria's everyday life – a photograph of her husband, the number of cats, and similar. In the part where there is indication of the author's inclusion in the text (the episode of the curious Belgrade couple who wish to stay with Petria, but who quickly flee because of the cat smell), what is most clear is the ethnographic-anthropological intention: the master of the voice clearly comes from another area of culture, Petria constructs it as the unknown of her own culture, with guilt. The demand made by Petria is to enter into the collective, guilty for having forgotten its own rural component of the identity. This is one of the most common strategies of "entry" into the nationalism in intellectual circles, especially in the Balkans. It relies on the literary (and ideological) motif of the bi-polarity between cities (states, culture, corruption) and rural areas (utopias, freedom from culture, moral cleanliness), which in great part determined the national literature in the region in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. This fairly old literary model, which extends from antiquity, that is, from Hellenism and Roman literature (Horatio already sneered at it), and which clearly carries the traumatic trace of the decline of Athenian democracy and crossing over to various forms of monarchy, always had enormous political potential. In the case of Balkan national literatures, it notes the appropriation of the patriarchal system on the part of capitalism and the national state. While women, having been divested of the patriarchal niche of the old, mainly rural patriarchy, are only left with the shackles of the mononuclear bourgeois family and eventual exit into Western feminism, men are also left divested of the important narrative complex: in this way the bi-polarity of the rural area-city obtains a deciding role in the narrativization/ideologization of the endangered male collective identity, no matter how much the basic historical political trajectory (left--wing/right-wing) is rearranged or mixed around. In the case of Mihajlović, the procedure for becoming ideologized is fairly transparent: Petria is the personification of communism-devastated rural Serbia. Her gender rights are not at issue – another woman is guilty for the tragedy of her first motherhood, the mother-in-law, or the backwardness, which is the aftermath of the communist regime. On the "screen" of larger happenings and their male representatives, Petria is a secondary victim, a fragmentary mirror, the second level under fire from the Cominform, social conflicts provoked by new ideology and government, economic reforms, the collapse of social services (especially health), the neglect of general education, unemployment, the class of short-term projects for industrialization, ideological intervening into national reality… Mihajlović's strategy

belongs to colonial discourse, but its political importance is in the evading of ideological censorship: the author, a hidden dissident, and state ideology thus cooperate together in the same activity, in the hiding of women's identity and history. The question that remains is why did Mihajlović not speak up openly, or was he attempting to cheat censorship (which officially did not exist, but which had a thousand forms as a result) by some elaborate strategies of discourse? A possible answer is precisely this hidden understanding between the regime and the rebels regarding gender politics. The second possibility, albeit particular but more convincing, is that Mihajlović was addressing a specific stratum of readers, in the secure cultural intimacy of the "poetics of the national state", as Michael Herzfeld (1996) states, those readers who already share his ideas, and who together, in the reception of the work, believe that they are subverting the system within the framework of their parallel institutions ("salons", editorships, critiques, awards). In both cases, every assumption about the deliberate construction of gender in the prose of Drago Mihajlović falls under suspicion, and the assumption of the manipulation of discourse and narrative models which are linked in with gender also becomes convincing. In this regard, Mihajlović's prose can be defined as "pre-revolutionary": it introduces a new meaning and points to the traumatic situation, but it does not name the ways, nor does it construct new types of discourse, new political or esthetic ideas. Parasitizing on the then already exhausted local model of "real" prose, Mihajlović showed a well-trodden poetic direction, retrograde in respect to its communicability, which in the nationalistic cultural production in Serbia would have the most numerous and most superficial of followers. An example of the fall of cultural and intellectual relevancy of another trend, emerging from magic realism (see Slapšak 1994), would speak in favour of the universal decadence and even of the destruction of poetics at the end of the 20th century in the contamination of nationalism.

In the case of Kostas Tachtsis, that is, of Nina, the anthropological--ethnographic interest of testimony does not lie in the bi-polarity of the city-village (Nina and almost everyone around her are part of the urbanized stratum, the village is a different world for her and for Ekavi) but in the discrepancy between large (male) ideological discourses and their insignificance in the world of women. Nina thus does not "convey" anything as a criticism of the system nor does her fate serve as a narrative basis for some specific political or ideological discourse. She in fact neutralizes the governing discourses, rendering them unimportant and trivial (her two husbands rightist, her brother and Ekavi's son leftist), placing them in the context of the everyday. This procedure has elements of the "descending" burlesque, in which the colossal people, ideas and historical changes obtain their counterpart in the lower world of the ordinary and the everyday. Athens and Salonika, the two cities from Nina's/Ekavi's narration, certainly in their history of the 20th century have different forms of contact between the urban and rural: Athens is a model

of synoecism, the bringing together of villages and hamlets into a city, and that is how it functions today, with a continuous influx of people from smaller towns, who bring their settlements – from mountain to island – to Athens. Salonika is different – a real Balkan city of mixed communities and cultures, with traces of the Roman imperial and then Byzantium organization and Turkish urbanism, which does not accept the integration of the village, but rather leaves it in its boundary, outside of the city whole. For this reason, Nina can view the newer history of Greece from a bird's--eye view, from the position of her education, culture, and class from whence she originates. With Petria, Mihajlović has a serious problem, and that is how to include elements of his political message in her confession. Nina is conceived so that she declasses every political message… I call attention to this important difference between the two characters mainly because of the surprising concurrence which places these two diametrically opposed cultural constructions of gender in the same anthropological framework. Both writers, namely, have almost an identical choice in the anthropological phenomenon in which they place their protagonists: religion/sorcery, healing, judgment, travelling in order to save men. But before entering further into this, what is needed is to point out the common characteristic between the two female protagonists, which clearly places them in the framework of Balkan racism. Nina (and Ekavi all the more so) cultivates stereotypes about Jews, while Petria has her prejudices against the Roma. Two of the most pronounced *others* of Balkan culture thus meet in a semantic field which should define both of the protagonists as general and average. In both cases, there are semiotic procedures which will direct this other into the sphere of the tolerable, but again with the use of stereotypes: for Petria the Roma become a channel of communication with her deceased husband (creatures of the Underworld, psychopomps) through music, while for Nina the Jews become victims during the war.

Religion/sorcery

The key women for both female protagonists and their doubles are linked with religion and sorcery, and in Mihajlović's prose they are clearly defined as witches. Nina is to be an example of Balkan opportunistic theism, which does not accept religious asceticism nor superstition. For Nina the local "holy woman" is an aberration, unacceptable even when she guesses and predicts accurately. Her relation towards the "holy woman" is more a relation towards other women who believe in her, especially when her own daughter enters into a religious phase. With regards to Petria, I believe that we have valid reasons to suspect ideological manipulation around gender politics: of the three witches in Petria's life, her mother-in--law and Poleksija, the woman who births other women and helps them with abortions, are quite negatively defined, while it is the third one who saves her from poisoning from her second mother-in-law who is the "good" one. The behaviour of Petria's mother-in-law (the "Bulgarian"

woman), who allows her grandson to die without the work of the ritual (the cutting of the umbilical cord) which she must do but which she doesn't carry out, defines her as a metaphorical witch. Poleksija is, however, real: handling women's bodies is her profession. Petria's fear and battle against Poleksija, which ends in court, comes out of Petria's moral stance towards abortion. This stance is not only provoked with the live experience of saving Milijana, the unsuccessful example of Poleksija's practice:

> How many children have flown out of her hands like this into the toilet, even the number is not known. She has buried at least three-four Okna in the toilet. Well, it's a bit bad for me, if I may say so. These things happen here, and women do some things to themselves, with some spindles and heated pieces of tile and what not, but at least they do it on time, when the kid's still not kicking. This one only does live kiddies, kills live babies and aborts (op. cit.:74).

Let us leave the medical credibility aside: what is apparent is that the jury at the sentencing of Poleksija, where Petria is the key witness, hears the following statement:

> And do you, doctor, know that abortions here are strictly forbidden? (op. cit.:103).

The obvious discrepancy between the Yugoslavian practice (and law) and this statement by the writer is covered by Petria's comment: "And then it was like that. You couldn't have an abortion at the doctor's, no matter how many appeals you'd have to write." (ibidem) Petria is married to Miso at that moment, which means that everything happens well after the Second World War. That is why Petria's earmarking of time is all very cloudy – for "then": the writer has to reinforce Poleksija's negativity with awkward intervention. This is not the only example of legible (transparent) ideological intervention in Mihajlović's prose. But the other examples are tied in either with the figurative statements made by men, partakers in history, or they are part of Petria's stories about men. In this case, the writer intervened in women's history and women's understanding of gender. The "good witch", "Vlajna" Ana of course, saves Petria from the poisons given to her by her second mother-in-law. The character of the evil/criminal mother-in-law is thus duplicated: the first is responsible for the death of Petria's newborn male, the second tried to kill Petria. Perhaps this picture of the total collapse of women's solidarity is, nevertheless, overdone? In any case, women's self-help is shown as being negative, and is replaced by institutional medical help, with male doctors.

The most complex thematic "node" where religion and magic meet is the concluding part of Petria's statement, the story of her meeting and feeling pity for her deceased husband, that is, for his ghost. In the chapter "Heavenly Musicians" Petria experiences the apparition of Roma at her husband's grave, who bring some type of musical message from the deceased Miso. In a previous "reality", a Roma boy had succeeded in stealing Miso's violin from her through deception. In the apparition, the

boy with the violin returns, but with an entire Roma orchestra. The role of Roma as a psychopomp or communicator between the world of the dead and the world of the living is quite clear. The role of a woman, otherwise delegated to deal with death, and with certain (changeable) powers around rituals in all the Balkan cultures, is somewhat changed here, but the communicational essence remains. In the structure of statements, this finale would mean that Petria is preparing for a soon death, not a special women's place in the rituals of death. This is also in direct contrast to Nina's status at the end of the statement: Nina is preparing for a new marriage, the triumph of women's survival is complete, however much it be subjected to criticism. Petria, even though she has survived all her men, has not in fact "survived": she is completely socially isolated, non-existent, and awaiting death – – which Nina shudders at.

Healing

Tahctsis' female protagonist and her double show a great independence in relation towards institutional healthcare: they do not always believe the diagnoses, they (successfully) apply their own methods, but are not in conflict with doctors and medical institutions. Even though Ekavi is successfully responding to treatment for cervical cancer, the domain of so--called "women's illnesses", this is not especially emphasized in Nina's statements. The relation of Petria towards illness and healthcare is completely different, and what is especially differentiated is the status of the doctor. In contrast to the city doctor in Salonika or Athens, the doctors in the surrounding area of the mine in "deep" Serbia are in fact the only thing close to intellectuals. That is why the three doctor characters are not only important for the plot actions, but for the construction of discourse and identity. The younger local doctor, partial to money and food, is a newcomer from another part of Serbia. The older local doctor, is, however, a figure of much importance. He is the picture of authority: when working (performing his authority), he swears ferociously without stopping. Coarseness and success are linked together in this patriarchal model of *rigidity and justice*. It is precisely with this figure that the unusual example of the setting up of a hierarchical link between the voices is connected. The master of the text – the author, namely, selected this very character so as to project himself through it. The older doctor *interviews* Petria, and asks her about everything, the least about her health. His questions replace those of the master of the text, *translate* his interest. Finally, the third doctor in the story, in Belgrade, who also interviews Petria in relation to the accident that befell her husband, utters a sentence at the end which is the ideological epitome of the accumulation of doctor figures:

> I thank you, Petria. And you have given me a lesson today (op. cit.:238).

Let us try to define the minimal ideological tension of this narrative line: Petria is not only not in conflict with the patriarchal structure and its representatives, she admires it and addresses it as the supreme authority, she receives real help from it, as well as the acknowledgement that her *exemplum* can be instructive. Petria, of course, is not in the position to evaluate which part of her story can have a highly instructive function. It is in no uncertain terms that in the scene with the Belgrade doctor Petria is most clearly constructed as a *noble savage*. At least in the reading of that scene it seems essential that Dragoslav Mihajlović's text be interpreted in light of postcolonial theories.

Judgement

Both female protagonists, along with their doubles, are involved in trials, Petria as the key witness in the process against Poleksija, a witch, and in favour of her friend Milijana, while Nina, witness to a trial but not to a case, in the proceedings against Ekavi's son for the taking part in a murder. In both proceedings, the behaviour of men, the accused or witnesses, deserves a more serious critique: they do not cope well, they make use of the wrong discourse, they inflict damage unto themselves. It is Petria's testimony which establishes a balance, which saves the doctor, and which leads Poleksija away to jail. In the case of the trial against Ekavi's son, things are somewhat more complicated: Ekavi, who had earlier successfully managed to re-establish her rights in the renewed process against her former husband, is now helpless to do anything, and is only an interfering body at the scene. Her son, with his criminal past, destroys his last chances to receive sympathy from the court in that at the trial he speaks his political discourse – as a communist. Both trials are scenes of the collapse of male and patriarchal authority, but Petria, with her prudent behaviour manages to save at least a part of the patriarchal system, returning to it its credibility by the saving of the mainly harmless doctor, and leading to the sentencing of a *witch*. Harmony and order are thus reconstructed within the system. On a symbolical level, healing (that which is women's) is substituted with institutional medicine (that which is men's). The sentencing is thus a narrative entity in which a most important ideological essence is "invested". From the perspective of ideological "investment", it is not less important even at the trial that Nina attends. Ekavi, who successfully managed to realize not only judicial but moral compensation in the process against her swindler husband, is no longer in the state to save her son. This is about the key gender discontinuity, about the impossibility of solidarity and understanding, that is, of the basic communication between the sexes: Ekavi's son prepares his downfall, and women's wise advice, suggestions for successful strategies and change of discourse do not reach him. Female politics suffer a final defeat before the very given and retained gender superiority, before the gender defined and unready-for-comprise male politics. The system of survival and the system of power cannot find a

common point in the mutual reading and understanding. Almost all the women in Tachtsis' prose assess this absence of dialogue between two different existential and gender ethics as the focal point out of which misfortune, political turmoil, wars, civil wars arise. In Tachtsis' prose Pandora's box with all its possible misfortunes is held in the hands of men in fact, and in that point the ancient myth is unusually interesting: Pandora is a robot who behaves exactly how the gods ordered, she is "female" inasmuch as the ideological text which needs to be realized allows her to do so. In contrast to this dialogue calling on the ambivalence in Tachtsis' prose, Mihajlović's Petria does not bring male_political choices and ideological turning points into question, but only introduces the stories of others, from which it is clear that the one ideology was defeatist for men – – and then also only secondary for women. The relativization of male politics with the standpoint of specific female politics does not exist.

Travel

Nina and Ekavi constantly travel: Ekiva between Athens and Salonika, Nina between the place of winter and summer residence/holidays, between the socially defined Athenian parts (Kifisio-Kolonaki-Patision-Faliron), between the points in the city divided by the occupation and later by the civil war. Nina is a *flâneuse*, someone who takes the urban landscape and moving through it and places it in the field of pleasure. The key events of her life are tied in with Athenian locations, her memory is in large part topographical, or to be more precise, topogeneric. Here we can read Tachtsis' metonymic ideological construct: Nina is Athena, clearly not "Greece" and even less "Greek". Many years later, in 1979, Tachtsis published a memoir entitled "My Grandmother Athena" (*I yaya mou i Athina*): the multiple meanings in the title (woman's name, name of the city – gender-defined, the name of the goddess) leads into the multiplicity of personal remembrances and polysemous *topogenesis*. In contrast to Nina, in Mihajlović's metonymic ideological construct Petria is "rural Serbia", and as such, pretends to be "Serbian" metonymy. Nina and her double, and the other women around her, determine the area in which it is impossible to set up gender compromises, which is otherwise the basis of women's politics in a given culture; Petria supports the endangered basis of patriarchy, and with this almost certainly loses the possibility of being read in a gendered perspective. For this reason even travel, or rather, mobility, for Nina is altogether different from Petria, even though both are in similar or the same cultural Balkan context, and even though both represent the victory of women's wisdom. Nina successfully outsmarts, in the most risky of her city travels, the occupying soldiers. This procedure is often repeated even in cases less risky. Nina's ‘weapons' are her charm, verbalism (lies), seduction and on the other hand her excellent knowledge of the terrain, possessing of information, and communication with a wide circle of people in the past and present, not succumbing to superstitions and stereotypes,

and speed. Petria's main journey is the search for her husband, who was carried away in an unknown direction after the accident at the mine. She has almost none of Nina's skills, no information, no social security. Her travels to the neighbouring city, and then to Belgrade, have the clear features of the descent into the Underworld (winter, guide, dogs who accompany her). Perhaps in no other place in the narration is there such a clear connection between gender/female with the animal. The city for her is an enemy territory, in which all orientation is lost, and people do not wish to help – except for the doctor, who receives the status of divinity of that Underworld. In contrast to Nina, who uses her background as the main communicational code in war conditions, Petria, in conditions which are clearly not war ones, behaves as if she is in enemy territory, using non--verbal deceit, invasion, following, hiding, the surprise effect…

Just as in the relation to death, and in the second largest anthropological complex that both authors engage in, travel – let us not forget that birth is for the most part censored and that motherhood is deregulated – the status of the two female protagonists is diametrically opposed. Keeping them in the same Balkan cultural context, we can defend the thesis that the subject at hand is the general line of distinction within Balkan cultures – urban and rural. But along this same line two different ideological/gender "investments" by both authors are presented, along with unexpected turning points. Both authors send the message of the endangered state of men and the patriarchal system, but in different ways. Although Nina "emits" the message of women's vitality and coping in all circumstances, this still does not mean the will, or the possibility that the circumstances will change. On the other hand, Nina's uncontrollable hatred towards homosexuals and towards her own daughter (daughter of a homosexual) make her vitality a kind of gender-tempered bomb, for which we do not know when it will explode. Petria, the *noble savage*, is given a transparent role in the wakening of the national consciousness, and in the same "package" we suspect that she will not be a participant in the new division of status and government, but will remain a female--abstraction, with temporary status in the nationalistic rhetoric. In both cases, the masking into a women's genre (her story), and the no-less confusing "masked uniform" of the voice which records – the master of the text – and which makes him almost invisible, leads to the conclusion that what we are reading is a multilayered manipulation of gender identity.

In place of a conclusion

The unique case of the semantic coinciding of the titles, thematic framework, some strategies within the text (acoustic identification, invisible master of the text/tape-recorder), some anthropological Balkanic paradigms, and some mutual gender ideological narrations in the texts of Kostas Tachtsis and Dragoslav Mihajlović deserve attention and analysis outside of the seductive but superficial call/political impulse that in the

corresponding elements one reads the unique male construction of female gender in the Balkans. The ambivalent construction of the collective on the basis of gender inscription into culture, in a rudimentary and politically assertive form in Mihajlović, and more subtle but no less alarming in Tachtsis, and in both cases the "antenna-like" construction of women, simply demands analysis and a rereading. Finally, the incomparably less privileged status of women's testimony in Balkan cultures – as far as locating, researching, publishing, translating, presence in mainstream culture, reception, criticism goes – today more so than before, demands a rereading of the works which were clearly at the very top of mainstream culture. This demand is valid in light of the radical changes in social and cultural circumstances in the region, the new repositioning of focus and emphasis on gender politics, the dynamism of cultural exchanges, and, last but not least, the progress of women's and gender studies.

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DVA PRIMJERA KONSTRUKCIJE RODA U BALKANSKOJ KNJIŽEVNOSTI: KOSTAS TACHTSIS I DRAGOSLAV MIHAJLOVIĆ

SAŽETAK

Dva su muškarca pisca, u dvama različitim kontekstima, zamislila svoje protagonistice: Kostas Tachtsis, plodan pisac homoseksualne orijentacije, napisao je roman o ženskoj izdržljivosti u zahtjevnom i opasnom grčkom političkom urbanom kontekstu dužem od 50 godina, nazvan *Trito stephani* (Treći vjenčani vijenac, 1962.). Srpski autor, Dragoslav Mihajlović, bivši prosovjetski simpatizer i politički zatvorenik na Golom otoku, na pola puta do svoga današnjeg nacionalizma, napisao je roman *Petrijin venac* (1975.), u kojemu je ruralna protagonistica ikona patnje: tučena, bolesna, siromašna, napuštena, obudovjela, ona je metafora kolektivne patnje, patnje naroda. U obama primjerima, ovdje se pretpostavlja, žena dekonstruira, konstruira i destabilizira ženski prototip vladavine/služ-bovanja. U objema je tvorevinama u predloženi ženski model upisana muška sjena. U obama primjerima protagonistica je ekran za kritiku lokalnog modela kojim dominiraju muškarci. Oba se autora oglašuju iz decentrirane (muške) rodne pozicije, ili, jednostavnije rečeno, iz pozicije ugrožene seksualnosti: seksualno nestabilnog voajera, homoseksualca, traumatiziranog ili mučenog bivšeg političkog zatvorenika. Ženska kritika balkanskih muških stavova nije posve u skladu s time: u ženskom se pismu muškarci obično optužuju za sebičnost, sklonost ratu i nasilju, borbu za vlast. Potraga za srodnim, rodno decentriranim predodžbama mogla bi obnoviti raspravu o autorskom rodu, koja je jenjala potkraj sedamdesetih.

Ključne riječi: balkanske književnosti 20. st., rod, nacija