

***A BALKAN MILLENARIAN HOBBY-HORSE OF TALES:
MILORAD PAVIĆ'S STAR CAPE. AN ASTROLOGIC GUIDE
FOR AMATEURS – A STAGING (ABS)TRACT***

Keywords: Kosovo war staging; postmodern tales; magic realism; hypertext fiction

Abstract: The paper compares the staging with the *écriture* of a postmodern book about war. Milorad Pavić's *Star Cape. An Astrologic Guide for Amateurs* (2000) is a sheaf of tales recollecting the bombing of Belgrade by NATO troupes in the Kosovo war, in 1999. It was staged in 2010 at the Mic Theatre in Bucharest. Analysing the effects of staging the postmodern text, we have observed better the underpinnings of our hobby-horse of tales, comparing the tales told by people in olden and newer times. The disruption of the present, discernible in the written account of Pavić's book, was compensated on the stage. The show foregrounded the symbols of the magical realistic text in order to build an intuitive frame needed during the performance and cancelled the essential tensions in the postmodern text. But the staging "illuminated" the tenuous statements of the text, made its species clearer and revealed the compositional strategies behind the experimental forms. The performance lost some of the free play of meanings in the written text but not all ...trace of the structurality of the structure. The staging forced the postmodern telling back to its solid narrative core and clarified its millenarian function. Whereas the text insists upon war blocking people's sense for the future and the writing of linear or projective present accounts, the staging makes available the horizons/tales of the past, which can return and reconcile people to the deeper layers of identity.

Introduction

Because our subtitle is derived from William Carlos Williams' poem *Tract*, which begins: "I will teach you, my townspeople, how to perform a funeral/ For you have it over a troop of artists", the argument of the paper can be jocosely announced as an account of the encounter between a troop of artists and the troops that made the war in Kosovo! It is an encounter over the head of a writer, Milorad Pavić, who tried to put on paper the sound and the fury of war, in *Star Cape. An Astrologic Guide for Amateurs* (2000). The Bucharest staging forced the text back into a performative arena by its reconstruction of the lived experience which had gone into the book. The manipulation of the text on stage shed light on the right way to perform an experimental show that adapts an experimental text's *écriture*. Without spoiling the surprise of the reader from the

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beginning of this paper, Pavić's experimental *écriture* is avant-garde because, in Brian McHale's sense, for example, it challenges the very notion of self-identity, "producing a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort" (Mc Hale 59).

The troop of Romanian producers included Nona Ciobanu, director; Iulian Bălătescu, light design and scenography; Doina Levința, costumes; the actors of the Mic Theatre in Bucharest. They staged what appeared as a history of loves from ancient to modern times, punctuated by the destruction of war, which constantly burst from the background to..."trouble the living stream" (see W. B. Yeats' poem *Easter 1916*).

The comparison between the discontinuous literary text (written as a sheaf of tales, according to the rules of the postmodern game) and the staging (eager to essentialize the text's components) raises the question of the relationship between the symbolic and the narrative components of a book which purports to be an astrological guide, while being a sheaf of tales put together under the sign of war. Lives and tales become articulated into a novel because, in a typically postmodern way, they are declared versions of each other and the protagonists become symbolical reincarnations. In the stage production, the symbols create a continuous reference frame, the life and love stories get foregrounded at the expense of the traumatic experience of war. In the competition between the star cape and the sky raining bombs, the star cape wins on the stage. But with this, the reason for people's sufferance becomes obliterated. The book shows that traumatic war blocks people's sense for the future, while the present fails them, being clogged at its future end. But they can still collect shards of the past. These can place people at one remote from reality in the mythically universal space of vaticination (and in the literary space of magic realism). Pavić throws the star cape as a first veil over the text's chronicling of the war and casts the silent lonely readers as amateurs engaged in the initiatory adventure. Did the Romanian troop of artists do the same?

The Show, the Symbols and the Torture

Judged intuitively, the show was a fabulous torture with essentialized, intensified stories of love, violence, survival, growing indifference and insidiousness. It had a narrow escape from being a romantic tragedy because it lured us into a latter-day fairyland with its rich stage symbolism. The light design was sophisticated, based on a savvy movement of screens and mirrors, lit and extinguished in turns by mutual projections which held cyphers and enveloped everything in an eerie, surreal atmosphere. The music was solemn. There was a multitude of suggestive props: a hospital bed on wheels that ushered in people cyclically; a phallic tree of fate and an *axis mundi* at the same time; some airy screens resembling huge, rigid and axiomatic butterfly wings. They acted like mobile prison walls on which the characters climbed or were carried around to speed the pace of the show. The stage movement and the actions of the people, with their symbolic costumes, told a story of their own. It was hard for the audience to make head and tail of the profusion of expressive means while following the words that the actors recited. First some women came on stage, dressed in modern outfits of showy red; these then changed into angelic, airy garments. Then a kind of she-devil dressed in black turned up never to

leave the stage completely till the end (this last creature proved to be the feminine reincarnation of the narrator, Dionysia, the alter ego of (pseudo)-Dionysius the Areopagite, who was allowed to hold the stage in a feminine Mephistophelic or Michelangesque Pieta posture. She prophetically announced the sense and the end of the show. The first men to appear on stage were dressed for war – as stiff and disciplined red-coat officers, who danced and acted as the would-be hierophants of the whole show. (In fact they were a crew of anonymous stage-boys, who moved in step to operate the props). They had no heads – maybe because they were mere instruments who advanced the show and moved from one of its sequences to the next. Maybe they had no heads because, as we could see, there were only cannon-balls to replace ordinary heads at the top of their bodies, being war-creatures. They moved in a kind of gracious and implacable quadrille, to the rhythms of the eerie, ominous music which spelled the leitmotif of war. Then came a huge man dressed in casual, olive green military outfit, a rough male who also appeared to control the show, whose meaning escaped to the disoriented women shifting costumes, fates and roles. There was a bold wig, like a bladder or ball cut in twine that each of the actresses and actors drew on their heads to enter the stage. It suggested what the words also said: that there was a sequence of reincarnations somehow related to each other which we were about to follow in the show. They were introduced by complete black-outs after which the light projections (some on screens and some on mirrors) suggested the night sky ready to receive the star cape of stories. The characters entered the stage each wheeled in on a hospital bed, ready for a repeatably sick reincarnation, as they came in each in a trance (“like a patient etherised upon a table” according to T. S. Eliot’s *Prufrock*. Yes, we were plunged in the thick of a sick humanity’s present, so familiar to us for a whole century now. But with a difference: there was a star cape which enveloped every new unhappy, disheartening episode in the theatrical persons’ lives and invited one to attach a projective millenarian meaning to the tales (they were all love stories mainly). The star cape empowered people to confront their present and its limit more openly. Sighting the repetitions in time of story types taught the amateurs how to approach life ritually. Vaticination and millenarian thoughts will do this: they will deepen the sense of the self in ritual repetitions. But the millenarian understanding can be blocked. The Minotaur, the protagonist of the last couple of tales, the *Taurus* and *Libra*, has his letter-reading competence impaired and cannot recognize increasingly more chunks of meaning spelt with the letters of the alphabet. He cannot dream thoroughly and suffers from hatred of the future. *After such knowledge, what forgiveness?* T. S. Eliot’s *Gerontion* would ask. The star-cape story-telling may continue, but there are no people to entrust it to. This revelation, however, occurs only at the end of the book, for the story-telling kept us busy long and intensely enough to give strength to the old fictional illusion. In the book this was achieved in the teeth of the threat from the bomb-raining sky in the stars compensating the deadly rainfall. The show only toyed with the fallen bombs when it turned them into a decorative stage leitmotif at ground level (the only connection with the sky in the performance were the light-projections of the screen). The morris dance of the red-coat soldiers with cannonballs for heads, who also held the performed stories as so many hobby-horses hanging around their waists, made war into a

secondary, though ritual presence in the show. But the stories were rather like Celtic warriors' trophies held around their waist and resembled the frightening enemies' heads. The stories enacted had plots that tortured the audience, while the symbolic props, the light projections and stage movement made the pathos meaningful. There was less torture and more meaning in the original hieratic book.

From the Show to the Book. Analytical Observations

Because the conflictual, eristic contents emerged from the substance of several (eventually thwarted) love stories, the first installment of the show (in the book the second pair of tales, cast in the Scorpio and Aquarius zodiacal frame), recommended it as a history of love in time of war, from the Middle Ages to the age of the present, with its "theatres of modern operations". We were transported from the post-feudal marketplace to the lecture theatres, from urban everyday environments on board of pleasure boats or airplanes (that typically tended to crash) and ultimately, in the sequence of tales, to one of the most sacred places of modernity, where lovers confront each other, in bed. The noblemen's mansions of old and the flats in the blocks of the present had one thing in common as the lives of the people in them were concerned: the universal patterns of love were suspended at the hand of the violent institutions of fate. It was possible to follow a history of emancipation side by side with a history of alienation – a modern history, therefore – set against the timeless attraction of men to women and viceversa.

The Romanian staging separated, then foregrounded, the feminine aspect of the Guide for Amateurs from its masculine half in order to do its translation of the text's postmodern subtlety into the theatrical language and media. It invented props to bridge the gaps in the text. On stage, the perspex *axis mundi* on the vertical responded to the horizontal sick beds on which the characters lay between reincarnations. They intimated the cross as an archetype of transformation in Jungian terms. At the other than archetypal level of meaning, the stories of the reincarnated selves joined romance, class and historical criticism in a game of near happy endings. Lived history interfered with love encounters, while public fate invariably thwarted private fates. This may well serve as ...the best definition of war. On stage, just as in the text, the various life-stories were governed by whimsical dream-planets; the attractions and distractions of the lives were classified by horoscope predictions, in their turn ready to be illustrated in recondite ways (which remained hard to follow). The continuum of old wisdom that should have effected, through vaticination, the subliminal reconciliation of tales with clear eristic contents was troubled. Old meanings emerged only partially from the versions of lives that seemed to contradict each other, just like people.

According to the rules of the postmodern and poststructuralist art, the sliding of planes and people, sometimes tangentially close, expressed the relationship between the layers of meaning and narrative: myth, history and individual life stories attracted and slid past each other. The multitude of tales, versions of each other, was the measure of the distance of the present from the past.

In the book it was clear that war was the culprit if people were for the maelstrom of tales that contain people for all their aspirations to be clad in the star cape. In the written book, the references to war augment with every new stage in the course of the written narrative. First the time “before this war” is invoked by the main narrative voice in the *Leo* and *Cancer* tales. This time is the background for a story of alienation and confusion, about an intellectual who cannot find his way among several hallucinating urban landscapes. Next, in the *Scorpio-Aquarius* installment, war comes centre stage through “the Serbian universal soldier¹”, the veteran who returns wiser in the ways of the world from the war to become the mentor of his naïve sister. In her full story, told in the guise of an old Biblical account of the fall of man, her knowledge of the fruit of *the* forbidden tree brings about disaster. Her naïveté lands her from knowledge into a state of traumatic disorientation. She was disoriented because she had been separated by her father from the man who had forced her to become his woman. He received a male punishment (the ring of pride he had worn around his phallus was driven through his nose) and she was punished for her social shame when infringing taboos. After her love was undone, she was delivered into the hands of the father and discovered both prohibition and punishment. In terms of Lacanian symbolism, she came against the Name of the Father who is out to castrate love. Meanwhile, Philippa was taken up by her brother, a war veteran versed in the ways of the world. He used her shame to introduce her to the local boyar, Kir Yeremya, and prepare her to bring death to the master through deceitful love-making (and magical poisoning). By the usual feudal custom, before becoming one of the boyar’s *courtesannes*, she was to be tested and initiated first by a hired *beau*. This was her original lover whom she recognized, while he did not recognize her (because he had suffered death, reincarnation and regeneration in the meantime).

The book thrives on a miscellany of stories. If Philippa’s brother symbolizes war added to the traditional punishment after the fall of man, this means that the mythical story and the historical reality merge into a single tale to illustrate the change of love at the hand of fate and of war and to breed violence and deceitfulness. If we follow the story-line of the feminine destiny, then after Philippa’s descent into history, from myth, and under the pressure of war, she is cast as much as Ophelia in the role of a universal victim of her men’s will. After the mythical and the literary, the social story underlying the romance is set in a rich man’s household, where Philippa becomes one of his mistresses, under the guidance of her go-between brother. As we can only see in the book’s written explanations, in the Orthodox world he was nicknamed Mrs (“he who never observes the fasting calendar” Pavić 39), though his name was Preljub, i.e., in Serbian, an adulterous male (as the footnote to the same quoted page from Pavić’s book explains). Fighting in his war, Mrs had become the rich Kir Yeremya’s pimp before training his own sister to love Kir Yeremya in order to kill him. Historically, the Scorpio-Aquarius stories are set at the time of the first known national war of Serbia, during the reign of the mediaeval ruler Stepan Lazrević, who died in 1420 fighting in a proto-Balkan war with the early Magyars.

¹ This phrase recalls Donovan Philip Leitch’s song about the universal soldier: “He’s the universal soldier”.

Coupling the war references with the stories told, the next encounter with war, which can only be discerned in the written book, not in the staging, is even more explicit. It occurs in the coupling of the *Aries* with the *Capricorn* story. The tale of the Capricorn begins with the following injunction of the implied narrator:

“Stop hoping and having great expectations you, numbskull, you’ - I would say to myself all the time the bombs rained down upon the town during the seventy-eight days of the war” (Pavić, 75, translation mine)

We are told in so many words that the incoherence of stories may well be due to people’s becoming future-blind under the pressure of war. A few paragraphs later, when mentioning his newly developed gastronomic preoccupations, the main character also reminds us that in times of war the survival instinct gets the upper hand in people’s lives alongside other instinctual drives and makes them develop manias and obsessions (hobby-horses) that end up replacing more ordinary, plus minus gendered, hobbies (forms of compensatory entertainment): for example, story-telling in its various guises (on TV, at the theatre and cinema, in books, e-books and on the internet). In the Capricorn story, we also find out some “casual” information about people, as well as prices in luxury shops becoming queer in times of war, while the symptoms of disrupted but extravagant life multiply. In the written text this makes us realize that the surrealist frame which links and contains the mere stories into an astrological machine for generating a rather forced futurity is yet another symptom of the war. Sky-messages replace ordinary life meanings when they are irredeemably disrupted because neither genuine memory, nor love-making, nor sleeping nor dreaming are possible when the sky releases bombs regularly every night. So the *Star Cape* itself becomes a compensatory palimpsest of artificial life stories – that will or will not come to their consummation. The disruption and repetition of the tales, as ever more depressing versions of each other is one effect of the disturbance of story-telling by war. It, of course, enacts the Nietzschean myth of the eternal recurrence of the same. Otherwise, the resulting random association of stories may or may not be overcome (compensated) by the would-be astrological necessity which governs their articulation, when they are regarded as “an astrological guide for amateurs”, as the subtitle of Pavić’s book indicates. Initiatory guessing is rendered impotent as it is entrusted to the logic of the as-if, as in Hans Vaihinger’s treaty.

This guide is made up of scraps of old script lore introduced by the first narrator’s hobby, of collecting old things that he buys from retail vendors of antiquities. There is also an expert, exemplary fragmentariness in the book: the life-stories have been sampled by a self-reflexive implied author so as to yield their symptomatic climaxes. In the treasured collection of fragments, the typical anecdote coexists with oracular, broken statements. These also come from mere stage episodes which alternate with gnomic interludes of classified wisdom, uttered at most unexpected moments. Chunks of Balkan history mix with social fables of the past and of the present, scenic travelogues and soap opera stories. There is one epistolary novel episode in the *Sagittarius* and *Pisces* story. The attraction of the past, in the fragments of old sacred script and recognizable fragments of myth tilts the Balkan postmodernist miscellany towards magical realism and the other way round.

The modular discontinuity of the written book and the reference to internet sites and links twice at the end of the book permits assimilating it as hypertext fiction, which the Wikipedia defines as “a genre of electronic literature, characterized by the use of hypertext links which allow the reader to move from one text node to the next, to arrange a story from a deeper pool of potential stories...(as the internet entry sighted on the Google portal on the occasion of writing this paper also explains), “this species of fiction provides a new context for non-linearity in <<literature>>”. In this respect, it resembles the Romanian postmodernist writer’s *Encyclopaedia of Dragons*. In this book, Mircea Cărtărescu has Ding-Dong the Programming Girl as its electronic literature narrator, too. Pavić wrote an encyclopaedia of tale fragments, then, in addition to providing a guide at the end of the Kosovo war under the pretext of offering a star-guide to amateurs. The Bucharest staging turned it into an encyclopaedia of love stories and pathetic human postures.

While in the postmodernist written text the logic of the composition is woven out of contextual correspondences, the show had to resort to more universally symbolic means of 3D communication and this brought to the fore the magical and subliminal component implicit in the first part of the book’s title. The enhanced symbolism of the staging differed from the more implicit correspondences in the book’s miscellany of symbols. The staging foregrounded the skyward tending people governed by their stars. Their sufferance was sublimated, made exemplary, as their stars were turned into time-honoured, timeless symbols. This levelled the miscellany of the book’s fragments and....made the book’s stars get aligned.

The return to past millenarianism in the show diverged from the book’s end. In the fortune-telling script of the book, there is an artificial construction of futurity, because war blocks people’s sense for the future of the present² and breeds discontinuity. But the Romanian staging stressed the underlying miraculous, millenarian strand that in principle invites the reconciliation in the archetypal key of all tales, be they ancient, modern or postmodernist tales of war. There was, in the staging of this book, a nostalgic desire to reassert faith in the existence of wisdom, though it be fragmented, buried/subliminal and threatened in the lives of the present violent races³. Fatally, perhaps⁴, the staging had to

² A philosophical term I encountered in Niklas Luhmann’s *Observations on Modernity*, the English translation by William Whobrey, published in Palo Alto by The Stanford University Press, 1998; there, what to us appears as the subjective “future of the present” is contrasted with the objective “present of the future” (which people do not anticipate in the present but which will be materially seen to have been the case in retrospect in the objective future).

³ And the word “races” is meant literally, for Pavić’s text is permeated with all the Balkan nations of today’s explosive melting pot or as they were chronicled in the history of the Ottoman, then the Austro-Hungarian empires: Serbs, Hungarians, Austrians, Albanians; the mixed races of the book reached as far as the Greek Isle of Hydra to cross into Asia Minor and alluded to the more recent empires fading or emerging in the wake of the Yugoslavian War, which was put a violent end to by the NATO forces and the Americans, especially.

cut out some pieces of the literary and foreground them, as for example the “pistich”, in the *Aries* story (Pavić 64). The book explains that this magical object was transmitted through hermetic knowledge of cyphers and texts and we can see that it is a combination of “*pistis*” (the Greek mythology personification of good faith, trust and reliability) and “(di)stich” (that stands for poetry). Though an old mythical heirloom and a secret leftover of Balkan folklore fantasy, the pistich also acted as a technological gadget, a kind of remote-control or USB, for entering the dream state (to retrieve the imaginary order and the mirror stage).. The knowledge mediated by dream in the text makes men descend into the underground of the wider national consciousness and make contact with other shell-shocked people who lived long before the 1999 NATO bombing, in the Serbian and Ottoman Middle Ages. This added to the Balkan flavour of Pavić’s postmodern I’Tsing.

The Hobby-Horse of Tales, the Millenarian Function and the Miscellany of Arts

To make a final case we repeat the observations made so far. As a disturbed (and disturbing) fictive encyclopaedia of tellable tales, Pavić’s text places the present between the rich, exotic covers of a book retrieved from the past. Its function is to project the present people’s sufferance caused by the war (among other recent evils) against the brands of wisdom inherited from the past as held by the star cape. The book and the show confront the readers/audience with the star cape, as amateurs to be initiated. Because the adaptation for the stage of Pavić’s text turns war into an ethnic morris-dance it foregrounds the stars and the tales to make them more accessible while directly experienced, in intuitive ways. Bombing as the Serbian hobby-horse (in the sense of “obsession” in the book) gets lost. The war remains no competitor in the show’s battle for symbolic reconciliation. With no serious present obstacle, continuity between the past and the present is achieved through the....”eternal reincarnations of the same”. These need not represent a symbolic reconciliation in the teeth of the symbolic violence of the text and the show, for if the reaction between the present versions and the reincarnations is reversible, this might threaten the past archives with the present dissolution. And the thesis of the paper then remains simply undefensible.

Luckily, the Romanian staging functioned as a shortcut to the principle of composition of the hobby-horse of tales. According to Lessing’s classification, in *Laocoön*, of the arts into sequential and momentary ones, visual and poetic, respectively, the symbolic, pictural staging ought to have privileged the momentary over the sequential and the novel’s poetry should have done the opposite. But because both the show and the novel are experimental crossing-overs of artistic codes and media, the show’s achievement was to foreground the narrative core of the postmodern novelistic palimpsest while the book’s was to bury it as deep as feasible in the oracular fragmentarium. The paradoxical underpinnings of the show’s symbolical narrativity and of the postmodern

⁴ Since the staging could not avoid creating, in this way, fake centres on the stage. And the creation of bona-fide centres infringes the laws of the postmodern mentality in art, disregarding the post-structuralist caveats.

guide for amateurs finally illuminated each other. And we, amateurish interpreters, became reconciled with the harsh lesson (earlier called torture) administered to us. The meaning of the written lesson had to come from a place between the sheaf of the book's endings, disputed between Arhondula Nehama and the Minotaur. In the *Virgo* story of Arhondula Nehama and her departed friend, Agatha (another young lady, in this potentially homoerotic love story), the 40 days' period of mourning, when death is made present to the living, is equated with the duration of Belgrade's bombing by the NATO forces. This provides a point of intersection for all tales, the casual, the historical, the allegorical and the symbolic and a formula for the book's composition. In the 40 days period, the plot and the allegory converge because death, life and dream meet here and are symbolically equated with the ritual interim period of 40 days after a person's material death. This formula for a war-time book combines nightmarish dreams with wishful thinking, dream with carnage, compulsive with free love-making, clinical with healing stories about all of these. At the other extreme is the Minotaur's refusal of all dreams and stories and his seriously damaged sense of the future and of communication.

Though the show has lost the postmodern book's hesitation between bold story-telling and reluctant story-telling, in the strident, pathetic staging of the tales, it has gone down quite successfully to the substance of Pavić's book, by being faithful to the strand of magical realistic wisdom of the Balkan score and granting the millenarian function to old symbols. Using these in an account about modern traumas, it reconciled mankind with its more recent traumas.

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