

DECADES AFTER:
SERBIAN LITERATURE
1991-2021
Collection of Essays

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SERBIAN LITERATURE 1991-2021:
IDENTITY, TRAUMA, MEMORY
(SLITaM)

DECADES AFTER: SERBIAN LITERATURE 1991-2021

Collection of Essays



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GORAN PETROVIĆ'S STORYTELLING MASTERPIECE

Abstract: A great number of critical texts, studies and reviews have been written about one of the most respected contemporary Serbian writers, and in most cases they followed a kind of axiological inertia. Namely, in valuing some of Petrović's works, critics have so far mostly overlooked some of his greatest literary achievements, specifically his stories, in favor of his novelistic works. Goran Petrović indeed perfected certain postmodernist tendencies in his novels *Sitničarnica* "Kod srećne ruke" and *Opsada crkve Svetog Spasa*, but it is in the stories and novelettes found in the collection *Razlike* that we find some of his best prose, which simultaneously hints at some new poetic tendencies in contemporary Serbian literature. With a literary interest in (national) history, Petrović's works span a time-frame from the legacy of Byzantium to the Yugoslav era. It is during the latter period that Serbian history experienced one of its greatest internal changes, and the final stage of that era has admirably been given artistic shape in *Razlike*.

Keywords: Goran Petrović, *The Differences*, mimesis, fantasy, epic, micronarrative

The Differences [*Razlike*] represents the pinnacle of Goran Petrović's literary work. The book in question is a collection of stories and it counts as one of the finest examples of its kind, in more than just Serbian literature. In comparison with famous titles of a similar nature, this work shares some of the harmony of Milan Kundera's *Laughable Loves* (Kundera 1999), or Ranko Marinković's *Hands* [*Ruke*] (Маринковић 1956), books in which all the stories collude with each other in an unusual and barely describable way. Differing in both theme and length, as well as in tone

and in many other aspects, these stories still remain equal and interconnected by a narrative force that pulsates from deep inside them. It is because of these features that *The Differences* is defined, and rightly so, not as a *collection* of stories, but as a *story book* (Паовица 2007: 73).

It is important to note how unusual it is that Petrović seems to be the only writer of his generation whose oeuvre experienced such a poetic shift when compared to his best-known works, yet this shift had been somewhat foreshadowed by the author's previous book, *Fellow-Creatures* [*Bližnji*]. Less noticeably, but no less importantly, it would be difficult, even from a wider perspective, to find a text which reaches the artistic heights of the author's previous work, bearing in mind how greatly it diverges from their recognizable style. First and foremost, *Fellow-Creatures* can and should be viewed as a work of art in its own right, but only when it is viewed within the entirety of Petrović's oeuvre does it acquire certain artistic and connotative nuances, which reveal some of its essential characteristics.

The predominance of the *mimetic* over the *fantastic* conception, which had prevailed up to that point in Petrović's prose, has been recognized as the book's first distinctive feature by many critics (cf. Аћимовић Ивков 2006; Дракулић 2006; Илић 2006; Певуља 2006; Врбавац 2007; Ђорђевић 2007). It would be incorrect to state that all the stories in the book belong to the same register, given that they form an entire spectrum: from the autobiographic and the allegorical, to those with a realistic subject matter and development. However, it is evident that the author completely abandoned his signature form of estrangement, which almost exclusively involved elements of the fantastic and supernatural. The core paradox of *The Differences* then lies in the fact that Petrović, who strived to make universal the *realistic* base of his earlier books by fantastic means, now reached the greatest heights of artistic universality through a prosaic story partly marked by historical events. Critics are therefore completely correct when they see in *The Differences* an authentic portrayal of local and present-day reality at the turn of the century, "Firstly, this is a book about *us*—about Serbs and Serbian society—in the 20th and early 21st century" (Радосављевић 2006: 181).

When describing the scope of Petrović's prose, it seems that there always exists a tension between the *epic* and the *micronarrative*. Many episodes from *Siege of the Church of the Holy Salvation* [*Opsada crkve Svetog*

Spasa] tend to possess a certain independence; a narrative concentration that has a degree of self-sufficiency. On the other hand, the need to constantly expand and further develop already *finished* stories, as would be the case with the novelette "Below a Crumbling Ceiling" ["*Ispod tavanice koja se ljušpa*"] (2010), is a testament to an opposite process. We can therefore say that Petrović's prose always stems from the same source, but that it finds its own way to its final form, where it shows its aesthetic fullness. Goran Petrović is a storyteller of the paradoxical, *Andrićesque* variety: *stories* are his main literary discipline, even when dealing with lengthier novelistic structures. Both Andrić and Petrović are writers whose scopes are of epic proportions, and both have ensured a permanent place for themselves in the history of (Serbian) literature with their novels/chronicles. However, while Andrić would link his tales into larger narrative wholes, Petrović's novelistic structure would spontaneously dissolve into smaller narrative units. In line with the abovementioned citation, this is compounded by the remark that in *The Differences* "Goran Petrović creates his own Serbia, just as Andrić created his own Bosnia" (Татаренко 2013: 182). With the addition that Andrić moves from smaller to larger wholes, while Petrović does the opposite.

The book opens with the fragmentary text "Spot and Circle" ["*Pro-nadi i zaokruži*"].¹ As has been pointed out elsewhere, this prologue-like text in *The Differences* was originally a response to a column in magazine *Povelja* titled "Ten (Un)recorded Photographs" ["*Deset (ne)snimljenih fotografija*"] which was initiated by Petrović himself, who was the editor of the periodical at the time (Павковић 2007: 92–93). The column in question was a kind of request aimed at a given writer to describe, and/or come up with, ten real or fictional photographs, which would then be used to form a kind of detailed (auto)poetic narrative mosaic of the author in question. The story "Spot and Circle" consists of twenty-two parts, each one representing a year of the writer's life, and it functions as an authorial response to the editorial request. Similarly to Petrović's story "Everything I know About Time" ["*Sve što znam o vremenu*"], which functions

¹ The very beginning of the book, but also the other stories in it, corroborates the critical observation that Petrović with *The Differences* "demolished the classical story into *stories*-microsegments and in that way bestowed upon the fragment the weight of a whole genre" (Тешић 2006: 2).

as a metapoetic explanation for his book *Fellow-Creatures*, so too does “Spot and Circle” serve as a personal historiographic prolegomenon for the events to follow in the other (sub)stories of *The Differences*.

In the introductory pages, Petrović paints a self-portrait of the artist as a young man firmly rooted in the era of his formative years, all the while intoning the new voice of his current prose. This is evident from the two fragments that serve as margins for the text—they symbolically show his early *predestination* to become a writer, as well as his *birth* as one in his early adolescence. The introductory description of a six-month-old baby pulling out a thread from a tapestry, followed by the comment, “I suspect that this reddish thread marks only the beginning of great work to come” (Петровић 2006: 5), coupled with the finishing statement regarding the publication of the author’s first story titled “So,” leads us to the writer’s fated dealing with *weaving*, bearing in mind the etymological correlation between *text* and *textile* which acts as a symbol of his life’s calling and professional vocation.

From the standpoint of literary tradition, a deeper critical look at the consequences of conceiving one’s autobiography in such a way reveals more than meets the eye: “If Branislav Nušić believed that an autobiography should end with marriage, Goran Petrović brings down the curtain on his tale with the publication of his first story” (Татаренко 2013: 178). The author of this citation does not just imply that personal and artistic biographies are, in a way, ever at odds with each other in a life dedicated to making art, but also discreetly indicates, by referencing Nušić, something that is more present in *The Differences* than in any other of Petrović’s books, namely a *humour* of the finest variety. Additionally, the fact that it is the first published *story* that is crucial suggests the presence, authorially intentional or (at least) spontaneous, of an awareness of the aforementioned *narratocentricity*, which Petrović turns to when he is at the height of his creative fervor. It would seem that, with this book, the author has been freed from his recognizable excesses of grand poetic aspirations and has finally reached a primal narrative moment, one devoid of anything *experimental*, just the simplest—and simultaneously the most demanding—act of *telling a story*. “Spot and Circle” announces, like a musical prelude, the ensuing four movements of Petrović’s prose symphony, which are titled as follows: “Below a Crumbling Ceiling”, “Above Five Dilapidated Pots”, “Madonna and Other Apparitions” and “Between

Two Signals". The prelude contains many of the motifs that will reappear as variations in the following *movements*, and they are mostly related to the historical context of the tales: Josip Broz visiting Vrnjačka Banja; the ceiling of the Dimitrijević family's home; a map of a no-longer-existing country hanging on a classroom wall; the "Sutjeska" cinema, found in the first story to follow, as the location that will metaphorically unite all these images... Lastly, the concept of the *differences*, a leitmotif found in all these story-variations, functions as the emblem of the introductory story, which then discreetly reappears throughout the collection. A "difference" is something that makes a memory worth telling, and given how the twenty-two introductory fragments contain many typical, even somewhat trivial life moments, it turns out that the difference actually lies in the noted ability of skillfully *telling* the stories.

Everything that Petrović wrote down, not only in "Spot and Circle" but in the other stories in this book as well, he did with great artistic focus and creative precision, the most remarkable part of it all being its narrative simplicity. All of it feels like a warm evocation of a not-so-distant past and leaves the impression of having been shown skillfully rendered memories from the author's life and close surroundings. However, everything constantly warns and urges the reader to feel and think that what they are reading is not simply *that* which they are being told by the author, and that there is *something* more to it all. This is precisely why the author's method of writing in *The Differences* is, rightfully, described by certain critics as a "poetics of illusive naivety" (Потић 2007: 67).

When, for example, the narrator describes his first photographic experiences, his early attempts do not exclusively refer to a typical playfulness of child, but also to his first creative ambitions, as can be seen from the clear allusion to the photo first described:

From the monetary part of his bonus for twenty years of service, our father bought our mother a ring, and for all of us he bought a Kiev camera. I enjoy conducting "grand" photographic experiments. I place books of an adequate size on the table, the camera on top of the books, wind the self-timer lever, and, while the mechanism buzzes, rush to strike the weirdest pose imaginable. Those are now dozens of badly focused and poorly framed images. In some of them you can't even see me, that's how much I missed. You can only see the wall and the backrest of the ottoman. Maybe the exact same wall where once hung the tapestry with the woven hart. (Петровић 2006: 16)

This scene can in many ways be understood as a poetic metaphor for Petrović's prose work up to that moment: his grand artistic experiments, the stacked books as obsessive novelistic propaedeutics, the absence of the author from the painted scene, as well as the empty wall where the first thread of the fabric of a lifelong literary adventure was stolen. This radical, programmatic insertion of biography follows the noted decision to approach storytelling from its fundamental aspect, without "grand" ambitions and epic obsessions, in a manner and with an intent which has always been applied to such an endeavor: to describe the world around us and man's place in it by an act of *telling* that speaks more than what is merely *said*.

The introductory story is followed by the largest and, in some ways, most ambitious one in the entire collection, the one titled "Below a Crumbling Ceiling". The tale in question is an exquisitely comical allegory about the dissolution of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia; a unique work not only in Goran Petrović's oeuvre, but in all of contemporary Serbian literature as well. In keeping with the offered musicological metaphor—one that critics clearly are not using arbitrarily to describe the book's structure, but is instead most likely a concept consciously used by the author—the narrative symphony begins, atypically, with a scherzo. By subtly imbuing his earlier narration with comedic elements, which evidently was not a case of incompetence or shy constraint, but rather a conscious decision, the writer has illustrated all the splendor of a comedic potential devoid of all farcically parodic allegory, to which the aforementioned historical rift has been frequently subjected to in recent literary interpretations.²

Additionally, as is the case with the preceding story, as well as those that follow, all the figurative meanings stem naturally from the base level of narration: there is nothing artificial, nor affectedly *representational*, in the specific people—symbolic figures found in Petrović's cinema-microcosm. The story primarily functions as a melancholy tale of a provincial universe, one which could be found anywhere in the world, regardless of historical and geographical coordinates. Herein lies one of the greatest

² The writer wisely sensed that some of his earlier poetic practices would have been less successful, as has likewise been remarked by critics: "The hesitation between fantasy and parable has here been resolved in favor of the latter" (Брајовић 2006: 50).

values of Petrović's prose: a rare balance struck between literal and connotative meanings gives rise to the most universal story about human prototypes determined by their personality, who are not representatives of merely one small community but rather a community of all people. The author achieved this by means of all the noted traits of his improved, or even completely matured, art of storytelling, interwoven with his old creative sensibility. This is also something that critics have already properly addressed:

Petrović is subtle not only in his narrative technique, but also in his treatment of the (SFRY) past: beyond the barren opposition of a critical denial and a romantic adoration of monumental proportions, Petrović writes tales in which the recent, prewar past is brought back with a kind of quiet longing devoid of nostalgia. This mild longing leads to something that characterizes most of the stories in *The Differences*, and that is spirituality. (Владушић 2007: 179)

Remaining outside all the pseudopoetic and, as a rule, ideological debates about the way recent history is represented in Serbian literature, Petrović saved his prose from such a detrimental creative inhibition. The spirituality mentioned in the quote above is not closely related to a confessional religiosity, but rather to a feeling of universal human connection, which can be seen in the fates of all the people gathered below the ceiling, which continues to crumble more and more. Therein lies one of the mentioned neosentimentalist traits of this prose, a subdued empathy for the characters, but far removed from the politically correct, meaning equally biased, assigning of roles brought on by a poor understanding of the ethical tasks of literature.

Twenty front rows of seats in the "Sutjeska" cinema, located in Kraljevo in the hall of the hotel that was once called "Yugoslavia," are occupied by a few town originals: from the theater staff, along with professors and lawyers, couples and highschoolers, to local bullies and paupers. They are watching a picture showing that will soon be interrupted, with the announcement of the death of the country's president-for-life. All of this is being carefully observed and noted down from the shadows by the present narrator, who is possibly the now grown-up author from "Spot and Circle" who does not reveal his identity. Only occasionally does he doubt the reliability of his memory—when it comes to the exact title of the film, and whether or not it was fictional or documentary.

The humorous tone of the story can be seen in the very names and initial descriptions of the characters: “comrade Avramović, later known as the Babushka Man;” “the famous town drunk, a certain Bodo, always picnic-ready with at least two beers equipped;” “some guy called Vejka, a hobo, who was bundled up in an oversized balloon jacket all year round;” two Romanies, Gagi and Dragan (“Gagi’s real name was Dragan, while Dragan’s nickname was Gagi”); a music teacher, Nevajda Elodija, who was “otherwise, very beautiful and very thin. All like a lush and promisingly opened, but, due to circumstances, never quite finished musical composition;” Njegomir the drummer, the local musician for weddings and funerals; Montage Kraut, the projectionist... (Петровић 2006: 48-56). This whole descriptively lush and inventively onomastic gallery, where the mutually connected voices of the characters intersect with their destinies, already in itself represents a demonstration of the author’s new poetic direction, but also the strength of his literary force at its greatest magnitude.

It is an old literary truth that different kinds of spontaneously collected microcommunities serve as a reflection of the whole world on a smaller scale. Whether we are dealing with a quarantine, a hospital, a madhouse, a classroom, a waiting room, or any other walled-off space, to which we can add the potently symbolic chronotope of the 20th century—the movie theater—the location in question is always important because it functions as a reflection of sorts to the characters. In this case, the picture showing is crucial for a deeper understanding of the writer’s intentions, given that the specific part of the unfinished movie says something about the situation in which the characters of the story find themselves in. To put it simply, the movie screen represents a symbolic *mirror* of the society of which those characters are chief representatives. Rummaging through his unreliable memory, the narrator retells the part of the movie those present managed to see:

As I said, I can’t remember if the movie was fictional or not, but I am sure that it was filmed in Africa. It had been advertised in the press because of a scene in which a man is literally torn apart by lions, which caused a fervent public debate, primarily about the ethics of the film crew which disregarded helping the poor soul for the sake of the “unique scenes.” Also, possibly an even bigger issue for some prudes, which led to calls for censorship or at least a ban for the youth, was that the movie

contained a really rare and, at the time, unusually realistic scene of a land fertilization ritual. It more or less showed a tribesman dig a little hole of an adequate size in the ground, his face is painted in ceremonial white, he is butt naked, and noticeably endowed by Mother Nature, then he lies down and simulates intercourse, thus gifting his land with his seed, believing that his poor land will then be more fruitful, that it will sustain him... (Петровић 2006: 63)

This documentary snippet represents the culturological inverse counterpart of the world seated about the theater. Namely, by combining Thanatos and Eros in this short movie fragment, in this scene from the depths of the Dark Continent, maybe from some fellow *unaligned* country, the writer points a spotlight on an image of the decadent society that is being reflected in it in a twisted way. It would, however, seem that it is not his intention to paint it with the dark tones of the age-old tale of internal corruption which naturally leads to disaster, instead, Petrović wants to make sure that his comic vision is given certain anthropological depth. Far removed from the primordial human forms of the struggle to survive, the representatives of the *civilization of socialism* are made funnier in their pettiness and individual obsessions, yet the story does become slightly more serious in this reciprocal mirroring of the audience with its non-aligned brethren. No matter how much humor Petrović uses to describe his characters, their story is essentially still a tragic one, like every other story about a community with shrinking coordinates, whose members remain unaware of their doom.

Besides the detailed character descriptions and their interrelations, many other things also point to the story's allegorical nature, and this includes the comments made by the mysterious narrator figure. His statements neatly fit in with the whole story, in which the parallel levels are not mutually subordinated, but rather strictly constructed at an even pace and into a relationship of equals. There is nothing in these passages that would seem to draw too much attention to the *symbolism* of the depicted object or phenomenon: both the description and narration are completely focused on telling the story as naturally as possible, while its *universality* quietly and unobtrusively emanates from every page:

Every time there was a long pause between two film reels or, simply, whenever there was a film burn, I would take the opportunity to look

at the curves and open wounds on the flanks of the stucco. It always seemed to me like a part of something bigger, something unimaginably big, so I never knew whether to pity us for the small lot we were given here or to be glad that we even got this much. (Петровић 2006: 65)

With such reflections, the narrator mediates a general feeling of detachment on a global level, even though, according to the nostalgic lore typical of the time period, they were a part of the larger world. The cinema's ceiling with the sky painted on it is merely a piece of the cosmic endlessness, in whose stars one hopelessly searches for the answer to the question of the future of the community gathered under that same roof. Only Vejka the hobo, in his almost blessed fool's upholding of the perennial Serbian fear of draft, warns from the very beginning that "someone up there left a latch unlocked" and reminds of the consequences that might have, "You and your constant airing out, just you wait, one day the cosmic draft will blow us all away like year-old straw, to who knows where..." (Петровић 2006: 36). The ceiling then becomes a symbol of the *local* sky, as part of an all-embracing celestial cover, which offers only temporary refuge from misfortune, and never an absolutely certain shield for everything that finds itself beneath it.

An additional source of the author's comic effect is a particular feature of the characters' speech, their perception of the events in the cinema is decisively marked by the main personality trait of each individual hero. However, each of them, through their solipsistic optics, unmistakably gets a part of the truth, hidden behind the whole (cinematic) *show*. Like broken clocks with hands frozen on different numbers, everyone tells the *correct time* at least once during the showing. The artist Eraković, for example, is *wrong* in his interpretation of the events related to the interrupted projection, but at the same time he says something that is *actually* happening in the background of the events being described:

– Brilliant! That's what I call a superb artistic provocation. Magnificent! What a frame! My honest regards to the director! Do you see, woman, the empty movie screen is now a symbol of devoid meaning, it's a terrible image of the world, a representation of a civilization that's grown tired and has nothing more to say! (Петровић 2006: 68)

This is why his later *professional* success with his conceptual art installation entitled "The Erakovićs," comprised of thirty-three self-portraits

on aluminum foil, brought him fame and recognition from the capital's critics. Noticing the moment of the dissolution of the existing system of values, Eraković found an opportunity for short-term success within that rift, never to repeat it again despite all his creative endeavors. In this way, the members of different professions found in the theater represent their oftentimes tragicomic fate following the new historical changes. Lazar Lj. Momirovac, for example, would go on to neatly fold up his diploma and send it irrevocably to the Secretariate of Belgrade University's Law School. There is also professor Đorđević, who would keep rereading his students' essays in order to find some kind of mistake which was responsible for the socio-political collapse.

However, the only truly tragic fate befalls the young men who will, unlike the rest of the audience, be sent from their high-school desks, and theater seats, into the army, from whence they will never return. It is said that they "died as soldiers of the Yugoslav People's Army during one of the first conflicts of the dissolution of Yugoslavia" (Петровић 2006: 83). This metonymic description of a generation that paid with its lives for the fifty-year-long attempt at maintaining a utopia makes for the most moving parts of the story:

There was never a complete reconstruction of the events. But, witnesses claim that it all happened because of one bullet. One single shell that ricocheted for no reason at all, as if enraged. Shot from an odd angle, who knows when and from who knows where. Maybe it was many years ago. Maybe even many decades ago. But centuries should also be considered. [...] *Ž.* and *Z.* simply collapsed. They didn't look dead, but they were. No, if we disregard the blood-stained temples, they didn't look like dead young men in the slightest. Quite the contrary, the two of them, with their heads bare and mouths open, looked like children who had just said, "Could you please sit down, we can't see anything" (Петровић 2006: 84).

Their fate, as well as that of Petronijević, Resavac and Stanimirović, the students who refused to learn their history lessons, stands as the only tragic counterpoint to the predominant tone of the story. Yet, even the description of their demise contains a certain component of a melancholically evocative narration, which fits in with the overall atmosphere in an unusual—but nevertheless artistically successful—way. Contrary

to this, the author consistently led the story with, and devotes a lot of space to, a predominantly cheerful vitality marked with humor, paying extra attention to the *romantic* episodes within the narrative. The several couples in the “Sutjeska” cinema, with their romantic rises and falls, are joined by Elodija and Njegomir, led by the brightest art of Petrović’s comic key:

The thin Nevajda Elodija finally gave in and accepted the advances of the chubby Njegomir. One sleepy night, she, a graduate from the musical academy, the department of solo singing, all like a lush and promisingly opened, but never quite finished musical composition, said to him, a failing rock guy, a drummer for weddings and burials by chance, she said to a guy like him:

– Beat me, baby! Lay down with all your might!

[...]

And “beat” and “beat” he did, always surprised at all the wild rhythms he managed to “strike” with her. As a result of this, she rounded up, while he became thinner. This in spite of the abundant catering for musicians on weddings and burials. Still, he did not mind, and she clearly enjoyed it.

“Snappitum-snappitum-tss... dumdida-dumdida-pss... badum-dum... clap!”—so Njegomir changed his “beat” every night. Sometimes barely touching Elodija’s taut skin, at other times diligently and sharply fri-sking her, at others still he would “get” subdued triumphant gasps, and sometimes he would combine everything he knew, something between hard rock, jazz improv and a primal, primeval call. (Петровић 2006: 89–91)

Behind this cheerful epilogue lies the author’s Fellini-Tornatore influence, one which, understandably, found more inspiration in cinematography than in literature. Thus, this whole string of events and people becomes, as Petrović implied in one of his video-interviews, his own prose *Amarcord* or *Cinema Paradiso* in a Kraljevo fashion (Сташић 2023). In this “film-novelette,” the writer in part improves on his earlier narration method, and in part completely abandons his usual style, and by doing so he accomplishes some of his greatest creative achievements. At the same time, he senses that his work on the text is not yet finished, which will be

confirmed a few years later with this story's expansion into a short novel of the same title.

However, the true culmination of *The Differences* and the very peak of Petrović's novelistic opus lies in the as yet inadequately assessed story titled "Above Five Dilapidated Pots". As a storyteller frequently compared with Ivo Andrić, because of this story, Petrović was, for the first time, placed in the company of writers like Thomas Mann, and with a reason (Делић 2007: 210). Indeed, there is something of the same atmosphere, the stone-like coldness, the same terse language, as well as the translucent symbolism shared by the best novellas of the two Nobel laureates, there is something of all of this here, in Petrović's masterpiece.

Taking place in the town of Vrnjačka Banja, known for its public baths, at the beginning of a tourist season, the story opens with a description of new arrivals who are in an endless pursuit of "more health, more love, and, for those who came here to gamble, more money" (Петровић 2006: 104). As with all the other stories in the book, this one is also divided into fragments, the first of which ends with the discreet, *Andrićesque* remark, "And so the new arrivals are eternally renewed. And so everything is repeated" (Петровић 2006: 105). In a typical semantic linking found in other exemplary works of its kind, "Above Five Dilapidated Pots" is a story about concrete reality, characters and events, but it is also a grand tale of eternal Life, which wants to be lived to the fullest, to last as long as possible, and to finally understand itself.

The author then localizes the center of his story, with an unprecedented restraint of a poetic, equally effective style, with a minimal number of literary ornaments, and yet proportional to the grandeur of the public baths' architecture: "Like a year-old apple being gruellingly divided with someone's bare hands, that's how the French doors on one apartment's balcony suddenly crackled in late April" (Петровић 2006: 105). Continuing in the same tone, in an indescribable and somewhat paradoxical fashion, the narrator connects cinematic realism with fairytale descriptions, which spills over into the rest of the narrative:

And that strange draft, invisible and incomprehensible, whatever it was, it looked like it continued onward—the weathervanes on nearby pavilion rooftops started fidgeting, dozens of cast-iron roosters turned and turned, every which way, relentlessly. And still, the balcony

remains empty. It's as if that someone were waiting for the inside and outside pressures to completely level out, as if they were waiting for the complete exchange between that third-floor apartment and all of Vrnjačka Banja, or maybe the whole world even, an exchange of all they had to offer each other, of all they had to say. Yes, without a doubt, with the whole world indeed, for this inexplicable air current continues on, it trails away, the nearest weathervanes have already given up, the cast-iron roosters are still, there are now a dozen colorful flags adorning the promenade that are fluttering, and in the next moment it is the treetops of distant poplars near Vrnjci. (Петровић 2006: 107)

A twelve-year-old boy then appears on the balcony, starts cleaning its surface, and takes out the five remaining pots of a few dozen, whose number gradually dwindled throughout the years. He is the third generation of the family that is looking after a disabled old man, whose name was long forgotten, now only known in the town as—Maestro. Now commences what has been in careful preparation: the boy wheels the old man onto the balcony, then he plays on the record player, yet again, the third movement of Johannes Brahms's Symphony No. 3, which the Maestro *conducts* from his wheelchair. Skillfully shifting between frames, the narrator lowers his *camera* to the staircase which lies next to the villa, leaving this scene in the background, where it is barely noticeable by the tourists entertaining themselves with their business. Here the author clearly insists on the tension, on the *pressure*—as it was called in the previous description—which exists between what's happening on the balcony and what is happening in the *lower* world, as an example of a typical *Mannian* spatial-symbolic disposition.

We can see just how much the influence of the language of film from the previous story of *The Differences* spills over into this one, especially in the cinematic *ellipsis* of the parallel sequences which show the generational change of Maestro's caretakers, "Why do you do this? I don't understand it, the same old thing, so many times?—the housekeeper asked, for years and years, growing old herself, so her son, a boy with black, curly hair, slowly took over all the duties;" which is immediately followed by the next image, "Really, Maestro, why do you do this? There are other records. Would you like something else for a change?—her son also asked, no fewer times, doing everything his mother did, only changing how he called the invalid, who was already quite old at the time" (Петровић 2006: 121).

However, it is not until the old man's third helper in a row, the son of the former curly-haired boy, the spitting image of his father when he was little, that the question is asked in *the right way*, so that the old man was finally moved enough to provide the explanation for his great secret, "Excuse me, Maestro... There's something I'd like to know. Where does all that music go? What happens to all that music?" (Петровић 2006: 123). Here it is finally revealed why the author constantly interweaves spatial and temporal plains: he wants to formalistically underline the core meaning of Maestro's efforts. That, namely, what is close and what is far, as well as what has past and what is happening now, all of it craves to merge into a movement of the symphony with which the old man wants to unify the whole world around him. That is to say, he wants to play the composition for a sufficient number of times so that it can spread everywhere and in that way reach God himself, transmitting to him Maestro's eternal contemplations:

At first, I wanted to use this sad music to ask him why am I disabled, and yet I live in this wonderful place, where everyone comes sick and leave for at least a bit of hope healthier. Why am I condemned to look at this lush park my whole life, and never be able to set foot on any of its paths, while others come from all around... At first, I wanted to ask him many other things as well, you're too young for me to go on like this for ages. You're too young for me to tell you how people have come closer to many things, but at the same time they've moved away from humanity. Trust me, I've managed to see all sorts of things from up here, because I haven't moved from this single spot. When someone moves around, when they see this and that, the two cancel each other out, one is diluted, watered down, in the other. But, when someone always has the same image in front of them, then they immediately spot the differences. (Петровић 2006: 125)

The whole narrative up to this point is condensed into this moment which acts as its semantic focal point. Maestro's very immobility makes him, in a way, *divinely* removed from the world, which is, on the one hand, an eternal repetition of the same thing: the family that takes care of him, the tourists that come to his town, the cyclical changing of the seasons; but, on the other hand, it is also an eternal change, whose major historical tremors reach Maestro's reality in waves, of which he has seen more than his fair share in his near one hundred years of existence, yet he

equally fails to find any visible meaning in any of it. And so, the figure of an old man with long, gray hair and a beard appears, at this moment, as one of the traditional representations of almighty God, here shown as his pitiful and equally sublime earthly emanation, which inspires the boy to ask him for one more performance of Brahms's Symphony. With this, the world's faith that Maestro's century-long struggle still carries meaning has been preserved, all thanks to the boy's well-asked question! This is also the moment where one, potentially, begins to suspect that the boy will later arrive at a deeper revelation: that such a task is beyond the power of one man, or even of several generations, but that still, with human dedication and persistence, beauty could someday save the world.

The narrator indirectly says that the task of those who are seemingly estranged from and discarded by the world is *diviner* than the tasks of those who directly participate in the world, which is a sign of the greatest artistic sensibility. The answer Maestro searches for is inside of him, but it is not intended for him; instead the meaning of his existence is to pass it on to someone else. Here Petrović plays the mighty concluding chord of the central prose movement of *The Differences*, ending it in a way worthy of the story's musical leitmotif:

And so the boy went through the wide-open French doors and entered the room on the third floor of the classicistic villa. The old man raised his arms. The strings were heard, violines, violas, cellos... The old man "guided" them confidently, more confidently, he thought, than any of the million times before. The boy peeked behind the pale-yellow curtain and nodded, as if he wanted to shout out, "That's it, Maestro!" But, he said nothing. The elegiac music started rising from the balcony.

Above the five worn pots.

Above the ruined villa near the steps that lead from the baths to the so-called Belimarković castle. Above the other houses, rooftops and moping weathervanes.

Above that park, abruptly awakened by spring.

Above Vrnjačka Banja.

Above everything in the area, streams, rivers, and mountains.

Above the whole land.

Above people from all ends of the world.

Above that small-scale world, which bustled below in pursuit of health, love and money, which wrote back home how they were getting better with every day spent here, paying no attention to the trembling hands which were being lifted, which moved about, at times spreading helplessly, and at others clasping each other—as if in prayer. (Петровић 2006: 127)

In this way, by using experiences from the musical and cinematic arts, Petrović has shown how the previous eras' obsessions over creative syncretism are effective even without radical practices—as part of the *illusive simplicity* of his neosentimentalistically intoned poetic worldview. It has, therefore, been remarked, entirely rightly, that in *The Differences* “the Word, The Music, The Image, intersect in an unrepeatable, magically natural way” (Татаренко 2013: 177). Additionally, the previously observed spirituality of Petrović's prose, which manifested itself in a noticeably confessional symbolism in some of his earlier works, here becomes translated into man's everyday life. This feature marks the starting point for the next story, “Madonna and Other Apparitions”, which is firmly linked to and follows up on the story “Above Five Dilapidated Pots”.

Generally speaking, Petrović's story collections are carefully planned out and possess a firm internal structure. *The Differences* represents the pinnacle of that aspiration, which turns these author's books into a kind of cryptonovel. This feature of *The Differences* is visible not only at the level of the predominant sensibility, but also in regards to the chronotope, which is marked by the cities and provinces of the Serbian interior during the wartime 1990s, as well as the leitmotifs such as the one from the book's title, the memorial plaques with the names of those who died in the wars, the photographs and many other discreet signs. However, Petrović's stories are mainly like cryptonovels because of their characters: oddballs, blessed fools, crazed individuals, or simply people who are reflections of the madness of a deformed world.

That is why the narrator witnesses the incarnations of the Virgin with the newborn Christ all around the country, in the remotest of places, out of which he chooses to talk about the first *sighting* on a train station in Vojvodina. Juxtaposing, in such a vision, a mother breastfeeding her child with a group of soldiers who direct lascivious jokes at her, the narrator with his illusive naivety, or maybe with a twisted mind even, places

the reader in the shoes of Maestro's youngest helper: is this a question of a suffering-induced compulsion, or an authentic epiphany? All the accidental guesses made by the heroes in "Below a Crumbling Ceiling" which end up being partially true, turn, in the other stories of *The Differences*, not into a comedy of inadvertent wisdom, but rather into a tragedy of divine madness. To exist in a world that is dancing on the edge of a precipice, or to believe that God could be reached with music, or that he can be seen in the arms of a breastfeeding woman in the waiting room of a train station, none of the endings of these stories paint this as a psychopathologic escape from reality, but rather they show it as a sign of the remaining faith that the world will not end after all. This is why all the things the heroes say sound so tragically ambiguous, because it is sometimes left to their interlocutors, and sometimes even to the readers of *The Differences* to determine how they will understand them. "Madonna and Other Apparitions" similarly ends with the narrator's characteristic comment, "I never managed to convince, or persuade, anyone, but I know it was them. The only thing I never managed to figure out was, did they know? Did they at least suspect it? Maybe they did at least, when we, and many others, didn't know—what we could have been" (Петровић 2006: 153). In the spirit of the title of the introductory story of the collection, it would seem that the author is consciously leaving the reader with a chance to "spot and circle" the *difference* in the possible meaning of this, and all the other ambiguities of their own stories.

The title "Between Two Signals" rounds up *The Differences* with a story that turns to, like the introductory one, a personal mythology of household items of the vanished family homes of a sunken era. As has been remarked elsewhere, the author here deals with "the fate of the little man, and his coming to terms with it by searching for and finding his way to endure" (Ђуричић 2009: 30). The aged Isailović, enthralled in a senescent bliss of the numerous channels his TV subscription offers, gradually loses touch with reality when his receiver starts losing signal, and the screen gets covered in "an endless curtain of snow" (Петровић 2006: 154). His "sense of being all-powerful" (Петровић 2006: 165) while holding the remote-control transforms into a feeling of powerlessness and defeat, the inevitability of which the protagonist clearly does not want to accept. There is something here of Petrović's recognizable literary compassion for characters of old age seen in *Fellow-Creatures*, yet Isailović's

loss of reality is still predominantly in keeping with the spirit and tone of the other stories in *The Differences*. His excitement with the absolute control over changing the program and the illusion of *controlling* time during his, it would seem, last days on Earth is yet another sorry attempt at overcoming profane reality and entering into the sphere of the *divine*.

This time around, it is, in its deepest sense, a melancholy caricature of an attempt: “Not even the dear Lord with his forefinger, pointing for centuries from the clouds, could arrange the world so quickly as he could with just one click of his thumb” (Петровић 2006: 154). This attempt at covering one’s slow departure from this world with the colors of the TV screen and the deception of an absolute control over the situation ends with Isailović’s tears. Namely, he believes that he is crying because of the “snow,” until the angelic figures of two little Gypsies tell him that it is high summer. The interference then ends, the signal returns to the screen, but Isailović then sets the automatic shut-down timer to fifteen minutes, believing that it will take him that long to fall asleep. This is the very end of the story, as well as the very end of the collection. As with all the previous cases, the reader is left with the impression that the *difference* here is that this sleep might be, or is, the last and deepest sleep of all.

In the sum of the individual outcomes of its five stories, in their *musical* structure, in the exceptionally effective playing with the illusion of *cinematic* storytelling, in the simple language rich with incredible meaning and euphony—and in many other aesthetic qualities—*The Differences* represents Goran Petrović’s greatest artistic achievement.

Translated by Matija Cvetanović

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