

CRITICAL INTEGRALISM OF BORISLAV PEKIC¹

Milan Orlic

(Monash University, Slavic Studies)

Abstract: Analysing negative utopias of Borislav Pekic, as well as his book *The Years the Locusts Ate*, the aim of the paper is to point out the basic principles on which Pekic builds critical integralism. The sources of this critical integralism should not be sought in the regressivistic or, still less, progressivistic stance, but rather in the stance of historiosophic cyclicity.

Key words: irony, critical integralism, Law, negative Utopias, Christian dogmas, Communism, historiosophic cyclicity.

*Judas Iscariot – said Jesus of Nazareth irritably – once and that, I verily say unto you, is not far, you will also be told: act as it is written. And if you act, but not as it is written, you will be told again, and again were you to act contrary to the Letter, it will be told to you, act again, and act seven times, seventy-seven times and seven multiplied by seventy-seven, until the whole Testament is fulfilled. For if one little letter of the Testament is not fulfilled, it is as if no letter has been fulfilled.*²

¹ This paper was presented at the 10th Biennial Conference of the Australasian Association for Communist and Post-Communist Studies (AACaPCS) in Canberra, 3-4 February 2011. It has been peer reviewed via a double referee process and appears on the Conference Proceedings Website by the permission of the author who retains copyright.

² The translation from Pekic's *The Time of Miracles*, and his other books, is mine. The original is found in Borislav Pekić, *Vreme čuda* (Novi Sad: Solaris, 2006), 258.

My paper is concerned with the transformation of Utopian thought in Serbian literature. Borislav Pekic, considered the most important Serbian novelist of the second half of the 20th century, deconstructs Utopian thinking in three novels which were published between 1960 and 1980. Pekic's critique of ideology and Utopian thought especially takes the form of a transgressive reinterpretation of Biblical motifs. Through transgression against traditional Biblical motifs Pekic transforms attitudes to old dogma, at the same time separately developing well-founded criticism towards politics and ideology of Communism.

Pekic's Poetics

In analysing the anti-Utopian novels of Borislav Pekic as well as his book *The Years the Locusts Ate* (*Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*), the aim of this paper is to point out the basic principle of Pekic's poetics, which I have called "critical integralism." The source of Pekic's poetics is thus not sought in any regressive post-Communist or post-modern myth-making techniques; instead, it is found to emerge from a historiosophic cyclicity, originating in Nietzsche's concept of "die ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen" ("the eternal Return of the Same").

Irony is one of the more subtle techniques of critique, intrinsic to Pekic's poetics. Simulating the language of the auto-declarative "scientific Marxism," Pekic's critical integralism begins with the well-known *critique of everything that exists*, both immanent, and transcendent. The arrow of Pekic's critical irony is directed at the ideological imperatives of the fulfillment of the Letter of the Law, of the Testament – up to the last letter or tittle.

The core of Pekic's poetics is constituted by a re-evaluation of Utopian thought through the creation of negative Utopias grounded in a systematic scepticism towards the ideological discourse of Communism, as already suggested, but also in a reinterpretation of Christian dogma. Structurally, this systematic scepticism comes to expression as a perpetually changing point of view of the narration.

Negative Utopias

The novels *Atlantis (Atlantida)*, *1999*, and *Rabies (Besnilo)*, as is well-known, constitute an anti-Utopian trilogy. Combining different genres, namely, the science fiction and the crime novel,³ Pekic portrays the conflict of rival paradigms. In *Atlantis* and *1999*, the conflict permanently exists between two rival civilisations, namely between people and robots (an intertextual allusion to *Rossum's Universal Robots*, the famous anti-utopia by Karel Capek). Each civilisation has supremacy in certain periods of history and each fails, dramatically and catastrophically. This is a metaphoric representation of the two civilisational trends: one is the spiritualisation of all levels of existence in the human order, the other is the comprehensive automatisisation in the robotic organisation of life. The ideals of the spiritualisation of the world are embodied by the human soul which, because of its uniqueness and irreducibility, remains a permanent and inalienable source of individualism and de-automatisation. In the periods in which the powers of the human soul (such as, say, the power of telepathic communication) need to be defended against the automatised way of life, these powers seem to flourish. The irreducibility and immeasurability of the soul in the world of robots and cyborgues, androids and humanoids, based on the *special relationship between matter and energy*, in the long historical process gradually destroys the automatisisation. The destruction of the automatisisation is proportionate to the loss of the power of the human soul; the conflict implies and proves a double loss, robotic and human. The cynicism of the double loss is contained in the fact that in the moment of a definitive victory, the conspiring human organisational force realises that its spiritual powers have dissapeared, as is the case with the mentioned telepathic communication. The escape from the aporetic situation is not possible without refusing the basic premises of de-automatisation: the more elementary, technological tools (for example, telephone instead of telepathy) are re-established, which step by step re-establish the roboticised world anew untill its destruction in the highest stadium of humanoidness. *The story about five mankind, the story about 1999, the story about the end* are vaulted by that same horror of the day which precedes the so-called day after. In the reality which hangs upon its unavoidable destruction, before the hell of the atomic cataclysm, only the wind is excluded from the complete robotisation as is, in the same way, the human soul, because it too cannot be artificially made. The same is the nature of drops that fall on

³ Nikola Milosevic calls this "the removing the golden layer" in his monograph *Literature and Metaphysics*. Nikola Milošević, *Književnost i metafizika* (Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 1996), 285.

the meadow, the rain drops, lifegiving, or the drops of the anticipated flood and with that the repeated beginning of life.

Pekic analyses the principle of non-fulfilling of each tittle of the Law in each of his three novels of the trilogy about negative Utopias, regardless of the theme which is concretely being developed in a concrete novel. In contrast to *Atlantis* and *1999*, in which the human and non-human (robotic) paradigms are in conflict, in *Rabies* it is the human and Super-human (as in Nietzsche's Uebermensch) civilisations which are destined to clash in their fight for power. *Rabies*, the novel which critics have not met with enthusiasm, represents the conflict, in an idealised projection, between so-called sick people and allegedly healthy Super-humans. The development of the Super-humans, whose creation causes rabies epidemic, culminates in the madness of mass destruction. This mass destruction threatens to begin first at the Heathrow Airport and thus to spread all over the world. The key scene at the control tower of Heathrow Airport illustrates the beginning of a potential global, pandemic disaster: the newly created Super-human (John Hamilton), after making love to the human female Mark Coro Deveroux, physically fights her. The conflict between Coro and John is a consequence of the meeting of these two madnesses in the struggle for power, the double moral depravity from which only Gabriel is spared. Gabriel's exemption from this widespread madness, i.e. his being unaffected by the canine Rhabdovirus, is paradoxical. Being a madman, the resident of the house for the insane, as Pekic calls him, Gabriel naturally ought to be affected, but his moral innocence brings him salvation.

Thus the anti-Utopian trilogy, portraying the conflict of rival civilisational paradigms, and their mutual failure to establish themselves axiologically as the ruling models of the world, expresses the impossibility of fulfilling the Law. According to Pekic, the contents of that Law is different for each individual civilisation. That which is common and important for all civilisations is an imperative for the realisation of each tittle of the Law immanent to the each civilisation. Taking into account the fact that no civilisation has ever succeeded to realise to the end its own Law, each of them ends its existence with catastrophe which is at the same time the beginning of a new and different civilisation which will, of course, be destroyed. In contrast to Utopian ideas which are impossible to realise, in Pekic's negative Utopias the ideas are realised – cyclically and catastrophically.

The Reinterpretation of Christian Dogmas

The Time of Miracles (*Vreme čuda*) is Pekić's first book. According to some, it is a book of stories, for others it is a novel. In fact, it is a kind of a "storynovel" whose main hero is Christianity, or more precisely, the myth about Christ the Saviour. The novel thus deals with the reinterpretation of Christian dogma. The most illustrative example is in the story "Death on Golgotha" ("Smrt na Golgoti"). This story deals with a tragic substitution of individuals: instead of Jesus of Nazareth who is supposed to have perished on the cross for all humanity and in the name of its salvation, another man is crucified. This is Simon of Cyrene, the man who offered to carry Jesus' cross on the way to Golgotha. He confides his identity switch to the Roman captain:

I was returning from the field when the Messiah came my way, who was being led to the damned place. I, Simon of Cyrene, greedy for the New Kingdom, kneeling down asked him to carry his cross, in order to disburden him, and using this last opportunity, to save my soul. He did not refuse, for the unwilling are never refused. So I took his cross, and while I carried it, praising his name and singing about his kingdom, the Son of God dissapered among the people. Your blind Romans saw nothing. Drunk on ale they crucified me instead of Christ – and, spitting on the captain's helmet, Simon ends his confession with the words: – Here, I submit my secret to your hands, captain!⁴

The colossal consequence of the tragic substitution is the impossibility of the salvation of mankind. Obviously, starting from The Gospel According to Luke – "And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus."⁵ – Pekić does not only puts into doubt the foundational Christian concept of salvation, but repudiates it. Pekić proceeds in similar fashion with the dismantling of the Christian myths in the rest of the stories in the novel's eponymous cycle "The Time of Miracles." Such is the case, for instance, in "The Miracle in Jabnel," ("Čudo u Jabnelu") in which the biblical healing of lepers is reinterpreted. In contrast with the same story from The Gospel According to Matthew, which is about an act of cleaning and healing, Pekić's story is about the exclusion of Egla, who is healed from leprosy, from both the community of the healthy and of the sick.

⁴ Pekić, *Vreme čuda*, 342.

⁵ Lk. 23:26 (AV)

With this method of radical reinterpretation of Christian dogma, Pekic points to the impossibility of fulfilling the Testament or realising the Letter of the Law, since according to the Law's own rules, the fulfilment of the Law requires totalisation. Contrarywise, *if one little letter of the Testament is not fulfilled, it is as if no letter is fulfilled*.

Critique of the Ideological Discourse of Communism

In the anthropopeia ("anthropological epic"), *The Years the Locusts Ate* (*Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*), Pekic subjects the idea of Communism to a radical critique. This is how he expressed his authorial intention:

*Closed ideologies permanently ruin the ability of many-sided, balanced opinion. The ideology which was programatically excluding doubt, deserting the gnoseological field and entering the field of theology, has also renounced the only weapon for its own development. But, it has also one more characteristic. It does not leave anybody – completely. Nobody is quite healed. And never without the disposition towards a delusion appropriate to it. Fanaticism cannot be healed, it only changes idols.*⁶

Pekic, therefore, chooses doubt as the guiding principle of his writing and his poetic. In choosing the attitude of doubt as opposite to the attitude of ideological belief, Pekic problematises the fulfilment of the testament or the Law as a human possibility. If the gnoseological notion of freedom and its theological correlate do not enable Truth, Beauty and Sense – in other words, do not realise the Letter or Testament – the question of whether political, social or personal freedom is possible remains an open question. That questioning Pekic formulates in the following way:

*The one who has not chronically doubted what he believes, who is not used to thought tolerance as the only culture in which intelligence can act in accordance to its inquiring nature, who has always thought he is unconditionally right, even if he successively believed in three opposing truths, he is really not needed by any of them. Even out of the most open idea, the moment he approaches it, he will make an impenetrable and unapproachable circle. And then close himself in it like in a grave.*⁷

The reply to that rhetorical questioning is undoubtably negative. If the nonexistence of the soul or its minimisation in the rival conflict between the human and robotic mankind is

⁶ Borislav Pekić, *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci. Tom II* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1991), 259.

⁷ Ibid., 259-260.

the synonym for rabies, then in the clash between the human and Super-human paradigms their analagon is the negativity of doubt. In the judicial and cultural perspective obviously arises anthropological illegality of doubt; such was, thus, the time of the ideological anthropopeia.

The Perpetual Change of the Point of View

Pekic's perpetual change of the perspectival point of narration does not imply the so-called Olympian perspective of the omniscient author. Nor does Pekic use the stream of consciousness technique.

The term *perspectival point of view* implies Pekic's construction of entire and complete points of view, which form attitudinal complexes or ideologemes. The attitudes are many and various: auto-critical and axiological, gender and race related, national, religious and political, anthropological and historical, theological and philosophical, but also many, many others. This incontrovertible claim can be illustrated with two sections from Pekic's political memoir *The Years the Locusts Ate*. The first section pertains to the judicial and sociological view of the court process:

*Each court process, says Pekic, is a Rashomon. It does not depend on its own proceeding only, but on the view from which one is following it. We cannot expect that it will be in the same way remembered by the judge, the prosecutor and the accused. We add to that the defendants and the public, even if we do not divide the latter further according to psychological and ideological factors, which we should do, we get at least five factors of the future truth. Often five truths.*⁸

The second example pertains to the category of understanding in the process of communication of ideas:

*Nobody will understand you. The Communists will look at you as an enemy, the undecided as the madman, friends as a fool. Only the police will take you seriously. And all of a sudden, in the nation of which you heard how it entered into so many wars for the sake of freedom, you find yourself in a position of a man who can seriously talk about freedom only with the police.*⁹

⁸ Ibid., 285-286.

⁹ Ibid., 270.

The just analysed perpetual change of the view of reality and the consciousness about it, starting from the finality and restrictidness of individual views, offers an integrality of ideas expressed in them as a criterion of Truth, Beauty and Sense. This methodological postulate is a *qonditio sine qua non* of Pekic's critical integralism.

Everything that makes up the totality of existence and consciousness about existence, Pekic believes, is susceptible to the unending process of change and redefinition. One can never have completely reliable knowledge with the highest level of certainty. Only criticism and a totality of vision aspires towards the realisation of every single sign of the Letter and every single tittle of Law and Testament. But they only aspire, and that is the most they can achieve; there is no proof that they could ever realise such a totality. The ideological discourse is only a part of that general, total and indivisible processual entity. Therefore it does not surprise that Pekic, as a declared opponent of Communist ideology, because of which he suffered as a young man, was explaining with so much democratic tolerance the individual phenomena and was interpreting with patience of a model researcher (not a passionate opponent) the structural absurdities of Communist ideology.

About the Metapoetic Principle: Nothing New...

Special significance in the critical integralism of Pekic's system of thought lies in the discovery that the projected totality, although an important ideal of the analysed ruling models, cannot be realised. As mentioned in the very introduction of this text, the critical imperative of the critical integralism does not reach its aim, which has a negative evaluative determination. This means that the Letter, the Law, the Testament, which are unrealisable *if only one* letter or tittle is missing from the whole – remain in a perpetual proces of realisation.

That process is of a cyclical character and its historiosophic conception is probably best expressed by the words from The Book of Ecclesiastes, the words which Pekic himself takes for the epigraph of *The Time of Miracles*, after the dedication to his *dead comrades*:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love; and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the

*sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.*¹⁰

The sea as the metaphor of a total repository of knowledge represents knowledge as something that always returns to the Same. This is the substance of Pekic's historiosophic cyclicity. The most important metapoetic principle of that historiosophic cyclicity is the critical integralism which dominates Pekic's work, which consists of a minute analyses of the ideological and religious discourse as the discourse of belief.

¹⁰ Pekić, *Vreme čuda*, 8. This is a quotation from Pekic who cites The Book of Ecclesiastes using the technique of montage (reversing the order of sentences, omitting sentences, etc.): Eccles. 3:2-8, 1:4, 1:6, 1:7, 1:9

Bibliography

Čapek, Josef, and Karel Čapek. *R. U. R. And The Insect Play*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961.

Milošević, Nikola. *Književnost i metafizika*. Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 1996.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *Also sprach Zarathustra: ein Buch für alle and keinen*. München: Wilhelm Goldmann, 1957.

Pekić, Borislav. "Uspomene iz zatvora: građanski putujući cirkus gleda na Zapad." *Književnost* 88/6 (1989): 860-865.

---. *1999: antropološka povest*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1984.

---. *Atlantida: epos. Knjiga 1 i 2*. Novi Sad: Solaris, 1995.

---. *Besnilo: žanr roman*. Beograd: Prosveta, 1991.

---. *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci. Tom II*. Beograd: BIGZ, 1991.

---. *Vreme čuda*. Novi Sad: Solaris, 2006.