

Borislav Pekić: Sysiphus as Hero

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I. Borislav Pekić the Man

Borislav Pekić was born on 4 February 1930, in Podgorica, Montenegro, in a well-to-do middle class family. His father Vojislav was a high-ranking state official; his quiet, somewhat sarcastic disposition was contrasted sharply with the ardent nationalism of his youthful years, when, as a guerilla fighter, he supported the Serbian political cause in Macedonia. Pekić's mother Ljubica, née Petrović—an outwardly energetic and rational high school teacher of mathematics—cherished a strong inclination towards painting. During Pekić's childhood the family frequently moved following Vojislav's professional relocations to Novi Bečej, Mrkonjić Grad, Knin, and Cetinje. It was in Cetinje that eleven-year-old Borislav first showed his rebellious nature and had the first of his many unpleasant encounters with the police: he was briefly detained during the anti-German demonstrations of 27 March 1941. The family spent the years of the German occupation at Ljubica's estate in Bavanište in the Vojvodina. They moved to Belgrade in 1944, after Marshal Tito's partisans liberated the city with Russian help and established communist government. The taste of victory was spoiled for young Borislav: "That year I was deprived of one of the happiest of all human feelings—the feeling of being liberated, victorious, and triumphant—and I realized how poignant it is to be defeated in victory."

Pekić's problems with the communist regime culminated in November 1948, when the police arrested him as a member of the Association of Democratic Youth of Yugoslavia, a well-organized, rather large anticommunist group, which, in his words, raised necessary funds "using both Robin Hood's and Lenin's methods." Pekić was in charge of ideology, propaganda, and the work of a secret printing shop. One of the group's escapades, in which a few typewriters and mimeographs were stolen from a government office, brought charges of "terrorism and armed rebellion" against him. The indictment also included "espionage in favor of one or more foreign powers." Pekić originally got eight years in jail, but the prosecution lodged a complaint. Finally, he was sentenced to fifteen years.



Borislav Pekić's parents, Vojislav and Ljubica, with little Borislav

Pekić's imprisonment decisively affected his life, ideas, and subsequent writing career. After five years he was released on probation, but the rough treatment that he received during the pretrial investigation in Belgrade and in the Sremska Mitrovica and Niš prisons undermined his health severely—he fell ill with tuberculosis. He also began to write in prison, although he insisted that his first attempts “at creativity” dated back to his elementary school days in Knin, when he wrote a diary urged by his mother's wish to improve his handwriting. The reasons behind the prison diary were naturally quite different, as were the tools that he used: on one occasion, he scratched his observations on pieces of toilet-tissue with the tooth of a comb. But the most valuable thing with which he left the prison was the scheme of the genealogical tree of the fictitious Njegovan family; more than twenty-five years later, Pekić described their history in his seven-volume masterpiece *Zlatno runo* (The Golden Fleece, 1978–1986), the novel that became the cornerstone of his artistic work.

After he left prison, Pekić studied psychology at the University of Belgrade. In 1958 he interrupted his studies and married young architect Ljiljana Glišić, whose father was executed by the Communists in 1944; her

uncle was Milan Stojadinović, the influential pre-war Yugoslav prime minister. Their only daughter, Aleksandra, was born in 1959.

At this time Pekić began to work as a screenplay writer. In 1961 the film *Dan četrnaesti* (The Fourteenth Day), for which he wrote the script, represented Yugoslavia at the Cannes Film Festival. He finally began to earn more money; but as he put it, this “improved [his] games of poker rather than [his] standard of living.” At the same time, Pekić was already working on several of his future novels. The first of them, *Vreme čuda* (The Time of Miracles, 1965), came out when he was already thirty-five. Seven months prior to its publication, Pekić went to the hospital diagnosed with an extremely serious case of tuberculosis. After he came out, he soon discovered that the short period of his relative affluence was over. In search of material security, he became the editor of the influential literary review *Književne novine* in 1968. Yugoslavia’s tempestuous political events in that year helped him find an appropriate ending for his second novel *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* (The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan, 1970) and further complicated his relationships with the authorities. He used the Belgrade University students’ march on the city in June 1968 as a symbolic illustration of a farcical repetition of revolutionary history that eventually kills his novel’s hero; at the same time, he was accused of being the students’ ardent supporter, although he did not share their radical Marxist ideology in the least. Consequently, when he decided to leave Yugoslavia and move to England in 1970, he was refused a passport and had to wait for a year before he could join his wife and daughter abroad.

The following year *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* won the prestigious *NIN* annual award as the best Yugoslav novel, and Pekić was finally granted a passport and left for England. In London he associated with the circle of dissident intellectuals around *Naša reč*, who insisted on the necessities of democratic reforms in Yugoslavia (Desimir Tošić, Nenad Petrović, Vane Ivanović), but he refused to write for their paper. Instead, he devoted his free time to his orchids. Nevertheless, the Yugoslav authorities considered him a *persona non grata*, and in 1973 the publishing house Nolit cancelled, although not for very long, the publication of three of his works—*Kako upokojiti vampira* (How to Quiet the Vampire, 1977) among them—that had already been accepted and paid for.

In the 1970s Pekić also distinguished himself as one of the best Serbian contemporary dramatists. However, he always insisted that he was a theatrical dilettante, who began to write plays only because he felt “a psychological need for political involvement and action,” but eventually “chose theater rather than open rebellion.” He also claimed that his plays were like “garbage cans” in which he disposed of everything that would not fit in his novels. But

critics were of a different opinion, and at least one of his plays, *Generali ili srodnost po oružju* (The Generals, or Kinship-In-Arms, 1969) can be found in any anthology of Serbian drama of the period. The end of this decade was marked by the publication of the first book in a series of seven that fully established Pekić as one of the most important Serbian authors. In 1978, after more than two decades of planning, researching, sketching, and developing, the first volume of *Zlatno runo* appeared before readers.

At the age of fifty, Pekić, who insisted that his life took different turns “at the beginning of each new decade,” became somewhat dissatisfied with his work. He claimed that his previous novels had brought him “nothing but disappointments,” primarily because they dealt with “inherited models” of human history. The limited possibilities of the traditional concepts of historical time and space prevented them from reaching the “true reality of human condition,” which in Pekić’s opinion existed beyond these categories. Therefore, he felt that he eventually had “to touch a different universe, and create something entirely new.” In fact, at that time he had already been collecting material for a book about the lost island of Atlantis for a year, with the intention to give “a new, although poetical, explanation of the roots, development, and the end of our civilization.” Despite the classical sources that inspired his anthropological interests, Pekić decided to project his new vision into the future and thus avoid the restrictions of the “historical models” with which he had inevitably to deal in his earlier remakes of ancient myths. As a result, during the 1980s he produced three novels—*Besnilo* (Rabies, 1983), *1999* (1984), and *Atlantida* (Atlantis, 1988)—each following the anti-utopian tradition in its own way.

In the late 1980s, after the one-party political system had collapsed in Yugoslavia, Pekić finally returned to Belgrade and once again became involved in politics as one of the prominent members of the Democratic Party. In an uncanny twist of irony, exactly fifty years after his first clash with the police in Cetinje in 1941, he again was beaten by security forces in 1991, during demonstrations organized in Belgrade by the united opposition against the ruling Socialists of Slobodan Milošević. And the following year he again developed problems with his lungs; unfortunately, this time the problems proved fatal and he died of cancer in London on 2 July 1992, active both as a writer and as a public figure almost until his last day.

II. Borislav Pekić the Artist

1. *The Time of Miracles* (1965)

Pekić's first novel clearly foreshadows the two perhaps most important characteristics of his art: his sharply antidogmatic views and his skepticism with regard to any possible "progress" that mankind has achieved in the course of history. The book is divided into two parts. The first one, subtitled "The Time of Miracles," deals with seven miracles which, according to the Gospel, Jesus Christ performed on his way to Jerusalem. The second part, subtitled "The Time of Dying," describes the deaths of four people, all related to Jesus' arrest and condemnation. In fact, each of the eleven stories offers a highly idiosyncratic reinterpretation of biblical motifs. The extent of Pekić's interference with the original may be illustrated by the concluding story, "Death at Golgotha," in which Simon of Cyrene is shown dying crucified in Jesus' place, while Jesus himself escapes with Mary Magdalene.

However, this radical distortion of biblical stories should not be taken as a sign of Pekić's negation of Christianity. In *The Time of Miracles* the Christian myth in fact becomes a vehicle for exposing the moral hypocrisy, cruelty, and futility of modern myths, especially those built around the Communists' ideal of their own "promised land." It is not a coincidence that all the miracles that Pekić's Jesus worked eventually brought misfortunes to the people affected, and that Jesus—who is presented as a nondescript, ordinary man—acquired his prophetic stature only through their, not his, subsequent suffering. His disciples are likewise depicted as a group of ambitious, power-hungry opportunists and dogmatists, who "teach unasked and save without being entreated," and among whom the zealot Judas is particularly impressive for his striking resemblance to a Soviet political commissar in charge of both ideology and money. But Pekić's criticism of the supporters of the new egalitarian faith does not imply any idealization of their opponents. This is especially true of the story "Miracle at Bethany," in which dead Lazarus is twice resurrected by Jesus only to be killed one more time by the Sadducees. Thus he becomes a helpless victim, for whom the two ideologically confronted parties engaged in proving the superiority of their respective teachings show equal disregard.

The Time of Miracles reveals Pekić's other important artistic qualities as well. The variety of linguistic devices adapted for the purpose of characterization is amazing. They range from highly ornate imitations of the biblical diction of the apostles to expressions bordering on urban slang and country vernacular used by "lesser" characters. The inevitable flatness of the allegorical presentation is always counterbalanced by an enormous vividness

of realistic details that almost give Pekić's descriptions of contemporary life in Palestine a taste of a travelogue. And the implied irony makes this somber book surprisingly light. These features remained the hallmarks of Pekić's style throughout his career.

2. *The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan* (1970)

Written in the form of the hero's last will, which is often interrupted by his lengthy reminiscences, *The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan* is a novel that deals with another of Pekić's important subjects: alienation. The former well-to-do Belgrade house owner Arsenije Njegovan lives in self-imposed isolation, unaware of any social or political changes that have taken place in the twenty-seven years during which he never leaves his apartment. When in June 1968 he finally decides to interrupt his seclusion in order to inspect some of the buildings he owns (or, due to the expropriation introduced by the Communists, rather *thinks* he owns), his trip through the streets of Belgrade and the encounter with the student protesters cause a series of misunderstandings, which eventually cause his death. The mixture of comic and tragic elements gives the novel a touch of absurdist burlesque, both humorous and pessimistic, strongly resembling a Beckettian play performed on a typical Balkan stage.

The central problem concerning alienation is combined with a number of other issues, such as Pekić's ironic treatment of ownership and his characteristic anti-dialectic vision of history. In one of his essays Pekić singled out "the will to possess" as one of the most powerful driving forces in our world, a phenomenon which inevitably influences even the "spiritual and moral side of man." Therefore Arsenije's devotion to his houses becomes more and more grotesque as he insists on giving them feminine names and finally develops feelings bordering on perverted sexuality for one of them. This preoccupation with the material was later to acquire proportions of a modern myth and become central in *The Golden Fleece*. On the other hand, Pekić's skeptical view of history, which implies occasional changes of form but never of substance (hinted at earlier in *The Time of Miracles*), is shown through three decisive moments of Arsenije's life: the October Revolution, the anti-German demonstrations in March 1941, and the student revolt in Belgrade in 1968. Despite the time span and apparent changes, the Communist ideological pattern remained virtually the same in all of these events, and Arsenije's growing inability to understand what is going on is the only visible result that they have brought about.

3. *How to Quiet the Vampire* (1977)

How to Quiet the Vampire was written in the early 1970s, during the first years of Pekić's self-imposed exile in England. Based in part on Pekić's own prison experiences, the novel offers an insight into the mechanisms of the logic and psychology of modern totalitarianism. It tells a story of the former SS *Obersturmführer* Konrad Rutkowski, now a professor of medieval history at the University of Heidelberg, who returns to a coastal town in Dalmatia where he served as a Gestapo agent twenty-six years before. Rutkowski returns to the spot of his past crimes, spurred by the ambivalent urge of both justifying and renouncing his Nazi past. His painful inner deliberations and his final acceptance of the Nazi ideology are described in twenty-six letters to his brother-in-law. But Rutkowski tries to reach a moral compromise with his own past, exploiting some of the major currents of European philosophy. Therefore the self-styled editor of his manuscript, Borislav Pekić (himself allegedly an "ardent admirer of the tradition of European thought"), loosely connected each of the letters with some of the best known and most influential works of European thinkers: Plato, St. Augustine, Descartes, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein. In Pekić's own words, this was necessary in order to show that Rutkowski and the ideology and the logic he pursues do not represent a deviation from, but rather a continuation and logical development of the "standard currents of the European philosophical tradition; the 'molecular structure of Rutkowski's mind' simply resulted from a consistent radicalization of those currents." Pekić claimed that his intention was to show "that fascism or some related form of totalitarianism could again knock on our door." But he also indicated that there is no distinct boundary separating the intellectual tradition of which Europe is so proud from some of its more recent aberrant political ideologies. In this way, Pekić questioned the ethical validity of the entire history of rational thought in the Western world.

The novel is written in one of Pekić's favorite literary forms: like *The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan*, it is presented as someone else's manuscript, prefaced by the alleged editor's (Borislav Pekić) introductory note. What follows is divided into three parts. The first part is written in epistolary form and entitled "Professor Konrad Rutkowski's Letters." The second part is entitled "Rutkowski's Post Scriptum," and is itself divided into two sub-parts. The first sub-part is entitled "Minutes Considering the Interrogation of Gustav Fröhlich," and it features the police methods and the political logic of Rutkowski's superior, the *Oberst* Steinbrecher. This part is written in the form of a dramatic dialogue. The second sub-part is entitled "The Secret Will of Professor Konrad Rutkowski or *Tractatus Logico*

Philosophicus.” In the form of an essay, it deals with the relationship between the ideograms of reality and individual morality. The last, third part is entitled “Notes of the Editor.” These are Pekić’s “footnotes” in which different issues discussed by Rutkowski are fully exposed.

In 1977 *How to Quiet the Vampire* was recognized as the best novel of the year by the Association of Yugoslav Publishers. Written at the peak of the Communist era in Yugoslavia and allegedly dealing with German Nazism, *How to Quiet the Vampire* simultaneously looks back to the 1940s and sums up the political reality of Yugoslavia in the 1970s. Given the upsurge of new forms of dogmatism in the Balkans (and elsewhere) during the 1990s, the novel has certainly not lost its topicality—it remains one of the most chilling accounts of the psychology of the “captive mind” in contemporary European literature. But its real importance is somewhat subtler: the glaring horrors of the “practice” of totalitarian ideologies are associated with more obscure threats implicit in some of the “theories” of the seemingly benign tradition of European liberal thought. In this regard, its message parallels the reappraisal of recent Western culture (especially with respect to the Holocaust) suggested by George Steiner’s *In Bluebeard’s Castle* (notably, both were written more or less simultaneously in the early 1970s). Thus, exposing totalitarianism as well as challenging accepted Western philosophical tradition, *How to Quiet the Vampire* is a welcome warning to a world that is well aware of what has transpired in the past, but apparently unwilling to believe that some of it can happen again—and in the most unexpected intellectual, cultural, and political surroundings at that. In this respect, the novel is clearly distinguished from most other literary accounts of modern repressive systems. And it is precisely this questioning of our intellectual heritage on the basis of Nazi and totalitarian cruelty, together with its highly unusual juxtaposition of two narratives (those of 1943 and 1965), that hinted at the direction Pekić’s writing was to take during the following decade.

4. *The Golden Fleece* (1978–1986)

In its different aspects, this novel can be compared to some of the most important works of modern European literature: like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, it is based on and often follows the narrative patterns of classical myths; like Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, it maps out a long family history; like Huxley’s *Point Counter Point*, its inner tensions are created through a maze of conflicting perspectives. And yet, it is quite unique. One of the novel’s obvious distinctions is its enormous scope and thematic complexity. *The Golden Fleece* describes the wanderings of the generations of the Njegovans, Pekić’s

ironical version of the mythical Argonauts, and their quest for the Golden Fleece. The quest began in ancient times, when the forefather of the clan left his homeland of Arcadia, fleeing the rage of mythical Hercules; it ended in a fire on Christmas Eve 1941, during a family gathering in their castle near Ljubljana, Slovenia. This span of time gave Pekić an opportunity to explore some of the most important events that shaped the political, social, and cultural map of the Balkans: from the battle at Adrianapolis in 1205 and the fall of Constantinople under the Turks in 1453, to the Austrian occupation of Belgrade in 1915 and the ominous signs of the approaching German invasion in 1941. Within this broad framework there is a narrower sphere of more particular interest: a turbulent period of Serbian history, lasting a little over a century, during which the country rose from a backwater Turkish province to an independent European state. And within this period, there is yet another focus: the origins, economic development, and final disintegration of the Serbian middle class. The choice of the Njegovans as the vehicle for showing these dramatic changes was not a random one. The Njegovans are not Serbs; they are Tzintzars, the progeny of one of the oldest peoples in the Balkans, who accepted the Serbian language, culture, and nationality, but always kept themselves apart from their Serbian countrymen. Thus Pekić was able to depict Serbian society from within; at the same time he could establish a significant critical distance from it. This was important, since one of Pekić's artistic intentions was to expose several Serbian national myths, invaluable for the understanding of Serbian history and the national character. But his main target, and the novel's real focal point, in which all its diverse thematic aspects converge, is a more important and more universal myth. The family's ultimate goal, the Golden Fleece, is a symbol of the "will to possess." In fact, the history of the Njegovans is shown as the universal history of man's craving for wealth, with the triumph of material interests over spiritual values at its center. Bringing the problem of material interests to the foreground and making it a phenomenon of mythical importance, Pekić in fact turned *The Golden Fleece* into an ironical comment regarding not only Serbia and the Balkans, but the nature of all of modern civilization as well.

The complex idea of *The Golden Fleece* is clearly reflected in its structure. Pekić addressed this point in a diary entry from 1963: "I imagine the Njegovan saga as resembling a planetary system. One major book, like a sun, in its center... Less important books, like planets, circle around that sun. They deal with certain periods from the long family history... And around several planets, like their satellites, revolve smaller books, portraits, or biographies of those Njegovans who are only mentioned elsewhere, but who deserve a more detailed approach..." The seven-volume novel is in fact divided into five major parts, subtitled in appropriate business terms: The

Account, The Business Venture, The Profit, The Lawsuit, The Balance Sheet. Central to its first four parts, like a sun, is the story about Simeon, nicknamed “The Boss,” the venerable head of the last generation of the Njegovans. More than a hundred years old, it is “The Boss” who epitomizes modern Serbian history and the development of the Serbian *bourgeoisie*. Since through him the objective historical perspective is reduced to an idiosyncratic vision, the whole story turns into a phantasmagoric grotesque, which combines the elements of reality, myth, and family legend. Around “The Boss” revolve the “planets,” or stories about other important Njegovans and the different periods in which they lived: Simeon “The Pilgrim,” his philanthropic father and the only non-materialistic Njegovan; Simeon “The Wolf,” his unscrupulous grandfather and the founder of the family firm; Simeon “The Greek,” his unsuccessful great-grandfather, and the crafty Balkan politician; Simeon of Sighet, an ancestor with uncommon artistic inclinations, who lived in the sixteenth century; and other, even older Simeons. These lesser characters, usually buried deep in history, take the roles of the “satellites.” Each of the characters’ major features inspired Pekić to enlarge on different issues: philanthropy, business, politics, art, love, family matters. The fifth, concluding part, which serves as a mythical framework to the previously described events, is a direct ironical remake of the classical story about the search for the Golden Fleece and the Argonauts, the epitomes of the sublime ideals of non-materialistic behavior. The important relativistic perspective, in which these ideals are shown confronted with the base realities of life and often ridiculed, is provided by the only non-divine, materialistic member of the *Argo*’s crew, Noemis, a mirror reflection (including the name) of modern Simeons, and the actual progenitor of the Njegovans.

The narrative method is no less complex: the first person accounts are combined with the objective third person historical narration, lengthy monologues, stream-of-consciousness, dramatic dialogues, epistolary passages, “showing” and “telling” procedures, and constant switches of point of view. Pekić explained the enormous variety of narrative techniques as “originating from the great number of different Simeons, the novel’s real heroes, as well as from the disparity of historical periods in which the events take place.” And indeed, in the huge and complicated structure of *The Golden Fleece* there is nothing random or accidental: the book offers a model example of organic unity. But there is more than the sheer technical perfection that makes the reading of the unbelievable 3,500 pages of one of the best contemporary Serbian novels a venture that is not undertaken exclusively by professionals. Not the least, it is Pekić’s rare ability to keep us constantly wondering about “what’s going to happen next,” a gift which has

almost completely disappeared among present-day practitioners of “high-brow” literature.

5. *Rabies*, *Atlantis*, and *1999* (1983, 1988, 1984)

The first part of Pekić’s anti-utopian trilogy, *Rabies* was finished in 1981, at a time when Pekić was still searching for the “new reality” about which he wanted to write. Mixing elements of science fiction with political, detective, and meta-fiction (as if Pekić had been wantonly trying to show how he could manipulate different genres), on its surface *Rabies* tells a story about an epidemic of rabies at the Heathrow International Airport in London and its disastrous consequences. But in fact it offers an apocalyptic vision of the moral, intellectual, and environmental breakdown of modern civilization, brought about by the criminal irresponsibility of both politicians and genetic scientists, and draws a paradoxical equation between the mutant *rhabdovirus* and man in which the deadly virus “destroys its natural environment with the same sly, cruel, sick arrogance with which man misuses and destroys his own.”

Pekić’s propensity for intellectual abstractions and generalizations found new possibilities of expression in *Rabies*. In his short preface Pekić characteristically stated that his heroes, the Heathrow Airport officials, do not represent particular individuals, but rather symbolize their “professional positions.” And he continued along similar lines in *Atlantis*, which he defined as an “anthropological epic, that does not deal with this or that man in particular, but with *homo sapiens* in general.” This attempt at an “analysis of our *Indo-Mechanical civilization*, whose many aspects have never seemed really human,” is based on a story about the millennium-long battle between the humanoid natives of the former Atlantis and the robots whom they had created in order to free themselves from the worries of everyday life. The idea of the clash is gradually developed on different levels, from the symbolic opposition of gold and iron (John Carver, the human hero, is shown as a man with “a golden tinge in his eyes,” while his robotic counterpart, John Alden, has “eyes of iron”), to the comparison between the basic principles of biology and cybernetics. Thus the story turns into an allegory, and almost ends with its inevitable black-and-white flatness. But Pekić gives its conclusion an ironic and relativistic twist: the victorious John Carver finally realizes how similar humanoids and androids have been in their development, and how they applied similar strategies to achieve their respective goals. Moreover, he realizes that the very idea of the progress of humanity is essentially corrupted, since “people created their history from the depths of evil within themselves,” while “good is not based on any kind of development or chronology.”

Although published four years before *Atlantis, 1999* was originally planned as the concluding part of Pekić's anti-utopian trilogy. It deals with the period following a nuclear war that supposedly destroys modern civilization in 1999. Trying to indicate the true nature of his vision rather than his artistic indebtedness, Pekić dedicated the novel to George Orwell; with the same intention he dedicated the individual chapters to Ray Bradbury, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Clifford Simak, Isaac Asimov, and Aldous Huxley. In its different aspects, the novel describes a search for humanness that had disappeared from the earth long ago. This is the reason why the last representative of the human race, the amateur archeologist Arno, is ready to idealize the life in a Siberian Gulag, where he discovered the bones of men and rats mixed together: in order to avoid misunderstandings that brought about the destruction of the former civilization, Arno himself has to live alone, and in his world "solitude is genetically inherited." The quest for humaneness is also carried out through the endeavors of perfected generations of robots to reach the human ideal. They discover it in the feeling of uncertainty (as opposed to certainty which is characteristic of androids), and thus another symbolic circle, so essential for Pekić's art, is closed. As a matter of fact, *1999* closes more than one circle, as it ends with the same quotation from the Bible that Pekić chose as the motto for his first novel *The Time of Miracles*: "The thing that hath been, 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."

III. A Critical Perspective

Considering the scope and depth of his novels, Borislav Pekić probably remains without an equal among post-World War II Serbian novelists. Not even erudite novelists like Danilo Kiš or Milorad Pavić could roam with such ease through an enormous variety of cultures—Judaic, Byzantine, Ottoman, Greek, Serbian, Central and West European—and the most important historical periods from Early Christian time and the Middle Ages to our own day, with occasional excursions even into the future. At the same time, it was Pekić's thorough knowledge of the long tradition of European thought from Plato to Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger, together with his artistic affiliation with some of the most important writers in this century—Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Aldous Huxley, Samuel Beckett, George Orwell, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn—that greatly helped reintegrate Serbian literature into major European trends, after a decade-long dispute between the so-called "realists" and "modernists," who, despite their conflicting views on writing, belonged to the same school of Marxist aesthetics. Pekić was also among the

first to voice a deep sense of disillusionment with life in post-World War II Yugoslavia; however, his anti-dogmatism and animosity towards the contemporary “age of faith” and political myth-making was so far-reaching that it was not confined exclusively to the totalitarian aberrations of the domestic political system. Instead, Pekić’s works soon turned into a bitter assessment of modern civilization at large, targeting its mechanical ways of life, materialistic obsessions, alienation of the individual, environmental problems, physical cruelties, and spiritual poverty. In this respect, Pekić was a “dissident” of the most universal kind, and it is not surprising that in the late 1970s and early 1980s his works exercised a strong influence upon a whole generation of young Serbian intellectuals, who had freed themselves of Marxist dogmas yet were still very reluctant to replace them mechanically with some of the ready-made myths of the Western world.

But unlike so many critics of modern civilization, Pekić did not indulge only in denouncing it. A skeptic who rejected the idea of progress, a pessimist who considered the world “meaningless and accidental,” he nevertheless occasionally offered not only his vision of how things are, but also of how they should be. These rare moments of transcendence—like one in which Simeon “The Boss” realizes that his dead wife meant to him more than his money, and at least temporarily overcomes his real nature with his no less real grief—appear inspired by Pekić’s defiant refusal to accept the very reality he otherwise dealt with. “During our inevitable fall into nothingness we must never remain inert,” wrote he. “Sisyphus must not give up pushing his rock uphill even if he knows that it will bounce down as soon as he reaches the top... The very secret of our existence may be in—pushing.” Therefore it is not surprising that Pekić considered his “literature, or art in general, as one of many projections of the work of Sisyphus.”

Pekić has also been widely acclaimed outside Yugoslavia. So far two of his novels have been translated into English: *The Time of Miracles* (Vreme čuda) in 1976 and *The Houses of Belgrade* (Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana) in 1978. Both translations have been released in repeated editions in the United States and received numerous reviews (*The Time of Miracles: Booklist*, 73 [1 Nov. 1976], 392; *International Fiction Review*, 4, no. 2 [1977], 194; *Kirkus Review*, 44 [15 Aug. 1976], 922; *Library Journal*, 101 [15 Oct. 1976], 2195; *New York Times Book Review* [24 Oct. 1976], 45–46; *Publishers Weekly*, 210 [23 Aug. 1976], 59; *Slavonic and East European Review*, 56 [1978], 634–35; *The Houses of Belgrade: Booklist*, 75 [1 Sep. 1978], 28; *Christian Science Monitor*, 71 [25 Jan. 1979], 19; *Kirkus Review*, 46 [1 July 1978], 712; *Library Journal*, 103 [1 Sep. 1978], 1662; *New Yorker*, 54 [20 Nov. 1978], 232; *World Literature Today*, 54 [1980], 138). The English translation of *How to Quiet the Vampire* is scheduled for publication

in 2001. A fragment of the new translation is first published in this issue of *Serbian Studies*.

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