REPRESENTATIONS OF BODY IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’s WRITING IN SERBIA

Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, Women’s Studies Center Belgrade

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Introduction

There is a wide diversity in the ways the topic of “body” has been treated in contemporary women’s fiction in Serbia.

To speak about the topic of body as bodily herstory in the context of women’s fiction in Serbia, would inevitably bring to mind a “shocking entrance” which Biljana Jovanovic made by her first novel, Pada Avala (Avala’s Falling, 1978). The novel, which became a cult book, openly treated the topic of body as the site of female identity, speaking “against all taboos”1. Already there had been Milica Micic Dimovska, as one of the representative writers of so called “reality fiction”, and deeply interested in women’s destinies. That means that she had brought, during seventies, the issues of lonely women, women growing old and women in many similar, painful and everyday situations, with their bodies often inscribed by these burdens.

During eighties in Serbia, as well as on the whole ex-Yu space, there was a boom of women’s fiction, often women-centered. In nineties, as this space was falling apart and the new borders were being established, some of the women writers turned to specific exploration of national history or their own private herstories, trying to rewrite them from the new perspective.

Thus, “body” was not just represented as site of scandalous sensual history, nor a structure prone to ruination, but it as well became a tool of many postmodern parodic games. In some of the texts written by women authors in Serbia, “body” is the element helping us understand the narration and the basic approach. To see how “the body” is described, positioned and narrated about helps in understanding the differences between the seemingly close texts, and this is what this essay aims to present.

The essay has three parts. In the first one, I discuss a chapter from a book by Svetlana Velmar Jankovic, in the second one a story by Jelena Lengold and in the third part a novel by Milica Micic Dimovska. Each of the three works is compared to one of three different texts by Ljubica Arsic, another Serbian writer. This composition requires a brief explanation - as it will be obvious from the essay itself, the point is not in making Arsic’s works normative ones, but in stressing the similarities and differences among the texts of various authors, on one, and in pointing to the diverse representations of “body” in the opus of one author, on the other hand.

1 This is the title /in translation/ of the text by Jasmina Lukic, published in ProFemina, 126-134.

2 See the text by Lukic, Special Issue, 1997.

Bodies in Metamorphosis: Emulating and Simulating

"I am another now, and yet the same".
Joyce, Ulysses

The issue of “body” has been one of the main topics of feminist theory in the last decades, marked by efforts to go beyond Carthesian division on the body and mind, so deeply permeating the Western culture. Thinking of "body" as a construction made of various elements of our identity soon was replaced by the efforts of think it as a site of our identities, a crossroad of constant process of changing, being under various influences and emitting various influences. Elizabeth Grosz illustrated this crucial interconnectedness of body and its environment by the term “lived body” to stress the process, constant changes a body is undergoing within social context.

Thinking of a body as "lived" means, consequently, that a finished, rounded construction would be completed, no longer “lived”, but a dead body. Dead body, on the other side, is not necessarily a closed structure. In the works discussed below it is presented as “lived-out” or “lived-through” body: the images of dying and dead bodies, as well as dissembling ready-mades, are used to point to the core of the process, the permanent metamorphosing of lived body.

Those bodies are caught in their transition to the new phases, even though these are sometimes final, lethal ones, in the moments of becoming "another", or even beyond the border of the living ones. By being exposed to fearful non-existance, re-constructed as site of identity, or by being dissembled, these bodies are represented as emulating historiography or simulating it, making it a basis of a parodic game. In both cases, however, the point is to enliven the moment of transformation, at which "another" and "same" are in one knot.

Svetlana Velmar-Jankovic, well known and established writer, in her book Dorcol (Dortiol/1986/), writes about the old Belgrade's part, and its streets. Each chapter is about a person after whom a street was named. In the concluding chapter of the book, however, she writes about the »old city’s core«, especially a place where executions were held.

In Dorcol, Svetlana Velmar Jankovic uses an omniscient, »objective« narrator, making her fiction as close as possible to historiography as a verified, “truthful” text. Thus, in this concluding chapter, the narrator emphasises that the description she is about to narrate had been »verified« by Filip Hristic, a minister and diplomat, who would never be easily convinced. He, the narrator says, noticed that in the number of witnessing, one same moment had been identically described.

»They described the moment, if thus could be called a fraction of time, at which a headless body of convicted one swings, still upright, before it falls on earth. In that fraction, as a mask with its head fallen apart, the corpse, already dead, still struggled in front of nonexistence. Probably that this very transformation of living into non-living, this drawing of non comprehensive border of disappearance, was the thing that filled the spectators with the maddest horor and an insight which they wanted, instantly, to push away. The horor, later on, as steam from hell, used to dissipate all over the nearby mud and was scattered under the steps of passers-by.« (Velmar-Jankovic, 252)

This description, aimed at “catching” a moment of transformation, of transition from a living into a dead body, from a person into a corpse, is done from the omniscient point of view. The "hero" of the scene has no name, he is not one, at the first place, but stands for a number of people, convicts, who used to be executed in such a way. This body opposing no-being, “struggling in front of non-existence”, is a sinegdochal body which stands not only for a number.
of convicted and executed ones, but for whole people, as this used to happen in 18th and at the beginning of 19th century, “during Turks”, meaning during Turkish rule in Serbia.

This violent metamorphosis into a dead body reflects the effort which permeats the text as a whole – to be “objective”, distanced as historical narrator. The Dorcol, a book named after an old part of the city, meaning in Turkish (Dort-iol) four roads or four streets (250), is thus a crossroad of historography and fiction. Its concluding chapter is neither a personal story nor a story about a historical figure, it is a story repeated and “verified” by many people, about a horrible transformation from life to death. The narrator, distanced and keen to support her narration by facts, is away from emulating historiography only in lyrical passages, such as in observations of the quality of light which hangs over the crossroad.

Also interested in retelling is Ljubica Arsic in her second novel Ikona (Icon, 2001), only not in retelling history as a great narrative of objective facts, but as a text itself. The novel is about the events which brought Laza Lazarevic, Serbian writer and professional doctor, to write his best known story “A German Girl”.

The body as “just a body” is twice represented in the novel as a dead thing. In the first case, it is a cadaver in the dissection room. Above the corpse of the Berliner homeless woman with a tag with a Russian name Lyuda, the hero of the novel constructs her identity, her story, prior to dissembling her in the name of the science. He uses the literary technique, the fictionalization, to transform the dead body, at his disposal for dissemblage, learning it all the way to the last detail, into the site of identity which he himself projects:

“He sees it as if real: Through the woods the beauty and her darling are walking... and also saw Laza the student, at his anatomy class, how, under the raised scalpel, which is just about to be lowered to cut, the lovers are going to small valley, perfectly fit for rolling in the grass” (Arsic, 2001, 25).

For a doctor to be, Lazarevic, the body of a dead human being is almost angelic – it has no sex. But, it has no human meaning, either, the dead body is “it”, to which he brings back the human meaning by his narrative:

“What lies now in front of him is neither man nor a woman although it looks like a woman, because a woman is not only breasts nor lips, but something which has forever left those eyes by which he would have passed, walking by the street, without turning around... If people had no sex, goodness would become a universal measure, and they themselves angels.” (Ibid, 27).

That there is no spirituality without the body, and vice versa, is the point of the idea that this homeless Lyuda could once have been the girlfriend of Gustav, painter of icons. If so, her eyes could have been the prototype of the eyes of the angel which Gustav had painted upon the model of the icon by Rubljov Radonjeski.

Thus the corpse and the angel, body and the mind, are interwoven in this novel. It points to the fact that only in love, in the relation with some other, human bodies can be the places of identity, crossroads.

In the second case, the body as “just a body” is represented as a mannequie, made for dissembling. The parody is in making the theatrical scene out of a medicine lecture: “…the student Lazarevic moves apart invisible curtain which reveals a lying blond which has just stood up in front of him and set by the toilllete table to remove the jewelry from herself after the ball. The velvet gloves of cherry color are on her arms, she undoes a shining neckles on the back of her head, a beautifull imitation, which she removes together with her vertebra and puts them on the cold marble of the table. With a few “clings” she has taken her false rings together with joints, removing by abdomen her own self, remaining at the stage in front of the students only with her genitalia, such an awful name for the thing which makes woman - a woman, and man – a man … / -You see, my dear, professor Liebreich smiled contentely, - everything can be dissembled to parts.” (Ibid, 72). The ”blond” from the Icon is revealed as a construct, from jewelry to genitalia,
the banal core of seductiveness and femaleness. This dissembling body has only human-like appearance, in different to the struggling corpse of Dorcol. It does not fight in front of the non-existence, it offers no space for constructing an identity, a narration of it, it is sterile, made for being dissembled in the name of science, and a far cry from human one it simulates.

Playing on the issues of transformation, pain, eroticism and impossibilities of comprehending the human bodiness through Carthesian division, Ljubica Arsic employs one of her favorite postmodern techniques in this novel. She is namely using a figure of a literary person, in this case writer Laza Lazarevic, to explore the issues of history as a text and text as a history. In this exploration, she leans much more on the parodic, in the sense of Hutcheon wants to restore, of a term which denotes both the change and cultural continuity. For Arsic, this is the technique she has previously vividly applied in her story "Onaj drugi sto ceka u tamnoj noci" (The Other One Who Waits in the Dark Night), discussed in the third part of the essay.

**Catharsis on Kazakh Border**

»...where we have already been and consequently no longer are«

_Braidotti, Nomadic Subject_

As the notion of process replaced the idea of construction, a structure, the primary problems in defining “a body” became to explain the sameness which has been altered, the identity as the constant change, becoming of "another" while staying the same. This carries on psychological level a problem of comprehending human being as a constant change, problem of accepting it without painful nostalgia, even when those changes are inscribed on our own bodies. In two works discussed in this part of the essay, these changes in identity, of being non/identical to one’s own self, are resolved in different ways. In the story by Lengold it is presented as the difference between narrating and narrated “I”, which does imply this psychological issue of accepting one’s one (new or changed) self. In the novel by Arsic, it is presented as a nomadic narrating subject, moving freely across various borders.

Dead body of a woman also appears in the story “Katarza” (Catharsis) by Jelena Lengold, a poet and prose writer of a middle generation. In this finely written piece about a brief love-affair, dead mother’s imprint on her son’s destiny is parallel to the story of a strong mother in the novel _The World According to Garp_, the book heroine reads on the train, at the beginning of the encounter. When she closes the book, it is to answer the man and, consequently, start a conversation and affair which is the subject of the story. Then she leaves the train with him, a few stops after her original destination, to spend a few days in his hometown.

During the first night he narrates her the story of his mother’s death, her final requests and hardships he had in fulfilling them. Some of these details are quite bizarre, on the verge of humor, underlying human vanity and shortness of existence. The dead mother’s body gives the hero all kinds of troubles:

“I did not know what to do with her hands. ... I had no clear instructions about that. ... Than I had to rent a van. The coffin could not fit into my car, no way. ... I drove a few hours to the place she was born at. ... I could not bring the coffin into the house ... I finally decided, opened the coffin, lifted the mother and took her into the house. I put her on the bed in another room. ... I even took her shoes off before I put her into the bed.” (Lengold, 106)

In his attitude there is a strong respect for the person the body stands for. At the end of the episode, even the priest, who originally opposed mother’s wish to have her grave digged by her son’s hands, confirmed that “everyone should bury his own mother in such a way.”

This purely bodily transaction between a mother, whose body had given birth to a son, and the son himself, who is supposed to put her to final rest, points to another transaction which
is happening right in front of readers” eyes – the body of the narrator being a catharsis device for the hero. The mother’s death and her wishes obviously left unresolved feelings, and the narrator-heroine is like a crossroad at which the hero finally decides which way to take.

Within the whole story, it is evident that "body" is talked and thought about in Carthesian terms, as a part of construction, something different from the whole person and personality, although there is an obvious tendency toward integration. This feeling of “uneasiness” about one’s own body is actually thematized by the story of mother’s corpse and the narrator’s description of her own embrace – she is reaching her lover first by hands, and then by the whole body, and then “by all she got”.

“I stood up, headed towards him first by my hands only and then by my whole body, I held him by all I got.” (Ibid, 107)

For a reader, it is obvious that in the love relationship with the narrator a process of “purification” has happened, and that she, her own body, served as the cathalisator of the catharsis. This is confirmed not only by the fact that the hero is telling this on the first night with the heroine/narrator, but also by his letter, sent after some emotional notes by the heroine, in which he tells her about a recent dream about his mother.

“All the scenes from the dream showed only nice moments with her. There were no other feelings except the most ordinary and purest love. I was purified from anger.” (Ibid, 108).

The story is told as a reminiscence, a strictly controlled memory of a love affair. The distance in place and time makes this first person narration almost as “objective” and distanced as if it had been omniscient narrator. The difference between the narrating and narrated is here expressed as the difference in two ages, personal and historical. At the very beginning, the narrator states that she is now much older and that a possibility of such a love story is far lesser: “Today, it could hardly happen that an eye of a stranger would stop at me longer than needed” (Ibid, 103). The times when all was possible are gone, and her position here is of a person remembering and telling her own, private herstory. The narrated time is slightly framed by the novel she reads, while the distance in place is not only geographic, but also by his letter, sent after some emotional notes by the heroine, in which he tells her about a recent dream about his mother.

On the contrary to Lengold’s story which has no local color, the Arsic’s novel is positioned in the city of Belgrade, but as a city representing liminal space.

“Our shop for old carpets repair is at the bottom of a steep Belgrade street down which the tram cars dive. A deep windowshop framed in wood, holding a pitcher, speening wheels and wool combs would rather fit into a town in whose dark suburbs horses pull carts and pedesetrians jump from a peble to peble over the big muddy puddles.” (Arsic, 1997, 5)

At the very beginning, the topic of the porous borders the city as the meeting point of West and East, is introduced. The body/city relation here is, however, completely different from the one in Dorcol by Velmar-Jankovic. There is no attempt in history writing, neither in reconstrucion of historical stories. Urban space is here liminal, and the past lives in different coordinates, of the space and not time, with the narrating subject open to nomadic shifts.

In creation of the novel Guardians... the major role belongs to the female voice of the narrator who is in the multiple position of the observer, witness and participant. The novel is short and its story is quite simple: a young woman assists to her husband Andria, in the shop for carpets” repair. One day, a Russian emigree named Vrubelj comes there with a precious old

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4 Published again in 1997, the novel became accessible to the wider reading auditorium only in 2003, when the third edition appeared, due to various unfavorable circumstances.
Kazakh carpet, flawed with a big hole in it. Around the carpet various stories, about objects and people, begin to gather, through the narrator as some kind of medium.

The very Kazakh border from the title is the hem of the carpet, the border of the space which stands for, signifies another, wider space. »It is a visible border which separates the world of the carpet from everything else, as important as the walls are for a house or rivers and mountains which separate one country from another.« (Ibid, 54). Kazakh border thus outlines the domain of »two dimensional world« (Ibid, 53), being at the an image of closed space (a house) and opened space, as well as the symbolic depiction of the promised space of happiness, the Eden. As in nomadic tent, where a rug is “almost all furniture: a pillow, a bed, a spread, a curtain, the place where meals are eaten and prayers said” (Ibid, 54), thus in the novel the carpet is a map, a resort, gate into another world and the text itself.

Into the carpet made on the portable loom of nomads, the symbolic stories about the world are inscribed; exposed to time, used and walked over, it becomes inscribed by yet another layer of meaning. Stains, wholes, damages – these are the places where from the old carpets a story springs out, in peaces and fragments. This is the domain of female - the heroine “reads” spots and wholes, shadows, pictures, posters, reflections and absences, amorophous, altering forms. She understands that the maps may be drawn only of »where we have already been and consequently no longer are« (Braidotti, 1994, 35), and that all those places are inscribed into present, just as our identity is inscribed into places and things. Each carpet is thus a recovering of an old story – it demands an entrance into time and space of the other which at the end grows into nomadism. The points of space and time become relative, the names to play with, confuse: a workshop "Caucasus" in Belgrade, a coffe-shop "Belgrade" in a Belgian town...

In difference to men who guard the borders of their property with concern and anxiety of the threatening other, the narrator embodies a nomadic subject, »a myth, that is to say a political fiction, that allows ... to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges« (Braidotti, 4). The nomadic subject enacts identity as dynamic, not static, entity, as a process, change, moving through a space, or in metaphors of space. The novel is written and published just before the borders and frontiers turned into boundaries and front lines, and thus the nomadism of the narrator seems sharply contrasted to painful nostalgia of some other characters in it.

Such »nomadic narration« is here the narration is first person, with almost invisible alternation of the position. When narrator speaks from the margin of events, she actually retells and thus renews the story of the Russian emigree Vrubelj, from the position of omniscient narrator. When the story turns to herself, she becomes for a moment, in one of the concluding chapters, the object of third person narration. All the time, other people stories reach her through absences – holes in the carpets, »female« spying into the lives of other people, touching and feeling the traces of absence. Nomadism and empathy here mean the ability to be simultaneously outside and inside a character or an event, and this is the point of the »femaleness« of this novel, both its narrative strategy and its topic. In difference to the most often female metaphor of

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5 In the same year of the first publication of Guardians..., 1988, also published was postmodern novel Zinc by David Albahari. The comparison of these two texts points to the interesting similarities and differences. The short, fragmentary, novel by Albahari is about facing the father’s death. However, the process of the very creation of the text is openly thematized: it is one of the cases of the writer suffering from anxiety/inability in front of the blankness of paper and father figure, whereas in the Guardians the process of freeing one’s self from the male genealogy of “border guardians” is much simpler, and the search for the text is disguised as the search for the texture. More interesting still, the (male) narrator of the Zinc is also on the move – part of the narrative is situated in Israel and USA, but this movement is unlike the unburdened wandering of the (female) narrator of Guardians. However, in a recent poll
weaving and texture - a spider and/or Arachne, the female narrator here establishes herself as some kind of a moth, feeding herself on the inscriptions of the objects and bodies.

**Bodies of A(r)mour**

"Consider, gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an "act" ...."

Butler, *Gender Trouble*

At the end of eighties and during nineties on the Serbian literary scene appeared texts by women writers, which deal with, as central or episodic characters, historical figures. Among these texts, obviously meant as rewritings of the official historical versions, are the novel *Poslednji zanosi MSS* (The Last Fascinations of MSS) by Milica Micic-Dimovska (1996), as well as the story "The Other One Who Waits in the Dark Night" which concludes Ljubica Arsic’s collection *Cipele buvine boje* (The Shoes of the Flea Color, 1998).

In both of these texts, the narrative tasks were highly posted - to deal with the historical figures, national icons, and treat them in the way which represent their identities as textual ones and thus, apparently paradoxical, more human than the official versions. The main “trick” in achieving this, in both texts, was to focus on what the main characters "performed". As the performance came in the first plain (in the background was, again, the well known postmodern attitude toward history as a kind of text, fiction), the more visible became the process of entering and being in the "conflicted cultural field" (Butler, 145). The idea of making her own act lead the heroine of Dimovska’s novel to the dramatic fall back straight into her gender; while the hero of Arsic’s story is in the middle of conflicting gender and other roles. Thus, this Butler’s suggestion - "Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an "act", as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where performative suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler, 139) - gets in these narratives parodic but emotional turns. Fallen into the gaps of “gender contingency”, the main characters of both narratives enact roles which, in turn, become inscribed on their own bodies; clothed in their roles as armors, they are deprived of, or longing for, Amors.

Dimovska’s novel on Serbian poet Milica Stojadinovic Srpkinja differs from her previous "reality fiction" works in its metafictional and parodic treatment of the subject, but it still uses the same merciless eye for the pain of everyday existence. The heroine of the novel, Milica Stojadinovic Srpkinja, is the only figure in Serbian literature to whom the name of "female precursor" and "foremother" could be associated, in the meaning defined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. But, she is certainly a problematic identification. In her name, the vision of national poem-creator, stigma of unsuccessful poetess, rare beauty and tragic fate have been braided into a strong knot. She is outstanding, magnificent, the one who carries the banner of national consciousness, fascinated (a fairy), but on the other hand her poetry is bad, she had not fulfilled herself as a woman, and at the end of the life her mind is disturbed (remember the tragic fate of Shakespeare’s sister from V. Woolf’s book). Just as S. Slapsak points to: “... what is important for women’s literature in Serbia is that the poet and author of nineteenth century was

among critics about “the best Serbian postmodern novel”, held by the magazine *Blic News*, Albahari’s *Zinc* was firmly at the fourth place on the list, whereas *Guardians*... was not even mentioned.

6In the conception of women”s literary tradition by Sandra Gilbert i Susan Gubar female precursors are "lost foremothers" who could help women writers in XIX century to "find their distinctive female power", see Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, 1984, p. 59.
not confined to being just a madwoman in the attic, but could also appear in the mythopeia of the national poet-soothsayer. Milica Stojadinovic enacted both of the roles, with emphasis on each one chronologically arranged.

The novel depicts the last years of Milica Stojadinovic’s life, the time when she had been almost the only one who remembered herself as a "fairy". We see an elderly virgin in a black widow’s dress of duchess Julia (in contrary to white dress of fairies), homeless, preparing to go to Belgrade and spending there her last days in misery and final, painful break from old and new fascinations. Other than her people’s fate, one of the sore places in her mind is also an unwritten epic poem on Joan of Arc - Jovana Srpskinja, and, more and more, her own separateness from life.

Milica Srpskinja in the novel wears black widow’s dress as a suit of armor, as membrane around her real, fruitless, neglected body. That is the final decorum of her "dangerous impersonation", of taking her metaphors and poetry literally by which the life itself becomes a poetical act, an impersonation especially dangerous for women who had dared to take up the "holy vocation" of verse-writing.

The novel is narrated through combination of "real" events and sequences of memory, because the heroine reacts to reality by turning back to past. This also suggests a fragmentary, fascinated state of mind. In the last chapter the narrating voice which not only spoke to the heroine but also spoke with her, is abolished: "Why are you envious and vain, my dear writer and patriot? Do I have the right to reproach her, I, who am just as well vain, who fancies, vainly fancies, that I can dive through the space and time, to descend into past, in that grave, to my object, to my heroine... She contradicts me in vain." (Micic-Dimovska, 169).

Instead, the last words are let to the heroine herself, the object of narration has been turned into the narrating subject.

Faced with another Milica, a girl without father, surname and future, the heroine says three times, less as a curse and more as the final sentence: "My name is impossibility", immediately adding: "Sounds nice". The right to word and awareness of the beauty of words are left to the heroine until the end: "I shall die with my verses on my lips. Crushed by them. "The ironic connotation given to these pathetic (melodramatic?) words by the tone of the novel as a whole, make her end even more bitter: "... it appears that the woman poet must literally become a madwoman, enact the diabolical role, and lie melodramatically dead at the crossroads of tradition and genre, society and art." At the moment when the main elements of her life have turned into its opposite, when supposedly immortal white fairy dies enacting the "diabolical role" of a madwoman, adorned in her black "suit of armor", the heroine concludes, commenting her own death: "Everything was the same. Everything was nothing, I thought."

Starting from "intrusive" and "unalterable" facts, giving the narrator right to come close to the heroine’s point of view, too, Milica Micic Dimovska creates the voice which nears the confident voice of the poetess in the diary U Fruskoj gori, recreating it in the modern context. The voice is also getting near the fascination which Milica Stojadinovic paid by her reputation of poetess and her life - it comes close to it, but never adopts it, plays with it, but never gets fascinated, never slips.

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8Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, p. 549.

See also Skerlic, p. 349: "Her “literary friends”, who were fascinated by Byron, wore long hair and acted the roles of “fatale men”, ended as rich and overweight bourgeois. She stayed in the poetic illusions of youth and suffered because she did."
10Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, p. 545.
One of the sources for this novel was actual Milica Stojadinovic’s diary *In Fruska Gora 1854*, which is a combination of a confession (never too intimate - it had been written with a clear intention to be printed), narration, letters to friends, translations and poems of Milica herself. Describing her life of a country girl and a parish’s daughter, actual Milica makes sure to convince us that she is taking care of the housekeeping duties, and that this steals precious time from her readings and writings, connecting thus her own self and the character of Cinderella. Thinking highly of herself, the “fairy from Vrdnik”, lured into a role of a singer of national spirit, the embodiment of it, her body locked into her ideas about herself, waited for someone impeccable, perfect, a prince.

Could there be anyone like that? This leads us to a person, who is both cultural and political icon, barely mentioned in the novel, but widely related to actual Milica Stojadinovic’s absence of love story. This is Petar Petrovic Njegos, the Prince-bishop of Montenegro. Legend has it that he had said, upon meeting Milica Stojadinovic: “I am a poet, she is a poet. Were I not the monk, she would be the Princess of Montenegro.”

He became monk and prince-bishop of Montenegro in the age of 17, and ruled till 1851, when he died of tuberculosis in the age of 38. Njegos was also a poet: his most important works include a philosophical poem *Luca Mikrokozma* (The Ray of The Microcosm, 1845), a national epos *Gorski vijenac* (The Mountain Wreath, 1847), and *Lazni Car Scepan Mali* (Tsar Scepan the Small, The Impostor, 1851).

After his death, one erotic poem, with unusual title “Noc skuplja vijeka” (A Night More Precious Than the Century), was found. Dated around 1845, it was published for the first time 61 year after author’s death, in 1912, and ever since became the object of awe, appraisal, wondering and mystification.

The interest in this poem branched ever since in few directions: as the interest for its poetical intensity and beauty; as the interest on the verge of gossipy tales on who was the woman who inspired it, and what was really “between” her and Njegos, and finally, the interest in “protecting” Njegos’s name which resulted even in changing the title of the poem into “Paris and Helen”, and modifying the pronoun “I” into “He”, so that “a possible mundane idyll” may be “heightened to godlike heavens and chronologically distanced (by more than two and half millenniums) from Njegos as poetical subject” (Popovic).

In an extremely condensed texture of her story, Ljubica Arsic weaves a version of “a possible mundane idyll”, by making a historically impossible but poetically beautiful tale. She also makes characters out of two other historical persons, Amalia Riznic, an Italian and a wife of Serbian merchant Jovan Riznic, and her lover, famous Russian poet Pushkin. Arsic sets the encounter of Njegos and Amalia Riznic in a year before Amalia’s death, as we are told in the story, which would be around 1824, since Pushkin’s poem written upon news of her death is dated in 182611 (begins with verses “Pod nebom golubim strani svoei rodnoi”). But, real Njegos was than only 12 and far away from writing *Luca* in that year (and, vice versa – Amalia had been dead for 20 years in 1845).

The abnegation of historical precision points to another characteristic of the story – it is all made out of literary, textual fabric. It would be rather complicated to trace all the materials which Arsic re-used to make this story at which every word counts and is often a door to some other text or a work of art. At the first place these are Njegos’s texts, than, texts on Njegos, and, of course, Pushkin’s poems devoted to Amalia Riznic.12

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11 Which, according to some sources, was a year and a half after Amalia’s death. See Pesic, 312.

12 Ljubica Arsic’s usage of the material is also pre-textualized – Isidora Sekulic had many decades before concluded her collection of essays, *To Njegos A Book of Deep Devotion*, by a “Fantasy on A Silent Meditation by Prince-Bishop”, “dated” April 1851, and situated in Rome, at which his thoughts are represented as a kind of stream of consciousness. Earlier at her book she
The story by Ljubica Arsic consists of three parts, all of which are told by omniscient narrator, but from different perspectives – the first one is told from the perspective of Njegos and presents his accidental encounter with a foreign woman during a carnival night in Venice. The second part is told from Amalia’s perspective, and consists of her impressions and flashbacks, while the shortest, third part, is an epilogue.

Thus the story emulates a realistic manner – there is no direct addressing the audience, there is no breakdown from the position of the omniscient narrator, so much omniscient that he/she dares to inform us about the “truth” of such an interesting but mysterious topic, making this exactly the parody of it. It is an impossible position of original knowledge, since the “facts” presented are so transparent in their textual origin that factional can be taken only as fictional.

Arsic makes *Luca Mikrokozma* the starting point by both using its implications and by citing it throughout the story. The beginning of the story, with indicative “relaxed” manner: “Just like that, while he walks alone through the late night...” puts us at ease with the carnival atmosphere. Soon, we start to recognize the hero, first by his cough and by care of his escorters, and maybe, by an elegant paraphrase of a verse from his famous love poem, which is a fine “warning” of what is just about to happen. If it is overlooked, any doubt of hero’s identity will soon disappear when we hear him thinking about *Luca*, the philosophical poem he is writing: “While he is walking alone by the boats, he thinks of how would the archangel talk about endless space, to what would it be compared so that the description would not insult the knowledge of God.” (Arsic, 1998, 180). All he can think of is not complete enough: “But this is only a half of the space. There is another one, too. Behind all this we come to the border of darkness which is as much present as light” (Ibid).

Arsic makes the entrance of a woman, this missing, unknown, dark half in the story, by lowering the tonality, reversing to carnivalesque, “down-to-earth” spheres: “Up there among the stars the heavens confluence one into another, just like when a pebble is thrown and the circles expand on water. /Close to him a pebble dropped in to water. A woman was targeting at a carnival cap ..” (Ibid, 181).

It is the body of the spiritual man Njegos that helps heroine “recognize him” and talk to him in proper language: “I saw such tall men only among the compatriots of my husband.” (181). His body emerges as a sign, a linguistic crossroad – it has a language analogy and it comes into the text of the story completely pre-textualized, discussed, described. From this point verbal communication slowly flows back to the body language. The woman “spoke beautifully...He had never before heard that women speak so beautifully” (Ibid). And, of course: “The time of carnival was to blame for him looking straight into her eyes while she was talking and laughing to some words she mispronounced...” (Ibid).

In *carnem*, in flesh, the time of reversed values, sets the scenery: she takes him through the night, “her body informed him on the path they are to travel through” (Ibid, 182). At one point, they come to a square where a man walks on a golden wire between houses. Standing in the crowd, they come closer to each other and “from the woman’s closeness, his body descended as sea in front of send, to make place to hers, which was expanding in the silence of the crowd, supposed that the mysterious muse of the controversial poem, could have been “… a cultural and a fine Italian woman ...” ( 104), whom Njegos could have meet in Naples in 1851, while searching for a cure. Also, this story is by some traits close to the title story of Arsic’s previous collection, *Barutana* (The Gun-Powder House), and it’s part “Eli Loves A Serbian Poet”, where another romantic poet Laza Kostic appears as a character.

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13 Again, Isidora Sekulic gives the best example, by the essay on Njegos”s appearance: “The bishop Rade /his Christian name, note by BDN/ was enchanting – that is how, at the end, all the people would sum up their impressions” (Sekulic, 152).
entering the outlets and hollows he had made for her.” (Ibid). Than the revelation comes: “In front of his eyes the thin parchment was rolled down, at which the letters of a simple and disturbing message were written: the voice, the body, the breath and touch, the hand leaning on his. The wife of his compatriot carried on the dark hairs of her neck the real and big announcement, certainly not the one expected in vain by Christians from one to another century. The announcement hit him straight into stomach, he had never bode that there was the middle of the love knot were his knowledge ended, and her began” (Ibid, 182-3).

The revelation of the other, absent, another side, the comprehension of the enormous space comes into his from hers body. By virtue of the paraphrase, Luca is turned into the proof of this outcome: “If all spaces were to conflux into beams, and beams into the thinnest wire similar to this one on which the acrobat walks, and if that wire comprehends the enormous flat surface, it would be just one point in endless space”. (Ibid, 183, compare to Njegos, verses 186-200 of the Chapter III of Luca)14

The body language runs back into words: these hungry bodies are bodies textualized – in the scene of love-making Amalia remembers that night, the “dark Russian’s” verses mingle with reminiscences of Njegos’s poem, and if we follow the borrowed yarns, the fierce/sublimed roles become surprisingly reversed – Pushkin’s verses, for all of his ripe and celebrated masculinity, seem shy in comparison to wild, open eroticism of poem written by the monk Njegos.15

The epilogue of the story informs us that Amelia “died coughing in May next year” (Arsic, 1998, 186), and that Njegos was prevented to come to Petrograd to attend Pushkin’s funeral because of political reasons. “He was prescribed a cell and food. From the window of the cell, a poet escorted another poet” (Ibid).

This ending also seems to reveal the final truth – that the whole story was about two poets, two men and creators (Njegos links words “God” and “poetry” in Luca more than once), connected through a woman. While worried about “desiring a wife of his compatriot”, Njegos was unknowingly a part of other triangle, driven by “homopoetical”, to-be-like-god desire. While writing “funny words” into Amelia’s notebook, Pushkin prescribed himself for the triangle he was never to be aware of. Could it be another example of the “use of the women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 481)?

Exactly a parody of it, because their bodies are verbal, pre-textualized, taken from the virtual space of textual web, doubly reproduced in language. In this both elegant and parodical manner, Arsic’s story “answers to” all three general questions about Njegos’s poem – the beauty the poem is being hinted at throughout the whole text; the story “informs us” who had been the mysterious muse and what was between her and the poet; and, as it proves that nothing had really “happened”, except a revelation in cosmic terms, too subtle for hypocrites to count, she preserves the historical image of Njegos as a gentleman above all.

14 “The space of darkness and the space of light, /As thou dost comprehend them in thy mind,/If both these spaces were to change and melt/Into one spinning orb of brightest beams,/And if this orbit were extended straight/Into the finest thread that ever was,/And stretched across the frightful plains of space - /The distance which this finest of all wires/With its bright trace could penetrate, it were/One single point in the space whose ends/I hardly reach myself. One mind alone/Is without limits; all the other minds/Are short of sight.” (Translation by A. Savic-Rebac).
15 Not only his love poem is included in this sequence. The scene of Amalia sitting in her room and combing her hair, unaware that she is being watched (gazed at) by Pushkin refers to Njegos mastery in sublimed erotic description and understanding of layers of masculinity as represented in The Mountain Wreath, when one of the fiercest of Montenegrin princes - warriors, talks in his sleep, and liberated from the tyranny of consciousness, reveals his secret fascination with a young widow.
In the story, this revelation first invokes the fear in the hero: "If I only touch her, he thought and got scared." (Arsic, 1998, 183). By prolonging the corporeal hunger he seems to keep a cosmic balance: "If he only touched her, the man would lose his balance and fall from the wire." (Ibid, 183).

But, a reader may justly ask, what horror would have come to them? In what void would they actually end? As the story goes, it is obvious that they would fall (back) into the Njegos’s love poem, into the verse “Mouths to mouths – one kiss the whole night long”\(^{16}\). The abyss would accept them in its meaning of the primary chaos, of pre-matter (which is here actually the primary textual material used). And this is the answer why their encounter leads to revelation, but not to the consumation. What both of the characters fear is the loss of desire: the tension would be gone, the desire would be dead, their bodies would be left without armor of textuality.

In both of these works, Micic-Dimovska’s novel and Arsic’s story, the actual historical figures are wrapped in the armors of texts, their own and many others’. Dimovska’s heroine has a black dress of prince Mikhailo’s widow, which accents her multiple role of an ex-fairy, a false widow, madwoman, whereas Arsic’s hero’s body reveals a lot about himself to those who know to “read” it - his language and his sickness, at the first place. In both of the texts, these armors had replaced Amor, and the bodies of main characters are exposed as histories of parodic and secret longings. In both of them, the main characters’ genders seem unavoidable, ultimate performances, they had been culturally forced to play all the time. But the point of these texts is yet in dreaming, imagining, yearning for something else, beyond these limitations.

Or, more figuratively: if the equilibrist it to come to the end of the wire, there must be void and there must be - desire.

References


\(^{16}\) “If he touched her by his lips, he could not part it from her skin.“ (Arsic, 183).
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**Author:**
Dr. Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić
Women’s Studies Center Belgrade,
Jove Ilica 165
Serbia and Montenegro
E-mail: zenskestudie@sezampro.yu