

Mimesis under Socialism

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At the beginning of the 1980's, when the political pressure on culture slowly began to weaken in what is now known as former Yugoslavia, a group of performers in Novi Sad, the second largest city in Serbia, produced the play *Golubnjaca* by Jovan Radulovic. This was a play about the most carefully buried chapter of recent Yugoslav history: the Civil War of 1941-44. The play was set in the Croatian Krajina, a region mostly inhabited by Serbs, and dealt with the psychological and historical genesis of hatred which during World War II led to the massacre of much of the Serbian population under the Ustasha regime. Since the official policy of post-war Yugoslavia was to cover up the past with silence, in the hope that the terrifying memories would thus disappear, the very subject of this play was politically provocative. In earlier cases, when such a play made it to the stage, the mechanisms of political judgment and execution functioned quickly, efficiently and in silence: the performance would have been barred from the stage. But this time everything went differently: with the dissolution of central authority, embodied in the person of the late President Tito, local – that is national – governments had already started opening up debates about the past. Looking for public support in the broader sphere of culture, the Serbian government encouraged discussion of Radulovic's play as well as its historic topic. One of the discussions was organized by Belgrade television. A large number of theatrical and literary critics – ten or more – were invited to add their opinion to the public debate.

One must confess that everything happened so fast there was no time to take up battle stations which would correspond to the new disposition of forces. For years, trench warfare had been waged between the authorities and its operatives in literature on the one side, and the politically critical intelligentsia on the other. Positions did not shift, and strategies remained the same. The former searched literature and theatre, as well as all forms of public discourse, for anything that might be construed as an attempt to render any sort of judgment about the political sphere, as no judgment could be sincerely positive. The latter strengthened their position during the 70s, with the advent of formalist literary theories in their Russian, French and Anglo-American variants, finding refuge in

the tenet of the autonomy and non-referentiality of literature. Faced with the authorities' attack on literature, liberal criticism raised a shield inscribed with several dogmas, the most important of these being that literature did not refer to any reality, least of all to ours. How successful this line of defense was remains to be determined, but it was an honourable defense for literature in any case, and the only one possible in what was in fact a fictive debate. There can be no real discussion if the participants are in unequal positions, if one side holds all the cards, including the possibility of stopping the debate at any moment, while the other one holds nothing. The debate was also fictive because the other side, liberal criticism, never actually believed in its own key argument. It defended political literature with the assertion that literature could not be political. In this way, liberal criticism defended literature from condemnation and bans, but also –and this was far more important, even though it would not have been admitted at the time– it opened up the space for public speech about politics. Through critical practice it constantly undermined the idea of autonomy which it espoused in principle. After Antonije Isakovic's novel *Tren 2 (The Moment 2)*, which deals with the Communist prison on Goli Otok island, was finally published, a literary evening was organized in Belgrade. It was an unusually well-attended ceremony, at which everybody, the audience in their seats and the critics on the stage, knew what they knew, and everybody pretended not to know. The critics spoke about the novel's composition, characterization and language, skillfully avoiding saying anything about the most interesting aspect of the book, that is, the Yugoslav version of the Russian Gulag in which thousands of people died. One of the listeners in the audience, however, was not aware of the conventions of the long struggle: he had read the book, recognized his own fate in it, and had finally lived to hear something said about it in public, but he was visibly confused. When he made it to the microphone and asked, also in a roundabout way, why none of the previous speakers had said anything about what was the most important thing in the novel, about a monstrous political crime whose victim he, too, had been, he was told by the critics that they were concerned with what they thought was important, which was literature, and that if he did not think so, then he was in the wrong place.

The same type of argument was used in numerous other cases. The television panel on *Golubnjaca* was presented in a context changed by the fissure in the authorities: now one current in power very much needed this game stopped, and the political theme of the work, not its literary merit, clearly spoken about. Sometimes strategies circulate among the participants in a struggle: now the authorities, following their own needs, tried to open up the field of public discourse about a political subject through literature, but the world of criticism did not accept this. The same critical dogma of non-referentiality and autonomy, of an independent artistic world, of illusion and literary freedom was varied several times that evening. One of the participants used the complicated language of theatrical semiology, spoke of signs and codes, although there were probably not more than five or six people among the viewers who could understand him. The change had come too quickly to reject the old strategy and take on the challenge: to speak of a literary work whose intention was to be *political* in an adequate

language –that of *political* criticism. This was the moment when such a move became possible for the first time, but the opportunity was not used, neither then nor later.

And yet, Serbian literature has produced many works that deal with the relationship between the field of power and the literary field. Take, for instance, the plays of Dusan Kovacevic. It is hardly possible to say anything relevant about the plays of Dusan Kovacevic¹ unless we abandon this dogma, born of aestheticism, of the autonomy of literature: *Balkanski špijun* (*The Balkan Spy*), *Klaustrofobična komedija* (*Claustrophobic Comedy*), *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*) and *Urnebesna tragedija* (*Uproarious Tragedy*) are works which draw their meaning precisely from their relationship to reality. In order to understand them, it is necessary to recognize the political and social context out of which they were born. Through the theatre, as an eminently social institution, they return to their place of origin –they step into a social context which made possible their appearance, not as its simple and neutral representation, but as an active force within it, however small. One of the basic tasks of cultural criticism is to determine in what way, by what means and to what effect a culture *represents itself to itself*: Forms of representation are never neutral –except possibly when, many years after a culture’s disappearance, they surface in museum depots and libraries– but are simultaneously formed and form-giving, both the results of complex social and cultural processes and active participants in these very processes. From a culture’s understanding of its own representations in literature, on the stage, in print or in film, what it determines as their origin and what it assigns as their purpose, we can begin to understand the poetics of that culture.

The theme of Kovacevic’s play *The Professional* is representation under socialism. The story is very short and simple: a former policeman, Luka Laban, comes into the offices of Teja Kraj, the new editor-in-chief of a large Belgrade publishing house. Teja Kraj is the 45-year-old author of one volume of poetry and one collection of short stories; he is aware that his opus is slim, but, still, he is a writer and is considered a writer by others, and if that is not enough, the fact that he has been editor-in-chief of a publishing house for two months further confirms his identity. The former policeman, Luka Laban, has been following Kraj for eighteen years, writing down everything that the latter said on every occasion, and has now brought him these official police records, which he presents to him as his unwritten books, as “speeches”, “stories” and “dialogues”. The manuscripts are there, tidily typed and ordered, they need only to be published. The occasion also gives rise to another work: as Luka Laban is taping their whole encounter, Teja Kraj also gains a play by retyping the audio record, and it is precisely this play –*The Professional*– that we are watching.

This twist at the end of the play gives legitimacy to the assertion made at its beginning: the story is “unbelievable but true”. Reality itself is known to oppose the rules of probability, but the manner in which the play is created –by typing out an audio record verbatim– serves as a guarantee of its authenticity. Thus, *The Professional* also justifies a literary programme: the subject of literary

representation in a social context which makes possible the appearance of a Teja Kraj and a Luka Laban is reality itself, and the mode of representation is literally copying, which will not permit the slightest distortion by literary transposition. To create literature, it is sufficient just to write down reality –the reality of this literary context is itself already ‘unbelievable’, so it can produce wonder in the reader or viewer. But at the same time it contains a truth which one need not seek below the surface, as it is self-evident. This is not only an unspoken tenet of the play, it is not only legitimized by the “tape-recording” procedure, but it is also explicitly justified in one of Teja’s ‘speeches’: “Vaclav Havel plays himself in an ongoing play. Along the way, when he is out of prison, he copies a few pages.... Distance, so necessary and so modern –none. Distance takes place later, when we watch his plays. That is when art starts and life stops.” The reality of socialism is dramatic in itself, especially for a writer or an intellectual who is opposed to the authorities, so there is no need to do anything but write down what is happening, without any artistic shaping, and one will get a *true* work of art. Why should such a representation be literature at all, and ‘true’ at that? Because this is not the only way in which socialism represents itself to itself: it abounds in ideological, distorted, glossy, officially desirable representations which are silent about or overlook reality –‘what is really happening’– and are, therefore, untrue. Society has at its disposal control mechanisms through which it favours ‘untrue’ representations and inhibits true ones, thus creating a desirable but inadequate representation of itself.

But not everything in Dusan Kovacevic’s *The Professional* is as simple as this. If the above justifies the creation of the play we are watching, it still does not justify the creation of Teja Kraj’s ‘opus’. The folders which the former policeman brings him contain texts which Teja spoke in highly informal circumstances –in cafes, in a train, during private conversations, in the bar of the Atelje 212 theatre– without the intention of making them ‘literary’, and without the consciousness of effecting any sort of ‘literary transposition’ while speaking thus. Apparently, even though one of the folders is marked “Stories”, it contains few literary texts in the usual sense, and many political texts which a citizen, critically disposed towards the socialist authorities, said to his friends, or publicly during the 1968 student protest, or, simply, in a cafe. It may be understandable that the police keep track of all this, but why do all the characters in the play –Luka Laban, his son Milos, even Teja Kraj himself– consider these texts to be literature, and think that the whole world would agree, had only the speaker become a ‘professional’ in time and written them down? Here is the second definition of literature offered by Kovacevic’s play: we may consider as literature everything said by a citizen who once, with his first collection of verse, legitimized himself as a writer. And more: there is no distinction between literature and verbal opposition to the authorities. In the final analysis, we can put an equal sign can be put between these two things –either a writer produces literature by verbally opposing the authorities, or the writer’s verbal opposition represents a form of literary production. Finally, the authorities, through their repressive methods, directly *produce* literature. Not only because the reality controlled and ordered by the

authorities is rich enough in literary material just waiting to be written down as literature, but also because through the police, who write down everything a critical citizen says even in spite of his 'lack of professionalism', it produces both his literary opus and himself as a writer.

If this is so, then the task of the writer under socialism is comparatively simple. His professional training need include only a critical attitude towards the socialist authorities, which produces literary content, and quotidian diligence in writing it down, which fixates the content and gives it form, preventing its evaporation and dissipation in barroom smoke. This is how a writer becomes a true professional. Even if he is not sufficiently professional, when, like Teja Kraj, he does not write down the literary content he produces, his literary identity will not be imperiled. There is a ready answer to the question which Teja Kraj asks at the beginning of the play: "Where are my unwritten books?" They are in your police file, neatly typed, classified and ready to print.

This is a paradox which we must treat with great circumspection, as it is the only way in which we shall be able to see what Kovacevic's play is actually saying about mimesis under socialism. On one hand, the content of a writer's police file is the literature he produces. On the other hand, anything that the writer under socialism says upon any occasion automatically becomes literature as it is entered into his police file. It is clear that in this relationship the police file holds the central position, because this is the place where literature is produced and preserved. The writer under socialism, creating literature, simultaneously creates his own police file. His legitimacy, both for entering the field of the police file and for producing literature, is provided by a critical attitude towards the authorities.

The authorities, for their part, by creating the police file through their apparatus of repression, create literature, even when the writer himself is not sufficiently 'professional'. Thus the policeman, Luka Laban, considers himself a true professional, and reproaches Teja Kraj for his lack of professionalism. The two of them are engaged in the same work, they move in the same domain, they have the same task –writing texts critical of the socialist authorities. In socialism, literature is in the same sphere as power and authority: the antagonists clash at the same level. Luka Laban and Teja Kraj, although pitted against each other in a struggle which is far from harmless and in which Teja could easily lose his life, are doing the same job. The antagonists condition each other: the authorities suppress, by suppressing they create, and through the apparatus of repression they write down and preserve, not because they themselves want to, or like to, but because it is in their totalitarian nature. Thus, an activity through which the authorities shore up and strengthen themselves simultaneously produces subversive voices. Paradoxically, in order to preserve the existing order, the authorities call into existence their antagonist and keep an eye on him. The authorities and the writer under socialism are, of course, not the same, but they move in the same sphere, and in this sphere power can circulate: if there should be a global change in this sphere, power will come to reside in those hands which a moment ago

were threatened with handcuffs. After such a change, Teja Kraj is converted from a marginal player into the editor-in-chief of a large publishing house. The fact that he has written only two books, and is himself aware that his work is not particularly important, has no relevance in this case. Even when it is not visible, his opus exists in the very place where literature is produced and preserved, where it is taken seriously –that is, taken as a critical stance against the authorities– before the eyes of the divinities who regulate the distribution of power. The same change turns the contents of his police file, the very thing which could have been the basis of an indictment sending him off to prison, into his literary opus. In the same way, Vaclav Havel, who is mentioned in the play, went practically straight from prison to the presidential palace, much as did Arpad Genz in Hungary, Zhelo Zhelev in Bulgaria or Dobrica Cosic in Yugoslavia.

This would not have been possible if Teja had not previously, by the existence of his visible or invisible work –*his critical attitude towards the authorities*– qualified for ambiguous presence in the sphere in which power circulates. Ambiguous, because it can mean both marginalization to the border of existence, or, in changed circumstances, integration into the structure of authority. But he is, whether he realizes it or not, already inside the sphere of power from the very beginning, with the publication of his first book or his first speech. In this sphere literature, understood as a critical attitude towards the authorities, represents an instrument of power both for the authorities and for the writer. For the authorities, who produce it and store it away in police files, it is material for a possible trial which will eliminate the dissenting citizen; for the writer, who also produces it, it can provide, in changed circumstances, the legitimacy which will enable him to climb the stairs of authority. Now we can give another answer to Teja's question –“Where are my unwritten books?”– from the beginning of the play. Your unwritten books circulate in the space of power, as its instrument, and even though they are currently in the hands of the authorities as a means against you, the next moment they may be handed over to you, as a means for you.

Is it possible to say, from the point of view of Kovacevic's play *The Professional*, that all literary production under socialism has this ambiguous status of instrument of power? Another writer is presented in this play of whom it is impossible to determine whether or not he is within the sphere of power: he is, simply, the Fool, a literary producer who has no power. Also, on the basis of what Kovacevic's play says about mimesis under socialism, we may suppose that a part of literary production is outside its scrutiny, namely that part which does not fit this qualification: literature which does not copy the incredible reality of socialism from an audio tape, but submits it to the mechanisms of literary transposition, so that the moment of truth vanishes from it. It was of such art that Adorno said that it had “entered into a pact with the fatal totality”, that by forgiving reality its monstrous and unbelievable truths it only reinforced the existing order, and had thus become, even if unwillingly, an instrument of power in the hands of the authorities.

But if there are no examples in *The Professional* of a different kind of literature, of a literature which would not be an instrument of power in any of the ways described above, there is the play *The Professional* itself as a literary work. While it is saying something about literary representation under socialism, about literature as an instrument in the sphere of power, it is at the same time defining itself within that context. If culture represents itself to itself through the representative arts, then plays such as Kovacevic's *The Professional* have a dual function: not only do they take part in social self-representation by their most general nature, they also represent the domain of reflection about it. Up to this point, *The Professional* has offered us a division of literary production into true, critical literature, and untrue literature which takes a neutral stance towards the authorities. Where is the place of *The Professional* in this scheme, then?

In order to find an answer, we must return to the very beginning: this play is created when Teja Kraj types out the audio record of his meeting with Luka Laban "straight into the typewriter", without changing anything. Of course, nobody will take this literally as meaning that Teja Kraj is a pseudonym for Dusan Kovacevic; but this procedure encodes the self-legitimacy of Kovacevic's play within the framework of understanding literary production established by the play itself. We are supposed to understand that as a work also created under socialism, *The Professional*, too, is a part of the critical literature which does not indulge in literary transposition, but represents reality as it actually is. In that sense, it claims a right to the truth, and defines itself as being critically disposed towards the authorities because it represents the implementation of their repressive methods. In this way, Kovacevic's play, just like Teja Kraj's "unwritten" books, magically born from his police file, has entered into the sphere of power, to be exposed to the ambiguous instrumentalization of literature which reigns in that sphere. But, it would appear, at the same time *The Professional* escapes from that sphere: it refuses to be an instrument of power in the hands of the authorities or of the dissenting citizen, and does this precisely through what becomes its content and the meaning mediated by this content. By presenting on stage the paradoxical mode of literary production under socialism, the mechanism by which the authorities suppress, and in suppressing produce, write down and preserve criticism of themselves, creating in this way their own antagonist and partner in the sphere of power, through this consciousness of itself of the literature produced by socialism, Kovacevic's play removes itself from the sphere into which it seems to have stepped. Consciousness of the mechanism of literary production under socialism should save this play from taking part in the *agon* of the authorities and their critics, an *agon* which not only ends in the identicalness of the antagonists, but is from the very beginning marked by the independence of their positions, and enable it to criticize the repressive authorities without turning into Teja Kraj, because it keeps a critical distance towards him as well, subjecting him to the same critical illumination undergone by the authorities.

If that is so, then we have to say that in socialist literary production there are not only two exclusive positions, the critical and the covertly affirmative, but

also a third one –that of which *The Professional* wishes to be an example. Truly critical literature is not that which criticizes the current figures of authority, nor those who currently oppose them, only to become the same as them the next moment, but that which is able to illuminate and represent the mode of production and distribution of power in society, not forgetting to cast a self-conscious glance at its own mode of production and the danger of ever-lurking instrumentalization. Thus, Kovacevic's play divides mimesis under socialism into two areas, keeping a third position, privileged and neutral, for itself.

The question now is no longer 'Is this so?', but rather 'Can this be so?' without simultaneously overlooking the gap opened in the very heart of the political and cultural experience which Kovacevic's play wishes to represent. The play has legitimized itself 'by tape recorder' as part of socialist literary production: it is part of the context of mimesis under socialism, but it still lays claim to a privileged position from which it would be possible to understand and critically judge that same context. If there is the possibility of a *privileged text* created in a social context, but at the same time so far above it that it can render a true judgment about this context, why should this status be reserved solely for *The Professional*, and denied to all other texts? In other words: why should it be necessary to suppose that all other texts created in the same way in which *The Professional* claims to have been created –by faithful, true, direct copying of events from the dramatic socialist reality– lack the double critical edge, directed against the authorities on one hand, and against the critical intellectual-writer on the other? Has this play itself not already convincingly demonstrated that no special effort is needed for this dual critical attitude, only a detailed and conscientious 'tape-recorder' procedure, as reality itself betrays and informs on both the authorities and its critic? Something must be wrong here: either the tape-recorder auto-legitimization of *The Professional*, or the division into true and untrue literary production in socialism.

It is the latter which is wrong. If we remain at the standpoint from which it is possible to render such a judgment, to divide the total literary production into 'good' and 'bad' halves, then there is no way in which a third, privileged and neutral position can be singled out for oneself. This division means that literature in socialism recognizes within itself a good, critical side and a bad, uncritical, and therefore covertly affirmative one. The same division can be made from the point of view of the authorities, with reversed value judgments. This division reveals a fissure down the middle of social experience, and it unwittingly betrays the play: *The Professional* only perpetuates the same structure of argument discussed at the beginning of this text, and cannot extricate itself from the sphere of power so precisely depicted by the play simply by turning its edge towards the critical intellectual, too. The authorities in socialism delimit discursive fields strictly, raise a barrier between politics and literature, and announce that they will not interfere with the latter unless it itself chooses to jump the wall. This strategy is defensive, as it serves to close off the space of public speech. Literature has two mutually exclusive strategies: an offensive one, when it interferes in politics

with its themes and judgments, opening up the space of public speech, and a defensive one, when through the idea of autonomy of literature –the same wall which the authorities use to delimit discursive fields– it wishes to protect itself from official intervention. But the authorities, too, may resort to offensive strategies when –as in the case of *Golubnjaca*– they wish to open up the space of public speech about something *through* literature. In brief, both writers and authorities simultaneously support and undermine the border which is supposed to divide the two areas of discourse. This border is unstable and porous not because the conflicting sides do not adhere to the rules –one side will not ban and persecute, the other will not interfere– but because *it is not natural*: it is only such arrangements, keeping to the rules or breaking them, accepting delimited and mutually exclusive discursive fields and attempting to revoke this acceptance, that draw this border and make its existence known. This border –or, more precisely, the identical strategies of the antagonists in the sphere of power, which serve to draw the border between politics and literature– decisively determine the mode of literary production under socialism. Mimesis under socialism is not, to use Bakhtinian terms, monological because the authorities are fond of choir singing, since as we have seen they simultaneously produce dissonant voices, but because literary production goes on under conditions determined by the assumption of both the authorities and literature that the existence of literature is possible only within the sphere of power. The authorities determine these conditions by taking such literature seriously as an antagonist, and by then producing it, and literature by taking itself seriously only in the form of critique of authority.

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Note

1. Dusan Kovacevic, born 1948, has by now written thirteen plays, one novel and several screenplays (one of them for the 1995 Cannes winner *Underground*, directed by Emir Kusturica). *The Professional* is published in English by Samuel French, New York, 1995.

Zoran Milutinovic Mimesis Under Socialism

Το άρθρο ασχολείται με τρόπους λογοτεχνικής αναπαράστασης υπό συνθήκες σοσιαλισμού, ο οποίος αποτελούσε την κρατούσα ιδεολογία της πρώην Γιουγκοσλαβίας για σαράντα πέντε χρόνια. Μετά από μια εισαγωγή που εξηγεί το πλαίσιο μέχρι την αρχή της διάλυσης της μονολιθικής στάσης της εξουσίας προς τη λογοτεχνία, το ενδιαφέρον στρέφεται στο θεατρικό έργο του Dusan Kovacevic *The Professional* (*Ο Επαγγελματίας*), το οποίο είναι από μόνο του μια μελέτη της σχέσης συγγραφέα και εξουσίας. Τέλος, το άρθρο αμφισβητεί τον τρόπο με τον οποίο χαράσσονται τα όρια μεταξύ λογοτεχνίας και εξουσίας και εξετάζει τη συνενοχή των δύο πλευρών στην αντιμετώπιση της λογοτεχνίας ως εφικτής μόνο μέσα στη σφαίρα της δύναμης.