

Aleksandar Tišma

Aleksandar Tišma (b. 1924) is a poet, prose writer, and essayist. He has published several collections of short stories: *Wrongs* (1961), *Violence* (1965), *Dead Angle* (1973), *Return to Peace* (1977), *The School of Atheism* (1978). His novels are entitled *Following the Black-Haired Girl* (1969), *The Book on Blam* (1972), *Fugitives* (1981), *Oaths and Plots* (1983), *Capo* (1987), *The Wide Door* (1988), and *Those We Love* (1990).

In his best works Tišma successfully accomplishes a synthesis of tradition and modern writing techniques. The essence of his prose is an atypical narrative about typical, ordinary occurrences, while the historical is always given indirectly and without an epic perspective.

THE WHOLE SELF

True, my uncle was an overproud genius of sorts, but he was not crazy. I say this despite the interpretations the family is wont to dole out with the conventional dispiritedness of those confronting something that transcends the bounds of ordinary understanding. In doing what he did, Uncle was obeying a monstrously overdeveloped conceit and, in my view, an inordinate sense of compassion.

When he was introduced to my aunt, at a party for young ladies during the holidays, she was already engaged to a very ambitious director of a sugar refinery just outside town, a man who would later become a member of Parliament and who, in World War II, would be hanged by the Germans from a post in front of the administration building of the very company he had run so successfully for two decades. Uncle bore no resemblance whatsoever to this adroit businessman, with his quick little eyes and movements. Uncle was a giant of a man, not tall so much as broad-shouldered, with a big head of unruly curly hair that would have made him look quite wild had it not been for the steady, calm, round brown eyes peering out from underneath, between the high arched brow and fleshy cheeks with the short straight nose. He was very quiet, but there really was no need for him to talk much. He told Aunt that he was thinking of abandoning his theology studies in order to devote himself to his “own writing,” and he recited a couple of verses of what at the time was modern French poetry, thus enhancing the impression that nature had been so generous in creating. After seeing him several times, Aunt announced to the family that she was breaking off her engagement.

The family found this hard to accept. My grandfather was a wholesaler

and could not imagine having a twenty-year-old theologian for a son-in-law—and that was before he knew that the fellow was planning to leave the priesthood without ever actually joining it. The girl was subjected to the full range of pressures known to the middle classes at the time: she was whisked off to a spa, forbidden to see him, cajoled, threatened, slapped, and her freedom of movement restricted. The pressure continued for four and a half months—all of that summer and early autumn—whereupon Aunt swallowed twenty sachets of sleeping powder. They found her unconscious in her white room upstairs in Grandfather's house, and it took days of stomach pumping, injections, and shock treatment to revive her. The poisoning left her with a damaged and weakened heart for the rest of her short life.

The family was frightened for her, naturally, but then, after the exhausting battle to save the sinful woman's life, they were disgusted by her. They now handed her over to her seducer without objection, discarding her like something that upon first use, as it were, had proved perishable and therefore worthless. Uncle left the seminary and the capital, and rented a room for the two of them on the outskirts of town. Thereafter, and until the end, he supported my aunt by giving foreign language lessons, devoting all his free time to his "own work."

Today it is impossible to say anything specific about that work because Uncle never published any of it, and whatever he had in manuscript he ultimately burned. All we have to rely on, therefore, is what we were occasionally told by Aunt, who, after a certain punitive rupture in relations, was invited back into the homes of some of the more tender-hearted members of the family, including my mother. But even Aunt had no real facts to offer—she was so sure of the worth and future success of Uncle's work that all you could get out of her were exclamations. Did her faith in something that was never to be indicate a certain blindness, even a certain limitation, perhaps? She was no expert on literature, of course, but she did have a good clear head on her shoulders—as absolutely everyone in the family acknowledged—and she was blind only to the extent that she transposed her confidence in Uncle's human worth and character unreservedly onto his deeds. Rightly so, too, in my opinion, because what else lends value to a work if not the character of its creator? There are instances, of course, where the personal element, even when bolstered by a strong will, is not enough, but the exception merely proves the rule.

Given its initial attitude, which it felt it had to justify, the family was

naturally skeptical about Aunt's effusiveness. As an ever present member of the family, I was forced, as it were, to follow from various vantage points how Uncle's work was, or was not, progressing.

In response to my mother's usually repeated invitations, Aunt would come, fragile and beautiful, looking girlishly youthful, despite the pallor caused by her infirmity. She would sit down on the edge of the armchair, casting a dreamy, yearning look over the back of the chair, sipping her café au lait and chatting breathlessly—even animated conversation was a strain on her lungs—and then, often for no particular reason, as if unable to suppress a thought that had been weighing on her mind the entire time, she would burst out with: "Ratko is working on a play now." And then, closing her blue, always slightly wet, compassionate eyes, she would add: "I'm sure it will be wonderful!"

And months or years later, Father would suddenly ask Mother, not without a bite to his words: "What ever happened to that wonderful play of Ratko's?" He did not expect an answer, of course. In the meantime, Aunt had long since stopped mentioning the play, announcing some long story or poem instead.

So much for Aunt. What about Uncle? How did he bear the non-fulfillment of his ideas? That is to say, if he did bear it, because of the grumbling (as he did for nearly fifteen years); was he not then really crazy? I think his silent perseverance shows the opposite to be true. It is maniacs who impatiently, unscrupulously, often even cunningly, push their products—their patents or poems or prophecies—onto the community of normal men, attributing failure to the unreadiness of that same community to accept them, seeking a remedy not within themselves but in the guise of new patrons. Uncle, however, did not foist his writings onto anyone; he never even showed them—except once, and that was the first time and the last and not done for his own sake; no, he himself rejected his writings, all of them, one by one, thus proving himself to have a very critical eye. But why then, if he kept rejecting everything, did he not give up sooner? Again, part of the answer can be found in Aunt's incidental comments, and still more, I think, in her boundless faith as victim and invalid, which left him obligated. "Ratko doesn't care when he will succeed. He doesn't even care whether he will succeed. He just cares about finding the right form in which to express himself."

To express himself. But which self? The self of the apostate and pen-

niless language teacher, the self of the uncorrupted worker and uncorrupted husband in the midst of a pack of filthy egotists, the self of the handsome, strapping zealot surrounded by provincial gnomes, or the self of a man helpless in the face of society's needs and those of nature? Probably all of them together, the whole self at once, because Aunt, who kept changing the descriptive genre of his writing, finally began talking about "the work" without indicating anything more, a big book requiring long years of labor.

At this point, the burden of effort that went into this strangely uncommon marriage began to leave visible traces on Uncle himself. He was still enormous, strong, and handsome, even though his mop of hair was streaked with gray—he had passed the thirty-five-year mark. In other words, he was strong and good-looking, but underneath that external frame, that shield of armor, that sculpting, there seemed to be a growing hollowness. He still wore the suits of his youth—he had no money to buy new ones—and though they hung lightly and spotlessly from the unchanged gigantic frame of his body, they looked as if they had been worn so thin from the friction of the same repeated movements that they would disintegrate like cigarette ash. He walked down the street ramrod straight, marching like a wound-up toy soldier, his earthy dark face towering above the heads of passers-by, his big chestnut-colored eyes fixed on a sight visible to him alone. He often failed to recognize us, and we would turn around to look at him.

Aunt alone still saw him that way, but she obviously did not see how others saw her: impoverished and enfeebled by a confined life, a life without respite for the irrevocably captured former beauty. Admittedly, even when the conversation turned to more mundane matters, she did not hide the fact that theirs was a hard life, which meant it was getting harder because of rising costs, because of the dwindling number of students, because of the various formal obstacles the authorities placed in their way. But in describing their difficulties, it was as if she was vaunting them—her eyes shone feverishly bright, her short breath was convulsed with emotion. Ratko works terribly hard. Ratko makes up for lost time at night. Ratko is burning himself out. Masked as concern, was this not the best possible news, a step toward accomplishing the supreme and only important goal?

My aunt's slightly comic courage, by now tedious and even unnoticed

by us, was shattered by a crime. His pupils banged on their teacher's door in vain; the neighbors—whose narrow lives made them suspicious—broke in only to find Aunt in bed with her head smashed, and Uncle, fully dressed, lying on his back next to her bed, with his veins slashed. And lots of blood on the floor and lots of ashes by the stove.

Needless to say, the incident left the public shocked—as anyone can see who cares to leaf through the November 7 and 8, 1938, issues of our local paper, the *Herald*. But the articles—which, while not particularly detailed, were written in the cheapest kind of journalese—also showed a total absence of any real surprise or doubt, a response that was entirely in keeping with my own recollections. For fifteen years, Uncle's haughty yet unfounded ambition had astonished people, and now, in hindsight, it seemed dreadful but natural that the only way this continuing mania could have ended was in the very worst paroxysm of self-destruction. Of course, there was also another victim here: Aunt, who had no eccentricity other than being blind to his; but was that not sufficient to condemn her to ruin as well? In a fit of deep, dark despair, when he decided to cut short his life, this madman dragged down with him whoever was close to him—indeed, the only person close to him: my aunt.

Only one detail jarred slightly with this generally accepted picture, as witness the closing paragraph in the *Herald's* first report, which mentions the conclusions of the police investigation. There was a certain deliberateness about the scene in which the dead couple was discovered: the woman's head smashed with a single calculated swing of the axe, obviously delivered while she was peacefully asleep; the burning of the papers and slashing of the veins, which requires the utmost resolve on the part of the suicide, because it gives him time to reconsider even after having taken the fatal step. All this seemed to call into question the theory of suicide in a moment of despair, taking the life of the other person as well; it pointed to a different, unknown, but deliberate motive.

But since the facts of the drama and distribution of the roles were so vividly clear, the investigation did not make any detailed examination of what was a purely academic contradiction; in its second report, the *Herald* did not even mention it. It merely published the statements of those questioned: my father and my mother's brother, both of whom enumerated Uncle's offenses, which had been so fatal for my poor aunt; then the neighbors, who talked mostly about the couple's financial straits;

and finally one of Uncle's childhood friends, a singing teacher in the local school, a bachelor and closet alcoholic who had moved to our town long after Uncle and had developed the habit of visiting him every Saturday afternoon, his last remaining friend. He was the only person to offer, apart from general, already known information, something new. Two months earlier, Uncle had entrusted him with a fragment of one of his huge literary works in progress, which he asked his friend to send, under his name, to a publisher he knew for an expert opinion. Four days before the tragedy, the friend had told Uncle of the publisher's negative reply. He told him the news in his own apartment and had returned the manuscript. This detail simply confirmed the accepted view: suicide out of despair, which in a moment of insane resolve had necessitated taking the life of the innocent, peacefully sleeping woman as well.

Many years later, however, I learned from a nephew of that same friend (by then deceased)—the nephew being a man my own age whom I chanced to meet on the coast—one other detail which I think confirms the hypothesis that this had been a crime of mercy—or to be more precise, that Uncle had not been in the grips of anger or despair, with himself as the main target, but rather that his primary goal had been to kill Aunt, with suicide playing only a subordinate role as the by-product of that main act. It was she, not himself, that Uncle wanted to spare the humiliation of failure. Long before the event, he had probably begun to doubt his own ability to accomplish this “all-embracing work”—as shown by his touchingly helpless move to submit it for an opinion under someone else's name. Finally, by the time he had spilled her blood and his own, he had already known the reply for four days. But I have yet to report what detail it was that, during my conversations with the nephew of Uncle's friend—those long evening talks which I arranged apprehensively—leaped out like a white stone popping out of a clenched fist in the dark, shining for a second in the moonlight, only to hit the floor, showing how close all things are to the ground. The detail in question was the fact that the deaths had taken place on the night before Saturday, which was the day of the weekly visit of Uncle's friend, who certainly had no idea of the effect of his news on my aunt and thus might repeat it in front of her.

Now you may wonder: why, instead of killing the woman he faithfully loved, as well as himself, whom she faithfully loved, didn't Uncle

simply ask his friend to hold his tongue and forget the whole story regarding the publisher? The reason, I think, was that he had an overriding inner need for purity. And also perhaps he was afraid of how Aunt would be affected not so much by the news itself as by his own now listless, indifferent acceptance of that news—an acceptance he would be unable to conceal—and she would then have to realize something that hitherto even he had only begun to understand, something he might have been able to bear on his own: that their splendidly sacrificed life was a delusion.

By killing her before she came to realize this, by killing her while she was asleep, he could tell himself that he was finishing something she herself had bravely attempted to do fifteen years earlier, and that by connecting the two acts, hers and his own, into their final irreversible outcome, he was annulling that failure, that delusion shared between them, for which he himself bore the blame.

Translated by Christina Pribičević-Zorić

Milorad Pavić

Milorad Pavić (born in 1929 in Belgrade) is the best-known contemporary Serbian prose writer. Pavić is also a poet, as well as expert on the Serbian baroque and symbolist literature, theoretician, translator, university professor, and member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Pavić began his university career at the Sorbonne and the Jagić Institute for Slavic Philology in Vienna. He currently teaches at the University of Belgrade. Pavić first published his scholarly works and poetry, then moved to prose fiction. He has published ten studies in literary history, several books of poetry and four collections of short stories: *The Iron Curtain* (1973), *Saint Mark's Horses* (1976), *Borzoi* (1979), *New Belgrade Stories* (1981), and *The Inverted Glove* (1989); and five novels: *The Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984), *Landscape Painted with Tea* (1988), *The Inner Side of the Wind* (1991), *The Last Love in Constantinople* (1993), and *The Hat Made of Fish Skin* (1996). In 1993 Pavić published a play, *For Ever and a Day*, which appeared in English in 1997.

Pavić's works are greatly respected both at home and abroad. *Landscape Painted with Tea* was translated into eleven languages, and *Dictionary of the Khazars*, a best-seller in France and England and one of the year's seven best works of fiction in the United States in 1988, was translated into twenty-three. *The Inner Side of the Wind* was published in the United States and several European countries in 1993.

Pavić's prose is characterized by the increasing inclusion of the fantastic into the realistic narrative. This gives an impression of an inexhaustible text and it is highly regarded by writers of hyperfiction.

THE WEDGEWOOD TEASET

In the story you are about to read, the protagonists' names will be given at the end instead of the beginning.

At the capital's mathematics faculty, my younger brother, who was a student of philology and military science, introduced us to each other. Since she was searching for a companion with whom to prepare for Mathematics I, we began studying together, and as she did not come from another town as I did, we studied in her parents' big house. Quite early each morning, I passed by the shining Layland-Buffalo car, which belonged to her. In front of the door I would stoop down and look for a stone, put it in my pocket, ring the doorbell, and go upstairs. I carried no books, notebooks, or instruments; everything stayed at her place and was always ready for work. We studied from seven to nine, then we were served breakfast and would continue till ten; from ten to eleven we would usually go over the material already covered. All that time, I would be holding the stone in my hand. In case I should doze off, it would fall on the floor and wake me up before anyone noticed. After eleven she would continue to study, but not I. So we prepared for the mathematics exam every day except Sunday, when she studied alone. She very quickly realized that I could not keep up with her and that my knowledge lagged more and more behind hers. She thought that I went home to catch up on the lessons I had missed, but she never said a thing. "Let everyone like an earthworm eat his own way through," she thought, aware that by teaching another she wasn't teaching herself.

When the September term came, we agreed to meet on the day of the examination and take the exam together. Excited as she was, she didn't have time to be especially surprised that I didn't show up and that I did not take the exam, either. Only after she had passed the exam did she ask herself what had happened to me. But I didn't appear till winter. "Why should every bee gather honey, anyway?" she concluded, but still asked herself sometimes, "What's he up to? He is probably one of those smile-carriers, who buys his merchandise in the East, and sells it in the West, or vice versa . . ."

When Mathematics II was on the agenda, she suddenly met me one morning, noticing with interest the new patches on my elbows and the newly grown hair, which she had not seen before. It was again the same. Each morning I would come at a certain hour, and she would descend through the green and layered air, as if through water full of cool and warm currents, open the door for me, sleepy, but with that mirror-breaking look of hers. She would watch for one moment how I squeezed out my beard into the cap and how I took off my gloves. Bringing together the middle finger and the thumb, with a decisive gesture I would simultaneously turn them inside out, thus taking them both off with the same movement. When that was over, she would immediately go to work. She made up her mind to study with all her strength, which happened daily. With untiring will and regularity, she delved into all details of the subject, no matter if it was morning, when we started out fresh, after breakfast, or toward the end, when she worked a bit more slowly but not skipping a single thing. I would still quit at eleven, and she would soon notice again that I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing, that my looks grew old in an hour, and that I was behind her again. She would look at my feet, one of which was always ready to step out, while the other was completely still. Then they would change positions.

When the January term arrived, she had the feeling that I could not pass the exam, but she was silent, feeling a trifle guilty herself. "Anyway," she concluded, "should I kiss his elbow to make him learn? If he cuts bread on his head, that's his own affair . . ."

When I didn't show up then either, she was nevertheless surprised, and after finishing the exam looked for the list of candidates to check whether I was perhaps scheduled for the afternoon or some other day.

To her great surprise, my name wasn't on the list for that day at all—or any other day, for that matter. It was quite obvious: I hadn't even signed up for that term.

When we saw each other again in May, she was preparing Concrete. When she asked me if I was studying for the exams I had not taken before, I told her that I, too, was preparing Concrete, and we continued to study together as in the old times, as if nothing had happened. We spent the whole spring studying, and when the June term came, she had already realized that I would not appear this time, either, and that she wouldn't be seeing me till fall. She watched me pensively with beautiful eyes so far apart that there was space between them for an entire mouth. And naturally, things were the same once again. She took and passed the Concrete exam, and I didn't even bother to come. Returning home satisfied with her success, but totally puzzled as far as my position was concerned, she noticed that, in the hurry of the previous day, I had forgotten my notebooks. Among them she caught sight of my student's booklet. She opened it and discovered with astonishment that I was not a student of mathematics at all, but of something else, and that I had been passing my exams regularly. She recalled the interminable hours of our joint study, which for me must have been a great strain without purpose, a big waste of time, and she asked the inevitable question: what for? Why did I spend all that time with her studying subjects that had nothing to do with my interests and the exams that I had to pass? She started thinking and came to one conclusion: one should always be aware of what is passed over in silence. The reason for all that was not the exam but she herself. Who would have thought that I would be so shy and unable to express my feelings for her? She immediately went to the rented room where I lived with a couple of people my age from Asia and Africa, was surprised by the poverty she saw, and received the information that I had gone home. When they also gave her the address of a small town near Salonica, she took her Buffalo without hesitation and started off toward the Aegean coast in search of me, having made up her mind to act as if she had discovered nothing unusual. So it was.

She arrived at sunset and found the house she had been told about wide open, with a great white bull tied to a nail, upon which fresh bread was impaled. Inside she noticed a bed, on the wall an icon, below the

icon a red tassel, a pierced stone tied to a string, a top, a mirror, and an apple. A young naked person with long hair was lying on the bed, tanned by the sun, back turned to the window and resting on one elbow. The long ridge of the spine, which went all the way down the back and ended between the hips, curving slightly, vanished beneath a rough army blanket. She had the impression that the girl would turn any moment and that she would also see her breasts, deep, strong, and glowing in the warm evening. When that really took place, she saw that it was not a woman at all lying on the bed. Leaning on one arm I was chewing my moustache full of honey, which substituted for dinner. When she was noticed and brought into the house, she could still not help thinking of that first impression of finding a female person in my bed. But that impression, as well as the fatigue from a long drive, were soon forgotten. From a mirror-bottomed plate she received a double dinner: for herself and her soul in the mirror: some beans, a nut, and fish, and before the meal a small silver coin, which she held, as did I, under the tongue while eating. So one supper fed all four of us: the two of us and our two souls in the mirrors. After dinner she approached the icon and asked me what it represented.

“A television set,” I told her. In other words, it is the window to another world which uses mathematics quite different from yours.

“How so?” she asked.

“Quite simple,” I answered. “Machines, space crafts, and vehicles built on the basis of your quantitative mathematical evaluations are founded upon three elements, which are completely lacking in quantity. These are: singularity, the point, and the present moment. Only a sum of singularities constitutes a quantity; singularity itself is deprived of any quantitative measurement. As far as the point is concerned, since it doesn’t have a single dimension, not width or height or length or depth, it can undergo neither measurement nor computation. The smallest components of time, however, always have one common denominator: that is the present moment, and it, too, is devoid of quantity and is immeasurable. Thus, the basic elements of your quantitative science represent something to whose very nature every quantitative approach is alien. How then should I believe in such a science? Why are machines made according to these quantitative misconceptions of such a short lifespan, three, four or more times shorter than the human ones? Look, I also have a

white 'buffalo' like you. Only, he is made differently from yours, which was manufactured at Layland. Try him out and you will see that in a way he is better than the one you own."

"Is he tame?" she asked, smiling.

"Certainly," I answered. "Go ahead and try."

In front of the door she stroked the big white bull and slowly climbed onto his back. When I also mounted him, turning my back to the horns and facing her, I drove him by the sea, so that he had two feet in the water and the other two feet on the sand. She was surprised at first when I started to undress her. Piece by piece of her clothing fell into the water; then she started unbuttoning me. At one moment she stopped riding on the bull and started riding on me, feeling that I was growing heavier and heavier inside her. The bull beneath us did everything that we would otherwise have had to do ourselves, and she could tell no longer who was driving her pleasure, the bull or I. Sitting upon the double lover, she saw through the night how we passed by a forest of white cypresses, by people who were gathering dew and pierced stones on the seashore, by people who were building fires inside their own shadows and burning them up, by two women bleeding light, by a garden two hours long, where birds sang in the first hour and evening came in the second, where fruit bloomed in the first and there was a blizzard behind the winds. Then she felt that all the weight from me had passed into her and that the spurred bull had suddenly turned and taken her into the sea, leaving us finally to the waves that would separate us . . .

However, she never told me a word about her discovery. In the fall, when she was getting ready to graduate and when I offered to study with her again, she was not the least bit surprised. As before, we studied every day from seven until breakfast and then until half past ten; only now she did not try to help me master the subject I was doing and also stayed after ten-thirty for half an hour, which separated us from the books. When she graduated in September, she wasn't surprised at all when I didn't take the examination with her.

She was really surprised when she did not see me any more after that. Not that day, nor the following days, weeks, or examination terms. Never again. Astonished, she came to the conclusion that her assessment of my feelings for her was obviously wrong. Confused at not being able to tell what it was all about, she sat one morning in the same room in which we

had studied together for years; then she caught sight of the Wedgewood tea set, which had been on the table since breakfast. Then she realized. For months, day after day, with tremendous effort and an immeasurable loss of time and energy, I had worked with her only in order to get a warm breakfast every morning, the only meal I was able to eat during those years. Having realized that, she asked herself another thing. Was it possible that in fact I hated her?

At the end, there is one more obligation left: to name the protagonists of this story. If the reader has not thought of it already, here is the answer. My name is the Balkans. Hers, Europe.

Translated by Darka Topali