

**A BLOODY DEFENDER OF CULTURE OR  
MULTICULTURALITY REVISITED IN SLOBODAN SELENIĆ'S  
*FRIENDS FROM KOSANČIĆEV VENAC 7***

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**Abstract.** *The most recent phenomenon of intensive and extensive cultural studies seems to have passed by Serbia leaving it undisturbed in its own cultural preconceptions, stereotypes and social prejudice. Yet, sooner or later, even the Serbian scientists would have to face the consequence of such a harmful delay in accepting cultural studies, especially at the academic level. This paper is an attempt to start talking about the topics that are now on the agenda of the cultural studies at every serious academia including the issue of national identity, gender and sexuality, history and social fiction, etc. In the presented analysis of Slobodan Selenić's novel, the focus is on the failure to establish proper bicultural contacts within the post-second World War Yugoslav (Serbian) framework between the members of two historically quite antagonistic ethnicities, Serbian and Kosovo Albanian. In the complex mélange of the presumed "reality", history, myth and fantasy, their relationship, instead of leading towards a creative and fruitful merging, leads to pathology, sickness and ultimate (self)destruction.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Any novel dealing with Serbian and (Kosovo) Albanian relations (in further text, S-KA relations), including Slobodan Selenić's *Friends from Kosančićev venac 7*, whatever aspect it may concentrate on, is more than intriguing in view of the tension-imbued relationships between the two nations throughout the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. At the times when there was no open conflict, this topic, at least in Serbia, was passed over in silence. If anything was talked about at all, it was done in whispers; if not in whispers, then in shouts, with threatening and violent overtones. There is no reason to doubt that something similar happened among the Kosovo Albanians. Therefore, apart from the novel itself and its presumed merits, the very fact that any writer, let him be a Serbian one for that matter, dared to offer to the former Yugoslav reading public - on the

eve of the terrible wars that would bring about the collapse of the country and, among other things, further worsening of the Serbian - Kosovo Albanian relations,<sup>1</sup> a novel about a friendship between the members of the two nations - had to be aware that his narrative would be taken for more than it is. And, consequently, he was to expect that, after the first shock, his work would be either remembered or pushed aside and forgotten. Or, simply, passed over in silence - like so many other things referring to Serbs and Kosovo Albanians.

The story told in Selenić's novel is even more provoking when it comes to the nature of the S-KA relations. Namely, the plot evokes the pattern of a typical love (friendship) story with homosexual implications which is another "taboo" in both the Serbian and the (Kosovo) Albanian societies in view of the patriarchal character of the former or, as Selenić suggests, the "tribal" character of the latter. Even now, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, homosexuality is still an unwelcome topic in Serbia (of the same "either whisper or shout" type). All in all, to discuss Serbian and Kosovo Albanian in terms of presumed homosexuality is more than daring. Yet, the novel is still here, by now partly forgotten, patiently waiting to be taken seriously and analyzed in all its aspects, not just the one proposed here. Its "re-visitation" would then, among other things, confirm a new moment in the history of the S-KA relations, namely, a new era of a much-needed, more sober and unbiased analysis of the cultural products influencing the relationships between the two nations. This paper, therefore, just attempts to announce its inevitable slow-but-sure coming by discussing some of the cultural relations implied in Selenić's novel.

## 2. THE STORY

The story takes place in the relatively recent Belgrade setting with several flashbacks, the central one dealing with post-Second World War Belgrade and the emergence of Tito's communist multiethnic Yugoslavia. In the form of the third-person (omniscient) or in the first-person (epistolary) narration, the "master narrative strategist" retells the story of a very young Albanian boy named Istref who escapes the horrors of the blood feud in the region of Bregovi in Kosovo by coming to Belgrade where, again, he escapes the homosexual approaches by his fellow countryman by coming to live with a member of the prewar Belgrade upper class society, Vladan Hadžislavković in his family home at Kosančićev venac 7, in the very center of Belgrade. Unsure of the motives of Vladan's hospitality that again takes on homosexual overtones, Istref feels the same "fear and anxiety" as in Kosovo until he finds a suitable shelter in the newly-created Yugoslav community under Vladan's roof (housing, as many rich people's places have done after the communist upheaval, newcomers from all over former Yugoslavia, thus symbolically turning the place into a Babylonian tower of languages and cultures). Istref starts a serious sexual relationship with a woman of Serbian origin (Mara) and at the moment when we meet him for the first time, in the opening pages, he is married to her, a happy grandfather/patriarch of a big family and a distinguished member of the National Assembly, all in all, a successful member of the communist Belgrade community. Vladan, on the other hand, disgusted with the idea of Istref's finding his place in the new and, as he perceives it, barbarous and primitive society, commits a really nasty thing by symbolically killing

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations taken from Slobodan Selenić, *Prijatelji sa Kosančićevog venca 7* (*Friends from Kosančićev venac 7*), Prosveta, Belgrade, 1986; an earlier version entitled *Prijatelji* published in 1980 by the same publisher

the pigs that his co-habitants brought to live in the backyard of his family home and this with the sword evoking the past heroic and glorious times of his family. After this, he runs away or, symbolically, disappears together with his house, leaving only the manuscript of his memoirs to Istref, who tries, unsuccessfully, to find the house again and re-interpret his ambivalent and obscure feelings towards it but he fails in both these attempts.

### 3. THE STORY AS PLOTTED

As plotted, the story in Selenić's novel has several patterns overlapping and, therefore, it can be interpreted in many ways. Here, however, in view of the basic opposition set up in the novel, namely, that between the past or presumably "high" culture and the oncoming or presumably "mass and primitive" culture, the most prominent plots that can be discerned in the novel are:

- the above-mentioned pattern of an unhappy love (friendship) affair with initial sympathies leading to a climax which soon turns into its opposite, a quarrel ending in the two friends' parting; symbolically, the cultural aspirations and differences among the lovers (friends), among other things, prevent any lasting affection or full-fledged relationship,

- the ring-like plot pattern in which the central place is taken by the main or inserted love (friendship) story mostly given in the form of the received manuscript/memoirs. The enclosing or peripheral story serves to stress the distance/detachment between the two main protagonists; therefore, Istref's reading of the memoirs is a form of silent dialogue taking place, as expected, of the real dialogue between the two protagonists or respective cultures, and,

- the most provoking initiation pattern with the young Albanian, Istref, undergoing certain experiences until his final integration into the community. This pattern also introduces the convention of "two Istrefs" or the older self recalling the life of the younger (though this, by no means, exhausts the other "Istrefs" in the novel such as the younger as seen by Vladan, the younger as seen by the omniscient narrator, etc.) and retelling it for us (and this mainly because the manuscript story is told by a highly unreliable 1<sup>st</sup> person narrator).

However, in the last structure mentioned on the above list, the initiation one, a quite serious problem arises. Namely, regardless of his final integration into the community, Istref does not seem to have reached maturity in the sense of gaining full understanding of the things that have happened to him. Though born as an extraordinarily clever child, as judged by his Albanian community, he is culturally lagging behind, unable to *read* other cultures including the target (Serbian) one; moreover, he is portrayed as emotionally inarticulate in the end as he was in the beginning, that is, as the same confused and not fully conscious being, as the narrator suggests (202), unable to fully grasp the meaning of his life experience.<sup>2</sup> This, on one hand, makes his initiation into community a rather completed task while, at the same time, it is a mock initiation since he fails to reach sufficient wisdom to understand the meaning of the process he has been through.

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<sup>2</sup> This, for instance, explains - no matter how awkwardly and vaguely - Istref's acceptance of the communist ideology. If Istref's case is taken to refer to a larger community, then it can be interpreted as standing for Selenić's view of the success of communism in former Yugoslavia. This, of course, deserves more space and, after all, more papers and discussions.

Several explanations can be offered for this, including the existentialist one, namely, that none of us is ever able to judge our experience fully. Following, however, one line of thinking presented in the novel that refers mainly to the cultural aspect of the novel, Istref is unable to comprehend his experience since his native culture has not equipped him with the means of recognizing and articulating his feelings in any other way but his own native. This is, of course, of no help in a new cultural ambiance since, as Istref suggests, cultures exist independently of each other and the knowledge of one does not help the understanding of another.

How does this view of culture, then, help when it comes to the Balkans where there are so many cultures present? And, how can a presumably independent culture exist when, to make things even more complicated, the times are so turbulent (as they were in the post-Second World War Yugoslavia/Serbia) that the cultures cannot stay distant and detached but are instead forced to face each other and mingle?

To illustrate this picturesquely, Selenić, at the very beginning of the novel, gives a portrait of the young Istref as a postwar Balkan hybrid, that is, as a Kosovo Albanian standing in the center of the Serbian capital, Belgrade, dressed in an old worn-out English coat with a Russian cap on his head.

This very tableau opens up a whole set of questions: What community does he belong to? What is he an icon of? What does his clothing *mélange* symbolize? A true mixture, a cultural melting pot? Or a travesty of one? A bizarre outcome of the bizarre Balkan history? A perfect specimen of the Balkan survivalist strategy? An instance of cultural criticism (the Balkans as a patchwork of scraps and leftovers from other cultures)? A sad relic of the sad Balkan fate?

In order to find answers to at least some of the above questions we must turn to the variety of cultures as described in Selenić's novel in order to test the above-mentioned thesis about the impossibility of cross-cultural communication or transfer of one set of values, knowledge and ideas to another at least within the given fictional microcosm.

Very suitably and very much in accordance with the cultural views propagated by the two main protagonists, Istref and Vladan, the latter also acting like the master of the ceremony of Istref's initiation, some of the more significant among the cultures mentioned in the novel are symbolically called "kingdoms."

#### 4. "KINGDOMS" - REAL AND GHOST CULTURES

One tentative division seems indispensable now: in order to sort things out, it would be easier to divide the communities referred to in the novel in two large entities: namely, the real and the ghost ones.

More precisely, some communities in the novel are mainly described in the form of the settings within which certain events take place where others, more numerous than mentioned in this paper, are just alluded to (more or less frequently). Though all of them have symbolical implications, regarding the functions they fulfill in the novel, the first ones are more story-oriented, described as appropriate settings and termed here as "real" while the other ones tend to expand the meaning of the novel and function more as "rhetorical commentaries". Because the latter ones are in themselves fictions, evoked by the authorial witchcraft every time when needed, they are referred to as "ghost cultures".

Yet, it is necessary to note here that this is just a tentative division since, regarding the novel on the whole, it can be seen that the "real" ones more tend to magic, myth, illusion and fantasy while the "ghost" ones are appreciated for their "factual" basis, namely, for the fact that their history is preserved in writing which is in itself a guarantee of their realism in comparison with the fictional and oral legacy of the "real" Balkans, including the Serbian one.

Nevertheless, within the context of the novel, it can clearly be seen that references to various cultures such as English, Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian or past Serbian, exist more as rhetorical/authorial commentaries on the developments in the novel than as ambiance-forming settings themselves.

### 5. AN ARCADIAN GHOST

The cultural framework of the novel can be suitably represented linearly with two most distant and extremely different environments forming the boundaries within which everything else happens, *i. e.*, the English and the Kosovo Albanian (Bregovi) one. In-between are all the others mentioned; yet, these two dominate since the two main heroes stand for them, that is, for the two cultures described in the novel as absolutely unlike.

Most notably, it is the presumed English 17<sup>th</sup> century society, which is taken by Vladan as the "ideal" cultural model to which all others should aspire. Namely, "since," Vladan writes, "nothing so harmonious and beautiful as the home of a modest and enlightened English landlord of the seventeenth century (who lived up to be killed on the very doorstep of his own home or to be expelled from it) did the English people of the great past and future ever make! The home filled with music (...), the home resounding at the same time with noble and joyful laughter, with wise Greek thoughts and cute Shakespeare's lines, in which the dwellers perform Inigo Jones' masks and violin concerts..."<sup>3</sup> and so on and on. This ideal "home" taken as a standard can be used as a means of comparing and contrasting other "homes" in the novel including Vladan's own, *i. e.*, Hadžislavković's house at Kosančićev venac 7, a desolate dwelling of a desolate woman, Vladan's mother, victimized by the Serbian machismo, a woman whose sorrow breeds an Oedipal complex in her son thus leading him, as the story suggests, to homosexuality. Further on the scale follow other homes, such as Aunt Lepša's, the Bregovi, etc.

Therefore, the standard is set and Vladan cherishes this ideal. He tries to live up to his English "ghost" entirely incompatible to the more "real" Yugoslav or Serbian or even Kosovo Albanian society sharing no such high aspirations. The symbolical battlefield is his house. And the most immediate cause of the clash between the "ghost" and the "real" cultures is the Balkan Helen of Troy, Istref from Kosovo.

### 6. ENGLISH SKELETONS IN SERBIAN CUPBOARDS

Vladan's family home has a long and turbulent history filled with unexpected turns of fortune, myths and legends. It is typical of the Balkans: it has undergone damages and alterations, repairs and reconstruction due to global social changes. At one point, for instance, it functions as "the bridge on the Drina", namely, it is supposed to set up the

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bridge between the East and the West, that is, to enrich the Turkish architectural legacy with the most recent European achievements. At some other time, it is supposed to serve as a Yugoslavia in small, that is, a common house for South Slavs vividly described as provincial, greedy social climbers, Tito's followers, coming from all regions of the former Yugoslavia, and turning it into a noisy and (admittedly) quite vulgar dormitory. Or, again, it is put under the protection of the state as a national monument symbolizing the past times or, *i. e.*, a collage made up of the fragments of collective memories, fictions and fantasies.

Yet, the ghosts residing in the cupboards of the house (including a dream-like vision of his father) are not only the Balkan ones. Some of them are imported from abroad, rather, from the West, and they set up the standard of the "high culture" that Vladan aspires to, that determines his way of life and his attitude to others, most delicately, to Istref as his "obscure object of desire."

The "high culture" standard is, more precisely, imported from Oxford where Vladan did his studies, acquired much of his erudition and sophistication, including his manner of speech (interspersed with English idioms, phrases, sayings and even "American slogans in the Turkish Belgrade") (59). Living most of the time inside his isolated kingdom, that is, his family home, he cuts off all his connections with relatives and friends except with Aunt Lepša, also extraordinary in her "witchcraft" or an imaginative attitude to people and history. Besides, always dressed up as an English dandy, he introduces English habits such as breakfasting in bed or tea drinking or using perfumes. At one point, disgusted with the newly emerging mass culture of Tito's Yugoslavia, in order to dissociate from what he perceives as a culturally deteriorating milieu, he quits his job in a Serbian company and starts working in the British Council.

Moreover, Vladan reads his times as reiteration of the English civil war historical pattern identifying himself with Rupert, the commander of the defeated Royalist army of Charles I Stuart, the alleged defender of the code of chivalry and the keeper of the presumed mythical "golden England", the land of elegance, taste and grace.

The situation becomes even more serious during the slow invasion of Vladan's house by those who he compares with the Cromwellian Roundheads, the ideologically-fueled soldiers who, under the religious pretense, destroyed the glorious English monarchy in order to replace it with the primitive and barbarous, anti-culture, anti-arts Republic of common wealth (while, at the same time, in their hypocrisy, they became "more royalists than royalists" in the attempts to win over for themselves the whole legacy of the defeated).

Vladan, locked up in an imaginary world of noble ideals, chivalrous knights and heroic defenders of high culture, turns into an outsider to the rest of the society. His immediate Balkan surroundings including Serbia at large are cut off.<sup>4</sup> His latent homosexuality increases this feeling of isolation from the still patriarchal Belgrade community rigorously clinging to its old ways. As an outsider, a dreamer or a self-proclaimed protector of the ghost/ideal culture, he gets an opportunity to prove his own resoluteness to defend his ideals when he sees (and presumably falls in love with) the young Istref. Again, in his myth-making psyche, the Albanian is immediately projected as a symbol of the innocent

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<sup>4</sup> At one point, he expresses his disgust with the newcomers from other parts of Serbia who are also seen as primitive and provincial and whose dialects, among other things, set them apart from the "noble" upper class Belgrade community

and ignorant or "noble savage" worthy to be saved for higher cultural ideals. This attempt turns Vladan into an even greater outsider than before: the conservative Belgrade society cannot accept an Albanian as a guest at its patron saints' celebrations in one of the most hilarious episodes of the novel which is also one of the most effective and pungent critiques of the Serbian society. In some other, not so hilarious episodes, the former Oxford student is more and more pathologically disgusted with the Babylonish Yugoslav community that penetrates his family home. Quite an opposite feeling he cherishes for the one who is *invited* to penetrate it, Istref, a newcomer from the region of Bregovi.

## 7. KINGDOM OF STONES

While Vladan's psyche is troubled with the ghosts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century England, that of the other outsider to the Belgrade society, Istref's, is overshadowed by the legacy of the native Kosovo Albanian culture.<sup>5</sup>

That Istref is an outsider in Belgrade is not extraordinary in any way considering the way in which his native Bregovi community is described. Namely, the Bregovi culture is introduced by an authoritative and unquestionable voice of the third-person narrator, an erudite who has spent a lot of time studying ethnography, anthropology, all sorts of books describing the Albanian way of life in addition to the Islam holy books, etc. Because of so much accumulated knowledge, given in the form of "factual, objective" scientific discourse, the Bregovi culture appears to be "real" though the lack of a more detailed in-depth analysis evidently testifies the lack of a more intimate knowledge of it. "Real" in this way and more ghostly than any other in the novel, the society as described here is a strictly controlled community with threatening tribal laws that occasionally bring about bloodshed thus further spreading "fear and anxiety", two feelings that Istref cannot escape despite the fact that, whatever his native culture appears to be like, it still equipped him with exquisite knowledge of tribal and Islam wisdom (especially music, poetry, etc).

Is Istref, then, well equipped for *his rite de passage*, initiation into community?

Apparently, he is not.

At the beginning of his Belgrade Odyssey, described as an archetypal, stereotypical Kosovo Albanian of the times, with a white round cap (*keče*) on his head and a small axe in his hand, Istref presents his view of the two cultures, the native and the adopted one. Namely, in his cosmogony, mankind is divided into two kingdoms that know nothing of each other and "in which, alternatively, one is not familiar with the existence of the other." These two kingdoms are defined as larger than ethnicities; they are more cultural, like the kingdom of stone *versus* the kingdom of the houses, or the kingdom of the groups of shepherds dressed in white and of the people-ants crawling in the street. Or, illustratively, as eagles *versus* streetcars. Or, easy killing *versus* long dying... It is impossible, claims Istref, for one kingdom to penetrate the other just like "the wolves, or the snowstorms" cannot penetrate "the dry and spacious rooms of the kingdom of honey-bees" in

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<sup>5</sup> The Soviet (Russian) influence is pointed out several times in the novel, especially when it comes to communist ascetic dogma. However, there are no firmer proofs that it is a consciously chosen target culture as in Vladan's case. Istref's turning into a communist is more unconscious than conscious, as made clear from the beginning, as said above, he is still unable to understand the meaning of his experience fully. To conclude, it seems that Istref's choices are more deterministic, that is, naturalistic, since ruled by the tribal collective codes and accidents, than Vladan's who is represented as a self-willed, active and not only conscious but far-seeing and over-sensitive scholar as befits the one who is to stand for the high culture aspect of the novel.

any possible way. *Neither by tricks nor by force.*<sup>6</sup> The reason for this is that these two kingdoms are separated by the river deep as an ocean whose water, like the one in the rivers from the kingdom of death, brings about complete obliteration of the past life. Istref, by coming to Belgrade, feels to be "a great outcast with whom the recording of time started, a skillful swimmer careful enough not to taste a single droplet of water. Yet, despite his precaution, what he learns is that nothing can be transferred from one kingdom to another, that there is no mixing, no knowledge acquired in the mountain region that could be put into use in the new one" (20) since things do not have the same meanings. If the two kingdoms reflected one another, they would "become incomprehensible. And their comparison is blasphemy." (23)

Blasphemous is, then, Vladan's transgression of the dividing line. If not blasphemous, then, it is at least suspicious. But, whatever his motives, it is due to his violating the borders of the strictly separated kingdoms and pushing Istref up the social scale that the latter manages to reach the highest social level. Or, more precisely, his life story leads from:

- the underground cellar or the "independent Albanian kingdom" in Belgrade or the society with its own practices and rules, utterly separated from its surroundings, like "Monaco in France,"

- *via* the garden "behind Mrs. Lepša's house" which is a possible meeting place between the Albanians and the Serbs being outside the house yet close to it, as well as,

- *via* Mrs. Lepša's "summer kitchen" as a place which is a part of the household but not inside the main building meaning that an Albanian can be freely let to live in it as a house servant,

- to the final (inserted story) destination, Vladan's family home or the symbolic "navel" of the Belgrade society.

These four stages sum up Istref's penetration into the society while, many years after the main or inserted story is over, we find him at an even higher place, on the ninth floor of a Belgrade skyscraper. Yet, the first four-stage period of his maturation is far more crucial to the story.

## 8. IN THE KINGDOM OF HOUSES

As we have said, Vladan's family home that Istref enters is a hybrid of many cultures but it is also, deliberately and wishfully, an imaginary Crusoe's island where a young "Friday" or a "wild pony" ("*divlje konjče*") is invited to share the dream of high cultural achievements. These achievements do not, by any means, exclude the Bregovi legacy. On the contrary, some decorative and picturesque ethnic emblems are invited to join in the dream such as Albanian poetry, or *zurle* (bagpipes) or Albanian peasant slippers (socks with hard soles). However, the "high culture" invitation is suspicious because of the possible homosexuality that lurks behind it like a trap in which no outside world would be allowed to enter. Even more frightening than the physical contact itself, this possibility of spending the life in a ghost world of Vladan's obsessed fantasy scares Istref to further maturation, distancing and final release from Vladan.

More precisely, at first, Istref, in many ways, triggers off the "noble savage" pattern. He is ignorant or, rather, he possesses the knowledge that cannot be of much use to him

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<sup>6</sup> Underlined by the paper's author



in Vladan's kingdom of houses. Or, due to his view of his own cultural upbringing, he is too strained to give himself up to the new culture. For instance, at one point, Istref desperately tries to understand Vladan's gestures in order to be able to react to the already suspected manipulation but "all the attempts to find in his or Pavka's kingdoms the situations similar to those described by Vladan have hopelessly failed."<sup>7</sup> (144) Intimidated, confused and unsure - of himself and others - Istref is received by "king" Vladan dressed in yellow silk and sitting on the symbolic sofa or "throne". Enough to make Istref feel like "a subject" of the "kingdom at Kosančićev venac." (98) Gradually, he perceives that the motive behind Vladan's attempts is even more demanding than just sexual; it is patronizing and colonizing in its intent: allegedly to educate him, to enlighten him, to elevate him, Vladan does everything in order to possess and control his thoughts and feelings, that is, to subdue, rule and manipulate him into accepting the master-slave relation (indicating the imperialist-colonial model of the Crusoe-Friday type).

Therefore, under the false pretense of being Istref's Lord Protector from the outside world and the oncoming barbarity of mass culture, Vladan imposes himself on Istref, threatens him and, finally, violently attacks him. In that sense, even his adoption of some Albanian ways is no more than a mockery of the idea of multiculturalism for the sake of locking up others in the ghost imperialist-colonial relation.

#### 9. HAMLET, QUENTIN AND VLADAN

As Vladan's obsessive fantasy turns into pathological sickness, Istref turns into his protector more and more before the new social forces that invade his house.

The newcomers, however, appear to be really lacking everything that the English dream-culture stood for. For Vladan, they are a bunch of noisy primitives, false heroes, spies and prostitutes. Yet, as Vladan sees it, as their social penetration or their ideological-tribal primitivism require, they seem to be ego-less (unlike Vladan, always "self-obsessed") and collective-orientated, able to create a community spirit on the basis of the shared system of values or ideology<sup>8</sup> and exhibit the life force that sweeps everything before them (as symbolically illustrated in their invasion of Vladan's house). An expression of that life force is Mara, the Serbian *femme fatale*, that charms Istref into a sexual relationship leading to marriage. This is the culminating point: Istref has passed through a series of ordeals, most of all, a crucial relationship with the latently homosexual Vladan before discovering his congenial community, his congenial new culture and his true sexuality. In this sense, his initiation is completed.

However, there is always Vladan's manuscript to reveal the other side of the story: in his opinion, Istref might have avoided the trap of colonization but he has not avoided another trap, that of falling into "organic certainty of fate" symbolically represented by Mara turning him into a follower of the new ideology of mass (primitive) culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Pavka, hero of Ostrovsky's novel, *How the Steel Was Tempered*

<sup>8</sup> Or, as it is said at some other place, concerning another nation, it happened that the newly created society "made the conscious decision to supersede nationalism by ideology" (Harvie, Christopher, ed., *Scotland and Nationalism. Scottish Society and Politics, 1707 to the Present*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, p. 11) Moreover, generally speaking, it seems that the opposition between nationalist and, in this case, communist ideologies characterized the fate of former Yugoslav countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This new culture, apart from its ideological contents, offers to Istref many advantages that have been denied to him either by Vladan's world or by the Bregovi community: the possibility of dialogue, of participation, of sexual liberalism, etc. This he accepts instinctively; thus, the communist ideology seems to make up for the shortcomings of Vladan's one. It fits in where the pre-war one has failed, namely, it wins over the weird, sick obsession with the past... and the communist hero, Istref, is born. Under the comfortable shelter of ideology, Istref finds the liberation from fear, suspicion, anxiety, subordination, ignorance as well as ghastly history, myths, the burden that, not only Serbian, but every presumably high culture carries with it together with its allegedly high achievements. By symbolically rejecting Vladan's world of perfumes, Istref rejects its seductive hypocrisy, its secret plot to possess, subdue, use and abuse.

What Istref experiences as a sense of equality, camaraderie, etc., Vladan perceives as a "relapse into barbarity." Evoking the tradition of the great cultural heroes or defenders, from Hamlet to Faulkner's Quentin Compson, in his violent, pathological and grotesque Balkan version, he sets out to revenge on the "barbarians" for, most of all, stealing Istref from him, that is, stealing from him the cultural ghosts standing for social fictions such as a code of chivalry or pastoral innocence or a noble savage that appears, as Vladan supposes, under the disguise of the different "other."

#### 10. A BLOODY AVENGER

Istref finds a place for himself in the new Yugoslav/Serbian society that, under an all-comprising ideological roof, offers a form of multiculturalism based on a shared set of values transgressing the particular, the individual and the ethnic. He has passed a long way from the days when he was dressed in rags, that is, leftovers from the high culture that Vladan's social circle or pre-communist Serbia aspired to. Now his ideological uniform makes all the leftovers disappear, including the house itself - the Balkan variety is replaced by the Balkan ideological uniformity but, as we now know, not for good.

Yet, Istref, finally *podoban* (which is a Serbian communist-ideological term for someone who is seen as "fit" or confirmed of being at one with the dominant ideology) and integrated into the "barbarian" community, still reads Vladan's manuscript, meaning he continues an indirect dialogue with the advocate of the ideal ghosts, especially when it comes to the theory of culture.

In his memoirs, Vladan first objects to, as he claims, Spengler's thesis about the unique distinctiveness of every culture, the impossibility of cultural mixtures and the "magnificent Spengler's Babylonian tower in which every culture remains consistently closed within itself and alone in his birth, life and death, useless for any other, asynchronous with it in time and separated from it by the Chinese wall." Quite the opposite, "the memories of universal humanity living at Kosančićev venac," he claims, have convinced him that "the Aristotle of the classical, the Aristotle of the Muslim and the Aristotle of the Western culture are three thoughts of the same biological structure, only at a different level of evolution." (201) Even more, Vladan believes in "the unique, cosmic civilization of a fatally imperfect man. Let it be true that you are gathered together, feeling like brothers around Mirčetić's hearth in the same conquered Milić's house or even brought together from the three sides and from the three cultures; yet, what I found out on this soiree, suddenly, with a terrifying explosion of the new truth, was that you were mu-

tually very close, in the same way as Mohammed and Cromwell, Plato and Goethe are contemporaries, just like stoicism and socialism are two congenial, brotherly close thoughts. The pretentious mankind boringly plays games with a few imperfect ideas convinced that it has changed the world while it has merely changed the name of an old human phenomenon. Only one way does this nervous and still unconscious being know of: a laborious and long rise from commonness to (indeed very low) ache of human potential followed by a relapse, at the neck-breaking speed and revolutionary, into the initial stage" (202).

To counteract the relapse, Vladan engages himself into the Shawian Pygmalion myth. His complex attitude to Istref, combining (homosexual) love as well as the impulses to protect, colonize or reform failed defeated by new "barbarians", by a new sense of shared communal values, by a woman or sexual fulfillment as an "organic certainty of fate," by the new faith and ideology, by pragmatic self-saving instincts. Failing in all his attempts, Vladan sees the dawn of the new epoch as another instance of man's blind faith in progress, in a saving yet illusory and devastating ideology - "a few imperfect ideas." There is no suspicion left, mourns Vladan over the dead Hamlet, yet suspicion in this new faith is necessary since it leads to the knowledge so that the man can be, by his dignified and conscious choice, only a hero or a saint. To be in-between means to enter the world of everyday, of common, of trivial - of all "that is common in nature and in fate, in the organic and the historic"- and that, as Vladan feels, finally separated Istref from him. For Vladan, just like for Quentin Compson, it is "either-or": in the same way Quentin, after failing his attempt to "protect" his sister from what he perceives as the new barbarous, pragmatic and materialist society of modern age, commits suicide. For Istref, what Vladan and Quentin despise is real, fruitful and life giving.

To revenge, Vladan turns into a murderer. Following the analogy with Aristotle, the murder is always the same and it only differs regarding a respective stage of evolution. In Vladan's case, his crime is a "high-culture murder" since he feels he belongs to the "the high cultural world" of his dreams, myths and historical fantasies. What he fails to see is that he, by deciding to kill, has repeated the fate of his historical obsession, Oliver Cromwell. Attacking the primitive in the most primitive way, he himself becomes the greatest barbarian of all, covered with blood with his ancestors' sword in the revengeful hand.

Thus ends the saga of the attempted saintliness or heroism turning into pathology and bloody swine-slaughter as the intended punishment for the frustrated fantasies of heroism, glory and high achievements. An ideal English cultural landscape, a presumed - as a rule - royalist high culture, a desire to adopt the presumed ideal cultural habits, a dream of chivalry, a latent homosexuality as a symbol of achieving more than just a physical union and preserving the romantic aura of the spiritual union, a pretentious desire to protect, manipulate and subdue other cultures understood as social fictions about the "wild", "innocent" or "noble savages", a colonizing spirit, a reforming zeal... all these things upset the relationship between a Kosovo Albanian and a Serbian Anglophile living for a while under the same roof. Istref's pragmatism has found a more congenial culture to his native one while Vladan, in his devotion to the assumed code of chivalry, turns into a bloodthirsty cultural vigilante, the cultural defender or cultural policeman of the world. His "pig-genocide" symbolically implies the murder of the community he could not dominate over or belong to. But, by killing it, he also kills a part of himself that he has wanted to suppress so much in order to live up to his "golden age" ideals. Including his

oedipal complex. Including his latent homosexuality with its accompanying aversion to women and machismo.

What won the day, after all, was the "common" option that he feared so much, namely, the everyday, the common, the apparently trivial that gathered people together and that might have repaired the damages done by the aspiring, pretentious, solipsistic cultural crusaders.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Selenić's novel is a provoking saga about the birth of communism and the decay of its troublesome cultural precursor. Yet, it is also a story about different cultural theories and approaches culminating in a conflict that would signal the birth of mass popular culture and the defeat of its highly aspiring and the ghost-like haunting opposition. Within this context, a central place is taken by the story about the SK-A relations, though described and interpreted very symbolically.

Namely, the novel does not give an all-inclusive or even realistic view of the S-KA relations. It refers to a specific place and time, in a highly symbolic way, since the given setting and ambiance of the great social upheaval brought about by the war and revolution represent, in their own right, a quite provoking impetus for respective ideas about cultures, their relations and mixtures. It is not just a simple thesis that "an Albanian and a Serbian relation should survive so long as it is biologically and historically appropriate" that seems to follow from Selenić's narrative; far more than that, the biological and the historical are seen as subordinate to the cultural with its highly influential set of presumptions, fantasies and myths, cherished by more powerful forces than simple "witchcraft" (otherwise, seen as much healthier and far more centripetal in its comprehensive embrace of all, living and dead, past and present, good and evil, etc.) such as education, social pretensions and pressures, class divisions, arts, etc. What Selenić's novel makes far more important than just a story about the almost "taboo" topic in former Yugoslavia and especially Serbia is its insistence on culture and its importance for shaping and reshaping human relationships. Published at the times when cultural studies did not have the prominent place they would hopefully gain in Serbia, the novel might have had a more profound message for the soon-at-war nations of former Yugoslavia concerning their cultural policies. Obviously, it did not. But it is never too late and even today it does nothing less than demand our active and full-fledged engagement in the field of cultural studies. Most of all, when it comes to the so far not sufficiently explored Serbian and Albanian cultures.

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**KRVAVI OSVETNIK KULTURE ILI POKUŠAJ  
INTERKULTURALIZMA U ROMANU  
PRIJATELJI SA KOSANČIĆEVOG VENCA 7  
SLOBODANA SELENIĆA**

**Dragana R. Mašović**

*Najnoviji fenomen sveobuhvatnih i intenzivnih studija kulture kao da je mimoišao Srbiju, ostavljajući je neuznemirenu u njenim kulturnim predubeđenjima, stereotipijama i socijalnim predrasudama. Ipak, pre ili kasnije, čak i srpski naučnici moraće da se suoče sa posledicama tako štetnog oklevanja u prihvatanju studija kulture, posebno na akademskom nivou. Ovaj rad je pokušaj da se progovori o temama koje su na dnevnom redu studija kulture svake ozbiljnije akademske institucije uključujući koncepte nacionalnog identiteta, roda i seksualnosti, istorije i socijalne fikcije, itd. U datoj analizi Selenićevog romana, fokus je na neuspehu uspostavljanja primerenih bikulturalnih kontakata unutar okvira posleratnog jugoslovenskog (srpskog) društva i to među pripadnicima dva istorijski prilično antagonistička naroda, srpskog i (Kosovsko)albanskog. U složenoj mešavini pretpostavljene stvarnosti, istorije, mita i fantazije, njihov odnos, umesto da vodi ka kreativnom i plodnom spoju, vodi u patologiju, bolest i (samo)uništenje*