

Representation of Children in the Works of Dragoslav Mihailović

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In Western European literatures, the appearance of the child as a major theme was closely related to the evolution of a sensibility that came to be known as the “romantic revival.”¹ The peace that marked the second half of the eighteenth century dissolved in the era of the French and the Industrial Revolutions. In the new society, created by industrial developments, artists were faced with complex problems. The literate public began to diminish and with it the impact literature had on public affairs. In a climate of isolation and doubt, the writers saw the child as a symbol of imagination and sensibility, through which they could express their dissatisfaction with society.

This spiritual crisis that Western Europe experienced at the end of the eighteenth century had an entirely different character among the Serbs. Under Ottoman domination for centuries, the Serbs expressed this sensibility primarily through poetry and works of fiction that dealt with liberation and unification. The creation of a “romantic child” was distant from the preoccupations of the Serbian writers.

After a disastrous hiatus of several centuries, during which the creative spirit of the Serbs lay dormant, the written Serbian literature lagged behind the literatures of Western Europe. Even after the Serbs achieved partial liberation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the interest in the child was largely absent from the literature written for adults.

The poets Branko Radičević (1824–1853) and Jovan Jovanović Zmaj (1833–1904) are notable exceptions. One of the most prominent poets of the second half of the nineteenth century, Zmaj began his career writing patriotic and love poetry. After the loss of his own children, Zmaj dedicated his life to young people and their interests, and he remains best-known today as a children’s poet. In his collection of poems entitled *Čika Jova srpskoj deci* (Uncle Jova to Serbian Children, 1899), Zmaj showed extraordinary empathy for children and was able to directly communicate his poetic messages using the language they understood. Before Zmaj, the child was only a subsidiary element in the adult world, not an important theme in literature.

¹ Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 29.

We have only had representations of children in Serbian literature since the rise of realism and advent of the tradition of the short story based upon village life. However, the child living in a strict patriarchal moral society, accustomed to listening and not to talking, remains a pale character. Literature talks more to the child than about the child. Throughout this time, not much attention is paid to the representation of the child's voice in adult literature in Serbia. The consciousness of the child is glossed over and the child is not the focus of literary interest.

The interest in constructing childhood consciousness in general is a product of the twentieth century and of its interest in psychological development. The general influence of Freudian theories has been mainly to direct literary interest toward the investigation and presentation of a child's consciousness: an objective accounting of a child's emotions. Even so, very few European writers have adopted a narrative from the child's point of view and presented, in their works, the small child's view from within.

Between the two world wars, literary works that focused on the child in Serbian literature emphasized social conditions. With the development of psychoanalysis and structuralism, the interest in the child grew rapidly and with it a deeper understanding of childhood. Ivo Andrić (1892–1975) wrote many stories with psychological connotations, stressing the importance of childhood in the future development of an individual.

The child in literature can be examined through various approaches. The critical theory of Otherness² has become very prominent in recent years. This theory is primarily concerned with the reevaluation of popular art and culture, as well as with the recovery and reinterpretation of the works of writers belonging to groups that were previously marginalized and unrecognized, such as women and minority writers. According to this view, the accepted literary works misrepresent and distort the views of the more suppressed groups of society by denying them their own voice. It emphasizes the persistence of natural bias, which ensures the dominant vision of the more powerful, recognized group at the expense of less powerful groups.

Adherents to this critical trend have lately expanded their interest to the representation of children in literature.³ Recognizing that only through adult

² For the critical theory of Otherness see Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978); Henry Louis Gates' "Race," *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Trin Minh Ha's *Woman Race Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

³ Mary Jane Hurst, *The Voice of the Child in American Literature: Linguistic Approaches to Fictional Child Language* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990) and Peter Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

mediation can the child's consciousness be presented in a narrative, they claim that the adult imagination cannot access a child's consciousness, and the experience of childhood is thus lost to the adult. The child experiences his reality but lacks the language to convey it to others, while the adult writer has the language, but is cut off from a child's consciousness. Thus any representation of a child's consciousness is fundamentally artificial. The disparity between the grown-up narrative and the rich energy that animates the inner life of a child is so great that the experience of childhood is practically irretrievable.

While many contemporary critics subscribe to the theory of Otherness, others, like Naomi B. Sokoloff,⁴ claim that the concept of Otherness does not apply to children so readily. In addition, Brian McHale points out that

the assumption would seem to be that children constitute a special case, presenting a special difficulty of access and representation, because as objects of representation, they are always inevitably other than the adult writers who undertake to represent them and their experience. This seems to me a fallacy. If representation is always culturally mediated, always repertoire-based, as I have argued here, then no object of representation is any more directly accessible than any other and the representation of childhood presents no greater (or lesser) difficulties than does the representation of adulthood. Raw reality is always Other, and that Other is always inaccessible and unrepresentable except mediately, through the repertoires our culture provides... The point is rather that there is no world accessible to us through texts that has not already been textualized. This is tautology, of course, but no less the case for being tautological.⁵

Opposed to the critical theory of Other is the cultural tradition, which says that literature can overcome "otherness" in the representation of the inner life of children. This tradition, according to Naomi Sokoloff⁶ "claims that through the representation of consciousness, fiction can (what men usually cannot) penetrate the intimate, never communicated thoughts of someone else and reveal the hidden side of people—give voice to those not heard by soci-

⁴ Naomi B. Sokoloff, *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 5.

⁵ Brian McHale, "Child as Ready-Made: Baby-Talk and Language of Dos Passos's Children in U.S.A." in *Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark A. Heberle and Naomi Sokoloff (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 219.

⁶ Sokoloff, 5.

ety.”⁷ Based on Bakhtin’s theory of utterance, Naomi Sokoloff examines narrative strategies in literary works written for adults but focused on children, which she calls “the discourse of childhood.”⁸ According to her, the child-character who inevitably serves as an expression and extension of their author’s views is also the one who interprets adult meaning. In the narrated events, such a character filters the words and actions of grown-ups around him through the prism of his own understanding. The result is a perspective that oscillates between the childish and adult, or bivocal narration. The child’s perspective, which orients the narrative, is distinct from the narrator, who composes the text.

This shift between two perspectives affects both temporal and cognitive factors. In the temporal factor, the text focuses on the child’s view, which results in an increased sense of immediacy and identification with the event narrated. The informed adult subject supplies a much broader perspective. Within the cognitive factor, the child provides limited understanding of the world around him. This world seems to him a magical place of wonders, and his experiences contribute novel, often deeper, insights than the after-the-fact information the adult narrator provides. The relation between the two perspectives varies from text to text and the extent to which the author is able to bridge the two determines the success of the childhood representation. It is in light of this scholarship that we examine children as represented in the works of the Serbian writer Dragoslav Mihailović (b. 1930).

Recognized as one of the most accomplished narrators in contemporary Serbian literature, Dragoslav Mihailović appeared on the literary scene with his brilliant short stories “The Quest,” “The Traveller,” and “The Measles.” All of these works first appeared in literary journals and were later published in a volume entitled *Frede, laku noć*⁹ (Good Night, Fred, 1967). These stories were written in the technique of *skaz* and in the distinctive idiom of Mihailović’s regional dialect. Their non-heroic protagonists, people from the dregs of society, were transformed into universal tragic characters through the author’s narrative skills.

One of the best treatments of a child’s consciousness in post-World War II Serbian literature and one of the most successful representations of children in general appeared in this volume. Lilika, the main character in a story bearing the same name, is an abused ten-year-old girl. In “Lilika,” Mihailović depicts a childhood that, due to brutality and the abuse of grown-ups, was never a childhood.

⁷ Sokoloff, 4.

⁸ Sokoloff, ix.

⁹ Dragoslav Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1967).

While some texts featuring a child narrator use this only as a frame for other issues, Mihailović is successful in adopting the outlook of a small child. Written in the first person singular, the story starts with the little girl's matter-of-fact statement: "Everybody says that I am stupid, my mother, my father, everybody. Only my little brother does not say that: he does not speak yet."¹⁰ On the eve of her departure for a juvenile home, the young narrator confesses her innermost feelings. An unwanted child ("My father is not my real father,"¹¹ says Lilika), the little girl takes privation for granted. She has never had real toys or books, and she accepts this. Nevertheless, she acutely feels that she is not loved. That feeling permeates the story and is repeated like a refrain: "They all beat me here. That is because no one loves me. I think so!"¹² "My mother does not love me. My mother only loves my little brother";¹³ "My mother does not love me, not even a little bit";¹⁴ "If my father loved me, he would have come to see me once."¹⁵ The only person who attempts to show empathy to the little girl is her school teacher, who, in Lilika's words, "wants to love me like all other children but can't."¹⁶

Lilika is both physically and mentally abused: "They all beat me here";¹⁷ "My mother and father would beat me until I'd wet myself. Then I saw that they don't like others to hear them beating me, so when I saw that they wanted to hit me, every time I would run around the room and make noises and scream as loud as I could 'ouch, ouch, they are killing me.'"¹⁸ Hearing this, the neighbors would come to the little girl's rescue by threatening to call the police. At this, the parents resorted to tying Lilika up to bed and plugging her mouth. "Then nobody can help me any more. I can't run, scream, or cry any more. Nobody can protect me anymore,"¹⁹ says Lilika.

The literary genre in which the child narrator is featured necessarily emphasizes the relations of home and family life. Lilika is not the only one who suffers. Her mother was also a war victim and a neglected and abused child. Lilika summarizes her mother's life story in one long paragraph:

¹⁰ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 43.

¹¹ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 49.

¹² Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 44.

¹³ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 51.

¹⁴ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 56.

¹⁵ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 49.

¹⁶ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 63.

¹⁷ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 44.

¹⁸ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 55.

¹⁹ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 56.

When my mama was a small girl, her father was in the resistance. Then the Chetniks came to the village and cut her mother's throat. Then the Germans came to the village, fired at the house from a cannon and burned the village. Then, they all fled to the woods where they did not have anything to eat and where Germans chased them with their dogs and threw bombs at them from their planes. And Mama and her little brother and her grandmother had a goat and they had it really bad. And then one plane killed the goat and grandma died and mama's brother got lost and her father, the resistance fighter, was killed. And so my mother no longer had anyone. And then that woman Rose, oh how much I hate her, took my mother and she tortured her and then sent her to an orphanage. But my mother didn't like it there and she ran away. And then, she had me. And now she is a cleaning woman in the hotel.²⁰

However, Lilika is not a helpless Dickensian victim of the perverted values of the adult world. She is an agent and she fights her predicament. Forced by circumstances to grow up quickly, Lilika is street-smart and her innocence is eroded. She often sees things for what they really are. She develops survival skills: she steals, she lies to protect herself or to get her schoolmates' attention. She is able to deceive social workers who handle her case and so postpone her departure for juvenile home.

The little girl tries to combat her misfortune through escape into the realm of imagination. To a large extent, this helps Lilika survive the brutality that surrounds her. The constructed, imaginary world is entirely under her control, in contrast to the impotence she often feels in the real world. Only in this way can she find solace and preserve a part of herself. She finds refuge in a neighbor's shed where she can be left alone and where she showers her two dolls with the maternal love that she herself lacks.

The destiny of the mother is visited on the child. Even though Lilika is not a victim of war circumstances, she nevertheless follows her mother's path. She lives in a loveless home and both her mother and her stepfather abuse her mentally and physically. She dreams of fleeing and having a child that she would, unlike her parents, love.

On the eve of her departure to the juvenile home Lilika appears wholly resigned ("I am no longer afraid. I don't care for my mother. I couldn't care less for anyone."²¹) However, this may represent more a cry for help than real resignation. She explores her options and determines that the most attractive

²⁰ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 48.

²¹ Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 46.

one is to run away to America to be a circus tightrope dancer. Thus, everyone would love her when she comes back to visit in a red convertible, wearing a beautiful dress. She dreams of the moment: "I would just ride without looking at anyone, and the wind would blow my hair and my beautiful dress and tears would come to my eyes and they all would scream 'how beautiful is our Lilika, how beautiful is our Lilika.' And I would blow the horn, blow the horn, blow the horn, ride, ride, ride around our shack, turn, turn, turn."²² Another option she considers is just to stop eating and die.

Even though she is street-smart, Lilika is a child. The child's perspective often defuses the gravity of the situation. Lilika's mind is at once open and uncomprehending. This combination sometimes leads to irony, comic reversals and strange redefinitions of values. When her stepfather and the neighbors call her mother a whore, Lilika does not want to believe that her kin, so lacking in good looks, could be a prostitute, since only beautiful women could be such.

Lilika depicts her sorrowful conditions, her unloving family, with child-like simplicity and without condemnation. Although she is well aware of cruelty around her, she does not openly judge people.

The author is able to project on his protagonist the quality of childish language, characterized by casual coordinate sentences, usually conjoined by "and," "and so," "and then," etc. This specific childish voice is further defined by a lack of embedded sentences; by the unusually sparse usage of adjectives and adverbs; and by simple temporal constructions. Lilika's statements are often run-on sentences. They have a breathless quality of "free indirect speech." Lilika's register reflects not only the regional dialect for which Mihailović is famous, but also the restricted code of the poor working class of her environment.

Just as is the case with American literature in the last few years, memoirs have been a very popular literary genre in Serbia in the '90s. In 1994, Dragoslav Mihailović published the autobiographical novel *Gori Morava*²³ (The River Morava is Burning), into which he incorporated other texts that had been published earlier as separate stories.

For a long time, the author, who had a very difficult life and was an inmate in the notorious detention camp Goli Otok, found it very hard to write about his own experiences. However, the genre of the pseudo-autobiographical novel allows the author to distance himself from his immediate experiences. While memoirs, in recalling childhood, are only setting factual details straight, and thus devote minimal space to the depiction of childhood,

²² Mihailović, *Frede, laku noć*, 68–69.

²³ Dragoslav Mihailović, *Gori Morava* (Belgrade: Srpska kniževna zadruga, 1994).

Mihailović's fictional- or pseudo-autobiography dedicates two-thirds of its space to the depiction of childhood.

Gori Morava is a first person narrative based on autobiographical material and devoted entirely to presenting the inner life of a small boy and, later, that of a teenager. It is claimed that the author and the protagonist are not one and the same. The narrator calls himself Steve, but it is obvious to the reader who knows anything about Mihailović's life that little Steve is Dragoslav himself. Much of the fictional character's life was drawn from the author's experience. From the narrator's point of view, the genre of fictional- or pseudo-autobiography is ideal. By mimicking the form of autobiography, the author encourages the reader to accept the first person narration as true, but at the same time is not limited to actual memories.

The child-character in *Gori Morava* is quite different from Lilika, yet the two have certain similarities. In this book, Mihailović uses a different retrospective technique. Even though he is closely identified with his former self, he keeps his separate identity to some extent. This is reflected in the shifting relations between the adult narrator and the child-character, between the child's and the narrator's respective points of view. Although they are the same person, they do not share the same knowledge.

The young narrator depicts his life immediately before World War II and his harsh existence during the war. Even though he is loved by the woman who raises him, though she is not his biological mother, the boy lives outside a family milieu, just like Lilika. His ill-adjusted father is rarely around. He drowns his sorrow for the boy's dead mother in alcohol and self-pity, and the boy is never sure of his love.

Mihailović's child-character fosters an innovative vision of the world around him. He is naive and his understanding is immature, and this results, sometimes, in comic and illogical turns of events. Told by his mother not to tease "Blindy," a young playmate who wears glasses and whose father has been recently killed, as the unfortunate child is only "a poor orphan," Steve makes a mistaken link between the loss of parents and poor eyesight. He is at a loss and he wonders whether children have to wear glasses only when they lose a father or both a father and a mother.

His father's behavior is incomprehensible to the boy, as is the fact that the woman he calls mother is considered by others as childless. He constantly corrects the local doctor, asserting that she is indeed his mother. The young narrator cannot fathom the mystery of the dead woman, his biological mother, who is somehow connected to his father's distress.

By far the biggest mystery to Steve is death. He fails to understand what is happening when people die. Faced with finality, the boy views events in an immature way, which guards him and makes the loss more bearable.

Whenever the boy asks an adult for clarification, the issue becomes even murkier. The death of those he did not know is least comprehensible. People around him constantly talk of “poor so-and-so” who would have been twenty-three years old now. The boy wonders how that is possible:

First, I can't understand how someone, at the same time, can be and not be. Poor Mika, poor Desa, poor Ljubica. I can't understand the grown-ups anyway, and I was ready to let them do what I didn't understand. But how could these children have been lost, just like that? If they don't exist now, did they ever exist at all? I can't believe that someone like me, who doesn't understand anything, but when he asks gets a spanking for it, can disappear just like that. If they lived, where did they go?²⁴

Throughout the novel the emphasis is on the limited understanding of the young protagonist. The narrator registers rather than constructs. There is no mention of specific historical events, no specific account of what is going on at the time of narration. In other words, the adult narrator, hiding behind the child, reveals a minimum. Consequently, the child's perspective prevails, and not the view of the more informed adult.

Because he does not understand adults, the boy prefers the company of a local eccentric, a poor man of whom the town makes fun. Steve finds Maxim, nicknamed Maxim-the-Rubber-Butt, completely understandable and not boring like the other adults. The same was true of Lilika, whose only friend and protector was a mentally retarded boy.

Even though the text deals with a child-character, it does not discuss the past; however, the present is necessarily shaped by the adult conception of the past. World War II and prior wars stand clearly in the background of childhood experiences of both Steve and Lilika.

The only two games the old woman Velika, another colorful character in the novel, understands and approves of are a depiction of battle between the Serbs and the Turks and a simulation of the Thessalonika Campaign of World War I, in which her son was killed. She watches the children play, and when they try to play something else, she spoils their fun by telling them what they are supposed to do. Even though he does not understand what war is, young Steve dreams of the end of the war when love would reign among peoples, especially between sons and fathers.

The novel becomes a record not of what happened to the child, but what Steve saw and remembered. His curiosity is aroused by everything around

²⁴ Mihailović, *Gori Morava*, 109–10.

him. Thus, within Mihailović's seemingly smooth narration there is a complicated interplay of voices. Taken together, these voices create the illusion of a world seen through the eyes of the child and call our attention to the distance between the child's world and that of the adults.

Gori Morava revives not only the individual reminiscences of the main protagonist, but also indulges in anecdotal treatments of a number of details typical of life in a small town, including elements of folklore and superstitions from the Serbian region of Pomoravlje. Popular cures and charms are accepted by Steve with his usual matter-of-fact attitude as conventional medicine. The child is able to see differently than the adult. Just as Lilika listens to her parents arguing, little Steve records the conversations of adults without any judgement, and in that way lets other voices be heard. This gives a panoramic view to the story.

The language of the little boy's narration has much less childishness than Lilika's. A look at the beginning paragraph illustrates this:

Everywhere on the slope and in particular close to the fence, grew dense, huge garden "brooms." We made our huts inside them just as Tarzan the wildman did, and when we played hide-and-seek we preferred to hide inside. Light green and soft in the spring, they would turn dry by the middle of the summer, their small leaves curled and falling, until finally there remained only ugly yellow-brownish sticks covered with small, hard seeds which starlings ate and which fell behind our necks and in our hair.²⁵

In this passage, there is nothing of the restricted code and the breathless sentences of Lilika. On the contrary, these sentences are long and flowing, embedded, and laced with many adjectives. The narrative may report a child's experiences and beliefs, but the expressive elements belong essentially to the adult. Also, talking about a neighbor, the boy obviously reveals the knowledge of the adult narrator when he says: "Her husband died a long time ago, her son was killed in the Great War, and she lived with her daughter-in-law, an already married grandson and his wife. But she was never able to get over her only son's death and she constantly returned to the war and his death."²⁶

An examination of these two works shows that, in Mihailović's works and, to a large extent, in the whole body of contemporary Serbian literature, children are presented as solitary, isolated figures, even in cases when they

²⁵ Mihailović, *Gori Morava*, 9.

²⁶ Mihailović, *Gori Morava*, 13.

have loving families. Wars, past and present, are visited on them through their parents and grandparents and they largely color their experiences.

The miniature narrator, looking at the world through his childish eyes, simply and honestly, reveals the follies and absurdities of the adult world. Without the ability to comprehend their significance, the child narrator perceives the facts of life and allows the reader, called upon to supply the necessary interpretation, to arrive at deep insights. Reporting without judging, he lets the facts speak for themselves, and the result is a realistic picture of life without the authorial point of view, which would color the narrative.

This account of the children in the works of Dragoslav Mihailović is necessarily sketchy. A more detailed study of the depiction of childhood sensibility in contemporary Serbian literature should be encouraged because the child-character reveals and raises questions of essence for all of us. Authors see the child-character as a means of establishing human values lacking in society. As Robert Pattison remarks, "In writing of childhood, we find that in a very exact and significant sense the modern writer is writing of life."²⁷

²⁷ Robert Pattison, *The Child Figure in English Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 35.