CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Borislav Pekić

Rabies: genre novel

Besnilo: žanr roman

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Borislav Pekić's *Rabies* (*Besnilo*), subtitled Žanr-roman (genre novel), was written in 1981 and first published in 1983 in Zagreb (then part of Yugoslavia, now Croatia). It is the first novel in his science fiction trilogy, followed by *1999* (1985) and *Atlantis* (Atlantida I-II, 1988). Born in Podgorica (Montenegro) in 1930, Pekić later moved to Serbia. In 1948, during Tito's break with Stalin, he was arrested as a member of the illegal student organisation "Union of Democratic Youth of Yugoslavia". Charged under the "Criminal Code against the People and the State", he was initially sentenced to ten years in prison, which was later increased to fifteen years with forced labour. However, he was pardoned on 29 November 1953. After his release, he studied psychology at the University of Belgrade and worked as a dramaturge and screenwriter (1958–64). From 1971 he lived as a freelance writer in London. After the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia in 1989, he returned to Belgrade and co-founded the Democratic Party. He died in London in 1992.

Rabies marks a significant departure from Pekić's earlier work, which had mainly dealt with historical themes. His literary corpus includes numerous novels and novellas- although the distinction between the two is not always clear. Works such as *Time of Miracles* (Vreme Čuda, 1965), *The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan* (Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana, 1970), *The Rise and Fall of Icarus Gubelkian* (Uspenje i sunovrat Ikara Gubelkijana, 1975), *The Apology/Defence and the Last Days* (Obrana i poslednji dani, 1977), *How to Quiet a Vampire* (Kako upokojiti vampire, 1977), *The Golden Fleece* (Zlatno runo, 1978–86), *Rabies* (Besnilo, 1983), *Atlantis* (Atlantida, 1988) and *1999* (1989) demonstrate his stylistic range and thematic complexity. Pekić is often associated with the postmodern or even proto-postmodern Serbian literature of the 1960s and 1970s. Scholarly interest centres on topics such as intertextuality, poetic principles, the role of documents, the grotesque and the biblical subtext. Among the various critical approaches, Pekić's oeuvre has often been interpreted through the lens of postmodern poetics. One of these analyses focuses on metafiction - generally considered a hallmark of postmodernism – as a productive starting point. Based on the idea of metafiction as a "borderline discourse" that operates between fiction and criticism, the threshold is emphasised as a generative space within literary modernism, postmodernism and theory. In *Rabies*, this metafictional approach shapes both the structural organisation and the thematic complexity of the novel.

The novel consists of six compact, chronologically organised sections, framed by a prologue (*Rhabdovirus*) and an epilogue (*Incubation*), which correspond to the phases of the course of the disease. Each section begins with a motto that subtly anticipates the most important themes and events. These semantically charged text frames play a decisive role in the composition. The prologue is preceded by a note from the narrator, who later reveals himself to be the editor of a manuscript by his deceased friend Daniel Leverquin. The narrative begins at Heathrow Airport and

is told from Leverquin's perspective- a logical choice as the novel is built around his diary. Internally, the novel follows a montage principle, interweaving multiple perspectives and storylines in fifteen narrative strands, each tied to a specific character or group. These include a murder investigation led by police sergeant Elmer, a love story between Abner (a Polish Jew) and Miriam (a young Palestinian woman), Professor Lieberman, a former Nazi involved in human experimentation, Cold War spies Donovan and Rasimov, Dr Luke Komarowski, Gabriel and Sue (as Theseus and Ariadne) and others. The novel frequently changes narrative focus and perspective and uses free indirect discourse to convey the inner thoughts and anxieties of its characters. Like a kaleidoscope, the narrative threads and perspectives constantly change within the spatial and temporal boundaries of Heathrow, which becomes a quarantine zone as the virus spreads. In addition to the complexity of the narrative structure and the changes in perspective, almost every narrative thread and every change of focus brings with it a corresponding shift in genre. This montage structure heightens the narrative tension by presenting events not as a unified whole, but through fragmented narrative "cuts" that mirror the accelerating crisis. The infected characters revert to an animalistic, dog-like state, reinforcing the importance of the intelligent virus introduced in Lieberman's prologue, which at one point acts as one of the narrative focalisers itself. Rabies can be read as a kaleidoscopic genre construct. It mixes elements of science fiction, crime thriller, romance, spy thriller and horror. The narrator's use of the term "paraliterary genre" suggests a fluid genre structure that adapts and mutates to the demands of the Story.

The political dimension of the novel does not result from an obvious thematic content, but from its complex formal structure. The meaning is broken up by changing narrative voices, temporal disjunctions and textual ambiguities. Instead of making a direct political commentary, the text presents scattered and often ambiguous gestures that invite critical debate. Its kaleidoscopic narrative mechanism enables a reconfiguration of the political that is immanent to the discursive operations of the text - a questioning of how the political is mediated and made legible through literary form. Rabies is therefore an example of literature's ability to articulate the political not as an externally imposed category, but as an integral part of its narrative and structural logic.

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