

The Dog and the Double Bass

Pas i kontrabas

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Saša Ilić is a contemporary Serbian writer of the middle generation who received the prestigious NIN Award for Best Novel for his work *Dog and Double Bass* (2019). By combining various discourses and ideas – from anti-psychiatry and the concept of Yugoslavism to jazz – the novel clearly positions itself as a political text, enabling such a synthesis in an attempt to construct a totality of post-Yugoslav societies.

The novel opens with the admission of Filip Isaković, a Belgrade jazz musician, to the Rehabilitation Institute for Veterans in Kovin. During the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the protagonist served in the Yugoslav People's Army, forced to carry out orders that at one point endangered his life. The war left lasting consequences on him, and he soon begins to clash with people in his personal life. After a physical altercation that nearly ends in tragedy, and suffering from an artistic block that prevents him from playing the double bass, he is compelled to undergo treatment. There, Dr Larisa Sibinović subjects him to an experimental method funded by the Dutch government, which involves erasing trauma through digital technologies that reproduce sounds and images triggering traumatic responses, aiming to desensitise patients.

At the institute, Filip meets another patient, Dr Desider Julius, a psychiatrist confined there because, according to his own account, he attempted to treat Mira Marković, a politician and the wife of Slobodan Milošević, the autocratic president of Serbia in the 1990s. Filip arrives shortly after Dr Julius has organised a failed escape attempt from the institution, during which a migrant woman named Asja, who was very dear to Julius, drowned in the Danube.

The novel intertwines events from Filip's six-month stay at the institute, his conversations and relationship with Dr Julius, and their retrospective narratives: Filip's about the relationships and dynamics within his jazz quartet, and Julius's about the history of his family, including his father, a psychiatrist who had to leave Belgrade during World War II and later became disillusioned with the postwar regime. In the final part of the novel, Filip escapes from the institute and goes to Genoa, where, having finally left the Yugoslav space, he is able to return to playing music.

The protagonist's name is quite indicative and clearly places the novel within the orbit of politically engaged literature. Filip Isaković derives his first name from Krleža's Filip Latinovicz and his surname from Vuk Isaković, the protagonist of Miloš Crnjanski's novel *Migrations* – two figures from

canonical Croatian and Serbian literature marked by rootlessness, constant returns to places they have never truly belonged to, and perpetual movement. The same fate befalls Ilić's Filip Isaković, whom the author attempts to anchor in these two literary figures, yet who, like them, is condemned to wander across Europe with his jazz quartet until he is confined to the Rehabilitation Institute.

The novel thus emerges as a suitable form through which various attempts to close linguistic, social, and symbolic structures are refracted, as well as the ways in which characters try to resist them.

The protagonist's name signals resistance to the nationalist closure of literary canons, and the consequence is his exclusion – his confinement in a mental institution where he must be “cured” of traumas caused by the nationalist wars of the 1990s. He chooses to participate in art, specifically jazz music, which is not tied to a fixed place or rigid structure, but is based on improvisation and created within a community of equal musicians. Filip's artistic block, which prevents him from creating, is essentially an inability to live in a community that is becoming increasingly closed and hierarchically organised. Psychiatry is yet another mechanism through which control is imposed on him, literally confining him. In contrast, Dr Julius speaks as an advocate of the ideas of anti-psychiatry, particularly those of Franco Basaglia, which emphasise integrating patients from mental institutions into society.

Because of these conditions, Filip escapes from the institute and heads to Genoa, a port that historically served as a departure point for generations of European migrants seeking better lives elsewhere. Far from the Yugoslav space that generated his trauma, Filip is finally able to play again and decides to form a new jazz ensemble, Trio Lampedusa, named after the Italian island known for tragedies involving migrants crossing the Mediterranean.

In this way, Ilić's protagonist creates his own community of people who are constantly moving and returning to places they have never visited, made possible through a musical expression most closely linked to language and literature: jazz. Thus, near the end of the novel, when the owner of a jazz club in Genoa, Schalk, asks Filip in which language they sing, he replies as a worthy successor to Latinovicz and Vuk:

“‘In different ones,’ I said, ‘Bambara, French, Spanish, English, Yugoslav...’

‘What Yugoslav now?’ Schalk smiled ironically. (...)

‘It is a language,’ I said after a short pause, ‘a language that most jazz musicians from the Balkans understand... Otherwise, it is banned by the constitutions of the former Yugoslav republics.’

‘I did not know that,’ he said seriously.

‘Yes,’ I confirmed. ‘Very often, public beatings are organised for anyone who admits to using that language.’” (284)

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

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