



**DRAMATIC HERO AS A CAPTIVE OF EXISTENTIAL  
NIHILISM**

*(Thus Spoke Zarathustra – Marambo vs Nietzsche)*

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**Abstract**

The main goal of this paper using V.M. Jovanović's first drama *Tako reče Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra) as an example is to depict the hero of a bourgeois drama, on the one hand, and determine the philosophical systems that conditioned his appearance which, interactively, was conditioned (in the case of later philosophical movements) by the reality whose direct product and epitome is just such a hero, on the other hand. It will later be shown that the struggle between individual and society, in the changed relationship between plural and singular (individuals as the representatives of a large number of disempowered people versus few possessors of justice belonging to the privileged class as an epitome of the imposed general laws), was transferred onto the inner plane (as a conflict over the choice between mere existence and authentic Sartrean existence). Under conditions of inequality and oppression, the dramatic hero, an epitome of the man of that period, becomes powerless and insecure as a fighter for real existence. Thus, in this struggle of opposites Moore's idea of real versus actual man, understood slightly differently in Nietzsche's philosophy – through the relationship between the superman and his opponent (a weak-willed man) – re-emerges and is transposed into the Serbian drama literature of the early 20th century in a distinctive way. The search for oneself and meaning assumes the contours of eternal wandering because utopia can only be found within characters, but looking into the essence requires strength which they evidently lack. Such a kind of disregard for contradictions within oneself requires spirituality that emanates from the core of humanness and whose basic aspiration is the rejection of any hesitancy and the achievement of integrity. In view of the fact that the integrity so understood is depicted in Jovanović's play from the viewpoint of weak-willed people, it also includes the need for union or, to be more exact, the union of incompatibles – female and male principles, as well as discourses. However, the structure of these characters' inner pole is conditioned by existential insecurity. At the same time, such a form of insecurity is also the cause of ethical relativism that is further transformed into modernist nihilism.

**Key words:** *dramatic hero, bourgeois drama, superman, existential nihilism, homelessness, apathy, Nietzsche.*



Just as Serbian playwrights, especially those from the early 20th century, tackled the current problems of that period – primarily the crisis of the family and morality of bourgeois society, weakening of the institution of marriage, sexual deviations and erotic frustration, tragic polarization of the feeling of life, spiritual and material poverty, as well as the suicide problem – and depicted the lives of people from the margins of life as a “fractographic and photographic“ document, the analysis of dramatic texts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries was based on the depiction of passions and characters due to which their plays can certainly be classified into the genre of social or bourgeois drama.

The mentioned dramas tackle the social problems of their time which, apart from the problems caused by social stratification, implies above all else the attitude of society toward an individual and vice versa. An individual is viewed as a factor of society, its typical product, so that the question concerning the mechanisms by which an individual can ensure his survival – both survival within his community and existential survival – is undoubtedly important. A dreary and complex social and historical context imposes on an individual a specific behaviour and role whose inability to act restricts his power. This causes the polarization of the feeling of life and, in a certain sense, the separation of a being from existence. If the former has a certain meaning, the latter contains the germ of self-destruction, and these two poles are lastingly divergent. If separated from its essence, existence becomes absurd, but the natural human aspiration towards conceptualization drives characters to seek essence. Over time, this conflict between something in the inner realm of characters and something imposed from the outside becomes a burden for them. Under such pressure, characters being essentially burdened by life, will be forced to make an illusory choice and submit themselves completely and wordlessly to mere existence. As if a being and existence occur regardless of them and are separated from them, so that heroes are obliged to opt for one or another. By rejecting a being (themselves), they inextricably enter the world devoid of validity and thus of everything spiritual and mental – the world of permanent apathy. In a broader sense, this represents fitting into some collective existence.

Apart from being both intimistic and introspective, modern drama is also naturalistic due to its interest in man as a social being (*see* Miočinović 1987: 17). Thus, the choice of dramatic material defined social pessimism looking at the lows of life.

As the starting point for an analysis of modern drama we can use Georg Lukács’ view that “in a drama there must be two classes: the class that leads the struggle and the class against which the struggle is led“ (Lukač 1973: 280). The abolition of classes will be possible when this struggle ceases to be in the epicentre of interest. This necessarily raises the question as to where the conflict in a bourgeois drama is reflected or, if it already exists, against whom the struggle is led. First if all, there is no doubt that the bourgeois drama hero is not strong enough to struggle; he forsakes and retreats not



only when the rebellion of his heart destroys the hierarchy of duties and love, while the drama itself unfolds on the basis of the motifs of giving up the struggle. Such an inherent or acquired passivity of the dramatic hero seems to be entered into the drama from somewhere – as if life was unfair to heroes so many times that they, as the drama unfolds, they already know that any attempt to struggle will be futile and meaningless.

In this way their life becomes something that was already decided and something that cannot be decided. A visible conflict between parents and children, or individual and society is just a superficial stratum underneath which a real conflict can only be perceived. Discontent with the system and life could point to man's struggle with his destiny.<sup>1</sup> If we do not go further than the dramatic texts of the epoch of Serbian modernism such as V.M. Jovanović's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Naši sinovi* (Our Sons), M. Bojić's *Lanci* (Chains) and D. Nenadić's *Veseli dom* (A Merry Home), we would certainly consider this conflict acceptable. However, it must be sufficiently general to be applied to other dramatic texts, including specifically V.M. Jovanović's *Karijera* (Career), S. Matavulj's *Zavjet* (Pledge) and M. Bojić's *Gospodja Olga* (Mrs Olga), on the one hand, and sufficiently concrete because the strain of neorealism needs something tangible, substantial and convincing, on the other hand. In that search we must proceed from the dominant traits of characters – weakness and insecurity.<sup>2</sup> They are weak to struggle for their own happiness, weak to resist their passions and vices, insecure about the correctness of their decisions and unprepared to be consistent despite consequences, endure temptation and free themselves from social and traditional constraints.

And just as a drama cannot be conceived without a conflict, the latter cannot exclude characters. The hero of a bourgeois drama is mostly frustrated and deprived, which is unmistakably felt by the reader/viewer even if that is not mentioned. Tensions are real and devoid of any mystical origin and religious feelings, including everything supernatural and unexplainable. If a conflict exists and is not evident on the stage, this means that it takes place on some other plane – the inner one – which is the only action that enables a bourgeois drama to move from the external onto the inner plane – especially if one bears in mind that in dramatic texts in Serbian modernist literature, excluding Jovanović's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Matavulj's *Pledge*, there are almost no monologues. On the inner plane, heroes struggle with their own weaknesses and are mostly overpowered – but there is one

<sup>1</sup> Such a concept of destiny differs substantially from the ancient one.

<sup>2</sup> In seeking to explain the difference between ancient and modern tragedy, Kierkegaard's analysis is invaluable. According to him, the basic difference lies in tragic guilt: "In a certain sense, our epoch does not deviate from its style when wishing to make an individual responsible for his entire life; unfortunately, it does not do that with a deep conviction and hence its impotence is sufficiently overblown to despise the tears of tragedy and yet sufficiently vain to be devoid of mercy" (Kjerkeger 1984: 99).



exception. In Matavulj's *Pledge* they are awarded with a happy ending because of the victory over themselves within themselves and their readiness to make a sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

Everything in a bourgeois drama is only the link between the sensual and the intellectual, between symbol and definition, "an outer event turned into an inner one in all respects, [...] in a sense, form became content" (Lukač 1973: 280), everything is some unclear state between delirium and resignation, enthusiasm and apathy. Apathy is an acute disease of these heroes and, to a degree, prevents their emotional wholeness. And just apathy causes the heroes of a bourgeois drama to become without emotions or, in other words, to be markedly indifferent toward everything.

The initial spark of a bourgeois drama is almost always a shock that may involve positive or negative energy, as well as destruction, thus creating or destroying worlds. Its heroes – who occasionally resist material poverty, find themselves on the brink of starvation and survival, and occasionally run away from routine and apathetic life – fall into the duty-acceptance/escape-suicide trap.

The permanent traits of the heroes and bearers or promoters of authors' ideas are their oppositional stance, rebelliousness and propensity for anarchist gestures. It seems that authors used their anarchism to test the possibilities for a more severe criticism of the reality of their epoch, but the very form of this criticism, which is ultimately reduced to a feeble revolt, was usually considered in the absence of a better idea. In any case, such an approach was implied (in St. Predić's *Golgota* /Golgotha/, M. Bojić's *Chains*, M. Crnjanski's *Maska* /Mask/ and V.M. Jovanović's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Our Sons*) in the situations involving genre-related oscillations and confusion, and it will lead them to better and more abundant solutions after changes in the thematic-motif conception.

The *dramatis personae* of Serbian bourgeois drama do not possess sharpened differential traits. With slight differences they all are alienated and incomplete because the reality in which they exist is also incomplete. Such a plane where the divergent factors of the epoch intersect will become the characteristic of later Serbian literature, which will win recognition thanks to Miloš Crnjanski, the author of the play *Konak* (Residence). As argued by this author with respect to *Gorski vijenac* (The Mountain Wreath), the play that captivates due to the manner in which the invisible crowd and characters are used, the shadow of the "shooting ballet" in this "political drama", the shadow of the massacre behind the scene, and the manner in which the actors perform their monologues, requires the

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<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Miloš Cvetić's drama *Braća* (Brothers) is similar. However, in view of the fact that these two dramas (M. Cvetić's *Brothers* and S. Matavulj's *Pledge*) belong to the same type of texts, Cvetić's drama will not be separately dealt with.



stage that is “stranger than Maeterlinck’s and more complicated than Pirandello’s”<sup>4</sup>. Crnjanski found confirmation in his philosophy of history which can be designated in short as anti-Hegelian.<sup>5</sup>

However, the ideas that will later be developed by existentialist philosophers were anticipated by several Serbian authors at the very beginning of the new century. Several *existential nihilistic* plays raise numerous philosophical and existential questions whose answers are sometimes only outlined and sometimes vague, and subordinated to the influences of inner forces, but are always clear in the domain of anticipation. Therefore, it is not unusual that their authors decide to take the classical hero away from them, deprive them of the heroic gesture, reduce the loud pathos of existence to whisper and delving into the depths of consciousness, as well as to debate about the problems of morality where the struggle between duty and desire is treated with the same pathos *borrowed* from somewhere or, better said, without *its own* pathos. Without these plays the beginning of modernism in Serbia would remain only an intermezzo. In these plays existential nihilism clearly manifested itself and enabled their authors to find their own style.

Vojislav M. Jovanović, a scholar with a European reputation in two unrelated fields – literature and political history, was known in wider literary circles under the pen name Marambo.<sup>6</sup> He began to deal with theatrical art, primarily as a theatre critic contributing to *Mali žurnal*, when he was only 18 years old. Thereafter, he went abroad to pursue his studies – in Switzerland, England and France, where wrote his five plays<sup>7</sup> and where he could be most directly acquainted with

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Goran Marković, “Kako je tužan kratkovid čovek kad izgubi naočari. Prepiska Crnjanski – [Rade] Marković“, *Politika* (Belgrade), 28 December 2013: Kultura, umetnost, nauka, LVII/37, 01–03.

<sup>5</sup> In his diaries, travelogues and essays he argued, incidentally yet vigorously, against Hegel’s speculative fantasy in understanding a logical historical development. In a drama, his arguments against Hegel, developed into a more or less coherent theory, provide the basis for a deductive verification of each action, each thinking and each idea that will be included in his critical depiction of a historical event in the play. Reality lacks reason, so that the divergent paths of a world event cannot have any goal in itself, nor do they necessarily mean continuity in the development of humanity. Therefore, Crnjanski considers the common view of history (as the stepwise rise of epochs with a specific historical type of man, which is always one step higher than the previous one) as historiographic fiction and one of many subsequent forms of restitution of order over chaos. Crnjanski holds that such kinds of historiographic fictions are not only faulty, but are also ethically impermissible. Similarly to existentialist philosophers, he views them as a typical case of self-deception and avoidance of any decision making and responsibility concerning the issues of personal and collective destiny in the future.

<sup>6</sup> A.G. Matoš interprets the origin of this unusual pen name in the following way: “Mr Vojislav Jovanović is a very young man who studies in England, where he hung out with our young storyteller Veljko Miličević. As a high school student he already used to entertain guests in Belgrade’s taverns as a contributor to *Mali žurnal*, where he signed his texts under the pen name Marambo (an anagram of Flaubert’s *Salamambo* and Voltaire’s *Caramba*)“ (Matoš 1973: 66–68).

<sup>7</sup> V.M. Jovanović’s dramatic opus consists of the following plays: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1903), *Naš zet* (Our Son-in-Law) (1905), *Naši očevi* (Our Fathers) (1906), *Our Sons* (1906) and *Karijera* (Career) (1907). In one extract by V.M. Jovanović there is mention of the sixth play – *Gospodin s kamerelijama* (The Gentleman with Cameralia) (“a comedy from Belgrade’s life“) which, had it ever been written, was lost in the whirlwind of war because the manuscript has never been found. In the introductory note for the readership in his 1914 collection of dramatic texts entitled *Career*, Jovanović gives detailed bibliographic data on his plays, that is, when they were submitted to a contest, awarded, performed and published, but there is no mention of the play *Thus Spoke*



contemporary philosophical and art trends. For some reason Jovanović does not mention his first play *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he wrote when he was very young. This play also has the motivational framework that is characteristic of modern drama – “the family bearing a heavy burden of heritage, erotic frustration and wrong relationships, ’sanative’ suicidal solutions, brutal laws of wealth acquisition” (Miočinović 1987: 11) – and a striking scene at the very beginning, which will add colour to the atmosphere of the whole drama:

Dimitrijević: Are you watching a dead town?

Jelena: I am watching life.

[...]

Yes. I’m watching its stillness, feeling it, longing for it, dying in it (Jovanović 1974: 707).<sup>8</sup>

The core of Jovanović’s nihilism lies just in this destruction of all existence and pathetic denial of the meaning of continuance and life, which is exaggerated even when it negates reality. The equation between the two antipodes, life and death, only lays a foundation for the further development of the idea about the heroes living on the edge of life and death, where life and death constantly intertwine and where the question concerning the dominance of one over the other is obsolete because death has overcome life. Dying constantly recurs almost like a leitmotif and dramatic heroes become indifferent and prepared to give up their futile and dejected lives.

Despite the necessary harsh attitude towards the dramatic work written in his youth, which he did not want to include in the collection of his dramatic texts, it seems as if Jovanović was not aware, at least not sufficiently, that the value of this dramatic text could be sought in the ideas of its heroes. Here, however, we cannot speak about their originality, but for the literary public of that period it was also important that Marambo tried to revive certain Nietzschean ideas on the stage. This is certainly not only reflected in the title of his dramatic text, Nietzsche’s hitherto untranslated work *Also sprach Zarathustra*.<sup>9</sup> “Jovanović repeats Nietzsche’s thought not only to affirm it, but also to lay bare and dethrone the false morality and conventions of bourgeois society, and the compromised moral and social norms of an ideal man. However, the characters are rather vague and more ambiguously

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*Zarathustra*, which he did not publish during his lifetime, but the manuscript has been preserved in the Matica Srpska Archives. Seven decades later, it was found and prepared for publication by Vaso Milinčević.

<sup>8</sup> All further citations from the play have been taken from this edition.

<sup>9</sup> The first translation of Nietzsche’s work into Serbian was done by Milan Ćurčin in 1911.



undeveloped than complex, while their philosophy seems rather simplified in a classroom-like manner and non-transposed“ (Milinčević 1974: 750).

There are two basic types of characters in Jovanović’s play *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: complete men (supermen) and incomplete, frustrated men who feel “ontologically deficient“ vis-à-vis others just because they are deprived of their human essence. Ivan belongs to the first type and Milorad Dimitrijević to the second, and their “link“ is Jelena Janković – again with some mutual differences. In contrast to the apostle of vitalism, Friedrich Nietzsche, who promotes a strong-willed man, Marambo’s play is elucidated above all else from the viewpoint of other men – weak-willed ones. If the former are the pledge for moving forward, the latter are the mainstay of stagnation. Their death is necessary to unreasonable humanity which, had it not been for their dead bodies, would not have known of rebellion.

Dimitrijević, “an economically ruined intellectual-weakling“ (Vučković 1982: 485), is a man who *constantly keeps going away*, but his escape is not permanent and does not offer a solution; rather, it postpones his destiny that will be determined by others. Decisions are left to others and even when he tries to revolt against injustice at the first moment, the arguments of his opponents seem more convincing and more uncompromising, so that he accepts them peacefully. Although Dimitrijević is greatly in love with Jelena, he leaves for Munich after her father’s decision not to accept him as his son-in-law, that is, after Dimitrijević’s attempt to ask him for his permission to marry his daughter Jelena, who got pregnant by Dimitrijević.

Dimitrijević: I’ve seen that you run away from me and I see that I should also leave you, just a reverie in which you’re my beginning and my end; but I wished to see you once more, only once more, once more... You know that my life is eternal postponement, so let it be this time, too: *once more...* Forgive me (709).

Apart from the mentioned postponement, which recurs as a second nature to this character, one can anticipate the full spectrum of symbols and signals in this scene – the first is embodied in Dimitrijević’s appeal to Jelena as his beginning and his end,<sup>10</sup> which will get its full meaning at the end of the play, and the second – in the linguistic recurrences sounding like

<sup>10</sup> Schiller’s thought, which Schopenhauer also referred to in his essay *On Women*: “Without women, the beginning of our life would be helpless; the middle, devoid of pleasure, and the end, of consolation“, was also shaped by Marambo in his play, but is also evidently founded on Nietzsche’s idea of a cyclical movement and eternal return.



an echo equalized with his life cycle. The endless recurrence and cyclical return show that the flow cannot be interrupted; after the completion of the cycle, the sequence continues. As an illusion of movement and action, his life itself cannot be used for the plot of this drama. Marambo saw it only as the phantom of reality, only a spectral event, but the reality itself will remain unchanged because – by calling off every action as eternal postponement, he reveals the very essence of reality as “one and the same“ in all of its life forms.

Alienation is the general characteristic of these heroes and the impossibility of belonging arises just from it. Dimitrijević wishes again to leave his mother and sister to whom he otherwise does not belong.<sup>11</sup> The difference between this view and Nietzsche’s lies in the following: instead of neighbour-love, Nietzsche advocates the love to the farthest and future ones, whereby lesser individuals must be sacrificed for the sake of higher men. Egoism here is depicted from a common man’s perspective; this is not the egoism of a noble soul that receives everything into itself, but does not keep anything; enriched and additionally refined, it returns everything. Nietzschean little men destroy themselves.

For bourgeois drama heroes there is no future, nor are there any plans for their future because they are governed by chance. However, they echo the spirit of Zarathustra’s sermon; they are unprepared to struggle and decide their own destiny by themselves; thus, ashamed, they run away from rejection:

Jelena: You suffer because you look distrustfully towards the future. [...] You’re governed by chance and chance ultimately never works out well. You’re one of those people who themselves have scarcely any influence on their destiny [...] As for me, I’m even more

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<sup>11</sup> A similar motif was incorporated by Milutin Čekić into his play about a young intellectual who returned home after studying in Paris. After his return, Pavle experienced an identity crisis and anxiety in his hometown and family home, where his mother and the girl with whom he had grown and who had been like a sister to him, welcomed him in a similar way. We will relate such a concept of the hero to the notions such as non-recognition, loss and non-belonging, which can be explained by those psychological manifestations which aroused Sigmund Freud’s interest as early as the 1880s and which he presented, together with the conclusions, in his 1919 essay *The Uncanny* (Das Unheimliche). At that time, most of our young authors, especially those who were educated in European cultural and artistic centres and thus were acquainted with literary movements in Europe, used the themes and motifs of the European authors of that period for their works. The most pronounced exponents of this practice were Vojislav M. Jovanović, Milutin Čekić, Miloš Crnjanski, etc. The ambiguity of the meaning of Freud’s term is confusing, so that Freud himself emphasized the impossibility of its linguistic explanation and, proceeding from the etymology of the term, arrived at the conclusion that it means both something familiar and close, and something alien, something concealed and something manifested. Of still greater importance is one more meaning of this term, which refers to homelessness and the lack of a strong point, and is associated with the poetics of the whole period and indirectly epitomized in the title of Čekić’s play – *U svome domu* (In One’s Home), written in 1907 (the methodological framework, suggested by Freud in his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffman’s short story ‘The Sandman’ /Der Sandmann/, was applied to Laza Lazarević’s story ‘Vetar’ (Wind) by S. Milosavljević Milić in her text “U mreži isprepletenih vremena – Hofman, Frojd i Laza Lazarević“ (In the Web of Intertwined Times – Hoffman, Freud and Laza Lazarević) (Vukićević, Milosavljević Milić 2014: 53–79)).





unfortunate. You suffer unendingly and such suffering is endured more easily than mine... [...] But I want life, life. The life I'm watching from afar (711).

The heroes of other modern Serbian authors, notably Nenadić and Bojić, crave life in the same way. This also applies to those who decide to commit suicide. On the other hand, chance designates heroes as passive individuals – which is evidenced by their subordinate and dependent position – and anticipates the idea of the impossibility of “winning freedom“. A man is free if he does not recognize the master, but if his own freedom or, more abstractly, “freedom itself“ becomes the desired goal that must be attained at any cost, he will fall into a trap and become its slave. Wounded by Jelena's reproach that the main source of his misfortunes is his failure to wear himself out with work, which would give him the impetus to move forward and be a trigger for his activity, Dimitrijević answers:

Dimitrijević: Whence is life in me; and there's no work to which you can or can't give your life... (711).

Consequently, bourgeois drama heroes aspire to life. What they lack is an authentic and fulfilling life, which shows that a real life differs from a mere existence. It is evident that work does not make Dimitrijević feel fulfilled and that he needs an impetus.<sup>12</sup> Truly, according to Albert Camus, the absurd could be something that enables the freedom of action and spirit, but the awareness of preposterous efforts stultifies any enterprise – ultimately, freedom does not exist because all roads lead to the same goal, whereby only one question arises as to the means to be used. Thus, we partially return to the question of morality, but in view of the fact that morality is a social construct, its origin should be sought in collective consciousness. Freedom, including the freedom of will, can barely survive as an individual product. Understandably, the categories of the absurd and freedom may refer only to the world of the hero, the conflict between him and his reality, but that conflict in Marambo's specific world is moved from life and destiny to thought and here it turns into a conflict between the truths sought by the hero and the fallacies to which he succumbs.

<sup>12</sup> Within the scope of the vacillations in shaping his life, Čekić's hero (like Marambo's) will be giving up work and then going back to it. At one moment, the dramatic hero will find his life purpose in work (“Yes, yes, you're right, Andreja, one should work and should begin as soon as possible“) and at another moment – pressure to be socially useful in the process of individualization (“Work! Work! That's all I hear from you. A little while and I'll find this word disgusting as if it embodies all misery of life.“) (Čekić 2000: 33, 46).



The understanding of one's own shame is also very interesting. Namely, Jovanović's heroes do not feel shame because they have no shame. This is emphasized by Jelena when she begins to suspect that their relationship is still not over because, in the opposite, she would not listen to Jovanović's shameless proposal to meet him alone once again, and nothing revolted within her. In this way, we come to realize that in their consciousness these characters can still make a distinction between right and wrong, but their weakness does not allow them to succumb to fallacies. And this can certainly be associated with Miloš Crnjanski's *Mask* in which the specifically shaped feeling of shame is mentioned in a motif-like fashion. Dimitrijević also says that he has no conscience and sense of shame because he spent half an hour with a friend whose honour he had ruined, and suppressed this fact from his loose consciousness during that period, as well as a little earlier, when his mother went to their muddy garden to pick some mint because there was no tea at home and he had to pay for it in a tavern the previous evening. Every feeling expressed by him appears as a subsequent delayed reaction. His egoism is not the Nietzschean highest principle of morality because it is not manifested from the superman's position. Namely, he condemns himself more strongly than required by the objective circumstances by saying that he has the heart only for himself and that this heart is evil. A little later, when he talks with Janković, Jelena's father, Dimitrijević will say bitterly:

Dimitrijević: Ah, those people who are heartless, they know the most sensitive spot in someone

else's (725).

Marambo also devoted great attention to the central motif in naturalist drama from Zola and Maupassant to Ibsen and Strindberg – the question of heritage and predestination – which he understood in its broadest sense. It is mentioned how Dimitrijević quit drinking because there was talk that he inherited this streak from his father. However, he started drinking again, which was confirmed by Ivan to Jelena: he found Dimitrijević drinking with the “worst scum you ever see on this earth“ (712). This heritage-based determinacy which, on the Serbian stage at the turn of the century, seemed less dramatic, also restricts and impairs the hard-won freedom. Bourgeois drama characters try to escape predestination with the same resoluteness like ancient drama heroes who tried to escape their destiny – and always returned to because they were unable to escape it. Jelena finds her father's letter in which he writes that he knows that her stillborn baby was Dimitrijević's. The volte-face occurred just because of this knowledge. Although she was determined to change the course of Dimitrijević's life, redirect it and make it meaningful, after seeing her father's letter she condemned him to death considering him the only culprit! Thus, she becomes like her father who has



already done away with Dimitrijević's father in a similar way. Hatred and love are intertwined in this deadly revenge. Everything revolves around the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed in the higher Nietzschean sense of the word. This inner split prevents the development of personality integrity, since each gesture is most often ambiguous, which also coincides with the inner duality of characters. Thus, female hypocrisy is also designated as the result of a monolithic male dominance.

Jelena: So far, his destiny has also been determined by others; even now, I'm the one who'll determine the end of his life, which appeared once and *will not reappear*.<sup>13</sup> He is no more: so be it! Let him follow in the footsteps of his father! (739; underlined by M. S.).

However, these characters display the acquired inability to view one of the inner poles related to identification with the oppressor from the outside, to be separated from him in order to be objectivized and ultimately rejected. The gestures of these characters already show quite an opposite tendency – not to overcome that contradiction with which the heroes identify themselves. It should be emphasized, however, that dehumanization is not a given fact or, more exactly, a destined determinant; rather, it is the product of an unfair order, which can be overcome only through a struggle for which the characters themselves have no courage, will or strength. Hence the regressive Freudian death wish as a solution also appears in a number of controversies through various forms of violence.

And all of them remain solitary. For if you are a slave, you cannot be a friend, and if you are a tyrant, you cannot have a friend (*see* Petronijević 1989: 54).

The past reminds these heroes not of what they have been, but what they essentially are. Therefore, in the effective replicas of some characters there appears regret about something that has passed:<sup>14</sup>

Jelena: We were so close back then, when we were growing together, at that time I didn't

<sup>13</sup> Eternal recurrence can only be stopped by death. This is evidently a variation on the theme of Nietzsche's rejection of metaphysics: there is no life after death, but there is cyclical recurrence.

<sup>14</sup> There is no feeling of deep and eternal grief like Borisav Stanković's *regret for youth*, but it is important to draw attention to delving, albeit incidental, into the finest threads of the human soul, something that we designate as psychological realism in B. Stanković's work.



realize how close we were like now when I am so far from him... (709).

The aesthetics of this drama is based on tensions between modal processes in the soul of a character and the interaction of characters at the plot level. Janković knows very well how Dimitrijević's mother cried out for bread; how he lost some money given to Dimitrijević's father – so that this procedure resembles the one applied to *Career*. However, in contrast to *Career* where the impossible illusion is directed at someone else, here we see the crumbling of an auto-illusion: Dimitrijević would constantly remind Janković of injustice he (Dimitrijević) had done, so that he runs away not wishing to recognize his guilt – just like at the beginning of the play when Ivan tells him about a man he met during his travels and whose daughter Janković had driven into the grave, after which Janković told his wife that they should immediately go home. In the first case, the reminiscences represent a carefree childhood escape, which isolates the heroes from the brutality of the world, while in the second case the ghosts of the past threaten to impair the cohesion of a false image of oneself.

In all plays of this kind, the father is a significant figure, while the mother's role is the accentuated reflection of that which is manifested through the father's character. The character of Mrs Janković is the example of a corrupted and egoistic society. Her selfishness becomes fully evident at the moment when her daughter goes into labour. She comments only on banal everyday things; these trivialities become evident whenever she appears on the stage. She is unable to feel compassion; she is insensitive to the importance of the moment and unprepared to sacrifice herself. In contrast to this character, the author depicts Dimitrijević's mother Sofija who lives in poverty after her husband's death and nurses her sick daughter. She even nursed Mrs Janković's daughter Jelena when she was sick, which we learn from other protagonists in this play. She understands the mother's role as the acceptance of sacrifice:

Sofija: Why am I a mother if not to suffer?

[...]

Destiny was probably like that! (716).

And just as the freedom of characters is restricted by their conditionally destined/inherited predetermination or social inequalities, life itself is restricted by death, which becomes more certain if it is determined by heritage. Since thoughts about death and dying accompany all characters and all life manifestations, the harbingers of death and indicative signs are also evident: Ivan points out that



Dimitrijević's sunken eyes left a special impression on him at their first meeting. Similarly, Dimitrijević knew a Pole with an unruly blond hair and sunken eyes in Munich, and it seemed to him that he would look at this Pole even while lying on his deathbed. He again appears before his eyes – and he concludes that he has certainly died. And just a linguistic causality reveals that this should be the sign of his forthcoming death, all the more so because he expects it. Namely, he is already older than his father when he died. On the other hand, Jelena gives birth to a stillborn baby and Jovanka dies. In fact, only the word goes around that she has died. The characters in Jovanović's drama are in constant contact with death. Death is everything. Every birth is the anticipation of death.<sup>15</sup>

Ivan (the superman) admits that he does not know how to love because he is a complete man: "I was made for myself" (736). This differentiates him from Dimitrijević who is only half of a man and cannot survive without the other half – in accordance with Plato's thesis that the first human was an androgynous being, who was then separated and condemned to seek the other half. "A complete man" is sufficient to himself, his natural aspiration is the aspiration towards separation, while the natural urge of an incomplete man is to seek the "other half", the part that is missing or, in other words, union. The trait of a superman is immortality, so that he is essentially unable to endure death and misfortune, despite being dignified and beyond this world. Every restraint stifles him, even if it is symbolically presented in the form of spatial narrowness. Therefore, at the end of the drama – when Ivan reveals to Jelena that he knows all about her relationship with Dimitrijević and gives her freedom to be with him and mosaically replace the part that both she and he do not have – he emphasizes that he cannot breathe because everything in the room is suffocating him. A little earlier, in a different scene, Dimitrijević will also observe the same thing and will tell him: "Well, go, go. You are suffocating here" (722).

Dimitrijević: Ivan, you know nothing about suffering, but you also know nothing about joy (732).

According to Jovanović, the superman should be the man of the future, devoid of feelings, *homo rationalis*, the foundation of something that Dragan Ilić succeeded in anticipating in his first science fiction drama *Posle milijon godina* (After a Million Years) (1889). Such a man is the product of alienation and is usually solitary. The presence of solitude is also dual. Seclusion for supermen means the return to peace, establishment of a balance and liberation from restraints, while for

<sup>15</sup> In such disregard for the lives of loved ones, as depicted by Marambo, one can recognize Nietzsche's motif of cruelty against loved ones.



incomplete men solitude, which is derived from alienation, represents a decisive moment – the turning point. When the characters look back in time, they only recognize horror and nothingness, while if they look into the future they only see hopelessness and death as the only certainty. However, there is no freedom without the future. The “enmity of life“ requires a decision, a commitment: giving up the struggle, or remaining and accepting the imposed suffering – “The important thing is to find out how people get away in the first case and why people stay in the second case“ (Kami 2008: 38). Jelena isolates herself and symbolically *locks the door*.

Spatial symbolism is clear: the heroine reveals that in her understanding of the world and life there is no room for hope any more. This breaks her link with life and life is something that exists beyond ourselves – in this case, it is also *outside the room* in which she lives. Until this moment, her urge for life was instinctive, but after realizing that her life is becoming burdensome and that it does not offer the desired peace because hopelessness is a long-lasting condition and that in her case this condition is permeated with the feeling of guilt, the heroine is left with only one choice – to escape from life. Here the necessity deprives the heroine of freedom or, more precisely, the freedom of choice. However, she was induced to commit suicide not by revolt, which implies non-acceptance because “death makes no sense except to the people who have passionately loved life. How can one die without having something to part from? Detachment is a negation of both life and death. Whoever has overcome his fear of death has also triumphed over life. For life is nothing but another word for this fear“ (Sioran 2011: 20).

Marambo is an opponent of the institution of marriage if it does not imply freedom, and this idea was also close to other authors of that period. First of all, it could be compared to Milutin Bojić’s *Chains* but, bearing in mind the strong influence of Russian realist authors on Serbian authors, one should not neglect L.N. Tolstoy’s view of the institution of marriage: “The Christian’s ideal is the love of God and his neighbour, self-renunciation in order to serve God and his neighbour; carnal love – marriage – means serving oneself, and therefore is, in any case, a hindrance in the service of God and men, and therefore from the Christian point of view – a fall, a sin“ (Tolstoj 1981: 258). There is no doubt that such a religious and moral problem of L.N. Tolstoy, which had a strong influence on European naturalism, is contrasted with the philosophy of F. Nietzsche who denies the existence of God,<sup>16</sup> so that it appears as a paradox, but our authors could not free themselves from Russian literature that was close to us, as well as the governing moral codes and religious beliefs being in

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<sup>16</sup> Once again, one should make a parallel with the play *In One’s Home* in order to present the established mechanisms of an individual’s attitude toward himself, his neighbours and God. Emphasis on the family values which Čekić’s hero repressed and then lost during his multi-year studies abroad, achieves its full meaning in the last scene. Pavle’s mother (who is addressed to as Mrs Matić throughout the play) is called “mother“ only at the end, when she wishes to remind her son of the values which she tried to instill in him with love and sacrifice: “Too bad, my son, too bad. You’ve forgotten yourself, myself, you’ve forgotten the memory of your father, in this home, Pavle, you’ve forgotten God“ (Čekić 2000: 72). In this scene, due to such a betrayal and thus the loss she has suffered, she will be prepared to take her son’s life.



compliance with the national mentality. The third moment, which could also be decisive, refers to the idea of freedom. Namely, due to its negative attitude toward marriage, it confirms itself in the sovereign erasure of every contradiction.<sup>17</sup>

The essence of the collapse of all values is actually reflected in the annihilation of everything that is deeply human. The revelation of the truth about a deformed humanness, as the primary goal of all modernists, leads also to the revelation of the reasons for a moral collapse of all religious and philosophical traditions. Namely, their wrong aspiration was not directed towards enduing the mere existential givens with human sense, but it systematically deprived life of its meaning. Therefore, authors felt the need to turn once again to the truth, which could only be sought in the unwithered inner sources of vitality. The view of the world, based on such assumptions, referred to the focal point of each content, and this involves the question that has already been posed by Georg Lukács: “What is man?” (Lukač 1972: 476). Hence all convictions of dramatic heroes are based on certain moral dilemmas, but since all their actions are reduced to the modern gesture of passive resistance or silent heroism, these heroes remain lastingly determined just by hesitance and then withdrawal. By approaching the theatre of the absurd, whether consciously or not, the authors of this period opted for one of the two possible concepts: the forthcoming existentialism of Albert Camus, which reacted to the absurd by “revolt and refusal“, or Pirandello’s concept of the absurd implying “indifference and consent“. That which imposed itself on the dramatic heroes of that period as an unattainable goal was the preservation of empathy as the basis of social justice. Having realized that such a goal cannot be attained, authors adopted a largely destructive mechanism by which they deconstructed everything human in these heroes, reducing them to the measure that would become the symbol of absolute annihilation and nihilism.

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<sup>17</sup> As for the issue of marriage, we must also mention the influence of Polish authors on Serbian literature. This refers primarily to Stanislaw Przybyszewski and his influence on Bojić. In the early 20th century, Przybyszewski was one of the most translated Slavic authors. His influence was largely based on the idea of a strong eroticization of everyday life (for more detail see: Bunjak 1999: 68–73).



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