



COMBUSTIONS

SRĐAN SRDIĆ

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COMBUSTIONS

by Srđan Srdić

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GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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ABOUT A CERTAIN DOOR TO POST-YUGOSLAV LITERATURE

Srđan Srđić is one of the most important authors of post-Yugoslav literature. In fact, along with a few others, he is a writer whose primary interest is literature; he knows it and loves it, and is someone who, if he doesn't live off writing, which is hardly possible these days, lives for reading and writing. In today's world this is an achievement, especially when the logic of the literary market no longer exists, where everything is turned into wild plunder, in a futile rat race for a piece of glory and small amounts of cash. Srđan Srđić is a long way from this. He belongs to the authentic and important tradition which he chose for himself, which he gained with his own education and knowledge, and which he inclined towards with his writing: without paying too much attention to what is going on in the literary field around him. Although he did not appear out of thin air, one can claim that he entered literature in the most classic way, through magazines and literary competitions. It could be said that he rose like a comet and since his appearance things have not been the same in post-Yugoslav literature. This does not mean that everybody approves of him, on the contrary. But this relationship is changing, and it is not straightforward. In

the beginning the critics were overwhelmed with him, but the readers were a bit appalled. Today, it seems that his readership is growing, but the critics are not as univocal as they used to be. The truth is that he does not care for either of them. He is treading the road he has paved, and with every new book he tries to cross new barriers and set new goals, to overcome the so-called “petrified form”. Srdić does not do this because he is vain or shrewd, but because he takes himself and his job very seriously, and this is a rare thing around here, no matter what work you do.

I do not want to explore matters that are not connected to literature so I will try to go swiftly through every book Srdić has written – three novels, two collections of short stories, and a collection of essays. I would like to present to you the scale of his talent and his hard work, because we seem to forget that talent only constitutes ten per cent of success, work, order and scrutiny do the rest.

Srdić’s first book, the novel *The Dead Field*, was published in 2010. It was kind of a precedent of the new Serbian literature, because it resembled the stream of consciousness and modernistic type of novel, similar to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, not only by its free use of other generic structures, but also by its use of an experimental mode of language. The metaphor in the title instantly tells the reader what the book is about, but when one plunges oneself into the seemingly complicated jungle of the text and its meanings, it becomes obvious that the plot is set in what may be the worst year in modern day Serbian history; mad and inflicted with war, poverty and economic inflation, the year of 1993.

Like his great Irish role model, Srdić set his narrative over twenty-four hours of a terrible day, and just like in *Ulysses*, in Srdić's novel nothing much happens, or one could say that everything that happens is merely the overflow of the Lacanian Symbolic in the reality created by the novel. Two guys flee Belgrade because of the draft, while a girl flees Kikinda for Belgrade; their meeting, along with their deaths and love, occur in the middle of the story, in a village called Perlez. What is important is the story, and as a character called Srđan Srdić says: "Every story is significant".

Bakhtin determines the polyphony as the main feature of a novel. In his study about Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin states that polyphony characterizes the novel through different uses of language, by means of which it creates and resembles reality. In a similar way Srdić's use of various perspectives, his constant change of viewpoint, the rhythm of the narration, the style, enabling the characters to use different languages, and their significant silences, all contributes to the enormous richness and fullness of the text. The question of polyphony inevitably puts the question of the Other and Different in focus by giving the right type of speech to them without the slightest intervention. Through this approach, Srdić's novel becomes a study of character: a precise sociological analysis based on language and language behavior. Polyphony also brings to light intertextuality, which, in *The Dead Field*, is not only based on literary sources but also on music, popular culture and film.

Why is it important to write about the year of 1993 today, after seventeen years have elapsed? The simplest answer is that 1993 is key to understanding the dominant

Zeitgeist of today's Serbia. This shows us who we really are, and highlights, unfortunately, that we have not really changed since then. The coda in the last chapter is some kind of pessimistic conclusion to our lives. Srdić will blatantly tell us to our faces that everything has stayed the same. When looking at the past, his novel is an open fight against forgetfulness, against the illusion that we can negate what has happened and what is happening by turning our heads away, or sticking them in the sand.

Finally, Srdić's novel is the justification of the tragic sense of the world, which stretches from Homer to the present day. All of the characters are based upon this premise. Following the logic of hubris, which is reflected in the state of being different, the lovers, who are united by fierce passion, have to discover that they are related. There is the Angel of Destruction walking through Serbia: his name is Captain Zoran Cukić. Before him, even those who believe in the logic of blood and soil, and who are basically his kind, cannot be sustained. Only those close to the power will prevail, like Inspector Braca Josijević. In short, in a dramatic tour de force the reality confirms its brutality and spits in our faces.

Espirando is Srdić's second book, and his first collection of short stories. After the success of *The Dead Field*, Srđan Srdić was given the chance to present himself as a storyteller. And he did not disappoint us. He continued with his authorial voice, as he did in his breakthrough novel, and it seemed that in some of the short stories he went even further. Right from the start he shows us that he has mastered the form of the short story, which, unlike the novel, demands certain artisan skills, almost technical trickery; but in a few stories he did something

that I consider to be the masterful touch – he managed to deconstruct the form, to reshuffle its pieces, and by doing so gained something completely new and different. He showed us that he mastered different modes of narration, that his intertextual scale is almost unprecedented in today's fiction, and that he can juggle the elements of humor and seriousness, and that, finally, he can, by the use of language, present authentic and profound emotions. If *The Dead Field* was an extraordinary experiment, the proof of authorial potential and bravery, then *Espirando* is the book that will bring Srdić to the highest peaks of Serbian and post-Yugoslav fiction. It is the testimony of the powerful and authentic narrative voice which (pardon my metaphor) can whisper and roar, scream and sing lullabies.

The architectural structure of the collection, which consists of nine stories, already tells us that the author knew exactly what he was doing. Not only do the stories have certain thematic similarities sketched into the titles, but they somehow melt into one another, which helps to create a loose novelistic structure. The common theme of all of the stories is death and its nearness; they represent the last breath, the moment in which the characters are still alive before the end. In other words, these stories are about the border between life and death; or are these stories focused on the thin line in between life and death: that exact libidinal experience.

In accordance with this theme, Srdić uses literary models which stem from high modernism. Although Thomas Mann and William Faulkner, whose story *A Rose for Emily* has been paraphrased or pastichized as an unveiled literary inspiration; still, one could claim

that the true father of these stories is Samuel Beckett. The Irish author's breath could be felt behind every story, whether the story was written directly under his influence or not. Maybe Beckett's influence could be felt most in the building of the characters, which are similar to his Molloy, Vladimir and Estragon, or Malone. The characters are always in a sur-tragic conflict with the world. They have reached a state of disgust with life. In this sense, the way in which Srdić shows his masterful narration, and which brings him out of the generation is his use of strict and concentrated language, which is similar to poetry. By his use of language, Srdić manages to represent that exact state in which the characters found themselves, and which is very close to the inexpressible; such are the protagonists in the stories "Regarding the Death of the Best Among Us", "Medicine", and some of the characters in "Mosquitoes".

What is truly powerful is the picture of human consciousness in a hostile environment whose hate and envy are best felt through the impersonal "we", something which Srdić adopts from Faulkner. Perhaps "A Rose for Emily" is the core of *Espirando*, even though this story is further away from the atmosphere of the collection. Narrated from a non-typical perspective, this story gives us, as in an inverted mirror, insight into the inner life of all of the other characters in the collection. It convincingly describes the nature of the conflict that an individual can have with the world, even when he is a complete bastard, such as the characters from "Mosquitoes" or "Regarding the Death of the Best Among Us". Every time "I" gets into a conflict with "We", this conflict is fatal for the self, and this is the point in which we discover the tragic nature of

the world, at least as it is seen through the eyes of Srđić's characters.

As in *The Dead Field*, where there was a chance for redemption which was lost in advance, in *Espirando* there are two stories which, regardless of the known closure, give us a glimpse of something different and better. "Medicine" and "Slow Divers" are extreme love stories, in terms of the emotions displayed and the extraordinary settings, but also through the portrayal of longing as well. One story is a romance between a guy and a dying girl, the other is a lesbian relationship with a flavor of antique bacchanals. It is clear through the narrative construct that both of these relationships are going to be fatal; but this intense tenderness which Srđić depicts is something that we don't see very often in modern post-Yugoslav fiction. In other words, no matter how short-lived these relationships were, no matter how much they fall from grace, which is inevitable, had been terrible and disastrous, the moments of bliss are the most important thing: they give meaning to life. Just like Bataille, by putting together Eros and Tanathos Srđić stands on the side of the former, because it represents the possibility of redemption from a gloomy everyday life.

The novel *Satori* was published in 2013. It begins with some quotes from Barthes, Lyotard and the Scottish band Mogwai. If nothing else, we (the reader) should be aware that we are in the post-world: post-structuralism, post-modern and post-rock. This is extremely important because the whole novel is set in a world that cannot be defined clearly: it does not belong to a unifying theoretical model. It can only be described as a world that comes after; it does not have a foundation, it does not

have a basis on which you can build, it is a ruin which merely pops up. The protagonist exists and survives in such a world (or is he a postagonist?), who goes by the nickname the Driver. *Satori* is a Bildung, or educational novel, in which the reader follows the process of acquiring knowledge, revelation and satori, which in Zen-Buddhism means the moment of seeing the truth of the world, something which the Driver will not experience.

When the educational novel arose sometime in the seventeenth century, authors such as Grimmelshausen, who is the father of the genre, or Goethe, whose novel *Wilhelm Meister* is considered the generic paradigm, had a completely different vision of human nature from Flaubert in *L'Education Sentimentale*, or Srdić in *Satori*. Every agent of education whom Wilhelm Meister meets along the way brings him some kind of enrichment of the spirit and expands his education. Unlike Goethe, Flaubert's Frederick Moreau regresses, i.e. his education does not flow in a logical sense from not knowing to knowing, but instead follows the protagonist's emotional development which is not balanced and teleological. Srdić's post-educational novel negates every kind of education which leads to knowing, because there is no world in which progress and/or regress would be possible. The world is a big ruin in every sense of the word, and the Driver and his friend Moki are like zombies, the living dead, shells that are bound to become part of the scenery. Their return to a place where they felt more alive than before, is as devoid of purpose as anything they had done before because nothing fulfils them. Meetings that occur along the way, which are not straightforward, follow the shortest line, but in a round way and are in fact goalless; these

meetings will not enrich their knowledge, will not allow any insight or any satori, but merely serve to prove to the reader that the world does not exist, that it is completely ruined. Duma, the half-witted keeper of a farm which is also a mass grave; the Hun and his mother who live by the river and who will help the Driver cross it in their boat; nameless gas stations; the motel on the motorway; the officer who became a cleaner; the truck driver who takes the Driver to the wanted destination, and in the end Moki, whose name may stem from the verb “to mock” – all live in a senseless world, whose existence is completely irrelevant, insignificant.

Srdić does not escape the frame he set in his previous novel or in his collection of short stories. His closest literary cousin is still Beckett, but Srdić’s theater of absurdity is enriched with a subtle ironic distance in the form of a key to understanding the novel. He is well aware which corpus texts he comes from, and at the end of the novel he extensively quotes from Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*. This quotation has a double function: it helps the reader to organize the text with hindsight, because sometimes the novel seems like a puzzle of narrative pieces and scenes, and this quote gives a certain teleology. On the other hand, the quotation refuses to be what it should be, according to the title – satori, revelation and epiphany. If the Driver and Moki spent their most valuable years when they were imprisoned; they weren’t living, and the big question is whether such a life is worth living. The dark side of Srdić’s poetics, which is set out in his earlier works, including those published in literary magazines, is enriched with the aforementioned ironic distance, which makes *Satori* his best oeuvre.

Readers who love to play intertextual games, who love to explore soundtracks, who like self-quotations, will certainly enjoy this novel. It is based on a certain post-emotionality, on de-composure of every closure: from the narrative, to that of the created world, to those characters who are not able to dream one dream but dream two, ruin of the ruin. Nonetheless, *Satori* is a convincing mimetic picture of today's world, not only in Serbia, but much further afield. Also included in the novel is Srđić's political statement about the existence of PTSP, even against those who did not take part in the war directly. It is as if the narrative poses the question: "What is your world, what makes your life?" I am not sure that there is an answer to this question.

In 2014 Srđić published his second collection of short stories, *Combustions*. It comprises nine stories, which can be clustered into three groups of three. The first group, which provides immediate joy, are: "The Daydreaming Rat", "Good Night, Captain" and "Summertime". The second group, the one in which intertextual examination is dominant, includes the stories: "Golem", "Espirando" and "Leng Tchè"; while the last group consists of the following: "The Leaden Carousel", "The Tale of How I.I. Settled the Quarrel with I.N." and the closing one, which in my opinion is simply marvelous is "About a Door". This division into reading classes should be taken with a pinch of salt, as a critical praxis which helps to ease the presentation of this narrative structure, and to show that Srđić does not give way to chance, because chance is the greatest enemy of art.

I have said enough about Srđan Srđić's masterful use of language. I could add that in these four books Srđić

managed to tame the language and put it into the function of what he basically does with his writing; this is the description of *condition humaine*, which is not cheerful at all. Srđić goes even further in these stories, and the question that seems to interest him is the one of communication or, to be precise, the lack of it. This is where the title comes from, because his characters burn out in a fruitless attempt to communicate with one another, and with their surroundings. Whichever story from the collection you look at, you will see that the real communication is directed inward; there is also no significant Other. Even when real communication is present, as in “The Tale of How...” (which is a very gloomy paraphrase of Gogol’s story), it is false, incomplete, one could say paradoxically unnecessary. If we raise this thematic level to an auto-poetical one, we realize that this is what literature does, it tries to communicate, but it often burns out in the attempt. It stays unread, or is either falsely or partially read. Its messages are like the famous Sartre’s claim of singing in the desert (also quoted by Danilo Kiš).

Superficial readers could claim that Srđić did not move on from what he had already done in his previous books; instead, he entered a vicious circle of his own reading and writing obsessions. Nevertheless, in the story “About a Door”, we can see clear signs of what will be the development of this still relatively young author. Not only intense emotional levels of the story which are visible during the mixture of narrative planes, skillfully jumping through the narrated time, crossing from third to first person narration, or the tone which is obviously more melancholic, even melodramatic, which could be compared to Bruno Schulz, but it seems that there is

something else. The ironic distance of the previous text which had been extremely important, changed to auto-ironic because it brings about a further distortion of the perspective for the reader as well as the writer. All of this ends in a magnificent glorification of literature, marvelous auto-da-fe which enables life-in-art. If “Good Night, Captain” and “The Daydreaming Rat” depend on a completely false interpretation of reality by the characters, then the mild tone which the narrator takes, describing the kid/himself, presents a very important and valuable leap from negation to affirmation, from Beckett to Thomas Man, especially the Thomas Mann injection of irony and love. *Satori* ends with a long quotation from Flaubert, and *Combustions* ends with a sentimental tone in which there are traces of an almost classic beauty.

Srdić published another collection of essays, *Notes from Reading*, in the same year. Fellow critic and editor Ivan Radosavljević said that the book gives its readers insight into the master’s atelier, as well as insight into the books that influenced his own work. Srdić believes that no literature was created ex nihilo, or with a simple touch of a muse. His deepest conviction is that literary artworks lean on one another and that they are born through the experience of reading. The nine essays deal with seemingly disparate subjects, from popular culture to Japanese literary modernism, but each essay shows us the depth of insight into the nature of the artistic world that Srdić has in the academic field, while also revealing the primary level of pure joy in the text. If his fictional books are sometimes gloomy and obsessive, then his dealings with other authors texts is in fact an opportunity for sheer *plaisir du texte*, as Barthes

put it. This is why this book is a cheerful diary of his reading and thoughts about literature, while also being an excellent introduction to the books these texts deal with. His research is thorough, his texts meticulously studied and written in a very clear, approachable and understandable way, as one cannot think about literature in blurred metaphors, but through well-argued and clear sentences. Srđić's relationship with the literature shown in this book is distanced from the dominant theoretically non-defined blurriness which is more often than not just a mask for complete ignorance. For this reason, this book is in a way the key to understanding his fiction.

Finally, the novel *The Silver Mist Falls*, published in 2017, is the peak of his career so far. Radically different from anything he has done before, and from anything that could be read in the post-Yugoslav literary scene; this novel introduces an almost experimental prose which stems from the most radically modern and post-modern models. Although it should be read as a novel about the impossibility of communication, which is the closest encounter between two human beings, I would say that it is basically a love story or, if it is possible to say, it is an anti-love story. The book opens with a woman who is involved with a very complicated, self-absorbed and secluded man, who is also an author: this is probably the most testing love story Srđić has ever written. But the novel has much more to offer. It produces as many meanings as there are readers, and according to sale figures, the numbers are constantly growing. Which is kind of a surprise because one has to be patient to make it through this novel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Some of the stories have been
published separately elsewhere*

“Good Night, Captain” in *Offcourse Literary Journal*, Albany, New York, September 2014, Issue 58.

“Leng Tch’è” in *Rock & Sling, a journal of witness*, Spokane, Washington, November 2014, Issue 9.2.

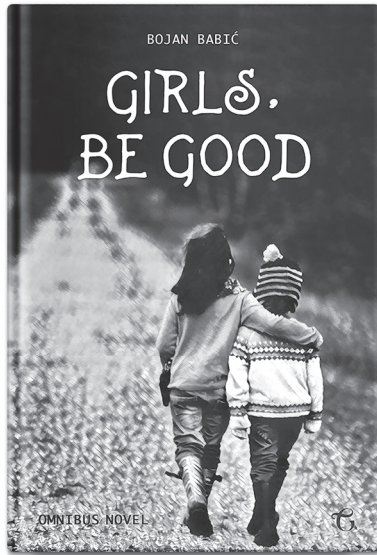
“About a Door” in *Gutter Magazine*, Scotland, February 2015, Issue 12.

“Summertime” in *Word Riot*, April 2015.

“The Tale of How I.I. Settled the Quarrel with I.N.” in *Mud Season Review*, Vermont, USA, June 2015.

Girls, be Good

by Bojan Babić

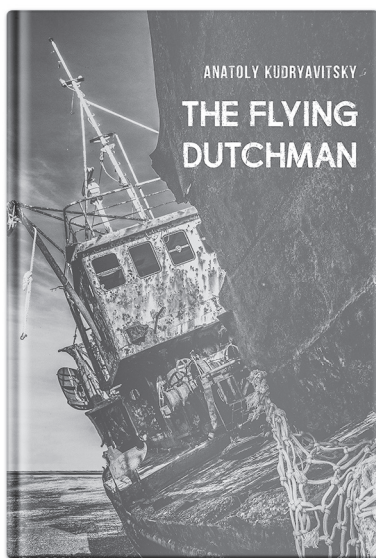


"Girls, be good" is an omnibus novel that consists of twenty short stories connected by a single framing narrative: just after the fall of the Berlin wall, foreign investors feel good about the investment climate in Eastern Europe and decide to open a huge toy factory in ex-Yugoslavia, where they are going to produce a hit range of toys designed for girls: small, plush lemurs called Aya, that will be sold all over the world. Before long, though, their optimism starts to feel out of place - the war in Yugoslavia begins, and the factory, having only produced one edition of the toys, has to shut down production...

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The Flying Dutchman

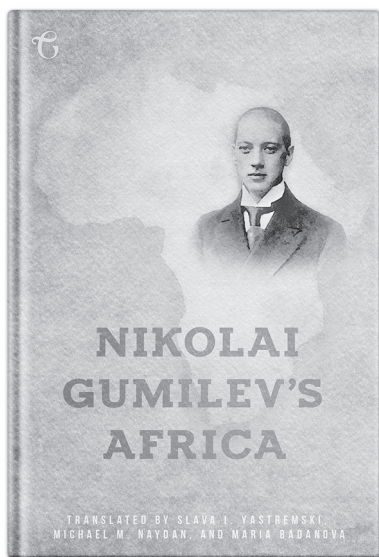
by Anatoly Kudryavitsky



Some time in the 1970s, Konstantin Alpheyev, a well-known Russian musicologist, finds himself in trouble with the KGB, the Russian secret police, after the death of his girlfriend, for which one of their officers may have been responsible. He has to flee from the city and to go into hiding. He rents an old house located on the bank of a big Russian river, and lives there like a recluse observing nature and working on his new book about Wagner. The house, a part of an old barge, undergoes strange metamorphoses rebuilding itself as a medieval schooner, and Alpheyev begins to identify himself with the Flying Dutchman. Meanwhile, the police locate his new whereabouts and put him under surveillance. A chain of strange events in the nearby village makes the police officer contact the KGB, and the latter figure out who the new tenant of the old house actually is.

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Nikolai Gumilev's Africa



Gumilev holds a unique position in the history of Russian poetry as a result of his profound involvement with Africa. He extensively wrote both poetry and prose on the culture of the continent in general and on Ethiopia (Abyssinia, as it was called in Gumilev's time) in particular. During his abbreviated lifetime Gumilev made four trips to Northern and Eastern Africa, the most extensive of which was a 1913 expedition to Abyssinia undertaken on assignment from the St. Petersburg Imperial Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. During that trip Gumilev collected Ethiopian folklore and ethnographic objects, which, upon his return to St. Petersburg, he deposited at the Museum. He and his assistant Nikolai Sverchkov also made more than 200 photographs that offer a unique picture of the African country in the early part of the century.

This volume collects all of Gumilev's poetry and prose written about Africa for the first time as well as a number of the photographs that he and Nikolai Sverchkov took during their trip that give a fascinating view of that part of the world in the early twentieth century.

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Srđan Srdić's collection of short stories, *Combustions*, establishes this author's position as one of the best prose writers in Serbia and across the region. This book consists of nine stories in which the author brings the reader face to face with the seamy side of every-

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– Mladen Vesković
Literary critic

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