

“Paper Theatre” by Milorad Pavić: mystifications with authorship and masonic symbols

Zoriana Huk

Ivan Franko National University of Lviv

Department of Slavonic Studies

1 Universytetska St, Lviv 79000, Ukraine

Email: zoryanahuk1@gmail.com

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3391-7280>

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Abstract. The article discusses the main poetic aspects of the collection of short stories, *Paper Theatre*, by the Serbian writer Milorad Pavić. The author of the article examines autobiographical moments and substantiates that Pavić’s work can serve as an illustration of a productive synthesis of fiction and actual events. The dynamic form and implementation of the postmodern concept of *the death of the author* are considered with the help of multiplicity of authorship, which in turn caused a shift in emphasis to the text and an increase in the status of the reader, who plays a dominant role. Self-citation inherent in postmodernist prose is analysed and realised through the use of already-known fragments, images, heroes, and symbols. Based on the analysis of the stories in the collection *Paper Theatre*, the elements that echo the Freemasons’ secrets were identified for the first time. This attests to Pavić’s awareness of the ideas of royal art and his desire to “illustrate” Masonic symbolism, which may be the key to reading his works. Particular attention is focused on the story *Blue Sweat*, where paratextual elements with Masonic signs were discovered. It is concluded that Pavić counted on an exemplary reader who should have the ability to notice the secret symbols of the semantic labyrinth and become the author’s accomplice in intellectual pursuits.

Keywords: Milorad Pavić; elements of autobiography; multiplicity of authorship; self-citation; Masonic symbols.

Introduction

Milorad Pavić (1929–2009) belongs to the classics of world postmodern literature, and the international success of his novels testifies to the relevance of the artistic forms he used, which are in tune with the creative pursuits of the authors of the contemporary world. The morphology of his works is characterised by a powerful intellectual flow, incorporating literary, historical, and cultural discourses. Most of the works of the

prominent postmodernist are well known, but one of his last books, *Paper Theatre* (2007), has not yet become the subject of widespread interest and study.

Pavić attempted to transform the genre from the standpoint of a postmodern worldview to ensure the effect of novelty; therefore, the work of fiction received an unexpected genre definition: “a novel anthology or contemporary world story”. Literary critic Sava Babić calls *Paper Theatre* a provocative challenge, as the writer continues formal experiments, rejecting traditional narrative models (Babić, 2008). A similar opinion is expressed by researcher Alla Tatarenko, who considers the book’s oxymoronic subtitle, “A Novel Anthology or Contemporary World Story”, as a new genre hybrid (Tatarenko, 2010, p. 373).

Numerous poetic aspects of the book *Paper Theatre* have remained beyond the attention of scholars. Distinctive features of Pavić’s last prose works, to which *Paper Theatre* belongs, are the restriction of the use of postmodern dominants, the labyrinth of the autobiographical and the fictional. The writer highlighted many autobiographical moments that were not characteristic of his postmodern works. The identified autobiographical markers can be helpful for interpretation. In this investigation, we will consider the realisation of the postmodern concept of “the death of the author” through the mystifications around authorship. Pavić often implemented the concept of “mystery” through secret symbols, offering a special game for the creative reader. The purpose of the research is to highlight the Masonic elements and study the symbolism of Freemasonry in the book *Paper Theatre*, which has not yet been the subject of interest to literary scholars. The biographical method is applied to achieve this aim, which helps identify autobiographical elements in *Paper Theatre*. Poststructuralist methods and reader response theory are essential for the analysis since the author’s use of postmodernist concepts can be traced in the study.

1. Mystifications surrounding authorship and autobiographical discourse

In the book *The Novel as a State*, the Serbian postmodernist incorporated his original theoretical considerations regarding the asymmetry between the traditional theoretical apparatus and the existing artistic practice (Pavić, 2005, p. 14–16). Developing the theoretical concept of the “open work” in his novelistic prose, the writer worked hard to diversify textual models and mechanisms of artistic communication between the author and the reader through the text. Relying on the theoretical research of U. Eco, a scholar and writer, and the creative practice of J. L. Borges and I. Calvino, Pavić developed an original novel technique, which was manifested in the author’s technique of embodying postmodernist theoretical concepts. First of all, this refers to diversifying the ways of reading the novel by increasing the role and responsibility of the reader in creating the text, which is realised by changing the way it is written. In his autopoietic reflections, the writer postulates not only the creation of a moving (“open”) structure but also “openness” at the level of content, which reveals many meanings and thereby provides grounds for interpretations from different perspectives. This involves the author’s establishment of the ambiguity of the text, the intention of which is to create a co-creator reader.

Pavić, the "inventor of forms", justifies the mechanism of the creation of *Paper Theatre* as follows: "a novel anthology" includes stories from 38 countries where his works were published. The postmodernist wanted to express his gratitude to the translators, publishers and readers of these countries. Such a formal experiment enabled the multiplicity of beginnings (the reader can move in the desired sequence) and helped to manifest the postmodern concept of "the death of the author" through the multiplicity of authorship and the new figure of the compiler. All 38 stories are written on behalf of 38 fictitious writers, each of whom represents national literature and publishes works in the publishing houses with which Pavić once collaborated. In this way, the Serbian postmodernist was able to distance himself from his text, to hide behind the mask of the compiler of "a novel anthology" or the masks of "internal" authors. In each case, the mystifications surrounding the authorship of *Paper Theatre* are designed to conceal the authentic identity of the creator of the artistic text from the reader. Pavić is a representative of Serbia in the anthology, but he invented biobibliographical information for the rest of the *internal authors*. An attentive and informed reader will be able to recognise the autobiographical inclusions that the *literary father* incorporated in these biographies to create the effect of reality. For example, among the authors, some musicians gave up music and became writers (*Playing Four Hands, How to Go to the Theatre*), lazy people who wrote all their books lying down (*Love Correspondence*), and writer who became honorary doctor of Sofia University (*The Devil*), university teachers or lecturers (*Château-d'Olonne, The Way along the Fjords, A Double-Barrelled Revolver, The Armchair for Dying*), writers whose interactive stories and interactive dramatic works can only be attributed to the 21st century (*Tattoos, Paintings*), a translator (*Global Warming*), a lover of the noble breed of dogs – sighthounds (*One Night Francisco Goya...*), a pipe smoker (*Château-d'Olonne, The Way along the Fjords*) and an e-book researcher without biography but with bibliography (*The Armchair for Dying*).

It is worth noting that Pavić has a self-portrait in the form of a violin because he concurrently studied at the Faculty of Philosophy (Department of "Literature of Yugoslavia") and at the conservatory in the violin class but subsequently made a choice in favour of literature (Popović, 2002, p. 69). The Serbian postmodernist considered himself one of the so-called *dual craftsmen* who mastered two crafts at the same time:

A separate discussion is about what it means to be a dual craftsman, as it was called in the 18th century, which means to be both (...) a writer and at the same time a historian and a theorist of literature. There are more similar cases than we think. Consider, for example, Umberto Eco or Italo Calvino. Today, there are more and more people like this in the world. This was once called **poeta doctus**. Perhaps this is not the best expression. I think what Borges, the greatest scholarly poet of our century, did should be regarded with the deepest respect. Thus, our time is the time of such dual craftsmen who live in two worlds – both scientific and literary. (Yevtych, 1999, p. 101)

Being a professor at the Universities of Novi Sad and Belgrade, an honorary doctor of Sofia University, Pavić was invited to give lectures on Serbian literature abroad. In

parallel with his scientific activities, he translated the poetry of Byron and Pushkin and published his own poetry collections, short story collections, novel prose, and interactive dramas. Pavić, in his essay *Autobiography* stated:

To my great surprise, my books have been translated into different languages about a hundred times today. In short, I don't have a biography. I only have a bibliography. (Pavić, 2005, p. 8)

Notably, the *Paper Theatre* anthology contains the *biography* of the German author, who is proud that Hans Robert Jauss wrote a review of his work. It is interesting that among the numerous studies of the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, Pavić noted with particular pleasure the research of literary scholar Jauss entitled: "Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*" (Immanent Aesthetics, Aesthetic Reflections, "Religious Polemic or: The Last Things before the Last" and Figures of the End in Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*") (Jaus, 1997).

In the story *The Devil*, the Serbian postmodernist describes his parents, Vera and Zdenko Pavić, who were gymnasium teachers and keen athletes (Pavić, 2007, p. 120). The author of the anthology endowed the characters with his character traits, habits (the mention of the habit of writing with a pencil while lying down is an example of autocriticism), preferences and even pets. In Popović's book *The First Writer of the Third Millennium: the Biography of Milorad Pavić* (2002), several photos of Pavić with two sighthounds can be found, which gave the name to his short story and the collection of the same name *Russian Greyhound (Borzoj)* (1979) (Popović, 2002, p. 66; 89; 109). Besides, the cover and eighteen photographs in this book testify to smoking a pipe as a passionate habit of the writer.

Actual events can be traced in the biography of the Chinese author Chang Lu, who completely stole "the most famous novel of one European writer" and published it under his name (Pavić, 2007, p. 141–144). Obviously, it refers to the plagiarism of the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, which started the popularity of the Serbian postmodernist in China. In an interview, Pavić spoke about the history of this literary theft, which ended in a lawsuit:

As for plagiarism (...), I would add that it made a good impression on me because when your thoughts and your literature can make their way so far (although under someone else's name) – this already means something. After all, Chinese Slavists exposed the plagiarism and wrote a separate book about it. (Pavić, 2006)

A notable feature is that in one of his stories (*The Armchair for Dying*), Pavić gives the character his date of birth (October 15) and describes people born on this day according to the horoscope of the Aztec Indians (Pavić, 2007, p. 280). Detailed information about the specific nature of such people can be found in R. Popović's book *The First Writer of the Third Millennium: the Biography of Milorad Pavić* (Popović, 2002, p. 11). The dates of death of the *internal* writers in the anthology also deserve special attention: in 2009, the authors of the two short stories *The Armchair for Dying* and *Paper Theatre*, which gave the anthology its name, died. Significantly, the first edition of the book was published two

years before Pavić passed away. It seems that the Serbian writer tried to predict the year of his death in 2007, and as a well-known hoaxer and mystic, he succeeded.

2. Masonic symbols

Despite the coverage of many autobiographical moments in the interviews, Pavić did not mention his probable membership in the Masonic lodge since it is a secret society. A characteristic feature of the writer's poetics is the repetition of images, heroes, motifs, symbols, and emblems, which can be keys to decoding the work. Pavić's brilliant familiarity with Masonic symbolism and his deep historical knowledge in this area can be noticed while carefully reading both the surface and deep levels of his works. Masonic symbols in the prose of the Serbian postmodernist perform cognitive, aesthetic and constructive functions. For the first time, the literary critic Radulović wrote about the Masonic code in the works by Pavić, devoting the most attention to the novel *Inner Side of the Wind* and the story *Damascene* (Radulović, 2012). The secret symbols of Freemasons also echo in the analysed anthology *Paper Theatre*.

In the prose of Pavić, the image of the architect is a leading, central one since builders are the main characters of many of his works: Atanas Svilar (*Landscape Painted with Tea*), Radacha Chihorić and Sandal Krasimirić (*The Inner Side of the Wind*), David Senemut (*The Glass Snail*), John the Damascene and John of the Ladder (*Damascene*), Agatha (*Star Cape*), Inhotep (*Paper Theatre*). It can be argued that the frequency of use of the mentioned image is related to the Masonic vision of God as the *Great Architect of the Universe*, the engineer of souls and matter, who creates the world according to the laws of mathematics (Tshelskyi, 2015b, p. 144). The Freemasons consider themselves to be the heirs and successors of the constructors who built Solomon's Temple.

The image of the builder Inhotep is found in *The Story of the Black Scribe* from the analysed anthology *Paper Theatre*. This is one of the *Egyptian* stories by Pavić, which tells about the construction of a pyramid for Pharaoh Djoser (III Dynasty) near Memphis. We assume that the prototype of the character in Inhotep's story was Imhotep – a brilliant personality, vizier to King Djoser, high priest, poet, physician, mathematician, astronomer, and architect. He is considered the probable founder of stone construction, the inventor of the pyramidal architectural form for royal burials, and the first builder of the step pyramid (Mark, 2016). The famed American archaeologist and Egyptologist James Henry Breasted said of Imhotep:

In priestly wisdom, in magic, in the formulation of wise proverbs; in medicine and architecture; this remarkable figure of Djoser's reign left so notable a reputation that his name was never forgotten. He was the patron spirit of the later scribes, to whom they regularly poured out a libation from the water-jug of their writing outfit before beginning their work. (As cited in Barton, 2017)

The patron saint of writing, education, scribes and their craft could not fail to attract the interest of the Serbian writer. The fact that Imhotep gave development to the ancient order of priest-builders, whose spiritual heirs are modern Freemasons, also seems significant. The name of this Egyptian architect may appear in the names of Masonic lodges because they are often named in honour of those historical figures who were Masons or are considered the forerunners and founders of symbolic Freemasonry.

Pavić liked to use his previous works as *building material* for the next ones. The writer repeatedly mentions the prominent neo-modernist architect Antoni Gaudí in his prose work. In the novel *Star Cape*, the heroine of the work Agatha, who was not destined to become an architect, was an admirer of the work of the Spanish artist:



She adored Gaudí's architecture and, even more – his interiors. In Barcelona, she tried to buy something (...) by Gaudí, but it turned out to be impossible. Agatha's e-mails to a friend about Gaudí, titled *Gaudí's Stables* and *Gaudí's Bedrooms*, are evidence of her stay in Spain", which could be read by visiting M. Pavić's website: www.khazars.com. (Pavić, 2022, p. 94–95)

Subsequently, the mentioned fragments in the form of stories *Gaudí's Stable* and *Gaudí's Bedrooms* are included in the book *The Novel as a State and Other Essays* (2005) (Pavić, 2005, p. 141–142; 149–150). The analysed anthology *Paper Theatre* also includes a story called *The View from the Bedrooms*, dedicated to the Spanish builder. We can assume that precisely because of A. Gaudí's alleged connection to the Freemasonry environment, Pavić devoted stories to him and, resorting to self-citation, repeatedly introduced them into the textual fabrics of future works. Josep M. Carandell, in his research, investigated the use of secret society's symbolism in the architectural works of A. Gaudí and his followers (as cited in Frisach, 1998). In open sources, you can find information that Freemasonry symbols are used in the famous Sagrada Família, which is the decoration of Catalonia. For example, in the temple, you can observe the image of *the Eye of Providence* on the palm, a Masonic emblem, and a cryptogram called the magic square. The magic square contains 16 cells with numbers, and the sum of each horizontal or vertical is the number 33. The number 33 is a significant number in the culture of Freemasonry: there are 33 degrees in the hierarchy of Freemasons (Karg, Young, 2019, p. 95–96). Pavić uses the number 33 several times in the anthology *Paper Theatre*. From the story *The Way along the Fjords*, we learn that the works of the Norwegian writer E. Haugesund have been translated into 33 languages (Pavić, 2007, p. 173); in the story *Silver Comb* a pool filled with seawater with a temperature of 33 degrees is mentioned (Pavić, 2007, p. 95), and in the story *AIDS* the elevator stops on the 33rd floor (Pavić, 2007, p. 143). After the death of Pavić, the Serbian media discussed the obituary published in the *Politika* newspaper entitled *To Brother Milorad Pavić*, the authors of which were the United Grand Lodges of Serbia, and also claimed that the writer was a master of the 33rd degree in the Regular Grand Lodge of Serbia (Pavić, 2009; Lopusina, 2010).

In the story, *Blue Sweat*, allusions to Masonic signs and symbols can be found. We assume that the colour in the name is not used by chance because there is a term blue



lodge, which originated to denote the first three degrees of Symbolic Freemasonry. In ancient times, the Masters wore aprons with a blue border since the sky blue symbolises perfection, truth, goodwill, world brotherhood, and loyalty (Vozniak, 2009, p. 266). The story contains an advertisement that repeats the English letter *G* several times and phrases in English, which are presented in the table below (Pavić, 2007, p. 106–107).

Table 1. Masonic symbols

7 EARLS WANTED!
G + earls = girls!
G   WANTED!
G + eyes wanted!
GUYS WANTED

Thus, according to the announcement, they try to find seven earls, whose mention refers to the Knights Templar. Emphasis is placed on the use of the letter *G*, the authoritative symbol of Freemasonry, which denotes God and geometry at the same time. Ancient Freemasonry was associated with architecture that incorporates geometric aspects:

The Brothers of the Craft regard the universe as one of the grandest symbols; combined with the aspect of the divine and geometry, they form a strong bond. In a certain sense, they provide man with the virtues necessary to build his spiritual temple. (Karg, 2019, p. 176)

The number 7 in Freemasonry is also important: during the rite of initiation, the candidate is presented with seven liberal arts, including geometry. In the expression *G   WANTED!*, the points inside the circles can be observed. The point within a Circle is a symbol of great importance in Freemasonry and represents an individual brother; the circle is the boundary line of his duty to God and man. The dot commands peculiar attention in this connection with the ancient symbolism of the universe and the solar orb (Mackey, 1882). This Sun symbol represents masculinity, rulers and fatherhood, power, authority, and self-expression. The Sun symbol was used to represent gold and was the sign of perfection for alchemists. The dot at the centre signifies the completion of the “Great Work” (Brus-Mitford, 2019, p. 200; 210). In the work *The Book of Symbols: Reflection on Archetypal Images* we could find information about a tiny spot that Jung calls “the symbol of a mysterious creative centre in nature”. It is referred to as a dot, point, jot, title, monad, *Bindu* and even a mustard seed. As the source of everything, it is imagined as the creative force in the cosmos. In Tantrism, as *Bindu*, it is symbolised and concretised in the body as male semen, the source of new life. As the centre and source of everything, the dot is imagined as giving rise to all opposing tendencies: top and bottom, masculine and feminine, hot and cold. And it is also the place where they can be reconciled (Ronnberg, Martin, 2010, p. 706). Based on the above, it can be assumed that Pavić wanted to combine 7 earls and 7 girls with this symbol.

It is also one of the Masonic symbols associated with Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, whose feasts are associated with the summer and winter solstice. On the day of the winter solstice, Freemasons *worship* John the Evangelist, the Apostle of Light. To take an oath in a Masonic lodge, the Bible is often opened to the first page of the Gospel of John, considered the most esoteric of the four canonical books. The first three degrees of Freemasonry are called *St. John's degrees* (Vozniak, 2009, p. 271). Expression *G + eyes wanted!* can be associated with *the Eye of Providence*, an ancient symbol that often appears in Egyptian and Jewish cultures, reminding of the constant invisible presence of the creator (Vozniak, 2009, p. 282). *The Eye of Providence* (or *the all-seeing eye*) within the equilateral triangle is often a recurring theme in Masonic art, as it is intended to remind the newly initiated of the Supreme Being and the watchful eye that appears as the judge of his words and actions (Karg, Young, 2019, pp. 184–185).

Pavić tried to present the Masonic movement in his work, using paraphernalia. An attribute of Freemasons is a top hat, a symbol of freedom. In the story *The Armchair for Dying*, the heroine has a hat with silk bees on it. The beehive is one of the Masonic symbols; it is interpreted as an allegory of the lodge. It symbolises orderly, systematic work because what one person cannot do can be quickly done together. The hierarchy within the hive is compared to the hierarchy within a Masonic lodge (Vozniak, 2009, p. 268). Particularly noteworthy is the story *Tatoo*, where the heroine wears a ring of Egyptian gold with a stone scarab that constantly emits light. The scarab beetle reminds us of the connection of the Masonic rite with the mysteries of ancient Egypt and that Hiram was a student of Egyptian masters (Pavić, 2007, p. 183). The symbolism of light is central to Freemasonry. The scarab beetle symbolised the Egyptian Sun god, Khepri, who rolled the Sun across the sky much as a scarab rolls its dung. Scarabs were also thought to protect the heart and, as such, were worn as amulets (Brus-Mitford, 2019, p. 195).

In *Paintings*, the heroine talks about her beloved icon, abandoned in a Ukrainian city during the Second World War. It was the work of a Spanish master with the image of the Virgin Mary, on whose lap sat the little Christ. The child held a rosebud in his hand. In this context, the symbolism of the secret society of the Rosicrucians is mentioned – a rose on a cross. The mystical Order of *the Rosy Cross* traces its roots to the mystery schools of ancient Egypt. Freemasonry inherited some ideological principles, functions and symbols from the Rosicrucian movement (Tsehelskyi, 2015a, p. 74). The strategy of mystification reflects the author's inherent manner of interpreting cultural and historical material.

The story *State Examination* mentions the monastery of St. Andrew in Constantinople (Pavić, 2007, p. 130). It is necessary to remember that this saint is especially revered by Freemasons. In contrast to the first three, St. John's degrees of initiation, the higher degrees are called St. Andrew's degrees (Vozniak, 2009, p. 280). Pavić often refers in his writings to prominent persons who are in some way connected with Freemasonry. The writer dedicated the story *One Night Francisco Goya...* to the outstanding Spanish painter and printmaker of the Romantic era, taking into account the fact that the artist is the author of the painting *The Injured Mason* (Pavić, 2007, pp. 195–198).

In the story *A Choir of Birds from Paris*, the street "Rue vieille du Temple" is mentioned, as well as the street of the Templars – *Rue du Temple*. The narrator, listening to the birds singing in the park, hears the word *Saintecroix* daily. In the research, we wrote about this: "The image of an architect and masonic symbols in works by Milorad Pavić" (Huk, 2021).

Conclusion

The paper identifies the elements of autobiographicality in Pavić's *Paper Theatre*, which are used for its interpretation. It is established that autobiographical discourse is a vivid confirmation of the writer's artistic transformations of autobiographical material. The realisation of the postmodern concept of "the death of the author" is characterised by the figure of the narrator distancing himself from his text because the empirical author hides his face under the masks of "internal" authors and the mask of the compiler of the anthology. An extremely important creative function in reading Pavić's texts is assigned to the reader, who must decipher the biographical cryptic writing of the prose work, recognise markers and establish connections to fill in textual gaps. By solving "text puzzles", the recipient becomes an accomplice of the author in intellectual pursuits.

In the course of analysis, it was found that a characteristic feature of Pavić's poetics is the inclusion of smaller structural units of previous texts in the novel fabric, as well as the *repetition* of images, heroes, motifs, and symbols. Taking into account the fact that the Serbian writer was a member of the Regular Grand Lodge of Serbia, it can be argued that the collection of short stories, *Paper Theatre*, is an open semantic labyrinth interwoven with secret Masonic symbolism, which is the key to reading the work. Pavić counted on an exemplary reader, capable of deciphering the Masonic code, esoteric subtext, symbolism of images and numerology. Suppose the readers are not initiated into the Masonic secret. In that case, they, while interpreting the symbols, will be forced to go beyond the text each time, attempting to solve semantic riddles through instructions. The text, referring the recipient to various cultural and historical sources, offers a special game since intellectual curiosity drives the research.

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