

# Mirko Kovač's Narrative Alloy (*Biography of Malvina Trifković*)

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*Mirko Kovač's short novel Malvina (Biography of Malvina Trifković, 1971) is composed in an indirect, fragmentary sequencing of a variety of forms and kinds of discourses. The textual fragmentation principle is exactly what activates the reader's engagement in the process of (re)constitution and (re)construction of meaning. Kovač's poetical principles rise from his commitment to reality, the reader, and the literary text. Since it was first published, Malvina has attracted the attention of a wide professional and non-professional readership, primarily as a narrative about Serbian-Croatian hatred and as the first lesbian novel in the South Slavic world. It was not only the choice of narrative forms but also that of the topic that marks Kovač's text as open to those forms of social life placed on the margins of society and exposed to repression. Kovač builds up ironic outlines of the codes of socio-cultural milieus and of all the forms of social power, providing a parodic image of social morality based on subversive mechanisms and partial truths. The social, political, ideological, religious, ethic, and aesthetic models of the world through which one perceives reality are established in the absence of emancipated action and choice. Prohibitions and limitations, stereotypes, and taboos, and, on the opposite side, transgression (breaking of boundaries) of all the proscriptions, are the object of redescription in this work.*

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The novel *Malvina (Biography of Malvina Trifković)* by Mirko Kovač was written in 1970 and was first published in the collection of novels titled *The Wounds of Luka Meštrević (Rane Luke Meštrevića, 1971)*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kovač wrote to Borislav Pekić about how the novel was made (May 17, 1970): "I have written one really good thing, a short roman fleuve, as Bule calls it, of some one hundred pages in all, with a huge family documentation of Malvina Trifković" (Pekić, 147). Soon after it was awarded, the book *The Wounds of Luka Meštrević* was judged ideologically inadequate and retrieved from all the libraries in Serbia. The text of *Malvina* was adapted into a theatrical piece and performed in 1973 in Belgrade, in Atelje 212. A bilingual edition in Croatian and Italian appeared in 1995 (published in

It anticipates Kovač's shift from "the poetics of modernist hermetism" (Beganović, *Mirko*) towards postmodernism, which will be completely realised in his novel *An Introduction to Another Life* (*Uvod u drugi život*) from 1983.

*Malvina* appears after Kovač's novels *Gallows* (*Gubilište*, 1962) and *My Sister Elida* (*Moja sestra Elida*, 1965), marking thus the pivotal moment in Yugoslavian literature when modernist narrative started to stratify, a "new textuality" was announced, and new postmodernist trends were recognized (Jerkov 9). Destabilisation of the narrator, deviation from the norm, pronouncement of the creative freedoms, interrogation of historical truths, insertion of documents in literary texts are some of the characteristic of literary forms produced in these years. As Beganović also points out: "Being indisputably intertwined with the changes in the economic and political systems, cultural events appeared to be their inseparable parts" (Beganović, *Ruganje* 30). In an interview from 1986, Kovač commented on this epoch of his own literary creation as follows:

Alas, from the publication of *Elida* in 1965, all the way to 1971, when my short novel *Malvina* appeared in Mašić's Independent Release – that, if not the best, was certainly my strangest book, maybe with a unique literary procedure – so, in these six years I often found myself quarrelling with myself, with my understanding of literature, wondering why all that and what for, doubting deeply the written word, the very *raison d'être* of literature. The profession of a writer appeared so futile. I cannot say that I was experiencing a crisis, because I wrote a lot at the time, although today I am prone to say: when a writer writes a lot, then he is really going through a crisis. I was even considering totally devoting myself to film and television. (Aćin 1)

Kovač's poetic principles grew from his strong social commitment, as well as his commitment towards the reader and literary text. Revisiting and rewriting his already published works, *Malvina* being among them (published again by Fraktura as a modified edition in 2007) was his aesthetic *credo*, the very essence of his literary endeavours. He showed it by constantly revising his already published works, as well as by his conscious position *beyond*, or above the social and political conditioning of the time, with an unremitting challenge to continuously, as he said, counter its literary and ideological puritanism (cf. Kovač 2017).

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Istra). After this came another separate edition, in 1977, when its critical reception for the first time recognized it as a novel. At the beginning of the 1990s it was published in France (as a pocket edition *Rivages poche* with 20.000 copies), while it had three editions in Sweden. Apart from Italian, French, and Swedish, the novel was also translated into English, Dutch, and Hungarian.

This resulted in his fate of being also continuously celebrated and persecuted at the same time, as well as of being deprived numerous awards due to his ideological stands.<sup>2</sup> His “steady opposition which, undoubtedly, determined the reception of his work and the fate of the author himself, resulted at the beginning of the 90s in Kovač’s determination to leave Belgrade and move to Rovinj because he was exposed to real life danger” (Meić 242).

The cohesive agent of the novel *Malvina (Biography of Malvina Trifković)* is the destiny of a homosexual (anti-)heroine who is making her way from Orthodox education to a monastery through a series of deflections: after the suicide of her school friend and lover, she runs away from a religious female school into a marriage with a man of Catholic denomination; she leaves him due to her love for his sister; and after an unsolved crime in which her adopted daughter was murdered (the daughter of her lover who died at parturition), she runs away to an Orthodox monastery where she becomes a neophyte. The narrative is indirect and develops through a fragmented succession of a variety of forms and kinds of discourses. The bordering literary forms: letters, testaments, confession, reports, forensic documents, black and white photographs (as mimetic and representational forms or as iconic material) are used with an aim to raise the implications of the documentary proceeding in its “high level of imagination” (Kovač, *Evropska* 51). The story, which grows up from a concatenation of relatively independent narrative fragments, is characterised by an exchange of diverse narrative perspectives and points of view, which is especially noticeable on the ideological and phraseological levels of the work. The play with the narrative strategy determined semantic transformations, which are dependent upon the perception “of the narrator, his function, i.e. his actantial status in the text” (Meić 269). It also points to both the transformation of the historically marginalized heroine (victim) into an anti-heroine (torturer), and to the deviation from the traditional expectation from the generic convention signaled initially in the title (biography).

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<sup>2</sup> Kovač’s works are translated into more than ten languages. He received international awards (Herder and Tucholsky), as well as numerous Yugoslavian awards, including: Vilenica (Slovenia), Stefan Mitrov Ljubiša, 13. jul, Njegoševa nagrada (Montenegro), Bosanski stećak and Meša Selimović (Bosnia). *Wounds of Luka Meštrević* (1971) received Milovan Glišić award, but it was taken away from him in 1973, and the book was retrieved from bookshops and libraries. A revised edition of the same collection came out in 1980, and the new short story from the book (“Pictures from the Meštrević Family Album”) received Andrićeva nagrada (Andrić Award).

## Repression and subordination

Since its publication in 1971, *Malvina* has attracted attention of a wide readership and professional audience, who used to read it predominantly through the key of Serbian-Croatian hatred or in light of the fact that it was the first Yugoslavian lesbian novel. Exactly, the novel was not only challenging because of its choice of the narrative form, “which in the context of desirable poetic models of the time was often considered deviant and unacceptable” (Meić 255), but also because of its thematic choice and its unrelenting referencing to the socially marginalized forms of life and the forms exposed to repression. “Linguistic and political, rhetoric and repressive – these are the connections which this type of functional presentation sets against (humanistic) faith in language and its ability to present a subject or ‘truth,’ past or present, historical or fictive” (Bogutovac 72).

Kovač paints ironical contours of the code of the social and cultural milieu, while parodying the morality of the society based on the subversive mechanisms and partialized truths. Exactly, social, political, ideological, religious, ethical and aesthetical models of the world, on the basis of which human being perceives reality, emanate from the absence of emancipated action and choice (Lotman 295). In this sense, in Foucaultian fashion, *Biography* is a picture of the forms of the social exclusion of the unwanted. Prohibitions and limitations, stereotypes and taboos, and, in contrast to these, transgression (breaking of boundaries) of all the proscriptions are precisely the object of the redescription in the work.

The story about Malvina is a story about an incessant chain of ex-communications – her escape from the Serbian Orthodox and educational female collective (the syntagm points to a whole series of ideologically closed systems), her being reported dead by her father (because of her marriage to a Catholic, and even accounted as dead in his testament, whereby the totality of his moral hypocrisy is revealed), her departure from the family home because of the prohibited love to her sister-in-law, and her exclusion by her brother-in-law because of her Orthodox denomination, which is also a result of her self-exclusion from her parental home because of her love for young Katarina and her escape into a monastery, as the final denial to the social milieu which weaves rumours about the unsolved crime. Her double position: the position of the victim and the position of the torturer (which is realised in the most delicate female role – that of a mother) points to her rejection to fit into the norm, in the law of the community, or to accept any

other given role. Her devotion to and care of Julka Dumča presents an emotional contrast to her irresistible hatred and the emotional hypertrophy towards her adopted daughter and her unaccomplished double. Repressive mechanisms that inflict the operation of the characters are congruent with their emotional register that ranges from hypertrophic empathy to exalted hatred.

The foundational elements of the formation of female identity in a patriarchal system of values, “in which male and female beings (sex) become men and women (gender)” and in which “men have the power to negate women’s sexuality or to enforce its desirable forms” (Zaharijević 138), are represented in this short novel as a structure which Malvina is constantly breaking with her behaviour. That system is already incarnated in the first *Manuscript*, in the letter to Malvina’s father, in which the head of the school, Petronela Barota, presents the agreeable social frame for an Orthodox girl: “Our aim is to make our female children capable of upholding appropriate and deserving places in the variety of relations within family, domestic, and social life, and to assume all the virtues of reputable, humble, educated, and hard-working housewives, so that they can be satisfied and happy in their lives” (Kovač, *Malvina* 5).

Even the phraseological plan signals discriminatory use of language, while “linguistic visibility reveals what is reality to a society” (Savić 304). Within this sociolinguistic frame, Petronela Barota announces: “Therefore, only when enlightened and educated enough, can a woman become deserving companion to her husband” (Kovač, *Malvina* 5). Already the first three manuscripts addressed to Đorđe Trifković, Malvina’s father, show the subordinating union of language, gender, and power, as well as the position of woman whose virtues include “primarily the good knowledge of the science of the Orthodox faith” (13) and “all the virtues of a hardworking housewife” (15).

Malvina’s homosexuality is a form of her sexual identification, which leads her to the production of the *abject beings*, while, on the other side, her multiple alienation, actually, reflects the alienating representation of the society. Her disgust over Kirilo’s phallus metaphorically presents a mode of resistance to the male power/domination. All the heterosexual relations in the novel are deprived of a vital sense of love and togetherness and reduced to a mere convention of mutual tolerance and extra-marital satisfactions. What remains after the tragic finalization of the short marital union of Kiril and Malvina Pavčić is documented in the last message issued to the wife to have her husband’s shirt and socks washed, while her own dead body is left in the kitchen.

Malvina is presented as an object of various forms of coercion, while the forms of her subjugation and subversion are projected through the point of view of others and in accordance with various social models. In her book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* Judith Butler points out:

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what 'one' is, one's very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. (1–2)

Going in this direction, Malvina's characterisation is realised exactly through autonomous forms of *citing the norm* and in the area of subjection to established rules (performativity), trying to avoid being included among the abject beings (cf. Butler *Gender* 169–170). Paradoxically, she is included among them by her brother-in-law, and not because of her sexual determination but because of the nationality and her Orthodox faith.

That national and religious hatreds are brought to their zenith is shown already in "Manuscript M," through Katarina's comment on Ivan's hatred and his irresistible revulsion towards Malvina:

[T]hat the rift in the family's authority, the fame of the Pavčićs, came exactly because a Serbian woman brought misfortune and chaos in the harmony of our father, that that very same one would even her children turn towards herself only, even from the time of their childhood, and the only God's answer was family's tragedy: Anton's mental illness and madness, and so is Katarina's misfortune to be mentally excluded from the world of men-women relations, that finally all the wrath of the Fate would topple down on Tomislav, the devil sends him a Serbian for a wife ... (Kovač, *Malvina* 83).

This assertion most completely exposes the absurdity towards which nationalistic and religious hatred leads; it turns Ivan even against the person who gave him life, while it also made Malvina's father Đorđe Trifković to disavow his own daughter in his testament, because she has "trampled on our sacred Orthodox church by marrying a man of

Roman-Catholic faith” (29). The use of the ironic discourse in the novel is particularly explicated in the instance of Ivana Pavčić's (Manuscript) and Đorđe Trifković's narratives. Through the use of archaic language (both Croatian and Serbian), these narrations focus on the ideological exclusivism and animosity towards the Other, but also on their national and religious identity founded on the same exclusivism. Actually, the linguistic identity of the characters becomes a mirror of their ideological point of view, but also a mediator in the projection of an image of a desired reality. Behind this all is their care for their possession, the family heritage, so that the real motivational drive for the extension of hatred and the destruction of family relations is, in fact, the property and the preservation (even the false one) of the family's name and respectability. Those are the manuscripts J (*Ladislav Pavčić, the glory and the pride of the proud Croatian nation*) and K (*Also Juraj Pavčić, following the spirit and the steps of his brother*) that announce the parodically doubled discourse – made on the basis of a documentary<sup>3</sup> template and its fictional processing, that is on the basis of the situation in which historiographic metafiction is placed within historical discourse, while they, at the same time, reject to renounce their autonomy as fiction (Hačion 1996: 208). The parody often turns grotesque, because the importance of the document is placed in the superposition over the common-sense understanding of things. Such examples are present in the narration of the following type: “You know, respected mandatory, that I speak of the gentile, thinking primarily of the Orthodox, because if they sneak in our graves, tomorrow they will sneak in our homes, our families, our mothers and sisters, in our wives, tomorrow they will conquer us and turn our churches into their Orthodox temples ...” (Kovač, *Malvina*, 71).

Passages as such consecrate one of the fundamental auto-poetic commitments of Mirko Kovač: that nationalisms are products of the mythologising consciousness and alibis for justification of all kinds of atrocities.

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<sup>3</sup> In his letter to B. Pekić, Kovač wrote: “I only read some old books. One of them is *108 Saborska sjednica* – a discussion whether it should be allowed that Serbs are buried in the Catholic cemeteries in the Kingdom of Croats, Slavonians and Dalmatians” (Pekić 172). While in *An Introduction to Another Life (Uvod u drugi život)*, he says: “I wanted it to be a book in which I would play the role of a snoop. I had a testament at my disposal, as well as a bundle of family photographs, mostly found at junk yards or received from connoisseurs who were working on the old chests, or they were rummaging through depositories. ... When in a curiosity shop I found a decomposing annual of the Serbian Orthodox female collective St. Mother Angelina in Budapest, everything was solved ...” (344).



## Textual concentration and amplification of informativness

Fragmentation, as the basis of the narrative manoeuvre, points to a multiply focalised narration (Marčetić 220), given through sixteen fragments labelled as manuscripts and marked by a letter in alphabetical order (A–P), as well as through the editor's *Final View on the Little Bundle of 16 Newly Arrived Manuscripts*. The exchange of different narrative instances determines a strongly explicated polyphony as a logical consequence of the cultural and ideologically heterogeneous narrators, who have their distinct points of view. Thus, the projected narrative structure represents a certain world with its own unique system (Lotman 347). This is especially supported by the use of archaic ekavian and ijekavian dialectological variants “depending on who is the narrator of the given ‘manuscript’ – Malvina herself, her father, who comes from central Serbia, or Malvina’s husband’s brother, her brother-in-law, who was born in Croatia” (Cidilko 142), with the presence of regionalisms and the heterogeneous stylistic nuancing. These kinds of proceedings give rise to the “paradoxical choice of the traditional narrative form and the postmodernist relativism of the narrators from the perspective of continual vicissitude” (Paić 63).

Instead of offering solutions to the accumulated uncertainties, and this thanks to the insight into all points of view (in the intersection of all the individual truths), *The Final View*, as a super-textual construct, suggests a restrictive informativness as a consequence of the unreadiness of the extradiegetic narrator (who, according to Genette, is the narrator “from this side of the *threshold*, who separates the real worlds of the writer and the reader from the fictive world of the hero,” Marčetić 89) to offer information to the editor of the manuscript. This restriction in the domain of knowledge of the unknown editor activates a receptive effort in mastering the story, by transferring the focus from the character onto the society. Apart from this, *The Final View* serves to demystify the strategy and to demolish any possibility of an omniscient narration. This is also supported by the doubled metafictional position – the existence of the anonymous editor of *Biography* and of its reviewer's, Father Justinijan, to whom *The Final View* on the work of the editor belongs: “I cannot precisely determine if the picture of Malvina Trifković was composed out of itself, from a midden, from a battered book, from some heritage, or, rummaging through these cabinets, you have obtained this image of hopelessness just as you wanted it to be” (Kovač, *Malvina* 97). In other words: “There’s no need to identify the origin of a manuscript, especially when the biography of



Malvina Trifković composed itself up in one, allow me too to say, *novel*" (98).

What the reader envisages through the character of the reviewer is the fact that the credibility of the documented material cannot be accepted unreservedly, just as the story about Malvina's life cannot be reconstructed as true or complete. We see that the reviewer's *view* is turned towards problematizing the borders between fact and fiction in a literary text, but also the borders between the text and non-fiction (the documented material). This, at the same time, forces us to consider the problematic perspective of the narrator, when it comes to both his ideological and ethical positions, as well as the intensified process of desacralisation. His letter to the editor begins with a comment on how the editor visited St. Petka on Easter of the previous year: "I was delighted when you brought that young man. He certainly cannot be older than twenty. You must be enjoying his company, too. You were gentle and enlightened by God's transparency. Like male seed, the drops of tallow-candle were falling upon your black jacket" (97).

The obvious homosexual affinities of Father Justinijan and his comment on the editor's enlightenment by the divine transparency intensify desacralisation of the monastery, whereas, on the other hand, he issues multiple invitations to take the pledge of keeping Malvina's secret. This double perspective of the editor and the reviewer of the manuscripts, inserted in the formation of the presented text, as well as the signal that there are four more manuscripts under the pledge of secrecy, point out to the existence of a third version of the story. Apart from that, the reviewer's knowledge is not limitless when it comes to shedding light on crime: "Yet, if all these events should be proclaimed suspicious, then history would suffer from them too ..." (100). All the while, Kovač suggests an axiologically superior position of the editor in the development of Malvina's story, because he offers the readers their own "personal insight" (98) into things. The novel combines documentation about historically marginalized destinies, by connecting it within a literary template that is to "establish and save from forgetfulness the picture of Malvina Trifković's life" (101):

However, after these comments in *The Final View on the Biography of Malvina Trifković*, I am disturbed by a notion: can there be something dishonest in the fact that a personal insight in all the occurrences in the representation of Malvina Trifković's destiny is already made public, although it would not cause a spiritual revolution if one surrenders the manuscript, even if one burns it. Because, it is the fact that the writer makes one's destiny and then passes it into the hands of the reader, a proof of self-glorification is ugly, and the satis-

faction he feels while tidying up and complementing his manuscript already brings in enough doubts in the honesty of the vocation and the good intention, and so the temptation to cherish the secret and be cautious overpower the reason and the will. Admittedly, you are allowed more, therefore I am not suggesting that you should regret. (98)

The very ending of the text is the testimony about the factographic unreliability of the data and the human intervention in the composition—(re)construction—of the present narrative, about the doubts in the truth of the expertise and the use of inaccurate facts that “bring in more of evil blood than could be imagined” (99), about the fact that “data disappear themselves” (99), as well as that “if all the events were to be proclaimed suspicious, then history would suffer from them” (100). Father Justinijan’s statements reflect some postmodern attitudes about the relation between historical and literary truth, especially when referring to the overall opinion that writing about the past is always a discourse, that is a human construction (Hačion 98), that it irrevocably changes each one-sided notion about what is real and what’s a reference (45), and that to question the past in fiction or history means to open history for the present and to save it from being final and theological (186). This poetic position becomes especially interesting when approached from the aspect of novelistic oscillation between modernism and postmodernism.

The self-conscious position of the narrator also suggests that not everything could be subjected to suspicion, because by doing this, as it is expressed in the reviewer’s narration, history itself would be questioned. By doing this, the measure of vagueness grows, but so does also the informativeness of the text (Lotman 380). Kovač, therefore, strips the process of reconstructing of the factographic truth as human creation, parodying all the while the relations of the fictive and the factual in the structure of the text.

The concluding part of the reviewer’s *View* offers semantic punctuation of two indexing and symbolical signs: the cemetery and the railway, which is indexically additionally represented by the appearance of the black arson stains that is lichen (Kovač, *Malvina* 101). If we are to semantically determine an earlier indexing and symbolical sign, the one from the will of Malvina’s father: the *bell* that “strikes on one side only during burials and thus endlessly announces her death to her father Đ. Trifković” (29), along with Malvina’s departure by a passenger train which is followed by a comment that “nobody escorted her, just as nobody but her escorted Katarina when she went into those Trebinje graves” (88), the intersection of these signs opens a semiotic space of

*death for the world* that exists as yet another disturbing factor of the linear causality of the text.

### **Generic destabilisation**

The fragmentation principle of the text activates the reader's engagement in the process of (re)constitution and (re)construction of meaning. The ending of the series of manuscripts is not the end of the subject matter, because we know that it is to be complemented by four more manuscripts that are crucial for the illumination of the crime and of Malvina's position in all the events. The factographic material that we are shown is chipped, incomplete, by which its referentiality becomes destabilized. Destruction of the cause and effect series opens space for connotative charges: "It is true, it happens that the data disappear themselves, and I like datum, even the true one" (Kovač, *Malvina* 99), but also to a specific deviation *from the lustful curiosity*: "It is true, the stories would never end, especially if we gave in to them and ourselves entangled us in them" (101). Polarisations on all the levels of the text, fragmented in the manuscript material, are brought this way to universal values, because the stories of all the others appear as an asymmetric perspective of the masses in their relation with one story – Malvina's version of the events that will be offered to the reader after her death.

The narrative heteroglossia produces incoherency of spatial structures, points of view, dissolution of ideological dogmas, a reversed image of the world (experiencing the masses as an anti-system), which, along with the decanonization and hybridisation of the genre, a documentary basis and referential relations to the Biblical subtext, supports a possible reading of Kovač's literary achievement "at the origin of the binaries between existentialism and carnival" (Beganović, *Ruganje* 31). The illusion of the documentary is constantly being established and then lost, even in the seemingly framed segments – in the narrations of Ivan Pavčić and Malvina Trifković, because we can see that both of these characters are narratively awakened, that is that they have an activated relationship with the reader by possessing "an excess of narrative consciousness" (Jerkov 97).

With the initial signal of the text (which in the first edition represented the title, while it later appeared as a subtitle following the name of the female protagonist), Kovač suggests that the text has to do with a life story, which activates an expectation in relation with a canonized prototypical textual model and an insight into "mimetic and

variational and transformational successions” (Juvan 180) and into a means “for awakening the reader’s gender consciousness” (181). In this sense, *Biography of Malvina Trifković* presents a specific ironic distancing from the generic signal (life story, biography), i.e. it is a test that “by evoking the prototypes in front of a model reader, displays the fictional construction of setting [itself] within the generic tradition” (Juvan 179). In the first place, life story/biography as a form of historical narrative is characterised by linearity and chronological ordering. Lešić points out that “biography, which in the natural limits of life establishes an illusion of conclusiveness, remains an open form because history of life of every historical personality can always be complemented by facts learned afterwards. If, however, it is constructed as a closed narrative and semantic structure, then it attains the form of novella or a novel” (Lešić 422). Apart from this, a biographical text should also paint the social conditions surrounding the life in question (Popović 90), i.e. it should offer an insight into “how external facts, the circumstances of someone’s life, determine the character of the protagonist and how, on the other hand, that character determines them” (Marčetić 13).

The text shows a broken temporal scheme whose linear flow develops on a succession of segments of subjective time, so that the objective time becomes deprived of causality. The absence of a unique flow of the fabula, its bifurcation into a series of stories (branches), listing and detailing about some moments unimportant to the story, with, on the other hand, an evident restriction of the narrator’s knowledge when it comes to those data important for the denouement, implication of the consequences that are to be revealed only in the manuscript to follow, and which will be focalized through another narrative instance, refusing an answer to the accumulated questions, dispensing with a final solution, associating the temporal point of view with the consciousness of the narrator, together make that the objective time loses its significance.

## Intertextual strategies

Kovač paints a picture which contains unmasking of all the forms of social and cultural dictates. Meić points out that Mirko Kovač’s overall poetics is in a constant “polemical gesture towards monologizing and ideological uniformity (primarily the Yugo-communist one, but also the nationalist one), and, consequently, against artistic dogma, too” (Meić 243). The enclosure of black and white photographs represents an incursion of the visual within the narrative. Refraining from portraits

represents a kind of anti-ekphrastic procedure, or a specific *renouncement of ekphrasis* (Javor 703, quoting Jay David Bolter). Therefore, we are facing the exchange of external portraiture for black and white photographs as a form of an intermedial interpolation of visual (two-dimensional) sequences with clearly emphasised cuts, which elevates semiotic implications of the text by spreading out its sense and adding up its meanings. This opens intertextual spaces for the reader, by which Juvan understands:

[A] play and intertwinement of heterogenous semiotic spaces that have been replanted into the text from some other place: be those the other representational spaces (from textual or visual worlds), or through an evocation of culturally characteristic locations, where certain languages, dialects, sociolects, registers and genres circulate. Intertextuality produces transgressive spaces. It is achieved by doubling, splitting, and widening of the central inner textual space and by deterritorialisation of the perspective (265).

Intertextual passages, biblical quotes marked off with italic letters, are subordinated to the main idea of this short novel – irreversible relation with all the cultural norms and the canonized principles, which results with de/mystification of irresistible hatred (contrary to universal love) in all the forms of its appearance. Kovač's texts are characterized by the use of “narrative strategies that are jeopardizing and degrading the traditional narration with its featured elements, such as: narrative instance, time, space, composition, characters,” so that “the canonized forms and values become questioned and, in a specific way, degraded” (Sekulović 670). Juvan maintains that citationality is a specific document of a mentality, that is “a means for modelling of a semantic, ethical, stylistic, and generic profile of a literary work with the background of the literary and cultural tradition and the contemporary mass of sociolects” (294), and that, in relation with this, it always provokes interactive relation between the text and its readers, on one, and the cultural tradition on the other side. All the while Kovač's short novel is “filled with a series of biblical quotations and allusions, which are often used to contradict their original meaning and to, in an indirect way, tell about the hypocrisy of the community” (Ahmetagić 155).

If we semantically determine the interpolation of the biblical text into the manuscripts, after the typology of citationality developed by Dubravka Oraić Tolić, we find that this text is characterized by illuminative citationality (Oraić Tolić 34). While keeping in mind that it is opposite of the illustrative citation, it means that *Malvina's* citationality is directed exactly towards de(con)struction of the “the most correct

cultural pyramid in the history of Western civilisation,” on whose top stands “the Word of God and the Biblical text in which it is written down” (57). Citational interpolation of the biblical prototext serves as an alibi when Malvina has the homosexual intercourse with Julka Dumča, which not only destroys its fundamental meaning, but also desacrilizes it. Starting from Juvan’s narrative, which points that the citationality is a narrative strategy that counts on the activation of cultural memory (Juvan 294), we realize that the articulation of prayer as an additional means in achieving love ecstasy between the female protagonists of the novel supports the breakthrough of the profane into the sacred and annihilate the conventionally established distinctiveness. The representative contents from the cultural tradition aims at sheltering the transgression and justifying the deviation from the stipulated rules of behaviour.

Biblical quotations, allusions, parodies, and installations activate a citational relation of the reader and the prototext, and serve as an “additional means of characterisation” (Ahmetagić 155), while the basis of characterisation is their Manuscript. Ivan’s epistle about the irresistible hatred paradoxically represents “the most poetic moment on the pages of *Biography of Malvina Trifković* ... focusing our attention on the turnover that happened in this world, and its message, while it calls for hatred as a special spiritual endowment, is opposed to Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians” (Ahmetagić 160). Therefore, the principles of contrast and metonymy rest at the semantic level, which ultimately leads to the destruction of the originally established meaning, to desacralisation, and to the conviction: “And the world, gentlemen, can only be ruled by the ideology of irresistible hatred and repulsion” (42). By deforming the reference material and producing transgression of conventional notions, Kovač opens a field of ontological destabilisation of the Christian cultural matrix. The subversive act of the reversal of the conventional virtues is shown in Ivan’s visionary thrill:

Well, what remains to us is to cherish the hatred, which is our spiritual need and which we will forever be calling for, to cherish it like a balm which heals a wound, and if you like to know it really is my only virtue and my hope ... so that I came to the thought that it is the shadow of abstraction that makes hatred a real process, and the more unapproachable it is for the simple soul, the more distant it is, inconceivable for the eye and the mind, it becomes stronger and it grows in ourselves, and it will become the blood of the people ... because once it could have been a vice, but now, gentlemen, it is but a virtue ... (Kovač, *Malvina* 42).

The prevailing orality in the manuscripts of Ivan Pavčić is characterised by a diatribic speech which, in places that abound with affected states of nationalistic enthusiasm, is reflected as a parody of Christian epistles. This is another example of complexity of this short novel's narrative structure, in which different generic codes are concurrently constructed and deconstructed (cf. Juvan 182–183).

## Conclusion

If we assume that models of space become organisational bases for development of an image of the world—a complete ideological model characteristic for a particular type of culture (Lotman 289)—, we see that the ending of the text is, actually, coming back, or is a regression, to its very beginning: because in semantically determinant definition of the space, the meanings of the school (from which Malvina runs away at the beginning) and the monastery (in which she quietly waits the end of her life) are identified with the space of imprisonment. Apart from this, the epilogue space of the text (*Final View*) begins and ends with signals that activate the sacral Christian symbolism of Easter and Christmas, but which are contaminated with the signals of the priest's homosexual affection towards the anonymous editor of *Biography*. We see that *Final View*, which demystifies the narrative procedure, also points out that the text “develops a specific form of narrative sensitivity,” which Beganović understands as a resistance to the story's conclusion (Beganović 39). Namely, Kovač remodels the linear space of stringing manuscripts into a structure that, by defying conclusiveness, gives a dimension of universality to the text.

The basis of all the manuscripts keeps the story about Malvina's subordinated relation towards all the forms and possibilities of imprisonment, that is, of institutionalisation, while the transgression, non-observance, becomes a discourse generator. She exists in different forms of clearly defined social space, whose system she is incessantly subordinating. It is exactly when we are given the information that Malvina is happy with nun Glikeriya (whose name, just as the name of Father Justinijan, is another index sign) that the monastery becomes an ideal projection of perfect imprisonment, but also of the desired exile. The intensified arbitrary position of the narrator as the *master of the story*, who is “not subordinated to the model but who governs the model” (Jerkov 97), points to another fact: between society, as the creator of norms, and an individual, who transgresses the norm/Law, there is a



discrepancy established in seeing things, so that crucial doubt in a possibility of bridging the space between fiction and fact is postulated, the space between the *stories* beyond the walls of the monastery and Malvina's story, which remains imprisoned within the walls, wait "for that one manuscript that will be composed not in repentance but in a cognizance of onself, and which will bring about a fuller image of all the life and will hold onto the reader more" (77).

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## Pripovedna zlitina Mirka Kovača (*Življenjepiš Malvine Trifković*)

Ključne besede: srbska književnost / Kovač, Mirko: *Životopis Malvine Trifković* / pripovedna struktura / intertekstualnost / ideologija / represija

Kratki roman Mirka Kovača *Malvina* (*Življenjepiš Malvine Trifković*, 1971) je sestavljen s posrednim, fragmentarnim nizanjem najrazličnejših form in vrst diskurzov. Prav princip tekstualne fragmentacije spodbudi bralčevo vpletenost v proces (re)konstitucije in (re)konstrukcije pomena. Kovačevi poetski principi izvirajo iz njegove predanosti resničnosti, bralcu in literarnemu besedilu. Od svoje prve objave je *Malvina* pritegnila pozornost široke strokovne in neprofesionalne bralske javnosti predvsem kot pripoved o srbsko-hrvaškem sovrastvu in kot prvi lezbični roman v južnoslovanskem svetu. Ne le pripovedna forma, tudi tema Kovačev tekst odpira za tiste oblike družbenega življenja, ki so marginalizirane in izpostavljene zatiranju. Kovač ironično očrtuje kodekse socio-kulturnih okolij in oblik družbene moči in tako prinaša parodično sliko družbene moralnosti, utemeljeno na subverzivnih mehanizmih in parcialnih resnicah. Družbeni, politični, ideološki, religiozni, etični in estetski modeli sveta, skozi katere je mogoče opazovati realnost, se vzpostavljajo v pomanjkanju emancipirane akcije in izbire. Predmet posodobljenega opisa v pričujočem delu so prepovedi in omejitve, stereotipi in tabuji ter na drugi strani transgresija (prehajanje meja) vseh prepovedi.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

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