



JOVAN ZIVLAK, POET, ABOUT THE VORTEXES BESIEGING US AND DOUBTING UTOPIAS

On the Golden Beam of Searching

The world of power is unscrupulous, elusive and demands to subdue everything. The era of great salvific and emancipating truths has ended. Man is swinging over an abyss, in a performance without a horizon. Everything reaching us is shocking and related to evil. The circle does not close with purification, reconciliation with the good forces of life. Culture and art are humiliated, trivialized, fallen into the hands of barely average spirits and turned into seasonal serial production. We are overtired, occupied and possessed. However, that in no way means that Man's chances are null

By: Branislav Matić

He grew up in the plain, a sprout of a blossom brought from afar. He searched for free verse and seeing through distances. He is known as a modern and authentic poet, a silent rebel, who knows much more than what he doesn't want. Thinking the world means participating in its constant creation. He doesn't like regional narcissism and the shadows of its provincial politics. In Novi Sad, a long time ago, he found extreme concepts of show-biz poetry and doubtful avant-garde, but chose to patiently build a high culture of knowledge and his own artistic position. And he succeeded. On the tower-belvedere of that edifice, we are writing the mosaic of Jovan Zivlak (Nakovo, 1947).

Lineage. My ancestors are from Dalmatia, from a place called Dicmo. They moved towards Krajina, on the other side of Dinara, when the Turks retreated deeper into the inland in the seventeenth and eighteenth

century. My ancestor was perhaps a repatriate in Krajina, since the border between the Turks and Venetians often changed after the siege of Vienna, thanks to the permanent resistance of Serbian uskoks. As we were able to reconstruct from scarce legends, my ancestor came to Resanovce near Grahovo alone, thus he was named Zivle, Zivlak, as a lamb that lost its mother.

Photo:
Guest's Archive

Road, Signs

Jovan Zivlak (Nakovo, 1947), poet, essayist and critic. He graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Department of Serbian Language and Literature. He was editor-in-chief of *Polja* magazine, head of "Svetovi" Publishing House, now head of "Adresa". Initiator and editor of *Golden Beam* magazine (since 2001). Founder and director of the International Literary Festival of Novi Sad (since 2005). President of the Literary Society of Vojvodina from 2002 to 2010. He published fourteen books of poetry in Serbian (since 1969) and four books of essays (since 1996). Included in many Serbian and international anthologies. His books were translated into French, Hungarian, Italian, Slovakian, Romanian, Bulgarian, German, Polish and Spanish. Winner of sixteen respectable Serbian and international awards.

► *Brother Dušan,
father Luka, Jovan*

*Jovan, mother
Milica, brother
Dušan, cousin
Jovan*

My ancestors from my mother's side were highlanders. My mother's mother Boja was Čeko, related to Gavriilo Princip, who was also a Čeko. Their houses were next to one another and she knew Gavriilo well, since they played as children on a wasteland in front of the houses in Obljaj. Once, in Princip's Obljaj, after traveling from Banat, I went through Gavriilo's preserved notebook into which he wrote verses. I was fascinated. That notebook is no longer there, as a Princip family member with the same name told me a few years ago.

My mother Milica was born in Isjek, and her father was Damjan Bursać. He spent almost eight years as a soldier of the black-yellow monarchy, four years in the army during the Great War. He was in Vienna, Trieste, Pest, Sofia. As a batman, he did not directly experience the horrors of war.

My mother grew up in a big family. She had six brothers and a sister. Her sister died as a partisan, one of her brothers died during the war. Her oldest brother, an officer, was imprisoned in Bileća as a supporter of the Cominform.

My father's father, Jovan, died during the war; my father Luka, as a cadet at the Air Force NCO School in Rajlovac, was a prisoner in a German army camp, and his brother Sava, first partisan, then chetnik in Knin, emigrated to the U.S. As the family scattered around, the old homeland disappeared.

As a boy, in Nakovo, a village in Banat, where old customs were destroyed after the colonization, faith forgotten, families became provisional, I was almost without memory. The colonization was a double-effect endeavor: it created a population of agricultural workers, who would continue production on the deserted fields of Banat, and formed a socialist human, exposed to the forces of modernization, dominated by the collective, as well as by technology, the myth of industry and science. The change was under the flags of a solid and simplified ideology.

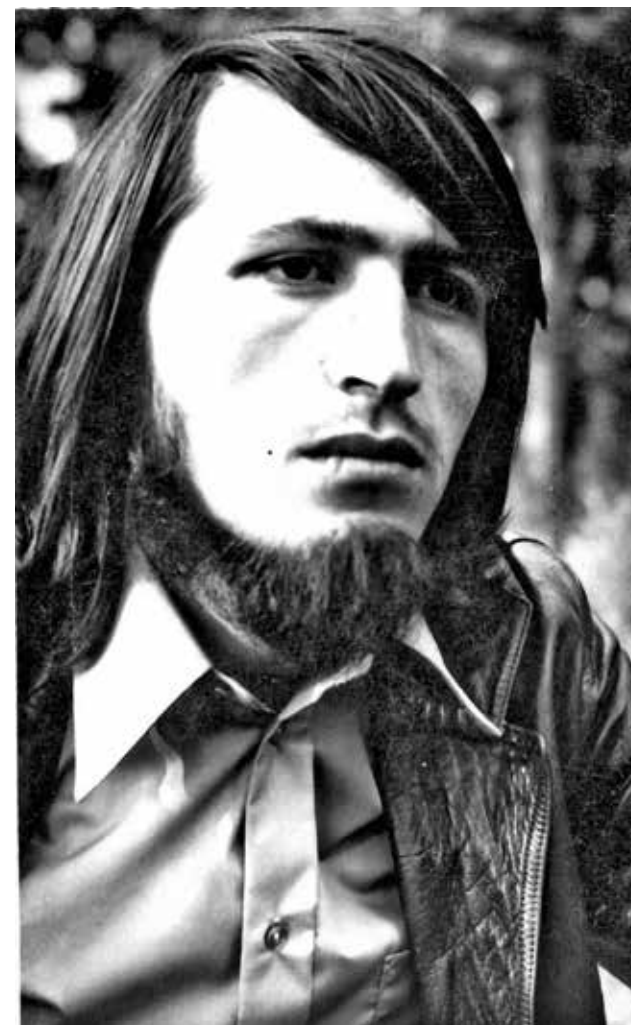
Through distant pictures. The homeland was a shell, in which I slowly realized that there were other worlds, different people. I first lived in a closed

community. The distance was insuperable. There was a pitted macadam road to Kikinda. We rarely traveled. Tractors and a few buses were driving to Kikinda. Working in the fields, the school as the place of disciplining, social life between busy and strict meetings of grown-ups, afternoon relaxing in the yard of the kafana, where people drank beer and competed in bowling. Sundays on the football field, with passionate and loud cheering. There were a few telephones in the village. Speakers on lampposts broadcasted music, political speeches, football games, news from the Local Office. Then came the radio, and later we discovered television. We watched it on a single TV set, placed on the Cultural Center window.

Privacy barely existed. We lived in imposed intimacy. However, besides socialization with children, I also discovered loneliness as a boy. I wandered through the fields, walked down the canal slopes, entered shady groves, watched birds, small restless rodents, amphibians, insects, the colorful and wild world that conquered meadows and fields, and it showed itself to me as unusual and free, lonely and unsubmitive. Nature became lavishing in its shapes, in its laws and exceptions, I saw myself amazed by that rich and ungraspable mysteriousness of life.

Close distances. I was insatiably curious as a boy, often confused when grown-ups wouldn't give me an answer to my questions. I felt redundant. I discovered books in my grandfather's house, on a green shelf, arranged by one of my uncles. A real treasure, from Pushkin, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, to English and American short stories. My father's library was dominated by Bruno Traven, with his *Rebellion of the Hanged*. From there, the voice of righteous ones woke me up and inspired me with compassion, sensitivity towards the despised ones.

We were encouraged to write patriotic poems in school, but no one was able to explain me how to write free verse. It tortured me for several years when I was a boy. I knew how to use free verse, but didn't know what it means.



► *Jovan in his
youth*

*With poet Milan
Komnenić*



▲ With Russian writer Eduard Limonov

With poet and philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye

I read school poets and later, in the village library, as well as the City Library in Kikinda, I found numerous answers in the examples of great poets. I was feverish while reading Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Eliot, Pound, Pasternak, Saint-John Perse, Rene Char... Later I became seriously engaged in studying our poets. Late Dučić, surrealists, Crnjanski, Vasiljev. I shared my discoveries about art with my brother Dušan, who chose sculpture, without anyone teaching him about it in the village community. He later graduated at the Academy of Arts in Belgrade, and now lives in Paris.

My youth was wired: I listened to the Beatles, Rolling Stones, The Troggs, The Hollies... I became a kind of a social rebel: sixty-eight shook me.

The plain. It meant everything to me. The foggy and endless landscape was all I knew. Silhouettes, contours of groves, lonely houses, high edifices, mills; I watched the world that outlined the near and hid the distant one I was only about

Echoes

The other should not be absolutized. However, a person who understands art, who is able to talk, is necessary for literature. There is no perfect reader, because a reader is, before all, from the writer's point of view, a picture of an encounter of different visions and understanding of art. You must be sensitive and skillful to achieve such a position. I could say that I have the privilege to talk with extraordinary and friendly people about my new texts. My most intent reader is my wife Jovanka Nikolić, also writer, who has been helping me immensely for four decades now.



to meet. My imagination burned while I strained to see events hidden behind a multitude of names marking village areas, to anticipate the wondrous meanings of distance, its relations with words; I invented histories that revealed the plain as an area full of human stories. It was a boyish romanticism, which made the world mysterious and attractive.

However, I later saw the plain as a cultural emblem in many poems of poets from Novi Sad. It was a mark of literary conservatism, pathetic regionalism, which I rejected.

Arrival. Novi Sad was not my choice. I was forced to it, because I didn't succeed in enrolling in dramaturgy or philosophy in Belgrade.

I read modern dramas at the time: Becket, Ionesco, Genet, Brecht, Sartre... I often visited the Kikinda theater, watched plays, talked, cooperated a bit. It seemed to me then that the theater is a powerful media of modern art. I showed that affinity towards theater later in Novi Sad as an occasional theater critic, and in the seventies I founded the festival of experimental theater Small Theater – Off Theater at the Youth Tribune.

I came to Novi Sad with illusions, as well as a kind of realistic irony. I didn't hope to meet Laza Kostić or Zmaj, let alone a romantic aesthete or philosopher. It was not a city inclined to high culture, although in many ways it was one of the leading cultural centers in Yugoslavia. I was greeted by the famous poetic show-biz, from Antić



to Zubac, a few official and confused journalists, shadows of omnipresent provincial politics, representatives of the local neo-avant-garde, dominant in magazines, papers and tribunes at the time. I had my own interpretation of the avant-garde, I rejected its assimilation with politics, I especially rejected its dialectic exclusivity of art as art and their way of perceiving poetry. When you have such extreme concepts in a small city, from popular lyrics, fatal in its self-love, to the neo-avant-garde, supported by local descendants of communist favorites, which, in the name of progress, rejects you and throws you into scrap, there is nothing else to do but to patiently and almost furtively build your artistic position. At the same time, you cannot be certain whether your life project will have an opportunity to be realized.

Overgrowing the city. I was editor in the Youth Tribune, then in *Polja* and "Svetovi" Publishing House. I didn't choose bohemia as a way of life, which was more a grimace than culture, and there was too much of it in Novi Sad; or politics, which was then especially interested in controlling art and disciplining artists; or avant-garde enlightenment, which revolutionized art in order to cancel it. I chose caution, thinking as an artistic and social emancipation, doubting utopias and their *kind* violence, hiding regional narcissism and reducing entire reality to a measure of a few banally enlightening ideologists of the Party.

At the Tribune, in *Polja*, "Svetovi", we created a large culture of knowledge, un-

derstanding new thinking and art, from structuralism and poststructuralism to postmodernism. Novi Sad was a place where many new books were published: from Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Compagnon, to Rene Girard, Paul Veyne, Jacques Le Goff and many others; philosophers and writers came from all parts of Yugoslavia, France, Russia... It continued with the actual International Literary Festival of Novi Sad, which I founded ten years ago in the Literary Society of Vojvodina. There we have the elite of European and Serbian poetry, specially published in the magazine *Golden Beam*.

All this was spiced with tensions, conflicts, disturbances, but the fact is that Novi Sad, after a long time, now has the elite of philosophers, critics, poets, from Dragan Prol, Alpar Lošonac, Damir Smiljanić, Vladimir Gvozden, to Zoran Đerić and others.

I experienced moments of my romantic self-enlightenment in friendly conversations with late poet Milan Dunđerski, as well as in many encounters with poet Miodrag Pavlović, philosophers Milan Damjanović and Nikola Milošević, poet Ljubiša Jocić, philosophers Danko Grlić and Ivan Froht, orientalist Dušan Pajin, germanist Srdan Bogosavljević...

This world. There are only presentations and constructions of worlds, which change and oppose one another. The mysterious bio-cosmic world is incomprehensible to us. As Wittgenstein would say: we don't even know how a dog could feel like.



▲ With poet Stevan Raičković

With writer Milorad Pavić



Ours is the social world, it touches us most, the world of human groups and communities, which either accept or reject us. Forces of different wills and natures rule that world. What is most important to us is taken away from us with a force exceeding our own. The world is ruthless, our fascinations are naive and compensational in relation to, I believe, the general violence besieging us from all sides. Power is imposed instead of truth, goodness, happiness... Human power is none the less destructive than the one in the laws of nature. Compassion, emotions, myths of love save us from ruthlessness devouring everything.

Before an abyss. The époque of great salvific and emancipative truths has ended. A human is before an abyss. Before an abyss of a cosmic catastrophe, in the form of exhausted potentials of the earth, or because of the unpredictable and fatal cosmic incident, or (in a better case) anthropological, humanist apocalypse. However, that doesn't mean that their chances are null. Instead of great truths in the form of religious or secular utopias, we have small, locals myths about salvation. The general pattern has many names. The production of those small myths is endless. It creates possibilities for saving lost meaning, as well as the general decline of human ambitions to understand the world.

The world of power is unscrupulous, elusive, constantly increasing its request to have everything subdued, to supervise and fatally control the human population. On its side are worlds of consumption, production, entertainment, calculating with nature, time, satisfaction, provisory measuring success in a general meaningless competition... while on its margins are thinking and art, which, with a measure of resistance, attempt to understand this horizonless presentation.

European shadows. Europe is a large treasury of culture, as well as a great master of evil, as Paul Celan would put it. It unites, integrates, at the same time disciplining small states and participating in educational and military campaigns in the second and third world. The wisdom



of Europe is the wisdom of the market, and where the market doesn't function, leveling is done by force, European and Atlantic. Europe is bureaucratic.

In the past, intellectuals contemplated on Europe and encouraged its critical spirit. Sartre, Camus, Cioran, Foucault, Habermas, Heinrich Bell... There are no such people today. When the old, cold-war Europe was torn down, there was a multitude of them. Now the job is probably completed and they are redundant.

I cannot estimate whether Europe used to be better in the past, but I hope it will produce culture and art worth remembering.

Choosing between united Europe and the Europe of nations, I'd choose the second. Europe of cultures and languages, not one culture and one language, which is where this continent is probably heading to.

In the ocean of evil. It is hard to resist the impression that we are in an ocean of evil. Everything reaching us is shocking and related to evil. The circle doesn't close with purification. The idealistic ancient ecstasy, which liberates and reconciles us with the forces of good, is missing.

We will open the newspapers tomorrow, unless we gave up on everything, and encounter a new flood of evil, its restless invention. We see beheaded journalists on television and *YouTube* shown by fanatics; every day we watch pictures of massacres, catastrophes, animalistic devouring, together with sophisticated pornographic

▲ Gerard Cartier, Jovan Zivlak, Paol Kejnec, Matthew Sweeney



▲ With wife
Jovanka Nikolić,
John Harty and
Neil McDevitt

presentations of pseudo-ethical stars, politicians and rich people.

Degradation. About ten years ago, after the approval of his friends to have their verses written on napkins, Michel Deguy cried that they shouldn't allow the degradation of poetry. Market forces had a large impact on degrading literature, its trivialization, bringing it down to the area of production and fashion. Literature is becoming a field of applying the simplest patterns, accepting to be pure entertainment, a current event. It simulates conversation, a special form of cognition, accepts the principles of utilization and consumption, and exhausts itself in the production of trivial splendor. That is dominant.

In circumstances in which market economy is lurking us on every corner, diversity is canceled. As Alain Kirby said, intellectually-wise, the world has narrowed, not expanded in the past decade. The ideology of globalized market economy is present in the place where

Music

My music is ecstatic, Dionysian. I don't have time for light, simple, entertaining music. I like reflection in music, weight, darkness. Sometimes music irritates me, torments me, because it is requesting, asks a lot from us. One should be prepared, open for music. I listened to Scriabin, Arvo Part and Rene Aubry recently, a seemingly light and ironic composer.

Of course, there are other kinds of music that evoke important social events or pictures of the culture I am related to, testifying about my boyhood and youth emotions, which echo in my soul like a plucked out word or sentence of a past life, the life of the community I belong to.

Lyotard saw the dusk of great stories, as the single and omnipotent regulator of the entire social activity – monopolistic, comprehensive, omni-explainable, omni-structuring...

Bridges, influences. That is vague. There are many books, authors, voices from other regions and genres, social incentives. Literature is not a controllable chemical element.

I appreciated rebels, nonconformists, marginalists, as well as central personalities of an époque. I was fascinated by Pyrrho, because he denied everything, even reality; Diogenes, who despised social conventions; Catullus, the great poet; Baudelaire, the rebel; Pound, the poet with great misconceptions; Crnjanski...

I liked winter, respected it as an author of the Pannonian landscape; echoes of voices reflecting from the meadow slopes; I respected my mother's father, who believed in life, patience and enduring; my dog killed by the village hunters – that upset me for all times...

Revelations and repetitions. Travels are often polemic. You argue with what was established as a cliché, try to discover a different, deeper reality. You deny prejudice, fears from the unknown, knowledge and beauty which do not exist.

However, travels are not revelations any more. Everything is already seen and you will never be in a position of our famous travelogue writers Dučić or Velimirović, who were discovering a different reality. The world repeats and you cannot resist the impression that the images you are seeing were already seen and that reality is almost the same everywhere.

Strength for writing. We are overtired, occupied, possessed. It is not possible to write in such a state. Writing requests openness, freedom, internal will to accept the world, to feel it and receive it with all its controversies. Both the external world and the one you are creating. Being ready to feel the shiver of a leaf, to sympathize and be motionless in order to dive into an event. In order for that to be possible, you must be strong to free yourself from the agonies of everyday life. ♦

