

**“Iz nepoznatosti propasti pravo u nepostojanje”
[“To plummet from obscurity into nonexistence”]:
A study of Aleksandar Tišma’s autobiographical project**

Ainsley Morse

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of the Arts in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures (Comparative Slavic Languages and Literatures).

Chapel Hill
2008

Approved by

Radislav Lapushin

Christopher Putney

Ivana Vuletić

Abstract

Ainsley Morse: “Iz nepoznatosti propasti pravo u nepostojanje”
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(Under the direction of Ivana Vuletić)

This paper examines the literary oeuvre of the twentieth-century Serbian writer Aleksandar Tišma (1924-2003), focusing particularly on his 1942-1951 diary and the memoir *Sećaj se većkrat na Vali* (2000). Although they were written fifty years apart, these autobiographical works are interconnected and mutually complementary. Tišma’s fictional work also plays an important role in complementing and supplementing the autobiographical information provided in the diary and memoir. Tišma pushes the limits of traditional autobiography in order to create a more nuanced and complete portrait of the writer and his experience. The unusual method and impressive scope of his project is illuminated through an examination of scholarship on autobiography, in particular Philippe Lejeune’s concept of “autobiographical space.” In connection with this, Tišma’s strong ties to literary modernism also help to clarify the processes at work in his unorthodox approach to autobiography.

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CHAPTER I.

Introduction

Aleksandar Tišma (1924-2003) was from Vojvodina, a region in northeastern Serbia which borders Hungary, Romania, and Croatia. He spent most of his adult life in Novi Sad; much of his fiction is set in this small but ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse city. Tišma himself was a model representative of this mixed environment. His mother, *née* Olga Müller, came from a well-off Jewish family with strong connections to Hungary; his maternal grandmother moved back to Budapest after the Novi Sad massacre in 1942, and Aleksandar lived with her while pursuing his studies at the university in Budapest.¹ Aleksandar's father, Gavra Tišma, was of Serbian peasant stock (from a village in Lika²). His parents' widely dissimilar ethnic and class backgrounds meant a great diversity of cultural influences for young Aleksandar. He was raised bilingual (Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian) and, with his mother's encouragement, began to study other languages at an early age. In addition to his native languages, Tišma became fluent in German, French and English, and he also seriously studied Russian and Italian. For Tišma, however, the polyglot environment of his youth was a mixed blessing. As a young

¹ The Novi Sad massacre is the name given to the execution of approximately 1300 Novi Sad residents, primarily Serbs and Jews, organized and carried out by the Hungarian collaborationist forces then occupying Novi Sad. The executions took place over a three day period in January 1942 and were carried out in a number of locations throughout the city, most infamously on the bank of the Danube. Pavle Šosberger, *Jevreji u Vojvodini* (Prometej, Novi Sad, 1998), 180.

² The region of Lika is located in eastern Croatia.

man determined to become a writer, he felt compelled to choose between Hungarian and Serbian, conscious all the while of the wider cultural and social implications of such a choice.³ The convoluted mix of languages and cultures in Vojvodina, reflected within his own family, is a recurring theme in Tišma's work.

Tišma's early determination to become a professional writer constitutes an important element in this paper's investigation. Tišma published his first short story ("Ibikina kuća" [Ibika's house]) in the journal *Letopis Matice srpske* in 1951,⁴ when he was twenty-seven; his first book publication was the collection of poems *Naseljeni svet* [The inhabited world] (1956).⁵ He continued to publish novels, novellas, short stories, plays and poetry until his death in 2003, although he stopped writing fiction in the late 1980s.⁶ His last major publication was the extended edition of his diary, *Dnevnik* [Diary]

³ Tišma chose to write in Serbian at nineteen: "Evo primera za sebičnu pozadinu nacionalizma...Otkako sam došao do odluke (ne suviše čvrste, istina) da ću biti srpski književnik, mene zabrinjava sudbina Srpstva—želeo bih da narod za koji u prvom redu pišem bude što snažniji i značajniji" [Here's an example of the selfish background of nationalism...Ever since I came to the decision (not a very firm one, it's true) to be a Serbian writer, I've been concerned as to the fate of Serbdom—I would like that the people for whom I primarily write be as strong and significant as possible]. Aleksandar Tišma, *Dnevnik 1942-1951: Postajanje* (Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 1991), 59. Further citations will refer to *Dnevnik*.

⁴ The journal of Matica srpska, *Letopis Matice srpske* is one of the oldest literary journals in the world (it has been published since 1824).

⁵ See Appendix for complete Tišma bibliography (Serbian and available English translations).

⁶ "Ja stvarno ne pišem...To sam prestao da radim još pre petnaestak godina" [I really don't write...I stopped doing that about fifteen years ago]. Quoted in Nedim Sejdinović, "Aleksandar Tišma, književnik: Autoportret usamljenog i začuđenog kućeta" (interview), Nedim Sejdinović website, posted 23. December 2001, <http://www.nedimsejdinovic.com/?p=165>. This and all following translations from the Serbian are my own unless otherwise noted.

1942-2001;⁷ a collection of letters written to his wife was published posthumously.⁸ In addition to his better-known fictional work, Tišma published essays and travelogues and translated a great deal of European literature.⁹ After an early foray into journalism (including stints at *Slobodna Vojvodina* and *Borba*¹⁰), in 1949 Tišma began working as a publishing editor at the publishing house, Matica srpska, in Novi Sad. He retained this position until his retirement in 1980 and continued to collaborate with Matica srpska until his death.

Tišma is best known for his fictional work. Almost all of his novels and short stories are set in Yugoslavia, much of the time in Vojvodina and particularly in Novi Sad. Much of his fiction is linked thematically to the wartime and post-war experience in this region. Other central themes of his work include memory and problems of memory, violence, death and problems of identity (cultural, social, ethnic, individual). The last theme is especially pervasive. Tišma refers to five of his most acclaimed books—the novels *Knjiga o Blamu* [The Book of Blam], *Upotreba čoveka* [The Use of Man], *Kapo* [Kapo], *Vere i zaverе* [Faiths and Treasons] and the collection of short stories *Škola*

⁷ *Dnevnik 1942-2001* [Diary 1942-2001] (Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, Sremski Karlovci: Novi Sad, 2001).

⁸ *Pisma Sonji* [Letters to Sonja] (Knjižarska zadruga “Ljubitelji knjige,” Novi Sad, 2006).

⁹ Tišma translated extensively, most notably: (from English) Hermann Melville, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Oscar Wilde; (from German) Leonhard Frank, Stefan Zweig; (from Hungarian) Jozef Pap, Imre Kertesz, Geza Ottlik, Laszlo Vegel.

¹⁰ *Slobodna Vojvodina* [Free Vojvodina] was founded in 1942 as an underground resistance paper during the Axis occupation. From 1953 to the present it has been published under the name *Dnevnik* (see: <http://www.dnevnik.co.yu/>). *Borba* [Struggle] was the party organ for the Yugoslav communists during Socialist Yugoslavia (for more information, see: Milovan Djilas, *Rise and Fall* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1983).

bezbožništva [The School of Godlessness]—as his “petoknjižje o mešancima” [Pentateuch of mixed-breeds], in reference to the author’s personal and artistic preoccupation with his culturally mixed background.¹¹ The protagonists in these and other of Tišma’s works are very frequently representative of this preoccupation, though it is explored differently in each of them.

Even a superficial acquaintance with the author’s background makes the autobiographical layer of his fiction evident. For example, Karan in the short story “Mrtvi ugao” [Dead Angle] shares a great deal of Tišma’s family background (his parents’ difficult relationship, his tortured and passive-aggressive mother, his sympathetic grandmother). As we will see, an acquaintance with Tišma’s autobiographical works reveals the extent to which his characters reflect elements of his emotional experience as well. Karan’s emotional tribulations, attitude towards women and general outlook on the world echo those of the young Tišma, as recorded in his diary; these features of character and background are also reprised to a large extent in Sergije, the hero of *Vere i zaveru*. One of the protagonists of *Upotreba čoveka*, Sredoje Lazukić, repeats many of Tišma’s own early experiences with women; as is characteristic for most of Tišma’s main characters, Sredoje is also burdened with a sense of isolation and estrangement from his fellows. Much in the life of Miroslav Blam, the eponymous hero of *Knjiga o Blamu*, parallels Tišma’s own biography. Likewise, the main conflict of the novel is one of central importance in Tišma’s life: Blam is constantly struggling to come to terms with

¹¹ Quoted in the collection of interviews *Šta sam govorio* [What I said], ed. Ljubisav Andrić (Prometej, Novi Sad, 1996), 203-204.

his Jewish background.¹² Lamian in *Kapo* is a more dramatic fictional exploration of this same theme: a Jew who escaped persecution during the war but will be forever punished by feelings of guilt and internal conflict.¹³ The autobiographical elements in Tišma's fiction are, however, only part of his engagement with autobiography.

¹² In the novel, Blam escapes the consequences of being Jewish in Nazi-occupied Novi Sad by marrying a Christian woman; Tišma experienced a similar escape due to having been baptized at birth.

¹³ The two characters differ most dramatically in their method of escape: Blam married a Christian and was converted, while Lamian worked for the authorities in a concentration camp.

CHAPTER II.

Tišma's autobiographical works

Dnevnik 1942-1951: Postajanje

Iskušava me misao da izlaz nađem u izdavanju svoga dnevnika, s tim da u njega stavljam sve što doživljavam. Ali, u tom slučaju postavilo bi se pitanje odnosa autora prema delu. Jer, ako bih pisao stvarni dnevnik i tako ga izdao, to ne bi bilo umetničko delo; ako bih pak pisao „dnevnik“, onda ne bih učinio ni korak napred, sem što bih promenio literarnu formu.

[I'm tempted by the thought that the way out lies in the publication of my diary, since I place everything that I experience into it. But that would raise the question of the author's relationship to his work. For if I were to write a real diary and publish it as such, it wouldn't be a work of art; if I wrote, on the other hand, a "diary," then I wouldn't be progressing at all, I would just have changed literary forms.]¹⁴

In 1991 Tišma published the first nine years of his diary, *Dnevnik 1942-1951*:

Postajanje [*Diary 1942-1951: Becoming*].¹⁵ In contemporary interviews he explains that he felt compelled to publish the diary at the time because he feared his descendents would suppress or censor it:

Mogao sam ga baciti, spaliti; mogao sam ga ostaviti, pa neka drugi rade s njim šta znaju. Međutim, to drugo rešenje mi se učinilo dosta nezgodno pošto znam kako ljudi vole da intervenišu u tekstovima drugog čoveka... Zato sam rešio da ga sam objavim.

[I could have thrown it away, burned it: I could have left it and let somebody else do with it whatever they wanted. However, this second option seemed quite

¹⁴ *Dnevnik*, 49.

¹⁵ This part of the diary was first published in thirteen installments in the literary magazine *Književnost* (1988: v.1/2 - 1990: v.5).

unappealing to me, since I know how people love to make changes in other peoples' texts...For this reason I decided to publish it]¹⁶

In the preface to the later, extended edition of his diary, meanwhile, Tišma writes that he chose to publish the 1942-1951 diary when he did because, given the shaky political situation in Yugoslavia at the time, he feared its potential loss or destruction: “Pošto je bio tajan, pobojavao sam se bio na početku međujugoslovenskog rata da bi usled neke nesreće—požara, bombe, šta znam ja—mogao iz nepoznatosti propasti pravo u nepostojanje” [Since it was secret, at the beginning of the Yugoslav war I became afraid that because of some accident—a fire, a bomb, who knows—it could drop right from obscurity into nonexistence].¹⁷ Regardless of these differing explanations, Tišma consistently states that he chose to publish the segment of diary covering this particular nine-year period because 1951 marks a watershed in his life: both his first success as a writer (the publication of “Ibikina kuća”) and the beginning of his married life.¹⁸ In other words, 1951 marks the end of life as an anonymous young man still relatively free from personal and professional responsibilities.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Šta sam govorio*, 174-175.

¹⁷ “Predgovor” [Preface], *Dnevnik 1942-2001*.

¹⁸ Tišma begins to mention his future wife, Sonja Drakulić (as “Sa.”), in the last few entries for 1951. They were married in 1952.

¹⁹ “Ovo što sam objavio, to je taj kritički period...To je vreme kad sam postajao pisac. I ono je puno unutrašnjih lutanja, groznice, aberacija, traženja nadoknade za uspehe u književnom traganju na drugim stranama, pa i u ispadima, emocionalnim i drugim. Međutim, 1951. objavljujem prvu uspehu pripovetku, *Ibikinu kuću*. Tada iz postajanja prelazim u postojanje. Počinjem ne više da postajem, nego da postojim kao pisac. Zato sam prvi tom dnevnika tu i zaključio” [The part I published is that critical period...That was the time when I was becoming a writer. And it is full of internal ramblings, fever, aberrations, the search for compensation for successes through my literary seekings elsewhere, also in excesses, emotional and otherwise. However, in 1951 I published my

Tišma's decision to publish only the part of his diary dealing with his development into a writer dovetails neatly with the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* [novel of formation]; the subtitle of the diary, *Postajanje* [becoming], corresponds directly to *Bildung* [German: formation, creation].²⁰ The *Künstlerroman* [artist novel], a sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman* which specifically treats the formation of the artist, is even more relevant to Tišma's project.²¹ As Maurice Beebe points out in his discussion of "the artist as hero," artist-novels very often end before the protagonist has established himself as a full-fledged artist.²² The *Bildungsroman* was particularly popular with Modernist writers in part because, as Harry Levin points out, it enabled them to reverse standard procedure: rather than using art to represent reality, they could "apply the methods of realism to the

first successful short story, *Ibika's house*. At that point from becoming I crossed over into existence. I started, no longer to become, but to exist as a writer. For this reason I ended the first volume of my diary there] (*Šta sam govorio*, 87).

²⁰ "*Bildungsroman*: generally distinguished from the coming-of-age novel (which simply sets forth the life-path of the hero) by the particular explication of the hero's inner formation through his cultural and personal surroundings. It is thus the development of the individual soul [entelechy] in conflict with the world" [*my translation* –AM]. *Kleines literarisches Lexikon* (2. ed), ed. Wolfgang Kayser (Francke Verlag, Berlin, 1953), 27.

²¹ "*Künstlerroman*: a category of bildungsroman, this "novel of the artist" examines the development of the artist from childhood to the point when the subject realizes his or her artistic potential and mission. Such novels typically depict the struggles of sensitive protagonists to overcome bourgeois values and other obstacles, thereby realizing their creative potential." *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, ed. Ross Murfin and Supriya Ray (Bedford Press, Boston and New York, 1997), 186.

²² Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (NYU Press, New York, 1964), 5-6. Beebe cites as an example Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

subject of art” (Levin 399) and to the experience of the individual artist.²³ Of course, Tišma’s diary is inherently non-fictional and cannot itself be considered a *Bildungs-* or *Künstlerroman*. Yet, Tišma’s focus on personal history and development as an artist in his diary and his ties to literary modernism in general both fall in line with the *Bildungsroman* tradition. It should furthermore be noted that among Tišma’s fictional protagonists there are no artists or writers. In other words, Tišma’s engagement with the *Bildungs-* or *Künstlerroman* can be most consistently observed in the way that he references and applies the form and features of the genre in his non-fictional autobiographical works: his diary and memoir.

Tišma’s diary is a curious document. Immediately striking is the near-total absence of commentary on contemporary political events, in an account that covers some of the most tumultuous years in twentieth-century European history. The first entries, written in the summer of 1942, make no mention of the Hungarian fascist occupation of Novi Sad; indeed, mentions of the occupation are limited to such supremely nonchalant entries as:

17. VI 1943. Plava nije došla na sastanak. Čekao sam je dugo, onda sam primetio da Hitler-tér, gde smo se dogovorili da se nađemo kraj telefonske govornice, ima dve takve govornice.

[The blonde didn’t show up for our meeting. I waited for her for a long time, then I noticed that Hitler Square, where we had agreed to meet next to the phone booth, has two such phone booths]²⁴

²³ Harry Levin, “The Artist,” in James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson (Penguin, Middlesex and New York, 1968), 399-415.

²⁴ *Dnevnik*, 40.

Similarly, there is no reference at any point to the January 1942 massacre in Novi Sad—a lastingly traumatic and profoundly formative event in Tišma’s life and one that took place only a few months prior to the first diary entry.²⁵ This attitude of studied indifference towards ostensibly significant events continues throughout the nine-year period covered in the diary (it extends to such monumental events as the 1944 liberation of occupied Novi Sad by Soviet troops and the fallout following the 1948 Cominform incident²⁶).

Tišma has commented that, at the time, he feared the potentially dangerous consequences of writing directly about the occupation. At the same time, he underscores the fact that he did not keep a diary in order to document the events of the time.²⁷ Rather, he felt compelled to record the intense emotional experiences that preoccupied him.

²⁵ Tišma in a later interview refers to the massacre as an initial stimulus for beginning the diary: “Bilo je to posle velike novosadske racije, u kojoj je pobijeno za tri dana oko 2.000 ljudi. Ona nas je sve prenerazila, skamenila. Onda, valjda iz neminovnosti svačijeg krvotoka, disanja, shvatio sam da se život nastavlja. Od tada, taj dnevnik stalno vodim, unoseći u njega sve što me pokrene da se sam pred sobom oglasim.” [That was after the big Novi Sad massacre, in which about 2000 people were killed in three days. That stupefied us, petrified us. Then, probably because of the inevitability of everyone’s circulation, breathing, I realized that life was continuing to go on. From then on, I have been constantly keeping that diary, putting down everything that moves me to make some kind of declaration to myself] (*Šta sam govorio*, 205-206).

²⁶ Following the ideological split between Stalin and Josip Broz Tito in 1948, Yugoslavia’s political ties to Moscow were severed and its communist party expelled from the Communist Information Bureau (usually abbreviated in English as *Cominform*, while in Serbian: *Informbiro*). Yugoslav communists who remained loyal to the Soviet Union were subject to harsh persecution. Relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union remained tense until the mid-1950s. For more details, see Djilas, “Confrontation,” *Rise and Fall*, 75-296.

²⁷ “...moj dnevnik nije imao nikakvu nameru sem ispovesti samom sebi. Nisam želeo da komentarišem ni društvo, ni događaje” [my diary had no other intention than a confession to myself. I had no desire to comment either on society or current events] (Sejdinović interview 2001).

Pisao sam ga iz potrebe da pribeležim ono što mi se dešava, da nečemu to saopštim, ako već ne mogu nekome, jer očigledno nisam imao takvog prijatelja ili prijateljicu kojima bih mogao da se do kraja poverim.

[I wrote it out of a need to scribble down what was happening to me, to inform something if I couldn't inform someone, since evidently I didn't have that friend or girlfriend whom I could trust implicitly]²⁸

One of the main sources of Tišma's emotional distress—his sense of isolation and estrangement from other people—required that his confidence be made to paper and not to an actual confidant. At the same time, when the diary is read as the account of an artist in development, its single-minded focus on internal goings-on seems more justified than neurotic.

Tišma's self-absorption, especially remarkable when set against the background of wartime tumult, thus constitutes an important layer in the portrait of his personality that emerges in the diary. Tišma acknowledges this at certain points in the diary:

24. X. 1944. Prvo: oslobođeni smo. Za mene, koji sam ove tri i po godine proveo manje-više samo u sebi, ta promena ne znači ništa sušastvenog

[First: we've been liberated. For me—who's spent these three and a half years more or less exclusively inside of myself—this change doesn't really mean anything].²⁹

The later entries reflect the more sober reasoning of a young man in his mid-twenties; Tišma is only eighteen when he begins the diary. However, the author's focus on his own personality and emotional development is consistent throughout the nine-year period covered. His fixation on women and sexual escapades is also more prominent in the first few years covered in the diary, but constitutes a major theme throughout. Such a fixation

²⁸ *Šta sam govorio*, 160.

²⁹ *Dnevnik*, 82.

could arguably be expected in any young man on the cusp of adulthood, but the extent to which Tišma emphasizes and even exaggerates its centrality is obviously intentional. It too plays an important role in the construction of his personality.

A great number of the diary entries relate to another key element of Tišma's personality: his development specifically as a writer. Many of the earlier entries are devoted to the impressions made by other writers and his own initial attempts at composition. Even later entries ostensibly documenting Tišma's period of military service and journalistic career are dominated by discussions of his more and less successful literary attempts. The image of the self for Tišma is thus, from a very young age, completely conterminous with the image of the writer: there can be no Aleksandar Tišma other than Tišma, the writer, even before he has produced anything (remember that the diary covers only the period prior to his first successful publication): "Moj cilj: da postanem pisac... Čini [mi se] sasvim sporedno šta ću biti i kakav ću biti do časa kada mi se ta mogućnost otvori" [my goal: to become a writer...it seems only of marginal importance what I am and what I'll do until that possibility opens up].³⁰ The diary entries document his struggle to become that writer; the fact that a more mundane, physical struggle for existence was going on around him during this period comes across as mere coincidence.

Tišma is aware that his single-minded determination to become a writer is connected to his overall egocentricity. On the one hand, he sees himself as a loner and as estranged from other people because of his inborn tendency to isolate himself and because of his ambivalent relationship to the ethnic- and class-based conflicts of his

³⁰ *ibid.*, 24-5.

background. On the other hand, he sees the uncompromising quality of this drive as justified: he believes that only through total self-absorption can he achieve his goal of becoming a writer. When Tišma's attention in the diary extends outside of himself, it remains focused on literary concerns. The diary gives us many examples of his constant "use" of friends and acquaintances as material for his literary production, both in the entries ("Anica bi mogla biti junakinja moga romana [Anica could be the hero of my novel]"³¹) and in the appended explanations ("prema [Dragi] sam modelirao Janju u *Knjizi o Blamu* [I modeled Janja in *The Book of Blam* on Draga]"³²).

The diary's appendix, titled "Objašnjenja 1990. godine" [Explanations, 1990] requires special attention. Although Tišma asserts that he did not change or edit the diary prior to its publication, he did append a substantial number of explanatory notes. The content of these notes ranges from one-line translations ("*oeuvre*: na francuskom dela [*oeuvre*: work in French]"³³) to more lengthy explanations and speculations:

Reiter: drug sa letovanja u Makarskoj 1940. godine s kojim sam se sukobio oko devojke koja nam se obojici dopadala, pa smo od nje zatražili da se između nas javno opredeli, a ona se opredelila za mene; ali možda i neko drugi sa istim prezimenom koga više ne mogu da se setim.

[*Reiter*: a friend from the summer of 1940 in Hungary, with whom I quarreled over a girl whom we both liked, so we asked her to choose between us, and she chose me; but maybe someone else with the same last name whom I can't remember any more]³⁴

³¹ *ibid.*, 106.

³² *ibid.*, 249.

³³ *ibid.*, 255.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 254.

The explanations are interesting from a critical point of view for a number of reasons. They provide further support to the centrality of literature in the young Tišma's consciousness by pointing out oblique literary references: "*jedne svoje nemoći: ciljam, po svoj prilici, na „Jade mladoga Vertera“ [one of my failings: I am referring most likely to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*].*"³⁵ Many of the explanations provide information that hardly seems useful to the reader not personally acquainted with Tišma (e.g. "*M...Lj.: poznanice u Novom Sadu [female acquaintances in Novi Sad]*"³⁶). Yet, the very existence of these explanations indicates the unseen but watchful presence of the older Tišma, lurking behind the scenes and doing his best to orchestrate the impression made upon the reader by this otherwise unadulterated document.

Dnevnik 1942-2001

In 2001 Tišma published an extended edition of his diary, *Dnevnik 1942-2001*. Keeping to the model of the first diary's subtitle *Postajanje*, the nearly 1200-page diary is divided into four sections: the other three are *Ostajanje* (remaining), *Nastajanje* (developing), *Prestajanje* (ending).³⁷ In the preface to this edition, Tišma notes that even this extension does not represent the final, unabridged diary—he has in the interest of tact and propriety expunged passages throughout that might be offensive to persons still living. He writes that he has left the full and unedited diary to Matica srpska with instructions that it be made publishable twenty-five years after his death. It should be

³⁵ *ibid*, 254.

³⁶ *ibid*, 252.

³⁷ All four words are formed from the same root, the verb *stati*.

noted that in a 1991 interview, Tišma refers to this extended version of his diary as less artistically interesting: “Ja ga vodim i dalje, vodim ga do danas, ali u njemu sve više preovlađuju misaoni, radni, profesionalni interesi. Takav dnevnik neće niko od mojih naslednika prećutati, ni krivotvoriti” [I still keep it, even today, but intellectual, working and professional interests have become more and more prevalent. None of my descendents will want to suppress or manipulate a diary like that].³⁸

This extended diary is certainly a rich source of information about Tišma’s life and work. A great deal of recent scholarship on Tišma relies heavily on this diary, using it precisely as a source of information similar to an interview (Tišma’s various pronouncements made in diary entries are quoted verbatim and taken at face value).³⁹ Both the way the diary is written and its reception, it would seem, diminish its significance as a work of art. This paper is more concerned with Tišma’s work as an artist, and furthermore with the period of his *becoming* a writer (more so than with his persisting, developing and eventual cessation). For this reason I will henceforth be referring only to the earlier, 1942-1951 version of the diary.

Sećaj se večkrat na Vali

³⁸ *Šta sam govorio*, 87.

³⁹ See, for instance, the 2005 collection of conference papers *Povratak miru Aleksandra Tišme: zbornik radova*, ed. Jovan Delić, Svetozar Koljević, Ivan Negrišorac (Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 2005), and the German-Yugoslav scholar Vesna Cidilko’s recent papers on Tišma in *Književna istorija* (2007), *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* (2004), *Sveske* (2003).

In 2000 Tišma published *Sečaj se večkrat na Vali*, subtitled “izveštaj o mome životu” [a report on my life], a combination of memoir and personal notes.⁴⁰ Though published only in 2000, the book was written in the winter of 1991-1992, shortly after the publication of the first installment of the diary. *Sečaj se* justifies its journalistic subtitle (*izveštaj*: report or dispatch). Resembling a long essay, it is written in a rather dry tone, in a colloquial register and is not divided into chapters or sections.⁴¹ Though its basic approach is retrospective, Tišma’s narrative meanders, sometimes approaching stream-of-consciousness in its free flow of associations. In this way, a chronological sketch of Tišma’s life-path is interspersed with anecdotes and musings on his development as a man and as a writer.

In *Sečaj se* Tišma provides a further, intentional exposition of his personality as a writer. The assertion of writing as his sole purpose in life, seen already in the diary, is repeated:

Sve više sam osećao da [neku vrstu normalnog života] mogu postići samo putem pisanja, putem svoje literature, da je cilj za kojim sam pošao po nagonu, po želji da stvorim knjige kakve sam voleo da čitam, u stvari moja jedina mogućna životna putanja. Bez literature, bez napisanih sopstvenih knjiga, ja sam bio ništa, jedan neispunjen prostor, prostor bez dodira sa stvarnošću, sa istorijom, pa i sa životom.

⁴⁰ *Sečaj se večkrat na Vali* (Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, Novi Sad, 2000), 5. The Slovenian title, which translates as *Always remember Vali*, reproduces a note written to the author by a Slovenian girl whom he claims no longer to remember. Further citations will refer to *Sečaj se*.

⁴¹ Slavko Gordić has noted the (primarily stylistic) failings of Tišma’s later non-fictional work: “The penetrating and inventive vibrancy of stance and the discourse ‘without illusions’ ... in his non-fictional texts is transformed into a dry, mundane and factual chronicler’s narration. It’s as if that which inspires the world and discourse of his fiction makes the nonfiction destitute and utilitarian (179)” [*my translation-AM*] (Slavko Gordić, “O poznoj nefikcionalnoj prozi Aleksandre Tišme,” *Povratak miru*), 178-183.

[All the more frequently I had the feeling that I could achieve [some kind of normal life] only by writing, by my literature; that the goal I set out for by instinct, by the desire to create books of the type I loved to read, was actually my only possible life-path. Without literature, without having my own books written, I was nothing, an unfilled space, a space lacking contact with reality, with history, and hence with life]⁴²

The older Tišma thus supports the conviction expressed by his younger self in the diary: that writing is for him not only a calling, but the difference between life and death, existence and non-existence. The diary's heavy focus on Tišma's development as a writer and subsequently, on his professional successes, underlines the lifelong persistence of writerhood as a key component of his being. In this and other ways, *Sečaj se* to a large degree contextualizes the raw material of the diary. Tišma discusses and even analyzes the diary in the memoir: "Ako sada pogledam taj dnevnik...pada mi u oči koliko je malo u njemu opštih događaja...ja i nisam imao izraženu potrebu za beleženjem spoljnih zbivanja" [If I look at that diary now...I am struck by how little there is about general events...I didn't even have an express need to write down outside goings-on].⁴³ The memoir's significantly broader historical scope allows it to provide the background information (family history, childhood, political events) to the brief period covered in the diary, and then to carry the narrative further into the adult Tišma's life.

Through anecdotes, the memoir also provides myriad indications of the autobiographical layer in Tišma's fiction. *Sečaj se* can thus to a certain extent be understood as an extension of the impulse behind the explanations appended to the end of the diary (*Sečaj se* was written and the diary prepared for publication at the same time, in

⁴² *Sečaj se*, 36.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 34-35.

the early 1990s). In his memoir, however, Tišma rarely links the real-life events directly to their fictional manifestations. On the contrary, he considers this the responsibility of the reader.

While the diary displays the young Tišma's meticulous examination of his own personality, the portrait that emerges is overwhelmingly that of a young mind in flux. The memoir, written nearly a half-century later, takes on the more complicated task of presenting Tišma's personality as a cohesive whole. A theme that becomes more important in the latter half of *Sećaj se* is the illness and eventual death of Tišma's mother. In the introductory paragraphs, he references her decline and draws a parallel between her disintegrating memory and the disintegration of Yugoslavia occurring at the time of writing. He thereby provides at least one apparent motivation for the writing of the memoir:

Jer ličnost je memorija—tako bar izgleda. Dok se sećamo šta smo činili, šta smo mislili pre pola sata i pre pola godine i pre pola veka, mi možemo sastaviti neko jedinstvo koje jesmo, neku ličnost

[For personality is memory—at least it seems that way. As long as we remember what we have done, what we were thinking a half-hour or half-year or half-century ago, we can construct some kind of unity that we *are*, some personality]⁴⁴

Though the statement about memory makes overt reference to his mother's decline, Tišma only returns to her plight at the end of the memoir. For the bulk of the narrative, he focuses on recounting his own experiences in order to make a record of his own personality. Through the writing of his memoir, it would seem, Tišma is seeking the way to a harmonious sense of identity, the search for which has preoccupied him personally

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 1.

and artistically for his entire life. At the same time, he seems to doubt the possibility for the unity of which he speaks.

Tišma's statement about memory and personality evokes the conflict between his desire to present a certain unity of the personality and his wavering faith in the possibility of this unity. His engagement with this conflict points to his close ties to the tradition of twentieth-century literary modernism, with its "inward turn" to highly subjective explorations of the self.⁴⁵ Proceeding from Nietzsche's idea that "the self might not enjoy a guaranteed, a priori unity," the work of Modernist writers like Joyce and Marcel Proust goes "beyond the self as usually understood, to a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question...or beyond that to a new kind of unity, a new way of inhabiting time."⁴⁶ This new kind of unity emerges, paradoxically, through fragmentation. According to Taylor's interpretation, in modernist works of art there are no direct, unmediated pronouncements; the overall "meaning" of the work is not directly stated, but rather allowed to emerge through the juxtaposition of individually meaningful words or images. The "epiphany" in a given work of modernist art thus happens "not so much in the work as in a space that the work sets up; not in the words or images or objects evoked, but between them."⁴⁷ In his book on autobiography, Paul Jay comments that Proust in his *In Search of Lost Time* approaches autobiography in a scattered,

⁴⁵ In his discussion of twentieth-century art, Charles Taylor proposes the concept of the "inward turn" as exemplary of the Modernist aesthetic focus (in contrast to, for example, the Romantic privileging of externally-produced impressions). Charles Taylor, "Epiphanies of modernism," in *Sources of the Self: the making of the modern identity* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989), 456-493.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 463.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 476.

roundabout way: “Proust seems to posit a relationship between memory and self-renewal...[his novel] is an attempt to recollect privileged ‘spots of time’ in order to renew himself in (and for) the present.”⁴⁸ Indeed, Tišma’s memoir on its own does not attempt to be a unified account of his personality any more than his diary does. It represents an important, but nevertheless limited element in his striving towards self-comprehension and, subsequently, self-representation.

Tišma’s commentary in *Sečaj se* on his artistic method further demonstrates the extent to which writing determines his existence, and at the same time provides direct clues to the understanding of his work:

Dnevnik sam vodio i na putovanjima, onima o kojima sam pravio putopise, tako da su isti doživljaji bili prikazani na dva načina, i kao suma zbivanja i kao praćenje trenutaka koji su za mene presudni, to jest i kao zapisnik—u dnevniku—i kao literatura—u putopisu.

[I kept a diary during my travels, the ones I wrote travelogues about, and so the same experiences were shown in two ways, both as a sum of events and as a keeping-track of the moments which were crucial for me, that is, as notes—in the diary—and as literature—in the travelogue]⁴⁹

Here Tišma further confirms his engagement with one of the favorite conceits of literary modernism: the oblique or roundabout expression of meaning, that which Taylor refers to as the “epiphany of interspaces.”⁵⁰ Tišma’s fictional work offers further evidence for the importance of such multiple perspectives.

⁴⁸ Paul Jay, *Being in the text: Self-representation from Wordsworth to Barthes* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1984), 36.

⁴⁹ *Sečaj se*, 170.

⁵⁰ Taylor here refers again to the idea that the overall meaning of a given work of art emerges in the spaces between individually meaningful words or images, rather than being directly stated (Taylor, 476).

Tišma's admiration of Modernist writers is attested to in his diary, where he records the excitement and inspiration kindled by the work of writers like Proust, Andre Gide, Virginia Woolf and others. Furthermore, the influence of modernist technique is evident in the diary's explanations, the memoir and throughout his fictional work, both in terms of the themes he focuses on and the means by which he addresses them. Tišma's engagement with Modernism reflects significantly on his autobiographical project, which seeks to present its essential meaning through the juxtaposition of component texts.

Dnevnik 1942-1951 and *Sečaj se* are clearly autobiographical works. They can furthermore be viewed as companion texts: although they were published ten years apart, Tišma worked on the diary and the memoir during the period between 1990 and 1992. The opposite viewpoints represented by the two works simultaneously form the basis for their complementary nature: the memoir looks back on and attempts to reconstruct a life-history, while the diary is a document, expressing a fixed moment from that history. Many of the lacunae in the diary are fleshed out in the more detailed narrative of the memoir. Likewise, the diary entries that correspond to the pre-1951 parts of the memoir provide an exciting note of immediacy and authenticity to the otherwise straightforward, dry narration of the elderly Tišma.

Although the works certainly reflect the autobiographical inquiry, they nevertheless do not constitute an autobiography in the traditional sense. On the contrary, these works (1) go about the business of autobiography differently and (2) have a different goal than that associated with traditional autobiography. As autobiography proper neither one on its own is adequate. At the same time, when read together these texts constitute *more* than a traditional autobiography.

Significantly, Tišma comments that his early diary should be seen as a work of art: “posebno književno ostvarenje, o čijoj sam budućnosti morao postarati, kao i o svima ostalima [a distinctly literary creation, whose future I needed to look after just as much as that of all the others].”⁵¹ The memoir must also be treated as a specifically literary creation, “like all the others.” Despite their autobiographical (i.e. ostensibly factual) content, they are literary productions and as such belong to Tišma’s literary oeuvre. Yet, they occupy a unique place in the system of his work. Not only do they stand apart from his other work in terms of genre (his other work is more easily categorized as *fiction*, *poetry*, *travel writing*, etc.), but they are unique in their relationship to the other works. By their existence in general and their content in particular these works designate an “autobiographical space”⁵²; they indicate Tišma’s autobiographical inquiry, implicate his fictional work in this inquiry, and at the same time help in its interpretation. Their intermediary function reflects Tišma’s interest in the gap between the artist’s intention and his resulting creation:

Uvek moramo odvajati umetnički rezultat od htenja. Dok umetnik stvara, on ima jednu vrstu htenja, kog je on više ili manje svestan, a mi čitaoci skoro nikako. Čak i ako on direktno izrazi svoju nameru, postavlja se pitanje da li smo ga mi razumeli na pravi način, kao i da li je on svoju nameru dobro razumeo ili izrekao.

[We must always divide the artistic result from intention. While the artist is creating, he has one kind of intention, of which he is more or less aware but we readers not at all. Even if he directly expresses his intention, there is always the question of whether we have understood him in the right way, and also whether he himself understood or expressed his intention well]⁵³

⁵¹ From the preface to the 2001 *Dnevnik*.

⁵² I use this term in the sense given it by Philippe Lejeune (see below).

⁵³ Sejdinović interview.

Interpretation of artistic intention is inevitably plagued by ambiguity. While this ambiguity cannot be eliminated, it can be ordered or limited. If the autobiographical works are read and understood in the proper way, Tišma will not only have produced a more successful autobiography. He will have laid the ground for the rest of his oeuvre to be read and understood in a way more in tune with his intention.

CHAPTER III.

Autobiography and autobiographical space

Autobiography

[In autobiography] no trick of presentation even when assisted by genius can prevent the narrator from always knowing the outcome of the story he tells—he commences, in a manner of speaking, with the problem already solved.⁵⁴

The past fifty years have shown a marked increase in scholarly interest in autobiography. The American scholar James Olney, who has written extensively on autobiography, attributes the first groundbreaking scholarly explication of autobiography to Georges Gusdorf's 1956 article, "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie."⁵⁵ As Gusdorf points out (and virtually all the autobiography scholars after him have confirmed⁵⁶), strictly defining autobiography is a task fraught with difficulty and uncertainty.

Various definitions have been attempted; for instance, Paul Jay succinctly defines an autobiography as "a factual and more or less objective life-history of its author that

⁵⁴ Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and limits of autobiography," trans. James Olney, in *Autobiography: essays theoretical and critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton University Press, Princeton, c1980), 28-48: 42.

⁵⁵ See above citation.

⁵⁶ See Bibliography (Bruss, Jay, Lejeune, Olney, Pascal).

includes details about personality and emotional, spiritual and social development.”⁵⁷

Gusdorf’s earlier definition, however, calls into question the “factual” and “more or less objective” quality of the life-history produced. He writes: “The original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization.”⁵⁸ The autobiographer faces the insurmountable temptation to, in hindsight, order and organize the events of his life in a coherent and harmonious way (regardless the discord that might have been).

Gusdorf also draws attention to the element of active self-creation involved in producing an autobiography: “Autobiography is not a simple recapitulation of the past; it is also the attempt and drama of a man struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment of his history.”⁵⁹ The artist, with his wild imagination and fondness for harmonious form, is as an autobiographer especially subject to the temptation to simplify and/or embellish his autobiographical construction in the name of aesthetic or logical coherence. While remaining cognizant of these difficulties, Gusdorf and many of the scholars subsequently writing about autobiography agree with the features given above in Jay’s basic definition.

Regardless of the ambiguity surrounding the definition of autobiography, scholars of autobiography would agree that neither of Tišma’s autobiographical works on its own qualifies as autobiography proper. To begin with, diaries and memoirs are both generally excluded from this category. Roy Pascal notes that the narrative of a diary moves through

⁵⁷ Jay, 15. It is pleasantly ironic that Jay produces this fine working definition in the context of his claim that it is pointless to define autobiography.

⁵⁸ Gusdorf, 41.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 45.

a series of moments in time, eliminating the retrospective element key to autobiography; the long-range significance of events and experiences can't be assessed. Pascal also largely discounts the memoir, citing its typical focus on others and on outside events (rather than on the narrator's evolving personality).⁶⁰ Pascal's judgments can be applied to both of Tišma's autobiographical works.

Philippe Lejeune's more narrow definition of autobiography likewise accommodates neither the diary nor the memoir. Like Pascal, he discounts the diary for its lack of a retrospective point of view; furthermore, his definition of autobiography requires an explicit identification between narrator and protagonist. *Sečaj se* comes closer to meeting Lejeune's requirements for autobiography, as it features first-person narration, retrospective viewpoint, some chronological consistency and interpretation of its author's life-path. Yet, Tišma does not claim it to be an autobiography, and in this way fails to "sign the autobiographical pact."⁶¹ Moreover, the autobiographical focus in the memoir falls off somewhat towards its finish, when Tišma starts talking more about contemporary goings-on and his mother's health problems. The balance between personal history and the reports on events and other people is shaky.

⁶⁰ Pascal notes that the memoir can become autobiography when the narrative involves otherwise "objective" identities and/or individuals only insofar as concerns their impact and influence on the subject and his development. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1960), 3-8.

⁶¹ Lejeune proposes the "autobiographical pact," a contractual arrangement that occurs between the author of an autobiographical work and his readers. The pact is mainly important as a pledge of sincerity of intention and allows the author a certain amount of leeway concerning the ultimate accuracy of his autobiographical account. Philippe Lejeune, "The autobiographical pact," in *Autobiography : Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Trev Lynn Broughton (Routledge, London and New York, 2007), 305.

So, neither the diary nor *Sečaj se* qualifies as a proper autobiography; at best, each only partially fulfills the task of producing a thoughtfully reconstructed history of the author's life and personality. In conjunction, however, the two works complement each other, fill in the gaps in the personal history, and create a fuller and more nuanced portrait of the author. In order to better understand the conjunction of the two works we can make fruitful use of a concept proposed by Lejeune in his lengthy investigations into autobiography: autobiographical space.

Autobiographical space

At the very moment when in appearance Gide and Mauriac depreciate the autobiographical genre and glorify the novel, in reality they are drawing something very different than drawing a more or less questionable scholarly parallel: they designate the autobiographical space in which they want us to read the whole of their work...they establish the nature of the ultimate truth to which their texts aspire.⁶²

Lejeune first makes reference to autobiographical space in his article on the autobiographical pact and develops the concept further in a discussion of its presence in the works of the French Modernist writer André Gide.⁶³ Gide published *If it die...* [French: *Si le grain ne meurt*] in 1924.⁶⁴ The book is generally referred to as Gide's autobiography, although it is more ambiguously subtitled *Mémoires*. Lejeune points to the myriad failings of this work as an autobiography and claims that the work is intentionally a failure.

⁶² *ibid.*, 321.

⁶³ Philippe Lejeune, "Gide et l'espace autobiographique," in *Le pacte autobiographique* (Seuil, Paris c1975), 165-196. Further citations will reference "L'espace."

⁶⁴ Andre Gide, *If it die...* trans. Dorothy Bussy (1st Vintage International, New York, 2001).

The earlier discussion of the *Bildungsroman* suggested that Gide was not alone among the Modernist writers of his generation to exhibit an interest in autobiographical experimentation. Levin writes that Joyce's transparently autobiographical novel *Portrait of the Artist* is "more candid than other autobiographies" and distinguished from them primarily "by its emphasis on the emotional and intellectual adventures of its protagonist" (it is precisely in this respect that it can be considered a *Bildungsroman*).⁶⁵ Similarly, Gide's autobiography was written not in order to present the story of his life, but rather for the same reason he wrote his novels, essays and diaries: towards the production of a complicated and nuanced image of himself (Lejeune uses the term *image de soi*), "that of a living being with all its complications and history."⁶⁶

According to Lejeune, Gide's aspiration is hopelessly overambitious and his autobiography must necessarily fail: no one book could possibly sum up the full and nuanced story of a person and his personality. Furthermore, Gide shows himself to be relatively unconcerned with the autobiography's typical requirements of fidelity, accuracy and authenticity. The result he hopes for will not be a mere historical chronicle or two-dimensional self-portrait: "it doesn't have to do with constructing an object, but with producing a certain effect, setting up a game."⁶⁷ In this game, the autobiography does not occupy an authoritative position in relation to Gide's other works; it is rather only one of the participating texts. Lejeune writes: "Gide's autobiography plays only a lateral role in his autobiographical construction: far from being a whole, it is only an

⁶⁵ Levin, 402.

⁶⁶ L'espace, 175. This and all subsequent translations from the article are my own.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 170.

angle added to other angles. A privileged angle perhaps, insofar as it reveals the existence of autobiographical space.”⁶⁸ Since the autobiography is just one of many important texts, its failure does not carry catastrophic consequences.

In a very broad sense, autobiographical space as a phenomenon is relevant to every writer: readers conjecture an image of the writer based primarily on his work, since the facts of his biography are not always available. This conjecture depends on the individual reader, however, and does not necessarily reflect any intention on the author’s part.⁶⁹ Gide produced an autobiography, ostensibly a direct presentation of “the facts” of his life, but this proved to be inadequate: if readers read only his autobiography, they would receive an oversimplified, inaccurate impression of his personality. A similar misapprehension would occur should only one, or some part, of his fictional works be considered. The ideal representation of Gide should emerge from *all* the texts he wrote, none of which individually claims any sort of “autobiographical fidelity, but... [which] in their reciprocal games, in the *space* which they constitute, define the image of Gide

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 173.

⁶⁹ As Boris Tomashevskii points out, sometimes the conjecture does not even take place, as when the personal details of the writer’s life are irrelevant to his work: “there are writers with biographies and writers without biographies” (50). The biography of a writer like Gide, however, is of central importance to the interpretation of his work. In Formalist terms, Gide is actively engaged in the production of his “biographical legend,” which in its relevance to his creative output constitutes a “literary fact.” B.B. Tomashevskii, “Literature and Biography,” in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Dalkey Archive Press, Chicago, 2002), 47-55.

without reducing or pinpointing it.”⁷⁰ Ideally, Gide would like for all of his texts to be read at once.⁷¹

Despite its failure, the autobiography nevertheless plays a key role in the achievement of Gide’s desired self-representation. Ideally, its insufficiencies direct curious readers to Gide’s other work. At the same time, the autobiography indicates the best way to approach this work: “There must exist at least one text in order to open up the perspective in which all the other texts should be read thereafter.”⁷² Properly apprehended, the autobiography compels Gide’s readers to recognize the autobiographical space that envelops all of his work.⁷³ Within this space, the works form a system in which autobiography and novel must be read one in relation to the other.

Gide wanted his autobiographical inquiry to encompass all of his work because he thought that greater autobiographical truth (personal, individual, intimate) was achievable through fiction. He hints at this possibility in his autobiography: “Memoirs are never more than half sincere, however great the desire for truth; everything is always more complicated than one makes out. Possibly even one gets nearer the truth in a novel.”⁷⁴ Read in the context of autobiographical space, Gide’s fiction takes on new and illuminating meanings; it becomes “at once personal confidence and depersonalization, at

⁷⁰ L’espace, 166.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 172.

⁷² *ibid.*, 180.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 175.

⁷⁴ In closing the first section of the memoirs, in reference to du Gard’s critique (Gide, 250).

once memory and experimentation, at once narcissism and self-critique.”⁷⁵ Despite its failings, the autobiography is still an essential part of the system: had Gide not written an autobiographical text, no one would see the nature of the truth to be found in his novels.⁷⁶

Some of Lejeune’s observations on Gide help to shed light onto Tišma’s autobiographical project. To begin with, Gide’s work and his ideas figure prominently in Tišma’s diary, especially the earlier entries. Tišma reports reading Gide’s journal and is strongly impressed by works such as *Les Caves du Vatican* [The Caves of the Vatican,] (1914) and *Les Faux-monnayeurs* [The Counterfeiters] (1925); of the latter he writes: “Gubim poverenje u sebe i svet...Od svih onih dela koja su živila u mojoj mašti ne mogu se setiti nijednog posle ovog zapanjujućeg romana” [I am losing faith in myself and in the world...I can’t remember even one of all the works that have been living in my imagination after this astounding novel].⁷⁷ Indeed, that novel’s incorporation of diary entries into the narrative seems to have directly inspired some of Tišma’s early attempts at writing.⁷⁸ This conceit continues to be important in his later works, most notably *Upotreba čoveka*, in which a diary figures prominently. More generally, Gide belongs to the generation of European Modernist writers whose work exerted a profound influence on the young Tišma.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ L’espace, 168.

⁷⁶ Gide, 322.

⁷⁷ *Dnevnik*, 30.

⁷⁸ “Večeras pisao roman o Dragi, sad u obliku dnevnika” [This evening I worked on the novel about Draga, now in the form of a diary] (ibid., 55).

⁷⁹ During the war, Tišma attended a series of lectures in Budapest on “Problems of the modernist novel” (ibid., 27).

CHAPTER IV.

Tišma and autobiographical space

Like Gide, Tišma does not appear to have been interested in producing a traditional autobiography. At the same time, the existence of his autobiographical works amounts to a statement of autobiographical intention. The publication of both a diary from one's youth and a book of memoirs indicates both the presence of the retrospective glance and the consideration of one's life as an ordered whole—both standard motivations for autobiography. Both the diary and *Sečaj se* are thus clearly autobiographical, though we have seen that they inadequately fulfill the demands of traditional autobiography. Rather, the diary and the memoir constitute the “[one] text which must exist in order to open up the perspective in which all the other texts should be read thereafter,”⁸⁰ i.e. the work that reveals the presence of autobiographical space.

Furthermore, Tišma's autobiographical works demonstrate the scope of his autobiographical space, which extends to his fictional oeuvre. The autobiographical works are thus not only mutually complementary, supplementary and explanatory; they are also connected to the fiction in a supplementing, complementing and explaining capacity. In his fictional works, Tišma is able to narrate events from his life experience unfettered by the demand for fidelity, authenticity and accuracy associated with the traditional autobiography. Correspondingly, the autobiographical layer of his fictional

⁸⁰ See footnote 72, p. 28.

works would not be evident were it not for the the background information, personal analysis and confession provided in the autobiographical works.

Tišma's desire for the autobiographical layer of his fiction to be perceived is very important, as it is connected to his desire to present a nuanced portrait of his personality (cf. Gide's *image de soi*). As in the case of Gide, Tišma's self-representation cannot be produced exclusively on the basis of the autobiographical works. The withholding of information in his autobiographical works can be seen as an intentional nudge towards his other works. Tišma moreover generally encourages the dissolution of generic boundaries in the reception of his work:

Dnevnik...je možda baš lice moga opisa, dok naličje predstavljaju moji romani, pripovetke, putopisi, drame, pesme. Jer, upravo ono što sam u dnevniku izostavljao, pošto me u trenutku događaja nije pokrenulo da to zabeležim, kasnije je postajalo tema mojih literarnih, hoću da kažem namerno literarnih radova.

[The diary...is maybe just the face of my description, while the reverse side is represented by my novels, short stories, travel writing, plays, poems. For precisely that which I left out of my diary (since at the time of the given event I wasn't moved to write anything down) would later become the theme of my literary, I would like to say intentionally literary works]⁸¹

The greater truth of self-representation that Tišma aspires to is hinted at in his autobiographical works, but requires the full spectrum of his work be taken into account in order to be properly apprehended. In this respect, Tišma's autobiographical project further demonstrates his ongoing engagement with literary modernism. The "epiphany" of the autobiography will emerge not directly, but from a multitude of diverse materials, fictional and otherwise.

⁸¹ *Šta sam govorio*, 205-6.

One frequently recurring expression of these modernist tendencies is Tišma's fascination with documents, evident throughout his fictional and non-fictional work. In *Knjiga o Blamu*, he incorporates documents relating to the occupation of Novi Sad into a discussion of historical meaning. The words of the unseen narrator could be easily applied to the way in which Tišma presents the history of his personality:

Koja je slika istinita? Razume se obe, odnosno ni jedna. Stvorene sa različitih stanovišta optužbe i odbrane, konačnosti i trajanja, suštinskog i površinskog, razotkrivanja i zataškavanja, istorije i svakidašnjice, one su kao dva crteža istoga kraja: jedan beleži planine i reke, drugi naselja i drumove. Tek kada se oba crteža, stave jedan na drugi, dobije se barem približno tačna slika predela.

[Which picture is true? Naturally both are, in other words, neither. Formed from the opposing viewpoints of accusation and defense, finiteness and duration, the essential and the superficial, exposure and palliation, history and the quotidian, they are like two map tracings of the same region: one marks out mountains and rivers, the other settlements and roads. Only when both tracings are placed one on top of the other is there produced an at least marginally accurate picture of the area.]⁸²

The power of documents is subjected to further fictional exploration in *Upotreba čoveka*, a novel built around a diary.⁸³ The novel begins with one character's beginning a diary and ends with it being carefully read and interpreted by other characters, years after the death of its author.

Začuđuje ih njegova kratkoća (nepun sat sporog čitanja), stegnutost čitavih godina u gotovo jedan jedini krik. Zatim, kad se ovako čita naglas reč po reč, u njemu se otkrivaju nejasna, ili sporna, mesta, preko kojih je njihova pažnja dok je bila pojedinačna i bezglasna, površno preklizila.

⁸² *Knjiga o Blamu* (Nolit, Beograd, 1980), 106.

⁸³ The inclusion of diaries or diary entries in the text is an especially popular conceit for many of the Modernist writers referenced in this study; the aforementioned *Portrait of the Artist* and *The Counterfeiters* both end with the diary entries of their respective protagonists.

[They were astonished by its brevity (less than an hour of slow reading), the compression of collected years into virtually one single cry. Then, as they were reading it out loud, word by word, they started to discover unclear or contentious parts, which their individual and silent attention had superficially glided over.]⁸⁴

The full text of the teacher's diary is reproduced close to the end of the novel. By having two of the novel's protagonists offer conflicting readings of the diary, Tišma calls attention to the possibility for infinitely varying interpretations inherent in every document, even one with the apparently direct and unmediated narration of a diary.

The passages cited above provide a metaphor for Tišma's autobiographical construction. The diary, memoir and fictional works all contain elements of truth; the diary is a sort of "document in the case," raw material that provides a portrait of development, while the memoir, as a logically and chronologically organized narrative, provides discussion and analysis of personal and artistic development. The fiction, meanwhile, offers a more liberal and creative interpretation of the same events and of the central personality (Tišma's). Even as none of the works can be considered a final authority, when "placed one on top of the other" they result in a representation of the subject which will be "at least approximately accurate," and in fact more so.

Autobiographical works

Tišma explicitly indicates his diary's role in the autobiographical space of his work. In the 2001 interview quoted earlier, Nedim Sejdinović asked Tišma directly about the link between his diary and other works.

S: Da li će neki budući tumači vašeg književnog dela moći [dnevnik] koristiti kao uputnicu za čitanje vaših romana i drugih proznih dela?

⁸⁴ *Upotreba čoveka* (Nolit, Beograd, 1976), 307.

T: Nikad se ne zna. Moguće je da će tako posmatrati, a možda i ne. Može da bude potpuno obrnuto, da moja prozna dela tumače kao komentar mojih ličnih beleški. Pisac stalno piše svoju autobiografiju.

[S: Will some future critics/interpreters of your literary work be able to use [the diary] as a guide for reading your novels and other prose works?

T: You never know. It's possible they'll look at it that way, or maybe not. It could be entirely the opposite, that my prose works will be read as a commentary on my personal writings. A writer is constantly writing his autobiography]⁸⁵

Tišma not only confirms the possibility that his diary can function as a guide to his fiction, but also directs attention to the fact that the fiction could itself be a part of his autobiographical project.

A diary is a document—like a photograph, it is fixed to a moment in time.

Tišma's diary boasts immediacy, intimacy and irreproachable authenticity, qualities explicitly valued by its author: "[dokumenti]...privlače me zato što daju veću čvrstinu, veću sigurnost i verodostojnost onom što o ljudima pišemo" [documents...attract me because they lend greater solidity, greater certainty and validity to what we write about people].⁸⁶ Tišma's diary documents the contiguity of his personal identity with his identity as writer and the extent to which his sense of self depends on writing:

18. VI 1949. *Pišem roman o Dragi. To je izlaz.*

19. VI 1949. Napisao sam prvu glavu romana...Osećam se čovekom. Nikakva beda ne može da mi smeta, jer ona odmah postaje i predmet pisanja.

[I'm writing a novel about Draga. That's the way out.

I've written the first chapter of the novel...I feel like a human being.

*No trouble can really bother me, because it immediately becomes the subject of writing]*⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Sejdinović interview.

⁸⁶ *Šta sam govorio*, 46.

⁸⁷ *Dnevnik*, 199.

The unfolding and development of his character is irrevocably tied to the development of his literary talent. Everything necessarily takes second stage to writing, including the tumultuous political situation and Tišma's no less turbulent personal life.⁸⁸

Sečaj se more closely resembles a traditional autobiography than a document; many of the anecdotes in the memoir concern formative life events and can thus be seen as germane to a traditional autobiography. Since *Sečaj se* is not a traditional autobiography, however, these anecdotes are also important as they reveal the autobiographical space that encompasses Tišma's literary output. Expanding upon the explanations appended to the diary, *Sečaj se* provides detailed explanations and illustrations ("origins") of various characters, episodes, and themes from the fiction. The link is usually fairly obvious, although Tišma does not directly draw the parallel. For example, the description of the Soviet soldier's amorous nighttime advances in *Sečaj se*⁸⁹ mirrors, nearly word-for-word, the interaction between Sredoje Lazukić and the Nazi captain Valdenhajm in *Upotreba čoveka*.⁹⁰ Such instances suggest that any one of the episodes in a given novel or short story could have a real-life parallel.

⁸⁸ "Uopšte, taj literarni stav prema svom životu i njegovim pokretima sve više vlada mojim refleksima. Ne samo što te pokrete posmatram i procenjujem kao 'material,' nego i sam posmatrač u meni, taj literat što deli u 'lepa i nelepa' mesta, stapa se sa ostalima, i tako sve, ceo ja, koji jedem, ljubim, osećam i razmišljam, kao da prelazi granice realnoga i postaje *proživljeno umetničko delo*" [In general, that literary stance towards my life and its movements is governing my reflexes more and more. Not only that I observe and judge those movements as "material," but also that observer inside of me, that *littérateur* who divides things into the "beautiful and not beautiful," is merging with the rest of me, so it's as though everything, the whole "I," who eats, loves, feels and thinks, is crossing the borders of the real and becoming a *lived work of art*] (ibid., 72).

⁸⁹ ibid., 65-66.

⁹⁰ *Upotreba čoveka*, 256-257.

Tišma's autobiographical works thus direct the reader to his fiction in a number of ways. The diary and *Sećaj se* fail to satisfy the requirements of autobiography and force the attentive reader to look elsewhere for their fulfillment. At the same time, the content of these works indicates the autobiographical space in which all of Tišma's work should be read: for instance, his direct commentary relating to real-life inspirations for the fiction and explanations of artistic philosophy and method. Such indications constitute obvious suggestions as to where the reader might find the information missing in the autobiographical works.

Fiction

“[Do not] our novels express the essential part of ourself? Only fiction does not lie: it half-opens a door on a man's life, through which slips, out of all control, his unknown soul.”⁹¹

Tišma's fiction plays a key role in his autobiographical project. In a general statement, he comments that the autobiographical layer in fictional work is constantly present, a sentiment that can certainly be applied to his own work:

Uvek se pitamo šta je u nekom delu autobiografsko, šta su lična osećanja a šta stvaranje posebnog raspoloženja da bi se lična osećanja prevazišla. I lično osećanje, odnosno izražavanje ličnog osećanja, kao i težnja da se ono prevaziđe – mogu poslužiti na isti način uživanju čitaoca.

[We always wonder what in a given work is autobiographical, what are personal feelings and what the creation of a specific frame of mind in order to overcome those personal feelings. Both the personal feeling, that is, the expression of personal feeling, and the desire to overcome it—both can contribute in the same way to the enjoyment of the reader]⁹²

⁹¹ François Mauriac, from his autobiography *Commencements d'un vie* (1953), quoted in Lejeune, “The autobiographical pact,” 321.

⁹² Sejdinović interview.

The reader's enjoyment of an autobiography does not depend on his knowledge of its veracity; for instance, the artistic value of autobiographical fiction such as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* transcends any autobiographical information the works might or might not provide about their authors. From the author's point of view, however, the designation of genre is more significant: the writer of fiction, released from the requirements of accuracy and fidelity that burden the autobiographer, is free to explore the most intimate or problematic moments of his experience from any number of perspectives. Tišma uses his fictional work accordingly, as a field for the artistic re-creation and elaboration of many of the most significant experiences of his life. Jay's observations on Proust are again relevant to Tišma's work: "Rather than remember and re-present a past self, Proust willfully forgets the past," an action which in turn allows for the "imaginative recreation" of the past in fiction.⁹³ Furthermore, in his fictional work Tišma directly addresses many of the instances of political and social upheaval in his lifetime, and their impact on individuals—subjects skimmed over or avoided entirely in his autobiographical works.

Tišma's notable avoidance of contemporary goings-on in his diary has been discussed at length. If Tišma's entire body of work is encompassed by his autobiographical space, however, it becomes clear that such significant events as the Novi Sad massacre or the Cominform incident are in fact explored extensively in the fiction. Moreover, these fictional explorations of significant political events are invariably presented from the point of view of characters who in one way or another

⁹³ Jay, 36.

clearly resemble Tišma. In this way, by engaging his fictional work in the autobiographical project, Tišma is able to present his own response to these events indirectly.

The production of Tišma's self-portrait as an artist is not limited to those fictional characters and situations which directly reflect elements of his biography. The emotional themes that preoccupy Tišma's characters are perhaps more important than any outward similarities:

Mene ima, svakako, u svakom mome liku. Jer, pisac teško može da gradi likove bez sebe...[Pisac] može da bude i žena, može da bude i muškarac, može da bude dete ili starac, zahvaljujući nekoj možda mekšoj strukturi svoje naravi, svoga karaktera, svoje ličnosti...Ali ipak, kada pokušava da zađe dublje u tu ličnost, da opisuje njene radosti i bolove i reagovanje na različite događaje, onda on ipak i nesvesno kontroliše kako bi se sam u to slučaju ponašao, šta bi u tom slučaju osećao, i to je ono što on onda unosi kao nijansu, kao detalj, a baš ti detalji čine živost opisa i osobenost dela.

[I am there, of course, in every one of my characters. It's hard for a writer to build characters without himself...[The writer] can be both a woman and a man, a child or an old person, thanks to some perhaps more malleable structure of his nature, his character, his personality...But nevertheless, when he tries to go deeper into that personality, to describe its joys and pains and reactions to various events, then he still unconsciously controls how he himself would act in that situation, what he would feel in that situation, and that is what he brings in as a nuance, a detail—and it is precisely these details that make the vitality of the description and the originality of the work]⁹⁴

Tišma continues his autobiographical narrative through characters who are in many respects distant from his personal experience. In *Upotreba čoveka*, Sredoje Lazukić is a Serb from a long line of Serbs; such a figure could hardly share Tišma's preoccupation with his mixed background. At the same time, Tišma endows Sredoje with other features of his personality that allow for a partial self-portrait to emerge. In the same novel, in the character of the Auschwitz survivor Vera Kroner, Tišma uses another, even less

⁹⁴ *Šta sam govorio*, 84.

outwardly similar character to further explore the recurring theme of the estranged and isolated individual. Vera's life has been catastrophically changed by the war: she lost her entire family and was forced to work as a *Feldhure* for the Nazi soldiers during her time at Auschwitz.⁹⁵ When she and Sredoje read their teacher's diary, however, she speaks as if for Tišma:

Ne čini li se Veri da je [Gospođicin] dnevnik, koji zvuči od početka do kraja tragično, u isti mah i jedna farsa, ako se čita na pozadini životnih surovosti koje su Gospođicu mimoišle?...Vera na to sleže ramenima i mrmlja da se sreća i nesreća ne mogu meriti činjenicama, nego osećanjem...To su dve različite vrste nesreće.

[Didn't it seem to Vera that [Gospođica's] diary, which sounded tragic from beginning to end, was at the same time somewhat farcical when read against the background of the cruelties which had passed her by? ...Vera shrugged in answer and muttered that happiness and unhappiness can't be measured by facts, rather by feelings...Those are two different kinds of unhappiness]⁹⁶

Blam in *Knjiga o Blamu* expresses a similar sentiment when, at his friend Aca Krkljuš' funeral, he decides that fundamentally there is no difference between Aca's death (resulting from complications from alcoholism) and that of his brother (shot during the 1942 Novi Sad massacre while attempting to help an old man). This is a further expression of the futile attempt of these characters to develop as individuals independently of the events conditioning that development. To judge from his autobiographical works, Tišma himself is constantly engaged in this attempt, despite its apparent futility. He writes about the events in and surrounding the Second World War, but he is not a "war writer"—he is much more concerned with questions of individual

⁹⁵ *Feldhure* [German: army whore]: This term designates those female concentration-camp prisoners selected to work in the camp whorehouse. The term "whore" is of course inaccurate, since the women received no monetary compensation for their services; while they enjoyed better food and living conditions than the other prisoners, they were also sterilized and forced to work as sex slaves.

⁹⁶ *Upotreba čoveka*, 310.

consciousness, identity, history and morality. This is made plain in the indifference to political goings-on and stubbornly self-centered outlook presented in his diary and memoirs.

Tišma's protagonists are rarely men of action; they are inevitably caught up in their own twisted psychological processes and often seem deliberately oblivious to the path of events in the outside world. Their involvement in outside events comes about through force of circumstance rather than by choice. This tendency once again recalls the *Künstlerroman*, wherein the sensitive young man is so fixated on his development as an artist that he cannot spare any energy for the contemplation of unnecessary side-elements. At the same time, as Bakhtin points out in his discussion of the *Bildungsroman*, the most essential type of this novel shows its hero's development as simultaneous with and inseparable from the development of the world around him (the "real historical situation").⁹⁷ Although Tišma's heroes consciously struggle to develop independently of (even, in spite of) the events which surround them, their development is very often directly governed by those events. For instance, Miroslav Blam in *Knjiga o Blamu* and Vera Kroner in *Upotreba čoveka* both strive to ignore the influence of the chaotic wartime and post-war situation on their development as individuals. Their development is, however, fundamentally conditioned by the historical situation. The experience of Tišma's fictional heroes in this regard directly mirrors the narration of his own experience in the autobiographical works.

⁹⁷ M.M. Bakhtin, "Roman vospitaniia i ego znachenie v istorii realizma," *Estetika slovesnogo tvorčestva* ("Iskusstvo," Moskva, 1986), 199-221 [my translation-AM].

The affinities of Tišma 's work with the features of the *Künstlerroman* is complicated by the fact that his fictional protagonists are never artists. This central feature of Tišma's self-image is completely absent from his fictional characters, although virtually all of them contain at least some autobiographical elements. Tišma endows characters with all of the other significant features of his young self: they might be youthful, in the midst of awkward development, isolated and estranged from others, ashamed of their mixed background, etc. Nevertheless, none of them is a writer; none of them has a "calling" which causes but also validates their emotional tumult as it does for Tišma. Only by publishing and commenting on the diary (with its *Bildungsroman*-esque subtitle *postajanje*) and by writing his memoir does Tišma present the classic drama of the writer in the stormy midst of his development.

CHAPTER V.

Conclusion

...Ne mogu da kažem ni – što se tiče tih mojih stvari – šta će biti primesa čega. Sigurno je da će sve ono što sam napisao moći da se posmatra kao jedinstvena celina, samim tim što je proizašlo iz jednog čoveka. Moje delo će se moći deliti i po nekoj intenciji – svakako je pisanje romana drugačija intencija nego pisanje dnevnika – ali će možda za nekoga u budućnosti moj dnevnik biti romaneskniji od mojih romana.

[I can't even say—as far as those things of mine are concerned—what will turn out to be central and what peripheral. Certainly everything I've written can be seen as a single whole, just because it came out of one person. My work will also be possible to divide according to some sort of intention—obviously writing a novel involves a different intention than writing a diary—but perhaps for someone in the future my diary will be more novelistic than my novels]⁹⁸

After his 1991 publication of the 1942-1951 diary, Tišma never returned to writing fiction. He instead redirected his literary activity to works of a self-reflective nature (notes, interviews, memoir, etc.). This turn away from fiction, however, does not really constitute an end to Tišma's literary production; at this point he simply devoted himself to the retrospective assessment and interpretation of his personal and professional life. As we have seen, for Tišma the personal and the professional parts of his life are inseparable; his diary and memoir underscore this conviction and, in so doing, help to reveal the autobiographical layer present in his fictional work. It would thus seem that Tišma has been engaged with the autobiographical inquiry since his earliest attempts at

⁹⁸ Sejdinović interview.

writing, and that 1991 simply marks the point at which he began the production of a more cohesive autobiographical whole.

The publication of his diary marks a shift in Tišma's artistic attention, away from fiction and towards the autobiographical inquiry. As a document, meanwhile, the diary is also the earliest account available of Tišma's burgeoning identity as an artist. The twofold significance of the diary exemplifies the importance of modernist practice in Tišma's literary production. Hallmarks of this practice—the influence of the *Bildungsroman* genre, the “inward turn” of the author's attention toward the internal travails of the individual and the overall privileging of a roundabout, fragmented approach to the creation of a work of art—are all reflected in Tišma's fictional and non-fictional works.

The influence of modernist technique is also evident in Tišma's construction of his autobiography. Lejeune's concept of “autobiographical space,” exemplified in the work of Andre Gide, helps to clarify the somewhat obscure way in which Tišma seeks to produce the most fully representative self-portrait possible. As Lejeune points out, Gide's “failed autobiography” fits in with that author's modernist literary principles—no self-respecting Modernist would attempt to produce an autobiography of stand-alone authority. Tišma, like Gide, does not seek to produce a traditional autobiography. He offers at least two works of strictly autobiographical orientation, while at the same time striving to involve all of his other work in order to present in composite form a more complete self-portrait.

Tišma's engagement with Modernism provides, however, only a partial explanation for the unusual form of his autobiography. His employment of fiction

towards autobiographical ends, for instance, perhaps reflects an assessment of its quality: Tišma as a writer is unequivocally at his best in the fictional work. Gordić observes in Tišma's fiction a "penetrating and inventive vibrancy of stance and the discourse 'without illusions'." He moreover notes that, "somewhat paradoxically, the virtues of Tišma's fiction turn into the faults of his non-fictional work...that quality of the fictional works which disarmed the reader by the bravery of its truth, in the nonfiction repulses by its conformist convenience and unidirectionality."⁹⁹ The value of the memoir *Sečaj se* lies not so much in its artistry as in the information it conveys. Yet, Tišma will not effectively convince his reader that literature is central to his existence simply by saying so directly. For this reason, the memoir functions not only as a source of information, but also directs readers to Tišma's other, more fictionally oriented work.

Tišma's autobiographical project is both enriched and liberated by the engagement of his fictional works. As we have seen, autobiography *per se* must adhere to certain standards of content and approach. Tišma takes advantage of fiction's greater freedom of content to discuss problems of artistic method within the works of fiction themselves (recall his discussion of documents in *Knjiga o Blamu*).¹⁰⁰ The consistent focus on the interpretation of personal experience and the exploration of artistic method in his fiction links it thematically to autobiography; "autobiographical space" thus extends to cover Tišma's fictional oeuvre.

⁹⁹ Gordić, 179.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Levin, quoted above (p.7): "The *Künstlerroman*...[enabled] writers to apply the methods of realism to the subject of art" (399).

Tišma's determination to be a writer certainly shaped the course of his life. His diary and memoir attest to the fact that his fixation on writing and writer-hood informed all of the significant decisions of his young life and beyond. It is unsurprising that Tišma's autobiography is compiled and composed in a highly literary fashion; this reflects the central role that literature played in his life. In producing the story of his life and personality, he sought both to avoid the limitations of traditional autobiography and to guarantee the future relevance of his work. Properly received and understood, Tišma's autobiographical project bequeaths a certain immortality to his texts: those hoping to understand his life must necessarily read his work.

Appendix:

Published works of Aleksandar Tišma (English translations noted)

Cena laži. Pozorišni komad u tri saslušanja. Niš, Niško pozorište, 15 December 1953.

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Krčma. Novi Sad: Progres, 1961.

Krivice. Novi Sad: Budućnost, 1961.

Nasilje. Beograd: Prosveta, 1965.

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* "In Search of the Dark Girl" (excerpt). Translated by Alan McConnell. In *Relations*, no. 1-2 (1970): 50-63.

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* *The Book of Blam.* Translated by Michael Henry Heim. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1998.

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* *The Use of Man.* Translated by Bernard Johnson. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.

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