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THE ETHICAL NATURE AND TYPES OF MIROSLAV EGERIĆ'S CRITICAL ESSAYS ON WORKS OF RECENT SERBIAN PROSE

In this paper, Miroslav Egerić's critical essays on works of recent Serbian prose are analyzed in their essayistic characteristics. Three basic forms (associative-reflexive commentary, points and critic's marked authorial transposition) are distinguished and interpreted in which Egerić gives his essayistic observations about an ethical problem. Egerić gave his personal stamp in essays on recent Serbian prose primarily about an entire range of ethical matters. The range of moral issues refers to the problem of the choice a man makes in borderline situations, his attitude towards the world and his own existence, when a choice has to be made, and includes: the principle of physical survival, the principle of moral survival, and the problem of pacifism (and pseudo-pacifism).

Key words: Miroslav Egerić, essay, literary criticism, moral, pacifism, pseudo-pacifism, problem of choice, Serbian prose

The focus of this paper is on issues which the author feels have not been given special attention or detailed consideration. This entailed examining Egerić's critical essays from a somewhat unusual position, with the essayistic components of Miroslav Egerić's critical opus as the primary subject of research.

Professional literature has already written extensively about Egerić's critical system (Đorđević 2003: 25-36; and Ivanović 2003: 15-24) and his avid interest in the work of Dobrica Ćosić (Bulatović 2010: 285-294). Numerous reviews on his books of critical essays and discussions of his creative critical sensitivity have also been written (Gordić 1983: 94-106).

Thus, there is little to be said that is new about Egerić as a literary critic. But the essayist value of his writing, although noted and singled out several times in the literature about him, has not been the subject of specific research.

Literary criticism cannot be separated from essay writing, so in practice there are most often mixed criticism-essayistic types. In this regard, criticism always includes value judgements and is more exacting than essay writing. The example of Miroslav Egerić shows literary criticism with prominent essayistic characteristics.¹

According to Epstein (Epstein 1997:7), even though the essay has existed for over four hundred years,² it is still one of the theoretically least researched forms of writing, which has led to numerous disputes regarding the nature of this genre.³ The essayist provides fewer arguments and relies more on his own experience. He has a free style but his subjective opinion is very important. The essay has an amorphous and considerably individualized form. The goal of an essay may be to formulate a problem, attempt to diagnose an occurrence or shed light on suppressed problems (Koch 2007: 159).

Difficulties in defining the essay are often associated with its primarily hybrid genre and distinct subjectivity (Raičević 2005: 5-44). Nonetheless, the essay's undeniable characteristics include its fragmentary quality (narrow scope), lack of definition, autoreflexivity, dialogue, metaphorical components (picturesque poetic language) and pronounced personal stamp. This last characteristic of the essay is reflected above all in the fact that the "fragment of the world" that is discussed in the text (or the specific work of literature that has been the starting point of the literary critic-essayist's writing), is more often a pretext for the writer's contemplations and reflections than its subject (Marić 1976: 1-17).

The main essayistic traits of Egerić's critical opus are his distinct *personal stamp* and the *poetization of his expression of thought*. Focus will be primarily directed on the first trait. Egerić gave his personal stamp in essays on recent Serbian prose primarily about an entire range of ethical matters. For this reason, analysis and interpretation will be restricted to works of recent Serbian narrative prose whose main ideas gave Egerić's

1 It is interesting to note that Egerić himself, speaking about his affinities, said: "My main pre-occupations are essay writing and criticism, in that order: first the essay and then the criticism." Although the author's opinion does not obligate the researcher of his work, Egerić's reflection is worth mentioning. See Jevtić 2007: 25-26.

2 The term *essay* was first used by Michel de Montaigne in 1580 to describe his book of essays. See Michel de Montaigne, *Essays de Michel seigneur de Montaigne* (Paris: A. L'Angelier, 1580).

3 The best-known dispute on the nature of the essay genre was between Georg Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno. Compare Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), originally published as "Über Form und Wesen des Essays," in *Die Seele und die Formen* (Berlin: Egon Fleischel, 1911) and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991-92), original edition: "Der Essay als Form," in *Noten zur Literatur*, vol. 1 (Berlin and Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1958).

creative critical pen cause for related associations (the works of Meša Selimović, Aleksandar Tisma, Antonije Isaković, Ivo Andrić, Boško Petrović, Dobrica Ćosić and Isidora Sekulić).⁴ The range of moral issues includes above all the problem of the choice a man makes in borderline situations, his attitude towards the world and his own existence, when a choice has to be made, and includes: the principle of physical survival, the principle of moral survival, and the problem of pacifism.

Writing about the character and actions of Predrag Popadić in Tišma's novel *Kniga o Blamu* (The Book of Blam, 1972) (Egerić 1975b: 228), Egerić defines the principle of physical survival as "the art of remaining calm and cheerful in the middle of other people's suffering," and this is "an existential sphere with one bright spot in the middle: *hanging on*" (Egerić 1975b: 228). The spirit that characterizes such a lifestyle is "the call of the unconscious need for bare subsistence" (Egerić 1975b: 228).

On the other hand, the highest ethical value, which Egerić calls a "voluntary hearth," is best formulated in his essay where he states that Selimović's novel *Derviš i smrt* (Death and the Dervish) suggests that the most worthwhile lifetime commitment is "the call to choose the most difficult, strenuous path and be a *voluntary hearth* battered by the varied winds of the world, to become a form of lucid belief in man's power to fight for excellence" (Egerić 2000: 83).

Bearing in mind that autoreflexivity, as one of the key characteristics of essay writing, suggests that the essay is greatly revealing of the author, it should be noted that Egerić's associations and digressions are by no means arbitrary or out of step with the world of the work that he is investigating. On the contrary, it is exactly these –somewhat autonomous and thereby creative – associations and contemplations of Miroslav Egerić, *triggered by the work*, that best correspond to and illuminate the ideological world of the prose works that are the starting point and territory of his critical-essayistic deliberations. In this regard, Mihailo Harpanj writes that Egerić's interpretations do not stop at explaining the meaning of the literary text, "or finally at their so-called messages, rather all of this is followed by reflections on the theme of these facts in which there is the authorial transformation of the critic. On this level as well, Egerić's criticism endeavors to be a creative act, not only discoursing on discourse, but autochthonous discourse" (Harpanj 2003: 14). Therefore, when writing literary criticism, numerous issues and as-

4 Since Egerić's critical writing about the novels of Dobrica Ćosić has already been the subject of considerable written work, the focus of this paper is directed equally to his essays on the other authors.

Several basic forms can be distinguished in which Egerić gives his essayistic observations about an ethical problem. First, there are those observations in the text as a type of *associative-reflexive commentary* that always result from the ideological layer of the work. Thus, in the essay on *Pevač* (The Singer, 1980) by Boško Petrović, Egerić writes that one “has to suffer, persevere, because on the spiritual level, the negation of every intolerance, cruelty and violence depends on the degree of suffering, thinking about freedom” (Egerić 1982b: 217). Or, in another example, criticizing the principle of vegetating – “shrinking, being invisible, stopping at nothing to survive, this is a level on which man’s being is obliterated” (Egerić 1997f: 134).

The second form of presenting essayistic commentary on this matter consists of making *points* as the summing up of certain contemplations in Egerić’s critical essays on works of Serbian prose. For example, in an essay on the problem of man’s existence in the novel *Derviš i smrt*, Egerić concludes his interpretation with the formulation that in man’s “rise and fall we see a type of heroic futility, because it is turned towards veracity, with a daring that leads to ruin, but in which honourable, exciting, authentic ruin is more attractive than dishonourable success and survival” (Egerić 2000: 50). Writing about Isidora Sekulić, he summarizes with a long point:

If it is the fate of all that is worldly to have an end, for the greatest élan to perish under the onslaughts of death, there is some noble meaning shining with goodness and expansiveness in man’s endeavour – as he acts – to live in accordance with his notion of himself. If his movement along earthly paths is sown with uncertainty, obstacles, misfortunes, if he is forced to realize that the world is not rationally ordered, that good does not beget good and evil is not punished by evil, but that it is often the opposite, then there is some consolation in the fact that man receives the temptations of fate and endures them calmly, working for good even when it seems that everything is just one big, endlessly monotonous, incurable illusion (Egerić 1997b: 30-31).

Also, in the essay on *Peščanik* (Hourglass, 1972) we find Egerić’s commentary in the form of a point on the high-minded act of choosing suffering and conflict: “Feeling that everything decent is being examined and verified, and being able to preserve one’s presence of mind, i.e. an awareness of this suffering and anguish, so that it can serve others, reaching a higher ‘self-interest,’ the ‘self-interest of life’ defending itself from dwindling away completely – isn’t this the type of message given by this novel that does not like clear, explicit messages?” (Egerić 1975c: 248).

The third form of Miroslav Egerić's essayistic expression in his critical work on the prose of Serbian writers from the second half of the 20th century merits the title of the *critic's marked authorial transposition*. The transposition of the critic's pen into that of the author is called marked in this case because there is direct subjectivization of the authorial commentary using personal pronouns in the first person singular or plural. Quotations from Egerić's texts on Ćosić and Isaković will be used as examples: "We who have felt for a good deal of our lives what that world did, how much it ruined our people's energy, the kind of abyss it has put us before, we have every reason to thank the moral historian of our time for running the risk he did" (Egerić 1997d: 106) and "the writer, at least as far as I am concerned, suggests that not every life deserves to be lived; that not every choice a man makes is equal to every other one" (Egerić 1997f: 135).

Compared to the above two, this type of essayistic expression has a somewhat greater degree of subjectivity and thus independence with regard to the textual layer of the prose that Egerić is interpreting. The function of the marked authorial commentary and of the previous two types is to convincingly single out the key ideas of the analyzed works and enable a more fundamental understanding of them. In this manner, Miroslav Egerić's critical work through essayistic narration becomes greatly aligned with the world of the literary work that is the subject of his attention.

In his essayistic statements about the novels under consideration, Egerić accentuates the tragedy of man's ethical choice, which is reduced exclusively to striving for biological survival ("self-interested subsistence") and "the principle of humanity before an act of violence" (Egerić 1975b: 225). Egerić's authorial view is clear and the attributes he assigns to these principles suggest his subjective value judgement. The first principle is most often found with the attributes "self-interest," "dishonourable," "dark," "unworthy" and the second is "exalted," "turned towards veracity" but "heroically futile." It is this futility that holds the tragic dimension of man's existence as well as the magnitude of the fitting moral choice that Egerić recognizes. In support of this, writing about the ethical meaning of Selimović's novel *Tvrđava* (Fortress, 1970), Egerić states in an associative-reflexive commentary that the world of this literary work warns that "life means constantly being tempted by the danger of accepting might as the only principle with which to survive" (Egerić 2000: 110). In Selimović's tragic view of man, Ahmed Nurudin and Hasan represent characters who, according to Egerić "set their life against everything life wants to contain, depersonalising it, transforming it into

the reign of blind necessity, dark, unlighted hand-to-mouth subsistence” (Egerić 2000: 30).

The second part of the ethical issue in the works of Serbian novelists that gives Miroslav Egerić the critic and essayist cause to write can be discerned as his attitude towards a pacifistic consciousness and philosophy.⁷ Although the author does not explicitly call this problem “pacifistic,” this is actually the most suitable name for it, and Egerić indisputably treats it as an ethical problem. To put it simply but precisely, Egerić is opposed to the vital, existential and even moral philosophy that consists of nonresistance to evil and reconciling oneself to something that Egerić feels a man cannot reconcile himself to; and often Egerić sees in this philosophy a kind of hypocritical indifference towards other people’s suffering. Egerić best illustrates the false pacifism (which, thus, points out as pseudo-pacifism) in a commentary on the meaning of Tišma’s *Knjiga o Blamu*:

What is the meaning of this oblivion? Isn’t it – like so many others in the past – only the calm between two storms, a semblance of good between two evils, a successful way for people to ignore their problems? Didn’t the inhabitants of Novi Sad before this peace – before the catastrophic incident in January 1942 when, still sleepy-eyed and warm, they were pulled out of their beds and executed on the frozen Danube – didn’t they too live like this – carefree and indifferent, not getting upset that Hitler was persecuting the Jews, not worrying about the fact that thousands of other people with a similar face and destiny were losing their homes, their parents and children, becoming grist and dust under the grindstone of history built by ‘great’ men (Egerić 1975b: 222).

Egerić then wonders how much this pacified attitude towards life and morality actually contributes to the preservation of evil, and not its decrease: “How many people during peacetime – a state that only appears to be the opposite of war – who, consenting to various types of violence, are preparing the germ of war” (Egerić 1975b: 223). Thus, by consenting to evil, man should have to bear the responsibility for both his failure to act and his criminal acts, which Egerić underscores with a rhetorical question, in the form of a point, about Tišma’s novel: “Regardless of what we do or fail to do, we are responsible for what we have failed to do or consented not to do” (Egerić 1975b: 226).

Egerić counters pseudo-pacifism with courage as a trait that should be set against violence, claiming that “courage is not thirsting for glory,

⁷ The section on this area of Egerić’s essayistic deliberations is perhaps too extensive. The author of the paper has proceeded intentionally, bearing in mind possible future negative interpretations of Egerić’s attitude toward pacifism in his critical essays.

an immodest desire to be better than others by showing how much a man can and dares do, but only the necessary realization that courage alone can defend the foundations of life, that which is or should be in life that is a characteristic of man's existence" (Egerić 1982a: 88).

A statement like this, open to future discussion, could be exposed to a variety of interpretations, both objective and malicious criticism. Focussing his essayistic observations on interpreting the thought world of Tišma's hero Miroslav Blam, Egerić wrote – in the form of an *associative-reflexive statement* – that in his opinion, the ideological layer of Tišma's novel indicates that "living in accordance with a specific ethical ideal, for example the one contained in the commandment *thou shalt not kill*, would be possible in a pure, refined, distilled, in the final reckoning – *static* world [...] In a world of contradictions and turbulent hatred, this ethical ideal becomes not only an expression of powerlessness, but consenting to evil, directly and brutally" (Egerić 1975b: 224).

Egerić's critical cutting edge here is certainly not aimed at the ethical ideal "though shalt not kill", but the problem of pseudo-pacifism as a form of man's inactivity, his ethical lack of vigilance and nonresistance to the eradication of what is decent in the world and in man. Such an ethical stand, which results in the pacification of the individual and collective consciousness, is utopian. "Disarming" the consciousness also leads to the neutralization of confrontation, which can certainly be said to be against the natural and divine order. This is evidenced by verses from the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus Christ addresses the twelve Apostles: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew, 10: 34). Just as Egerić certainly does not advocate militant "ethics" in his last quotation, but sees in the pseudo-pacifistic ethical commandment false humanitarianism and false reconciliation, neither should the "sword" that Christ mentions be understood literally. Christ's sword means that instead of peace, the goal cannot be false reconciliation but differentiating truth from falsehood. When Christ says in the next biblical verse: "for I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Matthew, 10: 35), he will differentiate those who are true from those who are not.

Egerić points to the ultimate and tragic consequences of the pacification of the consciousness – that misdeeds are not committing crimes but revealing them – in his essay on the national significance of Ćosić's novel *Vreme smrti* (A Time of Death, 1972-79). In this essay, Egerić tells the reader in a marked authorial commentary about the death of the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija in 1968, noting "for us it was already clear

that this period was one of the erosion of all values. [...] It was not those who torched and laid waste who were prosecuted but those who talked about the torching and laying waste” (Egerić 1997c: 75).

In addition to his essayistic style in interpreting literary works, Egerić gives his essays a powerful personal stamp by poeticizing his contemplations.⁸ Unlike the distinctly essayistic segments that give a striking intellectual tension to Egerić's works, this lyricism has the primary function of adding a poetic timbre to the contemplative heart of the text. Such a tone is given, for example, by the syntagma “fluid transparency of feeling” (Egerić 1975a: 208) or the relative clause “spiritual workshop in which every fact takes on a new harmony, some kind of bright spiritual twinkle” (Egerić 1982c: 291). Egerić sometimes impresses his personal stamp and lyrical tone into the essayistic elements of the text by means of metaphors: “the work [*Na Drini ćuprija* (Bridge on the Drina, 1945), note mine] that presents ideas in lasting form, brings together the dispersed elements of the world and life like a magnet does scattered shavings;” (Egerić 1997a: 7) and even by using archaic language, as when he says that Zoran Petrović is the writer of a book “with a lively atmosphere and gladsome scenes” (Egerić 1997e: 107). There are not many cases where Egerić can be reproached for a poeticized expression that is semantically unconvincing or the process of poeticizing runs the risk of becoming a goal in itself, as when he writes about “the high-altitude currents of Andrić's work saturated with spiritual lightness” (1982a: 91).

Finally, emphasis should be given to the instances when Miroslav Egerić is most convincing as a critic and essayist. His pen is the most authentic when he writes about prose works whose ideological essence contains a range of ethical problems, as interpreted in detail herein, and thus the novels of Dobrica Ćosić, Meša Selimović, Ivo Andrić, Antonije Isaković and Aleksandar Tišma are Egerić's privileged topics with regard to works of recent Serbian prose. Conversely, Egerić has noticeably less affinity, for example, for the works of Pekić, Kiš and Pavić. For this reason, his writing is perhaps not sufficiently convincing when he tries to present the world of these writers' work through the prism of the above-mentioned ethical problems, since their works' nature and intention resist this type of interpretation.

8 Since the author's primary focus in this work is the essayistic components (linked to ethical issues) in Egerić's texts, poeticizing his contemplations is not a subject of the author's broader interest.

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Борис Булатовић

ЕТИЧКА ПРИРОДА И ВИДОВИ ЕСЕЈИЗАЦИЈЕ У КРИТИЧКИМ ТЕКСТОВИМА МИРОСЛАВА ЕГЕРИЋА О ДЕЛИМА СРПСКЕ ПОСЛЕРАТНЕ ПРОЗЕ

Резиме

У овом раду критички текстови Мирослава Егерића о делима новије српске прозе сагледани су у својим есејистичким обележјима. Уочена су, затим, и интерпретирана три типа Егерићевих есејистичких запажања (асоцијативно-рефлексивни коментар, поента и маркирана ауторска транспозиција критичара). Лични печат својим огледима Егерић је дао пишући поводом читавог комплекса етичких питања, међу којима је шира пажња, овом приликом, усмерена на проблеме пацифизма (односно псеудо-пацифизма) и избора човека у граничним ситуацијама.

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