

Analysis of the Dictionary of the Khazars, by M. Pavic.

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“For 2,000 years writers have been inventing new ways of writing, but we always had the same way of reading. I tried to change the way we read.”
M.Pavic ¹

In his works Pavic pushes the reader to take on more responsibility in the reading process. He not only gives the reader the opportunity to choose the way of reading, but he, often, makes the reader part of the literary piece. In the Landscape Painted With Tea the reader physically affects what happened to the main character. And in the Dictionary of the Khazars the juxtaposition of “male” and “female” versions of the book creates a new understanding of the world that Pavic had created. Dictionary of the Khazars is a very complex piece of writing. It is multilayered in both structural and contextual ways. Pavic asks from the reader a lot, and, yet, he is still hiding something from him. Pavic doesn't have the respect for the modern reader. In the introduction to the Dictionary of the Khazars, when describing the original setup of the dictionary, he states that the current version doesn't replicate the structure of the original. And then, Pavic follows with the most cynical remark on the character of the modern day reader:

“All these shortcomings need not be considered as a major drawback: the reader capable of deciphering the hidden meaning of a book from the order of its entries has long since vanished from the face of the earth, for today's reading audience believes that the matter of imagination lies exclusively within the realm of the writer and does not concern them in the least, especially with regard to a dictionary. This type of reader does not even need a sandglass in the book to remind him

¹ <http://www.khazaria.com/pavic.html>

when to change his manner of reading: he never changes his manner of reading in any case” (Pavic 11).

Dictionary of the Khazars is indeed a lexicon novel. It consists of three books: “the Red Book”, “the Green Book”, “the Yellow Book”; where each corresponds to the three sources on the Khazars question: Christian, Islamic, and Hebrew. All the chapters in the books are positioned alphabetically by name or subject. So what is the right way of reading the Dictionary of the Khazars? “... It [the book] can be read in an infinite number of ways” (Pavic 11). One could read the book in a traditional way (from the beginning to end), or he could mix the books up and read from the back to the front. Another way would be to read it on a diagonal, reading the parts of the book that have been mentioned in all three books. Or the reader can also follow the “hyperlinks” that Pavic had provided in his text, and jump from one place to another throughout the reading process. From those general instructions a huge number of ways of reading the book can be constructed, and it is up to the reader to select whatever fits better his reading style, or his state of mind.

The first chapter that I’ve read was the first article in the Red Book called “Ateh”, then I’ve decided to continue to the Green and Yellow books and read what those have to say of the story of the princess Ateh. Then I continued with the Red book, but, if I came to the chapter that also existed in other books, I would jump to those other books, and then come back to the Red book. So my method of reading was somewhat diagonal, but connected through the people and actions rather than through the hyperlinks.

My reading method opened up for me the stories of all three books in a more balanced way than if I was reading the books in order. The main affect of this was that early on I understood the books were contradicting each other, and there was no absolute “truth” presented by the author. While, if a reader was to read the book from the beginning to end, such realization would come well after reading more than a half of the dictionary.

The Dictionary of the Khazars is a mosaic of beautiful separate pieces that together create a picture. Depending on which piece of the mosaic the reader came upon first, it will influence the reader's interpretation of the entire novel. Plus, the difference in the "male" and "female" versions of the book, also change the understanding of the events for the reader. All that said, there is a definite "cheating" involved on behalf of Pavic, for it is in the Appendix that he puts the crucial details that are the key to the interpretation. Also, it could be argued that all the translations and reprints of the book are, in fact, fakes. Pavic states that the publisher of the book in 1691, Daubmannus, died, while reading the poisoned version of the book. The last words that Daubmannus read were *Verbum caro factum est* ("The Word became flesh"), and it is the fact that the reader would die after reading 9 pages from the book. Those words are mentioned twice in the dictionary: on pages 6 and 244. It is obvious that all the reprints and translations do not keep the order of the pages that Pavic had intended, so there is no way of constructing the reading method that would truly open up the understanding of the book.

Another important point on translation of the book, is that in every single language the contents page would look different, simply because words in different languages are positioned differently alphabetically. I was reading the Russian translation of the Dictionary of the Khazars, and then looked over the English one. The key articles were positioned completely in a different order in the two translations. The only thing that stayed constant was the Appendix at the end of the book.

The contents of the book are no less of the labyrinth than the structure of the book. The story takes place in three time periods, as well as in three books. There is a period of the Khazar polemic (Red Book: 861 AD, Green Book: 737 AD, Yellow book: 740 AD), next there is a Reconstruction of the Dictionary period (17th Century - 1689), and the Modern Conference on the Khazars (1982). The main characters are being reborn from period to period.

In the 17th century the three characters Avram Brankovich (a Slav), Yusuf Masudi (an Arab) and Samuel Cohen (a Jew) tried to reconstruct the Dictionary of Khazars. Each of them was working on his own book, but all of them had suspicion that the other two books also exist. Brankovich and Cohen saw each other in dreams, and Masudi was following the two through the dreams and reality. He then had experienced the knowledge of death by watching the dream Cohen had of the dieing Brankovich. The three Satans of the three religions (Sevast, Akshany, and Ephrosinia Lukarevich) followed closely at the footsteps of the researchers. In 1689 Masudi called on Sevast being a Satan, to which Sevast didn't argue but concluded a bet with Brankovich:

“...you may, of course, turn me over to the Christian spiritual authorities and let the court for devils and witches deal with the matter. But, before you do so, allow me to ask you just one question. Do you believe that your church will exist and be able to pass judgment in tree hundred years, ad it does today? – Of course I do, replied Papas Avram. – Then prove it: exactly two hundred and ninety-three years from now, we will meet again, at this same time of year, for breakfast here in Constantinople, and then you will judge me just as you would today...’ (Pavic 54).

And so they all meet in 1982 at the Kingston Hotel in Istanbul. The researches from 1600's are reincarnated into Dr. Isailo Suk, Dr. Muawia Abu Kabir, and Dr. Dorothea Schultz. The demons in 1982 have become what Dr. Suk calls “the holy family”- the Van der Spaaks (Pavic 291). There are a great deal of details present in both the past and the present time of the book that lead the reader to understanding that the father Van der Spaak is Yabir Inb Akshany, the mother of the family is Nikon Sevast, and the son is Ephrosinia Lukarevich. Overall the demons are really easily recognized in their new appearance. In the 20th century the demons are much more active comparing to the 16th century in their wish of not letting the Dictionary of Khazars to be recreated. They actually commit two murders. The son kills Dr. Muawia, and the father strangles Dr. Suk, and Dr. Shultz is being blamed for the murders. Sevast, though, was alluding to this state of events back in the 16th century in his conversation with Brankovich as to why the devils were not stopping the

recreation of the dictionary. “We are waiting for time, my lord. Besides, we devils cannot take a step until you humans have taken yours...But let me tell you this too: you have not yet taken a single step that would impel us to pursue you. Yet, if you or any of your descendants ever do so, we will catch up with you on a day in the week whose name shall go unmentioned...”(Pavic 53). It was in the 20th century when “those who actually differ among themselves ... [and] ... pose the greatest danger” (Pavic 53) were about to meet, thus the demons had set to destroy the researchers and their work. The demons, however, did not succeed in destroying the Dictionary. It was Dr. Suk, who, while being murdered, saved the book by breaking the “Egg” on the blunt end. As the man who gave the egg to Dr. Suk said, the egg could have saved the man’s life by dispensing with the “bad” day, yet it wasn’t his own life that worried Dr. Suk. “And can your egg ... dispense with or save a day or an object – like a book, for instance?” (Pavic 117). The reader should be thankful to Dr. Suk for saving the Dictionary.

The structure of the book is such that each reader gets bits and pieces of the Khazars’ Dictionary at different pace and with different accents. The multitude of connections doesn’t end on the linkages between the 16th and 20th centuries. Some of the people and demons from the time of the Khazar Polemic have been intricately mixed in throughout the time line. Pavic plays with the idea of time, making events of the future influence the past.

From the structural point of view the interesting question arises when analyzing the difference between the “male” and “female” versions of the dictionary. The only physical thing that is actually different in the two versions is one paragraph of text in the Dr. Dorothea Shultz’s last letter.

Male version:

And he gave me a few of the Xeroxed sheets of paper lying on the table in front of him. I could have pulled the trigger then and there. There wouldn’t be a better moment. There was only one lone witness present in the garden-and he was a child. But that’s not what happened. I reached out and took those exciting sheets of paper, which I enclose in this letter. Taking them instead of firing my gun, I looked at those Saracen fingers with their nails like hazelnuts and I thought of the tree Halevi

mentions in his book on the Khazars. I thought how each and every one of us is just such a tree: the taller we grow toward the sky, through the wind and rain toward God, the deeper we must sink our roots through the mud and subterranean waters toward hell. With these thoughts in my mind, I read the pages given me by the green-eyed Saracen. They shattered me, and in disbelief I asked Dr. Muawia where he had got them.

Female version:

And he gave me a few of the Xeroxed sheets of paper lying on the table in front of him. As he passed them to me, his thumb brushed mine and I trembled from the touch. I had the sensation that our past and our future were in our fingers and that they had touched. And so, when I began to read the proffered pages, I at one moment lost the train of thought in text and drowned it in my own feelings. In these seconds of absence and self-oblivion, centuries passed with every read but uncomprehended and unabsorbed line, and when, after a few moments, I came to and re-established contact with the text, I knew that the reader who returns from the open seas of his feelings is no longer the same reader who embarked on that sea only a short while ago. I gained and learned more by not reading than by reading those pages, and when I asked Dr. Muawia where he had got them he said something that astonished me even more.

There are several readings of the above phrases and their effect on the world that Pavic had created. The interpretation can be a poetic view on the subject. One is invited to read the book twice, and analyze it from both rational and poetic views. However, such explanation doesn't really make the book "fit together as a whole, like a game of dominoes" (Pavic 335).

The key difference between the two passages is the fact that Dr. Muawia and Dr. Shultz in the "female" version have touched with their thumbs. In the Appendix I, Father Theoctist Nikolsky completes the discussion of Adam that earlier was discussed only in the Green and Yellow Books (Adam Ruhani, and Adam Cadmon). He tells the story of Adam, the Brother of Christ.

"When the soul entered him, Adam's left thumb touched his right, the masculine touching the feminine, and he came to life" (Pavic 318).

"Thus, it is only by joining Adam's body that we ourselves become all-seeing and joint owners of our future" ... That is why the Khazars searched for Adam's body, why the feminine and masculine books of the Khazar dream hunters were a bit like Adam's icons, in which the feminine marked his body, the masculine his blood... They often painted two icons without any face, but with two thumbs – the left and the right, Adam's feminine and masculine thumb. For each part captured in the dictionaries could be put into motion and come to life only after the touching of two fingers, the masculine and the feminine. Therefore, in their dictionaries the Khazars paid particular attention to mastering these two parts of Adam's body, and it is believed that they even succeeded, but did not have enough time for the other parts. Adam has, however, and he waits. Just as his souls migrate to his children and return to his body as the deaths of those children, so part of his immense body-state can at any moment and in every one of us be killed again or revived. It only takes the prophetic touch of the fingers, the masculine and the feminine, provided we have built at least a part of Adam's body behind these fingers. That we have become a part of it..." (Pavic 320-321).

Nikolsky's story is a thorough explanation of the significance of the touch that Dr. Muawia and Dr. Shultz had experienced. They've accomplished their destiny. The question of why this union of the feminine and the masculine took place in the "female" version of the book is an ever more difficult one to answer. One possibility would be the fact that the "verbs", or actions, are a feminine prerogative in the Dictionary of the Khazars, while the "nouns" are the masculine.

The Dictionary of the Khazars is un-doubtfully one of the greatest examples of non-linear fiction. The system that Pavic created is highly open to the readers' actions, yet there are some constraints that, in some ways, lessen its value as of an "open" book. The fact that vital information is hidden in the Appendixes, and they are not present in the List of Entries, makes the mosaic of the book loose its' absolute coherency. One could argue, though, that nothing deters the reader to start reading the dictionary from the Appendix.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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