

BRIEF MENTIONS

BORISLAV PEKIĆ

The Time of Miracles

Translated by Lovett F. Edwards
New York: Harcourt Brace
Jovanovich, 1976. Pp. 320. \$10.95.

In the mid-sixties a group of talented young writers entered the Serbian literary scene with a number of highly acclaimed works, mostly fiction. Since then these writers have furthered their reputation, some of them becoming the leading writers in Serbian literature today. Borislav Pekić (b. 1930) is one of them.

His first novel, *Vreme cuda* (1965), is translated beautifully by Lovett F. Edwards as *The Time of Miracles*. Termed simply a story, it is somewhere between novel, novella, and chronicle. The plot consists of a series of new apocryphal episodes in the life of Jesus Christ. Pekić presents his unorthodox gospel in the name of Judas Iscariot. In his occasionally sacrilegious treatment, Pekić uses an arresting logic: since Judas' betrayal enabled the Scripture to be fulfilled to the letter, he is by no means as despicable a figure as many would have us believe. Indeed, he is portrayed as the only reasonable and veritable character in the entire web of Christian mythology and a make-believe chain of events. Christ is portrayed as a very mortal, selfish, cunning fellow, more often weak than strong; he would rather denounce his holy mission, imposed upon him either by a quirk of fate or by his unbound personal ambition, than go through the hell of crucifixion. Pekić's most startling assertion is that it was not Christ who was crucified but a poor fellow who volunteered to help carry the cross, while Jesus disappeared in the crowd. Other conclusions by Pekić are equally amusing and shocking: the blind man whose sight was restored by Christ would rather not see all the evil and dirt in the world; the mute who was given back his speech is executed by the Romans for saying aloud what hitherto he could only think; Mary Magdalene beseeches Christ to restore her lascivious nature because she feels deprived of the

only true mission given women—to please men. All these twists are probably not new, but they are presented so engagingly, in a polished style and strangely beautiful language resembling that of the Bible, and spiced with such genuine humor that Pekić is readily forgiven his heresy even by those who violently disagree with him.

It was difficult to visualize Pekić returning to our prosaic, unheroic world after this exhilarating journey into the past of myths and legends. But return he did, and during the past decade he published several more novels as well as plays, TV and movie scripts. He lives in England now and continues to write works of unusual value. Even though he is, for the most part, absent from the everyday commotions and polemics in today's Serbian literature, his presence is keenly felt and his contribution gains qualitatively with every new work. Pekić is indeed increasingly becoming one of the leading writers in contemporary Serbian literature.

Vasa D. Mihailovich

RICHARD WRIGHT

Farthing's Fortunes

Toronto: Macmillan, 1976.
Pp. 333.

Though *Farthing's Fortunes* follows all the technical presuppositions of the picaresque mode, Bill Farthing (b. 1880) is not the rogue of hyperbolic adventure and exorbitant appetite, nor the put-upon innocent, that might be expected, in contrast to (say) John Barth's Ebenezer Cooke or George Macdonald Fraser's Flashman. Bill is too ingrainedly "Canadian" for this. Nor do the bizarre and grotesque appear; what is rather seen is an undertone of pathos that buttresses the comic performance. Satire, exposing all sorts and conditions of men, is present, but, characteristic of much Canadian fiction, there

is a rarity of genuine humor. If the epigraph from *The Horse's Mouth*—"You can't get justice in this world. It doesn't grow in these parts."—is taken seriously enough, the novel is more hopeless than comic, ultimately sharing the realistic sombreness of Wright's earlier *The Weekend Man* (1971) and *In the Middle of A Life* (1973). Yet here his vision is considerably more panoramic and, perhaps, inventive.

The wanderer-protagonist experiences an ample geographic range: from and sometimes back to Craven Falls, Ont., miscellaneous travels across Canada and the States, with Toronto, New York, Seattle, Skagway, Dawson, London, the Somme, Marion (Sask.), Stephenville (Mo.), and King River (Fla.) in between. Now a resident of his home town "home," Bill retails his exploits on tape to a prim and cliché-strangled editor who has "eschewed fastidious editing in the hope of capturing the texture and color of the man" (xiii). Bill's companions have been various: his madcap hairy brothers, an eccentric noble and his cardsharp mother, a cabman, prostitutes, a boxer, a poet, a capitalist, con men, an undertaker, the halt, rumrunners, and infantrymen. Two characters who figure heavily in Bill's life are Cass Findlater, a genial cheat of fluctuating wealth who is the archetypal guide, and Sally Butters, "the Belle of the Boards," Bill's true love, the search for whom precipitates his travels.

As a character Bill pales in contrast to his more crazed or earthy associates: his aimless father, devoted to alcohol and Longfellow; Mary Jane Fletcher, a highly sexed undertaker's wife and former prostitute; Shorty Wilson, a foulmouthed soldier; the pragmatic and lusty café owner Ruby Staedler. Yet no character is wholly two-dimensional, and a substantial redeeming dash of despair or frustration gives depth to most of Bill's human encounters. Individual touches abound, like the minor and impoverished Jake Snipes: "As we passed, Fletcher patted him on the shoulder, raising a cloud of dust, and a couple of bugs hopped out of his underwear tops. . . . Snipes was a mean-looking son of a bitch with narrow eyes and what I thought was a full beard. But when he turned into the dim light I could see it was just dirt. I could also see that he was drunk as a fart. He went across the room walking unnaturally straight. Just like a man with a corset or binding material around his middle" (pp. 35-36).

Bill is undeniably Canadian, more acted upon than acting, both puritan and guilty sensualist: "I led a double existence, working in a respectable Christian household six days a week and visiting Mrs. Fletcher every Thursday night without fail" (p. 77). The eccentricity alleged by his editor surfaces only in his middle age: he is inclined to look on the dark side, and he is "generally quiet and withdrawn" (p. 108). Bill is confessedly "too incompetent to be altogether crooked" (p. 162). His constant self-deprecation understatement, and general reasonableness persistently argue his nationality. Ironically, his most competent and self-assured period is back in Craven Falls, raising swine and living with the undertaker's daughter. Bill is also somewhat phlegmatic, a chronicler rather than an ironist, and his flashes of fun are rare and labored: "The story I heard was that a tough miner caught Madill [temporary husband of Sally Butters] cheating and tore that cork leg right off the stump and beat Madill to death with it. You've probably heard of men dying by their own hand but Madill represents one of the rare cases of a man dying by his own leg" (p. 146).

Farthing's Fortunes stresses the motifs of exile, things falling apart, and separations, which in Bill become the picaresque attitude, "There is no more exhilarating feeling in the world than shucking off responsibilities and clearing out of a restricting atmosphere" (p. 186). An extreme example of this is his shell-shocked amnesia from 1916 to 1932. But his searching seems equally to be a running away, particularly evident in the final grotesque meeting of Bill, Cass, and Sally within a Florida Gothic setting. The shameless operation of coincidence, often introduced by "Damn me for a liar if . . ." or evident on Bill's birthdays, gives a limited formal structure to a novel whose unity is more properly one of tone. Wright's imaginative range and historical recreation are wonderful, and his particular success is in the creation of a consistent suffering character who, despite his editor's enthusiasm, is the more remarkable for being undistanced from, and laughingly peripheral to, his experience.

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