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The Mousetrap of Language: The Mechanism of Anamorphosis in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe and Antun Gustav Matoš[✱]

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Rethinking conditions of revolutionary potential of literature, with special regard to ways literature incessantly has re-examined otherness in language, in this paper we have chosen to focus on specific mechanism of illusion-making, i.e. anamorphosis taken both as a technique and a theme. Since one of the most famous elaboration of anamorphosis in literature is to be found in Poe's stories, it is worthwhile to examine how Poe's game of hide and seek with depth and surface is reflected in his devoted Croatian reader and interpreter A.G. Matos. In a comparative analysis of Poe's and Matos's stories, we will elaborate on how a procedure of naming and a procedure of signifying are revealed to be mere effects of anamorphosis in Matos's short story "Miš" (The Mouse). Since it is an embodiment of a figure designating schism and split, the rodent from the title of Matos's short story reveals the other side of thinking, which is no other than the other within.

KEYWORDS: anamorphosis; Matoš; Poe; rhetorical figures; paregmenon

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In Dubravka Oraić-Tolić's view, modernism both "achieves its full splendour and encounters its first pronounced denial" in the works of Antun Gustav Matoš, the central figure of Yugoslav modernist literature (Oraić Tolić, 1980, 118). In his letters and in reviews of his literary works, Matoš openly refers to Poe as his literary model: "From among the novelists, I like Poe's genius the most" (Matoš, 1973, 279). Therefore, Croatian literary criticism has toyed with possible parallels in their respective works, especially since the publication of Sonja Bašić's works (cf. Bašić, 1970; 1986). As a follow-up to the discussions mentioned, the paper strives to point to the equivalence of Poe's and Matoš's "literary process" which comes to light in Matoš's famous statement that he found "an analogous method in the works of Poe" (Matoš, 1973, 279). Unfortunately, Croatian literary criticism and historiography have failed to explore it in detail, with the exception of Tatjana Jukić's comparative analysis of Matoš's *Around Lobor* (*Oko Lobora*) and Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (cf. Jukić, 2012). Critical reception has recognised Poe's intertext of Matoš's novella *Miš* (*Mouse*) emphasising, almost without exception, its points of contact with Poe's classic *The Black Cat*, declaring the titular animals to be symbols. However, in doing so, a whole range of mechanisms of optical illusion used both by Matoš and Poe for the purpose of exploring the traps of reception has thus been completely left out of the scope of interpretation. The literary traps set by Poe in a number of his short stories, starting from *The Sphinx*, *The Purloined Letter*, *The Spectacles*, *Ligeia* to his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*¹ coincide with Matoš's writing mechanisms, which are called "proto avant-garde"² in literary history terminology. We shall demonstrate that the manneristic mechanism of anamorphosis³ renders the two authors neighbours – and

1 As emphasised by Barbara Cantalupo: "All of these tales show Poe's keen interest in demonstrating the human propensity to see what is desired and not what is actually there" (Cantalupo, 2005, 54).

2 Regardless of the fact that its topics has been indisputably recognised as "Poeian-Baudelairean", it has become customary in Croatian literary historiography to interpret Matoš's poem *Môra* (*The Nightmare*) (1907) as a "pre-heraldic work", which can be connected "to later literary experiments in the period of stylistic formation of the avant-garde" (Slabinac, 1988, 56).

3 For this cf. Hocke, 1991, pp. 162–172.

that this neighbourhood does not carry historical, but trans-historical labels. In contrast to the protocols of interpretation that attempt to explain symbols in literary works and open up the assumed repositories of content, the following analysis will demonstrate that Poe's legacy can be discerned in a completely different place, in Matoš's play with "the form and the deformation of expression" (cf. Deleuze, 1986, 16).

In Matoš's case, incentives for deformation of the form came from other arts and media. Thus, Aleksandar Flaker claims that Matoš played a key role "at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century" since "he left a mark on Croatian culture by his interest in most varied media" (Flaker 1988, 12). Matoš's movement in inter-medial waters was guided by his affinity for caricature, "from Holbein, Goya and Daumier (...) to Toulouse-Lautrec's 'funny papers'; the inter-medial comparison of European caricaturists' style with the style of 'caricaturists of words', Luther, Voltaire and Heine" (Flaker 1988, 12), is particularly conspicuous in this context. The caricaturist views things, phenomena and people with a slanted look and in doing so inherits the look of a clown. The clown is introduced into Croatian literature "very early: in Matoš's carnivalesque one-act play *U pojutarje* [*In the Late Morning*] (1904), located in a Budapest drawing room 'in the filthy baroque'" (Flaker, 1988, 41). Flaker then observes that on par with high aestheticism Matoš takes an interest in the world of "journalistic feuilleton, caricature, poster, cabaret" (Flaker, 1988, 42), and thereby entry into the avant-garde "occurs almost one decade before the conscious appearance of the avant-garde" (Flaker, 1988, 42). The element that links these inter-medial genres is attention to detail. Matoš, as an author of feuilletons and caricatures, has an affinity for flânerie as a lifestyle and artistic world view, so that "the people (...) of intense details, people of the Baroque..." are not the only full-blooded avant-gardists (Šklovski in Benčić 1991, 99) but there are also some at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.

Thanks to identical features of Matoš and the hero of his novella *Miš* (1899), as well as the narrator's explicit remark on Mihajlo as "imitating Heine at only 16 years of age: he insults his peers and stealthily visits forbidden places," individual literary critics were led to proclaim the novella "a prose of self-irony" (Petlevski, 2015, 73). The statement may be true on another level, on the same one which claims that Matoš

is modern. One should recall Matoš's words from his *Dojmovi sa pariške izložbe* (*The Impressions from the Paris Exhibition*) (1900), where he explains modernity in painting:

The main characteristic of our artists is that they are – more or less – modern. This is already a lot. To be modern means to be original, i.e. to have spirit and energy, to understand and present the world or oneself differently from others, the older ones. Modernity is freedom, since only a free man is independent. Modern is something new, so the modernist is some kind of opposition. Modernity is individualism, since the new artist is on his own at the beginning, misunderstood; often, he is against all, frequently he remains as such and fails. As a novelty, modernity is development. It seems that there is no regressive mind that, as a matter of principle, would be against modernity – especially in this country, where there are no old schools and no manners.

Modernity – and I stick to painters – is twofold: a new way of painting, a new technique (this is so to say objective modernity) and a new way of observing or understanding the world (subjective modernity). For, black is not always black, and white is not always white. In a dream or in rapture, you see flowers with sweet-sounding beaks, and a black night is white, like a girl's warm breasts on her happy lover. In despair, the pale moon is bloody like a wound, and a tear crawls like a black snake down the 'green' face of the deceased (Matoš, 1973, 150).

In other words, the modern ironic writer, is truly modern and ironic (not trendy) only if he himself consciously twists, in a manner of doubling, the techniques and the perspective, by means of which others are declared or self-declared modern and ironic. Further, we shall consider how Matoš's insights into the visual arts are translated into the language of his narrative and stylistic procedures. Focusing exclusively on the problem of expression, we shall read Matoš's novella *Miš* in the context of Deleuze's and Guattari's reflections on revolutionary conditions of literature, as considered in a study devoted, among others, to many of Kafka's animals: monkeys, dogs, insects and, of course, mice. Namely, Deleuze and Guattari define the concept of minor or minority writing practice, comparing the writer with the animal, the one who writes "like

a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1986, 18). In other words, if we move away from the conventional judgement of literary history according to which the mouse is a symbol of remorse, and focus on the riddle of naming, then what we can observe in Matoš's *Miš* is the language that is decomposed, gnawed and eroded from within.

The main character of the novella is a young poet and lover Mihajlo Milinović "a student of medicine who is a passionate reader" (Petlevski, 2015, 72), a letters enthusiast, who writes letters about literature to his sweetheart and records his literary critical reviews parallel to his intimate writings. The extent of this intertwining of love and literary discourse in the packages travelling between Vienna and Araberg (pseudo-Germanised name of Zagreb, replacing the historical Agram) is visible in the fact that Milinović and Ljubica, in addition to letters, regularly send each other books. In this context, one should note that the relationship between Milinović and his mother is solely based on encounters with and connection to books. Since his mother died at childbirth, he always carried with him his mother's picture depicting her "with a book on her lap... as an amulet" (Matoš, 1953, 173). Instead of contacts with his mother, Milinović is solely left with his mother's reading. Therefore, the narrator says that he "learnt almost by heart the only book bearing her darkened signature: one of the first issues of *Danica Ilirska (The Illyrian Morning Star)*" (Matoš, 1953, 173).

The novella begins with a fragment of Ljubica's letter revealing that she was in the family way. The narrator's comment unambiguously states Milinović "was quite terrified by it" (Matoš, 1953, 172). In his written reply, he makes it very clear that his perception of what Ljubica calls God's blessing is quite different (cf. Matoš, 1953, 172) and suggests that she should have an abortion as soon as possible. Describing their unborn child as a "blubberer", "intruder" and "small parasite" (Matoš, 1953, 172), Milinović explains a further view on the matter, a view considering the child to be an obstacle to the business he is devoted to, study of medicine first of all, then literary work, and finally enjoyment and fun. Having received Ljubica's answer begging him to have pity on her and to show at least "a little bit of compassion" (Matoš, 1953, 174), Milinović suddenly has a change of heart and sends his reply "comforting his lover warmly and excitedly" (Matoš, 1953, 174). The letter, which we

read only as the narrator's paraphrase, clearly reflects the instability of Milinović's reception – having read Ljubica's letter "one, twice, three times", Milinović was "at first carried away by an incomprehensible, divine devotion, this noble love" (Matoš, 1953, 175) and in the following letter "he cooed that he was trembling for her sake" (Matoš, 1953, 175.). However, very soon, just when he addresses the letter "he remembers that she may be pretending, that she is forcibly witty in order to mislead him" (Matoš, 1953, 175). Suspecting that she is just trying to delude him with Đuro Jakšić's verses or declamations on the model of Rousseau and Turgenev, Milinović suddenly changes his mind and "tears to pieces his first letter and, although it stung him to the heart, scribbles another" (Matoš, 1953, 176). Believing that Ljubica is skilfully trying to make him form an opposite opinion, Milinović commends her literary endeavours but adds his observation that somebody else's words resound in them: "You are prattling like Rousseau's Julie... You are threatening me like Clara Militch you know from Miškatović's translation" (Matoš, 1953, 176). Milinović finally concludes that, unless she has copied her writing from somebody else: "Your latest poetic excitement is a mere pathological consequence of your unusual physical state" (Matoš, 1953, 176). Although he is not certain what exactly this is, Milinović is very clear that some foreign dimension has sneaked into Ljubica's language – either Ljubica has taken over some excerpts from a sentimental novel and adopted them as her own, or her words are so to speak in the family way.

Then again, as soon as he posts the letter, Milinović's behaviour shows that he does not stand by what he has written – his deeds oppose his words. As if the mouse in his thinking (*miš-ljenje*) has given his legs another direction, Milinović unconsciously heads for the post office where he does not find a solution and therefore continues circling:

(...) Then some inertia caught him like just before a fever. (...) To pull himself together, he went to *Beethoven* café. (...) Suddenly, he finds himself in front of the post office. He enters and remembers that he must have come to pick up his letter. (...) He walks through the office twice-three times, with his knees trembling, but he is not brave enough to persuade the officer to whom he has handed over the letter (Matoš, 1953, 177).

The very last letter in the novella is actually a cable from uncle Pera who informs Milinović that Ljubica committed suicide, suggesting that the immediate cause of this unfortunate event was “a letter from Vienna from someone who frequently writes to her poste restante: certainly her husband. But we found nothing: she burned it” (Matoš, 1953, 179).

In this game of writing and re-writing, tearing the letter to pieces and moving it, in the game of interpretation, reinterpretation and the conclusion that the contents of the letter are subordinate to its impact on the receiver, one can recognise the famous cat and mouse game between Inspector Dupin and Minister D. from Poe’s short story *The Purloined Letter*.⁴ Just as the power of the letter in Poe’s short story is hidden in the impact that its public disclosure may have on the Queen, so would the discovery of Ljubica’s pregnancy “for ever put Milinović in a feud with his uncle, the only one left of all his relatives.” The only thing that remains of Ljubica after her death is her name – her nickname denoting at the same time the title of the literary work and the animal rustling among sheets of paper. As Milinović records in his diary: the mouse scared him “like a little boy... since I thought of the governess by unconscious association” (Matoš, 1953, 178).

In Matoš’s novella, the naming process is considered to be an encounter with otherness. We can notice this at the very beginning, in Goethe’s epigraph containing a figure of paregmenon in its centre. “But I remember first and foremost that absolute love is unconditional in order to condition us.” The figure is later repeated in the name of Milinović’s sweetheart as the “ljubavnica Ljubica” (the lover Ljubica). In the novella, Ljuba or Ljubica Kolarička is called Miš (Mouse) and

4 Here, we rely in the first place on Lacan’s famous reading from the *Seminar* on “*The Purloined Letter*”, and on Lacan’s observation of structural laws in the story among protagonists. What is important to note is the fact that Lacan makes a “shift here from the field of accuracy to the register of truth. Now this register... is situated somewhere else altogether: at the very foundation of intersubjectivity.” (Lacan, 2006, 13) In other words, Lacan credits Poe’s (and by proxy Matoš’s) genius with having construed a story in which the truth of the letter is not found in the letter *per se*, but among characters’ perception of its value, i.e. its positioning. This also entails reader’s position – not to be identified with any one of the character’s, but with the letter (i.e. the novella) itself, as will be shown shortly.

Mišić (Small Mouse) as a term of endearment, whereas Milinović signs his letters with two names: the first with Mihajlo, the second with Mihajel.⁵ Matoš's game of names is most evident in the chain of signifiers that Ljubica uses to call him – Miško (Small Mouse), Miškec (yet another variety of Small Mouse). Milinović mocks them adding possible varieties of his name in the postscript:

Please, don't call me Miško or Miškec any longer. These sweet diminutives from the Kajkavian dialect are not very dear to my heart. (...) Where have you then found this 'Mijat', for the love of God? By God, I will convert to a Jew or a Turk in order to bring you joy with some Mujo or Moyshela (Matoš, 1953, 176–177).

In the final part of the novella, where Milinović hears Ljubica's voice enumerating and ordering foreign and local, familiar and distant sounds, one can recognise most clearly that Milinović's name is completely unknown and illegible to him: "Orifijel, Ofijel, Jofijel, Samajel, Asrajel, Aratron, Betor, Faleg, Oh, Fagit, Miškec, Miško, Mijat, Mihajlo, Mišel" (Matoš, 1953, 181). Lost in the infinite transformation, Milinović cannot identify himself with the names Ljubica uses to address him and cannot perceive their sameness with Ljubica's nickname. Milinović as Miš-ko, Miš-kec, Miš-el is not only a double of the unfortunate governess from Araberg, but also of a dreadful rodent – the mouse.

According to the interpretation that has entered many critical readings from lexicons, Poe's black cat and Matoš's mouse are nothing more than symbols representing the same dirty conscience (cf. Smolčić, 2019, 268), so one gets the impression that it does not matter whether a mouse or a hen has sneaked into the title of a literary work. As already mentioned in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, the mouse has been introduced into the work as a being that threatens the texts: "As soon as he lies down, some movement awakes him from his half-sleep... Rustling on the table and nibbling at the paper. – Mouse, strike him dead! – Milinović

5 We are grateful for the comment of the anonymous reviewer for pointing out cathectic energy both protagonists' names draw onto themselves: *Ljubica* – love, *Milinović* – *milina*, endearment.

shouts and begins beating with a stick under the furniture" (Matoš, 1953, 178). Then again, in the fourth paragraph of the short story, the parasite is again found in a setting filled with book covers, notebooks, sheets and letters, to be precise "under" Milinović's "book shelves" (Matoš, 1953, 180). As one might guess by the noise the intruder makes in Milinović's tiny room, which the narrator compares with the practice and the noise "in the mill," the hard and needle-like teeth of the animal are relentlessly approaching the books, the manuscript, the diary, letters, nibbling "ever more strongly," threatening to eat them away, turning them into nothing (cf. Matoš, 1953). Moreover, this indication of bibliophagia in Matoš's work enables one to link the protagonist's relation to the written word with the position assumed by the unpleasant rodent: as passionate readers, Milinović and Ljubica devour books and while exchanging letters, they also exchange literary works. Thus, Ljubica enjoys reading Đuro Jakšić, whereas Milinović praises Leskovar's novel. The last fragment of Milinović's diary reads: his "hallucinations must be a result of solitude and reading," which he does not know how to dispel but by reading, changing his reading list: in order to clear his mind, Milinović decides to devote himself to "Rabelais, Horace, Boccaccio and our folk songs" (cf. Matoš, 1953, 183). Replacing Leskovar with Rabelais and Boccaccio, the two prime representatives of carnivalesque literature, Milinović turns to folk culture of laughter, whose meaning can be discerned in connection to the anamorphic logic of twisting and distorting. Just as an anamorphic picture becomes visible when the vantage point is changed, so Milinović hopes to change his vision and cast a slanted look on the world.

Since it draws its origin from Menippean tradition that begins with Socratic irony, the perception of a dialogical nature of truth is what can be found in the foundations of carnivalesque literature. We can claim that this truth is in Matoš's novella repeatedly demonstrated in two aspects, in two pictures. What is more, duality will prove to be the foundation of all phenomena that plague the protagonist. However, this drama of the language, which takes place behind the protagonist's back, evolves before the reader's eyes, if his/her eyes are prepared to follow it.

Since Milinović is a writer writing in two languages; he writes his epic in German, and his diary in Croatian, and corresponds with his lover

Ljubica in Croatian as well, Matoš's protagonist is described in secondary literature as a domestic man abroad, i.e. Matoš's typical displaced subject. Stating that he does not belong either to the Croatian or the Serb linguistic community, Milinović explicitly writes in his letter to Ljubica that he is "not in the least flattered to be a Crobotic [Croatian] or Raskian [Serb] writer" and therefore "writes something in German" (Matoš, 1953, 176). It is noteworthy that Ljubica comments Đuro Jakšić's poetry as follows: "As if these Rascians [Serbs] write better Croatian than the Croats do!" (Matoš, 1953, 175). Trying to explain what it means to use multilingualism in their own language, and answer the question what it means to drill a hole in the language and turn the words inside out, Deleuze and Guattari oppose the minority use of language, as explained by Tomislav Brlek, to "literature which is called major or established literature, whose feature is to follow the idea that there is a corresponding form of expression for every content and form, which only needs to be found" (cf. Brlek, 2020, 161). On the other hand, minor or revolutionary literature is understood as literature that challenges and does not allow us to put "identity before existence" (Brlek, 2020, 162).

In Matoš's novella, displacement does not arise from the fact that its heroes find themselves at the crossroads of different languages, but rather from the fact that the mouse, as a pest hiding among papers and letters, as an alien body in the writing tissue, incessantly reveals itself by remaining elusive. Whether it is a capital letter or a small letter at the beginning of the word, whether it is mouse as a name or a word describing an animal, we recognise this signifier first and foremost in the inevitable tension between two different standpoints. Since Milinović can and cannot see the mouse at the same time, the mouse intrudes as a parallaxic object, as always and exclusively something different:

Lo and behold, there it is now by the window. It is hopping in the moonlight, striking its head against the wall and grinding rhythmically with its needle-like tiny teeth: eek-eek-eek.... And eek-eek-eek! – and there is the hubbub of squeaking mice on the green canopy of the sky like the swallows' chirping. Clouds? No. These are naked, black and wrinkled tails of mice that whistle and hiss in the night air like snakes...

Stars? No. These are malevolent mice's tiny eyes glowing in a greenish and bloody colour. The moon? No... That is a governess from Araberg! No, it is not: this is a huge rat with Mrs. Ljubica's yellow face and grey hair.

Milinović wants to hide under the duvet, but she smiles to him with a faint smile, sheds golden-silver tears and utters the cabalistic words: – Orifijel, Ofijel, Jofijel, Samajel, Asrajel, Aratron, Betor, Faleg, Oh, Fagit, Miškec, Miško, Mijat, Mihajlo, Mišel... And the voice hums silvery... like a bell of an ancient cathedral... And then again, a million of horrible bones squeak, a million of tails whistle – and there falls deaf peace and blind darkness... (Matoš, 1953, 180–181).

Just as Poe's heroes often suffer from optical illusions, so it seems to Milinović that he sees a mouse's tail in the shape of a cloud, discerns a mouse's eyes in the splendour of stars, sees his dead lover's face in the moon's circle, which is of course a privileged motif of Poe's entire work. If we return to Poe's *Ligeia*,⁶ then we refer to the mechanism of anamorphosis in the narrator's description of her eyes. We claim that the anamorphosis constitutes the key link between the Croatian and the American author: *Ligeia*'s eyes became "twin stars of Leda" to him, and he to them "devoutest of astrologers" (Poe, 2001, 172). After the

6 According to Barbara Cantalupo, art historian Jurgis Baltrusaitis noticed anamorphosis in Poe's *Ligeia* in his study *Anamorphic Art* and defined its mechanism as follows: "Anamorphosis – a word that makes its appearance in the seventeenth century but for a device already known – plays havoc with elements and principles; instead of reducing forms to their visible limits, it projects them outside themselves and distorts them so that when viewed from certain point they return to normal. The system was established as a technical curiosity, but it embraces a poetry of abstraction, an effective mechanism for producing optical illusion and a philosophy of false reality" (Baltrusaitis, 1977, 121; cf. Cantalupo, 2005). Gustav Hocke relies on the same definition in his work and adds the following determination: "1. the expression of another 'essence'; at the same time, it can be a form of illusion, considering that we observe it simultaneously from a different vantage point. Everything that appears can, thus, according to the vantage point, be observed in its being-so (directly) and in its survival (indirectly, so that drawings and pictures are viewed from another vantage point). Each 'phenomenon' can thus be observed dually, what is more it must be observed in a double perspective, in 'natural' and 'unnatural'" (Hocke, 1991, 164).

death of the woman he loved, Poe's anonymous narrator says that her eyes aroused a certain feeling in him, which he recognised again in the experience of anamorphosis: "And there are one or two stars in heaven (one especially, a star of the sixth magnitude, double and changeable, to be found near the large star in Lyra) in a telescopic scrutiny of which I have been made aware of the feeling" (Poe, 2001, 172). As Barbara Cantalupo demonstrates in her analysis:

Poe's inordinate fascination with word puzzles would naturally have drawn him to the manipulative potential of such visual tricks. (...) Many of Poe's stories (...) move from the material world to the fantastic or immaterial. Visual descriptions of elaborate interiors – ornate draperies, vaulted ceilings, lustrous colours, filtered light, intricate carvings, arabesque censors – fashion environments that can easily enfold anamorphic images or create camouflage or projection devices (Cantalupo, 2005, 56).

Following Poe's stories about transformations – in which there are indications of somebody else in one person, just as there is an indication of another meaning in a word – we shall emphasise the same splits of appearances in Matoš's work. They lead us to ask questions that seem to resemble Milinović's hallucinations in his diary: If a foreign element therefore sneaked in among letters, if some strange perceptions pop up from the straight lines, may the words themselves be in "the family way"?

Since the narrator's description of split appearances is linked to optical illusions, primarily to the play of light produced by the moonlight in Milinović's tiny room, this paragraph can be directly linked to Dupin's famous comment (on the sagacity of the Paris police) from *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, where we find a description of the phenomenon of parallax:

Thus there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountain-tops where she is found. The modes

and sources of this kind of error are well typified in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies. To look at a star by glances – to view it in a side-long way, by turning toward it the exterior portions of the retina (more susceptible of feeble impressions of light than the interior), is to behold the star distinctly – is to have the best appreciation of its lustre – a lustre which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision fully upon it. A greater number of rays actually fall upon the eye in the latter case, but, in the former, there is the more refined capacity for comprehension. By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct (Poe, 2005, 144–145).

Moreover, central to the description of the bridal chamber in *Ligeia* is the tapestry, in particular for its uncanny feature of ever-changing arabesque figures:

The lofty walls, gigantic in height – even unproportionably so – were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds, with heavy and massive-looking tapestry – tapestry of a material which was found alike as a carpet on the floor, as a covering for the ottomans and the ebony bed, as a canopy for the bed, and as the gorgeous volutes of the curtains which partially shaded the window. The material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with arabesque figures, about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black. But these figures partook of the true character of the arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view. By a contrivance now common, and indeed traceable to a very remote period of antiquity, they were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk. The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies – giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole (Poe, 2001, 178).

Sibila Petlevski analyses Matoš's novella *Miš* warning of the trap of simplicity and uniformity and offers two versions of the plot. If we happen to have "a chance to retell the contents of this text as briefly as possible", it may appear to us, says the author, "that we have been given an easy task" (Petlevski, 2015, 72). However, if we dare and try to re-shape Matoš's prose with words, we shall try very soon, as Petlevski, to start all over: "The same plot we have just summarised, could be also retold like this" (Petlevski, 2015, 73). We cannot but discern the structural duality in either version, this way or that way, the duality that prevents us from making the novella systematic or determining it generically.⁷ Matoš's novella offers the reader an uneven surface which, although it may not shine, definitely folds, as if the text embodies an anamorphic object. There is a continuous alteration of two shapes of letters in the text: italics and regular, oblique and straight. From the relation between text and paratext, between the external and the internal narrative structure, we discern that before us is "a mousetrap of an optical double stage in art" (Hocke, 1991, 165), a mousetrap by means of which the delusion of every idea of identity and representation is revealed and unmasked. The novella *Miš* is part of the collection entitled *Iverje* (*Splinters*) and subtitled *skice and sličice* (*sketches and small pictures*). It has Goethe's epigraph at the beginning and a final note at the end, it consists of four numbered sections in which we follow a constant exchange of the first and third person narrative that stands out by typographic differences in the type and size of font. The aspect of the omniscient narrator is contrasted again by two modes of autobiographic expression: epistolary and diary. Moreover, the letters exchanged between Milinović and Ljubica are split in two parts, in the text and the appendix, a postscript. Finally, in this game of subdivisions, the first person narrative is eroded by otherness – first,

7 Petlevski gives possible determinations of the genre: "A tragicomic love story with elements of the epistolary genre; a story from urban everyday life with fantastic elements; social prose covering class, gender and national issues; a story about a provincial in a big city; satirical prose about the break-up of modern society, persiflage of a decadent literary style; turning literary criticism into a literary work; mocking one's own exile and presenting the Homeland allegorically as an abandoned lover" (Petlevski, 2015, 72).

Ljubica writes in her letter: "The verses you have sent me some time ago, are now emerging by themselves from the pen" (Matoš, 1953, 175) and then includes verses of Đuro Jakšić's poetry. Milinović then repeats her construction when he writes: "Somebody else's verses are now emerging from my pen" (Matoš, 1953, 176).

However, the writing in the novella and writing the novella are not completely identical results – the former has a therapeutic role, "to analyse by means of writing, since this is currently the best medicine." However, the writer Mihajlo immediately continues by making an analogy to children: "Children, when they cry, calm down in front of the mirror. I am too a pathetic crybaby" (Matoš, 1953, 173, 182). Thereby the process of writing becomes a *mirror* reflecting his identity of a writer and a student in Vienna. This writing-mirror is "graphomania" (Matoš, 1953, 173, 182), but for the reader it is the only access to the view that encompasses Milinović, while being elusive to him. In the novella, the writing process is emphasised as anamorphosis and the challenge of reading consists of perspectivising, since "it is no less demanding" "to distinguish the narrator's perspective", as Petlevski notes (2015, 73). Although the plot is construed around a love story, the novella meets a paradoxical "requirement for novelty in the sphere of forming procedures that at the same time allows traditionality in the choice of its object" (Benčić, 1991, 103). This is like Nietzsche, as his reader Milinović interprets him, who "spoke very flamboyantly about morality, but has not said anything new and has not proven anything" (Matoš, 1953, 182). Literary criticism is inserted in the private correspondence between the lovers. Milinović's letters exemplify a pronounced stripping of the procedure, and its literary nature is falsely proclaimed to be supreme cynicism. For him, this disharmony between old and new, writing and living, the absence "of the strength to be in practice what a consequent and cold egoist is with the power of testimony" (Matoš, 1953, 178), is a motive for self-analysis. In analogous anecdotes from Kazimir Malevich's life, as described by Tzvetan Todorov, we find a consequent implementation of the avant-garde project:

For the sake of art, Malevich was prepared to use anything. On one occasion, hearing him saying that, his wife asked him: "I beg your pardon,

does this mean that you will use me as well?" – For the sake of art, Sofia, I will use you too (Todorov, 2018, 169).

However, in the genre of a love letter, he manages to achieve progress, depriving him of dimensions of the message, which, according to Živa Benčić, are sacrificed by avant-gardists: "Parallel to the weakening of the expressive and referential function of baroque and avant-garde poetic creations, there is a stronger tendency of increasing the 'perceptibility' of others" (Benčić, 1991, 109). These can be "non-semantic components of their structure" (Benčić, 1991, 109), and in the case of Mihajlo's letters, this is the emphasis on the poetic and meta-linguistic function.

As a motto of his novella, Matoš uses Goethe's final three verses from his one-stanza poem *Dem Absolutisten*. Although these verses have been regularly connected to the plot, one must notice a paregmenon (Doch merkt' ich mir vor andren Dingen / Wie unbedingt, uns zu bedingen / Die absolute Liebe sei!), which points to repetition that can be found in the midst of the absolute and love. Repetition refers both to the narration and its obsessive signifier, the mouse. However, for the absolute of love to be seen, repetition that establishes this absolute must not be seen, but the opposite is valid as well: it is only after the (Romanticist) content is expelled from the verses for the sake of sound that one can hear their echo, i.e. the repeated appearance of the root *ding*. This insight imposes itself as a look, "as a non-reflecting object that the subject structurally misses through a certain blindness in the heart of vision" (Dolar, 2015, 133). It is not simply that repetition stands in the heart of love, but rather, there is lack in love and repetition assumes the place of this lack, not as a supplement, but as an object *a* "in order to present it as such" (Dolar, 2015, 135), i.e. hollow. In other words, the motto of Matoš's novella signals self-referentiality in the centre of its narration, namely that the story and the narration mutually reflect each other. For the reader, this will become a narrative problem, for the hero an ethical one. Although this self-referentiality is exposed to the look of the reader, it has been regularly missed and not seen thus far, reducing the motif of the mouse to a symbol and metaphor. Indeed, much like the fact that the first syllable of Mihajlo Milinović's name and surname is paronomastically reflected in the lexem *miš*, remaining elusive to Mihajlo.

Listing paronomastic structures that are realised through the use of words that differ in one or two sounds, Matoš's novella toys with the possibility of presenting two different pictures of the item considered, as a mouse (miš) who sneaked into reflection (raz-mišljanje), and a mouse as a second opinion (drugo miš-ljenje). The nickname Miš reveals its alien face since Milinović expressly states that the nickname mouse stems from foreign literature, from a French play. We assume that this is Pailleron's 1887 comedy in three acts, which had its first Croatian première in the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb in 1892. Since the French word for mouse is *la souris*, which invokes a nasty rodent and smiling at the same time, this duality, which is in force, structurally reproduces the reversal, the carnivalesque transformation of one thing into something else, making the novella part of the tradition of serious-humoristic. The best proof of this is the tragicomic finale of the novella: Trying to kill the mouse, Milinović ends up killing himself too. The finale of the novella with its description of the mousetrap, which Milinović put together using two books, a piece of string and a revolver, contains a warning that we should not even try to escape literary traps, even if we write them ourselves.

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