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Anti-Camus: The Impossibility of Rebellion or the Dramas of Velimir Lukić

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The plays of Velimir Lukić (1936–97) have not yet received the critical recognition they deserve. Reading the reviews and interpretations, which mostly emerged during his lifetime and later subsided, one gets the impression that the perspectives from which his work was evaluated are responsible for this. Aligned with his own political and poetic interests, Predrag Palavestra sees him as a critic of totalitarian ideologies, while Slobodan Selenić views him as the author of political farces, who used either real or imagined pasts of others to comment on the contemporary society in which he lived.[1] 'He was the first to politicize our theatre', agrees Vladimir Stamenković.[2] In his dramas, we observe 'a bitter mockery of the human race, moral outrage at the structure of the world', and 'the dialectics of absolute evil'.[3] Slobodan Selenić sees Lukić's world-view as cynicism or sarcasm directed at a world ruled by 'stupidity and meanness; there are no grand truths, only small lies; there are no grand goals when they are advocated by insignificant, small individuals, no others even exist'.[4] 'In the world', he continues, 'there is an absolute equilibrium of corruption and insignificance; this harmony is eternal, and nothing can disturb it'.[5] This is hardly likely to encourage anyone to pick up Lukić's dramas, but that is not all: the form of his dramas is identical, with plots constructed according to the laws of a ruthless functionality that tolerates any kind of

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[1] Predrag Palavestra, *Posleratna srpska književnost*, Belgrade, 1972, p. 339; Slobodan Selenić, *Antologija savremene srpske drame*, Belgrade, 1977, p. xlvii.

[2] Vladimir Stamenković, 'Predgovor', in Velimir Lukić, *Izabrane drame*, Belgrade, 1987, p. 8.

[3] Ibid., p. 14.

[4] Selenić, *Antologija*, pp. l.

[5] Ibid., p. xlix.

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exaggeration, and characters simplified to caricature, to the extent that they neither think nor feel, their sole task to prove the correctness of the author's moral disillusionment with our world.[6] Stamenković agrees that Lukić's 'characters are undeveloped', and his plots 'schematic',[7] as though he always wrote the same play, but as justification for this deficiency, he points to the dramatic genre that Lukić chose to revive in the twentieth century. Although he categorized them as farces himself, those dramas are actually more akin to medieval morality plays, in which the characters' speech, representing not the fullness of human beings but persisting solely as codes for moral or ideological positions, is more important than the plot. Stamenković also adds that it is unusual that these dramas have not been linked by critics to Albert Camus' dramas.

I will argue that Lukić's dramas have remained misunderstood because, firstly, they are placed within the framework through which the 'critical intelligentsia' opposes authoritarian Communist rule; secondly, their true genre has not been recognized, which is philosophical drama, or drama of ideas; and thirdly, they have not been interpreted within the philosophical horizon from which they arise — the horizon of nihilism.[8] Lukić's dramas are only secondarily political, to the extent that 'stupidity and baseness', 'lies' and 'corruption' could be related to the Yugoslav political class — as well as to any other. However, if we read them as allegorical critiques of the Yugoslav political system, then they will only be marginally so: Lukić finds his plots in Roman history and Greek mythology, placing all the dramas in a fantastical world with reduced attributes, leaving very few signals that could connect it to Yugoslav contemporaneity. The form of these dramas does indeed resemble morality plays, primarily due to the schematic nature of their plots and the reduction of characters. Yet, these two characteristics are also traits of the modern drama of ideas, in which the persuasiveness or attractiveness of the plot, or the psychological complexity of characters, matter less, and in which a character's ability to explicitly articulate ideas is more important. Selenić accurately recognizes this: in Lukić's dramas, 'the heroes feel nothing', but 'with complete openness, blasphemously, not hiding anything that compromise them to the highest degree in our eyes, they present only those thoughts that will triumphantly prove the correctness of the author's moral disappointment with the imperfection of our world and the human race'.[9] Quite accurately, in a drama of ideas,

[6] Ibid., pp. xlix–l.
[7] Stamenković, 'Predgovor', p. 19.
[8] For an overview of philosophical drama, see Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocation in Theater and Philosophy*, Oxford, 2010.
[9] Selenić, *Antologija*, p. 1.

characters do not need to be full and rounded, as in realist drama, because here characters are merely instances of the articulation of a philosophical standpoint or an idea, closer to characters in Plato's dialogues than to those in Ibsen's drama.[10] What is important here is not psychology, but the dialectic of ideas, and thus the explicitness and precision with which characters articulate ideas are virtues rather than flaws. Stamenković came very close to this perspective when he mentioned Lukić's affinity with Camus and rightly recognized that Lukić's vision of human destiny differs from that of Camus, but he did not insist on it further. However, I will place this in the focus of my interpretation: Lukić kept repeating the same dramatic model precisely because he repeatedly attempted to reach audiences and critics who failed to recognize his philosophical message. Lukić's dramas cannot be understood, or are misunderstood, if not interpreted within the philosophical horizon of nihilism.

Nihilism is here understood as Martin Heidegger presented it in his essay, 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"'.[11] Nihilism is a process in the history of Western thought that Nietzsche expresses by claiming that God is dead, which signifies the disappearance of the supernatural world:

> God is the name for a realm of Ideas and ideals. This realm of the suprasensory has been considered since Plato, or more strictly speaking, since the late Greek and Christian interpretation of Platonic philosophy, to be the true and genuinely real world.[12]

This supernatural world is the metaphysical world, and when it disappears, when it loses its normative power, there is nothing left to direct human action: the supernatural world of ideals and values that externally determine the meaning of life disappears:

> Metaphysics is history's open space wherein […] it becomes a destining that the suprasensory world, the Ideas, God, the moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, civilization, suffer the loss of their constructive force and become void. We name this decay in the essence of the suprasensory its disessentializing [*Verwesung*].[13]

[10] Puchner traces this entire subgenre back to Plato's dialogues, claiming that besides everything else, Plato was also the creator of a dramatic genre that has persisted until today: modern drama of ideas is the dramatic offspring of Plato's dialogues.

[11] Martin Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York, 1977.

[12] Ibid., p. 61.

[13] Ibid., p. 65.

Nihilism, in Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, is the term for the devaluation of the highest values, as the ideal world cannot be realized within the framework of the real world.

However, since the real world continues to exist, new values are being established within it. Nihilism, according to Nietzsche, as Heidegger notes, is 'a history in which it is a question of values — the establishing of values, the devaluing of values, the revaluing of values; it is a question of the positing of values anew and, ultimately and intrinsically, a question of the positing of the principle of all value-positing'.[14] A life dedicated merely to its mere maintenance is already a decline. Opposed to this decline is the will to grow and to enhance — the will to power, the aspiration to acquire power. Nietzsche's philosophy, as Heidegger explains, is a metaphysics of the will to power, which takes the place emptied by the disappearance of the normative horizon, a disappearance referred to as the death of God. Every will is an assessment, and the will to power is the realm of value-setting. It 'is not satisfied with any abundance of life. It asserts power in overreaching — i.e. in the overreaching of its own will'. If God is dead, dominion over the Earth 'passes to the new willing of man determined by the will to power'.[15]

For our reading of Velimir Lukić's dramas, it would be useful to narrow this concept of nihilism to existential and moral nihilism: the former pertains to the belief that life has no meaning, and the latter asserts that traditional moral values — in whatever form they are posited — have ceased to bind, can no longer be grounded in anything, and should be discarded as they limit human freedom. The popular term for nihilism thus understood in the mid twentieth century was the absurd, as presented in Camus' essay, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) and in the novel, *L'Étranger* (1942). Both Camus' absurd and Nietzsche's nihilism are indeed the outcome of a historical process. The meaning of human life, as well as the values within it, were established by the Christian God who created the universe and determined our place in it. If he no longer exists, the perspective from which meaning and values can be determined vanishes. Despair over this or nostalgia for lost certainty would correspond to Nietzsche's concept of passive nihilism; on the other hand, the active nihilism that Camus advocates in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Outsider* emphasizes the state of new human freedom.[16] If there is no pre-given

[14] Ibid., p. 70.
[15] Ibid., pp. 81 and 99.
[16] On the difference between passive and active nihilism, see Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, New York, 2006, pp. 134–41.

meaning of life — in the Christian perspective, to earn eternal life — nor the values through which it is achieved, then we are free to live as we wish, to posit a new morality of human happiness, to follow our own instincts, to enjoy the natural world, and to listen to what our bodies tell us about happiness. This is not the will to grow and enhance, not the will to power, but it is the will to exhaust the abundance of life. At the end of *The Outsider*, in the scene with the priest, Camus' Meursault explicitly shapes this horizon of meaning: if there is no longer the perspective of eternal damnation and eternal salvation, if life is not evaluated from the viewpoint of something beyond and after it, if a human is free from both fear and hope, then we need only to be, more and for longer: we should live not better, but more abundantly and extensively. From this point of view, moral values also take shape, so now both good and evil acquire another meaning. The priest who comes to Meursault's cell hopes and believes, but Meursault knows. That is the meaning of the novel's last sentence, in which Meursault goes to the scaffold, desiring to be accompanied by cries of hatred, just as Jesus was accompanied into his suffering: the absurd man Meursault has a new gospel of human freedom.

This is the most general philosophical framework of Lukić's dramas. It introduces a recognizable dramatic model that repeats and develops within Lukić's plays. Without attempting to create another abstract triangle like the ones favoured by structuralists, I will attempt to present this model relying on the basic categories of structuralism in drama theory.[17] It will be easier to understand if we derive it from analysis of Lukić's first play, *Okamenjeno more* (Petrified Sea, 1962). This is an adaptation of Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which already points to a crucial characteristic of Lukić's dramatic model: placing the dramatic action in a time and space that exclude any connection to contemporaneity (Greek myth, Roman history, the non-specific City resembling Renaissance Italian principalities). The dramatic action is set in motion by an actant, a collective character composed of actors, Hellenic princes — Agamemnon, Menelaus and Achilles, and probably several others who do not appear on stage — who perceive the waiting for wind on Tauris, surrounded by the calm, petrified sea, as mere maintenance and decay. To that they oppose their will to grow and enhance: to sail to Troy and destroy and plunder it. Their intention, determined by the will to power, is the intention to conquer Troy. We will henceforth refer to this actant-subject as the Prince. Lukić's

[17] See Etienne Souriau, *Les Deux cent mille situations dramatiques*, Paris, 1992, and Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre*, Paris, 1993.

deviation from the myth consists of the absence of the world of Greek gods, who are outside and above the human sensory world, but govern events within it by their will. There is no goddess demanding Iphigenia's sacrifice here, causing the winds to blow again and the Hellenic princes to set sail to destroy Troy. Instead, the prophet Calchas invents a divine demand for sacrifice to take revenge on Agamemnon.

The subject, the Prince, desires the object — Iphigenia's sacrifice — and we will refer to this actant as the Victim. Iphigenia has her mother Clytemnestra and Calchas as her assistants. In one moment, overcome by guilt, Calchas confesses to Iphigenia and Clytemnestra that there is no divine command, that he made it all up, and offers them help to escape back to Argos. Achilles also becomes Iphigenia's helper when he hesitates to accept the role assigned to him in the deception to lure Iphigenia to Tauris — the false promise that she is to marry Achilles — but he quickly returns to the Princes. Calchas also changes his function, returning from assistant to opponent when he refuses to repeat in front of Achilles that he invented the prophecy, and Clytemnestra ceases to be an assistant when she reveals to Iphigenia the secret that she has been a long-time adulteress, the lover of Aegisthus. Then, she too becomes an opponent of the Victim. These changes in dramatic functions — which represent the essence of the drama and occupy the most significant part of it — aim to present the conceptual aspect of the play. Without these changes, *Petrified Sea* would be a straightforward drama about deception. Achilles' hesitation to accept the role of the false bridegroom points to what is missing in this world: truth as a value. The same function is fulfilled by Calchas's admission of lying, then retracting the confession, and Clytemnestra's admission of adultery. Confronted with such assistants who turn into opponents, Iphigenia explains why she cannot return to Argos and demands her own death:

> And in those dusks, Clytemnestra surrendered to Aegisthus,
> Agamemnon plotted treachery,
> Calchas lied in the name of gods,
> Achilles killed for the perpetuity of his name.
> Forgive me, city, I can no longer love your sunsets,
> I can no longer love your hours,
> That apparent peace and harmony.
> Because I belong to the underworld!
> If there's nothing there but emptiness,
> But the meaningless sound of empty time,

Certainly, there's nothing of this crowd,
That polishes spears and dreams of bloody victories![18]

Between the world of deceit, lies and the will to power, and the 'lower world', which is emptiness and nothingness — if there is no 'upper' world of gods and values, then there cannot be a 'lower' one either, except as void and nullity — she chooses the latter. Is this simultaneously a rebellion against the world of deceit, lies and the will to power? In other words, is the Victim also a Rebel? Camus would answer that yes, she is one. Now we have before us Lukić's dramatic model whose metamorphoses we will attempt to trace: the Prince, whose desire is determined by the will to power, demands a sacrifice from the Victim, the representative of values negated by the historical movement we call nihilism, who, after her helpers prove to be adversaries, desires the void of death rather than a life in a world where the only values are those dictated by the will to power.

The play *Afera nedužne Anabele* (The Affair of Innocent Anabela, 1969), although more complex than *Petrified Sea*, still follows the same basic dramatic model. Here too, the Subject, the Prince — in fact, this character bears the same name that we have assigned to the actant — initiates the action: the Prince spent the night in a monastery and dishonoured the novice Anabela, which is why a rebellion is brewing in the city he rules, incited by the Grand Inquisitor and his assistant Dominguez. The actant Prince includes the Prince himself, his minister Nikolo, the police commander Ferdinand, as well as the Grand Inquisitor and Dominguez, since their initial opposition — the church incites the rebellion to extract material privileges from the Prince — quickly disappears, once they agree to quell the uprising through a trial in which Anabela will be declared a witch who led the Prince to his actions. As with Iphigenia, Anabela is also the acter 'innocent girl' — such a character appears in several of Lukić's plays — but Anabela is not the object the Prince desires. The sacrifice the Prince demands is the false testimony of the philosopher Hart. In order for the Prince to continue his lavish hedonistic life, which includes the Prince's right to take the innocence of one of his subjects, it is necessary for him to be publicly supported by Hart, a representative of philosophers who 'wish to discredit the Prince, destroy the thought of Saint Apolonius, and turn our city into a sort of quasi-democracy, without a prince, without the inquisition, without Apolonius. That's why they want to prove that the Prince is a debaucher, a tyrant, that Apolonius's philosophy is vulgar and

[18] Velimir Lukić, 'Okamenjeno more', in *Izabrane drame*, p. 50.

shallow, and the like'.[19] Hart is a witness who would be believed, because he is the opposite of the Prince. He is the author of the book *Treatise on Virtue or Fundamentals of Hart's Ethics*, in which, among other things, he writes:

> Our being possesses full humanity only when it chooses freely. A person who acts according to their conviction, regardless of societal circumstances, irrespective of all possible pressures, is a free and noble individual, of course, provided that their actions serve the common good, love, and progress. I believe it's needless to say how essential the element of truth is in such actions and the development of thought…[20]

Here, philosopher Hart is opposed not only to the hedonistic Prince but also to his fellow citizens, who, like the waitress Gerda, when asked if they have any principles in life, respond that they want more money and dresses, and to work less. They believe that 'someone always has to rule, and it doesn't matter who it is. They think it's important to fill their belly and think as little as possible', and they have been 'so humiliated by life that they fear any change, even if they live in the greatest evil'; they are 'frightened and overwhelmed beings, plants of flesh and blood', as described by Hart himself.[21] In the nihilistic city ruled by a nihilistic, hedonistic and debauched Prince, philosopher Hart advocates for moral values and truth. By giving false testimony in court, he will not only help the Prince escape public accusations but will simultaneously contradict the very values he advocated for with his thoughts. Thus, the triumph of the nihilist will be complete.

In the next scene, it is shown that convincing Hart to do something contrary to his ethics is not impossible: on the one hand, he is offered to have the bans on his books lifted, to be able to publish whatever he wants freely, to receive royalties for it, to become a university professor again, or even a dean. If he refuses, the police will accuse him of misappropriation of research funds, plagiarism, incompetence and dilettantism; they will entangle him in small scandals from which he will not be able to extricate himself, and his reputation as an advocate of values will be destroyed. From being a proponent of values, Hart will become, in the eyes of others, what his opponents are — a moral nihilist. And Hart agrees to testify; Anabela will be condemned and burned at the stake as a witch. Such a turnaround

[19] Velimir Lukić, 'Afera nedužne Anabele', in *Izabrane drame*, p. 155.
[20] Ibid., p. 178.
[21] Ibid., p. 164.

in the play's plot must be motivated by something, so Hart is given the opportunity to justify his actions in a conversation with Robert, a student and follower who was previously an assistant in this dramatic model. Instead of exposing himself to the revenge of the Prince and becoming a moral nihilist in the eyes of the public due to false accusations, while keeping his moral integrity intact, Hart agrees to give false testimony and condemn an innocent girl to death. Thus he truly becomes a moral nihilist regardless of public opinion. When Robert accuses him of becoming a dirty servant and a murderer, Hart responds that Anabela would be burned at the stake anyway, and that a proponent of values does not necessarily have to live by the values they advocate:

> Generations will judge me based on the books I've written, not on my actions or my relationships with contemporaries. I am merely a man who writes. As a person, I am fallible, I am weak, I am helpless, discouraged. My books are not like that. My thoughts are stronger than my body. Understand that, you foolish little one. I must protect my body in order to preserve my independent thought.[22]

After this, it is clear that Hart is no longer the Rebel, but that the contemptuous description of his fellow citizens, which he had previously presented, applies to him as well. Even the Grand Inquisitor does not live by the values publicly professed: he too could say, 'I will be judged by how I preach and pass judgment, and as a person, I believe something entirely different'. This very separation between professed values and the values lived is one possible definition of moral nihilism.

Could it be that in this drama, innocent Anabela remains the sole Rebel against nihilism? Nothing is known about her until now, and therefore in the next scene, we have the opportunity to see and hear her. In her prison cell, she is visited by the Grand Inquisitor, who brings Hart along. The latter demands to see Anabela in order to confess to her that he is despicable, that he loathes himself, that he was forced to send her to death with his false testimony, and he begs for forgiveness. He claims that he is as much a victim as she is, but that he still believes in justice, freedom and truth, and can differentiate between good and evil. However, Anabela remains serene. She has faith and expects to be met by Saint Apollonius himself after her martyrdom. She refuses to listen to Hart. Not everyone in that city is a nihilist: evidently, Anabela has not yet heard the news of the

[22] Ibid., p. 180.

death of God. Therefore, in her moment before death, she hears it from the highest authority, from the Grand Inquisitor himself:

> I also don't believe in Saint Apollonius, Mr. Hart. In fact, I don't really believe in anything. […] We need some kind of flag, some kind of sail. Whether the sail is good — that doesn't matter. What matters is that there's wind. And the winds continuously blow from east to west, from south to north. I believe only in the winds that roam the cosmos, carrying us incessantly back and forth, tossing us from a lesser void to a greater one, and vice versa. Until one day, they drag us away completely. Then everything is fine. […] There is only the wind that carries all of this in a whirlwind, and you can't distinguish life from death, bondage from freedom.[23]

Anabela will die for Saint Apollonius, says the Grand Inquisitor, and he is not there: 'We invented him as he is, and now we must give him what he, invented as he is, demands.'[24] The nihilistic Inquisitor, who believes only in the fact that people are constantly thrown from a lesser void to a greater one and vice versa, behaves just like the philosopher Hart — he too does not live his thought, but preaches everything contrary to it, because he wants to preserve the normative power of the non-existent supernatural world of ideals and values. At the end of this scene, Hart is once again given a choice: either he will continue to assert that there is a difference between good and evil, truth and falsehood, even if he himself fails to live by that knowledge, in which case he will go to the stake together with Anabela, or he will deny that this difference exists, in which case the Grand Inquisitor will take him on a hunt. Hart opts for the latter, and besides going on the hunt, he also becomes the secretary of the Prince's office. The rebel Hart, the Victim, the advocate of values and truth, becomes the actant Prince. The triumph of the nihilists is complete.

The Affair of the Innocent Anabela does not end there: if this were its conclusion, it could be assumed that the cause of the triumph of the nihilists is the character weakness of a Rebel who, frightened and weak, fails to live the values he proclaims, but that this moral weakness is not a necessary constant of the world of the drama, and that another Rebel could make a better moral choice. For example, Hart's friend and assistant, the student Robert. In the final act of the drama, we see Robert coming to Hart, the secretary of the Prince's office, and seeking help: he was caught

[23] Ibid., p. 187.
[24] Ibid.

writing verses against the Prince and the inquisition on the castle walls, and for that he was fired and banished from the city. Hart was threatened with the stake, so he succumbed to that threat and renounced his values; Robert has only lost his job, which he does not care about anyway, and he is supposed to go into exile, not to the stake, but he does not want to accept such a fate and seeks protection from the person he condemned for lacking moral integrity. Hart refuses to help him and says:

> You're afraid, my boy. […] Now is the moment of decision — whether you will continue to rage, but with consequences, and heavy ones at that, or whether you will break and only accept insults and humiliations. Will you stay on the brink of hunger and unrest, but proud, or will you leave that magnificent realm of anger and turn into a tiny defenceless citizen? […] I carry my choice like a cross or a laurel, it doesn't matter. […] For us ordinary mortals, there are only paths of the cross: the path of the golden cross and the path of the heated cross, studded with thorns and daggers. I don't know which cross is heavier. I only carry one. Everyone is left to choose the one they suppose is lighter.[25]

Choose your cross: remain a Rebel and pay the price of that choice, or deny the values you believe in, and your life will be easier, maybe even very comfortable, like mine; you just have to make a choice, says Hart. Robert refuses: he wants to remain a Rebel, but not to pay the price of his choice. In an outburst of anger, calculated to give Robert the opportunity to report him to the authorities, Hart shouts: 'Down with the Prince and his tyranny! Down with the ruthless killer, the Grand Inquisitor! Down with the murderer of innocent Anabela! Down with the detestable backstabber Hart!'[26] And immediately after: 'Go and choose! Go and take your cross!' Take the cross of exile, but remain morally integrated, or report me to the police, then your cross will be golden. Hart's trap succeeded, and right after we see Chief of Police Fernando coming with guards to arrest Hart based on Robert's report. Robert has chosen: he will not take the cross of exile, he wants the golden cross. 'The Prince needs a new, young, and intelligent secretary', Fernando tells him. This Rebel, too, has denied the distinction between good and evil, and aligned himself with the nihilists. Therefore, it is not just Hart's character weakness, as it must be assumed that every subsequent Rebel will make the same choice as Hart and Robert.

[25] Ibid., pp. 198–99.
[26] Ibid., p. 200.

The only thing left is for us to hear from Hart himself, during his trial, an explanation of such a triumph of moral nihilists. The jury is composed of the collective actant Prince; Hart is accused because he led the court to unjustly send innocent Anabela to the stake by giving false testimony, because he does not believe in Saint Apollonius, because he spoke against the Prince, and raped the waitress Gerda. The verdict of the Grand Inquisitor sends Hart and his books to the stake, while innocent Anabela is declared a saint. All that is left is to hear what Hart himself has to say about this:

> Why did I agree to participate in this chaos, in this bloody and stupid chaos? Perhaps to stay alive. Maybe to experience a bit of the easy and pleasant life of the Prince's favourites, or maybe to save my books. Maybe I thought actions are one thing and written words another. Maybe I presumed that they would judge me based on my books later, not based on my actions in life. […] And maybe I did all of this without really knowing what I was doing. Maybe I just wanted to become the same as you: alive and content without reason. […] Now I am convinced that I wanted to fight against you, and in fighting, I chose your methods, and that's my fundamental mistake. Of course, you know those methods much better. It's almost impossible to fight against you. […] I want to sleep, on the condition that I don't dream of you. Born at the wrong time, it seems to me I'm dying at the right moment.[27]

Like Iphigenia, Hart also welcomes death, a dreamless sleep. The Rebel is completely defeated. At the core of both dramas is the same dramatic model: the Prince, the subject, demands the object, a Sacrifice from the Victim representing values contradicted by historical movements we call nihilism. After several attempts to avoid fate, to make compromises that would allow survival while preserving values — even in the form of books that someone will read someday — the sacrificial Victim ultimately desires nothingness over life in a world where the only values are determined by the will to power.

I smrt dolazi na Lemno (And Death Comes to Lemnos, 1970) is an adaptation of another Greek tragedy, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Among all Greek tragedies, this one is undoubtedly closest in focus to Lukić's dramatic interest: from the very beginning of the tragedy, its theme is the problem of goals and means. In the prologue of the tragedy, we see

[27] Ibid., p. 210.

two opposing viewpoints: Odysseus asks Neoptolemus to deceive, lie and manipulate Philoctetes to obtain Heracles' bow and arrows, without which the Greeks cannot conquer Troy. Using lies is not shameful, says Odysseus, if the goal is worthy, and 'none should recoil when what he does brings profit'.[28] The achieved goal will justify the means. Neoptolemus resists and would rather fail acting nobly than win through deceit, lies and intrigue. However, when Odysseus presents him with the opportunity to gain fame by conquering Troy — something Neoptolemus could not achieve without Heracles' weaponry — this young and ambitious warrior forgets about both deceit and truth and resorts to lying. The subjects, the Greek leaders, want the object, Heracles' weaponry belonging to Philoctetes, to dismantle and plunder Troy: an ambition driven by the will to power, which can only be realized by denying moral values. In Sophocles' work, this ambition is supported by the supernatural, metaphysical world of gods, as this command comes from Zeus. In the end, Heracles himself appears in the tragedy and commands Philoctetes to join Odysseus and Neoptolemus to conquer Troy, gain fame and, in doing so, rid himself of the festering wound that led the Greeks to abandon him on Lemnos.

Lukić, as in *Petrified Sea*, here too omitted the metaphysical world of gods, leaving only humans on the stage to contemplate goals and means. Like in Sophocles' tragedy, at the beginning of Lukić's drama, Odysseus expresses a viewpoint whose validity will be tested throughout the play: 'there is no honour when victory is concerned.'[29] However, Lukić's Neoptolemus does not hesitate to follow Odysseus' command because he does not want to resort to deceit and lies, but rather because he is dissatisfied with the distribution of honour and fame by the Achaean leaders. He is not, like in Sophocles, a character whose hesitation to obey Odysseus' order reminds us of the existence of moral values that Odysseus rejects — Neoptolemus is part of the actant we call the Prince here, ambitious, envious, obsessed with fame and power. Even though initially in this dramatic model he appears as Philoctetes' assistant, Neoptolemus easily shifts into an antagonist's role, just like Lanassa transitions from an antagonist to an assistant. However, the most significant roles in this drama are played by Odysseus, representing the Prince, and the Victim Philoctetes, who must bring his weaponry to Troy for the Greeks to win the war.

[28] Sophocles, 'Philoctetes', in Oscar Mandel (ed.), *Philoctetes and the Fall of Troy*, Lincoln, NE and London, 1981, p. 58.

[29] Velimir Lukić, 'I smrt dolazi na Lemno', in *Izabrane drame*, p. 215.

Unlike the previous three dramas, here the Victim is not the Rebel — 'your words are rebellion', Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus, 'you rebel against our world because you desire it, you defame it because you understand it. I understand it indifferently, consumed by my misery'[30] — and throughout the plot he does not evolve from rebellion to resignation and a demand for death. In Lukić's rendition, Philoctetes has undergone this evolution before Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive on Lemnos, so he spends the drama confirming his resignation and disgust toward a world devoid of moral values: 'no one can do anything to me anymore', 'you've left me behind, but I've surpassed you', 'everything is repulsive, Lemnos, Odysseus, Heracles, you and me', 'you are so insignificant' and 'I'm not interested in that'. Lukić's Philoctetes resembles Gide's, who, while solitary on Lemnos, also had time to recognize the vanity of the warrior's life. He willingly hands over Heracles' weaponry to Odysseus and Neoptolemus but remains on Lemnos, thus severing all ties with a world devoid of moral values. The reader — Gide's drama *Philoctetes* is written for reading, not for the stage — needs to imagine him as peaceful and content. However, Lukić's Philoctetes, despite claiming to have risen above the Prince and his ambition driven by the will to power, willingly agrees to return to Troy, thereby perpetuating a situation where he is again confronted with the absence of moral values and continually condemns the Prince, seeking death for himself.

This seems quite unconvincing, but it can be justified, first, by the moral debate between Odysseus and Philoctetes, which would not have been possible had Philoctetes not agreed to return to Troy, and second, by the twist at the very end of the play. The former is reminiscent of the confrontations between the Prince and the Victim in Lukić's previous dramas, in which the Victim exposes the absence of moral values in the Prince's behaviour and thinking, and the Prince does not attempt to defend or justify himself, but cynically confirms the diagnosis posed by the Victim. However, in the play *And Death Comes to Lemnos*, Lukić has brought the Prince and the Victim into dialogue, albeit briefly, but explicitly enough to affirm the contextualization of his dramas within the philosophical horizon of nihilism. When the Victim (Philoctetes) hurls accusations at the Prince (Odysseus) that connect honour, greed, gain and crime, the Prince responds with sentences that the reader will immediately associate with Nietzsche:

[30] Ibid., pp. 222–23.

> All of you purists who persistently strive to devalue our existence, to delineate its meaninglessness, its vice, and in the name of invented principles, deceive yourselves if you don't know that I know, and we know, that your purity is simply helplessness. When you can't be brave, when you can't be rich, when you can't seduce all the women you desire, then you lament about the world and its purpose.[31]

This is what Nietzsche talks about in *On the Genealogy of Morals* regarding ressentiment and Christian morality: a radically new way of valuing that is produced by a class that, due to its social and economic subordination, can only respond by devaluing the values of the 'noble'. This devaluation is simultaneously the first revaluation of moral values. In the black-and-white world of Lukić's dramas, this is the only place where it is hinted that the actant Prince is not only a representative of the will to power of a specific desire, a cynical manipulator devoid of any awareness of moral values, but also a representative of a different system of moral values. However, this notion remains limited: this brief exchange of arguments between Odysseus and Philoctetes does not develop further and essentially does not disrupt the dramatic model we are following in Lukić's dramas.

This model in *And Death Comes to Lemnos* is consolidated by a twist at the very end of the drama, which we mentioned earlier as the second reason for Philoctetes' unconvincing acceptance to sail with Odysseus and Neoptolemus to Troy. Philoctetes has been healed and freed from the suffering caused by his wound, just like in the Greek myth. Unlike the myth, however, in Lukić's drama he has slept through the fall of Troy and its destruction in his tent, under the influence of a potion with which Machaon healed his wound. When he awakens, Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive to inform him that the council of Achaean leaders, our actant Prince, has decided to declare Philoctetes one of the greatest heroes of the Trojan War and to award him the largest share of the spoils of war. Instead of the truth that Philoctetes abhorred those guided by honour, greed, profit and crime, and that he would rather die than live watching them, Philoctetes will be remembered as one of them: 'We are no better than you, you are no better than us', Odysseus tells him.[32] The triumph of moral nihilists, driven by the desire that is the will to power, is complete: for Philoctetes there is no death to escape to, no truth that he abhorred the moral nihilists, all that remains for him is imaginary revenge, to which he surrenders in his final monologue.

[31] Ibid., p. 231.
[32] Ibid., pp. 233 and 237.

This is the same dramatic model we have seen in the previous dramas: the Prince, the subject (Achaean leaders), demands the sacrifice from the Victim (Philoctetes with the weapons beneath Troy), who represents values denied by nihilism, who prefers death and nothingness over life in such a world, but in the end is involuntarily included among their enemies. In *Petrified Sea* this model is simple and leads in a straight line from the initial situation to Iphigenia's resignation, defeat and death: it could be graphically represented as A → B. In *The Affair of Innocent Anabela*, the model is more complex and can be represented as A → B1 → B2 → B3, where B represents three consecutive defeats of Hart followed by resignation (agreeing to testify against Anabela, denying the difference between truth and lies in Anabela's cell, and the final monologue in court). However, this complexity is not a result of plot or character developments but rather of simple repetition. In *And Death Comes to Lemnos*, the model looks like this: AB1 → B2(c) → B3. In the initial situation, Philoctetes already knows everything he needs to know (AB1), and that knowledge is confirmed throughout the rest of the drama (B2), with a slight addition of the victim's position being momentarily relativized in the dialogue with Odysseus (c), and the drama concludes with a resolution that again confirms what Philoctetes knew at the beginning (B3).

In *Zla noć* (The Evil Night, 1977), Lukić attempted to change the dramatic model he employed through a series of reversals, often encountered in vaudeville rather than problem plays, and through the nuanced characterization initiated by that relativization of the Rebel we witnessed in the dialogue between Odysseus and Philoctetes. This play is also set in an undefined time and unspecified place: the writer Publius was exiled to the provinces by the Senate, but these Roman associations are challenged by anachronisms — whisky is being consumed, travel is by cars and airplanes, and newspapers are being read. Here too, an 'innocent girl' appears as the representative of moral values. However, the most significant change in configuration from what we saw in the previous three plays is the nuanced portrayal of the Rebel: Publius is not an unblemished rebel against moral nihilism like Iphigenia, Hart and Philoctetes, but rather a part of our Prince, a former university rector, ambassador, a renowned writer close to the authorities. The nature of his rebellion is not entirely clear. Characters who do not know him well only know that he has offended the Senate and its political norms and ideas, hence becoming an enemy deserving of exile as punishment. He himself attributes his fate to senators 'gone mad with power, fear, and self-love', who 'turn every thought, every ethical stance

or reasoning into a crime'.[33] While he sees himself as a moral critic of the Senate, his life companion Beatrice disputes this: for her, Publius is a great actor who enjoys publicity, fame, comfort, and the privileges that come with proximity to power. In the end, she believes he wanted to play the role of a rebel:

> And suddenly, surrounded by all sorts of accolades and applause, honours, and the attention of everyone, even many respected members of the Senate, you started playing the role of a rebel, just to become a martyr somehow. Of course, without any actual hardship. But with great publicity. And it seems that you've even succeeded in that.[34]

One of the privileges that the proximity to power brought was protection from criticism: a student named Peter wrote an unfavourable review of Publius' poem, and Publius accused him of 'hostile political attitudes', and thus politically denounced him, resulting in Peter's expulsion from the university and the denial of his ability to publish. At the beginning of the play, Publius is a former part of the Prince (the Senate), a false rebel, a moral nihilist just as much as those he seemingly rebels against. In the following scene, the same former student, Robert, appears, who with Colonel Valentine's permission — who in a vaudeville twist went from a lieutenant to a colonel within twenty days — approaches Publius with a demand to write a statement and personally testify before the Senate that the true author of the unfavourable review of Publius's poem was Senator Robert, and that he was well aware of Peter's review of the poem all along, which was not unfavourable at all. This testimony is supposed to be a part of the conspiracy led against Senator Robert by Colonel Valentine. The Prince demands the Sacrifice: Colonel Valentine wants Publius's false testimony, which will portray Senator Robert as someone who unreasonably persecutes poets. The moral nihilist demands the collaboration of a man who sees himself as a moral critic of authority. However, the audience already knows that this is just one of the roles Publius has chosen to play, that he is not an advocate of moral values, and that lying — like politically accusing student Peter in front of Senator Robert — is not unfamiliar to him. In this drama of ideas, the characters precisely and extensively explain their philosophical positions, and thus Peter has the opportunity to explain himself. In response to Beatrice's remark that what he wants Publius to write is not true, Peter replies:

[33] Velimir Lukić, 'Zla noć', in *Tebanska kuga, Nečajev i ostali*, Belgrade, 1988, pp. 27 and 24.
[34] Ibid., p. 26.

> This is supposed to become the truth. The truth that the three of us will create and prove. […] I no longer have my own or others', nor any kind of opinion […] What I used to think, I don't think anymore, and what I think now, I might not think tomorrow.[35]

The false rebel Publius, with a certain degree of self-irony, agrees. However, after two days of isolation in his room, Publius still does not produce that false testimony that would bring him back from exile to the capital and restore his privileged position. The central part of the play is dedicated to a discussion among the characters, in which two philosophical positions are presented: moral nihilism, represented by Peter and Antony — in whose home Publius spends his days of exile — on one side, and the critique of moral nihilism, advocated by Antony's daughter Eloise, to some extent by Beatrice, and also by Antony's wife Claudia. Peter does not deny that what he is doing is deceitful, but he affirms a different set of values: those whom Claudia condemns as sycophants, reptiles and scum, including her own husband Antony, who complies with every demand of authority, are actually tragic and courageous: 'To obey so much, to be so submissive, requires true moral strength and almost sanctity', says Peter.[36] They are people 'committed to living by accomplishing nothing… nothing significant, nothing useful, nothing noble — because that can no longer be done'.[37] Absurd people, as Camus would say, those who have understood the meaninglessness of the world and life, in which no values exist anymore, and yet they do not kill themselves but continue to live. Moral strength is needed for such a thing, says Peter. To this, Antony adds, 'We don't choose our destiny ourselves',[38] a sentence in which the reader easily recognizes Camus' Meursault from *The Outsider*:

> What difference could that make to me, the death of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way one decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to 'choose' not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers.[39]

'We are what we are', Claudia adds, 'small, insignificant, scared. We've faltered, we've plunged into the abyss, into the infinity of nothingness,

[35] Ibid., pp. 42–45.
[36] Ibid., p. 57.
[37] Ibid., p. 58.
[38] Ibid., p. 65.
[39] Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, London, 1976, pp. 118–19.

our own and others', and finally, Beatrice confirms that she also belongs among such people.[40] Peter is a philosopher, claiming that moral strength is needed to live in a world where no values can be founded anymore, and these three are mere victims of a monumental movement that they cannot condemn, only adapt to as best as they can.

The discussion does not finish there, as the most important part is yet to be revealed. The innocent girl, Eloise, untouched by this monumental movement, goes to Publius to persuade him to write that testimony after all and save himself. Eloise condemns moral nihilism, but she is not a rebel; she is just a mirror in which the moral nihilists can recognize themselves in all their monstrosity. It is precisely to her that Publius has to explain why he no longer wishes to play roles. 'My decision isn't ethical in nature', says Publius. He has done much worse things in life, but now he knows something he did not know before: 'I just know that there is nothing, that there is no way forward, and there is no longer anything for which one should do something one doesn't want to do.' Instead of morality, he is stopped from writing that false testimony by his new knowledge of 'dust, emptiness, and misery'.[41] The moral nihilist has become an existential nihilist, realizing that there is only 'senseless sense'.[42]

The play could end here, but after this scene, there is yet another twist. In the distant capital, Senator Robert has defeated Colonel Valentin, and Peter now needs Publius's false testimony even more, as he intends to use it to prove Valentin's conspiracy to Senator Robert and expose his involvement in uncovering it. In return, Publius will be handsomely rewarded. If he refuses, Peter will kill him, thus proving his loyalty to Senator Robert by preventing the creation of a false testimony. Publius's choice is simple: either he writes the statement and returns to the capital rehabilitated and rewarded, or he does not and dies immediately. Publius's response to this offer is the response of an existential nihilist:

> Do you think it's worth being so active, or cruel, or call it whatever you want, that hysteria, just to get somewhere and to something? Have you wondered where and how far you want to get? Do you know that paths suddenly vanish, break off? Many believe that death stops and breaks them, but that's not true; natural and beneficent death comes in the end, after all, and the path has long been gone.[43]

[40] Lukić, 'Zla noć', pp. 73–74.
[41] Ibid., p. 77.
[42] Ibid., p. 80.
[43] Ibid., pp. 91–92.

Publius does not want to write the false testimony not because he has realized the repulsiveness of moral nihilism, not because he no longer believes that the end justifies the means, but because he now knows that there is no goal at all. And after Peter shoots him with the revolver, as he promised, dying Publius reckons with his life:

> I've lived for nothing and died for nothing. Just as the insignificant reasons for which I did all sorts of things during my life, the same reasons for my death are insignificant: the Senate, Robert, Valentin, fame… the beginning and the end. Oh, senselessness and bitter foolishness…[44]

The killer, Peter, will take Antonius and Claudia with him to the capital as witnesses that he killed the conspirator Publius, who insulted Senator Robert, in self-defence, and this seems like the ending we have already seen in each of the previous dramas: the triumph of moral nihilism and the death of the Rebel against it. However, from the previous quotes, we have already seen that Publius is not an opponent of moral nihilism, but an existential nihilist who cannot find a reason to do what Peter asks of him, even if that reason is to stay alive, in a senseless and futile life. At the very end of the drama, we hear Peter's self-defence:

> I am a killer, yet I don't feel that way. We are plunged into various situations to become what we are not and not to be what we are. […] Therefore, I don't feel guilty and don't consider myself a killer. Someone complicates and entangles our destinies to absurdity and then generously leaves us to resolve them.[45]

Lukić's intention to avoid the black-and-white characters from the previous dramas is quite evident: neither the Rebel is genuine, nor is the representative of the Prince what he seems to be. It is more likely that both of them are victims of the 'situation', from which one emerges as an existential nihilist, heading straight towards death, while the other makes a demand for his innocence to be recognized, much like Camus' Meursault. However, Peter's 'situation' that led him to be entangled in Valentin's conspiracy does not seem like a strong enough justification: after being expelled from the university, he had to work in a restaurant as a cashier. If Lukić's goal was to relativize both positions in this drama, that of the moral nihilist and that of his opponent, stronger motives had to be found for Peter's behaviour.

[44] Ibid., p. 92.
[45] Ibid., p. 96.

It is evident that a slightly different dramatic model is at play here. The subject, the Prince (Valentin, then Senator Robert, represented by Peter), demands a Sacrifice from the Victim (Publius's false testimony) from someone who used to be on the Prince's side. The Victim refuses, thus becoming the Rebel, and while not desiring death, he does not resist because he believes preserving life is not worth the effort. The rebellion proves futile, as Peter, through the testimonies of Antonius and Claudia, still gains what he needs. Moral nihilism triumphs but also seeks understanding for itself.

As far as our knowledge goes, Lukić's play, *Prizori iz života i umiranje Sergeja Nečajeva* (Scenes from the Life and Dying of Sergei Nechaev), has never been performed on stage and was published in 1988. Since it follows an epic rather than a dramatic structure, it would not appear within the framework of the dramatic model we are discussing here — if its theme were not, with an explicitness surprising even for such an explicit author like Velimir Lukić, the very core of this writer's literary interest. *Scenes* follows Sergei Nechaev's biography with almost documentary fidelity, focusing on the most characteristic episodes of his life: radical student activism, his relationship with Vera Zasulich, spreading rumours about his own exile to Siberia while simultaneously leaving for Geneva, his encounter with Bakunin where they deceive each other about revolutionary organizations they allegedly lead, the murder of the student Ivanov, arrest and imprisonment in Petrograd, Nechaev's success in recruiting prison guards for the revolution's cause, and ultimately his death in a prison cell. Lukić added Nechaev's collaboration with the police to obtain a passport for his trip to Switzerland, intensifying what drew him to Sergei Nechaev — the conviction that the end justifies any means. The common characterization of Nechaev and the entire generation of revolutionaries he belonged to as 'nihilists' is not entirely accurate: unlike true nihilists, they did believe in some values — in revolution, in the Russian peasant, in socialism, progress, science and materialism.[46] However, Nechaev's *Catechism of a Revolutionist* gave Lukić sufficient reason to portray him as a moral nihilist, an incarnation of various characters of the same profile we encountered in his previous dramas. In *Catechism* Nechaev the revolutionary writes:

> […] he has broken every tie with the civil order and the entire cultured world, with all its laws, proprieties, social conventions and its ethical rules.

[46] Ronald Hingley, *Nihilists: Russian Radicals and Revolutionaries in the Reign of Alexander II (1855–1881)*, London, 1967, p. 57.

> He is an implacable enemy of this world, and if he continues to live in it, that is only to destroy it more effectively. […] He knows only one science, the science of destruction. […] He despises and abhors the existing social ethic […]. For him, everything is moral which assists the triumph of revolution. […] He is not a revolutionary if he feels pity for anything in this world. […] Our task is terrible, total, universal, merciless destruction.[47]

Historically, Nechaev is a moral nihilist who rejects any ethics apart from the ethics of destruction, and for whom every means — lies, deception, murder — is justified if it leads to the revolution. In *Scenes*, Lukić's Nechaev promises Vera a new order that will be created after the revolution, based on 'truth and justice', but it is achieved through lies, crime and injustice. At the very end of the play, a moment before his death, Nechaev exclaims:

> I command the murder of God. The fundamental goal of the Revolution is to kill God. With daggers and gunfire. When you kill God, strip the heavens and all the angels. Condemn them to hard labour and imprisonment. And when those winged hypocrites disappear, that heavenly bourgeois scum, all troubles will vanish. I command it and say it. I, Nechaev. Death to the Tsar and God! Death to the angels. Long live the tortured people, long live destruction![48]

God is here, as in Nietzsche, a term for the metaphysical realm that holds normative power and guides human actions. When that world of ideas and ideals disappears, only the human's new intention determined by the will to power remains.

And finally, Lukić's last play, *Tebanska kuga* (The Theban Plague, 1986), an adaptation of the myth of Oedipus, precisely addresses what has been used as a cipher for nihilism here: in it, God has indeed died. The God is, of course, Zeus, and for the death of God in the Greek world to have the same connotations as in post-Christian Europe, Lukić had to adapt Greek religion and bring it closer to monotheism. Similarly, Sartre in *Les mouches* transformed Jupiter into a monotheistic god-creator, even giving him a monologue that echoes what God says to Job in the Old Testament. Lukić's Zeus is not the monotheistic God of the Old Testament, nor is he *primus inter pares* of the Greek Olympus: he is the 'Supreme God', surrounded by lesser deities from the Greek pantheon, dependent on him,

[47] Sergei Nechayev, *Catechism of the Revolutionist*, London, 1989, pp. 4–9.

[48] Velimir Lukić, 'Prizori iz života i umiranje Sergeja Nečajeva', in *Tebanska kuga, Nečajev i ostali*, Belgrade, 1988, p. 134.

subordinate to him, and indebted to him for their powers. This Supreme God in *The Theban Plague* is dead, and the 'Olympian clique' composed of lesser deities continues to rule in his name, guarding the secret of God's death from mortals. The authority of this clique is built on lies: it lacks metaphysical foundation, it is only a simulacrum.

The manner in which the Olympian clique governs is similar to the way our actant Prince governs in Lukić's previous dramas.[49] They resemble some kind of Presidium of the Central Committee, or the Board of Directors of a large corporation: they argue about the agenda of their meetings, sabotage decisions they do not like through procedural tricks, make numbered resolutions, compete for priority, power and influence, debate the meaning of the Olympian Law, vote, and when they cannot agree on something, they form a 'working group' to resolve it, and so on. They also manage their earthly apparatus, which includes the oracle at Delphi. In the second scene of the drama, we witness a dialogue between Apollo, who is responsible for the operations of the oracle on behalf of the clique, and the Chief Pythia: from this dialogue, it is clear that the oracle does not reveal any truth to those who seek advice, but rather cynically manipulates them. There is no real truth, only a performance for mortals directed by the Chief Pythia according to Apollo's orders, with the aim of extracting as much gold as possible from mortals to fund the comfortable lives of the clique on Mount Olympus. The oracle at Delphi has the task of maintaining the illusion of a metaphysical order: Zeus is dead, but people must not know that. This, says Athena at one meeting on Olympus, could:

> […] provoke a flood of challenges,
> Of many commands and decisions,
> even of all Olympian laws.
> And I must say, o gods and goddesses Olympian,
> This would be a horrifying practice,
> And its anarchy our power diminish, endanger
> And destroy, perhaps,
> And I must add, dear Olympian,
> Such disorder our beloved Olympus would ruin,
> Because Olympus without the name of Zeus cannot exist.[50]

[49] Similarly, it is also comparable to the way Yugoslavia was governed after the death of Josip Broz Tito, by the 'clique' of his successors, as a collective body attempting to maintain the illusion of the immortality of the revolutionary leader. In the dialogues of the lesser deities in this drama, there are enough elements to justify this parallel.

[50] Velimir Lukić, 'Tebanska kuga', in *Tebanska kuga, Nečajev i ostali*, Belgrade, 1988,

The fact that the clique rules with lies, deceit and manipulation could lead to the idea that the deceased Zeus was a representative of moral values that disappear from the world after his death. However, in Lukić's drama, that is not the case. Zeus was not the embodiment of moral virtues either, but in line with Greek mythology, inclined towards immoral tricks: on one occasion, he took on the human form of a poet to seduce a young woman inclined towards poetry, but her husband caught him in the act and beat him up. In revenge, Zeus asked Thanatos — who here holds the position of a lesser deity responsible for human death — to kill the deceived husband and, as a reward, 'promoted' Thanatos/Death to an independent deity who is not part of the Olympian clique and is not bound by their decisions. After Zeus's death, no one controls Thanatos anymore, and he can freely, unrestrictedly cause the death of humans. The death of God has left behind only a simulacrum of the metaphysical realm and — death and nothingness.

This is the initial situation in *The Theban Plague*: unlike the previous dramas in which the actant Prince initiated the dramatic action by seeking a sacrifice, here, as in Sophocles' play, the action is initiated by Oedipus himself seeking to find the cause of the plague ravaging Thebes. In the first scene, we see Oedipus sending Tiresias and Creon to Delphi to find out the cause of the plague in the city through the oracle, but at the same time, Oedipus presents himself as the actant we have previously called the Rebel. He is a rebel against the gods, including Zeus: 'arrogant gods and tyrannical Zeus', he says, 'do not think of us. […] They feast and drink, have fun and revel. They snatch everything they like'.[51] They are 'full of malice and vanity, greedy cruelty, resembling barbarians without a shred of refinement', (p. 186) led by the 'false God and Creator' whom Oedipus rejects: 'I do not acknowledge this greedy fury, this champion of all vices.'[52] But since he is still not certain if this is indeed the case, Oedipus decides to send Tiresias and Creon to Delphi and continue to play the role of a devout king.

In the second scene, which is the thematic centre of this play even though it is very short, Oedipus encounters Chrysostom, a Theban who has lost his entire family to the plague and is now leaving the city in despair. Chrysostom had devoutly offered sacrifices and prayed to the gods, but it did not save his family: 'now without hope, without fear, and without a

p. 218.

[51] Ibid., p. 184.

[52] Ibid., p. 187.

tomorrow', he says, 'I am the most powerful man'.[53] He has lost everything that can be lost, and no longer cares about life, so no one can harm him anymore. Chrysostom reveals a great and dreadful secret to Oedipus: after burning the bodies of his loved ones and crying out 'O Zeus, what have you done', the plague appeared to him in the form of a beautiful young woman and said:

> I am a handmaiden of Thanatos,
> He alone still lives,
> But Zeus has been dead for years!
> The God is dead and evils are free,
> And all in his name we plunder.[54]

The plague in Thebes is not the result of any sin, neither Oedipus's nor the Thebans', but rather the consequence of the death of God, after which only Death/Thanatos remained to ravage the land. In the meantime, the Olympian clique has formed a committee to address the 'case of Thebes': not to stop the rampage and killing of the entire city by Thanatos, because they do not have that power, but to use the Delphi oracle to maintain the appearance of a metaphysical order and thus preserve their own position. The oracle reveals the terrifying truth that Oedipus is responsible for the plague in Thebes, as he killed his own father and fathered children with his mother. As in the myth, Jocasta kills herself, and Oedipus remains blinded, guided by the Erinys Alecto, wandering the world until he atones for his sins and finds peace in the grove at Colonus. The Olympian clique is satisfied — the culprit for the evil has been found, people's faith in the gods has been re-established, the metaphysical and moral order they guarantee is preserved, the revenues of the Delphi oracle have tripled, and Apollo, the head of the committee that found this solution, is rewarded with the position of President of the Olympic Council in the next term. The Prince sought the Sacrifice, and he got it.

For the dramatic model we are following here to be complete, there is only one element left: the Victim should choose death, nothingness, rather than survival in such a world. In the final scene of the play, Oedipus, now cleansed of sin, encounters Thanatos/Death, who informs him that Zeus has been dead for a long time. If there is no Zeus, Oedipus wonders, perhaps Apollo lied — maybe I am not guilty at all? If that is the case, then were

[53] Ibid., p. 190.
[54] Ibid., p. 194.

Jocasta's death, his blinding, and his prolonged wandering in atonement just senseless and meaningless suffering? Thanatos/Death replies:

> I am freedom, truth, eternity,
> Endless night without stars,
> Silence,
> Soul without body. Body without soul.
> I want to take you there and bathe you in my mercy. […]
> Why these questions, Oedipus? […]
> All that is meaningless,
> Before the meaning of nothingness,
> Which I offer you so generously. […]
> The only truth is in vanishing […]
> There is nothing more after me.[55]

Before the face of death, there is no more truth or lies, no more crime or punishment; everything becomes indifferent — and meaningless. However, in the dramatic model we have established, it should be Oedipus himself who says this and wishes for death as the only way out from a world that is impossible to live in. In *The Theban Plague*, however, Oedipus refuses to settle into nothingness and rejects the offer to go with Thanatos: 'In meaning and meaninglessness / I am equal to you / Free and dark like you / In short / I am a reasonless God.'[56] Only here, at the very end of Lukić's final play, do we reach what Camus pursued in his early works, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Outsider*: Oedipus discovers the absurd and claims for himself — a human — the place that previously belonged to the metaphysical realm. But for this parallel to be justified, Oedipus would need to declare this demand joyfully: 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy', Camus says at the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.[57] Similarly, Meursault's confrontation with absurdity at the end of *The Outsider* results in an affirmation of life. He does not want to die, he does not welcome the nothingness of death; he wants to live more, and he believes that is how his mother left this world too: 'With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again', Meursault thinks.[58] Confronting the absurd for Camus means liberation from the normative horizon of the metaphysical realm, not despair due

[55] Ibid., pp. 234–36.
[56] Ibid., p. 237.
[57] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, London, 1975, p. 111.
[58] Camus, *The Outsider*, p. 120.

to its disappearance. This liberation carries within it the possibility of rebellion: unlike all the figures of the Rebel we previously identified in Lukić's dramas, which without exception all ended desiring death and nothingness, Oedipus as a Rebel who rejects death and nothingness would have to begin affirming values at this point. If being alive is a value, as Camus says in the introduction to *L'Homme révolté* (1951), other values must follow: individual human worth, universal human worth, solidarity among humans, etc.[59] However, in Lukić's play, in his final monologue Oedipus expresses only his inability to distinguish truth from lies, crime from innocence, sin from punishment and wisdom from folly. The fact that at the end of the play Oedipus confirms what he had vaguely hinted at from the start — that the metaphysical realm no longer exists and that humanity is left alone on Earth — does not result in him assuming the role of God that he had proclaimed. Instead, it leads to his resignation before the task of re-evaluating all values after the disappearance of the old normative horizon: 'Oedipus, you mistake! O King, O man', he says at the end.[60] Man, even a king, is a mistake, precisely at the moment he proclaims himself God.

From this perspective, it is possible to draw a new conclusion. We have seen that in all the previous dramas, Lukić questioned the possibility of rebellion and the figure of the Rebel: Iphigenia, Hart, Philoctetes and Publius, all end up in existential nihilism, despair, and a demand for death and nothingness. However, when they leave the stage, the actant Prince remains: Hellenic princes in *Petrified Sea*, moral nihilists sailing towards the destruction of Troy, the hedonistic Prince and the atheistic Grand Inquisitor in *The Affair of Innocent Anabela*, the Hellenic princes again in *And Death Comes to Lemnos*, telling Philoctetes through Odysseus, 'when you can't be brave, when you can't be rich, when you can't bed all the women you desire, then you lament the world and its purpose', Senator Robert and Peter in *The Evil Night*, and the Olympic clique in *The Theban Plague*, which has amassed enough gold for its lavish life. They also know that there is no longer a metaphysical realm as a normative horizon and that humanity is alone on Earth, but they do not invoke death and nothingness because of that. Instead, they desire the world and its abundance, celebrate their triumph in excess and 'overreaching', as Heidegger says. After the death of God, power over the Earth has shifted to man's new, will-to-power-driven intent. One must imagine them as happy,

[59] Albert Camus: *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower, London, 2013, p. x–xi.
[60] Lukić, 'Tebanska kuga', p. 237.

to paraphrase Camus. Lukić is not a writer following Albert Camus' path but rather an anti-Camus: a Camus who never wrote *The Rebel*, who does not believe that any moral values can be shaped after the disappearance of the metaphysical realm, but that everything must end in absolute negation and a denial of others' right to live. For Camus, rebellion poses the question, is it 'possible to find a rule of conduct outside the realm of religion and of absolute values?'[61] If, as in Lukić's works, every rebellion is doomed to failure, then such a rule cannot exist anymore. Lukić's vision, instead of echoing Camus' philosophy of the absurd and rebellion, is closer to Heidegger's statement from his posthumously published interview: 'Only one God can save us.'[62]

[61] Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 9.

[62] Martin Heidegger, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten', *Der Spiegel*, 30 May 1976, p. 193.