

Edition
Hyperlink

Original title
Vladimir Pištalo
Tesla, portret među maskama

Ovo izdanje objavljeno je uz pomoć
Pokrajinskog sekretarijata za kulturu,
javno informisanje i odnose s verskim zajednicama,
AP Vojvodine.

This edition was published with the help of
The Provincial Secretariat for Culture,
Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities,
AP Voivodina.

Copyright © 2008 by Vladimir Pištalo
English translation copyright © 2015 by Bogdan Rakic and John Jeffries
First published in the United States by Graywolf Press

Copyright © 2021 Agora Publishing House in Serbian and Montenegro only,
in the English language

This publication in whole or in part may not be reproduced, reprinted
or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission of the
author or publisher, nor can it be in any form or by any other means,
distributed or reproduced without permission of the publisher. All
rights to publish these books retain the author and publisher according
to the provisions of the copyright law.

VLADIMIR PIŠTALO

TESLA: A PORTRAIT WITH MASKS

A novel

*Translated from the Serbian
by Bogdan Rakić and John Jeffries*

ΑΓΩΡΑ

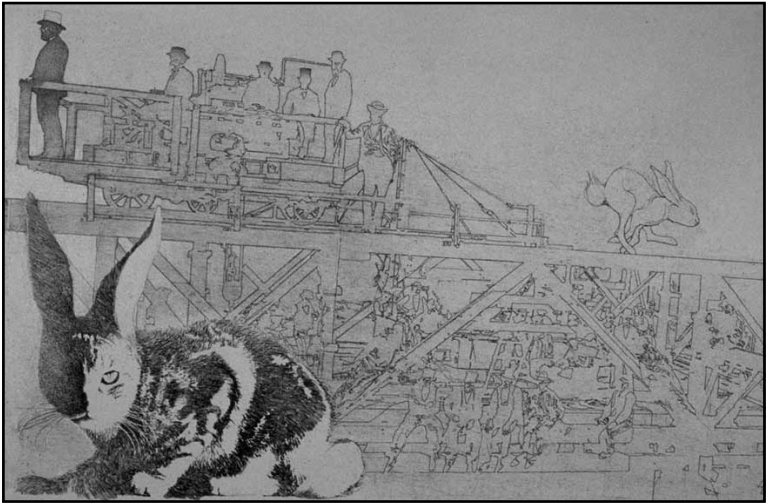


Translators' Note

This translation was done after the publication of the 2008 edition (second edition) of Vladimir Pištalo's novel. As we had the pleasure of frequently discussing the novel's main points with the author, he decided to make a few minor additions to the original text in order to better accommodate it to the spirit of the English language. This is why the text of this translation differs slightly from its Serbian original. The epigraph to chapter five from *The Republic* by Plato was translated by Benjamin Jowett. The quote from *Fasti* by Ovid that appears on page 42 was translated by James G. Frazer. We want to dedicate this translation to Svetlana Rakić and Elizabeth Weiss-Jeffries.

PART I

Youth



CHAPTER 1

Father

A Beautiful Phenomenon

What is this world?

What is the purpose of existence?

Such thoughts played in Milutin Tesla's head like kittens until he settled on the ultimate, frightening question: *What is "what"?* At this point the priest's thoughts died out and he started to feel dizzy.

The human mind is pragmatic—it's basically a tool, Milutin concluded. A saw cuts trees. One can take a bow and play music on it, but that's not what a saw's made for.

He advised his students to stop dithering and make up their minds. "I, for example, was about to graduate from a military academy," he told them, "but I quit and became a priest."

Milutin's first parish was in Senj, the windy city mentioned in many Serbian epic songs. There he kept telling his parishioners: "So I ask a favor and advise you for your own good: Don't be uncouth—you are folks endowed with common sense. Therefore, embrace the spirit of progress, the spirit of the people. Focus on liberty, equality, and brotherhood."

The parishioners ignored their priest's efforts to enlighten them. They griped about him being sickly and, actually, ridiculous. They were of the opinion that he was guilty of his ailments and wanted to fire him. The priest answered that being around people like them would make anyone sick.

"Do you think I get anything out of being here?" Milutin Tesla asked them sarcastically. "I wouldn't be much worse off if I moved to Bessarabia."

But instead of Bessarabia, Father Milutin got transferred to the village of Smiljan in Lika. During his stay there, he never failed to mount his

horse to go administer last rites to the dying, even when the winter nights glowed with wolves' eyes. After a long ride, the priest would shake the snow from his mink coat and enter the sick man's shack. He would come up to the bed, bend over the dying, and speak in a low voice: "Now you can open your heart and whisper to me what weighs you down because God hears best the whispered word." And the rough men would open up their hearts and tell the stories of their lives in ways no one had ever heard before. The priest tried in vain to forget most of what he heard.

In his house buried in the snow, Milutin Tesla spent a lot of time reading. He read about railways, the Crimean War, and the new palace built of glass in London. For a local paper, the Smiljan priest wrote an article on cholera spreading from Dalmatia to Lika "like oil over a table." He also wrote about the "countless impediments" that a champion of public education encountered in the most backward parts of the Karlovci Diocese. For the *Serbian Daily*, he reported on a "beautiful phenomenon" created by atmospheric light, which occurred right on St. Peter's Day. Milutin Tesla described it as a waterfall of sparks that appeared both distant and yet so close he could touch it with his hand. The light left blue tracers behind as it vanished over a hill. At the same time, something rumbled loudly, as if a huge tower collapsed to the ground. The echo reverberated across the southern slopes of Velebit for a long time. *God's little phenomenon* "made the stars look pale." This occurrence gave common people a lot to talk about, while a more thoughtful observer (apparently Milutin Tesla himself) felt sorry that it did not last longer—this display of God's nature ended in the blink of an eye.

The weather was sweltering just before it all happened. Afterward it rained, but the clouds dissipated in the evening: *The air was cold, the sky smiled, and the stars glowed brighter than ever; but all of a sudden, something flashed in the east and—as if three hundred torches were lit—the light stretched all the way to the west. The stars withdrew, and it appeared that all nature stood still...*

The Parliament of the World

It always frightened the children when their father went through a transformation. Milutin forbade his family to enter his room when he worked on his Sunday sermons. All of a sudden his angry, deep voice

would resound from behind the locked door, followed by a soothing female voice, and then several incoherent shouts. Anyone listening would swear that there was more than one person in there. The sermon was theater. Djuka Tesla and her sons were scared as they listened to Milutin alter his voice and argue with himself inside the locked room. Even the girls did not dare open the door. They were afraid to find their father transformed into unknown shapes. Behind the ordinary door, which suddenly looked mysterious, the priest whispered in German, shouted in Serbian, hissed in Hungarian, and purred in Latin, while in the background someone droned in Old Church Slavonic.

What was going on in there? Was it another “beautiful phenomenon” that called for an explanation? Did this Saint Anthony from Smiljan actually converse with his temptations? Did he feel lonely? Did this secluded polyglot see himself as *the Parliament of the World*? Did he practice delivering his sermon as a play in which he was both the tragic and the comic hero, as well as the chorus?