



# Mihailo Petrović

# ALAS

Life  
Work  
Times



Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts







SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS

MIHAILO PETROVIĆ ALAS: LIFE, WORK, TIMES  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 150<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF HIS BIRTH

Publisher

*Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts  
Knez Mihailova 35, Belgrade*

Acting publisher

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Editor-in-chief

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*Dosije Studio, Belgrade*

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Printing

*Planeta print, Belgrade*

Print run: 500 copies

ISBN 978-86-7025-818-1

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The publication was financially supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia and Telekom Srbija.

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LIFE, WORK, TIMES

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OF HIS BIRTH



SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS

Exclusive editions, such as this monograph, call for the engagement, enthusiasm and cooperation of a number of individuals and institutions. We would like to use this opportunity and extend our gratitude to everyone who has taken part or in any way contributed to, or supported the creation and publication of this monograph.

First of all, we would like to express our gratitude to the authors of papers for their effort taken to provide expert and high level insights into some main points of Mihailo Petrović Alas' life and work, at the same time preserving an important aspect of being easy to read and appealing to a broader readership. In addition, we would like to thank to Ms. Snežana Krstić-Bukarica and Ms. Nevena Đurđević from SASA Publishing Section for performing a thorough proofread of the papers, thus making the writing even more articulate.

The monograph features a number of photographs and the copies of documents that have been obtained owing to the kindness of the SASA Archive, SASA Library, SASA Mathematical Institute, Archive of Serbia, Mr. Viktor Lazić from the "Adligat" Society, Mr. Jovan Hans Ivanović and his "Mihailo Petrović Alas" Foundation, "Mihailo Petrović Alas" Primary School, "Svetozar Marković" University Library, Belgrade City Museum, Zavod za udžbenike (Institute for Textbook Publishing) in Belgrade, Virtual Library of Faculty of Mathematics in Belgrade and Digital Legacy of Mihailo Petrović Alas.

The publication of the monograph was financially supported by JP Srbijagas, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, primarily through scientific projects in which the majority of the authors of the papers takes part, and Telekom Srbija. We would like to express our deep gratitude for their support.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to Mr. Mirko Milićević from the publishing house "Dosije Studio" for excellent prepress preparation of the monograph.

S. Pilipović, G. Milovanović, Ž. Mijajlović

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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

As soon as one first encounters the work of Mihailo Petrović, it becomes evident that he was a person that according to its numerous traits was a polymath. Above all, the academician Petrović was a gifted mathematician and a renowned professor at the University of Belgrade, but also a fisherman, writer, philosopher, musician, world traveler and a travel writer. He earned a degree in mathematics at the Belgrade Grand School and a licentiate degree in mathematics, physics and chemistry at the Sorbonne. At the age of 26, only a year after he had completed his studies, he defended his PhD degree in mathematics at the same university, as a student of the famous French mathematicians Henri Poincaré, Charles Hermite and Charles Émile Picard. In the same year (1894) he was elected to the position of professor at the Grand School to which he brought the spirit of the French mathematical school. It was at that point that his long and prolific journey through science began, whereas, owing to him, Belgrade achieved parity with other major European centers in mathematical sciences. He became an initiator and a leader of the Serbian mathematics and strongly contributed to the spirit of the modern European science in Serbia.

Petrović's expertise spanned several mathematical areas in which he achieved scientific results of world-class relevance: differential equations, numerical analysis, theory of functions of a complex variable and geometry of polynomials. He was also interested in natural sciences, chemistry, physics and biology, and he published scientific papers in these fields, too. In his scientific endeavor he managed to meet the most rigorous standards of the most developed European countries. In a brilliant rise, in a few years' time, up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote around thirty papers that he published in the leading European mathematical journals. It was due to this fact that he was elected a member of the Serbian Royal Academy as early as at the age of 30, and soon after he became a member of a number of foreign academies and prominent expert societies. He won the greatest respect of the global mathematical community: he was among few mathematicians (13) who delivered at least five plenary lectures or lectures as a visiting lecturer at the International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM). He delivered five such lectures (1908, 1912, 1924, 1928 and 1932). One such invitation has been considered by the mathematical community as an equivalent of an induction to a hall of fame. In addition, it has been considered that Petrović was a founder of new scientific disciplines, namely mathematical phenomenology and spectral theory. He invented several analogue computing machines, possessed technical patents and was the main cryptographer of the Serbian and Yugoslav Army.

Up to the Second World War he was the mentor of all doctoral thesis in mathematics defended at the University of Belgrade. Aforementioned is related to one of professor Petrović's greatest and most important achievements – he was a founder of the Serbian mathematical school that has produced a great number of renowned and successful mathematicians not only in Serbia but also around the world.

In 2018, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and mathematicians in Serbia celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Mihailo Petrović Alas. Throughout this year, the Academy has organized a large exhibition dedicated to Petrović, alongside a solemn gathering and a conference. This monograph commemorates this important jubilee of the Serbian mathematics. Given the fact that a lot of articles on Petrović have already been written, and that his collected works were published at the end of the last century, the editors and authors of the papers in this monograph were faced with a daunting task of finding some new details from professor Petrović's life and career. Even more so given that his body of work is immense, spanning different scientific areas and encompassing topics that at first glance one finds difficult to combine. As Dragan Trifunović, Petrović's biographer and a man who most thoroughly studied his life and work, noted on one occasion that almost an institute was necessary that would encompass professor's entire body of work. Therefore, we set a relatively modest goal to ourselves to shed light upon some main points of Petrović's life and work, times and circumstances he lived in, as well as to elaborate on the present developments in relation to the Serbian mathematical school, through a selection of papers. The authors of the papers steered clear of technical details and excessive use of mathematical language. Hence, the monograph is intended for a broader readership, in particular to those readers who are interested in the history of Serbian science and its evolvement at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also to those who want to gain a deeper insight into the life of a brilliant mathematician and a polymath, and, we can quite freely say, an unusual personality.

Ž. Mijajlović, S. Pilipović, G. Milovanović





MIHAILO PETROVIĆ ALAS:  
LIFE AND WORK



# ON FISHING AND LITERARY WORKS OF MIHAILO PETROVIĆ ALAS\*

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There is but one Alas. Among all his interests and preoccupations, for which two lifetimes would hardly suffice, Mihailo Petrović Alas had given undeniable primacy to an age-old passion – fishing. It is this passion for fishing, for that matter, that earned him the nickname by which he has been permanently remembered in Serbian history, science and culture. (According to certain testimonies, the nickname, used ironically at first, was given to him by Milutin Milanković, another prominent Serbian scientist of that era, but later on that other name of Petrović's came to be used as a term of endearment which, according to the customs of Serbian cultural milieu, emphasizes general affection and popularity; it is enough to say – Alas! – and everybody knows the name and to whom it refers.)

The power of Petrović's pastime, which, over time, had turned into a specific worldview and had imperceptibly become his own brand of an idiosyncratic, identificatory, applied and embodied "philosophy of life", is substantiated not only by a large body of data and evidence, but also by some direct Alas's gestures (in a veritably eccentric "fishermen's style"). The son of Alas's friend Mladen St. Đuričić, a writer – Predrag

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\* A revised and supplemented version of the paper initially published in the catalogue *Mihailo Petrović Alas: The Founding Father of the Serbian School of Mathematics* (SASA, 2018)





Стари рибар.

Михаило Петровић је већину својих нематематичких радова посветио истраживању рибарске ботанике: Рибарски мајстор, Мајстор Мика, Стари мајстор, Стари рибар (а. уједнограф Петровићеве ботанике) и други. – Професорски лист из 1921. године, који је највише радио на проучавању и истраживању Охридској и Преспањској језера

Portrait of Mihailo Petrović from 1921 (*Collected Works*, Book 14)  
(Digital Legacy of Mihailo Petrović)

Ђuričić, a publicist, who had remembered the renowned Serbian scientist since his childhood, wrote in the article “The Personality of Mihailo Petrović Alas in Memories and Anecdotes” that it was his father who drew his attention to the odd character of Alas, showing him “the study of Mihailo Petrović, in which he had only one diploma hung on the wall above the desk – it was a master fisherman’s letter, written in a clumsy, coarse handwriting by the president of their committee, stating that on such and such a day Mihailo Petrović, professor, passed the master’s exam for a river fisherman, the fishing craft, as hereby acknowledged and confirmed by the undersigned committee” (Ђуричић 2005: 70)<sup>113</sup>. Notwithstanding all the academic accolades, honorary doctorates and memberships in the most prestigious scientific associations, Alas saw himself, first and foremost, as a committed fisherman, turned towards the water and the brotherhood of men with a passion for fishing.

Apart from the voluminous and versatile interdisciplinary scientific work which, though systematized a number of times, requires permanent study and re-examination, which has been facilitated by the most comprehensive edition to date in the *Collected Works*,<sup>114</sup> throughout his life Mihailo Petrović Alas had been concerned with both the theoretical and practical aspects of ichthyology, the study of fish. Having had a lifelong, almost fated, fascination with the world of fish, he knew down to the last detail everything concerning the nature, tradition and techniques of river fishing in general, and on the Danube and Sava rivers in particular. As a committed member and practitioner of the river fishing community, he perseveringly, one could rightfully say – even obsessively! – investigated, described and interpreted the customs, language, tools, ordinary and extraordinary scenes from the lives of that numerous, seemingly marginal, but then, at the turn of the century, and even afterwards, before and after the Great War, very colourful and authentic social group.



At first and any other glance, one could say that Mihailo Petrović Alas was *a man of two callings*, a mathematician and ichthyologist, and also a man of exquisite, very well nurtured and complex passions, a passion for travelling, scientific research, music, and yet, above all else – the passion for catching fish. “If I had not obtained that one additional vote at the competition for the position of a professor at the Belgrade Grand School, I would never have pursued a career in mathematics. I would have been living on the rivers across Serbia, not on a ship, but in a boat” – he wrote once (Мијајловић 2018).<sup>115</sup> When we talk about people with two callings, we usually, according to certain unwritten rule, look for the answer to the question as to which is the first, and which the second activity (vocation) of such a person, because two competencies, and in equal measure to boot, are rarely acknowledged to anyone, at any time or place. A man can be only one thing, not both, such is the ingrained, rigid stereotype. In the vein of that denigrating and yet active stereotype, Mihailo Petrović could be said, most probably with no great inventiveness, to have been the best mathematician among fishermen, and the best fisherman among mathematicians: competence always lies elsewhere, never there where it could undermine a hierarchy established by the power of customs, especially one that is artificial.

However, Mihailo Petrović Alas could not content himself with even those two callings. When we read his book, by which I mean primarily the travelogues and articles on fishing, we cannot fail to discover his third talent and skill – the one for writing. We come across a writer not in the common, fictional sense of that term. Alas is a first-class “applied” writer, he is able to flourish at what many writers of fiction labour under, even though that is their main calling – in a word, he knows how to narrate engagingly about lived, not imaginary, events, and to articulate linguo-stylistically an area of experience he has undergone, to give a document fullness it does not have outside of the framework of the story, even though an unskillfully prepared document is what it is, a dry archive material. Whatever he reports about or gives testimony of, Mihailo Petrović Alas does it in a straightforward manner, seductively drawing the reader in. He has the capacity for the magical weaving of a tale, which, it should be noted, has its roots in oral heritage and, as is easily associated, in the famous fishermen’s tale-telling and oneupmanship (competing in telling tall tales, banter, derision, and getting one up on each other) in a tavern or outdoors, by the fire. In his writings Alas himself often mentions both of these situations (tavern and fireplace), in which story and story-telling are a mandatory side act, almost like a natural phenomenon. Viewed from a more expert, formal and stylistic aspect, one could say that Mihailo Petrović Alas is a representative of the Belgrade school of style, which was promoted exactly at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, and whose main feature is narrativization, structured and fluent presentation of even the most complex speculative content. Only bad writers and pretentious scientists, it was thought at the time, and it is not any different now, tend to mystify their competences (or, rather, pseudo-competences), whereas the representatives of Belgrade style, Mihailo Alas among others, present what they have to say in a simple, meaningful, visual and always engaging manner. The travelogues and fishing-related writings of Mihailo Petrović Alas belong to a corpus of truly representative texts of the said type, then, as now.



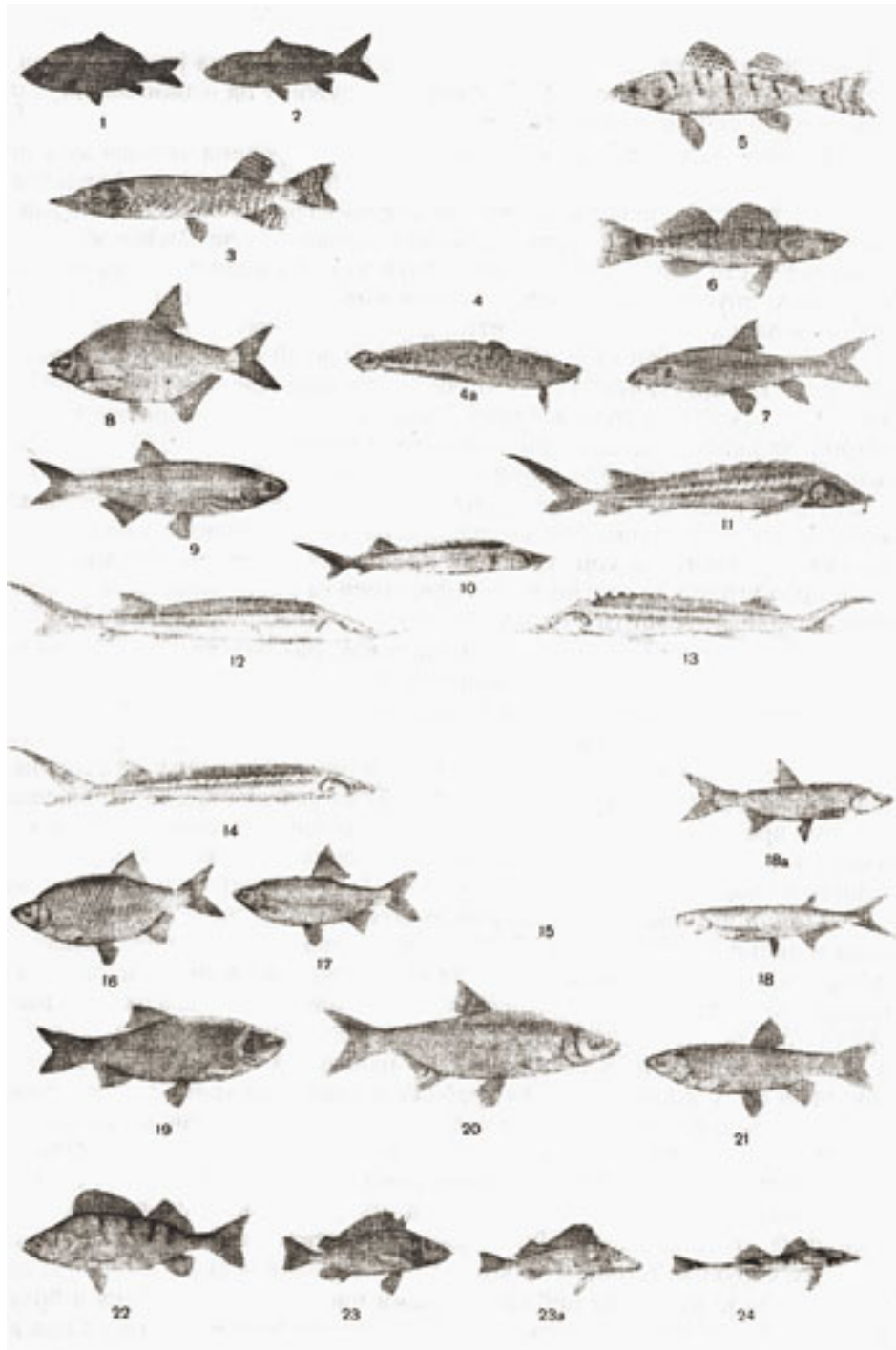
Belgrade Fishery Association confers a diploma to its founder Mihailo Petrović on 12 July 1942 (SASA Archive, 14188/33)

Of course, one should not exaggerate and accord Alas canonical status and relevance that he objectively does not have, but, equally, one should not lose sight of his literary work in our literary history, which had practically been the case before the publication of his *Collected Works*. The inner circle of readership, truth be told, were familiar with several Petrović's travel books that had been published at the time in the editions of „Srpska književna zadruga“. However, few people knew of the texts scattered about the periodicals and in less accessible publications, which were collected in Volume XIV of the said publication, under the title *Fishing (Ribarstvo)*. (Alas being the only “fisherman” to get his own edition of *Collected Works*!) Special attention should here be given to the editorial work of Dragan Trifunović, because editing the book *Fishing*, composed of insufficiently known Petrović's papers, required applying a whole set of complex editorial procedures and following a specific methodological principle, which is primarily reflected in the fact that the individual texts, published for the first time in their integral version, are organized in a harmonious way, with an inner logic to them and a natural order, which lends the book a dimension that even Mihailo Petrović Alas himself did not have in mind. Some of those texts, though, were not hard to find and be made available to the public again, as they had originally been published in the regular editions of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA), but a certain number of texts had firstly been printed in small papers and magazines or the ones that are now antiquarian. These diverse texts, which only have the same general topic, while everything else is different, were to be unified in a proper way intrinsic to the material, and this is exactly what the editorial team headed by Dragan Trifunović did. Petrović's book *Fishing*, thus, is not only a collection of texts entertained and organized around the

theme of fishing, but something else besides, a novel, so to speak, an unintentional, spontaneously created “novel”, such as is usually written out of obsession, out of an all-encompassing passion, for passion, when it is true, stands in for the whole world. I do not think I am qualified enough, though I am not entirely unqualified, either (I share the same passion with Alas, and passion is what makes me qualified), to speak of the purely scientific, ichthyological aspect of Petrović’s *Fishing*. Let others, who are more professionally equipped, have their say about it. And perhaps for the very reason that *Fishing* does not appeal to me only and exclusively from its scientific aspect, which is not at all to be underestimated (on the contrary!), I see in that book a great story, a history, in fact, a special chronicle of these parts seen from an unexpected, unconventional, and yet ordinary angle, from the perspective of fishing, which treasures and reflects the glimpses of bygone times. (It seems to be similar in kind to the intentions of Philippe Ariès to write a history of the Middle Ages based on facts from the daily life of common people, and not on the so-called pivotal events or biographies of privileged individuals.) That conditional “novel” of Petrović has got an anthropological, ethnographic, geographical-descriptive, chronicling, and documentary dimension, which, taken collectively, in their comprehensiveness, represent the very quality that gravitates towards literature.

Nowadays, we also read *Fishing* as a testimony of a time gone by, as a story about people that once inhabited the banks of the Danube and Sava rivers, and, in harmony with nature, lived off plentiful fish stocks in those great expanses of water. The way in which they, metaphorically speaking, picked the fruit of those mythical rivers changed and improved over the centuries, preserving something from the olden days of one of the earliest crafts in the world, and building up around it a whole system of very convoluted customs, facts, beliefs and superstition. That established system is clearly and strongly related not only to the category and type of geographical region, but also to the character and customs of the people inhabiting it. Jovan Cvijić, another prominent Serbian scientist, wrote and spoke in his time of how the natural landscape shapes the character, mentality and the way of life of the domicile population. That thesis, precisely that scientific truth, is indirectly confirmed in the book *Fishing* by Mihailo Petrović Alas. If a “novel” represents, as it does, some sort of a non-systematized encyclopaedia, with deeper, poeticized intellectual and conceptual system, Alas’s *Fishing* is also a special, though non-alphabetized, encyclopaedia in which the interested reader can get very detailed information about numerous names, aspects, facts and subtleties not only concerning fishing, but also the daily life in the history of Belgrade of earlier and more recent times.

Fishing is an ancient practice, so old that it delves into the collective unconscious, with deep archetypal and symbolic meanings, and thus it is natural that this practice reflects universal, characterological, geopolitical, ethnographic and psychological features of the nation and individuals that are involved in it. In the book *Fishing* we can find, among other things, that, at least as far as fishing is concerned, the Turks have left us a legacy containing some positive features. In accordance with the power and might they had wielded, Alas instructs us, during the late Middle Ages, the licences and rights for fishing on the Sava and Danube were in their hands, but, after the Serbian uprising, they passed on all their knowledge, or rather, gave it away reluctantly to







Folding of a large fishing net (a dragnet, *alov*) into a boat (SASA Archive, 14197/II-6)

diversity and cheapness of its fish markets. Alas mentions those travel writers and passers-by extensively in his writings.) The techniques for catching fish and the equipment for fishing had been used according to the Turkish tradition up until the great regulation of the Danube, in the 1890's, when they were gradually changed into their present condition, having been adapted and innovated in accordance with the Central European style of fishing, and indeed since then, due to more limited options for natural propagation, as well as to the forthcoming industrialization, the fish stocks have become increasingly reduced...

In the book *Fishing* a reader can also find out the origin of the surname Balugdžić, Balugdžija and the nickname Balug, which in Turkish refer to – a fisherman. This should be pointed out because a special linguistic value of Mihailo Petrović's narrative style, who might as well have been nicknamed Balug, is represented by extremely interesting and extensive lists of fishermen's nicknames, to such an extent that we can infer that the onomastic treasure of the said kind speaks volumes about the character of that marginal, but certainly very authentic part of the Serbian society. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, that demi-monde, free from social conventions, and rudimentary in the more positive sense of the word, populated the right, lower bank of the Danube in Dorćol, having their back turned towards the town, facing the river. In the twentieth century, Belgrade completely lost its touch with the water, and moved away from the banks of the Sava and Danube, cramming them full of warehouses, railway line, industrial facilities, dumps and slums. The connection had been lost between the old townspeople and the people from the river banks, who passed their whole lives on and by the water, from their

birth to death. (That world is evoked by Ivo Andrić in the story entitled “A Rabbit” („Zeko“).) And Alas describes how, at the time of favourable water coming in, the inhabitants of Belgrade had the opportunity to witness true spectacles of catching fish, as at the foot of the Kalemegdan fortress lay one of the richest fishing grounds in the whole flow of the Danube river. A fisheries association had been established and, in agreement with the state, it imposed strict regulations upon that branch of economy. Mihailo Petrović writes the history of fishing in a well thought-out and at the same time enthused manner, naming the types of fishing, the fish fauna and the most favourable fishing grounds on the Danube and Sava, but at a certain moment of reading his unusual, spontaneously created “novel”, you come to realize that in the whole story the fish is not important in itself, but as a symbol around which the whole community of people has organized themselves, and which serves to confirm life in its fundamental aspect, in its deepest elementary form. Apart from that, it is common knowledge that one of the most prominent Christian symbols, the symbol of fish, is in essence pre-Christian, ancient, and that it is rooted in the deepest layers not only of collective memory, but of the individual, subconscious memories, as well – it is enough to mention Lepenski vir and their fish-like stone idols. It touches the deepest past of the humankind and has an unequivocal ontological significance. After all, a man in one of the phases of his uterine development represents a fish, as a phoetus has gill openings. Through that universal dimension, as suggested by the book *Fishing*, we indirectly discover the basic values of man’s life in the community, on the water, in the quoted fisherman’s *boat*, under the open sky, which is exactly the moment in which the Kantian categorical imperative begins to take shape within us.

Upon publishing an anthology of Serbian stories about fishing entitled *Reading Water (Čitanje vode)* (Пантић 1998)<sup>116</sup>, which represented the result of twenty years’ “targeted” investigations of Serbian prose, during which I had been collecting stories related to that topic, I remembered Mihailo Petrović Alas among others, and included one chapter of his unusual travelogue, imbued with cosmopolitanism



Mihailo Petrović with a caught catfish weighing 124 kg, on 5 December 1913 (SASA Archive, 14188/28)

– *With Deep-sea Fishermen... (Sa okeanskim ribarima...)*. In that extract Mihailo Alas describes the time he spent with cod fishermen during his stay aboard a fishing vessel, on Newfoundland's plate. The deep-sea fishermen used to spend six months aboard the vessel during one harvest in extremely severe weather conditions, compared to which modern "extreme sports" seem like child's play. Many of them were buried at sea, while in their homeland, on the European coast, cenotaphs were erected in their honour. And that narrative passage of Alas's is certainly one of the best in the thematic anthology *Reading Water*.

The theme of fishing was introduced in the Serbian literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. (In the story „Švabica“ Laza Lazarević writes about how to "gut a fish" in the Serbian household (Лазаревић 1986: 216).<sup>117</sup> The fish, particularly among the people from earlier times, had an almost sacral status, predominantly because of their way of life, because of a great number of fasting periods, as well as because of a great tradition of fishing and fishery among the Serbian people; one merely needs to mention the toponyms derived from that root word. Alas himself in his book *Fishing* reconstructs the said past with a whiff of nostalgia.) It is well known that Stevan Sremac intended to devote one of his stories to the description of Belgrade fishing community. The credits for the discovery of the aforementioned fact go to Mihailo Petrović, who wrote an article about it entitled "An Incomplete or Lost Story of Stevan Sremac" („Jedna nedovršena ili izgubljena pripovetka Stevana Sremca“), and published it in *Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklor*, of 1938. (The article was reprinted in the book *Metaphors and Allegories (Metafore i alegorije)*, Volume XIII of Petrović's *Collected Works*.) Stevan Sremac, a great writer of people's daily life, in accordance with his non-academic method of observing reality and frequenting utterly quaint places, also liked visiting taverns in which fishermen gathered, and there he used to diligently take notes about anything that might be of use to him in composing a story with such a theme, which had never been published, and it is uncertain whether he had written it at all. Giving primacy to verisimilitude and "objectivity" in his writing, Mihailo Petrović is getting closer to the realistic tradition, which he particularly appreciates, and he speaks about it directly in the aforementioned text. Thanks to Alas himself, this idea, somewhat indicative of Sremac's poetics, has remained remembered; it is, namely, in accordance with the writer's principle of the close observation of life and the subsequent authentication and transposition of thus acquired experience.

Following the period of realism, fishing becomes an increasingly frequent topic in Serbian prose. An interest for it is sparked by none other than Petrović's books. In spite of being a non-fictional writer, Alas gives the topic of fishing in the twentieth century a considerable impetus and a literary, symbolic value and weight. Moreover, fishing represents the topic that was readily and fairly often taken up predominantly by the writers who were fishermen themselves, who had that passion, and an increased interest in writing such stories is probably the result of a fast-paced urbanization of life, in which the natural environment and fishing occur as some sort of a relaxing, liberating counterpoint, as a verbal stress relief therapy. The writers who wrote about fishing are, among others, the following: Isidora Sekulić (a superb description of a fish market in Bergen in the book *Letters from Norway*), Miloš Crnjanski, Rastko Petrović, Miodrag



Borisavljević, Antonije Isaković, Stevan Raičković, Danilo Nikolić and others, ending with my generation.

In the world of fishing, in an environment which seems rather odd and eccentric compared to the daily life, just like Mika Alas now appears to us, story is an inescapable part of the whole fishing ritual. It is this, precisely this, and many other things, that Mihailo Petrović Alas speaks about in an inimitable way in the book *Fishing*, a string of narrative medallions, details described with inspiration, verbal records covered with patina, well found, well chosen, and still better composed anecdotes and documents.

Writings about fishing by Mihailo Petrović Alas can provisionally be divided into four groups. The first group is ichthyological in the strict sense of the term (the list and description of fish species). The second deals with fishing skills, ways of harvesting, the descriptions and locations of fishing spots, cataloguing equipment and baits, technology of fish preservation and treatment, and finally, guidelines for fish breeding. The third group refers to the history of fishing in Serbia, since the ancient times, across the Turkish era during which fishing was very well developed, up until Alas's time, including the history of the association and legislation of that branch of economy, while in the fourth he gives different kinds of literary accounts of his existentially privileged passion (travel pieces, travelogues, popular articles on the topic "Do fish sleep?" and the like, whimsical historical fragments, for instance: "An Extraordinary Fishing Adventure at the Court of Emperor Napoleon the Third").

A special group, indirectly related to fishing, is represented by Petrović's works on hydrography and oceanography, and the one that stands out in every sense is the most voluminous and best known popular science writing – *Eel Novel (Roman jegulje)*. Defining the genre of that at first glance unusual title does not refer so much to the longest fictional form as it points to a broader meaning of the said literary concept. Under the label of a "novel", we read in that book of Petrović's about an exciting, real, but at the same time mysterious, duly stylized and formalized account, with a clearly defined theme, a specified time and space, as well as an immaculately formed role of the narrator.

The *Eel Novel* begins with an explanation of the reason why it has been written. Alas notes: "The eel has since time immemorial been considered as a living creature that nobody can make heads or tails of. The question as to how the eel is engendered has been a riddle piquing the curiosity and imagination of natural scientists and philosophers of all times. It also interested Aristotle, who, thinking about it, found it to



Front page of *The Eel Novel*, published in 1940 (Library of SASA, C 7/12;11)



Three portraits of Mihailo Petrović as a fishery master on the Sava and the Danube rivers.

*Petrović maintained an extensive correspondence with the world.*

*He used his seal to secure a postal package or an envelope. His stamp depicts a "fish eating a fish" with MP initials, which certainly isn't a coincidence (the stamp was made in Paris out of silver and yew tree wood – *Taxus baccata*, in 1898). (Collected Works, Book 14)*

(Digital Legacy of Mihailo Petrović)

be an unsolvable conundrum, just as much as the question of how an eel ends its life. The mystery baffled the world to such an extent that an opinion has been formed, when it became evident that no one can say anything about it, that it is elusive, inaccessible to the human reason for eternity and that it is part of the mysteries of religion. Writing about the eel, Herodotus has said that it is a holy creature of whom only a deity can give account" (Петровић 1998: 177).<sup>118</sup>

In the Middle Ages, Petrović continues, eels were also considered to be the evidence of the divine. Such evidence, he says, "had to be convincing even for the most hardened non-believer". And every mystery, not only of the eel, as has long been known, has its poetic flavour. Else, there would be no mystery at all. Izaak Walton in *The Compleat Angler* (1653), undoubtedly the most world-famous book that deals with the subject of fishing in a literary fashion, in an attempt to shed light on the mystery of eel breeding says, among other things, that "they breed (as some worms do) of mud [...] or out of the putrefaction of the earth [...] like some species of bees and wasps"; that they are "bred out of a particular dew, falling in the months of May or June on the banks of some particular ponds or rivers [...] and some of the ancients have called the eels that are thus bred the offspring of Jove", and he adds that "her brood come alive from her, being then little live eels, no bigger nor longer than a pin" (Walton/Cotton 1897: 185–188).<sup>119</sup>

Petrović's *Eel Novel* presents to a wide readership a retrospective of the proposed solutions to the aforementioned two-thousand-year-old mystery of the eel in easily understandable terms, starting with the discoveries of the naturalists Redi and Mondini in the seventeenth century, followed by Sirevi and Jacobi in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as Grassi and Fesersen by the end of the same century, ending

with the pre-eminent Johannes Schmidt, whose scientific research carried out in the first half of the twentieth century lasted for twenty-five years. After all the reconsiderations, challenges and enigmas, that research resulted in an in-depth scientific description of the breeding of that mysterious fish, in whose creation maybe there is no divine, but there is undeniably an inexhaustible source of supreme creative imagination of our holy Mother Nature. With a view to giving a detailed account and interpretation of the numerous questions encountered in ichthyology to do with unravelling the mystery about the eel, Mihailo Petrović Alas has himself undertaken trips to the eel spawning areas in the Atlantic Ocean. In his “novel” he included a series of outstanding reports, replete with extraordinary, sometimes intriguing, sometimes almost unbelievable details, as well as facts established by experience and then scientifically confirmed and explained, and last but not least, some striking impressions. It was such impressions that enabled Petrović’s text to overcome the limitations of the documentary genre and make for a compelling read, with a worldview of an individual-empirical provenience transposed into writing with great inspiration and conveyed by the matching, recognizable, nicely modulated narrative voice of the author. This in turn begs the pivotal, previously partly suggested, question of whether Petrović’s prose of the said type, at the secondary level at the least, could be read and considered within the context of literary art.

Indeed, it could. Even though he did not consider himself a writer, dismissing the thought that other people see him as such, and being a self-proclaimed rationalist – that is, a scientist who believes in facts and practical evidence – expressing scepticism regarding the human need for fantasizing, particularly towards flimsy “poetry” and the dissembling art of the “theatre”, Mihailo Petrović Alas has nevertheless shaped a considerable part of his opus by literary methods and devices, by following an inherent rule that the portrayed world is conditioned by the one who writes the story. Not only in a great number of travelogues, which are an eminently literary genre, but also in texts of another, non-scientific character, Petrović proves himself to be a writer with an engaging style. That style is neither expressive, nor lyrical, after the fashion of the best writers of his time, but very suggestive; the subjects and themes thereby exposed instantly grip the readers’ attention.

Many critics wrote about the literary qualities of Petrović’s texts (Milan Bogdanović, Milivoje Pavlović, Dragan Trifunović, Slobodanka Peković, and others). They are united in the view that Petrović is a master of the functional, reporting narrative style, an engaging and beguiling narrator focused on presenting his key subject with utmost precision. He is completely in charge of the form and the narrative rhythm, he controls the relation and proportions holding between the main course of action and the digressions, strikes a balance between a document and his own reaction to it, all of which is suggestive of the writer’s rational, scientific character, of his emotional restraint, and clear, positivist penchant for exact facts apprehended by common sense. (This could be brought into question up to a point: Mihailo Petrović Alas was, namely, an avid reader of adventure and science fiction novels, with a particular interest in the relation between science and poetry, which is the subject of one of his studies.) Alas’s language is accurate, mildly archaic at times, and an added value is represented by his lexis, always pertinent to the subject of narration, specialized when it is required, and colloquial when describing life itself

(for example: fishermen's nicknames, an index of tools, professional jargon, etc.). What testifies to this are his travelogues and texts related to fishing, as well as certain essays and articles, some of which represent full-fledged stories without an excess of poetic stylization ("A Great Muslim Pirate" („Jedan veliki muslimanski gusar“), "Memories from the Grammar School" („Gimnazijske uspomene“), "An Experience from the Djerdap Gorge" („Jedan đerdapski doživljaj“), "Mija Jagodinac, a Bandsman" („Muzikant Mija Jagodinac“)).

Standing apart from, but indirectly related to the other scientific and existential interests of Mihailo Petrović, is his incomplete phenomenological study *Metaphors and Allegories*, published posthumously in 1967 by „Srpska književna zadruga“, the publisher of many of Alas's books. Starting from the description of the properties of metaphor, that universal, generative literary trope, and allegory as a particular artistic mechanism of conveying meaning and crystallizing sense, Petrović deals exhaustively with the issue and types of analogies, that is, sets up a network of analogies, which represent the basis of the scientific and creative thinking alike, and rounds off his work by systematizing typical events and their roles, in an attempt to get as close as possible to an otherwise elusive principle of the phenomenological "absolute adequacy". As Dragan Trifunović, editor of the first edition of the book *Metaphors and Allegories*, finds, "Petrović is adept at grasping the sense of those figures of speech and develops an intriguing theory of affinity as yet another contribution to his 'extended mathematics'" (Петровић 1998: 233).<sup>120</sup>

Let us now go back to the beginning. Petrović's inimitable creative nature presents itself to us from a distant past, since which time the world has rapidly accelerated and transformed in a way that our ancestors could not even have dreamed of, as an epitome of a harmonious, optimal realization of the full potential of a creative individual, who was in all things second to none. In saying that, we take account of his sense and passion alike. Petrović's passion, fishing – and every passion truly beggars all description – belongs to the deepest, archetypal, collective instincts of humankind. By realizing the instinct for hunting, that passion returns to the general mysterious laws governing the existence of the whole living world and (re)turns to be its integral part. Few are the passion's captives who succeeded in bringing it to their awareness, in bringing it to light, as far as it is humanly possible. Petrović is, without a shadow of a doubt, a representative of that small circle. Everything is transient, but the story remains. With his stories about fishing, about his travels and everything else besides, Alas indebted the Serbian literature and culture. With him at our side, we have become quicker and better at "reading water", as well as the world, in which we perish so quickly, barely managing to squeeze in a couple of fishing trips.

And on that note, one more time – there is but one Mihailo Petrović, Alas.