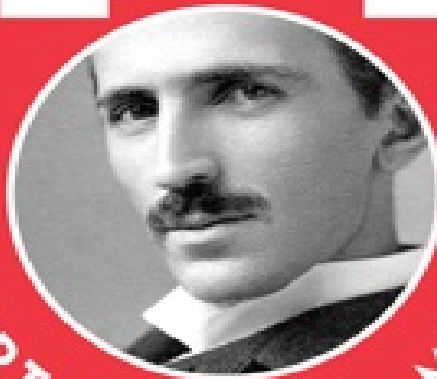


"BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN, IMMENSELY ENTERTAINING, & ASTONISHINGLY ORIGINAL . . . *TESLA: A PORTRAIT WITH MASKS* HAS THE RICHNESS, THE HIGH JINKS, AND THE ORIGINALITY OF [A] MODERN CLASSIC."

—CHARLES SIMIC

# TESLA



A PORTRAIT WITH MASKS

A NOVEL

VLADIMIR PIŠTALO

# Tesla: A Portrait with Masks

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# Tesla: A Portrait with Masks

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A NOVEL

Vladimir Pištalo

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

GRAYWOLF PRESS

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## Translators' Note

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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.

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# Tesla: A Portrait with Masks

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# PART I

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## **Youth**

# 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 his 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 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?

## Mother

### *A Spark from Flint*

While Nikola and Dane listened, their eyes shone like fireflies. The head of a skinny chicken dangled from Mother's lap as she posed riddles:

"What goes through the forest without a rustle, through the water without a splash?"

"A shadow!" said Dane, always quicker than Nikola.

"What hates water?" asked Mother.

"Cats and clocks!"

The folktales Nikola, the younger boy, liked the most were "Justice and Injustice," "When the Devil Is Scheming While Pretending He Is Good," and "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." In the last tale, the devil asked the apprentice if he has learned anything. "No, I've forgotten everything I used to know," the apprentice replied. Nikola liked these stories because in them food and younger brothers were really important. Djuka lulled him and his sister Marica to sleep by spinning yarns:

"As he traveled all over the world disguised as a beggar, Saint Sava came to the manor of a wealthy baron who possessed enormous riches..."

Nikola's eyes almost closed. He hovered on the edge of sleep.

"Then Saint Sava made the sign of the cross with his staff and the baron's manor turned into a lake..."

Was he dreaming?

"People say that every year on that day the water gurgles as a rooster crows from the bottom of the lake..."

Because her mother was blind, Djuka Mandić had to start managing her parents' household at an early age. Except for the stories her mother told her, she did not have a childhood. She wove all the linen in the house and took care of the younger children. To make things worse, cholera began to spread itself over Lika like "oil over a table." While her father was administering last rites, the disease killed their next-door neighbors. The girl herself washed and dressed the bodies of five of them.

When she got married, Djuka had to shoulder the responsibilities of another household. Milutin Tesla, following the advice of some Greek philosophers, insisted that "wherever a priest takes up a hoe, the idea of progress is dead."

Thus Djuka and the crossed-eyed servant Mane tilled the church land.

"Don't aim for where you're looking, but where you want to strike," she told Mane as he split firewood.

Mother explained to Nikola that the drone bee mated with the queen high up in the sky and that there would be plenty of bees if the queen could escape the swallows. "The enemies of bees are swallows and hedgehogs."

Once Nikola fell and hit his forehead on a chair. Mother kissed his triangular head to make



it better, caressed him, laughed, and quoted: "A strike liberates a spark from the flint, which would have otherwise despaired within it." When his stomach ached, she put her hand on his navel and started to chant softly:

*Almighty God, what a great event,  
When Milić the standard bearer got married...  
He couldn't find a girl to match his beauty  
A great hero, he found a fault in each of the lasses  
And he was about to forsake his marriage...*

The pain melted away and the boy felt very safe.

During the day, Djuka always wore a head scarf. Every morning, she got up two hours before anyone else. She sat in front of the kitchen stove with its door open. Nikola woke up and furtively observed her as she combed her hair. The fire glowed through the door and the cracks of the stove. He spied... Mother turned bronze from the glow. She became something else. He watched in secret.

His mother's life was deep.

Her life was soundless, like a tree falling in the forest without anyone to hear it.

## ***The Trees***

She turned to the forest on Bogdanić Hill: "Can you hear it?"

"What?" said Nikola.

"Can you hear the trees talking to each other on Bogdanić?"

"What about?"

"The birches sigh: How long till spring comes? When are we going to take off these icy shackles? The deep-voiced pines advise: Be patient. We'll take off our icy armor in three months. The streams will gurgle and you birches will sprout new leaves."

"What else do they say?" Nikola asked.

"The birches croon: The morning star will open the sun's gate and let the god Jarilo ride through it. Thus he will speak to Mother Earth: O moist Earth, love me, be my only one, and I, the sun god, will cover you with emerald lakes and golden sandbars, with green grass and swift brooks, with birds, fruit, and flowers, red and blue. Oh! You will bear me many, many children. With their new leaves, the birches will greet the rays of the spring sun and the gurgle of waters."

Nikola listened in awe and then laughed. "That can't be true. You're making things up."

His mother told him stories about plants instead of fables. She knew the herbs and insisted that many of them contained a spirit. Elm, fir, and maple belonged to the fairies.

"Where do fairies come from?"

"They come from the *mrazovac*," Mother replied. "That's why young men would never step on this plant. I'll teach you how to recognize it, so that you'll never step on it."

"Where do fairies live?"

"I've already told you what trees they dwell in. Yew is also a fairy tree. It grows only in unspoiled places," Djuka answered.

Nikola continued with the game. "How long do they live?"

Mother shrugged. “They eat garlic seeds and live until life becomes too boring, and when this happens they quit eating and die a painless death.”

Nikola was proud that Mother was so knowledgeable, as if she herself used to be a fairy. He never understood why Father frowned upon the stories about a world full of radiant spirits in which plants were just like people. At that time, Nikola did not comprehend that those stories were not just about fairies and plants but also about gods older than God.

“When there’s no church around, you can pray under a fir or linden tree,” Mother pointed out to Dane and Nikola.

She created the world, and then along came Father and cataloged it in books. Father wrinkled his nose at Mother’s stories. He wondered how such myths could have survived in a family full of priests.

“Let it go,” Milutin murmured. “Let evil go, and embrace the good. Let illness and misery go. Turn to health.”

## The Snowball

On the second day of Serbian Orthodox Christmas, Nikola and his two older cousins Vinko and Nenad slipped out of their parents' sight and went deep into the forest above Smiljan.

"The snow's really beautiful!" Nikola laughed.

"Beautiful, whatever... It gets in my eyes," said Vinko.

Nenad snapped at snowflakes like a young dog.

They looked down at their feet. After the climb, it was hard to tell which one was the most winded.

Covered with icicles, the boulders looked like monsters. A deep silence reigned among the pines. From time to time, the wind moaned through the treetops and a heavy white burden fell off the branches. It was as if the forest were breathing.

The boys plowed deeper into the snow, and their feet became soaked. They pushed their hands against their knees to help them climb up the slope. They scrambled on a big boulder in the middle of a ravine, on top of which the wind played with drifting snow dust.

"We shouldn't go any farther if we want to get home before nightfall," Nikola announced.

The boys clutched their sides and breathed heavily. On the rock in the middle of the ravine, the two very different cousins stood on either side of Nikola, each with an arm flung over his shoulders. Vinko was a quiet and squeamish boy with bags under his eyes. He disappeared once and his parents looked for him the whole day. Finally they found him sitting huddled in the church. In Nikola's family, men usually chose a religious or a military career. It seemed as if Vinko, with his quiet demeanor and bags under his eyes, had already made his choice.

His brother, Nenad, was hardly officer or priest material. Once he hoisted a big rock above his head and slammed it down on a turtle with all his might. When the Teslas' cat had kittens he drowned them in a bucket. When Nikola created a windmill powered by junebugs, Nenad grabbed the junebugs and ate them.

The silence in the forest got deeper. The three boys breathed as one. The bitter air stung their nostrils.

Nikola was deep in thought. Vinko took his arm off Nikola's shoulder and looked down the ravine. Nikola noticed a vein pulsating on his temple. Vinko said, "At this moment a bear is sleeping somewhere in this forest. Hamsters and badgers sleep in their dens. Bugs sleep under frozen roots. And underneath all of that lies a dormant force."

Nenad also took his arm off of Nikola's shoulders and almost choked: "I'd love... I'd love to be a wolf in this forest."

He threw his head back, craned his neck, and howled:

"Aaaaarrrroooooo!"

When his cousins let him go, Nikola felt cold and naked.

"Let's throw snowballs down the hill," he said impatiently, "to see whose goes the farthest."

“Sure.”

The snow crunched between his palms. Unlike his two cousins, he did not have gloves. While he made snowballs and threw them down the hill, his fingers grew numb. As the snowballs rolled along the slope, they gathered more snow and got bigger, but most of them grew too heavy and soon stopped.

“Look at mine,” Nenad squeaked. “It’s the best!”

“It’s crap!” Vinko yelled. “Look at mine!”

“Yours stopped too!”

“Sure it did, it hit a stump.”

Nikola’s hands ached from the cold. He felt as though his palms were stripped of flesh—was as if he packed snow with clenched, frozen bones. He shoved his hands under his armpits trying to warm them up. Finally, he put them in his pants, underneath his balls.

“Look at my snowball!” yelled Nenad.

“Look at mine!” shouted Vinko.

Nikola did not look. He pulled his cold hands from between his thighs. Silently, he made a snowball. He threw it like he was throwing dice. The snowball bowled down the slope gathering snow on the way. It quickly spun. It quickly grew. It turned into a huge ball of snow that whooshed and scudded. Then it stopped whooshing—it roared, storming down the ravine.

When the monstrous, rushing snowball started to amass topsoil the boys realized the things had become serious.

“Oh God, oh God,” whispered Vinko shrilly. “It’s turning into an avalanche!”

The snowball turned into a natural disaster. It left a jagged trail of ruination and effortlessly brushed away a row of birches and pines at the far end of the slope. Thundering and sweeping everything before it, it disappeared from sight, moving toward the village. The entire mountain shook from the impact.

At that moment, it became apparent that one of Nikola’s cousins was frightened by and the other delighted with life.

“Yee-haw!” whooped Nenad the destroyer, as if the fear physically pleased him.

While the earth shook under their feet, Vinko started to cry and plead, “O God, save me from another avalanche from up the slope... God, please don’t let this one destroy the village down there!”

Nikola stood entranced. He also felt ecstatic from the destruction. He was intoxicated by the release of this natural force.

The little white thing he tossed down the hill with his own hand tore out boulders and swept down pines as if they were matchsticks. It moved matter and released a primal force. Nothing could stop that snowball once it started down the slope at that unique, exact angle. Nikola got goose bumps as he stood between the frightened Vinko and the enthusiastic Nenad.

“Destiny,” he whispered in awe.

## Winters

God was still busy with creation in Smiljan. Villagers were as tall as giants. People's words were not dead—they were alive. Nature was primal. The smell of frost was a divine greeting.

Back then, winters were colder than those that came later. They felt more Russian or Finnish than Balkan. To Nikola it seemed that the villagers left a sparkling trail as they tromped through the snow. A snowball that hit a tree exploded into a flash of light. One evening, something odd happened with the tomcat that Niko liked to hug and wrestle. On his way to light the candles, the boy rubbed the cat and felt sparks crackling underneath his palm. He looked from left to right, following his hand. Light shimmered between his fingers and the cat's back. This was yet another "beautiful phenomenon" related to God's work.

"Would you look at that!" exclaimed Djuka.

Milutin figured out that what they saw—and there was no doubt that they all saw it—was electricity. He explained that peculiarity the best he could.

That was the first time it occurred to Nikola that Nature was like a huge cat. He wondered who's rubbing her?

"We live in an illuminated world," whispered Milutin to his wife and son.

"What does 'illuminated' mean?" Djuka whispered back.

"Lit from within."

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## The Visors

*When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.*

**Plato, *The Republic*, book VII**

(trans. Benjamin Jowett)

“It comes out of nowhere!” little Nikola complained to his parents.

He closed his eyes, and light engulfed him. The entire world dissolved in liquid fire.

“I’m disappearing. I’m getting absorbed by light,” the boy whispered.

He struggled to return to the precious world of daily existence.

“This thing has a will of its own!” he cried.

“Does it feel like it does when you turn your face toward the sun with your eyes closed?” asked Mother.

“In a way. A golden visor falls over my eyes while they’re open. There’s a flash and I’m floating in light.”

Milutin wondered, *Could it be epilepsy?*

It turned out to be something like the Tabor Light in the Eastern Church. The light that annihilated all the laws of the universe with one swoop fell on Nikola’s eyes. Seen from within, a golden hemisphere replaced his face. That illumination that shook the foundation of life and annihilated the physical world frightened Father Milutin.

This was when Dane, for the first time, took the side of his brother, who was younger by eight years.

“No. What Nikola’s talking about happens to me too.”

The parents felt relieved. Whatever happened to their prince could not be bad.

“Do images appear along with the flashes of light?” Dane asked his brother.

Nikola nodded.

“Don’t be afraid of them,” Dane said. “Let yourself go.”

With teary eyes, Nikola stared at him and wailed, “But that is the scariest of all!”

## Brother

“Who’s this handsome boy?” visitors asked, smiling at Dane Tesla.

They turned toward younger Nikola and said, “And who’s this?”

The brothers resembled each other, but no one noticed that. Auntie Deva, who was snaggletoothed like a boar, preferred Dane. So did Luka Bogić, the red-faced hunter who sometimes pointed his gun at children and threatened to kill them. The gray-bearded Father Alagić, who snorted as he laughed, also liked Dane better.

In front of visitors, Milutin never failed to boast about Dane’s intelligence.

“How many priest vestments hang on your mother’s family tree?” he asked impatiently.

“Thirty-six.”

“Who was the first one?”

“Tomo Mandić.”

“That’s my clever boy!”

When he started school, Dane never had to read a page more than once. Whatever he saw was well said.

“The prince!” his relatives would say.

“Will he become a patriarch?” the sly Luka Bogić asked.

“He can be whatever he wants to be,” Milutin Tesla responded soberly. “But let him become a good man.”

There were no signs that Dane was bored by these performances for his father’s friends even after he reached his teens. Whenever the exquisite Danilo Trbojević, the excellent Danilo Popović, or the diligent Damjan Čučković came to visit, he recited Schiller’s poems in German, including “Unter Den Linden,” “Die Ideale,” or “Das Lied von der Glocke.”

“It’s obvious he comprehends every single line,” praised Čučković.

“Both comprehends and feels,” added Popović, who was himself a poet.

But the real mental exercises were conducted when Milutin was alone with his son. He demanded that the boy learn texts by rote, practice rhetorical skills, and read people’s minds. As a cadet in the military academy, Tesla observed his teacher, a Jesuit, get into a student’s face and command, “Refute Aristotle!”

He repeated the same drill with Dane. In the voice of the former officer, he ordered, “Refute Descartes!”

Dane had new growth shadowing his upper lip. He looked out the window and began, “Descartes doubted his own existence, suspecting all visible things to be merely props that a malicious demon placed around him.”

The boy paused deliberately. Then he raised his voice: “Tormented by his universal doubt the philosopher searched for certainty. Excited and perhaps defiant, he uttered the famous sentence, ‘I think, therefore I am.’” Here Dane smiled and pointed out: “The problem that tortured Descartes was nothing new. In the fourteenth century, John of Mirecourt postulated

'If I deny or even doubt my own existence, I contradict myself. Is it possible to doubt one's existence without implicitly confirming it?' Saint Augustine foresaw Descartes's dilemma when he exclaimed, 'If I am deceived, I am!'"

Dane Tesla raised his arm and, like a matador killing a bull, concluded: "After all, Descartes was a thinker, and it does not come as a surprise that for him thinking was the source of certainty. Had he been a gardener, he would be looking for confirmation of his existence in his garden. As a musician, he would say, 'I play, therefore I am.'"

"Not bad," Milutin muttered, while his face was saying, "That's exquisite, son! That's top notch!"

And who was that big-eared boy with a triangular head, peering at his father and his brilliant brother from behind the door?

Nikola did not like to be called Niko, because in Serbian it meant "nobody"—the one who does not exist. Through the half-open door, the boy watched his brother, who was turning into a young man. Dane was as handsome as Young Joseph. How could one person be blessed with so many gifts? Who endowed them? Dane was mysterious with the mystery of youth. He felt blood rushing through his veins. Surprised by himself, he strained his ears to hear the voices in his own breathing. Nikola had to ask him three times before he got a response. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Dane called him back.

"I'm going to eat."

"Why? You'll only get hungry again."

Nikola laughed. His brother remained serious. When Dane's smile eventually shone through, Nikola forgot himself and his envy. He never encountered such grace again.

*If he were not around, it occurred to Nikola more than once, what kind of world would there be? Would the sun still shine?*

Perhaps Nikola would be important in that thrilling world? Perhaps he would seem bright in that horrifying world without Dane?



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