

DEPRECIATING THE LITERATURE¹

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Abstract

Science is, including the humanities, literature and art, in all ages has shown surprising vitality, adapting to and surviving, and in the most unfavorable socio-political environment, demonstrating willingness to accept any ideology and serve the new government in exchange for financial, material and human resources. Scientists and artists can act without political freedom, but without the professional freedom the science quickly degrades.

This paper will discuss examples of neglect or criticism of bourgeois literature and literature in exile in the period of socialism, focusing on the present-day Serbia, whose official ideology is the repression of the so-called Communist literature.

Keywords: *Ideology, Textbooks, Historical Revisionism, War Literature, Postmodernism*

It is indisputable that the science and art develop as long as there is humanity. But the development of science and art can not be done without interaction with the society and the system of government. This relationship was particularly strong during the socio-political and economic earthquakes, wars, straining the geopolitical situation. In crisis or wartime there are conditions to implement the politicization of the whole ideology of scientific disciplines. History teaches us that the process of the relationship of science and the state is always delicate, especially in finding common ground between scientists, artists and politicians.

Substantial differences in configurations in relations to the holders of political and economical power, on the one side, and science and art on the other side, of the extreme conditions, create many variants of the comparison of this relationship in different countries, that have gone through times of crisis. Meeting this task will enable the move from general statements about the impact of socio-cultural and political-ideological factors in science on the study of specific mechanisms that influence the different historical periods and in different countries.

HISTORICAL-IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SERBIAN LITERATURE

In the process of construction and shaping of social picture of history, literature inevitably enters the dialogue with other institutional discourses. This has always been the case and so much so, that the very idea of an independent, *l'art pour l'art* literature had to wait very long indeed to come to life – not earlier than the 18th century (French literary movements like Parnasism, Classicism etc.). In the long run, it is always the pragmatic nature of the politics that justifies the use of literature for ideological purposes. And in case there might emerge any appeal of consciousness in that matter, there is always the mighty silogistic consolation that - if subjected to the aesthetic rules - the use of ideology in literature becomes legitimate.

Serbian writers, during the eight centuries of existence of Serbian literature, were representatives, spiritual leaders of the nation and driving force of the spirit of patriotism, heroism, national pride. Especially during the Ottoman rule in Serbia (the 15th to the 19th century), the unifying idea of literature (dominantly oral) was the idea of freedom, the common perception of the past as well as the continuity of Serbian suffering and struggle for national liberation. During the wars and frequent changes of government in modern times, Serbian literature has taught people the persistence and served as a model for the perseverance of moral strength. Tragic heroic motifs were taken from the oral epic poems and the Kosovo myth.

In the 19th century, after two successful uprisings against the Turks, the Serbian state resurrected from historical ashes and both the writers and politicians had to catch pace with

Europe. That is why in 19th century Serbia it was possible to have even four greater literary movements almost at the same time: romanticism, realism, historicism, and socialist movement. A thin red line that connected them all was the nationalist revival, a positive, vibrant feeling of a fulfilled historical purpose. That is why the explorative works of Serbian writers were spread in all directions, testing various methodologies and epistemology, giving a space to collision of different discourses in search for explanations of the modern world. Although there was disagreement between the inherited traditional, patriarchal, and young and rising civic culture, these were in function of cultural revival and reconstruction of national consciousness.

At the same time, the late 19th and early 20th century brought along the first symbolists, the early founders of the Serbian avantgarde. It meant the break with the rural, patriarchal culture in favour of the rising bourgeois class and its dynamic needs. The best of the modern Serbian literature was founded in the time between the two world wars, including the authors and works of the highest European standards, like Milos Crnjanski, Ivo Andric, Rastko Petrovic, Jovan Micic and his magazine „Zenith“, Dimitrije Mitrinovic and others. This strong and fertile pro-European line in Serbian literature and culture was abruptly terminated by the socialist revolution, which successfully took place during the World War II. Thus Serbia, within the former Yugoslavia of course, shared the same fate with all the neighbouring Balkan countries whose short lived independence ended in a slavery of another kind.

The Serbian and Yugoslav case was even better than the case of other countries, because of the breaking with Russia in 1948, but it did not have such a fully positive effect on literature and culture of the time. On the contrary, making of Russia yet another enemy, the socialist regime had to reinforce its own propaganda and for this purpose it used literature with no mercy.

The development of Serbia from the end of World War II until the late 1980ies had quite a few cultural turns. In congruence with the

regular practice of totalitarian regimes, Serbian literature developed in the sign of socialist realism as its only relevant stylistic direction, and strengthened the spirit of collectivism as one of its basic ideas. It was built on pathetic heroic war stories, mythomaniac perspective of important events, the idea of perpetual revolution, patriotic tunes and social topics. Even in that period, the literary works of great artistic value were created, with an unambiguous anti-war message. It can be said that, not only in the Balkans but also in the broader context, the Serbian writers have given a very large contribution to the processing and presentation of anti-war message. Generations of pupils, until the beginning of 2000, were raised in the spirit of that literature.

But everything else was named as bourgeois, decadent, degenerated, depreciated and incomprehensible to the maximum, exiled and banished from the society. The literary works that were, by concept and expression, in conflict with the dominant literary and cultural models were generally not publicly discussed, therefore they did not exist, and so lost any significance. In some cases, though, true cultural crimes were carried out by literary critics who thrived to prove boundless loyalty to the regime.

An icon of these times was the author Dobrica Cosic, who wrote mainly about the events of recent national history. His literary opus was initially focused on the themes of partisan war, and later on the dissolution of the Serbian state (on the eve of the World War II and during it), in both cases filled with political ideas and functionally in favor of the socialist state and its political project. These works were praised as ideal, and their author was unofficially declared the spiritual father of Serbian nation. In the terms of profession, he was crowned with the highest scientific titles, elected a regular member of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts, and became president of Yugoslavia from 1992 to 1993. Today, despite an authentic epic dimension of his novels, the voices that challenge his character and works are stronger and louder, charging him for „ideological forgery“, and for socially conditioned interpretations of historical events.

Contrary to this, there were writers who have influenced his novels, although they wrote about historical deception in the Serbian totalitarian society. The novel „When the pumpkins were in bloom“ by Dragoslav Mihailoviæ, according to some critics one of the best postwar short novels, was outcasted. The novel, among other things, discusses the consequences and effects that Staljin-Tito conflict had on ordinary people. Yet another famous writer - Danilo Kiš, who is often compared with Jorge Luis Borges in foreign literary criticism, and who received numerous international literary awards,² met with huge misunderstanding during the Tito's regime. He wrote stories with mixed erudition and a taste for fantastic, thus opposing the banal historicism („literature that exists on a number of human deaths“) of his contemporary peers. He sought and found his rightful place in modern European literature. But, because of his bitter controversy and clearly ironic attitude towards the powers that be, he was accused of plagiarism, with an indirect but obvious political motivation. At 1988, when the ideological pressures abated, Serbia paid him his tribute, offering him the membership in various scientific institutions, first of all in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

After 1990 there comes a sharp break with the revolutionary past which is now seen as a burden. Divided republics of the former common state struggle to incorporate significant writers in their national cultural heritage (the case was especially so with Mesa Selimovic, Ivo Andric, Skender Kulenovic and a few Serbian writers born in Croatia). That „war for authors“ sometimes took weird turns. For example, Ivo Andric, a Serbian writer from Bosnia and the Nobel Prize winner, became famous for his Balkan theme of tragic fate of people who lived on the border of the Ottoman Empire. The main characteristic of his prose works is his positive feeling that different people of different nations and different cultures can live together and coexist, can and should build bridges (*The Bridge on the Drina*, *The Bridge on the Zhepa*) of understanding and cooperation. Despite that, in

the former Yugoslav Republic Bosnia and Herzegovina, he was lately declared a criminal by the Bosniak people, and „the architect of criminal project called Greater Serbia“.

The same is the case with the most important Montenegrin poet Petar II Petrovic Njegos, who lived in the 19th century. His book „The Mountain Wraith“, translated in many languages in the former Yugoslavia, had the importance of the Bible and was many times compared to Dante's „Divine Comedy“. After 2000 it was read and analyzed in a different way and publicly defined as Njegoš's „Mein Kampf“ because its subject was the slaughter of muslim Montenegrins (islamized Christians) by their Christian compatriots.

A more actual example of misunderstood „zeitgeist“ are the Kosovo's textbooks. As the long lasting and painful process of separation of Kosovo from Serbia came to its end, Government in Kosovo and its Pristina Commission on Education Reform, in the summer of 2010 extracted from the textbook for Serbian pupils of the seventh grade (elementary school), two classics of Serbian literature: the poem „Simonida“ by Milan Rakic and drama „Battle on Kosovo“ by Ljubomir Simovic, two of the most renowned Serbian poets. The explanation was that the „problematic content does not promote the principles of freedom and democracy and calling for peace and tolerance“. If there has ever been an example of stark misunderstanding of the very term „political correctness“, this must be it.

No matter how much they are against the contemporary political-philosophical mainstream, and even more our modern moral and political intuitions, it seems that certain attitudes (pointed out during 1930-ies) by German jurist Carl Schmitt are very actual today, especially in the interpretation of current political practices and „responses“ to literature. Because of that, considering the interpretation of historical events to the extent of value-oriented, charged emotions in the service of politics, some critics today think that the modern historical novel is - unhistorical!

EXAMPLES FROM THE SERBIAN LITERATURE TEXTBOOKS

Education is not preparation for life;
Education is life itself – John Dewey

In the past 20 years, during the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia and the change of ideology, the textbooks of history, geography and partly of Serbian language and literature, have been changed several times. As the textbook reading has a significant mobilizing role of the delayed effect, it is obvious that textbook literature is not only instrumentalised on factual level, the level of choice and interpretation of literary works, but it is also determined on the level of actual values and the construction of its own historical identity. So, the textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education, and offered to teachers within their school associations, should go through some minor changes. The reforms show a success, only if are made by the active participation of the most recognized individuals and representatives of national scientific and professional associations, and not by the ideas of political officials and scientific bureaucracy. First of all, there is no choice of equally valuable but different textbooks out of which teachers could make their pick, as is the case in other European countries. It means that there is, still, a strict State control over education.

As a result of wars that were fought on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, literary textbooks in Serbia have lost all literary works of authors from other Yugoslav republics. In the academic 1992/3, one year after the start of the wars in former Yugoslavia, significant alterations were made in order to adapt to the new conditions, and in order to design a new national identity. But, the ideological matrix has not been abandoned till 2003. when from the curriculum of the Serbian language and literature were removed literary works that, in the previous decade, were analyzed in detail: Antonije Isakoviæ: „Sky through branches“, Aleksandar Tišma: „The Use of Man“, Desanka Maksimović: „I ask for amnesty“, Mihailo Laliæ: „Lelejska

mountain“, „Stojanka mother Knežpoljka, a significant anti-war poem by Skender Kulenović, a Bosnian writer, a Croatian writer Ivan Goran Kovačić: „Pit“ (the monologue after passing the massacre). The interest in rural issues and social novel is completely lost. The loss of the social literature further affects the sense of the youth to understand poverty and distress, to develop feeling for morality, solidarity, empathy, sacrifice... (like story „Spoon“, by Vladan Desnica, a Croat-Serbian writer, like works by Bertolt Brecht - “Mother Courage and Her Children” etc.),...³ Generally speaking, by eliminating the issue of antifascist struggle and social revolution from the history of modern Serbian literature, the cultural politics not only diminishes their significance, but also opens the possibility of new models (even socially regressive or undesirable) of interpretation of the past.⁴ Although, in the period of global social crisis, the confidence in all important social institutions is falling, it is still possible to speak about the important role and the significance of education in preceiving national identity. Through the curriculum for national history and similar educative branches, the aim of achieving new cultural (multicultural and intercultural) synthesis begins to seem realistically possible.

Throughout history, it was relatively easy for the Serbian culture to integrate into modern styles and movements, so from the end of 20th century and on the main feature of Serbian literature is postmodernism⁵. Moreover, as a result of the tumultuous historical events that lead to the „tired history“, Serbian cultural community shows a high degree of indifference to their own cultural identity and prefer to accept the literature devoid of the burden of the past. Thus the author Milorad Paviæ is represented in literary textbook for 2003. as a paradigm of postmodern style, showing that there is not only one truth, but that all truths are equally false and illusory.

Reciprocally, the process of postmodernism is affecting anthropological, sociological, and cultural spheres, although there it coexists with a strong traditional heritage. Serbia, especially after the year 2000, found itself in multiple gap

under pressure to perform the transformation of modernization, which could no longer be delayed. This gap is, like any other social process, the most intensively reflected on the youth, who therefore experience it more dramatically than others. Canadian writer Douglas Coupland symbolically called his own generation – the „generation x“ (*Generation X: tales for an accelerated culture*, 1991), stressing their inclination to easily get fascinated by technological processes, feeling at the same time a nostalgia for a coherent system of values. In mid-1990s, the Serbian cultural public was preoccupied with this book and it opened the subject of analysis of social and individual practices of youth in contemporary Serbian social context as well as the question of how to integrate youth into society. It is, therefore, a significant challenge to the school system to open up a spiritual space for young people in which they will be able to live the life as they wish for, and which is, in addition, socially expedient.

Epilogue

Sense of history, more precisely, the epic historical vision, has always been an important feature of the spiritual culture of the Serbian people. The changing of the textbooks in the direction of depreciating or removing the war and „communist“ literature seems as an attempt to initialize the epic experience of the world in order to re-experience the tradition. Starting from one of the fundamental role of the textbook, which is reflected in the formulation of the desirable characteristics of both national identity and personal mentality, we can talk about the responsibilities of educational institutions in the process. If the goal is the unification process of culture and the weakening of national consciousness, that it would not be civilized progress, because (I'll repeat what was said many times, like a mantra), the true wealth of a civilization lies in its diversity.

Historical revisionism is imposed as a matrix and, if inevitable, it operates even on the principle of natural law. Uncritical, nonanalytic

view that history is repeating itself is not just superficial, amateurish approach that distracts one from dealing with the past and present, but it is also a dangerous propaganda by which the holders of political and economical power are securing their position and buying the amnesty for the future. In the field of literature, history, and other areas of social life subjective to evaluation, I believe that a mature society must have the strength and courage to face its past, leaving out the complex relations with countries in the region⁶. The image of the Balkans as a „powder keg“ and of the tragic historical destiny of the Balkan nations are dangerous auto-stereotypes, and should be avoided. Awareness of the continuity of all the social changes is a true test for a country, for its strength and vitality. So, in the process of articulating a long-term strategy of social development in terms of globalization (and eurocentrism), as the central driving force in reshaping the world, young generations should learn, based on a cultural pattern, not to grow up in a historical vacuum, but to themselves make a wise and honorable name.

Endnotes

1. Explanation the title of the text:

The medieval Arab and European alchemical texts and symbols use the term (literally) „blackening“ or „nigrifying“ to express the purifying nature of the alchemical processes. In the context I here suggest, the translation „depreciating“ seems more appropriate because the matter, before it turns to gold, has to pass the process of transformation, which is the stage of „depreciating“. Carl Gustav Jung used this principle to show how the figure of painstaking self-development meets the road with a number of archetypes that must be overcome in order to reach its wholeness, completeness. Although at the first glance it seems, the same happens with the literature and its protagonists. There are just a few literary works of the long-term national or civilizational values that have appeared in periods of social well-being and personal serenity. More frequently it is the exposed writers who found their power in suffering and pain and their literature was a signpost in the wilderness and a landmark in times of confusion. On the other hand, socially nonestablished literary works are still going through various

- ideological „depreciating“ on their way to (broad) social acceptance, „plating“.
2. The French literary prizes Grand Aigle d'or de la ville de Nice (1980th year, the entire literary work), The German literary prize Preis des Literaturmagazins, 1988. The American literary award Bruno Schulz Prize, 1989.
 3. It is noted that one of the most positive side of change is introduction the novel "The Master and Margarita" by Mikhail Afanasievich Bulgakov, in the mandatory reading material of the final year of secondary schools, in 2003. It seems that novel is very corresponded to the spirit of the time, because fourth grade pupils of secondary schools with great care and understanding of the issues analyzed the life in a totalitarian regime, the fear of personal existence, hatred and absolute obedience, hatred and absolute obedience, "washed hand" symbol, the devil as a savior motif.
 4. It seems that, in contemporary Serbia, the philosophical and cultural mainstrim is the literature (published in samizdat and most award-winning, especially by international awards), which is on the positions of europocentrism, and corresponds to (negative) stereotypes that West has on the Serbs. The special cases are the books of the writers in exile, written during the wars of the last decade of the 20th century and the regime by Slobodan Milošević. Some of them are instrumentalised his exile and turned it into a personal phenomenon and profitable project. In contrast of that, smaller in numbers and irrelevant in the artistic sense, is literature speaks of the Serbian people in the category of the „nation victim“, the „heavenly nation“ and the „historically correct nation“ and provides elements for inspire hatred toward some other nations and the West.
 5. Some authors, as for example Roland Barth, considers that the 19th century created a realist novel and a narrative history, two genres which with the common aspiration to select, construct and express self-satisfied and closed narrative world. On the contrary, history and fiction today have a common need to challenge these assumptions. Postmodern novels openly claim that truth exists only in the plural: there is never just one truth, and there is rarely a lie per se, for lie is but the truth of others. Postmodern fiction suggests that to pre-test and pre-put the past in fiction or in history means in both cases to be open to the present, protect it from being final and teleological.
 6. Also, it should be mentioned that some important historical events, especially in the recent past, for example: a dramatic and aggressive disintegration of the common state, themes of exile and its consequences, the bombardment of Serbia in 1999, is difficult to explain in a rational way. It is much more acceptable if explained through the works of literature and art that, among other things, provides a social and an individual catharsis. However, it seems that this issue is still not found its proper artistic expression in literature and art.