

# On the Phenomenon of Biliterariness (Based on the Experience of Studies of South Slavic Literatures)

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*Russian Slavic scholars have focused on issues of studying and interpreting South Slavic Literatures for a long time. A recent landmark in the field, the Lexicon of South Slavic Literatures presents not only prominent Yugoslav writers but unveils their literary interconnections. Among other things, a feature of South Slavic literary context is a phenomenon of biliterariness of a number of writers, i.e. their affiliation with literary life of several national literatures. This phenomenon has deep historical, literary, ethnic, lingual, and religious roots. In certain periods, mostly under the influence of extraliterary conditions, it triggers heated debates. For example, the Soviet Union collapse provoked polemics over the attitude of Russian writing authors (Aitmatov, Bykov) representing national literatures towards Russian literature. While identifying the specificity of works authored by writers whose literary activity can be affiliated with two literatures, it should be taken into account that their biliterariness may be diachronic, i.e. pertaining to different periods, or synchronic, i.e. manifesting itself throughout the development of two literatures simultaneously. Scholars studying multinational contexts of any kind are facing a challenge of developing key criteria to identify national dominant.*

Keywords: South Slavic literatures / national identity / multiculturalism / bilingualism / biliterariness

Russian Slavic scholars have focused on issues of studying and interpreting South Slavic Literatures for a long time. One of the milestones of the recent years was the publication of the *Lexicon of South Slavic Literatures* (2012), in which the literary works of Bosnian and Herzegovinian, Macedonian, Serbian, Slovenian, Croatian, and Montenegrin writers for the first time became “an independent subject

of scientific research as both a distinct literary community and an integral part of the pan-European context” (*Leksikon* 7).<sup>1</sup>

A team of contributors of the *Lexicon* headed by the founder of the academic school of Literary Southern Slavic Studies, Professor Galina Ilyina (1930–2018) faced the problem how to comprehensively survey the existing types of inter-Slavic relations. The problem persists until the present, when post-Yugoslav nation-states seek to revitalize their national heritage, promote their literary languages, and revise national canons after gaining independence.

With regard to scholarly goals, there are two types of articles covering Yugoslav subject matter in the *Lexicon* literary-historical outlines and portraits of writers. Ten review articles based on the material studied during the research project present the main stages of literary development: folklore, medieval literature, national awakening, romanticism, realism, Art Nouveau (the Modern), avant-garde, socialist literature, (social or new) realism, modernism and postmodernism. The structure of these articles is based on an integral comparative-typological approach to national literatures as distinct literary communities that analyses their artistic process and at the same time shows the degree of convergence and divergence among them, their deep similarity and the logic of individual national movements, as well as their interaction with the European literary environment while taking into account the differences and asynchrony in their development. The “portraits of a writer” specify and deepen the insight into relationship between the general and the nationally specific, the universal and the local covered by review chapters. Instead of attempting to provide quantitative equality of writers included in the *Lexicon*, the contributors rather focused on the work of writers considered to be the most significant and relevant for their respective national literatures.

A crucial problem the research team faced in the course of the project is the phenomenon of biliterariness, i.e. involvement of a single writer into the literary life of several national literatures. This phenomenon has deep historical, literary, ethnic, lingual, and confessional roots. In certain periods, mostly under the influence of extraliterary conditions, it erupts and triggers heated debates. For example, the collapse of the

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Soviet Union provoked polemics over the attitude of Russian writing authors (Aitmatov, Bykov) representing national literatures towards Russian literature.

Former Yugoslavia has a specific historical background. Since the ancient times, the Yugoslav lands have been populated by ethnically related peoples speaking closely related languages, but their historical development was affected by divergent social, political, religious (for instance the Great Schism of 1054) and cultural factors. The relations between South Slavs were further complicated because they belonged to different state formations, which were often at war with each other. Some of them fell and spent centuries under Austrian rule, others—under the Ottoman Empire. All this conditioned the structure of the emerging cultural context of the region and the system of internal relations within it. The twentieth century, with its two world wars, civil war, revolutionary transformations, Yugoslav Wars and breakup of Yugoslavia resulted for the Yugoslav peoples in multiple changes of political order, ruling ideologies, and relations between nations. Only towards the end of the twentieth century and after the Yugoslav wars, Yugoslav republics became independent nation-states. The political and social calamities overwhelming the country over the course of a century had a direct impact on the inter-literary relations between South Slavic communities and on centripetal and centrifugal tendencies within their shared cultural space. Since the transitions between periods of literary development were marked by political turmoils, which caused fatal ruptures in social and artistic consciousness, the arts—literature above all—took upon itself the mission to preserve national identity, national traditions, and cultural continuity.

In 1918, conditions were ripe for the formation of a multinational literary context. For the first time, the nations composing the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (with the exclusion of Slovenians and Croats of Italy and Austria) found themselves within the same state system in which the majority of the population had practically no need for a lingua franca. Under such conditions, a piece of art produced within one literature could become a part of the literary context of another. Writers, artists, musicians, and theatre people no longer needed to cross state borders, but instead they could freely switch between and rapidly adapt to various cultural frames. The possibility of direct contacts, participation in joint literary and artistic events, creative associations and publications increased. However, even though Yugoslav nations were ethnically related, they had developed in different historical conditions, religions, and cultural traditions, which

predetermined their unique identities, artistic expressions and mentalities. The existing communities were divided not only on the grounds of confessional differences, but also aesthetic values. Several cultural streams thus collided on the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians. On the one hand, the predominantly Catholic lands (Croatia, Slovenia, Vojvodina) were formed in the cultural sphere of the Latin West. They experienced considerable Latin, Italian, and later Austro-German influences. On the other hand, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia were Orthodox lands gravitating towards Byzantium, and later towards Russia and its culture; moreover, Macedonia had close ties with Bulgarian culture. The third Yugoslav component had been under the Ottoman and, more broadly, the Oriental influence. Most intensively it affected Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to a lesser extent Serbs, Montenegrins, and Macedonians, who succeeded to preserve the Orthodox fundamentals of their culture and literature. The historically differentiated cultural streams in Yugoslavia oscillated between centripetal, complementary, and cumulative forces on the one hand, and centrifugal, differentiating forces aimed at assertion of national rights against the unitary tendency of “integral Yugoslavism” on the other hand. The correlation between these forces was very unstable as they succeeded each other on a dominant position, which led the whole system to the verge of collapse or significant changes in its nature.

The situation was similar in the second, Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia with its single ideological system. There, the role of cultural contacts, both at personal level and between republics, increased to an even greater extent. The pan-Yugoslav cultural space existed not only as a cover for official policy. Its vitality was evident manifesting itself in international meetings and festivals held, books and joint journals published. This led to convergence, overlapping, and, in certain cases, even to interlocking of various literary phenomena. The integration process took different forms. One of them may be termed “bilit-erariness” (bi-literary existence). This term was proposed by the Slovak literary theorist and comparatist Dionýz Ďurišin, who noted that “bi-literary writers exist in each literature in a different way corresponding to their place and significance in given literature” (Ďurišin 249).

However, efforts at ideological and cultural unification under the slogan “Brotherhood and Unity” have been challenged by the resurgence of the concept of national individuality since the late 1960s. Fiction literature and the humanities played a considerable, if not the leading, role in the introduction of this concept into the public con-

sciousness. This process spread throughout almost all the cultures of Yugoslavia. Starting from the 1970s, many writers whose national literary affiliation was ambiguous began to be “divided” between national literatures. Instead of fading over the years, this trend even accelerated in the post-Yugoslav successor states.

Recent intensification and expansion of literary research formats such as histories of national literature, literary encyclopedias, lexicons, and bio-bibliographical dictionaries has called for urgent development of appropriate methodology. Resorting to such publications is associated not only with the necessity to strengthen the national identity of the peoples, who have recently gained their statehood, but just as much with the globalization process and the concomitant danger of universal cultural uniformity.

While identifying individualities of work of writers whose literary activity can be affiliated with two national literatures, it should be taken into account that their biliterariness can be diachronic, i.e. pertaining to different periods (Stanko Vraz, Ivo Andrić, Meša Selimović), or synchronic, i.e. manifesting itself throughout the development of two literatures simultaneously (Petar P. Njegoš, Hasan Kikić, Radovan Zogović, Vladan Desnica). Even though the role and significance of a given writer for two literatures is recognized, in certain cases (especially when it comes to national literature history textbooks or literary encyclopedias) it is necessary to ascertain the national dominants of their work, with full understanding that simplifications are inevitable. All scholars involved in studies of multinational contexts of any kind face the challenge of defining key criteria to identify this dominant. Example can be found in experience of the editorial board of the bio-bibliographical dictionary *Russian Writers of the Twentieth Century*, who had to address the issue of whether bilingual writers working in the space of the Russian language and literature, such as Gennady Aygi, Vasil Bykov, Chinghiz Aitmatov, were part of the corpus of Russian literature. In the preface to the dictionary, Professor Pyetr Nikolayev wrote:

Many of their texts were created in Russian; their contribution to Russian literature and Russian culture in general is very significant. But the main source of their creativity lies in the national spiritual elements: Chuvash, Belarusian, Kyrgyz, etc. As a general rule, their native language was the one that they began to write in, and it was the life of their national homelands that was the subject of their narration. Therefore, in the context of modern art, they represent, first and foremost, their national literatures. The examples of Vladimir Nabokov and Iosif Brodsky do not refute this statement: the core fundamentals of their work are within the specifically Russian artistic phenomena. (Nikolaev 6)

The question arises what features should be considered as markers of writer's affiliation with a certain literature. Should these be permanent residence in the country, involvement in literary life, membership in the Writers' Union, cooperation with and publications in periodicals, personal opinion? For example, the reason for Ivo Andrić to be included in the *Lexicon of Croatian Literature* in 1998 was his commitment to "the language, stylistic, thematic, and philosophical components of Croatian heritage" despite him "switching to Serbian and entering Serbian literary life" (*Leksikon Hrvatske književnosti* 13). Any such features may bear great significance in a particular case, but in our opinion, no single criterion can be considered self-sufficient when it comes to revealing the national literary dominant of the writer's work. It is only a complex of all or several of them creating a coordinate system in their interdependence that allows to affiliate the writer's work with one or another national literature, which, however, does not anyhow diminish his role (if there is any) in other literature. As a result, the key features of national literary affiliation defined by the authors of the *Lexicon* are the following:

1. Language. In the South Slavs' case, the situation is complicated by the fact that for South Slavic languages this component is not a constant, but a variable, since there are actual lexical, phonetic and stylistic distinctions, which begin to take on great importance in certain historical conditions, as we can already witness in the SFRY successor states. As noted by Nikita Tolstoy, these distinctions are largely caused by the fact that literary languages and literatures of the South Slavic peoples were formed at different speeds and in different bilingual situations. In case of Serbs and Montenegrins, bilingualism was homogeneous: Paleoslavonic (Old Church Slavonic) and Serbian. Bilingualism of Croats and Slovenians had heterogeneous nature: Latin/Italian/German and Croatian/Slovenian. Hungarian-Croatian bilingualism was also present among Croats (Tolstoy 126). For the literary language of Bosnian Muslims, the existence of literature written in three oriental languages (Turkish, Arabic, and Persian) and its transition to the national language through Arabic alphabet did not pass without a trace. All these factors, to a greater or lesser extent, shaped the perception of their language in relation to other South Slavic languages at different stages of development.

2. Place of birth; ethnic and religious environment of upbringing, education, and identity building; the role of folk art in the author's ethical and aesthetic world perception.

3. Incorporation into the literary environment, both external (participation in elective bodies, literary organizations, periodicals) and

internal (participation in or association with literary groups, movements, certain aesthetic norms).

4. National (and sometimes literary) self-identification. This feature can be construed as defining. Nevertheless, it must be understood that, however important this factor is, the subjective decision of a writer is bound to be affected by extraliterary factors when it comes to authoritarian and all the more totalitarian regimes. Also, the reasons that carry weight can be strictly personal with no relation to literature.

5. With all due regard for the undoubtful importance of the features mentioned above, it is a person's mentality, in formation of which the above factors had a hand, that we consider the most significant constant. It manifests itself in themes and literary forms of the work, its connection with literary traditions, in regional and ethnic features regardless of the writer's place of residence and sometimes even of his literary self-identification.

Here are three examples:

*Ivo Andrić* (1892–1975) was born in Bosnia to a Catholic family, spent his childhood and school years there, and received his higher education in Zagreb, Vienna, and Krakow. The publication of the anthology *Croatian Young Lyrics* (1914) in Zagreb marked the beginning of his literary activity, and he became a member of the Croatian Writers' Society. His first books were written during his imprisonment for participation in the anti-Austrian movement during the First World War and published in Zagreb in 1918 and 1920. As the War ended, Andrić being an active advocate for Yugoslavism moved to Belgrade, entered the diplomatic service, and got actively involved in the literary life of the capital. In 1961, he received the Nobel Prize. There are three literatures laying claim to this writer this day. At the beginning of his literary career, Andrić can be considered as a Croatian writer through the lens of the type of his creative writing, its stylistic and linguistic features, aesthetic proximity to Expressionism widespread in Croatia at the time. It is needless to say that this experience had a lasting impact on him. Then he became a Serbian writer, one of those determining the development of Serbian literature and not just that, which does not contradict his original affiliation with Croatian literature. The influence of Andrić's literary work is felt in the works of many writers of other South Slavic literatures. The exotic world of Bosnia became for him a model of human existence, but, having excellent knowledge of the material itself, he described it from the perspective of a person of different, Christian, European culture and world perception. In Andrić's mind, this world was interesting not only and not so much in itself, but

rather as a prototype of a human community in the context of coexistence of people and nations with different worldviews.

*Meša Selimović* (1910–1982) was born into a dynasty of Bosnian beys. He proclaimed himself a Serbian writer, remaining a representative of Bosnian culture. The world of the novels *Death and the Dervish* and *The Fortress* that brought him fame is the world of Muslim Bosnia, its psychology, ethics, domestic culture brought to light through the eyes of a Muslim (not from a religious but ethnic point of view), i.e. described by him from within. This, however, does not in any way exclude that Selimović being a writer of the second half of the twentieth century was gravitating towards the philosophical model of Existentialism. He was the one credited with transforming the genre structure of the novel, which had an immensely beneficial impact on the development of both Serbian and Bosnian literatures.

*Mak Dizdar* (1917–1971), like Selimović, was descended from an old Muslim family. Permanently residing in Sarajevo and participating in the literary and social life of Bosnia and Herzegovina, he, nevertheless, chose to define himself as a Croatian writer. With due respect to this decision made by Dizdar (apparently, not without a good reason), while studying his work, one comes to the conclusion that all the imagery of the artistic world of his poetry is deeply rooted in the traditions of the old and new Bosnian Muslim literature. As it was noted by the authors, who included an article about Dizdar in the *Lexicon of Croatian Literature*, preserving language purity and beauty of its archaic nature as the pivots of tradition, the poet showed how the culture of his native land “with its own language and civilizational context did not lose its continuity after the Turkish conquest, when Bosnian kings and magnates had passed into oblivion” (*Leksikon Hrvatske književnosti* 68). In their concluding sentence, the authors of the article drew a remarkable inference: “The indisputable place of Dizdar in Croatian anthologies does not exclude that, in the widest sense of the word, his work overall contributed to the emancipation of Muslim Bosniaks” (ibid. 69). While the significance of the poet for Croatian literature cannot be denied, it seems impossible to exclude him from Bosniak literature. Perhaps there was no one in the twentieth century who expressed the spirit of Muslim Bosnia and its evolution better than Dizdar. Slobodan Prosperov Novak, a contemporary historian of Croatian literature, has concluded that “after the death of the poet, he comfortably positioned himself in two literatures simultaneously” (Prosperov Novak 168).

The same is true with regard to the literary works of Montenegrins Mihailo Lalić (1914–1993) and Radovan Zogović (1907–1986), who,

despite living full-time in Belgrade and taking an active part in its literary life after the Second World War, never broke ties with their homeland. The artistic world of their works is also tightly bound to it, not just in terms of themes but also mentality. Their characters have clearly depicted national features; even the style of the works reflects the Montenegrin imagery based on the folk concepts of nature, man, and their interrelationship developed under special historical conditions. Both of them draw heavily on folk art. Both called themselves Montenegrin Yugoslav writers, although some literary scholars affiliate them only with Serbian literature. Meanwhile, the definiteness of literary affiliation does not at all exclude their recognition of the reliance on the richer literary traditions of Serbian literature and their creative contribution to the enrichment of two literatures.

Applying flexible and non-dogmatic scholarly criteria presented above may help to regard biliterariness of certain writers as less controversial and even painful (for national literatures).

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## O fenomenu biliterarnosti (na podlagi izkušenj študij južnoslovanskih književnosti)

Ključne besede: južnoslovanske književnosti / nacionalna identiteta / multikulturalnost / dvojezičnost / dvoliterarnost

Težave pri študiju in interpretaciji jugoslovanskih književnosti so že dolgo v središču pozornosti ruskih raziskovalcev. Prelomna izdaja zadnjih let je *Leksikon južnoslovanskih književnosti*, ki predstavlja ne samo ugledne jugoslovanske pisatelje, temveč tudi kvalitativno nove medsebojne literarne povezave. Ena izmed značilnosti jugoslovanskega literarnega konteksta je fenomen biliterarnosti pisateljev, tj. njihova povezanost z literarnim življenjem več nacionalnih književnosti. Ta pojav ima globoke zgodovinske, literarne, etnične, jezikovne in konfesionalne korenine. V določenih obdobjih, večinoma pod vplivom zunanjih pogojev, pride na površje in postane predmet vročih razprav. Na primer, razpad Sovjetske zveze je spodbudil polemiko o razmerju predstavnikov nacionalnih književnih pisav v ruskem jeziku do ruske književnosti. Pri ugotavljanju značilnosti dela pisateljev, katerih literarna dejavnost je lahko povezana z dvema literaturama, je treba upoštevati, da je njihova biliterarnost lahko diahrona, se nanaša na različna obdobja, ali sinhrona, tako da se manifestira v celotnem razvoju dveh literatur hkrati. Vsi literarni zgodovinarji, ki se ukvarjajo s študijami o večnacionalnih literarnih kontekstih, se soočajo z izzivom razvijanja ključnih meril za opredelitev nacionalne dominante biliterarnih pisateljev.

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