

Between *Boundedness* and *Boundlessness*: Literature in Postsocialist Context (An Introduction)

Marija Mitrović

If I conduct a search for the term ‘postsocialism’ in COBISS, the major Slovenian bibliographical database, I get as many as 866 search results.¹ Yet, only about 10 of these deal with postsocialism and literature. At the very top of the list is the brochure with the abstracts of papers presented at the international conference “Literature in Postsocialist Contexts,” which was organized by the comparatists from the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana in September 2019. Another individual bibliographic unit on this COBISS list pertains to the “Introduction” to this brochure, written by Vanesa Matajč. A similar topic was the subject of a symposium at the Faculty of Arts in Zagreb in 2015; the collection of papers from this symposium entitled *Transition and Cultural Memory*² is available in two Slovenian libraries. However, the more than 500-page collection is limited in two respects: first, because it focuses on the issue of transition only in the former Serbo-Croatian language and does not touch upon the entire Yugoslav area, and second, because it is primarily concerned with the past. It attempts to establish how we nowadays see the world that we lived in yesterday, what we remember and in what way.

Among the individual studies listed in the aforementioned search results, Nikolai Jeffs’s study “Od postkolonializma do postsocializma,” published in the journal *Literatura* in 2003, attracts attention. However, the term (post)socialism is first mentioned only in the last paragraph of the study in the framework of a general suggestion that the methods and theories of postcolonialism might be helpful in finding an answer to the issues that arose in the literature and in culture generally during the postsocialist period. This era and its echoes in literature have yet to be studied.

¹ The search was conducted on 22 February 2020.

² The collection was edited by Virna Karlič, Sanja Šakić and Dušan Marinković (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2017).

The list of studies in COBISS shows that postsocialism has been repeatedly described and considered from a political, social, ethnological, and anthropological point of view, while in the field of literature, this topic has remained somewhat neglected, although it has obviously brought fundamental changes to literary life since at least the 1990s. Some of the collections were published outside the area of former Yugoslavia. Possibly the first among these was published in the USA and is entitled *After Yugoslavia: The Cultural Space of a Vanished Land*.³ A few more collections on this topic exist, although unfortunately none is listed in COBISS. In 2014, the topic of transition in various arts in the area of former Yugoslavia was discussed at the Institute of Slavic Studies in Graz; Renate Hansen Kokoruš then edited a collection entitled *Facing the Present: Transition in Post-Yugoslavia*.⁴ The collection entitled *Post-Yugoslav Constellations* limits the period and area in its very subtitle: “Archive, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Literature and Culture.”⁵ In the collection *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media during and after Socialism*,⁶ in which—because of its title—one would expect further reflections on the relation between literature and the new ideological and geopolitical contexts, the focus is on the cultures of the Soviet bloc; a single text discusses the Yugoslav situation, i.e. it addresses the connection between Belgrade’s radio B92 and the Austrian ORF. There is not a single word about literature. Two valuable collections of this kind were published in Croatia—both in 2013: *Socijalizam na klupi: jugoslovensko društvo očima nove postjugoslovenske humanistike*⁷ and *Komparativni postsocijalizam: slavenska iskustva*.⁸

While the debate about postsocialism in culture has attracted the attention of researchers outside the former Yugoslavia and in Croatia,

³ The collection was edited by Radmila Gorup and it was published in Stanford, CA (Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁴ The collection was published in Hamburg (Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2014).

⁵ The collection was edited by Vlad Beronja and Stijn Varvaet, and it was published in 2016 by the publishing house Walter de Gruyter (Berlin/Boston).

⁶ The collection was edited by Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013).

⁷ The collection was edited by Lada Duraković and Andrea Matošević (Zagreb/Pula: Srednja Europa; Sa(n)jam knjige u Istri; Sveučilište Jurja Dobriše, 2013).

⁸ The collection was edited by Maša Kolanović (Zagreb, Filozofski fakultet, Zagrebačka slavistička škola; Hrvatski seminar za strane slaviste, 2013). Let me add that in 2019, the journal *Kultura* in Belgrade devoted issue 156 to literatures from the post-Yugoslav era (available online on casopiskultura.rs).

in Slovenia this debate is just beginning. This is precisely why it would be appropriate for these publications to become available, at least in the Slovenian National Library. Thus, the task of a group of enthusiasts from the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana is all the more important: to consider how the new economic and political ideologies are affecting literature. And above all: What is happening with the book production in the countries where postsocialism coincides with the establishment of new geopolitical borders? Until recently, these literatures operated under the same historical conditions and shared a common, socialist state with related nations. Now, however, there are new state borders where there had been none for more than 70 years. The change is therefore twofold: not only the replacement of the socialist system with a capitalist one, but also the replacement of the transnational Yugoslav framework with national literatures, which are now supposed to appear independently on the European and world literary scene.

If it is true that in the former Yugoslavia the topic of comparative studies of the postsocialist period in literature somehow failed to come to the fore, on the other hand, it is also true that as early as in 2002, soon after the tragic and bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia, the journal *Sarajevske sveske* began to be published. As Boris A. Novak's article on *Sarajevske sveske* in this volume states, this was essentially the first Yugoslav publication in the true sense of the word:

The paradox of the cultural and artistic life in Yugoslavia was that the so-called *Yugoslav culture* never existed, or more precisely: that it was an ideological construct that had no coverage in the reality of the linguistic, cultural and religious differences of the complex and highly contradictory Yugoslav state formation. An even greater paradox, with surprisingly positive artistic and cultural consequences, was that it was precisely the cultural differences that radiated the value that was most interesting and fruitful in Yugoslavia. If "Yugoslav culture" existed anywhere at all, it existed—paradoxically—precisely in the differences, in the respect and admiration for others and those different from us, precisely because of the culture inspiring differences. Yugoslavia was a microcosm; therefore transcending the narrow borders of national cultures meant opening up to a wider space, to other and different horizons.

Since this journal was no longer politically and ideologically oriented, but intended and was able to show the peculiarities and differences of the literatures that came into existence and are still present in the area of former Yugoslavia, it is a real source and starting point for studying postsocialist literary production in this area. Novak was one of the

initiators of the journal and an excellent descriptor of the supplements and collaborators, of which he was one.

The magazine ceased publication after the 51st issue; Vojka Smiljanić Đikić—the ‘soul’ of the whole project—is gone; many collaborators and initiators have also passed away (and Novak devotes special attention to each and every one of them); thus, it is important that all issues and the entire archive are now available online (on sveske.ba).

The present collection of articles in the thematic section titled ‘Literature in Postsocialist Contexts’ is a modest but important attempt to establish a new regional comparative approach in Slovenian literature, which came into existence between different, but related languages, within a similar social postsocialist context. Guests from abroad account for one-third of the participants; they are all from Serbian academic institutions. Most of the participants structured their papers in a way that made it clear to the readers that it was essentially a matter of getting to know each other; the papers were intended to present to the Other the characteristics of literary texts created during a period of loose or even non-existent contacts between literatures that had once existed within the borders of the same country. It is quite natural that the Slovenian participants focused on topics related to poetry, since in the times of better mutual contacts in the former Yugoslavia, Slovenian poetry was often translated and reviewed in the Serbian speaking area. That is why Alen Širca’s paper on Tomaž Šalamun’s poetry as “Slovenia’s greatest literary export”—now that Šalamun is no more alive, but his poetry is still circulating and being exported—is certainly interesting not only for Slovenian readers but also for those from the Serbian-speaking area. The same is true for Varja Balžalorsky Antič’s paper on the dialogicity in contemporary Slovenian poetry, which, in contrast to Šalamun’s, is rather unknown to the Serbian audience. Apart from poetry, the ‘locals’ presented reflections on drama and theatre in a paper by Igor Žunkovič, who analyzed the play *Kassandra* by Boris A. Novak. From this article, and even more so from the testimony of the author of the play himself, we find that the echo of the wars of the 1990s, as portrayed in this play, was met with a completely different response in Ljubljana than when it was performed in Belgrade. The same performance was received very warmly and enthusiastically in an area where war had recently been raging, while in Ljubljana it was received with reserve and coldness. This leads to the conclusion that an audience in a postsocialist society also perceives plays as a political gesture.

The papers of colleagues from Serbia deal with novels, which is also in complete accordance with the image created about this liter-

ary genre—as it was realized in Serbia in previous periods—among Slovenian readers. Marko Avramović discusses a new wave of Serbian novels, in which he finds references and memories of the avant-garde. He focuses on three novelists: Vladimir Pištalo, Mileta Prodanović, and Vladimir Tasić. Vladimir Gvozden discusses the Serbian novel from the perspective of historical themes, which has always been one of the most important thematic centres of the Serbian novel. Gvozden notes that in the late 1980s and 1990s, a direction that he metaphorically calls ‘reconstructive’ (Milorad Pavić, Vladislav Petković and Goran Petrović) is prevalent, while in the new millennium, he perceives a deconstructive direction as far as the historical theme of novels is concerned (he presents novels by David Albahari and Vladimir Tasić). Let me add that three of these authors have been living on the other side of the ocean for a long time (Pištalo in the US, Tasić and Albahari in Canada); dissent could be the topic of future meetings on literature emerging in the area of our former common country.

In the altered ideological, economic and geopolitical conditions, a new imagology is also emerging: the label ‘southern’ (bearing a meaning that is supposed to refer to the area of former Yugoslavia, with the exception of Slovenia) will probably have to disappear from the Slovenian language. This label now sounds just as ‘colonialist’ as the Italian label ‘slavo/sciavo,’ which denotes everything Slavic from Slovenia to Vladivostok. These developed, complete and strictly separated national literatures of the area covered by languages that emerged from the Shtokavian dialect also require the construction of new images of the Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin literature and culture.

Let me add a bit of personal experience from June 2019 in Padua,⁹ when I attended a talk by a Russian scholar Donatella Possamai.¹⁰ She spoke about nostalgia and erasing memories of the socialist period, of the period before 1989 in present-day Russia. I was surprised by the fact that the cultural climate, publishing activity and the position of literature in contemporary Russia essentially coincide with the situation in the area of former Yugoslavia. In spite of the differences that undoubtedly existed in all these fields between Yugoslav and Soviet

⁹ On 7 June 2019, the University of Padua held a one-day meeting entitled “Fra nostalgia e rimozione: l’Europa Centro-Orientale prima e dopo il 1989”. No publication is forthcoming for the time being.

¹⁰ The theses that Possamai presented orally in Padua are developed and substantiated in her book *Al crocevia dei due millenni. Viaggio nella letteratura russa contemporanea* (Padua: Esedra editrice, 2018).

socialism, today in all these countries of Eastern Europe, the concepts of culture, art and literature are completely neoliberal: everywhere literature and art as a whole is perceived as a creative industry that should survive on its own; the state is supposed to support only those manifestations that are at the same time good political propaganda for it. The only literature that is flourishing is of the kind that in the previous system was described as ‘trashy literature’: crime novels, chick lit, handbooks for various activities which are far removed from rational thinking, etc.

Of course, in the future it will be necessary to confront as many contemporary literary practices as possible. Because in the region that concerns us here, all national literatures are intended for a very limited number of readers, and because we are dealing with what are called ‘small literatures’ with a limited impact on the wider cultural space, it will have to be considered how these literatures are affected by this very limit, the border as such. In the book *Confini: l'altra Italia* (Brescia: Scholé, 2019, p. 183), author Cristina Benussi, a professor of Italian studies in Trieste, remarks that the image of Italian literature and culture that begins and ends in the centre of this country is substantially different from the image created from the perspective of its borders—especially from the Slovenian, Austrian and Swiss borders. Not only because of the minorities that are still numerous on both sides of the (former) border, but also because of the historical shifting of the borders and because of the ideological and political differences and even conflicts that were or are still present. Benussi questions the firm demarcation between the cultures of different nations and especially between national canons that do not take into account the influences from the borders of a certain national literature. This idea could become an impetus not only for new comparative research, but even for new readings of any national literature. In a small sample of the disparate receptions of the play *Kassandra*, we have already established the existence of significant differences in the perception of a certain characteristic within a national literature when it expands beyond the boundaries of one’s own national code. The postsocialist context almost requires the transcending of national canons simply because the ideological and political transition from socialism to capitalism, globalization and neoliberalism is a long process that began in the 1960s and is still ongoing. A certain parallel could be established between these long processes of social transition and the processes of renaming the national literatures in the area of the former Yugoslavia. It is true that, since the 1950s, Slovenia has had well-developed school

and university programs for the study of Slovenian literature, while the term 'Yugoslav literature' encompassed all programs for the study of South Slavic literature in a large part of Yugoslavia. It was not until the mid-1960s that this concept appeared in the plural form and the subject began to be called 'Yugoslav Literatures.' In the 1980s, however, a strong movement toward comparative studies of national literatures within the framework of Yugoslav literatures emerged in Zagreb. Between 1983 and 1987, Franjo Grčević edited three collections of such texts titled *Komparativno proučavanje jugoslavenskih književnosti*,¹¹ and in 2011 Zvonko Kovač published *Međuknjiževne rasprave: poredbena i/ili interkulturalna povijest književnosti*.¹² The collections on postsocialism in literatures in the area of the once common language published so far in Croatia can probably be understood as a kind of continuation of the regional comparisons that originated there as early as the 1980s.

It should also be noted that in the area of languages that developed from the Shtokavian dialect (Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin), reviews and histories of national literatures are rather powerless in the face of the emergence of the multicultural realization of certain writers, i.e. writers active in multiple national cultures. Not only writers of previous generations (Ivo Andrić, Petar Petrović Njegoš, Vladan Desnica, etc.), but also some of today's writers publish and are present both physically and with their works in the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian areas: Miljenko Jergović, Dubravka Ugrešić, Andrej Nikolaidis, Nenad Veličković, etc. Within Slovenian literature, a similar example is Josip Osti, a Slovenian and at the same time a Bosnian poet and writer. However, another phenomenon of multiple affiliation is gaining prominence, namely among the new 'dissidents,' i.e. writers who fled from the disintegrating Yugoslavia at a very young age or even as children and today live and write in foreign languages. They therefore belong to American (Alexander Hemon), German (Saša Stanišić, Marica Bodrožić, etc.) or French literature (Velibor Čolić), but also to Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian literature, etc. These and similar examples of transcending borders should become the subject not only of national, but also of regional comparative studies.

New borders are calling, demanding new and borderless approaches to comparative techniques that relate not only to literature but to cul-

¹¹ This and the following two collections with the same title were published in Zagreb by the Institute of Science of Literature at the Faculty of Arts and in Varaždin by the editorial board of the newspaper *Gesta*, 1983–1988 (Varaždin: Tiskara Varteks).

¹² This extensive book (433 pages) was published in Belgrade by Službeni glasnik.

ture in the broadest sense of the word. However, since all of this has happened along with a change in the ideological and political system from socialism to a brutal, neoliberal capitalism, it is important to keep an eye on both changes simultaneously.