

POSSIBILITIES OF A COMPARATIVE YUGOSLAV LITERATURE

Marija Mitrović

In Yugoslavia two books in all have been written with the title 'Yugoslav Literature: '* Miloš Savković published his *Jugoslovenska književnost I-III* in 1938, and Antun Barac wrote his *Jugoslovenska književnost* in 1954. The latter has been translated into several languages. In addition, *Pregled Jugoslovenske književnosti* by D. Stefanović and V. Stanislavljević has had more than ten editions and was very popular in Yugoslavia as a high school textbook. In all these surveys Serbian, Croatian, Slovene and (in the last-named book) Macedonian literatures were lined up one against another with no effort to put them into any kind of relationship. In encyclopedias (*Enciklopedija Jugoslavije*, 1st and 2nd eds., *Enciklopedija Leksikografskog zavoda, Prosvetina Enciklopedija*) there are only histories of the national literatures—Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian. There have been several attempts at theoretical discussions of Yugoslav literary history (in 1956, 1962, 1967) but all of them failed and were labeled 'unitarist' for not sufficiently recognizing the specifics of each national literature. And the efforts to assemble a team of literary historians who would write a history of Yugoslav literature have also failed—attempts that were made by Professor Ivo Frangeš of Zagreb and Professor J. Rotar of Ljubljana. Something easy and simple in a country with one nationality has, in a country with many, to be prepared for a long time and can only gradually be achieved.

Writing about Yugoslav music or painting raises no questions at all. For example, in the late sixties there were several very well organized exhibitions under the general title "Jugoslovenska umetnost XX veka" in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade and the respective catalogues treated Yugoslav painting as a whole. The history of Yugoslavia has also been written with a certain amount of success—both by an individual author (B. Petranović) and by a collective (I. Božić, S. Ćirković, M. Ekmečić and V. Dedijer).

Obviously, the history of literature is something different. As a special field for understanding literature, literary history developed at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. This was a period of national revival in all the countries of Europe. Literary history was conceived of as an effective device for enhancing the cultural self-awareness of a nation. To return to the literary past meant, and even today means—especially in small nations—gaining a notion about the glories of the nation's past. Besides, in the sense of a philosophy of art established by Plato and valid in European esthetics till the twentieth century, literature was defined as a kind of mimesis; and for this reason for the literary historian the first and most important goal has been to describe the context (the social and political background) of the literary work and to summarize its plot (what the artist was saying about the circumstances in which he was living).

In the kind of literary history based on the alleged mimetic nature of literature, the main goal was to re-create the past, to make the readers aware of their predecessors, proud of inheriting such a glorious past and such a nation. Since we in Yugoslavia have more than one nationality, it is clear that we can not have one literary history in the classic sense. We have to find a new key that might produce a new idea about what has been going on in all the literatures of Yugoslavia over the centuries. The old model of literary history does not work in a country with several nationalities and with an as yet unfinished process of national differentiation. Besides clearly marked national traditions (Serbian, Croatian, Slovene and perhaps even Macedonian) there are regions where the process of national rebirth is still ongoing (Muslims, Montenegrins). In such circumstances a traditional

literary history of each single nation would still be 'in the mood.' In such cases, literary history helps historiography to bridge the cultural gap of centuries and to re-create a not so obvious continuity. Although there are several developed and indeed even ancient nations (Serbia had its own state in the Middle Ages, as did Croatia; and Slovenia became a language unit in the sixteenth century), it is still believed that nationhood is the main basis and essence of a man. So, everything nationally colored receives great respect. The supranational—which is what speaking about Yugoslav literature is—is deprecated.

In such conditions it makes no difference if we speak about Yugoslav literature or Yugoslav literatures: in either case surveys of Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian, Slovene and other literatures are arranged in the raw state, with no comparison, no contrast among them. It would be the same if we were to juxtapose, for example, Swedish, Austrian, and Greek literatures. Yugoslav literature(s) should not be an artless arrangement of the literatures that belong to it; a survey of Yugoslav literature has to be some kind of *frame* that may help towards an understanding of all the parts. One could for example compare the forms, moods and ideas of each unit comprising Yugoslavia. Moreover it is not unimportant that Yugoslavia as a state has existed almost seventy years, or that the idea of a union among the South Slavs has been perceived as a necessity for about four centuries. If we do compare the phases of evolution and constant facts about this past we shall find a large number of similarities among all the units that could comprise a good basis for comparisons. Let us mention some of those features common to all Yugoslav literatures:

All of them are 'small literatures' and have, as their 'paradigm literature', one or more of the 'big' European literatures (French, German, Italian, Russian, . . .);

All of them have been national integrative forces and were composed not only for esthetic reasons, but as instruments of history, Christianity, nationhood;

All of them have experienced interrupted histories, with more than one beginning point; as a result, they do not all have the major stylistic units characteristic of other European literatures, and where they have them, they very often lack individual features of the major units;

They use the same language (Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Bosnian literatures) or very similar ones (Slovene, Macedonian literatures).

A fruitful and dynamic contradictory relationship can be detected between their functional literature (literature beyond literature, in history, morality, ideology) and their literature as art, in the authentic and receptive elements in every separate body, in their national and international ideals and stylistic tendencies.

The similarities among Yugoslav literatures enable comparison; with them in mind, we can say that Yugoslavia is not only a political (administrative) territory but also an arbitrary literary unit, in the same way that the Balkans, Southeastern Europe, or other regions are taken by comparatists as a frame within which units are in some kind of relationship.

The frame, or forestructure, named Yugoslav literature, and obtained by comparing movements, styles, typological features in all the literatures that belong to it "provides a method of broadening one's perspective in the approach to single works of literature—a way of looking beyond the narrow boundaries of national frontiers in order to discern trends and movements in various national cultures." And that is precisely what Owen Aldridge has designated as the purpose of comparative literature.¹ Although the frame or forestructure is not a system in the sense in which Tynjanov was speaking about the nature of literature, or a structure in the sense used by Mukařovský, a general survey of Yugoslav

literature arrived at by comparing its individual units may promote and increase the understanding of each literary work. And precisely that must be the main goal of a 'higher' system (forestructure or frame): understanding literature, rather than revealing the past as a glorious one.

The model of comparing Yugoslav literatures and 'opening' them with the same key would be especially useful in cases with so-called 'double appurtenance:' Njegoš is a part of both Montenegrin and Serbian literatures; Dubrovnik belongs by origin to Croatian, Serbian and Italian literatures, though through the centuries it has become mostly a part of Croatian literature because all the benefits of Dubrovnik have become a source of new Croatian literature, beginning with Mažuranić.

Putting Yugoslav literatures together, we shall see not only vertical, but also horizontal trends. There were intense similarities between different authors in the so-called older periods, before Romanticism; only after Romanticism did an individual style become the *sine qua non* of literature. Serbian culture was under Byzantine influence until the eighteenth century; after that time it opened up to new, European influences. But shortly thereafter, one can see another important system dividing the literatures and cultures of our country: Slovene literature, with Čop and Prešeren, chose European models of poetry and Schlegel's poetical theory; the Croats and Serbs took their own folklore tradition as a main source and gave all their attention to Herder's views of poetry and national identity. During the twentieth century horizontal tendencies were obvious, especially at the time of so-called Social Realism, and in all the varieties of the avantgarde. If the history of Yugoslav literatures were written merely as an arrangement in the raw, these and many other horizontal features would not be apparent.

The main goal of comparing all the Yugoslav literatures one with another is to re-think the whole, to put together and see something that could not be seen in any other way. The survey thus made would not be detailed: it would have to omit all biographies, anecdotes, even interpretations. . . Its goal would be to see the *mainstream* of developing and changing forms.

With this in mind, we could decide what the priorities are. In drawing parallels between literary works in style, structure, mood, or ideas, scholars could concentrate on tracing the sources for movements and for individual works (in folklore, in European models); they could define borrowings, the indebtedness of authors, or the style as such, but they would always have to keep in mind parallel manifestations in type, style, structure, mood and ideas. There would be a great deal of work in defining terms, describing the meaning of Romanticism or Realism, or of any other stylistic current in the various languages and cultures. We should speak also about a specific kind of reception: literature written in Serbo-Croatian can be understood directly all over Yugoslavia, whereas that is not true for Macedonian or Slovene literary works. Serbo-Croatian, as the most widespread language, is becoming more and more noticeable, through television, newspapers and other forms of mass media.

A very interesting book could be written on how folklore has been used in our literatures over the centuries: in some of them it was for a long time the only sign of creativity, there being no written tradition (for example, in Macedonian). The Slovene folk tradition is more lyric and was a source of traditional poetry only after Prešeren; shorter folklore genres (proverbs, riddles) and a balladic atmosphere were the starting-points for a new, modern poetry. Folklore becomes a metafolklore. Serbian literature was based on the classic folklore tradition, conceived and described by Vuk Karadžić. The metatextual quality of that type of folklore is very rare. In Croatia what was very important for modern poetry

was the 'pučka tradicija,' the tradition in dialects, a popular tradition outside Vuk's classic conception.

Themes and problems arise one after another. It depends on one's personal training as to which should be given priority. But one thing should be taken as a given: only a survey that is more than a mere arranging in the raw of all the Yugoslav literatures can be useful to each literature individually. Comparison is the main method of establishing relationships between all the units. Comparative literature is usually defined as a comparison between one literature and another, or among several literatures. As Henry Remak stressed, "a scholar asserting that a transitional topic of this nature is comparative must assume the burden of positive proof that he is dealing with significant differences in language, nationality or tradition."² To choose the comparative method of establishing relationships among the literatures in Yugoslavia may be perceived as limited, insufficient, undeveloped, imprecise; but it cannot be accused of being unitarist.

University of Belgrade

REFERENCES

*I have been thinking about this subject for a long time and have written several comparative studies, mainly on Serbian, Croatian and Slovene literature: "Župančičeva *Duma* v kontekstu jugoslovanske rodoljubne lirike," *Sodobnost* 1978/1; "Položaj in značaj zgodovinskega romana druge polovice 19. stoletja v jugoslovanskih literaturah," *Obdobje realizma v slovenskem jeziku, književnosti in kulturi* (Ljubljana, 1982) 169-78; "Pesniški subjekat kod Branka Radičevića i Franca Prešerna," *Naučni sastanak u Vukove dane 12* (Belgrade, 1982) 211-28; and "Problem raspolučene ličnosti u jugoslovenskoj drami prve decenije ovoga veka," *Obdobje simbolizma v slovenskem jeziku, književnosti in kulturi II* (Ljubljana, 1983) 561-71. Among other not so numerous attempts in the field of comparative Yugoslav literature the most important were two colloquia held in Zagreb under the title "Komparativno proučavanje jugoslavenskih književnosti" (1983, 1985). The results of the first colloquium were published by Franjo Grčević and Ernest Fišer in the review *Gesta*, studeni-prosinac 1983. There is still no theoretical study on the principles and possibilities of comparative Yugoslav literature. The present essay resulted from a discussion held at Columbia University in May 1986; for this meeting, I am deeply indebted to Professor Rado Lencek, not only because he organized the discussion, but because he supported and helped to develop some of my ideas on this subject.

1. Owen Aldridge, "The purpose and perspectives of comparative literature." *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method*, ed. and intr. A.O. Aldridge (Champaign-Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1969) 1.
2. Henry Remak, "Comparative literature: its definition and function." *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*, ed. N. Stallknecht & H. Frenz (Champaign-Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1971) 10.

POVZETEK**MOŽNOSTI KOMPARATIVNE JUGOSLOVANSKE KNJIŽEVNOSTI**

Avtorica predlaga nov pristop k že dolgo obstoječemu vprašanju o 'jugoslovanski književnosti' ali 'književnostih' s pomočjo moderne teorije komparativne književnosti, torej z uveljavitvijo 'predstrukture' ali 'okvira', v katerem bi se odrazila pomenska primerjava med nacionalnimi književnostmi, ki predstavljajo jugoslovansko književnost. Ker bi ta pristop temeljil na strukturalnih podobnostih (vključujoč obseg, tuje vire, cilje, jezik in slog), bi se izognil razvrščanju literarnih dejstev 'v grobem': biografiji, literarnim anekdotam in celo interpretacijam. Cilj tega pristopa bi bil v raziskovanju poglobitvega toka v razvoju in spreminanju oblik v jugoslovanski književnosti in v prepoznavanju vzporednic v tipologiji, slogu, zgradbi, čudi in idejah v nacionalnih književnostih, ki jih združuje jugoslovanska književnost.

