

Nemanja Radulović
University of Belgrade

IMAGE OF MITRINOVIĆ IN SERBIAN CULTURE¹

Abstract: The paper deals with the changing image of Dimitrije Mitrinović in Serbian culture. Recognized as teacher of his generation, after 1918, he was perceived as someone who left the national culture for Eastern-tinged “mysticism”. Negative judgement became stronger after WW2, backed up by the political context where he was seen as supporter of the *ancien régime*. His activity was split into the national and the British part, where even those who paid attention to him (mostly literary historians), weren’t familiar with the latter. When the second part of his life became better known, growing interest has often focused precisely on the aspects previously condemned (esotericism).

Keywords: Reception, literary history, cultism

Mitrinović’s personal influence in the period before 1914 is something luminaries of Serbian culture recognized with respect even decades later. Distinguished people like the author and Nobel Prize laureate Ivo Andrić, novelist and poet Miloš Crnjanski, philosopher and trailblazing female scholar Ksenija Atanasijević, art historian and critic Milan Kašanin – all singled out Mitrinović’s name as important in their formative period. But already after WW1, an image of Mitrinović emerged. It was the image of a man who had withdrawn, who was once involved in national activism but who parted from the mainstream in order to pursue his own way, who had abandoned culture to devote himself to the universal cosmopolitan mission and “mysticism”. It is impossible to miss the disappointed tone of some articles written by authors who respected Mitrinović. The Croat poet Tin Ujević, who had a conflict with Mitrinović during the war, never to reconcile again, as early as 1921 calls him an “occultist, spiritist, hypnotist, Oriental mystagogue”.² An article in the 1925 *Encyclopaedia of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes* – a publishing project aimed at presenting the new country – signed by the writer Veljko Petrović, ends in very telling words: “Mitrinović devoted himself to oriental languages, occultism and Theosophy”. Mitrinović’s attempt of coming back in 1930 gave rise to di-

1 This research was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, Project No. 7747152, Cultural Transfer Europe-Serbia from the 19th till the 21st Century – CTES.

2 Tin Ujević, “Uz spomenicu Vladimira Gaćinovića“, *Jugoslavenska njiva*, Vol. 5, No. 46 (1921), 733.

rect attacks of a more political nature. The literary critic Velibor Gligorić – who in early 1920s endorsed Yugoslav messianism before turning to Communism – published a pamphlet against Mitrinović and his followers, describing him as mystifier, guru, false messiah, and his followers in Belgrade as a kind of cult, emphasizing Oriental the flavour of this circle (*Mysticism and mystifiers*, 1930; a similar article is “Neohumanists”). He was vocal in accusing Mitrinović of abandoning the real problems of his country for fake mysticism – “he spent the most critical postwar years interpreting sacred books of India to the idle old ladies of London” – adding an ideological subtext to this accusation. Not only leftist critics like Gligorić, but some of Mitrinović’s generation of the Young Bosnia period, expressed the same criticism in that period. “His poems kindled a national elan...we’ve heard fantastic news about him during the war, that he was wearing Indian clothes...he comes to us as an apostle with the ambition of becoming the almighty mumbo-jumbo” (mumbo-jumbo in the original).³

This image is actually not fully correct. Mitrinović kept in contact with his Serbian friends or followers. He had contacts with the political top too, for instance, with the Prime Minister, General Petar Živković (1929–1932, the period of King Alexander’s personal regime). In a letter, Mitrinović informs the general about some big financial transactions on the state level he had brokered in Britain. Mitrinović secured that British coal owners, who supported the king’s regime, send bricks to the Yugoslav railway on a credit basis and the 100% guarantee for the credit was given by the British government. The deal was publicized in the local newspapers as the new government’s political success, but Mitrinović’s role remained unknown. Ecstatic mystics usually don’t give credit advice to generals presiding over governments in dictatorial regimes. The group of intellectuals gathered around the idea of Yugoslav messianism and Indo-Slavic panhumanism in the 1920s should actually be seen as the Serbian branch of Mitrinović’s vast network and as a group of his disciples. But he preferred to remain in the shadows while intellectuals from his network preached his ideas through journals. That remoteness, staying in the shadows, fueled this public image. That is why in letters from that period men of letters ask: “When Mitrinović will come back, we need him”, inviting him to contribute to the journals. Keeping contacts with people, however influential in culture or other fields they might be, is one thing, but being present in culture is another matter altogether, and the image analysed here is precisely the image of a distanced man who maintained contacts but avoided public anticipation and who obviously maintained those contacts on his own terms, always prepared to distance himself.

3 Dobrosav Jevdjević, “Akcija g. D. Mitrinovića“, *Pregled*, Vol. 4, No. 81 (1930), 611–613.



Article from the Belgrade daily Borba (June 12, 1966) entitled “Who was Dimitrije Mitrinović?” by Grozdana Olujić

Even more interesting things could be said of the period after WW2. Mitrinović’s death didn’t pass unnoticed, and the same image of a man who had left was reiterated. Some of the obituaries were written by authors of his generation who knew him personally, like Stanislav Vinaver and Borivoje Jevtić, and others by young critics, like Slavko Leovac, but the content was quite the same. Here are some examples: “Great hopes were put in him that he would make something extraordinary and brilliant... Great hopes put in him he failed to fulfil”.⁴ “His silence in our literature was painful and sad”.⁵ “By his second life he left Yugoslav literary history a riddle hard to solve...” “He turned his back on his own country and her spiritual needs...” “His life, which promised spiritual wealth, was a mayfly that died as soon as it started to fly over summer river waters – it doesn’t matter at all that his physical life continued for another 40 years after he left his native soil. Those 40 years were nothing but wrestling with dead spirits, some kind of dark sinking into the mysterious area of Hindu religious mysticism, which never had anything to do with our cruel and bloody Yugoslav reality”.⁶ So, Mitrinović’s life had been split in two halves, and the second one was a waste, a loss, described in terms of Theosophy and occultism, areas that have been taken as signs of delusion since the age of Enlightenment.

4 “Mita Mitrinović“, *Republika* (8.09.1953).

5 Slavko Leovac, “Reč o delu Dimitrija Mitrinovića“, *Život*, Vol. 2, No. 13 (1953), 263–268.

6 Borivoje Jevtić, “Dimitrije Mitrinović“, *Život*, Vol. 2, No. 14 (1953), 357–360; No. 15, 433–440.

But interest in his persona never fully ceased. The émigré writer Nenad Petrović observed a paradoxical situation in 1967: although Mitrinović spent most of his life in emigration, almost no one among emigrants wrote about him while in Yugoslavia they published pieces about him.⁷ (We will leave aside here topic of Mitrinović and immigrants). Indeed, young writer Grozdana Olujić, who was also touched by Indian influences in her work, visited the Mitrinović Foundation in 1966, interviewed Henry Rutherford and published a longish article in the most unexpected of papers – in *Borba*, the official Communist Party organ.⁸ It is an example of interest not in the “old” and “good” Mitrinović from the pre-1914 period but his later work and legacy.

One aspect became emphasized in post-war criticism of Mitrinović: he was seen as a protagonist of the “reactionary” ideology of interwar monarchist Yugoslavia. Mitrinović’s 1930 visit had laid the ground for such an interpretation, but this political aspect became dominant after 1945 – not quite fair given Mitrinović’s unhappy reception by King Alexander. Nevertheless, in the later reception, he became a kind of ideologist of the Yugoslav interwar regime and official Yugoslavism. The *Encyclopedia of Yugoslavia*, a state project of the new country supervised by Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža, also described him through an ideological lens, as panegyrist of national and racial mysticism. Krleža, a writer with a semi-official position whose influence in Communist Yugoslavia cannot be underestimated, published a multi-volume novel called *The Flags* (1962–1976) about his generation. Mitrinović is depicted under the name of Mitar Mitrović. The portrait is actually a parody, focused on Mitrinović’s involvement with Meštrović’s art: he confuses students in the days before 1914 with his speeches about national art and liberation. Krleža describes him as a Yugoslav racist, creating a scene where the novel’s hero comes into conflict with Mitrinović. Velibor Gligorić offered a reassessment of Mitrinović after the war. Gligorić, now a university professor and president of the Serbian Academy, wasn’t as vitriolic as 40 years earlier. He was obviously mystified and intrigued by Mitrinović and wrestled with his image. Gligorić described Mitrinović as a paradox, a man of contradictions, recognizing the novelties he brought. Although Gligorić repeated what was ideologically problematic in Mitrinović’s image using, among other terms, the word racism, he was more impartial than before. In another text, Gligorić admitted Mitrinović’s importance, placing him, when it comes to their respective influence, even above the iconic literary critic and influential social figure of his generation Jovan Skerlić.⁹

7 Nenad Petrović, *Dimitrije Mitrinović* (Vindzor: Avala, 1967).

8 Grozdana Olujić, “Ko je bio Dimitrije Mitrinović“, *Borba* (12.7.1966).

9 Velibor Gligorić, “Marginalija uz književno delo Dimitrija Mitrinovića“, *Senke i snovi* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1970), 143–148; Idem, “Putevi i bespuća“, *U vihoru* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1975), 122–144.

Literary historians of the 1960s and 1970s – Radovan Vučković, Dragiša Vitošević, Dejan Djuričković – did not forget Mitrinović.¹⁰ They followed a more impartial approach, recognizing Mitrinović's influence both as a critic and a poet in the young generation at the turn of the century. They all gave Mitrinović his due place as a key figure in the transformation of Serbian poetry before WWI.

Predrag Palavestra was among such critics and wrote about Mitrinović since the 1960s. According to his autobiographical testimony from a much later time, it seems that, in spite of this recognition, Mitrinović could be a troublesome topic. Palavestra's editing of Mitrinović's collected works in 1967 for the series *Literary heritage of Bosnia and Hercegovina* was stopped because of "nationalism, Yugoslav unitarism, mysticism and Theosophy". Palavestra's 1977 monograph about Mitrinović was initially rejected by the publishing house Nolit on the decision of the poet Vasko Popa.¹¹ Literary history was focused entirely on the first half of Mitrinović's activity or his pre-UK period, so to say. Palavestra's 1977 book *Dogma and Utopia of Dimitrije Mitrinović*, a biography and monograph about his work, bridged the gap between the two halves, presenting Mitrinović's life as a whole to Serbian readers. His second life was now presented not as a kind of flight from the homeland into foggy mysticism but as a period of exuberant activity – for the very first time, the audience in Yugoslavia could read what Mitrinović was actually doing in Britain. Palavestra didn't shy away from esotericism but gave quite an ample overview of Mitrinović's esoteric activity and its framework. That is important because biographers of writers, artists and historical actors for a long time tended to skip over the esoteric interests of their heroes or to downplay such interests as something embarrassing for the image of "our important men" (and occasionally women). The book revived interest in Mitrinović beyond the milieu of literary historians, and many a review was an occasion to tackle the book's protagonist. A thematic issue of the journal *Delo* (1988) brought studies about Mitrinović and translations of some of his English texts. The Serbian edition of his texts, including those in English, became finally available as a three-volume edition of his collected works (1990). After Palavestra's book and collected works, writings on Mitrinović since 1990 have taken into account Mitrinović's English opus. His "British half", a topic that previous researchers either weren't familiar with or

10 Radovan Vučković, "Kritičarski lik Dimitrija Mitrinovića", *Izraz* Vol 8, No. 11 (1964); Dejan Djuričković, "Pjesnik i kritičar Dimitrije Mitrinović", *Godišnjak Instituta za proučavanje jugoslavenske književnosti u Sarajevu*, Vol. 1 (1972), pp. 127–141; Dragiša Vitošević, *Srpsko pesništvo 1901–1914*, vol. 2 (Belgrade: Vuk Karadžić, 1975).

11 Predrag Palavestra, *Posleratna srpska književnost 1945–1970 i njena istorija* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2012), 16–17.



Photo from the conference “Dimitrije Mitrinović and New Age” held on December 10, 2013 at the University Library “Svetozar Marković”, Belgrade

shied away from, now became a subject of great interest. Mitrinović has attracted attention precisely as an esotericist, social thinker and Orientalist. In the last 30 years, articles about him have appeared not only in academic journals but also in the popular press, he entered some novels, there is an award bearing his name...In a sense, we can say that he finally came back home. The image of a split, withdrawn man changed. Another paradox – which seems inevitable when it comes to him – is that his way back was largely, although not exclusively, due to his mysterious and now available works and writings penned in Britain.

Bibliography:

- Djuričković, Dejan, “Pjesnik i kritičar Dimitrije Mitrinović“, *Godišnjak Instituta za proučavanje jugoslavenske književnosti u Sarajevu*, Vol. 1 (1972), pp. 127–141.
- Gligorić, Velibor, “Marginalija uz književno delo Dimitrija Mitrinovića“, in *Senke i snovi* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1970), 143–148.
- Idem, “Putevi i bespuća“, *U vihoru* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1975), 122–144.
- Jevdjević, Dobrosav, “Akcija g. D. Mitrinovića“, *Pregled*, Vol. 4, No. 81 (1930), 611–613.
- Jevtić, Borivoje, “Dimitrije Mitrinović“, *Život*, Vol. 2, No. 14 (1953), 357–360; No. 15, 433–440.
- Leovac, Slavko, “Reč o delu Dimitrija Mitrinovića“, *Život*, Vol. 2, No. 13 (1953), 263–268.

“Mita Mitrinović“, *Republika* (8.09.1953).

Olujić, Grozdana, “Ko je bio Dimitrije Mitrinović“, *Borba*, No. 159 (12.7.1966), 11.

Palavestra, Predrag, *Posleratna srpska književnost 1945–1970 i njena istorija* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2012).

Petrović, Nenad, *Dimitrije Mitrinović* (Vindzor: Avala, 1967).

Ujević, Tin, “Uz spomenicu Vladimira Gaćinovića“, *Jugoslavenska njiva*, Vol. 5, No. 46 (1921).

Vitošević Dragiša, *Srpsko pesništvo 1901–1914 2* (Belgrade: Vuk Karadžić, 1975).

Vučković, Radovan, “Kritičarski lik Dimitrija Mitrinovića“, *Izraz* Vol 8, No. 11 (1964),