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HISTORY, CULTURE, REALITY AND IMAGINATION: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SERBIAN LITERATURE AFTER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

Abstract: This paper describes and comments on changes pertaining to Serbian literature after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Excluding education and entertainment, what particularly stands out is its lack of a special role within society. A constant volatility of literary style and, parallel to that, the absence of hierarchy in the existence of various, often conflicting creative concepts can be noted. Another aspect to observe is the weakening of the social corrective role of literature. Its tendency to utilize certain techniques to fictionalize memories and detraumatize, as well as paint a picture of the nature of individual and collective identity is used to understand, as profoundly as possible, the key, largely negative, crisis-related symbols of reality and the recent past.

Keywords: Serbian literature, social function of literature, poetical paradigm, literature and reality, art market, functionalization, detraumatization

The social and historical reality in Serbia after the fall of the Berlin Wall was marked by a series of significant political, social and other events which affected the fate of individuals and the entire state, including its place in Europe. Not only did this period see the fall of the Berlin Wall, but also the collapse of the old communist-socialist social system, the dissolution of the Second and Third Yugoslavia (see e.g. Bakić et al. 2013; Ђурић, Кнежевић, Јовановић 2013; Chomsky 2018), civil wars, the introduction of the multiparty system, the weakening of institutions,

the fall of the regime in 2000, the assassination of the prime minister, the very slow progressing, yet unattained goal of the establishment of true democratic order, endless transition and everyday life mired in chronic crisis. To a large (if not decisive) degree, these events significantly changed the nature and status of culture: over the years, literature itself gradually lost its former relevance as a symbolically representative art form. In which way did this specific reality change the nature of literary imagination, and what are the results of this change? There is no simple and easy answer to that question. The answer, namely, ought to cover various perspectives and requires a multidisciplinary approach, including sociological and political theories, phenomenological insights and comparative analyses, as well as immanent critique and hermeneutics.

It is an age-old rule that crucial—and oftentimes also tragic—historical events transform art, imposing on it new themes and “canons” (a term used by Miloš Crnjanski).¹ In order to recognize how such trauma inevitably requires catharsis, it suffices to recall the way in which Serbian literature changed following the two world wars. Experiencing World War I caused the emergence of a heightened sense of individualism and introduced innovative, avantgarde movements (see e.g., Јовић, Новаковић, Тодоровић 2015) while the aftermath of World War II foregrounded the question of the relation of the ruling ideology and literature (more on this in Палавестра 1983). This relation would remain in the focus of public discussions in many different ways up until the fall of the Berlin Wall, at which point it was either completely severed or extremely relativized by the emergence of the postmodernist literary style.² In that way, however, literature began to lose the power of influencing broader society, its impact mainly remaining in the field of individual (creative and reader) predispositions.

This was followed by waves of the “strong pressure” of history and the art, yet again, was to face the temptation of (de)traumatization, the

¹ The change in art after the war was noted by Miloš Crnjanski in the famous text “The Explanation of Sumatra” [“Objašnjenje Sumatre”] through the apodictic statement: “Ideas fell, forms fell, and thank god, so did the canons.” (cited acc. to Tešić 1983: VIII).

² “Postmodernist tendencies in Serbian literature were the result of the effect of both purely literary and general cultural common knowledge facts of national and transnational nature” (Татаренко 2013: 13). Also see Pantić (1994; 1999; 2003).

shaping and fictionalization of memories,³ as well as the testimonies of the recent past and the new reality (“speech” model). Altogether, it also faced the importance of establishing both individual and wider, collective identity within which it was to be conceived, as that is exactly where its many important, inevitable influences come from. Thereby, it also repeated the (intraimagological) rule that society gets to self-awareness, i.e., to an idea of itself, by means of art forms. Those forms may, in the first instance, be embedded in specifically literary genres such as prose, poetry and drama; in a secondary way they may include the literary background in movies and other visual forms; and in a tertiary way, they can expand to include music, art, and performance.

No matter how calculatedly or otherwise spontaneously it gravitates towards uniqueness or the self-sufficiency of shaped worlds, and very often the emphasized denial of its relationship with the social context within which it was born and continues to exist—no art, especially not literature can (even if it does not want to or intentionally tries to circumvent it) avoid relating itself to reality, the everyday, history, politics and all other fields manifesting human existence and action. Without that type of relationship, literature would either have no reason to exist, or that reason would be socially irrelevant, seeing as all forms of art, especially art based on the use of language, creates a corresponding image of the world. What should instantly be pointed out is the bidirectional nature of that particular process: individual and collective experience, no matter how it is depicted in fictional or symbolic codes, gets its cognitive (and aesthetic) fullness precisely through art forms and, vice versa, it is exactly those art forms which testify to the sense or nonsense of the world. The way the world changes is also the way art changes, in this particular case that art being literature; the change is particularly intense during wars, as well as in post-war and everyday crises (See Pantić 1995: 9–46).

This type of change can be observed on multiple levels, starting with the introduction and shaping of new themes (prompted by indirect,

³ Tihomir Brajović notes: “This type of historiographical narration often borders on *applied literature* of its type as the writing style which combines fictional and completely pragmatic interests, establishing itself in the form of ‘impure’ or *hybrid fiction* [...] with distinct cognitive-corrective and implicitly compensatory ambitions.” (Брајовић 2009: 70).

personal or collective, diverse, often traumatic experience), through the creation of new or innovative forms (whose origin is oftentimes in the digital realm), to the change in authors' literary style, and the elusive yet undeniable global character of literature itself (see e.g. Pantić 2009: 36–44). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that changes to literary style, the introduction of new forms of expression, the redirection of the nature of imagination and the assertion of new topics do not necessarily result in aesthetically richer works. On the contrary, mass literary production,⁴ or rather an enormously increased number of books aiming to be considered literature, makes it significantly more difficult to spot potential beacons of a true aesthetic value.

In essence, given that every experience naturally aspires to be recorded in an appropriate form, hundreds upon hundreds of books were written in Serbian over the last few decades which, in one way or another, thematically covered the recent past or the immediate present. Every trauma, as has already been said, seeks its own catharsis and commemoration, acting as a source and incentive, and tends to be shaped by means of a suitable linguistic expression. Yet, any keen researcher of that period will need to pause at such questions as selection, indicativeness, representation and especially exceptionality of (newly) created literary works: it is necessary to determine the works that mark the essence and symbolically represent the aforementioned epoch. That is partly why in recent times there has been a growth in the importance of multidisciplinary approaches, project research and interpretations which could lead to important conclusions and also provide a basis for further research and interpretations of the literature of this period.

What did, therefore, happen with Serbian literature following the fall of the Berlin Wall in the newly formed socio-historical circumstances? That question requires a special, complex, layered, varied, or, in other words, nowhere near a simple answer. Throughout its history in the new age, starting with Baroque and the Enlightenment and then throughout all the transformations of the modern period, literature established

⁴ “Characteristic *overabundance* of contemporary literary ‘production’, through a chain of cultural-historic and political-historic events, is seemingly especially expressed in modern Serbian literature.” (Брајовић 2009: 9).

itself as a form of social and artistic representation, i.e., a specific, privileged way of collecting aestheticized knowledge and building images of the world (see e.g., Samardžija et al. 2011). Literature started this mission within Serbian culture during the 18th and 19th centuries (and even earlier than that for other, bigger European nations) and fully accomplished it in modern times, marked by the slow shift from a collectivist to a subjective perspective of creation. Throughout the aforementioned period, literature obtained and solidified its role as the, for many reasons, privileged locus at the core of culture and its most significant authors were simultaneously considered its elite representatives and pivotal figures of nationhood and identity. Their national recognition is corroborated by numerous monuments, as well as the names of a myriad of institutions, schools, libraries and streets.

In other words, in those past centuries, literature became a special, socially responsible institution whose impact has been used and supported by other institutions: the education system, from elementary school to university, the academies, theatres, religious institutions, libraries, publishers, some media, etc. Within literature, all of those often searched and found one of the central reasons of their establishment and their current, or sometimes even core activities. In the system of cultural values, specifically in the hierarchy that rules it, there was a good reason why literature was considered the art that sublimates, synthesizes and exhibits all other forms of human knowledge, feeling and world view, naturally, in a distinct, linguistically imaginative way. Accordingly, authors were accepted and established as public figures who, through their works, explored the nature and meaning of historical and contemporary reality in profound ways. What is more, they were also seen as the greatest connoisseurs of the mentality and distinctive features of the linguistic collective they belonged to. Consequently, their works have been considered the most valuable symbols of national tradition and guarantors of its value. This value is subject to a constant process of reinterpretation, which reflects the changing times, political, social and cultural codes and which is traced and documented by relevant interpretative schools.

As was the case for both older and more contemporary traditions, a great deal of that cultural pattern is still active today. It has been nurtured up until the immediate modernity, partly following the experience of memory and partly following systematic or scientific research in the

area of culture. This process mainly occurred in the above-mentioned institutions, while in the broader public space it is done sporadically and by exception (for example, the celebration of a significant author's anniversary, an important award ceremony, etc.). There exists, however, a line of fundamental change which makes the Serbian literature in the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall more or less different from the European context, which will be further addressed later. For instance, contemporary authors (with a few exceptions) are not put on a pedestal as important figures and their works are not seen as suitable to collectively identify with. This is a stark contrast to the cultural relations set up in previous historical periods, when it was common to say that "our" author is great because "our" great culture enabled the emergence of such individual talents, implying that in some way, ultimately, "we" ourselves were great.

Today, moving further, those changes are becoming more and more intense, primarily due to the introduction, multiplication and supremacy of the digital way of communication, and then also due to the fluctuation of poetical paradigms. Namely, the author is sometimes reduced to solely an exponential element, executor of orders, or at least wishes, of certain editors or publishers. As a result, the author's cultural mission is transformed, slowly yet evidently, from an ethical and enlightening role which visibly weakened, into a more ambitious one, that of the intellectual "entertainer" of a more demanding, better educated part of the audience. They turn into *opinion makers*, who design, or otherwise disseminate, new stereotypes demanded by the art market and the not-so-wide readership. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the era of declared or regained freedom (which may be perceived as "given" or "won", depending on the point of view), one can use literature to write and say anything. The real question, however, is whether anything can be done with what was written and said, unless of course it is supported by a particular—usually economic—interest. Hence, a formula was found by which the *know-how* of literature gets recalculated in any event into a specific material value.

Historical experience indicates that, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Serbian literature had a clearly articulated relational dimension, one much stronger and more visible than today. Its impact was often determined externally, according to a given moment of general or social importance, a turning point of sorts, wherein its primary literary function, poetic and ethical, usually got pushed back to the second or even third

rank and put on the back burner. Our time is not very different from that, although the other side of that relation is no longer ideology or politics but rather the market. Art has unequivocally become simply a sector which participates in the appraisal and exchange of material values, a tendency which can best be observed in film or painting, though literature is not exempt either.

On the other hand, national cultures, and not just those of Southeastern Europe, rather prefer to canonize the authors whose work has an unambiguous external function, while its aesthetic component is either assumed to be there or sometimes even completely ignored. It should be added that a special characteristic of contemporary Serbian literature, as well as of the literatures of other Slavic peoples from the Balkans, consists in the fact that events from a distant and more recent past, and to an extent also from the current reality which is largely political and non-intimate, strongly affect the type of literary imagination and direct themes or ideologems. They do so firstly by following and affirming, and then by disproving and demystifying, the various poetic and political concepts, which in their scope and importance may appear as “large” or “small”. In this context, it is important to remember that in the Serbian literature of the Enlightenment period, the emancipatory function of literature had already been developed at both the individual and collective levels. The memory of those advances has been preserved in the present time too, although it is precisely in that memory that the notion and meaning of knowledge itself becomes problematic. Knowledge, namely, also gains a particular market price, and is presented by means of “special offers”, mimicking those in supermarkets, *workshops*, crash courses, and *ad hoc* seminars.

During early Romanticism, it is the collective identificatory function that gains the upper hand: literature confirms, in mainly linguistic and thematic terms, the uniqueness of national identity. The writing subject becomes the center of the literary text and this positioning accentuates the significance of the idea of a collective to which the writer belongs and which is idealized and celebrated rather than jettisoned. The stylistic formation of realism adds onto that the belief that literature is the best way for a community to represent itself to others and thereby fully affirms the community to the world. At the same time, however, realism also takes a certain, mostly conservative, corrective critical distance towards reality,

which is usually in line with the conservative view that the old is always better than the new.

The era of modernism, which marked the artistic practice of the 20th century in various ways and forms, developed, among the rest, the ideological, anti-ideological and socially appellative function (with the idea of engagement gaining a special, distinctive meaning). Simultaneously, modernism strongly promoted the idea of exclusivity or the autonomy of a literary text, which in hindsight may be interpreted as a special form of defense of the freedom of literary expression in the face of ideologically rigorous, oppressive social systems, in the East as well as in the West in their own ways. Securing the right of literature to speak about social phenomena as freely as possible is an important factor of modernity: literature remains outside of the prescribed constraints of the ruling regime, and is exposed to various forms of repression, from the physical elimination of authors to prison sentences, persecution and dissidence.

In the field of interpreting literature, it was beneficial to see the emergence and development of a range of valuable methodological schools and approaches which construed the text as a self-contained linguistic phenomenon. For example, a phenomenologically based interpretation would frame a text as an exclusive linguistic island in its own right, denying the possibility of construing that text as an element of a complex (co)relation. "Protected" in this way from the end of World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall, literature gained in significance through its undeniable critical, corrosive role in ideologically imposed social systems and it was, as a result, often in the center of culture and cultural events.

All the described functions were relativized in recent decades; literature, as documented by contemporary authors,⁵ does not have the ob-

⁵ "Literature, and not only in our area, lost the significance that it had during the 19th century for a myriad of reasons. It is important to be conscious that the reasons are not only based on the change to spirituality, but are also technological in nature, and the place that the book had, in good part, is also of technological and not spiritual nature. The book, thanks to Gutenberg, became the first mass industrial product. [...] That is why authors gain their important place within society, they are simply involved in a large ideological project. That job was accomplished, and the development of new technologies, first and foremost television, offers much more efficient means of accomplishing various ideological goals." (Radoslav Petković, "Svet je nešto mnogo veće", cf. Пантић 2007: 238–239).

jective importance today that it did just thirty or so years ago. In just that short time span, there were changes to the creative, receptive and interpretative environment; only from the humanistic, enlightenment concept did there remain a weakened social effort to retain adapted educational and pedagogical roles of literature. If it cannot be stated with any certainty what its most prominent social role is anymore, it is evident that literature is still the best available option to school and, in terms of ethics, raise and educate the generations to come.

A change of social context and the status of art within it was followed by a change in the literary system itself. Established in the 19th century as the dominant, socially most influential genre, the novel completely dominated the literary field, provoking a decent amount of interest from the more informed public, while all other literary forms, somewhat excluding dramatic theater pieces, were relegated into the margins. With a bit of bitter freedom, it could be said that those forms went underground and survived merely thanks to those who created them and read them. However, compared to the size of the population, statistically that is a basically negligible number.

It should also be noted that some of those forms, such as essays or short stories, went through a powerful transformation. The short story adapted to the sphere of digital communication, and in the field of opinion journalism a similar thing happened with the essay, the only openly appellative, informative, commentarial, involved form. The contemporary essay does not avoid nor dismiss literary and exact verifiable elements, provided it “must be” recognizable by the author’s style and have a logical system of argumentation. Nevertheless, it is most often not written for aesthetic reasons, but rather with the intention to actively use words in an impactful way, to point out various social anomalies and deviant conditions and advocate for their correction. That type of essay presents a new form, given what changes is its nature and also its format, known in online journalism as a column, and in the digital world as a blog. It is interesting that authors often collect them and publish them in the form of a (physical) book, with the claim of them lasting longer and being re-readable, which is a literary trait and ambition. However, although writers had possibly the strongest influence on the public with their new essays, it cannot be stated that the opinions and views expressed in that form are of general public importance. Although they are monologic

by nature, they indirectly invite social dialogue, and even though they are the largest (para)literary form thanks to the media in which they appear, they are still largely directed at groups of like-minded people, which leads to the conclusion that their real social impact remains dubious, regardless of the quality of the given text.

In recent times, literature has lost its social impact and partly its political subversiveness to which, even when it exists, nobody pays any mind (writers become subject to the scrutiny of the authorities or individuals with opposite beliefs due to their public influence, but not their written works). Many claim that literature now increasingly fits into leading market mechanisms or rules, but it might be more accurate to say it is the opposite: the market nowadays greatly dictates movements in literature and even the writing process. The concept of fulfilling wishes of potential readers and pandering to their expectations has created a manipulative creative imperative—works are written for the public to enjoy them, for the book to sell well, for the author to become popular and win awards, etc.

When discussing the broader social perspective on contemporary literature, it is impossible to avoid the question of the influence of readership in the industry, which leads to the backward “rule” that the most read books are also of the best quality. The impact of several factors is undeniable. The first major factor is marketing, i.e., media advertising, creating top charts and ordered “critiques”, along with “blurbs” worded in superlatives on the covers. The second key factor is distribution: other than in chain or smaller bookshops, books can also be bought in kiosks, convenience stores, gas stations, and from street vendors. Finally, the third large factor is circulation—for example, typically in the Serbian literary market, unless it is a specific case of a famous author with a large reading audience, a novel is printed in 1000 copies, a short story or drama book in 300 to 500, an essay collection in 200 to 300, a poetry book in 150 and a specialist, literary-scientific study in 50 to 100.

In addition to all of these aspects, the status of writers (which is a broader concept than that of an author) and their role within society was also changed and problematized. There is only a handful of authors who are publicly known as “significant”, or even more rarely as a “living legend” or a “classic”. Characterizing one of them as a messenger who “speaks for the entire nation” now seems completely anachronistic and almost comical. In spite of that, the hard to explain paradox of the preserved

prestige of *the profession of being an author* has not stopped being impactful—on the contrary, that prestige has actually increased, despite the loss in social relevance of literature as art. Being proclaimed an author by the sole fact something was written and published is an ambition that has not gotten lost, only grown stronger. Those books that aim to be accepted and affirmed as literature are now written by people of virtually all professions, irrespective of their educational level or relevant knowledge. A testimony to that are also the books which, in the name of the customer, get written by more experienced, paid writers (*ghost writers*).

With all that being said, literature in the digital age aims to adapt as much as possible to new forms of communication, including adjusting the writing process to the emergence of new literary forms and ways of reading. The acceleration of the act of writing, the ease of creating copies, the low price of presenting written works and the resulting boost to production were all key to literature becoming a representative part of “art production” (known as the “creative industries” more recently). It has emerged as a product necessary to the running and growth of printing and publishing, now important manufacturing branches. Furthermore, a text that, for one reason or another, does not end up published in physical form becomes part of the virtual world with no obstacles and without much difficulty.

In short, the development of technology and quick, cheap access to the unbearable ease of “the printery” has led to an enormous rise in the amount of new published works. Serbian literary production has become overabundant and limitless (which deserves further comment), despite the marginalization and decay of education, the breakdown of the system of values, the surge in the impact of showbusiness on society and the economic hardships and decrease in genuine spiritual needs. A book is no longer a rarity, let alone a sacred object—rather, it is an everyday, easy to obtain product that is not very highly valued amongst the majority of the population. The contemporary state of chronic graphomania points to the fact that in places where a lot is written and published without measure, there is little in that vastness that is actually read, interpreted and appreciated by the masses.

Within literature, one can observe the rapid change in poetic conception, both in general and in the work of many authors. The first of those changes includes the movement of “women’s writing” into the

center of the literary system, since the most published writers today are women and the reading audience is mainly female; the second one asserts the domination of easy-going, trivial genres. The last change pertains to the defense of the critic, whose highly influential and important role in the past was founded on the observation, analysis and systematization of aesthetic values, while nowadays “literary criticism” has become an either somewhat covert or completely overt type of advertisement.

Paradoxically, the study of literature has seen massive advances, yet still remains somewhat underappreciated within academia. In that type of social environment, it is not easy to exert any influence on social movements, despite the relatively high level of cognizance and standard of expression of the section of contemporary Serbian literature which is currently aesthetically and form-wise the most successful. It can be observed that the previous critical attitude towards the prescribed ideology of the past decades has been replaced in many newly written literary works by a critique of the regression of social life in its different forms. Generally speaking, the critical power of the artist’s word has declined in the previous decades. Art almost imperceptibly, yet still evidently lost true social relevance, and the possibility to write and publish every thought has devalued the responsibility for what gets expressed, turning into its own absurd contrast, the flip side of artistic liberty.

Intellectual engagement, relocated in its fictionalized, aestheticized form, “moved” from literary works onto mass social media and into low circulation periodical journalistic releases like newspapers, weeklies, magazines, and annals. Unequivocally, literature is more often merely one, not very popular at that, way of spending one’s free time. Reminiscing a screenplay outline for a movie or TV show, it is used for relaxation and as a mood booster. In Serbia, according to statistics, about 4% of the population has a reading habit, while an additional 4% are familiar with books in a professional capacity.

It is important to point out the change in the comparative aspect of the creation of literary works. As early as 1968, the earlier ideas of the “influence” of poetic conceptions taken from foreign literatures have been overcome and have become practically useless, due to a growing and seemingly endless flood of newly translated books from every corner of the world. It is no longer a matter of accepting a specific influence or developing a receptive model, as used to be the case in comparative studies

in the past decades. The world exists in a permanently open, dynamic simultaneity and synchronicity, many Serbian writers create abroad and many travel for work. Therefore, in recent times, everything is (sub)ordinated to the nature and affinities of an individual's curiousness, that is, the writer's personal readiness for openness of one kind or another. Consequently, it is hard to speak of the notion of schools, styles and movements in today's literature, simply because the contemporary author has become a kind of intellectual nomad, regardless of whether they restlessly wander the world or brainstorm ideas with likeminded creators from the comfort of their own room. Any rather knowledgeable, expert reader of what is currently getting produced, especially of novels which are the dominant literary genre in Serbia as well, will very easily ascertain and confirm the importance of diversity in today's writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

While all creative concepts circulate among the public, their relevance depends uniquely on the author's degree of individual creative prowess, having (or not having) a gift and a certain level of knowledge. Poetic and stylistic hierarchies do not exist anymore; all tradition-based and recently extended, innovated writing styles are becoming activated and used, simultaneously yet with no mutual interaction. That dehierarchization was preceded by the appearance of postmodernist literary styles from the end of the previous century—the latest innovative, but not always consistently programmed change within domestic literature. These styles partly altered the epic horizon of Serbian literature, making it more playful, humorous and less conventional than the one we nowadays deem as classic or, in other ways, firmly modernist.

Postmodernism brought on beautiful, cheerful turmoil. The real world was flipped upside down and turned inside out like a glove, the insistence on the traditional wiseness and over-seriousness of literary speech was relaxed, becoming less strict. Historiographic metafiction debunked the big, pretentious, apodictic narratives of the person who continuously bears the pressure of dreary history having no other choice but to laugh at nothingness—this also reflected in the rhetorical figure of comical “postapocalyptic hedonism”. However, the “seismic” happenings that came afterwards redirected and reshaped the literature of the more recent, contemporary times. Postmodernism remained just one of the presented, tried and true expressive poetic possibilities, though not as attractive and

interesting as in its early, pre-war days, of course. New ways of illuminating ideas appeared; new attempts for literature in its contemporary form (new defeatism and engagement equally) to regain its former glory and the role it traditionally fulfilled—the prospect of literature not being able to change reality, yet being helpful in understanding it more deeply. Some of these methods included the ideologemic and fictionalized reinterpretation of the past and present, the revival of stereotypes of reconstruction of many types of identity and imagological ideas, as well as the nostalgia and melancholy that permeated every tale of old times based on “memory optimism”, wherein “the old days were simply better”. Due to many circumstances, literature in Serbia during the new age, from 1990 onwards, was given many roles outside of art—it shaped and presented historical, political, sociological, collective and individual, psychological knowledge and beliefs, and that fundamental quality has been retained in a different capacity in recent times as well. Nevertheless, literature from the end of the previous century and beginning of this one has not been able to regain its previously distinguished place or significance to identity in the cultural system of Serbian (or any other) society.

Without a doubt, crisis-mired times left a visible mark on literature, both thematically and stylistically. Looking at it from a distance, it is impossible to determine a poetic dominant in today's Serbian literature. What can rather be talked about when it comes to its active creative diversity and versatility are specific indications, not finished conceptions, that would determine the nature and character of the central confluence of literature, including thematic properties and standards of value. In that way, books that address questions of general importance to society (recent history, questions related to collective identity, politics, the abundance of heavy tragic content, lack of humor, cheerfulness, parody...) parallelly co-exist with the outsider's paradigm, talking about marginal or minority social groups.

This especially applies to autofiction, which only partly, enough to be part of the field of literature, uses the form of a confession to stylize personal experience from times of war, inflation, bombing, voluntary or forced exile, life in other countries and the return home, and most of all, the commonplaceness that came as a result of all those and other experiences. For autofiction, though interesting as a quite common way of the literary shaping of reality, it is difficult to defend it from the objections

of the decline in the level of knowledge within it. It usually speaks through limited experience with an overemphasized, egocentric “me” focus, with no formal inventiveness and with a lack of true experimentation, but rather with evident favoritism toward impersonal, monotonous daily life and various trivialities. Scarce symbolic effects impoverish the aesthetic values of autofiction-style written texts.

Highly detailed realistic storytelling which unites stylistic inertia of the unproductively read and reproduced tradition has not been abandoned or overcome yet. Neither has the linguistically conventional approach to the topic that is considered *a priori* to be meaningful and important, with the purpose of the “imitation of life” as faithfully and authentically as possible. Finally, there is the quite diluted field of genre literature in every familiar form, intended for target reader groups that, either voluntarily or due to the inertia of critical and academic interests, is rarely the subject of more general research, interpretation, systematization and valuation. A literature genre profiled and defined in that way fully remains a method of linguistic imagining in which the current social context hardly has a discernible role. Relating to it becomes even harder precisely due to the strictly regulated genre rules and ways of metaphorization.

The description of active poetical conceptions and the resulting map of stylistic configurations lead to the conclusion that the literature of the current decades cannot be understood without being compared to the literature of either the more recent or more distant past times. The coefficient of their difference can be ascertained only from the perspective of a continuum, from the comparison of *how it is now* versus *how it was before*. On the other hand, literature is always at an assumed beginning; every newly written work of value opens the door to, and offers, something heretofore untold and different. Overall, viewed from a broad social context, it seems that the change to Serbian literature in the past decades is primarily reflected in the loss of its general (but not individual) significance. Moreover, it is manifested in the changes to the way of writing itself, motivated, among other things, by the will in the act of creation to shape and represent the spirit of new, historically and socially turbulent times.

It is an age-old truth that literature changes by incorporating “non-literature” as well, absorbing new experiences and inventing new forms of expression. As a result, that type of creative “mechanism” is active in

recent times as well, which is marked as the era of “screen culture” and the lightning-fast digital exchange of information. This fast way of communication certainly impacts the changes to one’s perception of reality, which literature registers and often takes as a jumping-off point for its creation. In short, it can be said with certainty that changes in literature, and especially to its place in the cultural system are indirectly correlated to the changes to the society in which it is created, and on a wider scale to the changes to civilization as a whole.

Needless to say, the world today is not the same world of a few decades ago, let alone centuries ago, so literature is also not the same or in the same place it was in the past. It can often be heard that the glory of literature is “the glory of yesteryear”, that the best literary works were written a long time ago and should be read and interpreted over and over again. That enamoredness with the past is merely a bad excuse or an alibi to quit reading and interpreting new works, especially their relation and interaction with the current times. Either way, it is an inescapable fact that contemporary literature follows, expresses and (to a certain, not easily determinable extent) affects the shaping of the constantly changing image of the world. It offers certain views of it, differing based on the subject which perceives that change and gives it a particular linguistic form or expression.

The acceleration of time and the “end of history” are used-up metaphors. If all the metamorphoses of the world, from sociopolitical to technological and artistic between the beginning of World War I and the fall of the Berlin Wall, had the range and dynamic of the entire past millennium and not just one incomplete century, what can be said then about the last couple of decades? During them, new technologies have transformed every facet of social life, including people’s private lives, the very impetus of literature. Following those global transformations, literature has gone through a metamorphosis of its own and, as it has already been mentioned, it has been pushed into the margins of society. That essentially does not change much considering, as we are taught by the history of literature, the margins are productive and every new aesthetic value gets conceived there. What was considered an excess or an incident at the beginning of the century now becomes a classic pattern. In essence, an unwritten rule is that new aesthetics and literary styles must inevitably go through

a phase of misunderstanding and dispute before they are accepted and become a part of history.

In the end, it needs to be emphasized that, despite the problematic nature of its current social status, the role of literature in education and the enlightenment of the individual is indisputable and everlasting. The art of the word still remains very much required and necessary today, since an emancipated person is unthinkable without the influence of literature. Despite its impact on general society being disputed and relativized, its influence on the individual is undeniable. Although literature today has been left to the whims and inverted logic of a market that gives precedence to widespread, mass reproduced global stereotypes, authentic literary value and aesthetic literary imagination continue to exist against all odds. Literature has not given up on its traditional functions, despite the spirit of the times tending to push it into the realm of mere entertainment, along with movies, television, painting and other art forms, determined by market rules. That is also the case in Serbia where this phenomenon can be seen even more distinctly than elsewhere, due to chronic crisis and strong social tremors and traumatic events. Literary art still forms and exhibits the characteristics of every national community, aiming to resist the apathy of the current times which tend to settle and determine the market value of every aspect of human and artistic creation. In those times, the supreme deity and measure of everything is profit.

All in all, in accord with the necessary methodological diversity, i.e., the need for multidisciplinary approaches, there are multiple perspectives from which one could seek the answer to the question *what* and *how* Serbian literature was during the past three decades. Additionally, there are the questions of how literature looks today, what it tells us, what it offers us, what individuals and the collective see in it and what it means to them. Although systematically irreducible and creatively diluted into complete incomprehensibility for many reasons which must be further addressed—through different individual, poetic and ideologemic matrices, contemporary Serbian literature still forms ideas (emphasis on the plural: ideas) about individual and collective identity. Special attention, in that sense, should be paid to its memory potential, to emphatic, aesthetized, imaginary remembrance. At any rate, literature as an art does not remember or reproduce particular events in a literal but rather a metaphorically represented, indirect manner.

Finally—considering it was conceived in highly irregular times, during many seismic changes and societal breakdowns, which is an important matter—literature is a way of detraumatization, consciousness-raising, and defining of both individual and collective, largely distressing experiences. The synergy of the indicated perspectives, each in their own way detecting the homology of reality and fictionalized literary text, could lead to acceptable answers to the hard questions or, at the very least, to working hypotheses that demand constant new interpretations—a basic feature of the study of literature.

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