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**БАЛКАНИТЕ – ЕЗИК, ЛИТЕРАТУРА, ИСТОРИЯ**

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**THE BALKANS – LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, HISTORY**

*Summary:* The Balkan nations have been constituted by means of the national languages and national literatures; the great national writers have played a very important role in this process. It is well known that a national history and, consequently, politics has very often been the topic of national literature. The important function of language, literature and writers in the Balkans is just a specific historical course, but not a kind of historical failure. Also, the historical course of the West-European nations, with the typical role of national politicians, is not a compulsory pattern. Therefore, whereas in the West “The End of History” is the most prominent topic, the Balkans thematizes history, even today. It must be realized that in the Balkans national languages and national literatures are still playing a very important role in preserving the national and cultural identities. But, contrary to its former romantic and recent pseudo-romantic role of mythologization and idealization of history, the contemporary role of the national literature in the Balkans must be a kind of artistic demystification both of the past and of the present. Such a literature could – through its local thematic and specific atmosphere – call the European’s cultural attention, and, at the same time – by means of its artistic value – build any authentic national Balkan culture into the great building of European and world cultural heritage.

*Key words:* The Balkans, nation, language, literature, history, identity.

1. It is very well known that *the Balkan nations* have been constituted by means of *national languages* and *national literatures*, i.e. that the great national writers have played a very important role in this process. This process has been typical of Romanticism at least in South- and Eastern European nations, no matter where the typical romantic occurrence sometimes exceeded the historical framework of Romanticism. So, the important function of language, literature and writers in the Balkans is just a historical course, but not a kind of historical failure, as it is suggested in the recent books written by some bad-tempered scholars. Certainly, there are significant and apparent differences between West and South-East European nations regarding their origin and their human “material”. Western nations are mostly territorial-political nations, and Balkan nations are ethnic ones. Also, the historical course of the West-European nations, with the typical

role of national politicians (but not writers), is not a compulsory pattern. Having in mind the state of historical circumstances, of the general cultural level and particularly the level of political culture, the state of literacy, it is quite understandable that Balkan writers were mediators in the circulation of European ideas, values and practices.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the manner of constructing the Balkan identity in a negative way (for instance, through the irresponsible use of the pejorative term “Balkanization”) is not a good European manner. The fact of “balkanization” does really exist, not as a kind of Balkan destiny, Balkan mentality, but rather as a result of complexity of different political, both Balkan and European, interests and games. So, if there is no amnesty of historical responsibility – there is no amnesty either for the Balkans or for Europe.

2. In the Balkans there really exists diversity, “narcissism of small differences”, the Balkans is really, even today, sunk into *history*, it is “the powder keg”, crossroads of civilizations, battlefield of different interests, arena of “the Great Meeting” or “the Clash of Civilizations”, of political and historical dramas, tragedies... Here, in the Balkans, history has constantly been in the act. So, could anything be more habitual than the fact that Balkan national histories are a permanent source of literary motives, that history itself has very often been the topic of Balkan *national literatures*?

But, this is yet another topic of possible misunderstanding: conception of history, especially in the age of globalization. Is there anything like the *world history* (Hegel 1951)? I am afraid that – in spite of overall global connections, impacts and interferences – there is no single unique history, one-goal history, even like a world history of salvation, of progress in humanity and morality, in domination over nature, in classless society, in freedom consciousness. Especially, there is no world history as a reign of mind, with the famous Hegelian selection of “historical” and “non-historical” nations. There is not even a unique understanding of “the historical world” (in the sense introduced by Wilhelm Dilthey, Diltaj 1980), of its origins, its ends and its meaning in the philosophy of history: nominalism, empiricism and “physics”, on the one hand, and realism, rationalism and metaphysics, on the other. Moreover, there are differences between “metaphysician” conceptions of history. For instance, the German poet Gottfried Benn wrote that history might have occurred by “geological laws”, that it is violent, but since its goal is to create “a new type of man” (!) it is – metaphysical. (Ben 1991: 33, 23) In my opinion, each quest for meaning is metaphysical, even when it is only an ascription of meaning to incomprehensible events. Therefore, such a “metaphysical” conception of history could also be humanistic, at the same time. I do believe that it is not science (discipline of finding, analyzing and interpreting facts) but literature that has to deal with the quest for meaning in history. There is, perhaps, “the End of History” in the West. There is no “End of History” in the Balkans, all the same if we like it or not. Therefore, whereas in the West “the End of History” is the most prominent topic, the Balkans has been occupied with history, even today, digging for its meaning.

3. It must be realized that, in the Balkans, national languages and national literatures, elaborating on national history among other topics, have played a very important role in preserving the national and cultural identities. The claim that the significant social role

and function of literature and writers (always “overestimated”) in Eastern Europe has been radically changed in the post-communist era could not be accepted without certain criticism. It is a really acceptable finding that the social position of writers in post-communist Eastern European countries has been radically changed. (Vahtel 2006: 8) But, the fact does not at the same time mean that literature itself has lost its former significance. The prestige of literature has not disappeared, but not only because the new writers’ strategies of preserving social reputation, relevance and importance, i.e. of exchanging the achieved symbolic “cultural capital” for any other significant social position, have been found. This is because in Eastern Europe, and in the Balkans, literature has been a very important source for understanding the meaning of the past and of the present. So, I can agree with Wachtel’s “unforced” admission that in Eastern Europe – despite a certain proletarianization of writers – literature will have a permanent significance at least (90), supplying the need of defining and preserving cultural identities, and being indispensable in any endeavour to understand this part of Europe (226). In contrast to Wachtel’s prediction (261), I do believe that in Eastern Europe there will again be really significant and even great writers.<sup>2</sup> Finally, what is wrong with preferring poets to politicians and entrepreneurs?

National literatures are still important in post-communist Eastern European and Balkan societies. But, contrary to their former romantic and recent pseudo-romantic role of mythologization and idealization of history (especially in heroic epic poems), the contemporary role of national literatures in the Balkans must be a kind of artistic demystification both of the past and of the present, demystification or – if you like it – deconstruction of myths, idols, ideologies. It is true that writers could be nationalists not only as citizens but – if non-literary matter of their works was not mastered by literary form – as writers also. Then, their literary products are ideological pamphlets much more than works of art. (See: Žunić 2002) But true literary works could – through their local thematic and specific atmosphere – call Europeans’ cultural attention, and, at the same time – by means of their artistic value – incorporate any authentic national Balkan culture into the great building of European and world cultural heritage. Let us think of Ivo Andrić and Orhan Pamuk at least.

Finally, we also encountered the notion of “*the World Culture*”. We are wondering if there is anything like “World Culture”? Some scholars claim that, if there is “the world system” (Wallerstein), as an international economic system that affects the whole social life all around the world, there is also “the world culture – culture of the world society”, as a complex of common knowledge, principles, values, based on global infrastructure, economy, rule, law, and global problems. They also claim that “the world culture” does not repress local cultures nor unify the world (Lečner 2006: 42), and that it even “stimulates” and improves differences (215). In my opinion, we have to admit that some global cultural phenomena do really exist, but the argumentation of the above mentioned “stimulation” of differences, referring just to local creative interpretations and adaptations of global models (204), is not convincing enough. My standpoint is that globalization is inevitable, quite understandable and no less than acceptable in the sphere of civilization,

i.e. in the material substratum of culture. But, what is desirable in the sphere of culture is a diversity of cultures, as a remedy for the mono-cultural globalization. Different national, cultural and literal identities, different histories, are not “geologically” given, but historically constructed, unstable and changeable. Moreover, sometimes they could be a base of misunderstandings and conflicts. But, nevertheless, these differences are at the core of human cultural being – a being of humanity itself.

World history, world society, world culture... Is there any chance for the Different, for the Other, to survive in peace, in tolerant communication and creative cooperation? Is there any desired model for it? I think there is. It is the old pattern of “*the World Literature*”, a notion introduced by the great German poet, philosopher and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. I could not imagine any better instruction or inspiration for a theoretical solution of the problem, based on real conditions. Goethe wrote in 1827, regarding Serbian poetry, that “a common world poetry” does really exist, and, regarding a French drama, that “a common world literature” (eine allgemeine *Weltliteratur*) had begun (Goethe 1981: 361), and – most importantly – that “the common world literature” did not mean uniformity, but the contrary: mutual setting eyes on other nations and their particular but translatable literatures, their mutual understanding, true tolerance of the particular, of the specific, and, finally – the true values belonging to the mankind.<sup>3</sup>

World literature consists of different national literatures, which thematize their own experience of the history and of the present, their own collective and individual destinies, building themselves into world literature and world culture through their specific, local colouring creatively raised by artistic form to universal literary validity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> By historical and cultural coincidence, mostly the German ideas of nation and, consequently, the German patterns of nation making were transferred.

<sup>2</sup> In Serbia there was an interesting discussion concerning the topic of the position of writers and literature in post-communism. Serbian postmodern philosopher Nenad Daković, in an unspoken accordance with Wachtel, wrote that the social status of writers in post-communism, i.e. in transition, has been drastically changed, has been worsened, in cultural, political and economic sense. But, he claims that the specificity of Serbian transition is that the mutual ideological matrix of communism and nationalism has not been changed: former dissidents have become nationalists; the illiterate literary men have managed to get their old social roles of the false Messiah: “To be a writer in Serbia does mean to be prophet of conservatism, primitivism and corruptness. (...) Prophets have profited again”. (Daković 2007) On the other hand, Serbian poet and critic Gojko Božović finds that poetry has been marginalized for a long time by the public discourses of Politics, Ideology, History, Pragmatics, and also by the “populist literature” and quasi-poetry, that the social function and status of literature has been thoroughly changed during the last twenty years. He also maintains that literature is not a compulsory discipline of world-view defining and one’s self-building any more. He claims that in Eastern Europe poetry

has been relieved from social functions and, at the same time, from burdensome social obligations. But this process, stresses the author, has led to a certain self-concentration of poetry, i.e. to a kind of a “hermetic intimization of poetic language”.

<sup>3</sup> Presenting the Scottish periodicals *The Edinburgh Reviews* and *The Foreign Quarterly Reviews*, he wrote: “Diese Zeitschriften, wie sie sich nach und nach ein größeres Publikum gewinnen, werden zu einer gehofften allgemeinen Weltliteratur auf das wirksamste beitragen; nur wiederholen wir, daß nicht die Rede sein könne, die Nationen sollen überein denken, sondern sie sollen nur einander gewahr werden, sich begreifen und, wenn sie sich wechselseitig nicht lieben mögen, sich einander wenigstens dulden lernen.” (Goethe 1981: 363)

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