

## THE THREE ENDS AND THE FOURTH ONE

### ТРИТЕ КРАЯ И ЧЕТВЪРТИЯТ

Напоследък бяха провъзгласени три велики края: 1) на историята; 2) на националните езици; 3) на националните литератури. Сбъдването на тези „пророчества“ наистина би повлякло след себе си края на самите Балкани. Без да пренебрегва процесите на извършващата се глобализация и известна културна унификация, авторът не просто посочва „преимущества“ и „вредите“ от тези тенденции, но се спира и на желателните езикови и културни различия, на паралелно протичащите процеси на диференциация и, накрая, на важната в културен аспект необходимост да се запази буквално иронична резервираност по отношение на националната история.

**Ключови думи:** история, езици, литература, Балканите, разнообразие, наблюдение, ирония.

1.1. Four years ago (October 2005), here, in “St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo, at the international conference *The Language Policy of EU and European University Education*, I stressed the importance of the basic principles of the EU language policy, especially the principle of safeguarding linguistic and cultural diversity; the importance of the instrumental role of official EU languages but also the significance of the ontological dimension of national languages; maintaining that the language of poetry is the best speaker of the ontological dimension of language and the best guardian of national cultural identity, I emphasized the necessity of learning both pragmatic and poetic languages, i.e. pragmatic and poetic aspects of our national languages, for the sake of both our efficient technological and meaningful cultural survival (Žunić 2006).

1.2. Two years ago (April 2007), at the same place, at The First International Conference *The Balkans – Language, History, Culture*, further developing the view mentioned above, I underlined: that the Balkan nations have been constituted by means of the national languages and national literatures; that great national writers have played a very important role in this process; that national history and, consequently, politics has very often been the topic of national literature, that – whereas in the West “The End of History“ is the most prominent topic, the Balkans thematizes history, even today, and 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 (Žunić 2008).

1.3. Asking you to forgive me this little vanity of “self-quotation”, I stress that my wish here is not primarily to present my own attitudes (which are, after all, not so very extraordinary), but rather to draw your attention to the coherence and consistency of the conference organizers’ views and purposes. In the second place, I wish not only to broaden and support my theses, but also to “sharpen“ them in terms of consequences – concerning both (a) the status of the Balkans in Europe and (2) our Balkan self-image. Ad 1) We, Balkan nations, are really going to disappear, if our languages and our cultures disappear. Ad 2) We are really going to jeopardize our own national and cultural survival, to cause significant self-damage, if we continue to “cherish” non-critical relations towards our national political and cultural histories and towards our contemporary cultural creativity.

2. In recent social philosophy and social science **three great ends** have been allegedly “recognized” and proclaimed: 1) *the end of history*; 2) *the end of national languages and vernaculars*; 3) *the end of national literatures*. The fulfilment of these “findings” and “prophecies” would really mean (4) *the end of the Balkans* itself (and also the end of all specific cultural and historical regions).

2.1. **The end of history** has been foretold because of the process of global post-industrial, technological unification of the world and the political attempt to make a unipolar world society. But, it seems, having in mind quite evident, even painful and traumatic economic and political facts, that this neo-liberal ideology was just – ideology, i.e. a matter of interests and, therefore – false. History has happened, in the great part of the world at least. It is not just an effective phrase, but a range of obvious facts. For instance, many historical processes, based on certain religious, national, cultural programs, which started in recent and even distant past, have not been completed. Some nations have constituted themselves, while even completely new nations have emerged<sup>1</sup>; new programs and projects have arisen, calling upon certain old historical ideas. Finally, the single fact that “programs” and “projects” still exist refutes the postmodernist claim of their end (which does not exclude the fact that some of them are really damaging, even fatal, so it would be much better that the above mentioned claim was correct). Now, there is a history not only in backward and isolated areas, but also in the European Union (at least because of the Bulgarian and Romanian membership, and of the Serbian “threatening” candidacy); there is also a history, although “imported” history, in the USA, at least since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. I am not malicious, but it seems, paradoxically, that the postmodernist idea of “the end of history”, conceived of as an end of all modern historical projects, was a kind of project itself<sup>2</sup>. An unimplemented project. To be in history (even if there is “a surplus of history”, as in the Balkans) – is neither a failure nor an advantage. It is just a fact.

2.2. **The end of national languages and vernaculars** has been announced because of the supremacy of the new *lingua franca*, in favour of efficiency. But contemporary linguists believe that, in spite of the ubiquitous domination of the English language and in spite of everyday extinction of small community languages, they – being identity expressions – will not be totally neglected and forgotten (David Crystal)<sup>3</sup>; or that the

English language, today at the peak of its diffusion, probably will not spread and expand anymore, a fact that favours the survival of local languages (Nicholas Ostler)<sup>4</sup>.

So, according to famous linguists, it is not necessary for all world languages, including Balkan languages, to perish inevitably. Except if we ourselves support this process by linguistic and cultural indolence and inactivity.

2.3. **The end of national literatures** has not been predicted because of the supremacy of a “world literature”<sup>5</sup>. National literatures could be endangered, it is said, by the supremacy of both audio-visual world culture and the disappearance of nationhood. The second “argument” was discussed above: nations and national or regional cultures, together with national languages, are not going to disappear soon. Some specific national problems will probably evaporate, but, on the other hand, the majority of global problems will only assume different national and regional forms. Concerning the first argument, the fact is that the civilization of the book (the so-called “Gutenberg galaxy”) has been pushed out by the audio-visual civilization. The book itself will not vanish either – it has just changed, and its traditional medium has been changing, becoming an e-book, an e-book reader etc. In my opinion, there is only a technological, but not ontological difference between a chalk crayon, a pencil, a typography-machine... a personal computer.

Of course, it is not possible to overlook some alarming facts. For instance, an increasing number of writers do not write in their mother languages; a corpus of “the world literature” is made mainly, perhaps fully, of books written in or translated into English (popular top-lists of “the best books” in the world have been made in this way). The problem is not just the mother language, but “the small mother language”<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, in spite of the globalization processes, in this field there are also signs of quite opposite tendencies, indeed with both their bright side – preservation of cultural identity – and their dark side – nationalism. As usual, those who notice the early hints of these signs are writers (scientists, with their methods, findings, analysis, arguments and interpretations, come later). This is so because the living reality, full of the irrational, can be better grasped by literary imagination and empathy (especially in literary works of art, but sometimes – in a different form – in writers’ public statements, inspiring observations and remarks). In short, writers observe the renaissance of old local languages and local cultures in general, but also see through the nationalistic political abuse of the quest for national cultural identity (Alexander Genis)<sup>7</sup>; they also believe that languages of the periphery are more significant than the quite commercialized English language, and that literature of the periphery lights up hidden, invisible sides of our world (Peter Handke)<sup>8</sup>.

2.4. Now, it is much clear why a possible end of history, of national languages and national literature would really mean a possible **end of the Balkans** itself – because it would be the end of all uniqueness in Europe; perhaps even more – the end of all unique, “original” regions and cultures. In spite of many obvious and sombre facts of globalization and noticeable cultural unification, we also witness opposite and reactive tendencies, i.e. reversible processes of differentiation. Therefore, having in mind not only the desirable but even factual and persisting linguistic and cultural diversity in the unending history, I do

believe that no real end of the Balkans is yet visible. Even so, some “commendable” examples and important institutional efforts of the European Union, the Council of Europe and national governments are not quite sufficient for cultural survival and development.

3. If we really do believe that **the Balkans** is a specific but integral part of the European culture, we have to do something for the sake of its preservation. Not for its mere “survival” as a rarity, but for its development as a whole and for its appropriate reputation.

3.1. Concerning *languages*, besides learning the contemporary lingua-franca (whether it is English or any other language in that function), we also have to learn, to cultivate and preserve our own languages, including languages of minorities; to protect the linguistic heritage and language rights of the majority, but also that of minorities, to build and to found minority schools, museums, theatres, media institutions, and to pass appropriate laws. Protection of minority rights is a touchstone of our tolerance, readiness for dialogue and willingness for intercultural living together. Let us never forget that the national, confessional and cultural majorities in the Balkans – in some other relations – could also be minorities themselves. Concerning *literature*, we have to support not only our own national writers and literary institutions (publishers, libraries ...), but also mutual translation and publishing of the most significant literary works of art from our own national literature, those of our minorities, and of our neighbour nations and cultures, to cultivate intercultural dialogue, and not only tolerance but the living interest for the Other and the Different<sup>9</sup>. Concerning *history*, we have to look at our histories from a critical distance, including different views, made by others. Here, in the Balkans, we are very proud of our national histories, very often, but not always, with a good reason. So, we need a realistic insight into our histories, i.e., we need an appropriate distance to our own histories and – a proper culture of memory. Unrealistic, uncritical insights, mythological and nationalistic interpretations, cause damage to national and cultural identity and, therefore, are not advisable and favourable instruments for cultures to survive.

3.2. There is no critical insight without **distance**. Let us view the problem of distance within historiography and literature – the two main symbolic forms for facing ourselves, our past and our present.

Historiography is one of the most important institutional ways of cultivating memories, of course, only if historians (at least them, if not “common people”, too) are not totally sunk into a history, i.e. only if they have a certain, methodologically arranged, reflective distance to their subject-matter, especially to the historical topics burdened with mythological, ideological and emotional memories. A theory of distance in historiography (sometimes, a mere quasi-methodological pretext for an ideological ban on investigations) could make possible an unbiased description of different facts, explanation of their connections and, even, a certain understanding of their meaning (within an appropriate methodological framework). Of course, its scientific access must be free of emotions and, generally, value free. Exactly because of this “emotionlessness” of historiography,

any full experience of the human being in history, i.e. a real empathy, could be possible only in art, in literature.

Having in mind the ancient Aristotle's words about the difference between historiography and poetry, I would like to examine this relationship from a contemporary standpoint<sup>10</sup>. Historiography has a distance – temporal distance, it provides us with important knowledge, sometimes with sensational and shocking discoveries, but – without *catharsis*. A literary work of art, however, dealing also with human, individual, emotional aspects of historical events, could assume a formative distance to its subject matter, it could play a game with facts, and, therefore, could result in a proper purgation, purification (*κάθαρσις*) of emotions. A historian must preserve his subject-matter, an artist must “destroy” and “overcome” his subject-matter “by the form” (Fr. Schiller; Šiler 1967, Letter 22). In other words, a historian researches facts, an artist plays with facts. The consequence is: both historiography, as research, and literature, as observation, spectation, have a distance to a history, but only literary distance could be the ironic one. A writer is an ironic observer, distant *spectator* (not a real participant, and, therefore, sometimes stigmatized as a “traitor”, a “needless man”), whose literary work, thanks to its artistic form (artistic transformation of a matter) – paradoxically – makes receptive empathy and catharsis possible. But, literary irony is not a simple sneer, mockery, derision; it is just a playable formative distance. Such a literary ironic distance to a national history is a prerequisite for facing collective prejudices, auto- and hetero-stereotypes, traumas, “holy” and painful topics, for confronting national myths and mythologized national history, and, eventually – for gaining catharsis itself. Likewise, it is a prerequisite for literary creativity, cultural creativity, and therefore, for real and lasting belonging to the world of cultures.

**Irony** – it is an attitude of distant spectation in art, generally, i.e. it makes possible a formative play with a matter in all the species of art, although it is more noticeable in comic species, especially in creative plays with “sacrosanct” motives of national myths and national histories. Let us neglect for a moment not only festive, ceremonial and “commemorative” writings, but also our valuable national epic poetry, romantic national poetry, tragic dramas, historical novels... – national identity emblems. Let us look for “Rabelaisian” national literary examples<sup>11</sup> – comic, grotesque, burlesque, satirical, at least “farcical” works of art! Let us look for a life, art, and life destiny of those “martyrs of art” who have dared to play a literary game with facts of national history – penetrating the essential meaning of historical events! Maybe, from that point of view, our contemporary historical, social, cultural... position could be understood a little better.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Attali, a French economist, scholar, writer and politician, speaking about national identity, contemporary nationalism and internationalism, global egoism, increasing gap between the rich and the poor, said that till the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century more than one hundred new nations could emerge. (Jelena Mitrović, “Kratka istorija budućnosti” /A Short History of Future/. Interview with Jacques Attali. *N/V*, No. 3035, 26. 02. 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Just a few years ago, it was “the obligatory topic” in social sciences. Today, scholars, politicians, journalists wash their hands of Fukuyama’s (Fukuyama 2002) and their own, once everywhere compulsory, conception – “the end of history”.

<sup>3</sup> Today there are about 6 500-6 900 languages. But, unfortunately, they are dying rapidly, together with their speakers (two languages per month), and – as it is estimated by the British linguist David Crystal – a half of world languages are going to disappear till the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, many important institutions and instruments for safeguarding linguistic diversity have been established, especially in the European Union. However, even with the contemporary supremacy of English as lingua franca (based, as usual, on the political, military, economic, technological power), there is no real threat that all other languages of today will be completely pressed out by English, said Crystal, because languages are not only useful instruments but also an expression of national identity (T. Bojković, “Svake druge nedelje izumre jedan jezik” /”Every fortnight a language dies”. Interview with David Crystal. *Politika*, 06. 11. 2008). In my opinion, languages are not only “expressions” of identities – they, among other factors, really do constitute identities – they are identity constituents.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Ostler, a British linguist and combatant against language extinction (also, a creator of the Foundation for Endangered Languages), claims that English has reached the maximum of its world diffusion, that the power which has made its real base has passed its zenith, and, that, theoretically, there is a possibility, in the future, that English is going to lose its dominant position; anyway, its future is not so clear and certain, because other languages, both “big” and “small”, are taking their own positions (Ostler 2008: 625–632).

<sup>5</sup> According to J. W. Goethe, “the common world literature” did not mean uniformity, but its opposite: 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 (Gete 1959, Goethe 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Kito Lorenc, a significant Luzic Serbian poet (in German: der bekannte sorbische /wendische/ Dichter), says that he writes both in Luzic-Serbian and in German, that he is the translator of his own poems, because, one who writes only in Luzic-Serbian will not be noticed out of Luzic; his ethnic group has not created a nation, so, in his opinion both “the modern” and “the national” are “shaky categories”, and “national poems” today seem to him to be “anthems of mice” (Zlatko Krasni, “Gusta zemlja pesnika” /A Dense Country of Poets/. Interview with Kito Lorenc. *Politika*, 05. 11. 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Genis, a Russian writer born in Riga (Latvia) is of the opinion that globalization “raises the price of all diversities”, and that, therefore – in parallel with English language world domination – there has occurred “the renaissance of ancient local languages”. In the epoch of global tendencies, the local becomes “a precious ore and a reserve of growth”. Shaping his utopian formula – “maximum of diversities of cultures within a universal political structure” – he knows that desirable cultural fantasy, quest for identity and, even, “creation of national myth”,

could be a terrible political, demagogic instrument – a weapon. “During the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century we have fought to banish nationalism from politics, back to a culture” (Vesna Roganović, “Tokom XX veka borili smo se da nacionalizam proteramo iz politike, nazad u kulturu”/During 20<sup>th</sup> Century We Have Fought to Banish Nationalism from Politics, Back to a Culture/. Interview with Alexander Genis. *Politika*, 04. 04. 2009). And we did it.

<sup>8</sup> The famous Austrian writer and very, very controversial public activist Peter Handke, speaking about his interest in languages and literatures of “the periphery” (i.e. “small” languages and literatures), expressed his belief that “the languages of the periphery are, perhaps, more significant” than the English language. It is because “each language transmits its own variants in a music of the world soul”, and the English language is – commercial. The literature of the periphery and, generally, phenomena from the periphery, are, he says, like “polar light. We are stunned by them, and then the world appears different” (Žarko Radaković, „Srbija i tragični intenzitet Evrope: književnost rata i raspada“ /Serbia and the Tragic Intensity of Europe: the Literature of War and Decay/. Conversation of Žarko Radaković and Peter Handke on Serbian literature. *NIN*, No 3036, 15. 03. 2009).

<sup>9</sup> David Grossmann, a contemporary Israeli writer, says that people do not want to know each other, because they are afraid of others, that, therefore, they have to learn languages of their regions, in order to converse with the others, and, finally, that we have to learn languages of our enemies trying to decipher them and to understand them, to see things from their standpoint, and, moreover, to see ourselves with our enemy’s eyes, even if we do not like that sight (Anđelka Cvijić, “Pisanje me je spasilo”/Writing Has Saved Me/. Interview with David Grossmann. *Politika*, 04. 03. 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Even if we accept Aristotle’s claim that historiography relates what has happened (the particular), whereas poetry relates “what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity” – (the universal), today it is not recommendable to accept uncritically Aristotle’s word that poetry “is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, 51b). We know that historiography tends also to find out and fathom general “laws” in history. But, there are another, important differences.

<sup>11</sup> Contemporary Serbian writer, scientist and university professor, “Prof. dr Sava Damjanov”, in his burlesque and salacious literary work *History as Apocrypha*, in a witty, courageous and provocative way, taunts about all Serbian figures and institutions: historical and contemporary, real and fictional, in particular literary ones (Дамјанов 2008).

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