

# A Note on the Meaning of the 'Post' in Post-Yugoslav Literature

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My aim is to try to clarify the possible meanings of 'post-Yugoslav literature', a designation which has become relatively frequent in contemporary literary criticism, but which still requires some attention if it is to be used as a scholarly term. It implies a geography, as it directs our attention to Yugoslavia, and a temporality, as it refers to something that comes after Yugoslav literature. The easiest would be to use 'post-Yugoslav literature' to refer to all literature written in the region formerly known as Yugoslavia, but it would be very difficult to find a single instance of such usage: as a rule, the term 'post-Yugoslav' is never applied to novels and poems written in Slovene, Macedonian or Albanian, but only to those written in the standard Štokavian. It is even sometimes explicitly underlined that all writers from this 'post-Yugoslav' regional space 'all share the language' — which certainly comes as a big surprise to those who write in Slovene or Macedonian. However, using the term 'post-Yugoslav' to refer to the literature written in the language formerly known as Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian does not seem justified in any sense. If we want to refer to some shared commonalities in literature written by Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs, and to close connections between them at all levels — so close that in some periods they leave the impression of writing a single national literature — then both 'post' and 'Yugoslav' are misplaced. These commonalities and connections are older than the state of Yugoslavia, and can in no way be thought of as something that comes after it. At the same time, excluding all non-Štokavian speakers from whatever 'post-Yugoslav' we may want to talk about, and appropriating this term only for Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs certainly cannot be justified in any way. However, it reveals something very important about the possible meaning of this term, to which I will return after examining its other possible meanings.

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A very widespread use of the term post-Yugoslav literature is based on its perceived ideological leanings. Post-Yugoslav literature is said to be whatever opposes the nationalist and neoliberal policies of the successor states: *non-nationalist*, *leftist literature* written in the Yugoslav successor states. The ideological criterium for admittance to post-Yugoslav literature is derived neither from the history of Yugoslav literature — which was not ideologically uniform, contained both nationalist and non-nationalist currents, and could hardly be characterized as predominantly leftist in any sense — nor from the actual political practices of the Communist Alliance of Yugoslavia, but from the Alliance's official anti-nationalist and socialist ideology: not from what it historically was, but from how it wanted to be perceived. This understanding of post-Yugoslav literature is not based on generalizations about a specific literary corpus as a list of works meeting these criteria would be rather brief, but on our aspiration to appear as people who, in their conference papers and articles in refereed journals with quite a limited readership, 'subvert' something or other, or 'disrupt' it, 'transgress' or 're-draw the boundaries', or make the world a better place in some other way. This aspirational activist dimension, taken from larger socio-political movements such as feminism and postcolonialism, leads some of us to identify, support and advocate non-nationalist, leftist literature either in a sincere hope that this advocacy could eventually change the political realities of the Yugoslav successor states, or simply as a way of self-positioning in the cultural field. The former is rather naive, and the latter simply vain and self-serving. This notion of post-Yugoslav literature cannot be used in any meaningful way and should be abandoned.

The second, apparently more theoretically sophisticated description of post-Yugoslav literature is based on the notion of *post-national literature*: it argues that the historical period in which literature was nationally produced is over, that we now live in a post-national constellation in which national literature becomes as redundant as nation-state. Consequently, present-day literary studies, still under the spell of Herder's ideas, must take note of this fact and either update their research methods or step down and give way to other approaches more in tune with the times. There are several misunderstandings built into this definition of post-Yugoslav literature. Its premise about the post-national constellation, which was energetically advocated by various proponents of globalization in the late twentieth century, became hardly convincing in our time.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, it seems obvious that we live in a period in which re-nationalized

<sup>1</sup> For example, in Jürgen Habermas, *The Postmodern Constellation: Political Essays*, Boston MA, 2001.

political agendas have the upper hand. Whether one considers it a positive or a negative development is quite another matter, but simply ignoring this obvious fact certainly does not contribute to a convincing programme for updating our research methods. However, more striking in this description is the misunderstanding of the very notion of national literature. The division of literature into national literatures is merely a conventional way of classification, based on the existence of various languages: Finnish national literature is the one written in the Finnish language, Hungarian literature is in Hungarian, and so on. Granted, there are more complex cases which demand additional clarification — Spanish or English literature, for example — but the principle is clear: this conventional way of classifying literature based on its link with a language is perhaps the only thing that no literary studies, whether present-day or future, will ever be able to change. In this sense, there will always be national philologies. Abolishing them, or blaming them for any number of political ills, will neither improve our political situation nor clarify our research agenda. One further sense of national literature is simply a matter of perspective in which a poem or a novel can be seen: some works, such as Mažuranić's poem, *Smail-aga* ('Čengi's Death'), are better understood in this perspective; some others, such as Dobriša Cesarić's poems, are not, as they do not gain anything from being understood as specifically Croatian, or as a part of the corpus of Croatian national literature. There is nothing illegitimate or harmful in having this perspective in mind. In this sense, there have always been *national literary works of art*, meaningful in a national context, and *non-national* — which this definition mistakenly calls *post-national literature*, albeit written in the same national language, meaningful in any number of other contexts. Determining a context in which a work of art becomes more meaningful, or meaningful at all, equals finding the right perspective in which it can be seen, and the perspective of national literature is quite legitimately one of them.

The third sense of national literature is historical and refers to the role literature played in the process of building modern nations. Literature is said to belong to a nation in the same sense in which this nation lays claim to rivers, fields and mountains, to songs and dances, to cuisine and costumes, and to its own history. The link between a nation and its literature is again the national language: if written in our language, it belongs to us, and it cannot be shared with others, as mountains and fields cannot simultaneously have two legitimate owners. In this corpus of national works a nation sees itself as in a mirror and offers this image to

other nations. The purpose of literature is its participation in the nation-building process, and in maintaining the nation by serving as its 'spiritual space', by becoming a repository of its values, images, representations and stories, and thus becoming *nationalist* rather than merely national.<sup>2</sup> However, conflating the two is not always justified: literature can be national — meaningful in the national context, or in the perspective created by it — without ever becoming nationalist. Post-national in this definition of post-Yugoslav literature is a misnomer: those who use this appellation actually have in mind *post-nationalist*, not post-national. However, if this is so, there is nothing that literary studies can do about it. They will always continue to divide the literary field into national literatures according to their languages and advocate the idea that some works are more meaningful in national perspective. Advocating this idea is in the job description of a national philologist. When they stop doing so, they become something else: a comparative literature specialist, for example. Confusing *national* with *nationalist* philology is not helpful at all. The latter is often camouflaged within the former, but it does not mean that we should 'just kill everybody, and let God recognize his own'. We may also want to exercise some sense of distinction before we act.

However, if by post-Yugoslav we designate post-nationalist literature, in the sense of literature which opposes the nationalism of all the Yugoslav successor states, or which is at least indifferent to it, then 'Yugoslav' is out of place here. In this historical scheme, 'Yugoslav' is meant to stand for 'non-nationalist,' and post-Yugoslav should consequently denote various nationalisms which destroyed Yugoslavia. Post-Yugoslav literature should then denote the literature of nationalism, which came into being already within Yugoslavia and celebrated its triumph with its demise. Obviously, this is not what those who use this term have in mind.

A version of this argument can be recognized in the following, somewhat simplified, historical scheme: once there was a Yugoslav literature, but it disappeared with the dissolution of the state. There are now several national literatures instead, but Yugoslav literature survives in those works and authors who cross the state borders, and by being published and read in the whole Yugoslav space helps maintain Yugoslav literature. Anti- or non-nationalism in such works is implied, as otherwise crossing borders would be impossible, and the 'post-' in it denotes not an

<sup>2</sup> The classical explanation of literature as 'spiritual space' of a nation is in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1927 essay, 'The Written Word as the Spiritual Space of the Nation', in David S. Luft (ed.), *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the Austrian Idea*, West Lafayette, IN, 2011.

opposition, but a merely temporal succession. Post-Yugoslav literature is thus a fraction of Yugoslav literature which survived the dissolution of the Yugoslav state.

The advantage of this version of the same definition is that we do not have to deal with the *leftist* component of post-Yugoslav literature, but the presumed anti- or non-nationalism in it is more than just questionable. For example, Muharem Bazdulj publishes his books in both Zagreb and Belgrade, but so does Rusmir Mahmutćehajić. Do we need one category for non-nationalist post-Yugoslav writers and another for nationalist ones, or are we happy to lump them together? The existence of Yugoslav literature, which begins in 1918 and ceases to exist in 1991, is also far from certain. Here — in parenthesis — we can clearly see how the notion of a post-Yugoslav literature, however questionable it may be, in one stroke happily creates something which had to be fought for throughout Yugoslavia's history, and hardly anyone was convinced that by 1991 it had really come into being: namely, Yugoslav literature as such.<sup>3</sup> The present author is among those who believe that it did exist, which certainly is not a majority view, albeit not as a national literature, as it was optimistically imagined in the 1920s,<sup>4</sup> but as a supranational literary space: not as a sum of various national literatures, but as a shared space in which individual authors participated without ceasing to participate in their respective national literatures.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Miroslav Krleža was at the same time a Croatian writer, and due to his reputation, wide reading public and influence, also a Yugoslav one; Ivan Aralica, however, was only a Croatian writer. Non- or anti-nationalism was not a requirement for admission into this space: Momo Kapor or Ranko Marinković, for example, participated in it, despite being nationalists. What mattered was their capacity to cross the borders of their respective national literatures and engage the readership in other spaces. If there ever was a Yugoslav literature, it could have consisted only of works capable of becoming a patrimony of others. Is this what the notion of post-Yugoslav aims at? If so, then the 'post' in it is unnecessary: it is still the very same Yugoslav literature, older than the state itself — as there were authors in the nineteenth century who equally easily crossed borders and engaged

<sup>3</sup> On recent discussions regarding the concept of Yugoslav literature, see A. Marčetić, B. Stojanović Pantović, V. Zorić and D. Dušanić (eds), *Jugoslovenska književnost: prošlost, sadašnjost i budućnost jednog spornog pojma*, Belgrade, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in Pavle Popović, *Jugoslovenska književnost*, Cambridge, 1918.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this concept of Yugoslav culture, see Zoran Milutinović, 'What common Yugoslav culture was and how everybody benefited from it', in R. Gorup (ed.), *After Yugoslavia: The Cultural Space of a Vanished Land*, Stanford, CA, 2013.

readerships in other South Slav spaces — which outlives Yugoslavia and thus testifies that a state, be it national or multinational, is not necessary for such a phenomenon.

But why would we not try to think about post-Yugoslav literature disregarding geography and non-nationalist attachment to the common South Slav state? Instead of trying to fit them into the impossible corset of national literatures, which they obviously are not, why should we not say that both Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav literatures belong to the category of transnational literatures?

The answer is simple: because we should not postulate the existence of a phenomenon simply because there already is a developed methodology which we would like to apply. One popular model of transnational literature is literature written by a community within a community, such as Mexican authors writing in English in the United States, or Turkish immigrants writing in German in Germany.<sup>6</sup> They write in a host language, which they imperfectly appropriate in such a manner that their cultural otherness still shines through: this is neither fully German literature, although it is written in the German language, nor fully Turkish, although written by writers who are culturally Turkish, but remains between both and thus becomes transnational. This version of post-Yugoslav literature takes us beyond the Yugoslav borders and into the wider world: it is no longer a question of who lives in Sarajevo but publishes in Zagreb and Belgrade, and the other way around, and who opposes or promotes particular South-Slav nationalisms, but of our identities being projected onto the widest screen possible.

The problem is, however, that ex-Yugoslavs do not have the capacity to fill in this developed methodological framework. How many writers can they enlist in order to start discussing their own *communities* within larger non-Yugoslav national literatures? Two in the United States, one in Denmark, one in the UK, one in Germany — although that one would claim to be culturally fully German, and perhaps oppose their attempt to claim him for themselves — and that would be about it. Their work may be transnational, but they hardly constitute a community which produces a significant body of work to merit such a pompous title as 'post-Yugoslav'. One can list a few more writers living abroad who still write in their mother tongues and publish at home, some of whom have acquired an international reputation, but there is hardly anything transnational in it.

<sup>6</sup> For a clear and succinct summary of various interpretations of the notion of transnational literature, see P. Jay, *Transnational Literature: The Basics*, London, 2021.

The notion of exile, however romantic it may be, cannot be applied to them either: an exile does not maintain a home in the country he or she is exiled from, does not visit that country several times a year, and especially does not publish his or her works in that country. Simply living abroad does not make one an author in exile: *Gastarbeiter* is a word good enough for this position. One does not leave a national literature by simply moving house. There is nothing separating such authors, however great their international reputation might be, from those who write in the same language, publish their works with the same publishers and for the same readership, but have not left their country of origin.

In all these attempts to specify what 'post-Yugoslav literature' might mean, there were some features which seemed obvious, and also obviously uncomfortable to many. The term itself is meant to oppose the national orthodoxies based on the fiction about four different national languages, and consequently four national literatures. It wants to point to the fact that there are still many commonalities between the literatures of Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs, and that at least a part of it — the part which is not imbued with localism or nationalist ideology — easily crosses political borders and finds publishers, readerships and critical reception in other parts of the Štokavian-speaking area. The fact that we cannot imagine a novel written in Italian and published in Oslo, or simply widely read in Oslo without previously being translated, testifies that the model of four distinct national literatures cannot be applied here. Despite the radical, oppositional, non-nationalist posturing, those who use the term 'post-Yugoslav' seem to be too shy to draw the obvious conclusion. We are still dealing with the same, at least two centuries old, constellation: Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs still write books which do not require translation in order to be read across all four states; as previously, there are parts of this literary production which remains local, national and of no interest to others, but there is also a large part of it which can be read in all four states as supranational or regional literature. It is still exactly the same constellation as in the times of Yugoslavia: several historically distinct literary traditions, which have a lot in common, yet refuse to be merged into one. There is nothing 'post' in this, and 'Yugoslav' seems to be too broad a designation. Calling it 'post-Yugoslav' is obviously less controversial and provocative than calling it 'Štokavian' — which it actually is — but we should at least try to be clear about the real meaning of this term.

Can this term ever become a strong, theoretically grounded one, or is it destined to remain a weak, descriptive designation for something we

cannot really pin down? By now it should be obvious that the latter is the case. We will never be able to devise a set of coherent and usable criteria to classify the writers and their works into a broader post-Yugoslav, or better Štokavian, and narrower Croatian or Serbian literature. If we tried, we would find ourselves endlessly discussing their neoliberal or non-nationalist or cosmopolitan or merely local aspects, which certainly does not leave the impression of dealing with a strong theoretical term. It can still be used as a weak, descriptive term for what we clearly see, even if we cannot conceptualize it — as the previous generation of scholars could not conceptualize the existence of a Yugoslav literature: the relationship between these four national literatures, and the way they function, is atypical, and they can simultaneously look like one and many.