

— Tijana Matijević —

National, post-national, transnational

Is post-Yugoslav literature an arguable or promising field of study?

To define *post-Yugoslav* as a stable term is not only difficult, it seems to be not completely accurate. This notion is used in a variety of contexts; on one hand it relates to what has recently been formulated as the *Yugosphere* (Judah 2009); on the other some scholars interpret it as a kind of refuge of the historical fact into the realm of fiction and theory (Hitzke/Majić 2012). Some regularly use it to refer to the cultural production originating from the post-Yugoslav space. Whereas it is obviously difficult to find ‘post-Yugoslavia’¹ on the map², the term *post-Yugoslav* has been disseminated to refer to a cultural concept, or to a particular economic-political realm. By examining texts of authors who either as theoreticians, critics or writers relate to the discourse, in this paper I will show how *post-Yugoslav* is a sound and necessary concept of cultural and literary theorization and production.

To be able to define the signifier *Yugoslav* and its successor *post-Yugoslav* in the context of literature, one must inevitably deal with questions of national literature and culture and their present status. Also, one should decide if *post-Yugoslavism* is some kind of leftover of Yugoslavia, or at least of an *idea of Yugoslavia*, or if it has certain autonomous and self-regulating (con)textual meaning.

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- 1 Recently a book with contributions from the international conference “Facing the Present: Transition in Post-Yugoslavia: The Artists View” held in Graz has been published, evidencing that the seemingly suspicious substantive form has also started circulating in the academic discourse (see: Hansen-Kokoruš 2014).
 - 2 When presenting my paper at the JFSL 2014 conference I asked the participants to show me ‘post-Yugoslavia’ on the map. I had offered a geographical map of the Balkan Peninsula, but one of them said: “But you don’t have Canada on that map!” alluding to the post/ex-Yugoslav exile authors (credit to: Dijana Simić).

What is Yugoslav in the post-Yugoslav discourse?

One of the arguments is that post-Yugoslav stands as the alternative to the hegemony of the newly formed social and political agenda in the post-Yugoslav countries. This capacity of resistance is, according to some authors, a feature, which necessitates the very creation and promulgation of the notion. This has been shown in the Tanja Petrović's study (2012) of industrial workers and the way they remember their life and work in Yugoslavia. This book attempts to debunk the negative and totalitarian aura Yugoslavia has in the current political discourses. It shows how certain practices and ideas of socialist Yugoslavia (workers' rights, self-management, education, solidarity etc.) were the nucleus of enduring democratic and progressive attitudes, including the awareness of one's own effectual agency. Moreover, it has been demonstrated why and how positive attitudes towards Yugoslavia are not only about non-reflected nostalgic remorse, but about the fact that Yugoslavism owes its strength to the fact that it was the identity marker for the whole collective of people (in this case workers; however, it functioned as an identifier throughout the whole range of different societal contexts). Post-Yugoslav discourse is emancipatory, it offers the "platform for resistance" (Slapšak 2011, 311) in post-Yugoslav societies, which narrow and very easy deny the space for articulation of dissident and alternative cultural and political voices. This centre-periphery dynamics is essential for the status of post-Yugoslav cultural and literary discourse: as cultural and political notion, it relates not solely to anti-national, but also to non-national or trans/post-national cultural and political space. It functions as the antagonistic counterpart to post-Yugoslav nationalisms.³

The identity that Yugoslavism was 'bestowing' on the citizens was simultaneously economic, political, social, but it seems, above all, it was a cultural one. Popular music, film, common language, education and literature shaped that what used to be *Yugoslav identity*: "Yugoslav identity was, above all, a cultural definition⁴, characterized by intellectual open-

3 One important post-Yugoslav author, Borivoj Radaković, twisted the usual perception by saying that writers are (in) the center: "Nismo underground, nismo margina – mi smo centar – ostale selimo na marginu" (Radaković, 2011) – "We are neither the underground, nor the margin – we are the centre – and we send the others to the margin". (Unless otherwise indicated, translations and cursives are mine. When they form part of the sentence quotations are given solely in English; otherwise quotes are inserted in the original language together with the translation in the footnote; T. M.)

4 In this regard, there is an indicative statement by Dimitrije Tucović, one of the authors who was inspired by and had contributed to the discourse of *Yugoslavism*. In one text he bonded his social-democratic ideas with the liberation of South-Slavonic peoples and

ness, diversity and mutual curiosity” (Klaić 1993, 3). Andrew Wachtel, a prominent scholar studying South-Slavonic culture and literature and in particular the shift of the cultural paradigm occurring alongside the dissolution of Yugoslavia, argues that cultural aspects of the Yugoslav unification are essential to the foundation of the common state of South Slavs, which is why it is necessary to relate to this feature of Yugoslavism when exploring also the break-up of Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav state of affairs.

In his article *When and why did Yugoslav culture have sense?* (2002) he sums up the main processes which pushed forward towards the unification – they were precisely cultural and, unlike the course of the late Yugoslav national(istic) cultures, Yugoslav cultural discourse relied on cultural and societal similarities. By referring to the linguistic (inspired by Herder’s ideas of the nation and its culture) and literary output of the early nineteenth century Wachtel goes so far as to say that there was an “initial explosion of the Yugoslav *cultural ideologization*” (Wachtel, 2002). Upholding the fact that this project had its highs and lows, the author is assuming a relationship between the idea of Yugoslavism and different cultural/literary formations. Realism, modernism and socialist modernism made a major impact on the political history of the country, argues Wachtel, leading to a conclusion that the postmodern cultural perspective had accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Importantly, Wachtel does not deny or exclude other factors, such as politics, economics, geo-politics, still he asserts that the cultural background of Yugoslavism is actually an enduring formation which might even, if other mentioned aspects coincide, restore another Yugoslav unification (sic!).

Post-Yugoslav literature as post-national literature

An important text about the topic is Boris Postnikov’s *Postjugoslavenska književnost?* (2012; *Post-Yugoslav literature?*). By mainly interpreting it as a transitional, market-oriented catchphrase, this author puts forth claims which destabilise the reality of post-Yugoslav discourse. He is mostly concerned about the “arbitrariness” of the way critics and

their unification, envisioning it as a *cultural emancipation*: “Nije srpska vlada ta, nisu srpski bajoneti ti koji će izvršiti ujedinjenje jugoslovenstva. To su narodne mase koje će izvojevanjem uslova za kulturni napredak izvojevati sebi slobodu” (as quoted in the daily newspapers *Danas*, www.danas.rs) – “Neither Serbian government, nor the bayonets are the means to achieve the consolidation of Yugoslavism. These are the masses of people who will, by fighting for the cultural progress, eventually conquer the freedom”.

journalists use the term. “Dionice mu na tržištu simboličkoga kapitala posljednjih godina ubrzano rastu, potpomognute njegovom navodnom samorazumljivošću: svima bi nam, valjda, trebalo biti jasno na što se misli kada se kaže ‘postjugoslavenska književnost’.”⁵ (Postnikov 2012, 11) When numbering the alleged benefits acquired by those who stick to the term ‘post-Yugoslav’, he simultaneously asks important questions about the legitimacy and dynamics of a discourse production:

Govoriti o postjugoslavenskoj književnosti, tako, znači zauzeti implicitnu distancu spram izolacionizma i autarkije nacionalnih kultura, [...] znači usputno deklarirati vlastitu liberalnost, širinu pogleda i odmak od uskih, klaustrofobičnih kanona slovenačke, hrvatske ili srpske književnosti; negdje u pozadini takvog iskaza lagano titra naznaka subverzivnosti, slatko i benigno uzbuđenje ponovnog prisvajanja prava na zajedničko sjećanje [...]; znači nonšalantno zaobići goleme institucionalne pogone akademija, sveučilišta i instituta, koji su puna dva desetljeća angažirali intelektualne elite novonastalih država na povijesnoj konstrukciji i znanstvenom utemeljenju izoliranih literatura kao vrhunskih izraza ‘nacionalnoga bića’ [...]; znači pokazati figu dojučerašnjim neprikosnovenim autoritetima: to je zgodna, mangupska, ali i relativno bezopasna gesta usputne provokacije.⁶ (11–12)

Postnikov goes on to suggest a body of other scrupulous questions: how could countries which have had different development ever since (some have already joined the EU, some still struggle with transition agenda; cultural, education, economic and other institutions have been constituted independently), which still face different underlying or open con-

5 “Shares of the term grow rapidly on the market of the symbolic capital, due also to its assumed self-explanatory nature: I guess we should all know what we mean by the ‘post-Yugoslav literature’.”

6 “To talk about the post-Yugoslav literature therefore means to distance oneself implicitly from the isolationism and autarchy of the national(istic) cultures [...], to declare one’s own liberal views in passing, together with the open-mindedness and detachment from the claustrophobic canons of the Slovenian, Croatian or Serbian literature; somewhere in the background there are traces of subversion, which resemble sweet and benign excitement by reason of re-appropriating the right to the common past [it means; T.M.] to bypass nonchalantly [...] academies, universities and institutes, which have been employing intellectual elites of the new-born states for two decades already to historically construct and scientifically ground those isolated literatures as the sublime manifestations of the ‘national being’ [...]; to show the finger to the bygone untouchable authorities: it is a convenient, punk-like, but relatively harmless gesture of the short-lived provocation”.

flicts, and which are undeniably divided by the political borders could be considered to share a common standpoint as it is articulated in the notion of the ‘post-Yugoslav (literature)’?

Little could be said to oppose the above arguments. They all stand as indisputable evidence of the state of affairs in former Yugoslav Republics. However, I argue that the notion *post-Yugoslav* has been thought of and built precisely as a means to prevail over the obvious obstacles historical and political reality has posed. This is the point at which Postnikov in part obscures this discourse. He focuses on the practices of neoliberal publishers and cultural policies which exploit the nostalgic aura of the post-Yugoslav. Yet, the commodification of the concept is just one of the consequences of the process. *Post-Yugoslav* is the cultural and political designation, which functions as a tool to counter both the nationalistic agenda of post-Yugoslav societies and neoliberal economies which accompanied the formation of all the respective post-Yugoslav states. By the end of the text instead of a conclusion the author speaks affirmatively about post-Yugoslav literature, articulating himself the potentiality of the phenomenon. He focuses on the post-Yugoslav literature as the alternative to the imposing rules of capitalist envisioning of culture and literature, the devalued role of the writer and narrow-mindedness of national(istic) cultures. It “could be transformed [...] into [...] field of researching and articulating *different community* of the authors, publishers and readers.” (14) By finally acknowledging that the process does exist on the “margins of literature” Postnikov concludes that “no matter how modest, [it is] already manifest: we read books we normally wouldn’t know of, we hear a name which would otherwise remain unknown for good. And that is why one should be persistent [...] – different literature is possible.” (15)

As shown in this argumentation, the term *post-Yugoslav* does show a tendency to fluctuate; it seems even that it has been easily interchanged with other terms. Pulling this notion into one specific direction can associate it with the post-war setting, or it could be reduced to describe the nostalgic literary inquiries. In his critique of a newly published book, a critic from Serbia does equal the term post-Yugoslav and some other terms, but still he employs it as a genuine literary demarcation:

Термини ‘послератни’, ‘постјугословенски’, ‘регионални’ или ‘југоносталгични’ у контексту савременог књижевног стваралаштва означавају писце из СФРЈ који данас пишу о покојној земљи, балканској Атлантиди. За њих не постоје границе и оквири у којима пласирају своја дела, те се она тако штампају

‘без титлова’ у Сарајеву, Загребу и Београду, у непромењеном облику, у писму и на језику у којем су оригинално настала. Међу овим писцима су Мухарем Баздуљ, Миљенко Јерговић, Беким Сејрановић, Ивана Симић Бодрожић, Ведрана Рудан, Дубравка Угрешић и остали [...].⁷ (Babić 2014, 202)

On one side this author asserts that it is difficult to define this literary discourse, on the other he forges arguments which constitute it as a single literary realm – the language is the same and so there is no need for translation (both linguistic and cultural). Finally, he names the authors which form a kind of a post-Yugoslav literary canon, which also brings out the fact that the notion *post-Yugoslav* is not absolutely unstable or indefinite as it might seem. Moreover, I would argue that the type of argumentation we could see in two previous examples shows that there is the necessity to rely on the concept *post-Yugoslav* in order to speak about the authors from the region. Even though it is arguably a vague term, we still imply certain *features* when discussing it. For example, Babić asserted that post-Yugoslav literature has to do with the war and with the common past, albeit idealized in the works of some authors.

Therefore, even though it has been often referred to in negative terms – we are told what post-Yugoslav is *not*, or why and how it cannot be said to exist – the term is by all means circulating. A well-known critic from Serbia, Vladimir Arsenić, proves that “different literature is possible” by taking into account works and authors from the wide post-Yugoslav space for the obvious reasons: they all share the language, culture and experiences of the past and the everyday life.

Arsenić effectuates the term sovereignly and regularly, thus proving both the necessity of the denotation and its comprehensibility: “Post-Yugoslav literature still doesn’t have the great novel about the epoch”; “one of the best fragments of post-Yugoslav prose in last ten years”; “the Croatian and post-Yugoslav literature now have an author they can be proud of”; “one of the most talented post-Yugoslav poets who rightfully

7 “In the context of contemporary literature terms ‘post-war’, ‘post-Yugoslav’, ‘regional’ or ‘Yugo-nostalgic’ refer to the contemporary writers from the former SFRY who write about the deceased country, the Balkan Atlantis. There are no borders to conform to or any specific framework in which these writers publicise their work, which is why their books are printed ‘without the subtitles’ in Sarajevo, Zagreb and Belgrade, in the same form, alphabet and in the original language. Among the writers are Muharem Bazdulj, Miljenko Jergović, Bekim Sejranović, Ivana Simić Bodrožić, Vedrana Rudan, Dubravka Ugrešić and others [...].”

earned this geographical but also aesthetical/ethical attribute”; “one of the best post-Yugoslav writers” (Arsenić 2014). These are randomly picked excerpts from Arsenić’s literary reviews, showing that the conception of the post-Yugoslav literature is the cultural background and a logical framework when dealing with the literature from the region of (former) Yugoslavia.

In his review of the round table *Post-Yugoslavs, the generation of authors. The seventh international conference on exile writing* organized in Paris in 2007, Robert Rakočević, a scholar of a younger generation dealing among other things with the post-Yugoslav literary realm, had also framed the term and incorporated it into the debate about the contemporary literature from the region. This author even proposed a sound categorization of post-Yugoslav authors and their works based on their alliance to Yugoslavia or Yugoslav literature. Rakočević distinguishes four groups: (1) post-Yugoslav literature as intertextual discourse, which communicates with the texts of Yugoslav authors; (2) literature, which is ultimately informed by, but also critical of Yugoslav ideology; (3) literature, which is post-Yugoslav in its critique of post-Yugoslav nationalisms; and finally (4) post-Yugoslav literature as the literature of an exile. He particularly focuses on the last one by seeing it as the one expressing “particular sensibility” (Rakočević 2011, 204). Sensibility is yet another extensive denotation, however it envisages the feeling of one’s own self and the world in the context of crossing borders and migrating; spatial and temporal alternations are another aspect included into the discussion about what post-Yugoslav literature is or could be.

By focusing on the works of two renowned post-Yugoslav exile writers – Dubravka Ugrešić and David Albahari⁸ – Rakočević considers their feeling of belonging to the country which does not exist any longer as essential to their “unstable identity”, the one which is “difficult to define” (206). Yet, this projection is not a theoretical, cultural or textual dead-end, it is, on the contrary, an affirmation of open and presumably versatile discourse, “for it characterizes the text and the identity as never fully determinable and by that never concluded constructs” (208). The very name of the term says a lot about it, Rakočević argues, for ‘post’ implies both the necessity to “look back” in the past and to prevail over it, to go beyond it. Here is where this author cunningly sets the debate within the

8 Importantly, these two authors didn’t solely influence the whole of the post-Yugoslav literary and cultural reality, they themselves to a great extent conceptualized it in their works.

post-colonial discourse: by building on Homi Bhabha's work, he asserts that "the post means never fully prevailed over", which makes our presence manifest in its "discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities" (209). All of these could be attributes of post-Yugoslav literary discourse which functions, as said earlier, within the centre-periphery paradigm. Nevertheless, what is repeatedly highlighted is the necessity of relying upon this comprehensive cultural denotation: "post-Yugoslav identity arises partially from the right to choose – that is a choice to remain attached to a certain culture, certain way of life, certain community – but also out of the *necessity*."⁹ (210)

Authors who deal with the term *post-Yugoslav* necessitate its existence and circulation. It is a term which describes certain culture, certain types of experiences and the whole of certain geography and history. This is further reflected in the literary discourse, which embodies literary histories and traditions of Yugoslavia, thus enclosing a complex of relevant issues of the reality (outside the text).

Post-Yugoslav literature in the context of South Slavonic Studies

To impose political (that is: arbitrary) criteria onto the space of culture which is heterogeneous, multi-layered and hybrid, proves to be a powerful instrument in the discourse of post-Yugoslav nation building¹⁰. This is what exactly comes into sight when the concept of post-Yugoslav literature is set against the outside-post-Yugoslav academic discourse. The German South-Slavonic scholars Angela Richter and Miranda Jakiša have shown in their rather humorously intonated text that when looked at from the outside the whole debate about whether or not *post-Yugoslav* could or should be used as a (technical, scientific, cultural) term seems simply to be a superfluous (literally: "luksuzno" – luxurious) issue (Jakiša/Richter 2011, 192). They support this by different sound arguments which interpret the issue practically and realistically scientific-wise. By affirming that South-Slavonic studies have always been inevitably comparative, and

9 Rakočević's text has been published in *Sarajevske sveske*, a journal based in Sarajevo. This journal is one of the few, but very important post-Yugoslav cultural and literary platforms, in which both the authors from all over the region and international scholars publish their works; it is also a platform to discuss important issues of post-Yugoslav literature and culture such as memory, women's writing, minorities literature, war literature etc. Together with some other institutions, like literary prize Meša Selimović and regional online magazines, *Sarajevske sveske* form the network of post-Yugoslav cultural 'infrastructure'.

10 To paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm: firstly, the language and only afterwards the nation is what is being created.

by maintaining the fact that the shared language and cultural background are an adequate basis for conceptualizing certain literature as a single scientific field, these two authors make the debate look not only superfluous, but indeed ridiculous. They discuss the scrupulous matters of the job market, faculties' structure and curriculum (South-Slavonic studies are a small enough field, compared to traditionally dominant Russian studies, that the attempt to break them into pieces of particular South-Slavonic literatures seems doomed to fail). Finally, they argue that there are impeding and implied solidarities among recently born and established national cultures (194).¹¹ Their argumentation is grounded in the understanding that the term post-Yugoslav is an (inter)culturally generated concept: "instead of bestowing the alleged rights to particular literatures [we are interested] in showing substantial interrelations" (194). These two authors criticize those constraining cultural agenda in respective post-Yugoslav countries by opting for the approach which would behold the "de-territorialized and exophonic literature" (195).

Closing remarks: post-Yugoslav as the comprehensive cultural notion

Entire volumes, which contain in their title or somehow refer to the term 'post-Yugoslav' are being published. A book *Post-Yugoslav Literature and Film* by Gordana P. Crnković, a professor of Slavonic studies at the University of Washington, published in 2012, shows the growing need of authors to deal with the topic of post-Yugoslav artistic production, particularly in the sense of seeing it as originating from a single cultural foundation. Crnković offers few essential arguments about the legitimate research motifs related to the concept of the post-Yugoslav culture: "related to each other by emerging from an environment of such changes, the post-Yugoslav literary works [and films] have much to tell

11 South-Slavonic literatures are nowadays mostly thought of and taught as ex- or post-Yugoslav literatures. I find these authors' argumentation about the necessity to include Bulgarian literature into the respective complex an excellent evidence of how post-Yugoslav discourse itself actually suffers certain exclusivist deficiencies. It is necessary to challenge the 'standard' notion of *post-Yugoslavism* and check if a capacity attributed to it – the capacity to connect the divided and to offer a platform for the marginal and alternative voices – blurs the fact that the post-Yugoslav discourse itself struggles with its own 'nationalism'. This could also help overcoming those non-reflected and nostalgic procédés of post-Yugoslav discourse. Even though the ideological and the political are integral aspects of the debate, the proposal to broaden the notion *post-Yugoslav* to the *South-Slavonic cultural realm* should be considered. This philological incentive might prove to be a good methodological approach in trying to define the concept of the *post-Yugoslav*.

to the world, especially about things that bring wars”; “the artistic and conceptual realm that they create when they are brought together and allowed to relate to each other simply by being put together” (Crnković 2012, 5).

One of the significant contributions to the discourse of post-Yugoslav culture and literature is certainly a ground-breaking project of publishing the collection of post-Yugoslav lesbian stories. This book presents a cultural and social precedent: authors in this collection are multiple minorities, starting from their sexual orientation to their position within the canon of national literatures. This book is an attempt to circumscribe temporally and spatially the works of authors who are otherwise absent from the literary sphere. In the foreword of the collection an editor has proposed for the very sound definition of post-Yugoslav literature: “By bearing in mind that post-Yugoslav literature (is) the complex of motifs which originate in the common intellectual heritage and which mutually communicate” (Barzut 2012, 10).

Works of authors who deal with post-Yugoslav cinematography evidence that *post-Yugoslav* is a broad cultural designation employed to describe spatial, temporal and narrative accordance of contemporary films¹². Nebojša Jovanović studies the discursive setup of Yugoslav (socialist) cinema, by also following some more alternative and varying ‘versions’ of Yugoslavism in the film. One of the important arguments this author offers is that Yugoslav film died twice: the first time it was murdered by politicians, the second time by film theoreticians. That is why Jovanović proposes that “Yugoslav cinema should have continued to exist in the way in which Weimar cinema or Soviet cinema still exist, i. e., as a *corpus of films*, produced in a particular historical context.” (Jovanović 2011, 169)

Previous arguments relate to and help shed light on the question of post-Yugoslav literature: Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav literatures are corpses of literary works which are interrelated in time and space, and which communicate through respective literary narratives. Moreover, certain cultural identification has spread out and continued to exist after the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia had broken out, exceeding politically envisioned and imposed boundaries. Importantly, what ethno-national understanding of culture had brought is the impoverishment of single Yugoslav cultures (Crnković 2012). Yugoslav was not a simple blend or collection of particular sub-Yugoslav cultures, but had a comprehensive

12 I refer mainly to works of Pavle Levi, Nebojša Jovanović, Ana Dević and others.

quality of its own (ibid.). This quality, how it survived and how it evolves in the new socio-political ambience of Yugoslav successor states should be an essential projection of any research dealing with the region of former Yugoslavia, above all of the contemporary South Slavonic studies. I will conclude by saying that the discussion about post-Yugoslav literature triggers broader debate about national literatures and their perception as “natural phenomena” (Biti 1997, 173). Thinking in terms of *post-national literature* (as a variation of post-colonial literature such as post-Yugoslav, post-Soviet or some other ‘post-literature’) opens the possibility to reassess the question of what constitutes the subject-matter and methodologies of the present-day philologies. One should be confident about the argument that Herderian ideas of culture belong to the history of literary theory.

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