Contemporary Serbian Literature

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It is very difficult to understand or explain what has happened to the former Yugoslavia, but what is happening in the new Yugoslavia, now reduced to Serbia and Montenegro, is also strange. If the fate of Serbian civilization in these weird federal states is still unknown, how is one to interpret what is going on in Serbian literature, which springs from confused, perhaps even disturbed social communities? This makes the attitude of Serbian literature and contemporary Serbian culture as well — to the environment in which it exists and survives — of peculiar interest. Despite all difficulties, and the fact that these questions are being considered in the midst of turbulent historical events and in the immediate neighbourhood of a most repellent civil war which makes any complete picture of the state of affairs almost impossible to obtain, perhaps this is the right moment to ask some important questions.

Probably the most interesting question is whether, to what extent and in what way do these tragic events and political disturbances occur in Serbian literature; are they expressed or ignored, do they influence literary form or have they as yet left no trace on the literary imagination? The basic problems convulsing Serbian society, such as the relationship of democracy to nationalism, history to the future, modern life to the progress of civilization, the cherishing of tradition to the universal cultural legacy, appear in a particular way in literature. These are just some of the fundamental dilemmas at this juncture of Serbian literature which, naturally, are not immediately apparent, and from which only indirect conclusions may be drawn. The answers to them depend less on how they are presented in literary work than on the status enjoyed by individual works in Serbian culture. A perception of Serbian tradition and prevailing interpretations of it, however, may help us to discern the future of literature after this war, when the sanctions and political upheavals are over. What cannot be found in Serbian literature today is political propaganda, support for the war or a brutal attitude towards Muslims and Croats. In this respect, it is far above the media and public life; its preoccupation is with poetry and cultural history, and not with sensational reaction to recent events.

To perceive the current moment in Serbian literature, it is necessary to briefly sketch developments during the lengthy period following World War II. With the establishment of a Communist power in Yugoslavia, a single-party dictatorship was imposed in all areas of culture, including literature. The break between Josip Broz Tito and Stalin, however, meant that from the early 1950s, Serbian literature took a somewhat different course from writings in other Socialist countries. In the 1950s, it had its first encounter with contemporary world literature and passed through an exceptionally stormy and poetically interesting period of modernistic research and experimentation.
Despite this, the Communist Party did lose interest in developments in literature, as important ideological battles were fought out between centres of political power in cultural rather than state or party forums. The Serbian national question at that time was absolutely taboo. Its raising in the 'sixties caused a split in the party hierarchy from which emerged distinguished Serbian national writers, such as Dobrica Cosić and Antonije Isaković. By writing about Serbian history, Cosić became the champion of national literature. His status as a writer is not so much determined by the value of his work as by the national significance of the subject. A member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, he was until recently President of the new Yugoslavia. Because of this national orientation, Dobrica Cosić was seen by the older generation as 'the father of the nation'. Following his break with Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, this role very quickly faded. Antonije Isaković, the Vice Chairman of the Academy, is today, however, an influential member of Milošević's Serbian Socialist Party.

Treatment of national topics and the position on the Serbian national question were an important yardstick of literary success, and the political attitude of the writer decided his/her place in contemporary Serbian culture. Young Serbian writers, who had not taken part in the Second World War, however, did not take their bearings from this generation of authors whose obsession with politics was the predominant feature of their literary work. New generations split into two main streams who carried on a debate throughout the 1970s. The one, condemned by official policy as the 'black wave', was interested in people on the margins of society and in showing the other side of social life — similar to Italian neo-realism on film. The other, represented mainly by Danilo Kiš, Borislav Pekić and Milorad Pavić, were intrigued by the challenge of modern and especially post-modern literature. Although frequently disparaged and accused of looking up to world literature, the post-modern Serbian writers dominated the 'eighties. This became obvious after the international success of Milorad Pavić's The Dictionary of the Khazars, which received enthusiastic reviews and became a bestseller in many countries.

At the time of the collapse of Yugoslavia, Serbian literature was cosmopolitan, authentic, abreast and part of mainstream culture elsewhere. Viewed from this angle, the situation of Serbian literature in the last few years becomes clear. On the one hand, there is a very strong movement towards national literature, dealing with Serbian history, rectifying political mistakes and interpreting national objectives. Although this can generate a fair amount of creativity, what happens more frequently is that works which attain great popularity and seem very challenging to their contemporaries, are not in fact of much literary worth. Their great popularity, however, is a factor which should not be easily discounted. Literature tinged by politics and written in a national key, is fated, despite its popularity, to remain of minor value and importance.