

821.163.42.09 Угрешић Д. (082)
821.163.4.09 Хемон А. (082)
316.722(082)

Stijn VERVAET*
Utrecht University

UGREŠIĆ, HEMON, AND THE PARADOXES OF LITERARY COSMOPOLITANISM: OR HOW TO “WORLD” (POST-) YUGOSLAV LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Compared to Yugoslav culture, post-Yugoslav literature is perceived as utterly provincial by many critics. Using the example of work by Dubravka Ugrešić and Aleksandar Hemon, this paper explores how certain works of post-Yugoslav literature can nevertheless be read as “cosmopolitan literature.” I argue that both authors contribute to the “worlding” of (post-)Yugoslav literature(s) in a double sense. Dealing with issues of displacement and trauma, their work not only puts life stories from the former Yugoslavia on the map of the world but also deconstructs Western stereotypes about the region. Through a web of intertextual references, their work includes the literary and cultural legacy of the former Yugoslavia in the imaginary space of world literature, thus reclaiming the common Yugoslav cultural space.

Keywords: post-Yugoslav literature, transnational literature, Dubravka Ugrešić, Aleksandar Hemon, cosmopolitanism, globalization, intertextuality, cultural memory

Introduction

In a paper written in 2008 for a symposium on (post-)Yugoslav literature and culture, Zoran Milutinović reminds us that one of the consequences of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia was the loss of “a supranational, common cultural layer in which all Yugoslavs took part” (2013: 75). According to Milutinović, “the common cultural space strengthened Yugoslav cultures by providing a wider audience, an enrichment of the various groups’ cultural resources, and a shared space for dialogue and competition – free from the danger of suffocation or domination” (2013: 82).¹ Such a common culture, Milutinović suggests, functioned as a buffer against the fierce competition in “the world republic of letters,” that is, as an intermediary between the peripheral South-Slav national cultures on the one hand, and the center(s) of the global literary scene on the

* Stijn.Vervae@UGent.be

¹ Milutinović adopts the notion “cultural resources” from Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* ([1999] 2004).

other. The loss of this common culture, he suggests, to a large extent explains “the obvious provincialism and intellectual and creative poverty of all post-Yugoslav cultures” (Milutinović 2013: 82). It is difficult not to agree with Milutinović: compared to socialist Yugoslavia, post-Yugoslav authors and artists have a much a smaller audience and more limited local cultural resources at their disposal. Their respective national readership as well as the interaction and dialogue with neighboring South-Slav cultural actors amount to only a percentage of what the Yugoslav literary and cultural circuit once offered. In addition, the nationalist flavor of much of the contemporary literary production not only closes it off from its South-Slav neighbors, but also hinders its broader international circulation and reception.² On the international book market, as Andrea Pisac has shown, authors from the former Yugoslavia who manage to have their work translated are as a rule treated as “consumable exotic,” that is, not as world literature but rather as “world music” in the sense of “non-Western music.” At the same time, they are expected to play an ambassadorial role, that is, to “represent their culture as a whole,” to write on “political matters,” and to express the “liberal-democratic views” of their Western host countries (Pisac 2010: 238ff).

But does this mean that a common Yugoslav culture is entirely lost? Whereas Milutinović’s diagnosis is certainly valid as far as the institutional mechanisms (which are now indeed nationalist in spirit and provincial in outlook – in line with the new nation-states’ policies) or the bulk of the cultural and literary production of the successor states of Yugoslavia are concerned, and whereas Pisac’s sociological analysis underpins many of his pessimistic claims with empirical evidence, I would suggest that there still exists something that could be called a common post-Yugoslav literature and culture that is truly transnational in nature but functions in an entirely different, global context than that of its Yugoslav predecessor.

In this paper, I will examine the work of Dubravka Ugrešić and Aleksandar Hemon as an example of two authors from the former Yugoslavia whose work does manage to transcend the “obvious provincialism” that Milutinović rightfully regrets. Their work can give us a sense of how post-Yugoslav literature – despite the lack of institutional support and the missing “buffer” of common Yugoslav culture as an intermediary between the national and the international literary scenes – takes part in a transnational cultural and literary space; it can provide us with valuable insights about the nature and functioning of the global literary

² It is important to keep in mind, as Milutinović pointed out, that the characteristic nationalism of the post-Yugoslav successor states and, one could add, of much of the contemporary (state-supported) cultural production, is both “a cause and an effect of the [country’s] dissolution: it is not only perpetually maintained and stirred up by the successor states, but it is guaranteed to remain in place by the incoherent and ad hoc solutions that the ‘international community’ has devised for identical problems in Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina” (82).

scene and can give us a more concrete idea of how a “cosmopolitan post-Yugoslav literature” would possibly appear.

I propose to consider Ugrešić and Hemon as writers with a cosmopolitan outlook not (merely) because they successfully adapted to the requirements of the global market in the sense that they found “strategies” to “remain relevant after communism” (Wachtel 2006a), but because their work contributes to the “worlding” (Kadir 2004) of (post-)Yugoslav literature. I will argue that Ugrešić and Hemon, by putting life stories from the former Yugoslavia on the map of the world, undermine stereotypical views of the region, and through a rich web of intertextual references, they inscribe Yugoslav literature and culture into the larger whole of world literature. In doing so, they at the same time provincialize the global literary space and cosmopolitanize local (post-)Yugoslav culture.

“Worlding” Post-Yugoslav Fiction

Even though I lump them together, treating both Ugrešić and Hemon as transnational writers, their access to and position on the global literary market is very different, mostly because Hemon writes in English and Ugrešić in Croatian.³ Ugrešić discusses the consequences of writing in a “minor language” at length in some of her essays in *Europe in Sepia* [*Europa u sepiji*, 2012], displaying a growing embitterment, at times even cynicism, about center/periphery relations on the global book market today. Moreover, she writes with a wry humor about the exoticizing gaze of many Western publishers, critics, and readers, to the extent that some of her essays read as an unambiguous illustration of Pisci’s claims, adding to her list the issue of gender inequality. In addition, Ugrešić positions herself explicitly as an a-national writer, emphasizing that she is living “in a literary *out of nation zone*” (2014: 216) and claiming that she is considered by both her former and present literary milieu as a foreigner.⁴ To be sure, Ugrešić does more than offer a critique of the neoliberal conditions of the global book market on the one hand and of the nationalism of the Yugoslav successor states on the other. Post-Yugoslav literature, by extension, has a more complex relationship both to processes of globalization and to the world(s)

³ Next to Hemon, we could add a few other post-Yugoslav authors who instead of their native Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian chose (or rather, on whom the circumstances of often involuntary migration imposed such a choice) a bigger language as literary idiom: like Hemon, Ismet Prcić opted for English, while authors such as Saša Stanišić and Marica Božović write in German.

⁴ Not unimportantly, Ugrešić not only continues writing in Croatian but also published her last few books in Belgrade, as if still embodying the cultural pattern that Milutinović describes as typical of the common Yugoslav culture, in which it was completely normal that a Slovenian actor flew several times a week to Belgrade to participate in a theater piece. If we would push this idea a bit further, we could even claim that Ugrešić, rather than a post-Yugoslav author – a term which she actually despises – is one of the only remaining truly Yugoslav writers.

on which it builds. Not unimportantly, Eric Hayot reminds us that globalization is a process, a transformation “that acts upon us,” whereas the world is essentially a place, “a geographic unity, an organic whole, a frame for cosmopolitanism” (2011: 227). Elaborating upon Djelal Kadir’s proposal to use the noun “world” as a verb (2004),⁵ Hayot writes:

If worlding named a process, however, it would be a process of orientation or calibration; to world (a person, or a place) would be to locate it “as is” in relation to the whole, to think the whole as that which includes “on loan.” Worlding is gestural; it is an attitude, by which one adjusts oneself, symmetrically, to one’s inclusion in a whole that does not belong to one. Worlding creates worlds because it bespeaks the part’s relation to the whole, but also because in that speaking it imagines (or recreates) the whole that opens to the part. The whole neither precedes the part, nor succeeds it. (2013: 228)

In line with Hayot’s thoughts, Ugrešić’s and Hemon’s “worlding” of (post-) Yugoslav literature/culture could be understood in a double sense – as a genitive of the subject and as a genitive of the object. Situating (post-) Yugoslav literature and culture in relation to global culture, their novels and essays open up (“world”) Yugoslav culture to bigger audiences and cosmopolitanize it by locating it in relation to the whole. At the same time, their work decenters (“worlds”) the (Western) perception of what the “global” world looks like and provincializes this perception, thus (re)calibrating the whole. Understood in this way, “worlding” literature is an in essence transnational gesture.

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2008) has suggested that there are two categories of writing that can be seen as transnational par excellence: migrant literature and Holocaust literature. On a more general line, we could say that transnational literature today is characterized by the themes of displacement and trauma – two tropes that play a pivotal role in Ugrešić’s and Hemon’s oeuvre. The experience of displacement is an inherent part of Ugrešić’s and Hemon’s life and a recurrent theme of their work.⁶ Much of Ugrešić’s post-1990 work and Hemon’s prose fiction could be termed as literature of exile and displacement that maps a transnational topography; in many of their novels and short stories, either the (pseudo-autobiographical) narrator or the main characters are migrants from the former Yugoslavia who try to find their place in Western Europe or

⁵ As Kadir writes, if we use the word world as a verb and “understand globalization not as boundless sweep but as bounding circumscription,” then “*to world* and *to globalize* [...] would have to be parsed in light of their subject agencies and their object predicates.” Moreover, “literature [...] is itself the outcome of cultural practice, and to world literature is to give it a particular historical density. Globalization is a process that binds a sphere by the circumference it describes. In the case of literature, the compelling question becomes, who carries out its worlding and why?” (2004: 2)

⁶ A native Bosnian, Hemon writes in English and lives in Chicago, whereas Ugrešić chose in 1993 to leave the young Croatian nation-state because of its narrow-minded nationalism, a journey that, via intermediary stations in Berlin and the US, took her to Amsterdam.

in the US, and who at the same time must deal with the (traumatic) memories related to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. Their encounter with “the West,” however, is not a straightforward salvation of poor Eastern Europeans in the world of liberal democracy but a confrontation with Westerners’ stereotypical ideas about “Eastern Europe” and the Balkans. Ugrešić’s and Hemon’s fiction not only deconstructs stereotypes about the former Yugoslavia but also unsettles the self-congratulatory image of the West as the seat of “universal values” and undermines the assumed direct link between economic and cultural superiority.

For example, in Ugrešić’s *Ministry of Pain* [*Ministarstvo boli*, 2004] refugees from the former Yugoslavia soon learn that it is easier to obtain a Dutch residence permit when you claim that you were harassed in your country of origin because of your homosexual orientation than when you are a female victim of mass rape. This leads the main character, Tanja, a literary scholar from Zagreb, to reflect on the hypocritical double standards of the Dutch government in dealing with refugees and asylum seekers and on the stigmatizing discourse of Balkanization that permeates the Dutch press and which her compatriots find very offending. Nevertheless, she remains critical of the national stereotypes that her fellow ex-Yugoslavs produce about “the Dutch” or “the Germans” (see Williams 2013: 100-101). In a similar way, Hemon’s *The Question of Bruno* and *Nowhere Man* invert American stereotypes about Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia. The former, for example, stages an encounter between John Milius and Pronek, out of which Pronek emerges as “a literate young man and Milius as a moronic thug” (Matthes & Williams 2013: 30).

Apart from the fact that their work deconstructs and at times inverts Western stereotypes about the former Yugoslavia – which to a certain extent amounts to the creation of fictional worlds that foster mutual understanding – one thing is clear: the ex-Yugoslav characters that populate their fiction are not poor or primitive Eastern Europeans raised in totalitarian conditions who had no experience whatsoever of democracy or Western (popular) culture. Moreover, their novels and short stories explicitly link the protagonists’ cultural baggage to their youth in socialist Yugoslavia, which had, compared to other East European countries, a rather liberal regime and thriving cultural life.

It is this rich literary and cultural legacy of the former Yugoslavia that Hemon and Ugrešić, through a rich web of intertextual references and allusions, (re)inscribe into the imaginary cultural space of world literature. In doing so, they re-claim the common Yugoslav cultural space that was irretrievably lost by the dissolution of the country. In this respect, the post-Yugoslav fiction by Ugrešić and Hemon could be seen as a form of mourning, as a way of working through the loss of the supranational Yugoslav space and culture. It is no accident, as Renate Lachmann pointed out, that the *ars memoriae* of the ancient Greeks (according to the legend of Simonides) has its roots in mourning:

At the beginning of memoria as art stands the effort to transform the work of mourning into a technique. The finding of images heals what has been destroyed: The art of memoria restores shape to the mutilated victims and makes them recognizable by establishing their place in life. (Lachmann 2008a: 302)

We can find a first way of mourning in Ugrešić's *Museum of Unconditional Surrender* [*Muzej bezuvjetne predaje*, 1977/2002].⁷ Read together with the leitmotiv of artists incorporating rubbish into their art work, the narrator's attention to the life stories of the people who lived the common Yugoslav experience can be interpreted as a way of re-valuing their experiences in spite of the dominant, nationalistic horizon of expectation of the newborn nation-states that tend to reject categorically any positive reference to the Yugoslav socialist era. In doing so, Ugrešić's novel actually not only saves Yugoslav citizens' (fictionalized) life stories from oblivion but also reclaims part of the values for which they lived (cf. Vervaeet 2011). Hemon's novel *The Lazarus Project* (2009), in turn, could be read as a book that attends to historical traumas that in the wake of 9/11 have been forgotten or neglected, such as the Bosnian war of 1991–1995, but also much earlier events, such as the 1903 pogrom against the Jews of Kishinev. These traumatic histories are interwoven with less visible traumas suffered by discriminated minorities in Western society (victims of xenophobia and anti-Semitism in early twentieth-century Chicago) or by populations living in peripheral regions of the world (the victims of post-communist transition) and presented against the backdrop of snapshots of Eastern European *tristesse* of post-communist Ukraine and Moldova. Indeed, Hemon's novel could be read as a work of fiction drawing attention to what Terri Tomsy (2011) has called the "trauma economy," that is, the global circulation of traumatic stories as commodities in a process that is enhanced, amongst others, by the media, which to a great extent determine what stories will be remembered by the general public while others are instantly forgotten.

A second way of mourning can be recognized in the way in which Ugrešić's and Hemon's fiction helps us remember and re-imagine the lost world of the common Yugoslav cultural space. On a formal level, Hemon's debut *The Question of Bruno* (2000) is clearly indebted to Danilo Kiš. Many features of Hemon's collection of short stories, starting with the genre of historiographic metafiction, and its ironic narrator, who presents himself as a pseudo-historian, can be traced back to Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* [*Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča*, 1976].⁸ Ugrešić's *Museum of Unconditional Surrender* abounds with

⁷ Published first in 1997 in Dutch translation, the novel was only five years later published in Croatian.

⁸ Not accidentally, Wachtel (2006b) identified "Danilo Kiš's posthumous influence" as a common marker of post-Yugoslav fiction, underpinning his claim with examples from work by Drago Jančar, Svetislav Basara, Aleksandar Hemon, and Muharem Bazdulj.

quotes from and references to Yugoslav and broader Eastern European literature and culture, ranging from Miroslav Krleža and Viktor Šklovskij to Danilo Kiš, Leonid Šejka, Ilya Kabakov, and others. Indeed, as Lachmann has pointed out, ever since the establishment of the *ars memoriae* in antiquity, writers have been aware of “the genetic noninheritability of cultural experience, and thus the need for a bearer of memory (as witness, as text, or as a cybernetic apparatus)” (1997: 5). Arguing that “literature appears as the mnemonic art par excellence” because “it supplies the memory for a culture and records such a memory,” Lachmann then claims that “intertextuality demonstrates the process by which a culture continually rewrites and retranscribes itself. Writing is both an act of memory and a new interpretation of (book) culture” (Lachmann 1997: 15–16). Ugrešić’s and Hemon’s use of intertextual references to important Yugoslav or broader East European writers and artists could thus be read as a way of not only saving from oblivion but also re-claiming the lost supranational Yugoslav culture, of (re-)constructing a transnational Yugoslav – and, in the case of Ugrešić, an Eastern European – cultural tradition in which they self-consciously inscribe their own work.

Conclusion: Towards a Cosmopolitan Community of Readers?

By opening up the local to the global and by decentering the global, literature – literary imagination in particular – shows its world-making potential. In this respect, novels such as those by Hemon and Ugrešić may well help construct a community of cosmopolitan readers – a transnational, politically conscious community, which, very much like Nancy’s “inoperative” or “unworked community” [*communauté désœuvrée*] (Nancy 1991), would not be held together by a kind of imaginary or imagined essence or be informed by the parochialism (both in time and space) of national identity politics (see also Miller 2011: 3–35). It is probably in this sense that Ugrešić’s and Hemon’s works help create the “cosmopolitan conviviality” that according to César Domínguez (2012) is characteristic of world literature. As Hemon put it: “Books open a space, a public space, in which the truth can be negotiated. [...] One should think of fiction – not just writing, but all imaginative practices – as a space where people get together to talk about things that matter to them” (2002). Perhaps paradoxically, Ugrešić’s and Hemon’s work, among others, opens up a space for public debate by creatively drawing upon the cultural resources, transnational heritage, and cultural memory of the shared Yugoslav space whose loss Milutinović laments.

REFERENCES

- Domínguez, C. (2012). World literature and cosmopolitanism. In: D'Haen, T., Damrosch, D. and Kadir, D. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. London: Routledge, 242–252.
- Hayot, E. (2012a). World literature and globalization. In: D'Haen, T., Damrosch, D. and Kadir, D. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. London: Routledge, 222–231.
- Hemon, A. (2002). “Aleksandar Hemon by Jenifer Berman. Interview. *Bomb Magazine* 72. Online. <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/2328/aleksandar-hemon>>
- Kadir, D. (2004). To World, to Globalize – Comparative Literature's Crossroads. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 41.1, 1–9.
- Lachmann, R. (1997). *Memory and literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- (2008). Mnemonic and intertextual aspects of literature. In: Erll, A. and Nünning, A. (eds.) *Cultural Memory Studies. An Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 301–310.
- Matthes, F., and Williams, D. (2013). Displacement, Self-(Re)Construction, and Writing the Bosnian War: Aleksandar Hemon and Saša Stanišić. *Comparative Critical Studies*, 10.1, 27–45.
- Miller, J. H. (2011). *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Milutinović, Z. (2013). What common Yugoslav culture was, and how everybody benefited from it. In: Gorup, R. (ed.) *After Yugoslavia. The Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 75–87.
- Nancy, J-L. (1991 [1983]). *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pisac, A. (2010). *Trusted Tales: Creating Authenticity in Literary Representations from Ex-Yugoslavia*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Goldsmiths, University of London: Goldsmiths Research Online. <<http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/4751>>
- Thomsen, M. R. (2008). *Mapping World Literature. International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*. London: Continuum.
- Tomsky, T. (2011). From Sarajevo to 9/11: Travelling Memory and the Trauma Economy. *Parallax*, 17.4, 49–60.
- Ugrešić, D. (2014). *Europe in Sepia*. [Transl. by David Williams] Rochester, NY: Open Letter Books.
- Vervaeet, S. (2011). Whose Museum? Whose History? Whose Memories? Remembering in the Work of Dubravka Ugrešić. *Comparative Critical Studies*, 8.2–3, 295–306.
- Wachtel, A. (2006a). *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . (2006b). The Legacy of Danilo Kiš in Post-Yugoslav Literature. *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 50.1, 135–149.
- Williams, D. (2013). *Writing Postcommunism: Towards a Literature of the East European Ruins*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Стејн Верват
Универзитет у Утрехту

УГРЕШИЋ, ХЕМОН И ПАРАДОКСИ КЊИЖЕВНОГ КОСМОПОЛИТИЗМА
ИЛИ КАКО ОТВОРИТИ ПОСТЈУГОСЛОВЕНСКЕ КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ
КА СВЕТУ У ЕРИ ГЛОБАЛИЗАЦИЈЕ

Сажетак

У поређењу с богатом југословенском културом, постјугословенска књижевност често се доима као потпуно провинцијална. У овом раду се на примеру књижевног дела Дубравке Угрешић и Александра Хемона испитује могућност читања пост-југословенске књижевности као космополитске књижевности. У раду се тврди да оба аутора доприносе отварању (пост-)југословенске књижевности ка свету у двоструком смислу. Њихов рад не само што смешта животне приче из бивше Југославије на мапу света, већ и деконструира многе стереотипне представе са запада о региону. Поред тога, њихово дело помоћу широке мреже интертекстуалних референци уписује књижевно и културно наслеђе бивше Југославије у имагинарни простор светске књижевности, на тај начин поново присвајајући заједнички југословенски културни простор.

Кључне речи: постјугословенска књижевност, транснационална књижевност, Дубравка Угрешић, Александар Хемон, космополитизам, глобализација, интертекстуалност, културно памћење