The Literature About The Former Yugoslavia In The Paradigm Of World Literature

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The present study seeks to present the manner in which the paradigm of world literature can be applied to the literature about the former Yugoslavia. My point of departure is represented by the assumption that – besides the methodological turns – the 1990s witnessed a series of geopolitical (the break-up of Yugoslavia) and literary changes (the emergence of literary texts that fictionally tackle the former country and that are published in a variety of geocultural areas). In such a context, this literature not only can, but has to be read using larger frames of reference. In this regard, my paper insists on three features that can be considered essential in the attempt to read this category of texts in the paradigm of world literature: transnationalism, the core-periphery matter, and the circulation of this literature in original and in translation. Although they are not the only ones, these features shed light on the structural similitaries between the method and its object of analysis.

Keywords: world literature, transnationalism, literature about the former Yugoslavia, core-periphery matter, translation, ex-Yugoslav migrant writers.

The geopolitical changes that occurred at the end of the twentieth century in Southeast Europe led to a series of transformations in the literary field. Herein, I take into consideration a particular case: the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the outcomes that the disintegration had on geopolitical level (the creation of nation-states), social (displacement and mass migration), ideological (the rise of nationalisms) and, last but not least, literary (the creation of a new type of literary works). Such a point of departure is evident inasmuch as the hypothesis of an autonomous literary field was repeatedly contested. One of the viewpoints belongs to Pascale Casanova who, in "Literature as a World" emphasizes the fact the world literary field is relatively independent and relatively dependent on national-political and economic context[1]. The literature that appeared after the 1990s is significantly influenced by this murderous break-up and its consequences. Scholars started to talk about a post-Yugoslav literature and the emergence of novels about the Yugoslav wars. They shed light on ex-Yugoslav writers (migrant or not) who write about the former country. The tendency is to select works of fiction written by authors who live or have lived in the space they write about. Understood this way, this literature is limited to a geopolitical area. Therefore, multiple questions arise: does the literature on the Yugoslav wars exceed the borders of the former country? And if it does, who, where and in which language writes?

The Literature about the Former Yugoslavia: from where to where?

To answer the aforementioned questions it is

enough to start by mentioning the literary works that have the ex-Yugoslav space in the foreground. The most well-known are those written by ex-Yugoslav writers: Dubravka Ugrešić, Aleksandar Hemon, and Saša Stanišić. Their works, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain* (Dubravka Ugrešić), *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* (Saša Stanišić), and *Love and Other Obstacles*, *The Book of My Lives*, *The Nowhere Man* (Aleksandar Hemon) are important for the contrast between the plot and the place of publication. Having as nucleus a particular, local theme, specific to a restrictive geocultural area, they were published outside this space, in countries that have nothing to do with Yugoslavia. If it is framed according to the equivalence between the place of origin and the fictionalized space, then the literature about the former Yugoslavia also includes writers who live within the former country, among which Miljenko Jergović, Faruk Šehić, and Alma Lazarevska. Even though some of their books were translated in English (such as *Sarajevo Marlboro*), they have a reduced visibility in the world literary system. A more peripheral circulation defines the literature written in the neighboring countries. Thematically, Orcsik Roland's *Comandoul-fantomă* (*Fantomkommandó*) and Radu Pavel Gheo's *Disco Titanic* can be included in the wider category of what I call literature about the former Yugoslavia. However, if the language in which they are written and the place of publication are taken into account, they belong to Hungarian and Romanian literatures. The same situation occurs in the last case: that of the novels published in distant areas. I mention here Clara Usón's *Fiica Estului* (*La hija del Este*) and Stephen Gallaway's *The Cellist of Sarajevo*. One of the main differences between these novels and the previous ones is to be found at the level of production: while the previous authors start from a direct or mediated contact with the former country, the latter have no contact at all. Therefore, their narrative strategy is to take real stories from the wartime and to fictionalize them.

To synthetize, I can say that the literature about the former Yugoslavia consists in a cluster of texts published in a variety of geocultural areas, which can be divided according to the proximity and contact with the fictionalized space, as follows: a) literature about the former Yugoslavia written within the territory of the former country; b) written by ex-Yugoslav migrants; c) written in neighboring countries; d) written in distant territories. Understood this way, it is obvious that this literature cannot be read using the national frame of reference.

Transnational Literature and World Literature

I have shown that what defines the literature about the former Yugoslavia is the variety of cultures of origin. Such a diversified mapping follows the path of the scholarly debates in literary studies. The research methods that emerged in the last two decades focus on central and peripheral literary areas, as well as on the interconnections between them. In fact, all paradigm shifts are, as I have already said, linked to the social changes. The influence that the globalization has on the entire span of human existence leads "to the need for a new conceptual framework to understand the interconnectivity of the world and go beyond national frames of reference"[2], as Gerard Delanty shows in *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*. In the literary field, this global or worldwide perspective is represented by world literature.

I come back to the concentric mapping of the literature about the former Yugoslavia. The narrow definition of the term (referring to the authors that come from ex-Yugoslavia) enables the inclusion of this cluster of texts in the wider category of transnational literature. Dubravka Ugrešić, Aleksandar Hemon, and Saša Stanišić are migrant writers. Iterative as it is, such an observation represents the starting point in the attempt to understand how the paradigm of world literature can be applied to the concerned literary works. Textually, these writers give – as Mads Rosendahl Thomsen points out – "a foreign voice to local material"[3]. In doing so, they intertwine two or more cultures, they are representative for each of these cultures, belonging at the same time to all and none of them. Looking closer, it can be said that the autobiographical features of their works consists in the traumatic experience of the war and displacement, the life in the former Yugoslavia, and the exilic experience. For example, in *The Ministry of Pain*, one can find all of the above-mentioned thematic layers. Tania Lucić, who teaches Yugoslavistics in Amsterdam, asks her students to take part in an imaginative game of bringing together nostalgic elements from the life in the former country. This nostalgia is an inclusive one, in the sense that it consists not only in returning to the spatio-temporality left behind, but also in a critical approach towards the space concerned. Using the distinction made by Svetlana Boym, it can be claimed that *The Ministry of Pain* deals with a reflective nostalgia. Unlike restorative nostalgia, which constitutes the basis for the rise of nationalisms and "protects the absolute truth", reflective nostalgia "does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones"[4]. Put in different words, the Yugo-nostalgic game comes together with a critical attitude towards both former Yugoslavia and exilic experience.

A last question has to be asked. Why is it necessary to start from the ex-Yugoslav migrant writers in the discussion about the manner in which world literature

applies to the fictional works about the former Yugoslavia? Firstly, it is necessary because "world literature takes seriously both cultural globalization and literature that can be characterized as transnational"[5] and migrant writers represents one of the most important subsystems of transnational literature[6]. Secondly, it is due to these writers that literature about the former Yugoslavia has a worldwide visibility. In fact, only after their works gained international prestige, was this literary subsystem formed. Bringing together the arguments, it can be noticed that they are interdependent: the transnational characteristic contributes to the worldwide circulation of the books and then, this outcome makes transnationalism of great importance for world literature.

The Core-Periphery Route

The matter of circulation leads to the systemic feature of world literature. Understood in terms of either field or literary system, world literature met multiple debates concerning the core-periphery inequalities. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova emphasizes this opposition between major literatures and minor, emergent ones[7]. Another perspective belongs to Franco Moretti who, in "Conjectures on World Literature" and "More Conjectures" presents a world literary system that is "one and unequal", consisting in a core, a periphery and a semiperiphery[8].

The core-periphery matter, as it is defined by Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti, is one of extreme relevance in the case of literature about the former Yugoslavia. The international circulation of works written by ex-Yugoslav writers depended on the authors' route. It is true that they left a war zone, but this conflictual area is – using the terms of the aforementioned opposition – peripheral. On the other hand, the receiving countries are, in all the three cases, central: Dubravka Ugrešić moved to Berlin, then to the United States, and in the end she settled in Amsterdam, Aleksandar Hemon moved to the United States, and Saša Stanišić to Berlin. Orcsik Roland is also a migrant writer, but in his situation, migration followed the periphery-periphery route. He moved from the former Yugoslavia to Hungary. Of course, the international circulation does not depend entirely on the geographical area, but I will come back later on this subject. For the moment I am sticking with the core-periphery inequalities in order to show that they can also describe the position of the other authors in the world literary system. Clara Usón and Stephen Galloway write within geocultural areas with a highly export potential. If the visibility of the novel *La hija del Este* is generated, among others factors, by the fact that it belongs to a major, canonized literature, Stephen Gallaway's novel gains visibility due to geo-linguistic reasons: it comes from the anglophone zone. Put differently, it is written in a language whose hegemony has been strengthened by globalization[9]. At the other extreme, there can be found the novels written by Orcsik Roland and Radu Pavel Gheo. Having a regional (*Comandoul-fantomă*) and national (*Disco Titanic*) circulation, these novels are representative for the unequal organization of the world literary system.

An overthrow of influence occurs when the theme, instead of the work of fiction, is taken into consideration. If the core-periphery inequalities presented above emphasize once more the dominance of major literatures, the change of the analysed object reflects the opposite. This time, the periphery is the one that circulates towards the core and influences it. The cases of Clara Usón and Stephen Galloway are illustrative. Even though they have written more books, their international prestige is generated by the novels *La hija del Este* and *The Cellist of Sarajevo*. Therefore, the export potential is to be found, first of all, at the level of production due to the fact that they use a local, peripheral theme, but one with a global impact.

What conclusions can be drawn based on such a sistematization? Firstly, it can be noticed that ex-Yugoslav migrant writers have a position as central vectors. Secondly, the international visibility of literary works is not determined by the proximity to the former country, but by the distinctions existent within the world literary system. Thirdly, the core-periphery matter goes beyond the standardized representations. The influence is not unidirectional; it is exercised by the core (the circulation of books) as well as by the periphery (the circulation of theme).

The Literature about the Former Yugoslavia in Original and Translation

The last major aspect to be discussed in the attempt to tackle the literature about the former Yugoslavia according to a global frame of reference is represented by the importance of the linguistic element. In *What Is World Literature?*, David Damrosch claims that world literature "encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language"[10]. It is not by chance that I start from the double possibility of circulation. Seen from the perspective of the languages in which they are written, this cluster of texts features a pattern that overlaps almost entirely with the mapping of works within the world literary system.

The first point of discussion is represented by the writers' option to write in the language of the receiving country. The novel *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* was written in German and Aleksandar Hemon's books in English. An atypical situation is if that of Dubravka Ugrešić. Some of her books were

published for the first time in Netherlands, but they were still written in Croatian. Moreover, the most recent novels were both written in Croatian and published in the ex-Yugoslav space. Yet, the authors' option not to write in their mother tongue has several justifications. On one hand, writing in an international language raises the chances of being worldwide read and recognized and on the other hand, it raises the chances to be translated in as many small languages as possible. In fact, it is a strategy that exemplies what Rebecca L. Walkowitz calls "preemptive translation"[11]. In her article from *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, Mihaela Ursa emphasizes the fact English has a catalyctic role on the Romanian literary market. Starting from 1990, almost 50% of the translations are from English[12]. As expected, translations from French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Russian continue the list[13]. This situation is representative for other literary markets as well. To quote Gisèle Sapiro, "translation flows move mainly from the core to the periphery"[14]. This statement reflects the situation of the literature about the former Yugoslavia. Whilst the works written in major literatures circulate beyond their culture of origin both in original and in translation, those written by Orcsik Roland and Radu Pavel Gheo remain in the national or regional channel of circulation. This last observation makes problematic the inclusion of such works in the paradigm of world literature.

In spite of its drawbacks and unnequal representations (predictable, though), translation is the most important tool to be used in any attempt to tackle the literature about the former Yugoslavia. As I have shown, this literature is represented by a cluster of texts published in a variety of geocultural and linguistic areas. In such a situation, the transposition of texts from a cultural zone to another through translation is not a second-hand or superficial practice but a condition. In fact, scholars deal with a literature that – to use one of the definitions of world literature given by David Damrosch – "gains in translation"[15]. But translation is not unitary. Some texts are translated into a language, but not into others.

Taking into account the heterogeneous circulation and translation of texts, it can be claimed that there is not a single world literature. Instead, world literature appears to be perspectivized[16]. More precisely, says Marko Juvan, "with their translation repertoires and canons, the various national literatures reproduce different versions of world literature"[17]. The literature about the former Yugoslavia functions exactly the same as world literature does. It is always seen from somewhere. In this essay I presented this category of texts from the perspective of Romanian literary market. Therefore, even if at a first look it may seem restrictive, my selection was necessary. As long as this literature is perspectivized, approaching it according to its versions is extremely important. Had I chosen another perspective, there is no doubt that the cluster of texts would have looked different. As an aside, I can say that I mentioned the authors from ex-Yugoslavia because of the need to offer an adequate geocultural representation of this literature. Otherwise, they are not part of this version of literature. Except for a few fragments, they are not translated in Romanian. In fact, the situation of translation in Romania considerably inclines towards translations from major literatures.

In conclusion, it can be said that the literature about the former Yugoslavia is one that –by its nature – requires larger frames of reference. The nodal points between world literature and this cluster of texts are more visible than it may seem. On one hand, they are synchronous and, on the other hand, both of them are an implicit or explicit challenge for the way in which we still approach literature. But besides the common stake and the major directions of reading that were traced in this paper, how exactly the entire process of reading this literature in the paradigm of world literature will look like is to be found out.

Note:

1. Pascale Casanova, "Literature as a World", în David Damrosch (ed.), *World Literature in Theory* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 202.
2. Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination. The Renewal of Critical Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.
3. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature. International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London & New York: Continuum, 2008), 61.
4. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 15-16.
5. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature*, 5
6. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature*, 23
7. See Pascale Casanova, *Republica Mondială a Literelor*. Translated from French by Cristina Bîzu (București: Curtea Veche, 2007), 108-112.
8. See Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", in *New Left Review*, 1 (Ianuarie-Februarie 2000): 55-56. and Franco Moretti, "More Conjectures", in *New Left Review*, 20 (Martie-Aprilie 2003): 77-78.
9. Gisèle Sapiro, "Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market. The case of Literary Translations in the US and France", in David Damrosch (ed.), *World Literature in Theory* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 229.
10. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.
11. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated. The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): 15.

12. Mihaela Ursa, "Made in Translation: A National Poetics for a Transnational World", in Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian (eds.), *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (New York & London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 320.
13. Mihaela Ursa, "Made in Translation: A National Poetics for a Transnational World", 320.
14. Gisèle Sapiro, "Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market. The Case of Literary Translations in the US and France", 211.
15. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 281.
16. Marko Juvan, "Perspectivizing World Literature", în *Literaturna misal*, 61.1 (2018): 7.
17. Marko Juvan, "Perspectivizing World Literature", 7.

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