

## POSTSCRIPT

Basara's particularly significant autopoietic text is "*Post scriptum*," the concluding chapter of the 1989 collection *Phenomena*. This text brings to a close the body of work selected for the present purpose, except for the 1990 novel *In Search of the Grail*, which is included because it is a kind of postscript to *The Cycling Conspiracy* even if it does not formally belong to the period under review, i.e. before the collapse of Yugoslavia and the emergence of a new socio-historical, cultural, and even publishing context. Reading "*Post scriptum*" as an autopoietic text highlights a particularly interesting aspect that I want to pull into focus here: it establishes a dialogue with Basara's first book, more precisely, with the story that has already been emphasised as central, "Circumstances." The opening sentence of the postscript to *Phenomena* reads: "In this collection of imaginary inquiries, I'm a Borges who believes in God."<sup>180</sup> The differentiation of the terms *up* and *down* is emphasised and the thesis presented – theologically intoned, as in *preaching* – to the effect that the horror of the modern world outdoes the horrors of all other times because its primary facet is the oblivion of the vertical: everything is reduced to a horizontal dimension. This is a degeneration of perception and within this perspective the universe takes on the features foisted upon it by indoctrinated and perverted consciousness. The text continues in a confessional tone: "Since I am, despite the widespread rumour that I'm a writer, only a theologian who, in the absence of public interest in theology, resorts to literature, I had to use the form of a story."<sup>181</sup> The writer points out that to this end he had borrowed several procedures that the more attentive reader will know the origins of. Then follows the autopoietic confession: form is no longer of interest to him, and the subject of *Phenomena* is mystification. It was for these two reasons that he filled the finished forms with content. "After intensive exploration of the inconsequentiality of the subjective (to which my earlier booklets were dedicated), I undertook the exploration of the inconsequentiality of the objective."<sup>182</sup>

<sup>180</sup> Basara, *Феномени/Феномени*, 63.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

He points out that he did not make use of any objective phenomenon, inventing the problems dealt with in the book instead, and the process of rendering the inexistent objective made him realise that imaginary problems (at least literary ones) are just as difficult to solve as those deemed real. The writer further states that he gave free rein to imagination and all but followed the surrealist practice of automatic writing. A common feature of the fictions he constructed is that they compellingly resemble everyday reality. Fiction reminds him of the *circumstances* we are surrounded by on a daily basis to such an extent that at times it seemed to him an allegory – a stylistic trope he finds repulsive. If reality resembles the fiction of negative utopias, Basara argues, that is not his fault. That reality is empirically attested is itself a fiction popular in enlightened circles, for the inquiries demonstrated that it is incomparably more absurd, fantastic, and monstrous, than anything even the wildest imagination could invent. This does not surprise the writer, because the imagination of an individual is completely powerless against the lies that have been accumulating for thousands of years. Basara emphasises that the project of turning the world into a forgery, which is the story of “Falseland... the Land of Forgers,” is not the result of any conscious intention. He concludes that what is at stake is the following: any untruth projected into the world harms the subject, because the world is what we project into it. Thus, the circumstances in which we live are created by ourselves, and by lying, we do not falsify the truth, but ourselves. In this way, man becomes untrue – hence unreal. The author goes on to claim that people who do not exist are not a fiction; unreality is the real state of today’s world. To enable the belief in lies and movement within their world, Falseland’s propaganda, conceived in the Renaissance, sought to push the soul (which, according to Basara, is the most real thing in man) into the world of fiction – where the idea of Falseland was created. Judging by the Neo-Platonists, the soul in this world can only be seen in forms from which it draws from its own substance and attributes to the external world. If the soul is removed, the world remains without a soul – Basara thus opens up a problem: if such a world is inhabited by people of dubious ontological grounding, what about human knowledge? What, for example, of science? Of history?

Of particular interest, from the point of view of postmodernist poetics, is the autopoietic take on citation: “In constructing a world analogous

to the one which claims to be the original, it seemed to me equally irrelevant whether I should quote Montezuma, Sitting Bull, Marx, or Hegel; or whether I should use fabricated quotations like the one attributed to Isidore of Seville.”<sup>183</sup> In this sense, the author claims that Falseland is not an absolute fabrication – as there is no such thing. After all, he notes, all states acquire significant features of the literary Land of Forgers. The counterbalance to this negative utopia is the story of Rosenkreutz’s metaphysical projection, which thematises hope for the existence of a society of honourable people who care about the fate of a world to which even God has turned his back. The way “*Post scriptum*” ends is significant in this regard:

Counterfeiting adopts ever more perfect forms, uses ever more subtle means, permeates all forms, so the only way to tell the truth today is to publicly admit that everything I have written in this book (and not only in this one) – is an outright lie.  
But I have thereby told the truth.<sup>184</sup>

## “Postmodernists” and “Traditionalists”

This segment is dedicated to the contextualization of Basara’s poetics on a broader canvas, with special emphasis on the controversy that took place in 1996 among the Serbian cultural public over the issue of postmodernism versus traditionalism, i.e. the status of national values and traditions. This controversy ties in with the understanding of the postmodern literary and cultural field advanced by Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1997) and Niall Lucy in *Postmodern Literary Theory* (1999): postmodernism acts as a blow to both opposing ideological sides and each side is forced to contradict its own assumptions in order to defend itself. The central question that arises with regard to Basara’s fiction is: can the genre of the novel in the narrower sense present things as they are, given that things are exceedingly incongruous today and undeniably

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-65.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

cannot be rendered according to standard codes of significance? According to Lucy, the answer to this question, lies in writing *illegible* literature. In the controversy in question here – in which Basara is an implicit participant – it is the generation of writers who came to prominence in the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s that is charged with writing illegible literature (mostly novels) by the representatives of the “traditionalist” group, against which in turn the objection concerning the *unrenderable* reality can be raised.

In 1996, the editorial board of the magazine for literature and social issues *Književne novine* organised a panel in which the foremost literary critics discussed the current situation on the literary scene in Serbia.<sup>185</sup> The main topic of this debate, which developed into a controversy, became the question of the social mission of literature and its consequent relationship to national values and traditions, the latter invariably framed in pairs of opposites: national vs. non-national, traditional vs. modern, and domestic vs. foreign. The clash of views between the participants did not lead to either consensus or compromise, as both sides held steadfastly to their positions (which only proved that the conflict existed). The crucial character of the rift was confirmed by the fact that it reverberated beyond the narrow circle of readers of *Književne novine* and was transferred to other periodicals (*Vreme* and *Наша Борба*). The discussion thus became a testimony to a change in the literary paradigm. The delay in the articulation of the conflict enabled the representatives of the postmodernist current to recapitulate their previous activities, as well as to verify the justification of adapting postmodernist thought to Serbian literature. In this short overview, I will present the main theses of the most prominent participants in the controversy in order to map the fundamental points of the conflict and thus gain insight into the state of the literary field in question, as well as the interpretation of the problems by the two opposing sides – the “traditionalist” and the “postmodernist.” In that sense, Mihajlo Pantić’s “Several Introductory Remarks,” is most significant, starting as it does from the thesis of a monologic, i.e. non-polemical, type of culture, to which, in his opinion, Serbian culture belongs. This results in a lack of an objective, global, and polyphonic perception. Pantić defines the problem field as follows:

<sup>185</sup> See *Književne novine*, XLVII(1996), issues 923 through 930.

literary life reflects issues arising from an immanent poetic understanding of literature, as well as conflicts whose origins are ethical rather than aesthetic – in a broader sense, issues that are political and ideological in nature. Pantić views the situation of Serbian literature in the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s in the light of a latent polemic that refuses to be formulated, and sees the reasons for such a situation in the fact that a generation of writers had entered the literary scene at that point who were not bound by any form of predetermined ideology.

In the later stage of the controversy, Pantić describes the cultural situation in Serbia as a *simulation of cultural rituals*. According to him, literary life is inauthentic and constantly produces and imposes various “conspiracies,” so we can talk about a paradigm shift. He concludes that literature today is powerless and represents a silent retreat into language, which becomes a parallel reality that constructs itself, and the participants in the debate are themselves *post*, even if they refuse to be, simply because they had witnessed all the utopian ideological concepts and watched all of the historical-enlightenment films, and now they face the defeat of all spiritual and social projects, no matter what they were based on. In his opinion, the political reality in which they live and the literature they write and read is hopeless. In his contribution, entitled “The Truth and Morality of Postmodern Literature,” Aleksandar Jerkov starts from Foucault’s thesis that truth in discourse can shine only when there are political conditions for it to do so. A view of literature that relies on empiricist epistemology implies that a certain political and historical truth in the literary material belongs to a former epoch, Jerkov claims. Today, repression takes place in a different way. In the new epoch, literature without poetic self-awareness cannot preserve cultural-historical memory. The new textuality – the poetic self-consciousness of postmodernist literature – establishes the truth of literary discourse because in this way (as opposed to a predetermined political truth) a new poetic but also moral dignity is acquired, which is needed to act on readers’ consciousness and their understanding of historical processes, as well as of political conflicts. “The Postmodern Age and the Iceberg” is a contribution by Jerkov in a later stage of the discussion, in which he insists that the controversy is an attack on postmodernist literature and its compulsory defence. Jerkov emphasises the distinction between the terms *the postmodern age of Serbian literature* and *postmodern-*

*ism*, because the postmodern age of Serbian literature differs from “pure” postmodernism due to the absence of programmes and diversity, as well as to the intersection of modernist and postmodernist poetic features on the one hand, and traditional and modernist ones on the other.

“Once again, *On the Poetry of the End of the Century*” is a contribution by Saša Radojčić, who claims that this dispute will probably not be able to remain within the boundaries of aesthetics, because almost every dispute in Serbian literature over the past fifty years was an ideological showdown. Radojčić believes that the most important change that has taken place is the loss of the wider reception scope of Yugoslav literature, which provided Serbian writers with an easier and more natural path of affirmation. Miodrag Perišić participated in the first round of the debate with several pieces, of which I have singled out “The Compromise between Arts and the Media” and “There are Good and Bad Writers.” In the first, he points to the misunderstanding between criticism and the literary market, concluding that an author’s literary position should be separated from his political stance (or at least recognised when the two overlap to the detriment of literature), while in the second he argues that the question of differentiating postmodernism from other poetic concepts is of no ideological consequence. According to Perišić, the real ideological issue has been avoided here, and it is primarily of political, and not creative, provenance. The question he asks is: is the affiliation of a literary text to a particular cultural corpus determined by the political beliefs of the writer or by the language in which the work is written? Perišić’s answer to the question of the lost horizon of Yugoslav literature is that, in actual fact, such a horizon simply never existed.

In the further course of the discussion, Vasa Pavković argues in the text “Three Modernities and Postmodernity” that the situation of criticism is so acute that it is necessary to place the ethical values of the critic’s literary engagement in the very foreground of discussion. Pavković believes that in recent years there has been a process in which many former ardent fighters for socialist aestheticism in their mature and late years have become ultra-traditionalists when it comes to literature: they advocate primitive, national, class, political, and social engagement of simplified political feuilletonism – which amounts to their confrontation with the spectres of their own youth. In “Literature and Commentary,” Tihomir Brajović expresses

the opinion that the consideration of contemporary Serbian literature very quickly turned into a discussion of postmodernism in contemporary Serbian literature, based on the pros and cons of postmodernism. Brajović believes that the confrontation came too late – it should have taken place in the mid-1980s at the latest. He emphasises the importance of Predrag Palavestra's book *Critical Literature*, with the subtitle *The Alternative to Postmodernism*. This book appeared in 1983 and it introduced the notion of postmodernism into critical discourse in the Serbian cultural field quite early on – it tries to problematize the position of writers, and thus the position of critical consciousness, in relation to this notion and the further complex of notions it implies.<sup>186</sup> It seems to Brajović that Palavestra's book sketches out what was happening in Serbian literature well, and that is the replacement of one ideological paradigm with another. In this way, a space was created in which elite literature could criticise the crumbling ideology. At the same time, however, another set of taboo topics came into being, created by the new ideological paradigm.

In "Postmodernity and Morality," Mileta Prodanović describes the preceding debate about the current moment of Serbian literature as an elaboration of the mimicry model. It seems to him that everyone is a little reluctant to name things. The issue of "postmodernity" and morality has been touched upon but not elaborated. It is important to consider the moral position of those who were there before postmodernity, and are still there. In "Similarities and Differences," Dejan Ilić points out that postmodernism does not represent any absolute novelty in relation to the literary heritage. It seems to Ilić that in the Serbian literary environment postmodernism is understood as an act of radical opposition. It is not clear what postmodernist fiction opposed is opposed to, as it is easy to see that postmodernists are more tolerant of literary heritage than, for example, representatives of interwar modernism. The second oversight of the discussion that Ilić points out was made when, in these discussions, the fiction of the 1980s was equated with postmodern fiction. According to Ilić, the terms *Young Serbian Fiction* and *Serbian Postmodernist Fiction* cannot be synonymous.

<sup>186</sup> Предраг Палавистра, *Критичка књижевност: алтернатива постмодернизма* (Београд: Вук Караџић, 1983).

The consequence of the logically erroneous derivation of the basic features of postmodernism, according to Ilić, is the misinterpretation of the national feelings of postmodernists. The problem arises when the criterion of non-nationality is used in the interpretation and evaluation of a body of work. Ilić makes an important contribution to the discussion with a review of Serbian fiction in the 1990s: he points out that in the context of the latest Serbian fiction, it can be said that discussions of postmodernism are something that should slowly move into the field of literary-historical considerations, because new narrative models appear, markedly different from postmodernist patterns. There is a noticeable return to mimetic mode, developed plots, and well-rounded characters. The position of the narrator is once again stable, and the social context once again becomes an important element in the motivational structure of the narrative. “Between Politics and Postmodernism” is a piece by Leon Kojen, in which he argues that from a political and economic point of view, the world we live in does not differ much from the world of ten years ago – power is in the same hands as it was then, economic life is, as then, subordinated to the political goals of the ruling elite, the mass media (which exercises enormous influence) are tightly controlled, as it was back then. But on a cultural and symbolic level, things have changed: with the disappearance of Marxism as an official ideology and the formal acceptance of multiparty democracy, the position of literature, as well as of humanistic thought in general, has changed dramatically. Literature has lost its special position in the public sphere and left a void that someone had to fill.

The only female voice in the controversy belongs to Ljiljana Đurđić. Her contribution, entitled “Serbian Literature Today: Situation Normal,” is an overview of the situation on the contemporary Serbian literary scene in the context of European and world literature. In her view, Serbian literature is small-scale literature, without impact in the world, or even European, literary context, and as such can know nothing about itself and must sink into insignificance. “Postmodernism is no (literary) crime” is a contribution by Sava Damjanov, in which he warns that the dispute has forgotten that there are other poetic options present on the scene, apart from “traditionalism” and “postmodernism”: non-fiction (especially memoirs), classical fantastic or realistic prose, as well as radical syncretic experiments of the verbal-visual type, which are based on the experience of the



avant-garde. According to Damjanov, writers who consider themselves representatives of the postmodernist current very much do establish a relationship with the national cultural tradition – some implicitly (through intertextual links in their prose and poetry), but most of them explicitly (in theoretical, critical or literary-historical essays). The real problem is that the postmodernist selection from the local literary tradition, as well as the reflection on it, is radically different from the traditionalist one, which refuses to understand that tradition is not something which is dead and codified once and for all, but a spectrum of phenomena which every generation needs to rediscover, evaluate, and analyse.

As a final comment of this debate I will turn to the opinion presented in Boris Postnikov's book *Post-Yugoslav Literature?*<sup>187</sup> According to Postnikov, discussions about postmodernism in Croatian and Serbian literature in the 1990s took place in the context of nationalist ideology – whether they explicitly attacked postmodernist poetics in the name of that ideology or, on the other hand, denied the ability to oppose such ideology. In order to understand what is postmodern in Croatian, Serbian and other post-Yugoslav literatures today, Postnikov warns, it is necessary to abandon this perspective and, instead of literary procedures, narrative techniques or self-referential strategies, talk about the economic, political and social context of transition. The contributions to the debate do largely correspond to the situation delineated in Eagleton's study *The Illusion of Postmodernism*, published (like Naill Lucy's study, *Postmodern Literary Theory*) the following year. The policy of postmodernism was and is, according to Eagleton, both enrichment and escape – if it opened up significant new political themes, this is partly due to its escape from older political issues, not because they have disappeared or been resolved, but because at the moment they seem unresolvable. Postmodernist literature is a commentary on reality that is expressed in a new way – in the words of Brian McHale, on an ontological rather than an epistemological basis. Therefore, in the context of this controversy, it is important – as Silvija Novak Bajcar warns – to notice the difference between the po-ethics of Danilo Kiš and the poetics of the postmodernist writers.<sup>188</sup> In the first

<sup>187</sup> Cf. Boris Postnikov, *Postjugoslavenska književnost?* (Zagreb: Sandorf, 2012).

<sup>188</sup> Cf. Silvija Novak Bajcar, *Mape vremena* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2015), p. 189.

case, universal poetics and ethics are still possible, while in the second the critical dimension expands from the field of politics and sociology into all forms of life. Postmodernist literature, even when it abandons reference, does not lose touch with reality – it is always a response to impulses that come from reality. Postmodernism has no escapist basis: its engagement is simply expressed differently than in mimetic poetics. Nail Lucy's chapter, "Performing Politics,"<sup>189</sup> argues that postmodernism acts "as a *blow* to both sides of politics," and that "in order to defend itself against this blow, each side is forced to contradict its own assumptions."<sup>190</sup> This view is fully applicable to the controversy discussed here: the "traditionalist" critics condemn postmodernism as an attack on timeless truths and values. "But if in fact there *were* such an order of timeless verities, one might wonder why it would ever have to be defended since it could surely never come under threat. If it is true that truths and values are unchanging, why should there be any need to say so?"<sup>191</sup> Postmodernism is "apolitical" according to the principle that political responsibility calls for intervention, not indifference, and it is excessively "political" according to the principle that art and literature express a higher order of truth. Postmodernism is thus seen as a threat to the assumption that culture is political and as a threat to the conservative view that culture protects human identity from political putrefaction. "If politics and literature did have secure identities, then in a sense there would be nothing of a 'political' or 'literary' to decide."<sup>192</sup> Earlier in his book, Lucy raised the question: "How can the genre of the novel proper [...] possibly tell it as it is if the way that things are now is so utterly improper and, according to standard codes of sense-making, so absolutely unrepresentable?" According to the Romantic tradition on which postmodern theory draws, he explains, the solution is "to write *unreadable* literature."<sup>193</sup> In the controversy under consideration, the objection about the illegibility of literature (primarily novels) of the generation of writers that came to prominence in Serbia in the period from the mid-

<sup>189</sup> Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory*, pp. 141-162.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

1980s to the mid-1990s is specifically articulated on the side that can be defined as “traditionalist.” The objection that could be addressed to that party would concern the unrepresentable reality, which is never explicitly mentioned in the deabte, yet an attitude toward it is implicitly present in each of the contributions.