

ON SOME SPECIFICITIES OF SYMBOLISM IN THE BALKANS

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Balkan symbolist writers have not yet been duly treated; neither the overall emanation or atmosphere of their lyrics nor the subtle nuances of their experiences have been revealed. The new modern sensitivity of the Balkan artists, the spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist*) that allowed the implementing of previously unknown socio-cultural conceptions have not been elucidated either.

If we glance at the symbolist movement in the Balkans at the turn of the 19th century (this seems to be semantically the least loaded term that can encompass the richest content) we shall discern numerous essential peculiarities of the verbal art that enable one to disclose the specificity of Balkan literary development and its relation to the European model of artistic evolution. During that period the patriarchal thinking of the nations that found themselves at a busy crossroad and came in touch with various civilizations and antipodal religions at one and the same time gave way to a new cultural consciousness.

In the early 20th century, at the latitude of the Balkans, one will come across a new optimistic artistic consciousness and a new literary sensitivity. At that time there was an intensive joining in the achievements of European culture and arts corresponding to the expanding expectation horizon of the Balkan intellectuals. If we focus our attention on the Slav South we shall observe how the radical logic of European modernism is opposed to obsolete forms, to inert traditionalism, to oriental passiveness (Палавестра 1986: 105).

During the first decade of the 20th century there were more than one South Slav intellectuals who, living in a world of imbalance, were gripped by the sensation that "there was no ground but live coal under their feet". Vl. Nazor, S. Pandurovich, Vl. Petkovich-Dis, D. Debelyanov, T. Trayanov, A. Matosh, Vl. Vidrich dared turn their backs to the real world and live in the ghostly realm of poetic fantasy,

they dared bid farewell to concrete impressions and emerge from “the jail of reality” to sink in the embrace of pure reverie. In his moving essay on the artistic works of Boris Georgiev, the symbolist L. Stoyanov would note the following when interpreting the tendencies in the painter’s modern art:

Things had to acquire their individuality, the unnecessary details had to be eliminated, so that only what was primary and independent of out perception could remain (Стоянов 1922: 8).

Poets believed that in this very way art could be transformed into a “mirage” and a “portentous dream”, into self-fulfilment of the individual spirit, while the artist could become a prophet and clairvoyant. They were not willing to depict external reality, they desired to penetrate its concealed essence and come upon the paths leading to the transcendent, to a world of unabating beauty:

О, смъртний! Забрави надзвездните предели!
Сърцето ти не е ли шепотен фонтан?
Струи се ярка кръв, а образ възмечтан
Възлезва и руши мечти осиротели.

(L. Stoyanov, *A Fountain of Love*)

Or:

Нощта е неземно печална
нощта е по-тъмна от смърт,
напразно за ласка прощална
разкрива тайнствена гръд.
Сънят и е ледна пустиня,
но нейният шепот е плам,
тя тлее, самотна богиня
и тъмата на снежния храм.

(T. Trayanov, *Winter Night*)

All these artists who had renounced the conventionality and the archaic literary requisites had followed Rimbaud’s motto “to study the invisible and hear the inaudible”; their desire was not to evoke an illusion of reality, they aspired after a different reality and sought refuge in the bosom of beauty and in the fabulous realm of imagination. For was it not Baudelaire who first demanded that the unnatural should be “allowed” to triumph over the natural? With him everything beautiful was always strange and extraordinary. And these thoughts of his proved him to be not only a follower of romantic poe-

tics but also a champion of a new concept of art according to which the extraordinary was a property of exquisite individual taste and a “consequence” of modern artistic morality demanding originality at any cost.

At that moment the South Slav and Balkan authors also strived to reveal the “extraordinary” in a lyrical way. With unerring aesthetic insight they “closed” their spiritual resistance against reality in an imaginary world, reproducing only the “landscape of their souls”. The artists escaped beyond the visible and became obsessed with their muse in a peculiar realm that lay away from the rich motley-coloured reality. In it the objects of the surrounding reality seemed “to dissolve” and lose their material concreteness, distinctness and colour to become symbols of abstract ideas. T. Trayanov, Vl. Petkovich-Dis, L. Stoyanov, Vl. Nazor, Vl. Vidrich, Em. Popdimitrov seemed to dematerialize the word, exhibiting, like West European modernists, pronounced affinity for ambiguous speech that provided diverse interpretation options (*Madonna* and *Madrigal* by L. Stoyanov, *Autumn Terza Rima* and *Winter Sunset* by T. Trayanov, *Hair Consolation* and *Winter Evening* by A. Matosh, *Interlude* by J. Griparis, *Looking-Glass* and *Jail* by Vl. Petkovich-Dis, etc.). There is nothing accidental about the assertion that symbolic poetry can be defined as predicate poetry. It is about something or somebody but the subject, the personality or thing remains concealed. Thus this poetry attempts to detach speech from the extralingual situation. It belittles the “here” and “there” social situation (Wellek 1982: 25).

So the endeavour to reveal the unknown, the unseen, the new characterized the efforts of the Balkan authors as well. Actually, during the very first year of Stefan George’s well-known magazine “Blätter für die Kunst” the thesis that the beautiful and the new should be conceived as an artistic entity was persistently upheld. Apparently the general development tendencies of modernism at the turn of the 19th century were analogically manifested. It was not accidental that the Croat Antun Matosh, whose poetry marked the climax in the development of the Croatian “modern” one, had his “mysterious rose”, while his soul desired to be “a remote garden” guarded by a “high wall”, “a sphinx and dragons”. Miroslav Shitsel advocates convincingly that “love”, “flower” and their variations were the most frequently mentioned words in the early period of the Croatian writer’s artistic performance, while the mutual “assimilation and the conversion of the pure abstractness of the concept ‘love’ into the concrete symbol ‘flower’ was a dominating motif in his verses” (*Povijest*

hrvatske književnosti, 1978: 177).

The works of the modernists were also dominated by grief and elegy, by a strong feeling of solitude and transience, by a premonition of death as a salvation from the nightmare of life. The moments of sorrow and grief, the pain of recollection were particularly frequent in the poets' closed world where the colour and sounds of the unrefined tangible reality only reverberated. The suffering of the Balkan artists was caused by the unrealized reverie to be befriended, by the awareness of the transiency of the earthly days and by the tragic end of everything terrestrial, by man's insecurity in the desert of being. Let us mention the delicacy of feeling and the tender compassionate melancholy in Lambros Porfira's few works. Always a captive of a split mind, Yavorov's character also knew "the glass wall" that surrounded him, even though he fought against its votive might: "The eternal wall — I never broke it with my head..." (thus the poet "legalised" the theme of alienation in Bulgarian lyrical poetry and the following generation of symbolists inherited it from him). If in Yavorov's work we discover "the early mist of the autumn evening", "foggy ghosts", "mists terrible and stifling", "colourless dusk" and rainy days, Matosh's gloomy states of mind also have as their correspondences grey landscapes, crawling fog: in a word, an affinity for such natural scenes that emphasize the dramatic tension in his spiritual world. L. Stoyanov also depicts natural states in which his mind detects its projections: silent autumn nights, heavy disconsolate mists, a light but cold autumn wind. Just like Verlaine and Mallarmé the Bulgarian poet has an affinity for "the autumn fog", for the "Month of Falling Leaves", etc. (Let us recall Verlaine's "autumn song", Mallarmé's "autumn mourning" and the "wistful-eyed autumn" of Vielé-Griffin). Naturally, all these moods are not always the result of authentic and deeply individual experiences, here one frequently detects an echo from the works of modernist West European poets.

It is obvious however that we have come across a trait typical mostly of South Slavonic poetry. Though sharing some of the properties of traditional symbolist poetics, South Slavonic poetry has its definitely specific features as well. Thus, for example, the symbolist L. Stoyanov was not a poet of martyr's deadlock or of metaphysical fear. He sank in a supraterrrestrial world of "bright anguish" evoked by his own words. In his best poems one can feel youthful wantonness and "strenuous vigour, something of Lermontov's zeal" (Пундев 1929: 66) that undoubtedly run counter to sorrow. His "grievous

solitude" differs from Baudelaire's "proud solitude", it "does not come from the soul, from being, it is not tragic substance", as the poet himself points out when considering N. Liliev's solitude. On the other hand, skepticism and a sense of being lost in the modern world lead Yovan Duchich to more frequent extrapolation of his own experiences. We come across "crevices" of serenity even in the lyrics of Dis, who discloses a world built entirely under the sign of the "first rose's dream", of the disheartening aimlessness of beauty. We would also like to accentuate on the life-loving power of the lyrical character in A. Matosh's poetry, who surmounts the everyday agony of reality. On the whole there was a strong life cult and powerful surmounting of pessimism in Croatian lyrical poetry, where the tradition of the Dubrovnik Renaissance school was alive. There is no doubt that with a number of Balkan authors one will discover verses indicative of a highly personal and vital poetry of life, showing a Dionysian ecstasy brought about by worldly matter and beauty, by the joy of existence. The affinity for the great music of Beethoven and Wagner transpiring in the poetry of a M. Rakich was also related to these life-loving positions. It seems to me that the pessimism of a number of writers was but a manifestation of their disappointment with the morality crisis of the epoch; it was associated with tormenting spiritual restlessness. At that moment many of them could repeat Nikos Kazantzakis's words, "I am calm because I am hopeless".

Evidently the aesthetic platforms and manifestoes refracted in their works of art in a peculiar way. The different national literatures belonged to the European modernistic community, yet they transformed its general schemes in their own ways. The symbolic movement at the latitude of the Balkans had its specific face and character. During this destructive formation (if we assume as our principle of classifying cultures and their trends their relation to the existing systems, we can qualify them, in most general terms, as constructive and destructive. In this case we have to define symbolism as a destructive formation, stressing thereby its conduct of opposition to the forerunning systems) that contributed largely to the elevation of the literary taste of the readers' public, the Balkan literatures continued to implement their national tasks.

In the beginning of the 1890s, in France, almost two decades after Rimbaud had lapsed into silence, in an interview entitled "On Literary Development", Mallarmé advocated with certain pathos that writers were involved in a genuinely extraordinary scene of literary history:

Each poet, in his place, plays the instrument typical only of him and the tunes that he likes; it is for the first time that poets have stopped singing in the church choir.

South Slav and Balkan modernist poets did not sing “in the church choir either”. They enriched the individual literatures with new forms of plastic “thinking”; they transformed a number of elements of the all-European trend of modernism in compliance with their native traditions. (It is quite right that the literary developments in Serbia during the first two decades of the 20th century should be defined as “a felicitous combination of Baudelairean themes of hopelessness and symbolic grievances concerning atmosphere and music, as well as deeply national traditions” (Gavrilović 1960: 7). Quite often their poetic pictures, notable for their dismal forebodings and intrinsic metaphysical meaning, suddenly became warmer and more particular. They rushed in a real sensation of the material world, of the grandeur of life. Suffice it to mention such works as *Tryphon and Chrystofrydi* by Johannes Griparis who made a triumphant debut in Greek literature with a series of sonnets at the end of the 19th century. Shortly after their publication under the general title of *Scarabs* these sonnets made enormous impression owing to their artistic brilliance and sonorous language. Some medieval legends were skilfully used in *Tryphon and Chrystofrydi* and its poetic language became warmer and more concrete. And in Griparis’s most mature work, *Elegies*, parallel with the indefinite sorrow and disappointment, one comes across deeper and purer tones.

Let us now consider some of L. Stoyanov’s verses included in his symbolist books *Foremother* and *Holy of Holies*. Here one detects clear-cut contours and outlines of the lyrical pictures, more distinct verbal images and greater objectivity. In many parts of *Foremother* the real feeling for landscape and atmosphere, for the earthly flesh of things dominates over the peculiar intellectualization of sensuality, over the endeavour to suggest absolute ideas. In *Holy of Holies*, parallel with the helpless grief and the “subdued hostility” spreading “dismal omen over us”, there also stand out lyrical patches (*Stepmother, Poverty*) used by the poet to describe the sorrowful destiny of his ‘poor’ people. In my opinion this peculiar ‘sociality’ is typical even of the author of *Nirvana*, — Dis. The set of problems tackled in his lyrics is typical of modern poetry. Perhaps there is nothing social about Dis in the common sense of the word, but he *is* a social poet with his unabating anguish and sincerity of emotion, with his endeavour to promote the moral aspects of man, with his renunciation

of the challenges facing social reality (*Hymn, Comprehensible Song, Our Days, Disintegration*). Like Kafka, Dis feels a stranger in a reality of universal indifference (Ту, где и мртве убијају људи).

Undoubtedly, the artistic quests in the Balkan literatures at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century had specific dimensions. The artist-society conflict, drastically manifested in Europe in the 19th century through trials against some writers (even against Baudelaire and Flaubert) because of the “lack of morality” in their works, exhibited peculiar features here, in the Balkans. A proof in this respect is the highly ethic humanistic gust in the considered works, their proximity to the existentialist issues of the time and the discords of reality.

Linked with the vicissitudes of the peninsular people's everyday life and with the concentration of aesthetic phenomena was also the fact that the South Slav and Balkan authors of that epoch did not lose their national identity. This was so despite the fact that in their programme-texts they often advocated the idea of a single, universal, new art. We come across assertions to the effect that “neither time nor space” exist for the artist “since he has the power to cover, by using the mirages of his creative insight, both the immediate environment of his creative activity and the environments whose existence he does not even suspect...” (Радославов 1922). On the other hand, the young generation writers and critics in Croatia believed that the main object of artistic creativity should be “the integral man”. While accepting the idea of the art that seeks and attains some supreme, abstract beauty, however, they also associate literature with the socio-historically conditioned man and do not separate him from his nationality. Obviously the South Slav critics of that period were not fully consistent in their aesthetic platforms.

Most frequently national feelings were not ignored in immediate artistic practices, even though at first glance modernists seemed to ignore national traditions in favour of cosmopolitanism. The national identification of the authors became predominant at the latitude of the Balkan Peninsula. Naturally, this was largely predetermined by national traditions and roots. For is it not true that the artists here, at the borderline of the East and the West, where different civilization models, different faiths, religious principles and ethnic communities have clashed, the heirs of a tradition of a pronounced social and national function? The main reason, however, lies in the author's acute sense of the historical fatefulness of the nations, in their increased sensitivity with respect to national and social threats. (We

should not forget that in the period of romanticism there also prevailed national shades and the endeavour to attain national emancipation. There is no doubt that by virtue of the objective historical prerequisites the Balkan literatures faced radically different tasks as compared to the West European ones).

In his work *The Symbolic Movement in Poetry*, the British author Yeats points out that it is above all necessary to seek out that fluctuating, concentrated, restricted rhythm in which imagination is embodied and which neither desires nor hates because it has squared its accounts with time; its only desire is to contemplate reality, beauty (Yeats 1961: 163).

In the South Slav, however, the artists were inseparably linked with their time and homeland, with the unsettled national problems. Obviously, there was a peculiar transformation of the artistic elements typical of the entire modernistic formation, a fusion of the general aesthetic principles of the modernist movements of national content and colouring, i.e. one comes across specific violations of the general regularities. Suffice it to mention the “patriotic self-sacrificial pledge” in the poem *Night* by the Bulgarian poet Peyo Yavorov. In an article about him another master of the poetic language and author of crystal-clear tender lyrical works, N. Liliev disclosed that Yavorov loved his native land more than anything else, that he “carried its chains and sought it everywhere: in the freedom struggle of his brothers, among the innumerable multitude of the living, “scattered high and low”, in himself, in his heart which was a spring of songs illuminated by the flame of great sorrow” (Лилиев 1929: 393).

These words of the Bulgarian author are particularly indicative since he himself turned his eyes to his motherland during the years of war and articulated the following oath: “Не знаех твоя мир ли любя/ и твоята безбрежна шир...” (*To the Motherland*).

R. Likova is right when maintaining that in some of Nikolai Liliev’s lyrical confessions the heart, “with its light, lack of prospect and tenderness weeps along the cruel roads of life” (Ликова 1987: 114).

In Antun Matosh’s poem *Night* the depressing contemplation of the embittered and oppressed people and the patriotic pathos are woven in feverish irrational visions: and here the pain and the suffering of the author, for whom freedom has always been the greatest “moral and aesthetic endeavour”, have quite real, truthful dimensions. In Ivo Andrich’s words, his love for his fatherland contains something

'morbid', something more than what the refined soul of a romantic can feel. In Croatia we discover some other "patriotic manifestations" of the artists: they are even more visible in their real life than in their literary work (let us recall Vl. Vidrich who was expelled from Zagreb University because of his patriotic activity).

In actual fact, the establishment of a close relationship between personality and life through the image of the homeland, the lyrical disclosure of the tragic national destiny of the motherland will be discovered in the works of numerous South Slav authors. Examples are Yovan Duchich's works *Royal Sonnets* and *My Homeland* which provide striking evidence of the patriotic inspiration of the most eminent poet of Serbian modernism. Let us also point out the strong patriotic feelings in the verses of Milan Rakich, Vladimir Nazor, Oton Zhupanchich, Teodor Trayanov.

Lyudmil Stoyanov's laconic aphorism, formulated in his poem *Homeland*, i.e. "Without me you will still be great, yet what am I without you", can serve as a motto of series of works revealing the patriotic harp of South Slav modernists. Quite indicative in this respect is also the relationship between the ideology of "Young Croatia" or that of "Young Bosnia" and modernism in that Balkan region. P. Palavestra has every ground to maintain that the political radicalism of the revolutionary-minded youth, giving the lead to the literary and cultural events in the height of modernism, is an "ethic, national and social correlative of their aesthetic radicalism" (Палавeстра 1986: 32).

The partial overlapping and merging of the aesthetic models in the Balkan literatures are also an important specificity and a proof of the heterogeneous nature of the modern movements at the borderline of the two centuries, of their contradictory essence and expansiveness. If we wish to penetrate into the substance of the modern movements at the turn of the 19th century, we should bear in mind their polyphonic nature, the mutual attraction of more or less kindred style models. It is not accidental that some authors quote as an example the year of 1910 when Serbia was at the crossroad of impressionistic-symbolist and neoromantic trends on the one hand, and vanguard expressionistic-futuristic tendencies on the other hand. A particularly interesting phenomenon in the early years of the 20th century was the interaction between Parnassian and symbolist ideas in the works of a Duchich, Griparis or L. Stoyanov. At the same time the Parnassian movement that paved the way for the modernist arts cult was practically non-existent in Croatia.

The situation in West European s was somewhat different, even though in the early 20th century they also experienced a certain “internal struggle“ among their different trends: a struggle that was not observed earlier, during the epoch of romanticism, for example. Undoubtedly, this internal struggle was “the most typical feature” of the literatures of that time, their “raison d’etre” (Марков 1978: 491), yet the dynamic merging of artistic systems, trends and styles was much more intensive on the peninsula.

It seems to me that some of the most essential peculiarities of the allegorical and pessimistic modernist lyrics encountered at the Balkan crossroad include its specific ‘somberness’, the synthesis of the ‘universal’ and the ‘national’, the absence of acute and aggressive individualism, its vitality, the blurred borders between the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘non-aesthetic’ objects in reality (i. e. the contact with the contradictions in reality as well). We can see that the model of symbolism lays the foundations for a new attitude towards the European cultural tradition. Here, on the threshold between the East and the West, where continuity and succession are often intercepted and phenomena of diverse life and aesthetic order coexist, this model has traits of its own.

The symbolism of the Slav South and the Balkans transforms components common for the entire European symbolist trend and builds up its own original poetics. Moreover, this symbolism is not isolated from the traditions of realism and romanticism in the peninsula, from their ideatic and specifically Balkan commitments.

A more detailed analysis of the works with pronounced aesthetic changes, created during the period of symbolism, would enable one to draw conclusions on the typological similarities of the style models, on the specificities of symbolic poetics — we should not forget the considerable contribution of symbolism to what is known as ‘word poetics’. All these are issues that expect their researchers. We have ventured to focus only on the major specificities of symbolism which, both as an ideatic-and-aesthetic platform and as artistic practice presupposes more comprehensive treatment and interpretations.

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