

**THESES OF PH.D. DISSERTATION**

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Serbian and Bulgarian Postmodern Prose.  
Origin. Specifications. Context.

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In the context of world literature, Central and Eastern European literature seems to share a similar destiny. To a large degree this is due to the fact that because of political and geographical reasons, it is in a way on the periphery when compared to the more dominant Western European literature. This leads to a certain cultural subjugation. As a result there is a constant pursuit of substantiation, a search for identity, and a turning towards its own traditions and ancient roots.

In 1989-90, the years of political transition in Central and Eastern Europe, a specific postmodern literature appears. Despite the common feature which it shares with Western European literature, it is also quite different from it. The differences between the postmodern Western literature of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the literature that is to be discussed here from the same period, are part of the reasons for the observed postmodern differences. Malcolm Bradbury puts forward the idea that whatever is to be the modern of a culture, so will be the postmodern, since one originates from the other.

The first attempts for comparison of Central and Eastern European literature are found in the work of the Hungarian literary critic Endre Bojtár, 1988, who compares this prose with Western postmodern literature. He poses the question whether the postmodern is a literary current, since it appears with a slight delay in Central and Eastern European literature. Due to the abrupt discontinuance of the literary processes here, one should not look for the characteristics of Western postmodernism. The emigration literature, as well as the so-called *samizdat* ('publish-it-yourself') literature lead to a "postmodern situation", quite different from the Western one. The only advantage of this delay is that Central and Eastern European literature receives all the arguments against postmodernism along with the literary current itself.

Following the above it is clear that the appearance of postmodernism in South-East European literature is also belated. The different political situations and the literary inheritance lead to various results and the delay is realized during different periods in South-East European, i.e. Serbian and Bulgarian literature.

After Yugoslavia's 1948 split from the Soviet Union and the International (The International Communist Movement), an approach towards Western literature is observed. In the field of fine art all the modernistic currents appear. The main Western authors are translated. The establishment of this contact also brings important results for literature.

The concept of "postmodernism" appears in Serbian literature in the 1980-s, denoting the literary pursuit of the young authors of that time. Later on, however, it is clarified that postmodern characteristics were present in Serbian literature in earlier periods as well, and the

most important works date namely from the earlier period.

The beginning of Serbian postmodern prose is marked with several works: the novel of Radomir Konstantinović *Ahasver* (1964), the polemic work of Danilo Kiš *A lecture in Anatomy* (1978) and the novel-dictionary of Milorad Pavić *Dictionary of Khazars* (1984), highly influenced by the polemic work of Kiš.

An interesting fact is that Danilo Kiš does not define his works as postmodern. Some of his short stories are among the most characteristic pieces of postmodernism in Serbian prose and one can trace the process which illustrates the clash of the prose with the contradictiveness of the postmodern. In his search for self-expression, Kiš discovers the forms of postmodern prose. His works combine modern and postmodern features. Departing from the narratives (such as fascism, communism), he uses the form of a pseudo-documentary novel, simultaneously deconstructing history. For example, *Hourglass* (1972), novel and *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), short stories.

The most emblematic postmodern work of the Serbian literature is the world famous novel-dictionary *Dictionary of Khazars*, written by Milorad Pavić. Pavić “reconstructs” the well-known Khazar theosophical dispute using the form of a pseudo document. The novel “reconstructs” the dispute three times, each “reconstruction” having a different source: Christian, Muslim and Jewish. Thus three different “truths” appear, which supports namely the postmodern thesis that the Truth does not exist, only various interpretations of the Truth exist.

The lexicon novel, typical of the postmodern genre, is not only associated with the name of Milorad Pavić; this form is used by some earlier authors such as Borislav Pekić – *How to Quite a Vampire*, a collection of short stories by Pavle Ugrinov – *Elements* and a collection of short stories by Danilo Kiš – *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1983).

It is namely the novel of Pavić that creates the fashion of a pseudo-documentary novel. Many follow the example of Kiš as well and as a result in the 80-s and 90-s Serbian prose is enriched with a lot of pseudo-documentary works – the so-called “trick-novel” is created (the name is given by Péter Milosevits, a Serbian literary critic from Hungary). Among them are: Slobodan Selenić *Timor Mortis* 1989, *Premeditated Murder* 1993, Dragan Velikić *Astragan* 1991, *Dante's Square* 1997, Svetislav Basara *The Fuss about Cyclists* 1988, *On the Grail's Trail* 1990, *Damned Land* 1995, and many others. The key representatives of the more traditional doubling of the ‘I’ postmodern novel having autobiographical elements are David Albahari *Snow Man* 1995, *Bait* 1996, and Vladimir Arsenijević *In the Hold* 1994, *Andjela* 1997 – the latter being among the younger authors.

Postmodern Serbian literature is expressed mostly in prose, predominantly in novels. As far as poetry is concerned it can be said that one does not find key representatives, simply the individual attempts of poets.

The political and economical changes from 1989 onwards bring about changes in Bulgarian literature. On one side, the constant party control lets go of its tight ideological monitoring, and on the other, along with this newly acquired freedom comes the disintegration of the “literary strategy” of the state – production and publishing of literary works. The state stops financing the publishing of books, the different channels for book distribution do not function any more. During this period some small publishing houses come into existence to respond to the needs of small groups of readers. The so-called popular genres appear – erotic, detective and esoteric. Contemporary Bulgarian literature finds itself pushed to the periphery; the authors have no other choice but to distribute their books on their own.

The new situation in Bulgaria allows its literature to rejoin the world literary currents, namely – the postmodern. In 1989 the anthology *Ars Simulacri* is published. It is a volume issued by the Sintez (Synthesis) Circle; philosophers and writers of postmodernism (members: Ivajlo Dichev, Vladislav Todorov, Alexander Kiossev and Ivan Kristev). It plays an important role in bringing Bulgarian culture in the direction of the postmodern. In 1991 the weekly literary newspaper *Literaturen vestnik* (Literary newspaper) starts being published, shedding its influence in the 90-s of the previous century. It turns into a forum of the new literary approaches and works. A new generation of writers and poets is born.

Undoubtedly the dominating genre in the Bulgarian postmodernism is lyrics. Among the main representatives are Ani Ilkov, Kiril Merdzhanski, Zlatimir Zlatanov, Georgi Gospodinov, Plamen Dojnov and Jordan Eftimov.

Traditionally Bulgarian prose is tightly connected to the reality, often perceived as hostile. The new generation of writings is trying to escape from this “dictatorship” of reality. Thus, in their works they identify the relationship between the ‘I’ and the reality by implying the principles of the magnetic realism and romantic grotesque. (For example, Emil Andreev: *Lom Stories*, 1996, Boris Minkov: *Ballade Hunters or Scherzo catabile*, 1999)

In the Bulgarian literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the autobiographical novel as a genre is certainly not popular. It is rehabilitated in 1990 with the appearance of the autobiography-ness – the writers represent their own lives, over the skeleton of reality they build up the fictional I. An example for such form is the novel by Palmi Ranchev *Streets and Avenues* (1998), depicting the story of a boxer. At the same time, it is known that the author himself was a boxer. Among such “doubling of the I” postmodern novel we can also mention *Naturel Novel*

(1999) by Georgi Gospodinov. In fact, the novel is a manuscript, which has been published by an editor, called Georgi Gospodinov. The Naturel Novel deals with the issue of why it is impossible to write novels in Bulgaria in the 1990-s.

Alek Popov's most popular novel *Mission London* (2001) is a satire about the change of the political and economical system in Eastern Europe. It is taking place in the Bulgarian Embassy in London where its characters – officials from the embassy – find themselves in completely absurd situations, which, however, are described with documentary preciseness.

In the text one does not find excess philosophizing, there are only the typical of absurd current precise descriptions. With the help of the traditional methods, Popov creates fiction. He is no longer interested in the “deconstruction” of the past, rather, he is attracted by re-construction; the re-writing of the past. According to Popov, the change of the regime belongs entirely to the past, and therefore it can be reconstructed, rewritten, invented.

The tendencies in the development of Serbian and Bulgarian postmodern literature discussed above can be summed up in the following points:

- The literary current appears in the Serbian literature of the 70-s, which is partially due to the “opening” of Yugoslavia towards the West.
- The literary current appears in Bulgarian literature only after the changes in 1989, in the 90-s, after the so-called “party censorship” was removed and the literature opened towards the modern trends.
- The leading form of postmodern work in Serbian literature is the novel.
- The leading form of postmodern work in Bulgarian literature is lyrics. This can be explained with the fact that literature attempts to continue what had been abruptly interrupted in the early 20-s of the previous century – the period of avant-gardism, in which the dominant form is lyrics.
- The emergence of Bulgarian postmodern prose can be positioned at the turn of the millennium. At that time the poetry had somehow moved into a more background position and the Bulgarian literature – living the blossoming age of the novel. This is a characteristic tendency of the Bulgarian literature – such “evolution” has been witnessed in previous literary periods as well: after the relatively short period of poetry boom and esthetic superiority came the boom and esthetic superiority of the prose.

The problem of defining the postmodern appears to be a challenging point in the investigation of postmodern prose. The discussions concerning the postmodern, which were initiated in Serbia and Bulgaria, are practically continuing nowadays as well. One of

the main reasons for that is there has not been any consensus whatsoever as to what the meaning of the concept postmodern is and what it denotes. From the works which have been published it is clearly seen that currently there is no common perception of the notion postmodern. However, a certain kind of “postmodern cannon” has been formed in the literature, which defines whether a particular literary work can be classified as postmodern. The postmodern behaves in a similar way to the modern: it does not relate to a main style/genre period, and is not uniform in regards to various arts. The postmodern should be interpreted as an approach, rather than as a literary stream.

Publications connected with the subject of the Thesis:

1. Новото поколение на прозаиците в българската и сръбската литература през 90-те години на XX век. *In: Балканистичен форум '08. 1-3.* Vlgovevgrad, 2008. (under preparation)
2. Serbian and Bulgarian postmodern prose. *In: Българският език и литература на кръстопътя на културите. Том I.* Szeged, 2008.
3. Сръбска и българска постмодерна проза. *In: A bulgarisztika ma.* Budapest, 2007.