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Yugoslavia as a Non-place in Prose Works about Transition by Rade Jarak (*Yu puzzle*) and Mirjana Novaković (*Tito je umro*) The Twilight of the Yugo-nostalgic Paradigm (?)

Abstract

This article examines the spatial representation of Yugoslavia – as a Bakhtinian chronotope, as a place of collective and individual memory, as geopoetics in the broadest sense, and, most importantly, as a non-place and a no-man's space (Marc Augé). Paradoxically, the country that formally no longer exists remains the object of various scholarly inquiries and references, functioning also as a literary and reading community. Two selected works situated in the field of literature on the transition of the post-Yugoslav region (*književnost o tranziciji*) are discussed: the Serbian writer Mirjana Novaković's crime story *Tito je umro* [Tito Has Died] and the Croatian author Rade Jarak's *Yu puzzle* [Yugoslav Puzzle].

Keywords: Yugoslavia, literature on transition, non-place, Yugo-nostalgia, Titoism

Introduction

After over three decades of the slow decomposition of Josip Broz Tito's Balkan federation, the topic of the disintegration of Yugoslavia has been pursued in countless multi-dimensional analyses, theses, and discussions conducted from a wide range of scholarly, scientific, and cultural perspectives. It is reasonable to assume that it will continue to be an inexhaustible subject for further interpretations and readings. One popular opinion is that the end of Yugoslavia came with the death of the legendary marshal (4 May 1980); in a more radical, almost prophetic approach, the project of a unified state of the South Slavs was doomed to fail from the outset, and 1 December 1918 was not only its beginning but also foreshadowed

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its end.[1] Yugoslavia became a place of integration for "border societies," in which cultural, linguistic, and religious differences, as well as discordant concepts of statehood, proved to be destructive factors (Markovina 2018: 33). Another paradox of history closely observed by researchers is the sense that, despite its dissolution, Yugoslavia, in some ways, endures to this day. For those who analyse the literature of the post-Yugoslav area, it is currently a considerable challenge to conceptualise the relations with – and perceptions of – Yugoslavia as a space that formally no longer exists.

In the structure of a literary work, the category of space occupies a significant place. In the wake of the post-structuralist turn, attitudes towards the phenomenon of space have undergone several groundbreaking shifts in literary theory and history, including Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, introduced into literary studies in the late 1930s. Gaston Bachelard theorised this phenomenon through specific spatial metaphors (drawers, trunks, wardrobes), while Michel Foucault coined the term *heterotopia* to describe certain cultural, institutional and discursive spaces.

Geopoetics defined broadly as an approach examining the relationship between literary works and geographical space[2], together with concepts such as narrative maps, literature of idiolocality, toponomastic tropes, auto/bio/geo/graphies, imagined places, literature and reading as a geographical event, emotive topographies and literature as a site of memory (Rybicka 2014: 9) – has proved to be a valuable research tool for the hermeneutics of the literary text.

Marc Augé distinguishes between three types of place: identity-based, anthropological (understood as culture situated in space and time), and non-place[3]. In Augé's model, the term *space* is more abstract than *place*, as space may refer to a myth or a site tied to a narrative (Augé [1992] 2012: 56). The category of non-place, applied to Yugoslavia as a rhetorical land (Vincent Descombes) evolving in the authors' imagination, proves to be an interesting point of departure for studying contemporary literature of the post-Yugoslav region.

This category of non-place also relates to protagonists who embody different – also generational – attitudes of former citizens towards the state that no longer exists: ranging from critical-revisionist to (Yugo-)nostalgic, both approving and disapproving of the socio-political changes, which were reflected in contemporary literature on transition (*književnost o tranziciji*)[4]. For the purposes of this discussion, this literary trend is represented by two selected works: the novel *Tito je umro* (Tito Has Died, 2011) by the Serbian writer Mirjana Novaković, and *Yu puzzle* (Yugoslav puzzle, 2014) by the Croatian author Rade Jarak.

In the early 1990s, a dangerous tendency to inject national-utopian ideas into almost every national imaginarium emerged in political discourse in Yugoslavia; the post-socialist transformation was

1 It is worth recalling that as early as 5 December 1918, mass demonstrations by Croatian opponents of unification took place in Zagreb's Ban Jelačić Square. A decade later, the events in the Belgrade *Skupština*, including the assassination of Stjepan Radić, fuelled discontent (Jajčinović 2013: 31, 140).

2 Robert Packard used the term *refraction*, borrowed from optics, assuming that literature acts as a prism transforming authentic *loci* into literary places; for more on this topic, see Rybicka (2014: 36).

3 *Non-place* (*non-lieux*), by which Marc Augé understands a no-man's space – not due to the absence of an owner, but owing to the lack of emotional connection between the space and people; it denotes the attitude and the way this (non-)place is perceived, cf. Augé ([1992] 2012).

4 *Transition* is a political science term originally referring to the political, social, and economic changes in South American countries in the 1980s; later, the term came to be applied to the so-called Eastern Bloc, the transformation of which was initiated by the collapse of the USSR.

interrupted by war and the bloody disintegration of the state, with all its consequences. The memory of Yugoslavia took extreme forms – from radical negation and institutional silence, through peaceful modification, to uncritical nostalgia for bygone times, which were perceived as a period of relative stability and prosperity against the background of other Eastern bloc countries. With the consent of contemporary policymakers, a significant Yugo-nostalgic discourse[5] emerged as an expression of disapproval of the slow disintegration of the South Slavic federation. The idea of homogenous nation-states resulted not only in territorial fragmentation but also in fragmentation of citizens' identities. This Yugo-nostalgic discourse is the voice of Yugoslav dissidents, writers, and intellectuals born and raised in Tito's state, for whom the dismemberment of the state was unacceptable, as was the policy of "cleansing the space" of nation-states of all undesirable symbols of the Yugoslav past, for example in Croatia, by demolishing about 3,000 monuments to the anti-fascist struggle, changing street names, or eliminating Cyrillic books from circulation (Markovina 2018: 77). The breakup of space, linked to the disintegration of the identity of anthropological places, constitutes an indispensable aspect of Yugo-nostalgic prose. For many residents of Yugoslavia, being born and growing up in Tito's state was a natural part of their self-identification: "the inhabitant of an anthropological place lives in history but does not deal with history" (Marc Augé [1992] 2012: 36).

Recalling the peculiar atmosphere of the second half of the 1990s, it is worth mentioning that, on the Croatian cultural scene, artists who gathered around FAK – that is, Festival Alternativne Književnosti Jugoslavije (Festival of Alternative Literature of Yugoslavia) – made a rather successful attempt to resuscitate Yugoslavia as a community of people (writers and readers)[6]. Even the term "FAK generation of writers and critics" (*fakovska generacija pisaca i kritičara*) gained a foothold (Pogačnik 2006: 6). The festival and the concept of alternative literature signified an attempt to resist Franjo Tuđman's cultural policy – as well as the "state-and-nation-building" tendencies represented by, for example, Ivan Aralica's works or the literary magazine *Hrvatsko slovo* with its nationalising messages.

As the phenomenon of the literary festival grew in popularity, critical voices soon emerged and denounced this way of promoting literature as allegedly trivialising it, taking it to the stage, and manipulating the media (Visković 2006: 11). The undeniable fact that, although Yugoslavia disintegrated, it continues to function uninterruptedly as a linguistic community and a significant literary audience (amounting to a reading market of several million people) remains one of FAK's most enduring legacies.

Yugoslavia has endured, even though it has disintegrated, because in the "literature of the region" it continues to appear as a metaphor, an ephemeron, a myth, a point of reference for the modernity of the countries that emerged after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It is difficult to say unequivocally whether the attitude towards the Yugoslav past is generational. Different age groups of Yugoslavians, born in successive decades of the creation and reconstruction of the common state, represent different experiences. The attitude towards Yugoslavia also stems from personal and regional

5 Cf. Magdalena Ślawska (2013) *Proza autobiograficzna pokolenia jugonostalgików*. Wrocław: Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe Atut.

6 The FAK, which had been running since 1999 and was launched in Osijek by Borivoj Radaković and Nenad Rizvanović, came to an end in December 2003. Its aim was to establish a new relationship between authors and readers; it was a "travelling" festival performance across the cities of the former Yugoslav republics. Around 80 writers, invited foreign guests, and local audiences participated in events where individual authors read excerpts from their works on the stages of clubs and theatres. The club atmosphere, the spontaneous communication with the audience, and the highlighting of shared social problems in the territories of all the former Yugoslav republics sustained the impression of an enduring community.

experiences (of the inhabitants of the individual republics), often conditioned by particular family micro-histories, social status, or ideological entanglements resulting from the complicated history of the area.

In the literature on transition, Yugoslavia as a chronotope becomes a common link between the past (the country of childhood) and the present (the negative effects of socio-political changes, the experience of brutal war); moreover, we also observe the twilight of the Yugo-nostalgic paradigm and the confrontation of the past with post-transformation reality in, among others, Croatia and Serbia. The characters in this prose are embedded in both urban and rural settings. For the next generations, who grew up after the disintegration of the federation and deal with the current problems of globalisation and liquid modernity, Yugoslavia is no longer an anthropological place (Augé), but has become a non-place.

The past as a puzzle

With regard to the transition process in Croatia, Marius Søberg, a Norwegian historian, outlined a case study, distinguishing three main phases: 1) democratisation, independence, and war (1989–1995); 2) the illusory awakening (1996–1999), and 3) the second attempt – the second transition (ongoing since 2000) (Søberg 2006: 35–64). These processes are also apparent in the other countries that emerged as nation-states on the ruins of Yugoslavia. Similar mechanisms stemming from neoliberal tendencies can be observed in these states – for example, corrupt privatisation, already evident in the second phase (illusory awakening); the emergence of flea-market capitalism; fledgling capitalism after the collapse of the socialist economy and central planning. This was accompanied by overarching narratives of nation-states deemed ethnically, culturally, and religiously homogenous. The third phase – the second post-war transition – has been strongly reflected in contemporary literature, in which markers of transformative reality are evident, i.e. sites typical of the Yugoslav socialist era. Often, the socialist past present in the layer of the plot is the main causal factor behind current events, usually with negative consequences.

In the novel *Yu Puzzle* by Rade Jarak, a renowned Croatian writer and art historian born in Dubrovnik in 1968, the Yugoslav jigsaw puzzle – a scattered jigsaw puzzle that the reader has to piece together – is a chronologically and spatially shredded miniature of the fate of the influential Serbo-Croatian Romić family. The mosaic (jigsaw puzzle), based on the themes of tragedy, love, and war, as well as complex human relationships in turbulent times, is set against the backdrop of the vision of the Balkans as "a powder keg" – due to the entanglement of the region's inhabitants in ideological and political conflicts, as well as the turmoil of war. The multi-generational and multi-ethnic Romić family (Yugoslavia in a nutshell) is not only a witness to history but also its victim.

In addition to the ethnic–religious–national mix of Jarak's characters, there are also such culturally distinct figures as Zoran Romić's Japanese wife (whose mysterious disappearance casts another shadow over the family's history) and the black offspring of the boxing coach who worked at a Zagreb sports club during the period of the Independent State of Croatia (1941–1945). In the conservative setting, recurring family stigmas include the homosexuality and suicides of some members of the Romić clan, among them partisans, Ustashas, artists, businessmen, and even a combatant in the Spanish Civil War.

In Jarak's work, the mapping of the space in which the characters operate extends well beyond Yugoslavia. The plot covers the period from 1931 to 2012, reaching Spain, countries in the Far East (especially Japan), and Madagascar. The migrations of almost all members of the Romić family are

sometimes driven by the desire to flee the Yugoslav space, marked by "an excess of history." Belonging to the Yugoslav "Balkan powder keg" becomes a burden for them and destroys their individual identity.

The writer addressed this issue most explicitly through the character of Milena (the last of the Romićs), who not only survived the last war (1991–1995) but also, in a broader sense, escaped the tragic fate that marked so many members of her family. The protagonist chooses Madagascar as the place of her existence:

> Every story has an end. Mine paused here for a while. I had to run far away. I could no longer stand the homeland, the Croats and Serbs, their endless war, quarrelling, jostling. My father is Serbian and my mother is Croatian. What am I supposed to do? Shall I follow in the footsteps of my other family members and take my own life? Oh, no. […] The post-war mentality has drained me of all hope. […] I want to belong to the whole world, not just to them. Let them be cursed. (Jarak 2014: 235)

Under transformative conditions, identity is also subject to (self-)creation – the process often involves the swapping or concealment of ethnicity and serves as a form of camouflage or mimicry, which guarantees survival in the new circumstances. Driven by a self-preservation instinct, Milena decides to break with the past and the geographical space that has engulfed the lives of her loved ones – and she chooses a life without roots, on the other side of the world. In the narrative, Jarak does not avoid controversial topics in the history of Yugoslavia, showing how ideological and worldview conflicts often placed its inhabitants on opposite sides of the barricade:

> The accumulated energy finally exploded when war was declared and Yugoslavia surrendered in April 1941. […] Zoran Romić survived the war. He distinguished himself in combat, and as an intellectual, he quickly climbed the partisan hierarchy – at the end of the war, he was a battalion commissary […]. He knew about the partisan crimes committed on Daksa Island in 1944 when the partisans occupied the town. He also knew about other later crimes – throwing the dead into the sea through an opening in the southern part of the city walls. […] He felt that there was something wrong with communism. The original idea had apparently been distorted, drowned in blood. (Jarak 2014: 70, 84, 113–114)

Đorđe Romić, serving as an officer of the Yugoslav People's Army, took part in operations against the Ustashas and fascist collaborators on the road to Bleiburg. In Slovenia in May 1945, Romić witnessed an act of partisan reprisal: soldiers digging ditches for the liquidated Ustasha troops, Ante Pavelić's allies, and anyone who attempted to cross the border with Austria. Partisan crimes tarnished the myth of the defenders and builders of the Titoist state. Additionally, the end of the Second World War and the communist takeover of power only intensified policies of revanchism against at those regarded as bearers of Ustasha ideology – a label often applied to the Croatian people as a whole.

> So, there will never be real peace. […] He remembered the huge columns of refugees. It's said that there were tens of thousands of them. Now, towards the end of the war, the enemy lost its demon face, which it had when it was more powerful. More and more, he saw those people as a collection of miserable, lost human beings. He did not support such revenge. He asked himself whether Tito would bury them all. "It's impossible", he consoled himself, "there's not that much land". (Jarak 2014: 132–133)

The worldview and ideological differences in *Yu Puzzle* fracture family ties and cause further conflicts, division, and mutual resentment. Almost all of the Romićs died tragically or disappeared in

unexplained circumstances. The family's gradual decline set in during the 1980s; in the next decade, another war arrived and plunged them – as well as the people of Yugoslavia – into further turmoil. One of the tragic events is the bombing of Dubrovnik in 1991: "The air smelled of coffee. Flakes of ash were falling from the sky. And grenades. Burning shells from the anti-aircraft guns on Srđ Hill glowed in the darkness. The port warehouse in Gruž, full of coffee, was on fire" (Jarak 2014: 204).

What emerges from Jarak's novel is a picture of Yugoslavia with its entire inventory of painful memories, ideological conflict, Ustasha crimes, partisan crimes, and oscillation between grand historical narratives and intimate family micro-histories, in which questions of the past and identity are sensitive issues.

Palimpsest-places

Mirjana Novaković is a popular Serbian writer, born in Belgrade in 1966. She is the author of short stories *Dunavski apokrifi* [Danube Apocrypha] (1996), the novel *Strah i njegov sluga* [Fear and Its Servant], for which she was awarded the Isidora Sekulić Prize in 1999, and *Johann's 501* (2005); her works have been translated into French, English, and German.

In the prose work *Tito je umro*, written in the mode of a detective story, Novaković interweaves narrative strands set in Tito's Yugoslavia with contemporary events. At the centre of the plot is an encrypted message published in *Politika* in the 15 November 1968 issue (interpreted as a threat or a signal to potential killers). The message concerned the death of Josip Broz, who died on 4 May 1980, and coincided with the actual date of the Yugoslav leader's death. In the cultural events column, in the review of the play *Death and the Dervish* (based on a well-known work by Meša Selimović), a mysterious person with the initials M. N. posted an acrostic forming the message: TITO JE UMRO, with a further suggestion that Tito's death would occur on 4 May 1980.

Trying to unravel the mystery from years ago, an ambitious journalist conducts her own investigation. In line with her assumptions, she finds that this surprising discovery is closely linked to the equally mysterious death (from an overdose – murder?) of a young Serbian politician. Exposing the picture of post-transformation Serbia, Novaković, through her main character, freely refers to life in Yugoslavia, the land of her childhood and youth, as a dictatorship. Her recollections of Tito's state do not bear the hallmarks usually associated with Yugo-nostalgic narratives. Both Yugoslavia, as a failed project, and the current situation, resulting from poorly implemented and unfinished reforms, are criticised.

In the plots of the selected literary works, the phenomenon of transition and the current perception of Yugoslavia take various forms. It manifests itself in the way political, social, economic – and even identity – changes are situated and described. It often shows characters moving up or down the social ladder; those who rise and those who are pushed down as a result of systemic transformation (unemployment, migration, forced relocation due to political circumstances, change in social status – the life of former communist dignitaries, tycoonisation,[7] and the emergence of a narrow group of the so-called *nouveau riche*).

7 The word *tycoon* has a historical etymology in Japanese and refers to a shogun, a wealthy nobleman; in the former Yugoslavia, *tycoonisation* is synonymous with getting rich quickly as a result of unsupervised and non-transparent privatisation, often involving illegal dealings. The tycoons (nouveau riche) form a narrow elite group of influential and wealthy citizens.

In Novaković's novel, these themes are embodied by:

> [...] residents of two kinds: the well-off Belgradeans from before the Second World War, though not wealthy enough for the communists to seize their flats in 1944, and the petty red bourgeoisie from the lower party ranks, far away from the villa on Dedinje; more accurately, both groups have long since died and their heirs, in defiance of their grandfathers, grandmothers, and parents, became supporters of the Democratic Party – and developed a passion for wandering around hipster cafés, convinced that they are the most progressive and most modern part of Serbian society. (Novaković 2011: 180)

A common phenomenon among the nouveau riche is "Susies," namely young Slovak women (after the most common name Susanna), who clean the flats of wealthy Serbs. Particularly noteworthy is the metamorphosis of space – most clearly visible in cities, but also present in the provinces. Once again, as a result of post-socialist transformation, the city appears as a palimpsest, in which old symbols are erased from the landscape (statues, cafés, drab housing estates, shops, *etc.*); new ones take their place, and the former symbols gain the status of "obnoxious":

> I was walking past the Syndicate House, which no longer exists, just as no real syndicate exists nor the square that once bore that name. But the cinema remains, just because nobody goes to the cinema any more. And from here to Moše Pijade street – I don't know what it's called now. Has my whole life passed me by amid all these changed, banned and forgotten names? Not because I supported communism – when it was in power, I was against it – but because my youth unfolded under socialism. (Novaković 2011: 330)

The city is changing, and with it – the neighbourhood, the street, its toponyms, and the homes of its characters. In addition to the mapping of space, motifs from the socialist Yugoslav past play a significant role as signs of cultural memory, confronted with the rushing current of change:

> The Sava shopping centre provoked a kind of grim fascination in me every time; its glass structure hasn't been renovated and it looks like it hasn't been cleaned for several decades; whoever built it, reasonably foresaw that next generations would treat it with disgust, so he designed it in the most disgusting way. Even its dark green colour turned out to be perfect as it effectively covers the dirt. (Novaković 2011: 45)

In prose on transition, the question of ownership – the state of possession, the means of acquiring or multiplying wealth, real estate and housing (whether owned, rented, or, as was once the case, allocated by workplaces or granted as prestigious residences to party VIPs or JNA officers) has been given special attention. So has the appearance and standard of the interiors described. This seemingly trivial aspect proves to be interesting as a category for assessing and determining the state of society (in the past and now):

> It was one of those old villas; I could only guess if the Babić family ran the pre-war bourgeoisie off it and moved in as distinguished communists, and then gave the building to their daughter, so that she, in turn, would act as bourgeois in it? Or did the Kovačević family buy it thanks to their shrewdness and entrepreneurial corruption? The only recently renovated two-storey house, just like the fence installed to resemble an anti-tank barrage in war zones, only confirmed the rule that the biggest thieves always enjoy the greatest protection: the military, banks and politicians. (Novaković 2011: 355–356)

In the novel, moving through the city is an excellent way of documenting, nostalgia, and the personal musealisation of memories and space. In Novaković's work, we find the "cult of the café" and social gatherings over coffee, typical of Balkan culture and often described in the scholarly literature: "In their articulation of identity, urban café spaces traditionally reflect the heterogeneity of the city's sociocultural groups" (Koroman 2013: 135). Krešimir Nemec introduces the notion of: "The cult of the café as an authentic urban space, a place for hedonistic entertainment and creative leisure activities" (Nemec 2010: 10). Ines Sabotič makes a sociological distinction by pointing out that: "the inn is a democratic hospitality venue and the café is a place for the bourgeoisie" (Sabotič 2007: 166)[8].

Novaković's novel repeatedly portrays contemporary Serbia in the post-transition period as seen from the vantage point of a café:

> The Šumatovac café became a paradigm of successful transformation as progressive forces imagined it; a recent dive bar, where the *Politika* journalist once drank himself senseless, has now been transformed into a fancy expensive restaurant where foreigners, temporarily employed workers in Serbia, directors of banks and other oligarchic companies, mid-level members of political parties, those who paid lip service to European integration, assistants (namely, high-end prostitutes), and everyone else who wanted to impress their business or love partners, or, in the worst case, themselves. (Novaković 2011: 36)

A popular chain of well-known pizzerias becomes an object of sociological inquiry and change in the Belgrade landscape of the late 1990s:

> Pizza Hut was yet another model of a successful transformation. During the socialist era, there was a café called *Pod lipom* here; later a pizzeria of the same name, […]. Pizzas are much worse than they used to be – salty and greasy – but they are now branded products, unlike in the past, which is sufficient evidence of the successful transition. The restaurant has undergone a transformation, and with it, so has the pizza. (Novaković 2011: 37)

As if in opposition to the inevitable changes, a kind of sentimental bazaar of souvenirs and traces of the former state – in this case the old Belgrade café (*kafana*) Brankovina – became an important object of transformative comparison in Novaković's work:

> […] into which, if someone who had been dead since, say, 1984 were to enter now as a vampire or resurrected, they would think that the world hadn't changed at all. The furniture, the menu in shredded plastic cover, the curtains of an obscure dark colour, the chequered tablecloths and concave tin ashtrays, the waitress in Boro slippers (which were discontinued before any of the wars), the guests (still debating if Tito was a dictator or not; or if King Alexander should have united Yugoslavia or expelled all other nations to create Great Serbia), the soda syphons, the glasses and cutlery, the plates with a blue rim, everything made in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, nothing made in China – all together declared one thing: around June 1980, time stopped in the Brankovina café. (Novaković 2011: 136–137)

In works describing the transition period, the narrator's social status and function are important – in Novaković's work, the story is mediated through a privileged narrator. The narrator is characterised by

8 The cult of cafés and nightlife, important for the Balkan bohemia, was perhaps best described by Stanislav Vinaver (1891–1955) in the now canonical essay *Kafane*, included in the volume of essays, stories, and travel journals *Gromobran svemira* (Belgrade 1921).

subjectivity, the ability to take a revisionist view of the past, and to assess its significance for the present. The privileged narrator is usually a representative of the intellectual elite: a journalist, a writer, a professor, *etc*. (Koroman 2013: 141). The knowledge of the context of socialist reality is reinforced by the fact that both Novaković and Jarak represent the generation of Yugoslavians born in the 1960s.

In Novaković's novel, the protagonist is competent to express an accurate, albeit subjective, assessment of past and current realities:

> In the later days of Tito's rule, i.e. when the party had successfully neutralized its political opponents and the regime had relaxed somewhat, those who dared to continue to show their discontent were neither killed nor sent to prison (though there were exceptions); rebellious professors were transferred from universities where they had an audience, to institutes where there was no one to hear them; the so-called dissidents were issued passports so that they could voice their grievances in Western Europe and America. It was clear how much criticism of the regime could be allowed on television, on the radio, in one newspaper or another, and in books – the smaller the audience of a medium, the more leeway it had. Ultimately, the common punishment was to take the audience away from the enemy. (Novaković 2011: 175–176)

However, in the new long-awaited conditions of state independence, there emerge further systems of entanglement and dependency for average citizens, what Viktor Ivančić refers to as "new cages": the state, the church, and the nation (Ivančić 2005: 19). A considerable dose of criticism is directed at the growing role of the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Orthodox Church in Serbia, which benefited from the process of political, economic, and also ideological transformation; additionally, they positioned themselves as institutions defining the national-religious identity of citizens. The sphere of religiousness began to define declarative belonging and identity recognition.

For Novaković's protagonist, this rise in religiosity signals a world turned askew. In relation to the Yugoslav past, in which – due to top-down party-state policy – a completely secularised society was the organising principle – in the new reality, the characters are keen to expose their Orthodox identity: the biggest former communists go to church, wear devotional clothes; prostitutes and gangsters from the underworld, if they plan to get married, do so only in an Orthodox church, with great pomp.

The End of the Narrative of the Land of Socialist Happiness and Prosperity

In the discussed works about the Yugoslav transition, the socialist past is usually approached with criticism, exposing the hypocrisy, façade-like power, and illusory prosperity of Tito's Yugoslavia. Jarak's narrator, however, adopts a more measured tone and portrays the vicissitudes of 20th-century Yugoslav history through a lived, everyday perspective of several decades of one family's turbulent fate. In works whose leitmotif is the transformation of the post-Yugoslav space, the past is rarely framed as a time of carefree and happy childhood, or the so-called good old days. The 1990s (including the events of the war) are presented as bad times – a collective trauma and a collapse of civilisational values in this part of Europe.

In the context of transition, criticism is also directed at the policies of contemporary leaders, Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević, whose efforts to realise the myth of a homogenous nation-

state concealed the policies of plunder, tycoonisation, and corruption, alongside the simultaneous pauperisation and unemployment of the wider masses of society. Croatia at the turn of the century appears as a "Potemkin village" (Rešicki 2010: 16–19), especially at the time of regular presidential or parliamentary elections, when citizens are once again enticed and deceived by familiar political promises.

The oppression attributed to the (Yugo-)communist regime persisted into the new independent states after the break-up of Yugoslavia, when its citizens became enmeshed in the discourses of revived nationalisms, triggered by the demons of the past. In the literature on transition, Croatia and Serbia of the late 20th and early 21st centuries appear as oppressive and authoritarian states. Contrary to the historical breakthrough and the metanarrative about national revival, frequent elements of the new (also literary) reality include organised crime groups, criminality, the underworld, the mafia, drugs, the hardship faced by ordinary citizens, unemployment and poverty, migrations, devastated cities and villages, exile, the flight of dissidents, "cleansing of space and language," collective trauma, and many thousands of victims.

A long-term Greek correspondent, journalist, sociologist and great enthusiast of Serbian culture, Leonidas Hadžiprodromidis, pointed out that the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia did not solve the problem, but pushed one and a half million people to the brink of existence, and left millions of workers surviving on starvation wages. Moreover, in 1991 the disintegrating Yugoslavia was dependent on external financial aid and loans, and the situation was further aggravated by Slobodan Milošević's policies, due to which the country lost its credibility. What emerged from the turbulent process was a picture of a state acting against its citizens:

> The mindset of those in power perceived the overall history and its anonymous masses solely as an object of manipulation. […] The peculiarities of "national" homogenisation in Serbia carried with it the tragic originality of ideological nihilism of Milošević's ruling circle, whose sole strategic objective was to stay in power regardless of any national, economic, social, and historical price for the country. (Hadžiprodromidis 2004: 15)

The titles of the works cited above, *Tito je umro* and *Yu puzzle*, become a metaphor for Yugoslavia as a non-place, a space that is now a no-man's land; the works suggest the death/end of the state, of which the undeniable embodiment was Josip Broz Tito, and his passing caused the federation to disintegrate into small elements: "When Tito was gone, so was security in Yugoslavia" (Jarak 2014: 158).

For younger generations, as well as for those that remember life in Tito's federation mainly in terms of oppression and everyday scarcity, Yugoslavia is no longer a point of reference. It survives in memory (individual and collective) as a rhetorical land that [for the protagonist] "ends where his interlocutors no longer understand the rationale he communicates through his actions and gestures, nor the accusations he makes, nor the admiration he expresses" (Marc Augé [1992] 2012: 74).[9] This happens in one of the scenes of *Tito je umro* when, due to transformational changes, communication between the characters – and the way they perceive the same (?) reality – becomes disrupted: "The taxi driver looked barely of age, which is probably why he didn't know where Lola Ribar Street[10] was, because he'd been born after it had been renamed after some monastery; I can't remember which one" (Novaković 2011: 155).

9 Marc Augé cites the thought of the French philosopher: Vincent Descombes, *Proust, philosophie du roman*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit (1987: 179), which is a study on the works of Marcel Proust.

10 Ivo Lola Ribar (1916–1943), a communist politician and partisan.

Yugoslavia functions as an echo of the past, a blurred and heterogeneous memory, a no-man's place, a myth; and in the collective imagination, it survives through the word, the story of a certain space, and as a "landscape-text" (Marc Augé [1992] 2012: 64–70). The narrative led by the Serbian author is dominated by sharp language and scathing remarks; the writer aptly describes the reality of the unfinished transition, which consists of corruption, violence, the world of politics intertwined with the semi-secular, the environment of tycoons, local celebrities, the police community, and criminals. The retrospection to the times of Yugoslavia is also marked by a critical analysis of the past, dominated by the atmosphere of the Cold War, intra-party jostling (denunciations, conspiracies, espionage, the security apparatus – *Ured Državne Bezbednosti*) and the deteriorating situation of ordinary people. The Yugoslavia evoked in the memoirs becomes a phantasm, a myth, a rhetorical land, a dream that disappears just after waking up:

> [...] we cannot return to the idyll (paradise), we cannot return to socialism, to youth, [...] to the first months of being in love, [...] to childhood joy, [...] a happy past, [...]; this is not because it has passed and time travel is impossible, but because we have idealised it [...]. It has always been bad for us and it always will be; at best we managed, now and then, to trick creditors into granting us loans. (Novaković 2011: 250, 252)

The protagonist of Novaković's novel spares no bitter epithets against the former state, describing the country of her childhood and youth as: "our hallucinatory mixture of imagination and memories" (Novaković 2011: 57). The communist system had to collapse – the socialism in which the *prvoborci* (those who fought on the front line, here: the partisans, later the builders of Yugoslavia) believed but never managed to bring into being. The ideals of fraternity, unity, and equality were swapped for villas on Dedinje, ambassadorial nominations, Mercedes cars, and overseas studies for the children of party VIPs. State land is now being sold off for next to nothing to the businessmen who bankroll political parties. Yugoslavia as a collective hallucination is also illustrated by the words:

> when Tito died, there was no cotton wool nor coffee, and there were constant power cuts; then, before the war, we got loans and we lived well; and then the war broke out and there was nothing, [...] no, we never had anything, only sometimes we believed we had something. (Novaković 2011: 329)

Attitudes towards Yugoslavia are far from one-dimensional. The joint state project did not succeed in eliminating the issues of cultural differences or inter-ethnic tensions. The SFRY is sometimes perceived through the lens of totalitarianism, examples of which were the events of 1968 (the suppression of the student demonstrations) and the events of the Croatian Spring: "When Tito dealt with Croatian nationalists in 1971" (Novaković 2011: 50). The positive image of the country from Vardar to Triglav comprised narratives about the social and technological advances brought by socialism (jobs, housing, a higher standard of living in Yugoslavia than in other countries of the Eastern Bloc, later – popular and consumerist culture, the opening to the West).

The literary representation of the past in contemporary works with Yugoslavia as their backdrop assumes an ambivalent character. The Macedonian researcher of the transition period in the Balkans, Angelina Banović-Markovska, compares the peculiarities of the social and political changes there to the shedding of snake skin, which, in the case of the former Yugoslav countries, took place too early, when the "new incarnation" was not yet ready (Banović-Markovska 2013: 266). And while memories of the past remain vivid, for some people they function as nostalgia for the lost illusion of stability and security,

for others as a kind of frustration and a conviction that post-communism is the only thing worse than communism.

Translated into English by Anna Białasik

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