

An Introduction to Serbian Literature

Serbian literature is a branch of the large tree that grew on the rocky and often bloody Balkan Peninsula during the last millennium. Its initial impulse came from the introduction of Christianity in the ninth century among the pagan Slavic tribes, which had descended from the common-Slavic lands in Eastern Europe. The first written document, the beautifully ornamented Miroslav Gospel, is from the twelfth century. Not surprisingly, the first written literature was not only closely connected with the church but was practically inspired, created, and developed by ecclesiastics—the only intellectuals at the time. As the fledgling Serbian state grew and eventually became the Balkans' mightiest empire during Tsar Dušan's reign in the first half of the fourteenth century, so did Serbian literature grow, although at a slower pace. From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries it blossomed, suddenly but genuinely, in the form of the now famous old Serbian biographies of rulers of state and church. Until modern times, this brilliance was equaled only by the literature of the medieval republic of Dubrovnik. Then came the Turkish invasion, and a night, four centuries long, descended upon Serbia and every aspect of its life. The literary activity in the entire area during those dark ages was either driven underground or interrupted altogether. The only possible form of literature was oral. Consisting of epic poems, lyric songs, folk tales, proverbs, co-nundrums, etc., it murmured like an underground current for centuries until it was brought to light at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In retrospect, it is a miracle that anything, let alone the ability to bounce back into life when the opportunity arose, survived this long, sterile, cold night.

Schematically, Serbian literature can be divided (roughly) into several periods: medieval literature (1200 to the eighteenth century); Enlightenment, Rationalism, and Pseudo-Classicism (the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries); Romanticism (1840s to 1860s); Realism (the second half of the nineteenth century); "Moderna" (the beginning of the twentieth century); the interwar period; and the contemporary period (literature after 1945).

The medieval period is called Old Serbian Literature. As mentioned, it consists primarily of translations or adaptations of ecclesiastic works for use by the church. The most important—and most original—works in this period are biographies of Serbian saints and rulers. Folk literature also flourished at this

time, especially after the Battle of Kosovo, lasting throughout the Turkish occupation. Next to the old biographies, these epic and lyric poems, tales, and proverbs belong to the highest achievements of all Serbian literature.

After five centuries of enforced dormancy, literature was revived, gradually, to be sure, in the form of Enlightenment, Rationalism, and Pseudo-Classicism. It was basically a period of transition, ushering in Modern Serbian literature approximately in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The revival of literary life is closely connected with the stirrings of national aspirations against Ottoman rule throughout the entire Balkan Peninsula. During the Turkish occupation, the Serbian Orthodox Church was the only force that kept alive the national spirit and the hope for a better future. In the process, the Church emerged as the strongest factor when the nation was preparing for the final battle with the declining empire. As a consequence, the Church was able not only to influence the thinking of the few Serbian intellectuals but even to impose upon them a written language, the so-called Slavic-Serbian—an odd mixture of Old Church Slavic, Serbian, and Russian. It was created under the influence of the Russian Church to promote church affairs. In its early form it was distinctly removed from the everyday spoken language. The only literature in the people's language at this time was folk poetry, which was quite different from the officially fostered literature.

Because they lived in the Austrian Empire, only the Serbs of the northern province of Vojvodina—in contrast to other Serbs still suppressed by the Turks—were permitted to carry on literary activity, even if this was under the auspices of the Austrian authorities and in the official, church-sponsored language. In addition to the Russian influence, they were exposed to the liberal and rationalistic thinking of Western Europe. Long periods of Rationalism and Pseudo-Classicism ensued at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first four decades of the nineteenth. It was mainly the work of one man, Dositej Obradović, that initiated the process of liberation from Slavic-Serbian in Serbian letters. Thus he launched the revival of Serbian literature that led to its phoenixlike rise around the middle of the nineteenth century. A former monk, Dositej renounced the shackling atmosphere of his early education and, instinctively drawn to the learned world yet unknown to him, set off on wide travels throughout Europe, learning everything within his grasp. Eventually, he became one of the best educated Serbs of his time. He never forgot his national allegiance, however. On the contrary, the more he learned the more he realized the backwardness of his foreign-dominated people and the need for a pioneering work among them. He spent the rest of his life enlightening his countrymen and establishing various educational institutions, the most important of which were a university and a national museum.

Dositej's literary merits rest largely on his autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Dimitrije Obradović* and on his pedagogical, utilitarian writings. More important, however, is his use of a language that, although not yet a replica of the everyday speech of the people, freed literature from its unnatural bond with the church-fostered linguistic invention. Thus he made the first hopeful steps towards full use of the people's language in literature a few decades later.

To be sure, the victory of the reformists did not come overnight. For a number of years the official language was still Slavic-Serbian. Even those writers, like the playwright Jovan Sterija Popović, who decided to write in a language accessible to the broad masses could not avoid altogether that superimposed hybrid language. It was not until another self-made Serbian writer, Vuk Karadžić, declared an all-out war against Slavic-Serbian that the battle was fully engaged. He was fortunate to attract to his ideas several talented writers and scholars, who applied in their works his concepts about the purity of the written language. But Vuk went even farther than just liberating literature from the parasitic burden of an artificial language: With his peasant genius he created an entirely new alphabet by following his own slogan "write as you speak," allocating to each sound in Serbian speech only one character. The consequence of his ingenious work was an almost completely phonetic alphabet that is still used in Serbian and Croatian literature (the latter uses the Latin script) and, much later, provided the foundation for the Macedonian alphabet.

Karadžić's other accomplishments include the translation of the Bible into language comprehensible to all Serbs, the first grammar of modern Serbian, the first encyclopedic dictionary of Serbian, and the first large and systematic collection of epic poems, folk tales, and other forms of folk literature. Through him the outside world, by way of the Brothers Grimm, Goethe, Lamartine and others, learned of the priceless treasure that had hitherto been hidden among the "primitive," "uncultured" Serbs and Croats.

If Dositej ushered in a new era in Serbian literature, Vuk gave it substance, meaning, and direction. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a very brief span Serbian literature witnessed a flourishing of young writers and, under the circumstances, remarkable works in both poetry and prose. After Vuk's spadework, it remained for the poets to dot the i. A young Serb from Vojvodina, Branko Radičević, proved with his highly lyrical, emotional, and rhythmical poems that good poetry could be written in the people's speech. The Montenegrin prince and bishop Petar Petrović Njegoš wrote several enduring works, patterned after the epic poetry not only in form but in spirit as well. His most significant work is a verse play, *The Mountain Wreath*, which depicts an important moment in the history of the Montenegrin heroic struggle

against the Turks. His philosophical epic, *The Ray of the Microcosm*, resembling Milton's *Paradise Lost* in more ways than one, showed that even the most profound thought could be expressed in the language of the people. For these two works alone Njegoš would enjoy immortal fame in Serbian letters; but he wrote many other works of lasting value. Today he is still considered one of the greatest Serbian poets, if not the greatest.

With Njegoš and Branko, the Romantic movement in Serbian literature began in the 1840s. It lasted about three decades, following, somewhat belatedly, the other European Romantic movements. Poets dominated the scene. Their flights of emotion and fantasy easily match those in other literatures. Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, with his highly sensitive love lyrics, Đura Jakšić, with his exuberance and fiery patriotic verses, and Laza Kostić, with important though at times awkward prosodic innovations, were the other most important Romanticists.

Romanticism in Serbian literature faded slowly and reluctantly. By the 1870s, a new movement, Realism, made its appearance. A similar change was taking place throughout European literature, though in Serbia on a smaller scale and, by now, at a somewhat accelerated pace. The acknowledged catalyst of the new trend was Svetozar Marković, although his influence was only an indirect one; he was primarily a social and political thinker and publicist. Practically all the new writers—Milovan Glišić, Laza Lazarević, Janko Veselinović, and Simo Matavulj, to name only the best—reflected in their works the newly attained awareness of existing social problems and matters other than individual concerns. A corollary to the increased social awareness was the emergence of the village as the main, and at times the only milieu and subject matter. Glišić, an author with his ear to the ground and somewhat more optimistic than the others, was, in addition, highly critical of the cities' intrusion into the secluded life of the peasant, which threatened to destroy the simple but durable fabric of the Serbian village, the principal factor in the survival of the national spirit after centuries of foreign occupation. Laza Lazarević, who mustered the craft of a finely woven psychological short story, was far more pessimistic about the ability of the village to withstand the onslaught, and about the fact that the cities themselves were beginning to show the symptoms of corruption. Veselinović's presentation of idyllic village life revealed not only his lack of sophistication but also his desire to delay the inevitable by saturating his stories with hope, inherent in the peasant philosophy of life. In addition, Matavulj (*Bakonja Fra-Brne*) reflected in his stories and novels the life of the Serbs and Croats along the South Adriatic coast, penetrating the complex make-up of these two peoples.

Other Realists followed more or less in the same vein until the turn of the century. Stevan Sremac divided his allegiance between Vojvodina in the

North and the southern provinces, which were newly liberated from the Turks. His is an artificial idiom of people's daily life sprinkled with a hefty dose of ribald humor. Svetolik Ranković, having studied in Russia, was heavily influenced by the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century. His three novels displayed a fine insight into the psychology of an outlaw, a monk, and a village teacher. Radoje Domanović is the best satirist in all Serbian literature. A gifted writer interested in politics, he wielded his implacable pen against the injustices of a democracy in the making.

All these writers, as can be clearly seen, were closely attached to their home town or their narrow region, yet they did not completely shut themselves off from the rest of the world; indeed, they were trying to speak to all mankind by presenting the seemingly inconsequential destinies of peasants, artisans, small merchants, and incipient proletarians. Some works of the Realists crossed the boundaries of narrow regionalism, but by and large they remained locally bound, folkloristic, conventional, and artistically frugal. Thus they struck a note that was to last for decades, a note of practical and somewhat limited concern with the here and now, devoid of a loftier and universal scope.

One of the few lyric poets at the turn of the century, but a good one at that, was Vojislav Ilić. He was able to combine the Realists' concern for the concrete with the genuine emotion and sensitivity of a lyrically tinged landscape painter. In the drama, towards the end of this period, the playwright Branislav Nušić began his long and fruitful career. When he died half a century later, he left behind scores of plays, mostly hearty comedies, with which he was able to make people laugh while at the same time throwing sharp barbs at the causes of social ills. He enriched a genre notoriously weak in all of Serbian literature.

The first two decades of the twentieth century saw new trends in Serbian literature, usually referred to as the Moderna. Undoubtedly, the Moderna came as a result of the sharply increased but still indirect and somewhat vague influence of the leading literary movements in Europe, notably that of Symbolism. This influence was more pronounced in the literatures of Croatia and Slovenia. In Serbian literature, it was more an influence of mood and aesthetic attitude than of literary craftsmanship. It was manifested most keenly in two poets, Jovan Dučić and Milan Rakić. Dučić was a poet of refined taste, worldly culture, and preference for things past. His melancholic and almost fatalistic disposition reflected the decadent fin-de-siècle mood of the French Symbolists, whom he admired. An avowed esthete, he wrote some of the most beautiful and sonorous poetry in Serbian literature. Rakić, though similar to Dučić in his basic poetic attitude, was different in many respects. He wrote a small amount of contemplative, analytical poetry, permeated with pessimism

and awareness of man's inability to change his fate. His love lyrics show a keen understanding of love relationships. He also wrote several topical but unconventionally patriotic poems. The third leading poet of this time was Aleksa Šantić. His was a much simpler poetry, but what he lacked in sophistication and the philosophical approach he made up with sincerity and pathos. He wrote poems with personal, romantic, patriotic, and social overtones.

There were other young poets who struck independent paths and showed great advancement not only in their world view but also in the craft of poetry: Vladislav Petković Dis, Milutin Bojić, Sima Pandurović, Veljko Petrović. They all showed a surprising savoir faire, sophistication, and maturity in poetic matters. Most of them were pessimistic in their outlook, while at the same time warmly patriotic in supporting their country's cause on the eve of the fateful events culminating in World War I.

In prose, a new generation of writers also made its presence felt. Perhaps the strongest was Borisav Stanković, a writer of boundless talent but limited skill. His best work, *The Tainted Blood*, is considered one of the best Serbian novels despite its serious technical shortcomings. His was the world of the quaint, tradition-laden town of Vranje, close to the border between Serbia and Macedonia. This world of merchants and landowners was on its way out together with the retreat of the Turkish empire from the area. Similarly, Svetozar Ćorović depicted his native Herzegovina, where the changes brought about by the shift of the Moslem population were most severely felt. Ivo Ćipiko, like Matavulj, gave us a picture of the South Adriatic which was not always sunny and blue. He frequently injected into his lyrical writings a sense of alarm concerning the deterioration of social conditions (*The Spiders*). Another regional writer, Petar Kočić, described in a highly lyrical prose the Bosnian Serbs and their struggle for independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and for unification with Serbia. In his most enduring work, the play *The Badger Before the Court*, he ridiculed with devastating satire the right of the Austro-Hungarians to rule over Slavic peoples. The Bosnian peasant, by nature sly, suspicious, and witty, is shown here as morally superior to his foreign oppressors.

The efforts of the writers of this time were aided by several capable critics educated in the West, especially by Jovan Skerlić and Bogdan Popović. Skerlić, with his sweeping historical survey, and Popović, with his refined, Western-schooled aestheticism, not only weighed the writers' achievements but also pointed out the directions of modern world literature to them.

Several writers from this period (Dis, Bojić, Uskoković, to name only the best known) made the ultimate sacrifice during World War I, adding to the enormous toll the small Serbian nation had to pay on its way to victory.

The First World War represents a natural watershed in the development of Serbian literature. Although the majority of prewar writers reappeared on the scene after the war, it was mainly the new generation that brought a new and different spirit into literature. Six groups of authors can be distinguished according to their orientation. In the first, two poets, Miloš Crnjanski and Rastko Petrović, especially embodied and exploited the postwar mood in their works. On the one hand, they were revolutionary in demanding vigorously a new approach to life's problems; on the other hand, they showed signs of revulsion and tiredness after the colossal slaughter of humans they had just witnessed. But it was in the form of their work that they, together with many other authors, struck a very modern note, seeking a new, more forceful expression in poetry, and in literature in general. The entire first decade of postwar development was permeated with the spirit of innovation, marked by heated polemics with the opponents of Modernism as well as among the modernists themselves.

The counterpart to the modernists was provided by a number of prewar and new writers who followed the traditional realistic line and who, while enriching their language with new possibilities, generally shied away from the extravagant experimentation of the modernists. Ivo Andrić grew during this period into a mature short story writer and his skill, poise, and wider historical scope made him one of the most significant interwar storytellers. Some prewar writers continued their well-trodden paths—Dučić, Rakić and Šantić in poetry, Stanković, Ćipiko, V. Petrović in prose, Nušić in drama—but most of them left the scene, one by one, realizing that their era had ended with the war.

Early in this period, a small but vocal third group of young writers declared their allegiance to the French surrealist movement, trying to transplant it onto Serbian literary soil, with greater or lesser success. The Serbian surrealist episode was very important for the enlivening of the literary atmosphere.

A similar characterization can be made of the writers with a pronounced or exclusive socialist orientation. Few of them amounted to much by way of literary production, yet they represented both the symptoms and the causes of the social ills that beset the country prior to World War I.

A fifth group can be called, for lack of a better term, the folklorists. These writers—there were quite a few of them, mostly young ones—were very close to the so-called traditionalists: they too were realistic and conservative in their outlook and the treatment of the subject matter. But they clung to their narrow region and were uniquely untouched by outside literary currents. They limited themselves to the description of people, customs, and problems of their home provinces, renewing the tradition of the second half of the nineteenth century in Serbian prose. Like their predecessors, however, they too tried to focus on

the universally human pathos by presenting their little man, usually a peasant, in his microcosm. Some stories and novels by these writers have survived the erosion of time and winds.

Finally, a few highly individualistic writers worked secluded in their private worlds, the loners who either cared not to, or could not, find rapport with their fellow writers. The best example of this isolated attitude is Momčilo Nastasijević, a darkly strange and powerful creator, whose mystifying poems and stories have yet to be fully fathomed, mostly because of their obscure language.

The interwar period, despite all evident hustle and bustle, left relatively few great works: poems by R. Petrović, M. Crnjanski, S. Vinaver, D. Maksimović, and Nastasijević; short stories by Andrić, V. Petrović, D. Vasić and B. Ćopić; novels by M. Crnjanski (*Migrations*), B. Ćosić (*The Mowed Field*); and a few plays by Nušić. This period of less than great literary productions is not to be underestimated, however; for some writers it was a time of maturation for, when another world cataclysm was over, it was these writers who gave Serbian literature a new breath of life, notably Andrić with his three great novels, *The Bridge on the Drina*, *The Chronicle of Travnik*, and *Miss*. The socialistically oriented prewar writers and the former surrealists attempted to adopt the norms of Soviet-style Socialist Realism in the immediate postwar period. Political developments, however, aborted this movement.

Between 1948 and 1955, approximately, two groups fought each other for supremacy. They can be called the “realists,” who advocated adherence to straightforward, utilitarian literature, and the “modernists,” who demanded greater freedom, especially in matters of form. The struggle ended in the mid-fifties with the victory of the modernists. Since then, Serbian literature has followed its own meandering path of accommodation to, and acceptance of, reality. As a result, several new writers have attained prominence, and a number of enduring works has been produced, particularly novels. All Serbian literature has been steadily gaining in stature, the rise culminating in the Nobel Prize for Ivo Andrić in 1961, the first of its kind in the entire Southeastern part of Europe.

In addition to Andrić’s achievements, there are those by Branko Ćopić, Mihailo Lalić, Oskar Davičo, Dobrica Ćosić, Meša Selimović, and Miodrag Bulatović in prose; and in poetry by Desanka Maksimović, Davičo, Vasko Popa, Miodrag Pavlović, Stevan Raičković, and Ivan V. Lalić. Although basically a one-theme writer—the last war and man’s predicament in it—M. Lalić explores the darkest corners of man’s soul stripped of the last vestiges of civilization, as in his novel, *The Wailing Mountain*. Ćosić dramatically fictionalizes Serbian history of the twentieth century in his monumental novels, *A Time of Death*, *A Time of Evil*, and *A Time of Power*. Bulatović is ironically

more popular abroad than at home, his popularity undoubtedly stemming from his fashionable depiction of a nightmarish, demented, perverted world which knows neither the causes and consequences of its plight nor the remedy.

Among the many younger writers deserving mention here are, above all, Danilo Kiš and Milorad Pavić. With their novels on universal themes they have—more than any other writer after Andrić—elevated Serbian literature to the level of world literature, especially Pavić with his *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Other leading writers are Aleksandar Tišma, Borislav Pekić, Dragoslav Mihailović, and Slobodan Selenić in fiction; Branko Miljković, Ljubomir Simović, and Matija Bećković in poetry, and Aleksandar Popović, Simović, and Dušan Kovačević in drama.

The present-day situation is one of fluid activity and great expectations. An entirely new generation has entered the literary scene, young writers who have brought with them their own ideas and problems, and who are surprisingly deft and knowledgeable about literary matters. They are benefiting from the international exchange of ideas, of which they freely partake. Indeed, the most important aspect of contemporary Serbian literature is that in the last two decades it has broken the centuries-old indifference toward it on the part of the outside world. Although only time will judge the true merits of the works written now in Serbia, it can be said that Serbian literature as a whole has found its proper place among others, and that it is willing to listen and eager to be heard.

In sum, through these seven periods (Medieval, Transition, Romanticism, Realism, Moderna, Interwar, and Contemporary) Serbian literature has made its tortuous way from a low existence and obscurity to respectable membership in world literature. Following in the main the developments in other European literatures while at the same time adhering to the peculiarities of its own nature, trying to satisfy both the quest for esthetic fulfillment and the need for a spokesman of historical, social, and patriotic causes, and creating traditions where there were none while often destroying those that might still serve well, Serbian literature has asserted itself against mighty odds. Aware of the difficulty a small nation, with an unfamiliar language, has in being heard in the outside world, but also conscious of their own shortcomings and limitations (due above all to historical developments, four wars on their soil in the last half century, to cite one example), Serbian writers have seldom sought excuses or demanded undeserved laurels. Instead, they have worked patiently and hard to justify their membership in the family of world literature to which they have made a modest but genuine and heartfelt contribution.

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