

LITERARY EDUCATION – (RE)SHAPING OUR PAST/PRESENT/FUTURE PERCEPTION OF THE *OTHER*

Zavedajoč se, da je književnost, hkrati pa tudi način poučevanja književnosti, način razumevanja in spreminjanja družbe, sem pred tremi leti na Univerzi v Novem Sadu (Filozofska fakulteta, Oddelek za srbsko književnost) pripravila predmet z naslovom »Podobe drugih v srbski in hrvaški književnosti 19. in 20. stoletja«, gradivo za predmet pa je bilo natisnjeno tudi v knjižni obliki (*Self-portraits – imagological variations*, Novi Sad 2004). Predmet so neposredno navdahnile »študije podob«. Dobro je znano, da književnost pomaga pri ustvarjanju in izražanju narodne identitete, imagološki pristop pa upošteva notranje delovanje besedila in njegovo interakcijo s sobesedilom. Joep T. Leerssen definira študije podob kot »preučevanje narodnih in etničnih stereotipov in literarnega prikaza medkulturnih spopadov« (Leerssen 1991: 128). Literarno izražanje narodnih stereotipov, ki ga najdemo v izbranih literarnih besedilih za predmet (Nenadović, Lazarević, Vinaver, Crnjanski, Nemčić, Matoš, Kamov, Begović itd.), je pri pouku služilo kot izhodišče za dialog o različnih temah: kako gradimo pripoved za druge in zase (heteropodobe proti avtopodobe), kako se v literarnih delih opisuje tujca, kakšen je odnos med književnostjo in »zgodovinskim spominom« itd. Ker lahko na predavalnico gledamo kot na »kraj, kjer se poraja kultura« (Hardcastle 1985), sem skušala krepiti »kulturo primerjave«, »zavedanje razlik« in »kulturo dialoga«.

književnost, izobraževanje, imagologija

Bearing in mind that literature, and hence the way of teaching it, is a way of understanding and changing society, three years ago at the University of Novi Sad (Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Serbian Literature) I prepared the course »Images of the Other in 19th and 20th Century Serbian and Croatian Literature«, which also appeared in book form (*Self-portraits – imagological variations*, Novi Sad 2004). The course was directly inspired by »image studies«. It is well known that literature also helps in the creation and expression of national identity; and an imagological approach takes into consideration the internal workings of the text and its interaction with the context. Joep T. Leerssen defines image studies as »the study of national and ethnic stereotypes and of the literary representation of intercultural confrontation« (Leerssen 1991: 128). The literary articulation of national stereotypes found in selected literary texts for the course (Nenadović, Lazarević, Vinaver, Crnjanski, Nemčić, Matoš, Kamov, Begović, etc.) served as a starting point for dialogue in the classroom on different topics: how do we construct narratives for others and for ourselves (hetero-images versus auto-images), how does literature depict the foreigner, what is the relation between literature and 'historical memory', etc. Since classrooms can be seen as »sites of cultural making« (Hardcastle 1985), I was attempting to cultivate »a culture of comparison«, »an awareness of difference« and »a culture of dialogue«.

literature, education, imagology

»The Balkans are usually reported to the outside world only in times of terror and trouble; the rest of the time they are scornfully ignored.«¹ This a quote by which Maria Todorova begins the concluding chapter of her book entitled *Imaginary Balkans*. (1997). Examples from literature that support this claim can be found both in the past and in the present: literary texts from various periods and of various genres enter into a discourse relationship with reality.

In an effort to counter the stereotype of the permanently belligerent Balkan nations and to show that it is possible to deal with differences in the Balkans without the use of »war rhetoric«, an international project called *To Know Our Neighbors. The Image of the Other in the Literatures of the Balkans* was initiated in Sophia six years ago. Its participants are professors of literature from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Moldavia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey. One of the results of the project is a textbook with the same title,² printed in 2002 in Bulgarian.³ This book is a Utopian attempt to »decrease« political and ethnic tensions through research of literary texts. Although the word »Utopia« is used, the group of associates who worked on the textbook approached their work in the hope that it would, in some way, have some influence of future understanding of relations in the Balkans.

One of the basic aims of the project was to reveal to the readers the mechanisms we use when we speak of the Other, primarily the Other from the Balkans, our neighbour. Representative texts (excerpts or integral texts) were chosen from Balkan national literatures⁴ that deal with the Balkan Other or with a vision of one's own nation. The texts are accompanied by questions and tasks in whose formulation imagology was the basic premise and methodology (among others, texts by Daniel-Henri Pageaux, Jean-Marc Moura and Joep T. Leerssen were used).

Why imagology? Literature is not only »the art of words«, literature enables us to understand ourselves and others, literature is a communication with the Other, it is perhaps the most impressive source of information on the culture of other nations. Literature also aids in the construction and representation of national identity. The imagological⁵ approach likewise takes into account the relations within a text and

¹ Theodore I. Geshkof, *Balkan Union: A Road to Peace in Southeastern Europe*, New York: Columbia University Press 1940, p. xi.

² *Да опознаем своите съседни. Образът на «другия» в литературата на Балканите*. Учебно помагало, София: Център за образователни инициативи 2002.

³ The book is at present being used as an alternative textbook in several grammar schools in Sophia, and at some universities in Bulgaria as a reference work for graduate studies. The project also provides for the translation of the books into the languages of the participating countries in the project.

⁴ In the body of texts chosen by participants in the projects from Serbia (Prof. Ivana Živančević-Sekeruš, Prof. Mirjana Stefanović and Prof. Pavle Sekeruš) there are texts by Ivo Andrić, Vasko Popa, Aleksandar Tišma, Danilo Kiš, Judita Šalgo, Vidosav Stevanović and Dragan Velikić.

⁵ Imagology is a relatively new and markedly interdisciplinary field that combines traditional qualitative and diachronic methods of humanist scholarship with the newer and often more quantitative and synchronic methods of the social sciences. It studies the origins, nature and influence of national stereotypes, cliché conceptions (of certain regions or nations) about the *Other*. Imagologists favor a structural approach, making a distinction between inter-textual and typically »self-determining« auto-images and hetero-images

their interaction with the »context«. One of the possible definitions of imagology is that it deals with the study of national and ethnic stereotypes, that is, with the discourse and literary articulation of cultural differences and national identity that appear in various forms through history (Leerssen 2000).

It should be stressed that imagologists do not deal with the degree of accuracy of some image/representation, since they do not study what some nation is really like but *how it has been written about*. It should be borne in mind that the image of the Other is conditioned by the national, cultural or ideological context, and that an analysis of this image forms a basis for the understanding of differences (Leerssen 1997). It is also important to point out that a writer in each conception of the Other, that is, of another culture, introduces a certain degree of subjectivity (an auto-image as opposed to a hetero-image), which is the basic difference between »the objective information« and the »representation/image of the Other«. For these reasons it can be concluded that we cannot describe cultural identity, but only cultural difference (Pageaux 1989).

In a certain way, the participants in the project, by creating this alternative literary textbook, tried to overcome those stereotype conceptions which Balkan neighbours have of one another, as well the stereotype image of the Balkans which are »geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as 'the Other' within, the Balkans have been able to absorb conveniently a number of externalized political, ideological, and cultural frustrations stemming from tensions and contradictions inherent to the regions and societies outside the Balkans« (Todorova 1999: 188).

Since literary textbooks are special forms of »official memory« and contain information (sometimes also implicitly), which is transferred from generation to generation, thereby shaping »national memory«, they establish a »generation dialogue« with the national, and on the international level an »inter-cultural dialogue«, in this sense it is clear that it is almost impossible to provide »neutral« education (Assmann 1993).

I bore all of this in mind when I was preparing a course for students of the final year at the Department of Serbian Literature of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad for the academic year 2002–2003. Without much hesitation I decided on an »imagological« topic: *Images of the Other in 19th and 20th Century Serbian and Croatian Literature*.⁶

There has always been an emphasis on the role of the humanities in the change of a society and individuals and in this sense this is partially true, if literature, and the

(Chew III 2001: 1). The most widespread cliché, which we could also term the »mother of all stereotypes«, is the one that the nation in question is a »nation of contrasts« (Leerssen 2000). It could be concluded, from an insight into the present trends in imagology, that the main parameters for the study of national stereotypes are geographical, social and historical.

⁶I used the texts of L. Nenadović, L. Lazarević, S. Vinaver, M. Crnjanski, A. Nemčić, A. G. Matoš, J. P. Kamov, M. Begović and others.

way that it is taught, are considered to be means for the understanding and changing of a society. Literature can also be considered to be a production and a reproduction of the discourses of the author of the text, the professor and the students. The varied activities in teaching can become the production of various discourses which are constructed within the classroom and which are constituted as a criticism of the formal literary discourse (Burgess 1984). In this sense the teaching of literature is an exceptional means for the creation of a climate of tolerance (but it should also be mentioned that it can also be a perfect means for manipulation and the promotion of intolerance).

One of the motivations in creating the course *Images of the Other in 19th and 20th Century Serbian and Croatian Literature* was to warn students of bad habits in the representation of the Other and to show them how the mechanisms which are usually used to write/narrate about the Other function. During the classes a dialogue on various topics was quickly established: on mechanisms of memory and forgetting, literature and »historical« memory, the relation between the »centre« and the »periphery«, how the discourse about the Other and about oneself (auto and hetero-images) are constructed in various literary genres, how literature portrays the stranger, how the East »sees« the West, and we also dealt with themes of identity (national, regional, ethnic, religious, gender), the homeland, Europe, tolerance and the like. It turned out that students were very productive in their discussions of these themes, and that they presented their observations in a witty, provocative or resigned fashion. One of my aims during the course was to cultivate dialogue and the respect for different opinions. I wanted some of the students' comments to be recorded for after the completion of the course. This is how the book *Self-Portraits – Imagological Variations* (2004) originated as a proof that education is one of the main fields of cultural production and reproduction and that classrooms are »sites of cultural making« (Hardcastle 1985).

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