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### JOVAN SKERLIC AS A LIFE TUTOR

(Cultural historical and aesthetic criteria of the history of literature as criticism)

*This is merely history of the  
new Serbian literature, of the  
writers who undoubtedly  
had a feeling of being Serb.*

J. Skerlic

*He is speaking of a man, but  
is thinking of the nation.*

R. Konstantinovic

*Summary:* The paper studies and illuminates Jovan Skerlic's social function and "criticism anatomy" in his *History of Serbian Literature*. The object of analysis is the act and actors of Skerlic's engaged criticism and method relying on facts. It is the path taken a hundred years later by Serbian criticism and literature as culture and a part of educational process.

*Key words:* history of literature, J. Skerlic, literary criticism, culture, nation, education.

The anthology *Serbian literary criticism* (1958) by Zoran Misić, comprising criticism development from Vuk Karadžić to the Second World War and showing how the criticism moved "in its entirety following one specific and determined line", features thirteen critics with twenty two schedules closer to "essayistic" than to "day to day criticism", one of which is most represented, i.e. Jovan Skerlic with his four papers. Misić's main criterion was "cultural historical criterion (...) equal to aesthetic" and it was supposed, by means of affirmative opinions and Serbian critics' evaluation, chronologically, to show continuity and developing path of critics thought concerning developed form of essay and "rotation of literary concepts". However, we refer hereby to fundamental psychological fact that interaction between speech and mind is not constant and invariable fact, it changes "in course of development in scope and quality" and that speech and mind "do not develop alongside and uniformly" (Vygotsky, 1977: 104). In our research of the history of literature as source of literary criticism and its criteria as its social, cultural and educational character and conclusions, it is important to be careful, because origination of new histories does not necessarily always mean development and raise of critical thought itself.

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Already in *Preface* Misić apostrophizes one dilemma as primary: whether to compose anthology of criticism or essay, because it is about “two spheres of literary conception hard to distinguish” although they differ? Emphasizing *differences* between them, he refers to two definitions: (1) criticism originated (and was established by the appearance of printing) from the necessity to interpret literary works and appraise their literary value), and essay writing originated (initially without literary aspirations, aimed rather at ethics, philosophy and social life, to severely overpower literature subsequently) in order to use them as examples in “discussing the nature of literary creation itself” and (2) criticism is closer to science, because it makes impartial judgment on literary work, and essay writing is closer to art, since its notions give rise to present personal experience on literary phenomena – *inaccurate and uncertain and ambivalent*.

Z. Misić, as an anthologist of criticism, hence found himself determining character and function of *literary criticism, essay and history of literature* or, as he named it, “literary historical study”. His annotations *on criticism*, kept for a long period of time continuously in Serbian tradition, and on *essay*, without any tradition and at the earliest stage are essential:

- first interpreters and tutors of literary skills were not literary critics, but historians of literature and theoreticians and codifiers of aesthetic, linguistic and moral or religious norms;
- character of criticism changed the moment writers appeared as critics, performing under the credo that their vocation is not merely to recite but also to 'criticize life' and where philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and others discovered “the most fertile ground for their research in art“;
- such practice announced *crisis of criticism* reaching its full authority in the 19<sup>th</sup> century ordering it to change;
- ultimately, today crucial role in literature interpretation is played by authors themselves that caused the change of classical form of literary criticism and, because they are “much more interested in penetrating the secrets of creative process than making evaluations on the work of art”, aimed it at aspect interpretation of “social, esthetic, psychological” (Misić, 1958: 7).

Misić’s *Anthology*, Skerlić’s status therein and the fact he, of all historians of Serbian literature, is the closest to critics, are starting point in considering his *History of the new Serbian literature* and defining social and educational role of literary criticism in Serbian society and culture: from Vuk Karadžić, being at its beginning, to *History of Serbian literary criticism* (2008) by Predrag Palavestra. For the introduction to analysis of literary criticism function in fulfilling its educational purpose considered as essential are *Preface* and introductory parts of Skerlić’s *History: The beginning of the new Serbian literature* and *Political and cultural condition of Serbian nation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century*.

The first Skerlić’s idea is to be considered important for criticism as culture and its social, national and educational role. It specifies the awareness of importance of the history of literature as the central literary science branch and the authors’ awareness of national belonging. “This great *History of the new Serbian literature*“, he emphasizes, determining the 18<sup>th</sup> century as its beginning in the history of development, “from the authors connecting the old Serbian medieval, monastic literacy and the new literature”, and accentuates national

character, is written “more freely, for the audience already conversant” and comprises “active and live literature” of the authors “who undoubtedly had a feeling of being Serb”.<sup>2</sup> Another idea concerns literature as an important part of national history and culture. Skerlic understands literature as “the utmost expression of popular life” in the context of cultural historical circumstances causing its development. Their illumination in each stage of Serbian literature development, proceeding by Pavel Safarik’s model, opens each part of its *History*. Meticulously presented and clarified are the facts implying political and cultural state of Serbian people in the century marked as the beginning of the new Serbian literature: *political and religious circumstances, cultural circumstances, educational institutions, review of publishers and magazines* etc. The research is determined as such: “To me (...) it is much more important to present the overall development of literature than to produce rounded studies and portraits on individual authors, irrespective of entirety“. This methodological principle excludes Dositej and Vuk as “initiators of ideological and literary movements” (Skerlic, 1997: 16).

This idea is motivated more complexly in Skerlic’s periodization of the history of Serbian literature by movements, which gives priority to method of generalization. Apart from sequence, intelligibility and practicality, such division inspires “*the feeling of evolution of our entire literature*” and “does not illustrate authors alone but simultaneously denotes *spiritual flows and cultural stages*, being generally important in modern literature studies, again being important in our circumstances where *literature has always been a pronounced reflection of cultural settings, spiritual, national and social political movements*“(Skerlic, 1997: 24, 25).

Great critic had a significant idea regarding innovation that Skerlic refuses previous divisions creating entirely new periodization of Serbian literature, to be embraced or modified by future both historians and critics. Being source and exemplar to himself, he implies problems and difficulties in working, defining already a constant in society and national culture: lack of monographs, bibliography and biographic dictionary of authors. He was the first to undertake such complex and comprehensive work only to complete it after twelve years, lasting from 1901 to 1912, aware of its flaws (“I do not think of it as definite or flawless”) and critical fundament: “Whatever I could give, especially considering what there is to give nowadays, is in this book”. (Skerlic, 1997: 17).

*Preface*, therefore, already clearly defines history of literature as the first sphere of the literary science, more important than the theory of literature and literary criticism, and directly conditioned by historiography. Skerlic considers history of Serbo-Croatian literature in the context of general history and begins from the fact that it “does not represent unique entirety”, because it “consists of detached literatures, weakly linked or without any correlation whatsoever”. Searching for its beginning and finding it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he claims: the new Serbian literature is “autonomous conception, without tradition, entirely independent organism”. The old Serbian literature, “narrow by its contents, inauspicious by its form and language, more literacy than literature in its actual meaning, could not be of any influence to the literature of secular era, since it was practically dead at the time. The same happened to local literatures: coastal, Bosnian, and Slavonic” (Skerlic, 1997:19). The new literature was “awaken by historical feeling of being Serbian” and was delivered by “the

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<sup>2</sup> “Croatian and Serbian literature is the literature of one nation and one language, but still two literatures. It is a paradox, anachronism and proof of our cultural national backwardness, but that is the way it is” (Skerlic, 1997: 15). The critic advocated unification of Serbs and Croats into Yugoslav thought instead of Serbian national idea.

people who migrated to the Kingdom of Hungary in 1690 after a century of great suffering and struggle.<sup>3</sup>

Basis of the history of literature as the fundament of literary criticism on Skerlic's example strongly imply that *the function of criticism is contained in cognition or education itself*. Facts classified and interpreted in this way, as hence presented, create national and cultural awareness which forms strong individual and collective national spirit. The significance of this phenomenon becomes clear in light of the fact that in declining and ephemeral world only human spirit is unbreakable and imperishable. It is even better defined by the historian's division of the history of Serbian literature in five periods in light of perfect style the rhetoric of which radiates with truth and conviction power. Literature periodization illuminates *literature as the essence of culture and criticism as the sum of cognition which in parallel act edifyingly, morally and aesthetically*. Hereby we illustrate the opinion with four examples of Skerlic's motivation of periodization, although he himself understands its imperfections and limitations using rhetorical figure that all divisions "include reality just like fishing net grabs water":

1. *Rationalism* (beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the year 1810): "Serbs leave medieval culture of Byzantine origin entering modern western culture. *Rationalist and edifying ideas appear comprising literature and public life. Common sense cult rises*, and alongside Serbian civil society secular and liberal literature is generated, aimed at people and with *purpose of general education*" (A.M.). Therefore, literature as culture is developed in parallel with society fulfilling educational function, not excluding literary criticism.
2. *From rationalism towards romanticism* as transition epoch (from 1810 to 1848 and entire first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century): "Rationalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, having struck deep roots, is prolonged, *authors are always didacticians and national defenders and educators* (A.M.), but infiltration of romanticism doctrines is constantly present". Therefore, *within educational and pedagogic mission simultaneously apostrophized is national thought of literature as culture* in Serbian society striving to constitute as a state.
3. *Romanticism* (from 1848 to 1870): "It is the age of imagination, feelings, astonishment, idealism; detachment from western culture, *emphasis on national culture, cult of complete nationalism and popular poetry* (A.M.); literature of imagination and feelings". Hence, it is distinct for the conviction of authors that feeling gives us the actual image of the world and return to tradition, national history and popular literature is the road to achieving freedom and national state. Literary criticism practically adjusts to the same ideas.
4. *Realism* (from 1870 to 1900): "Reacting against romanticism sentimentality and rhetoric, *it returns to common sense*; main ideas are: *cult of science, seeking of truth, positive outlook of life and literature, relying on reality and contemporaneity*" (Skerlic, 1997: 25, 26). Thus, the principle of negation is indicated in literature development: *instead of imagination reason dominates, instead of the past and history reality dominates* etc.

This coincides with consideration of educational circumstances and establishment of national institutions: schools, printing houses, founding newspapers and magazines – cultural domain

<sup>3</sup> "That fragment of spiritual life in Serbian people", explains Skerlic the relation of history and history of literature, "was with those few hundred thousand fugitives that settled in desolate plains of Hungary. Serbs began living a new cultural life there, and some hundred and fifty years it was the place of thinking and writing for the entire Serbian nation" (Skerlic, 1997: 24).

where all historians, historians of literature and culture and literary critics shall revisit. From primitive courses, or without schools, Serbs got to their schools. The crown of that process is establishment of Gymnasium of Karlovci in 1791 and the first Serbian seminary in 1794.<sup>4</sup> They made to their Cyrillic printing office and to their first newspapers and bulletins thus making way for development of national culture and popular literature. Summary of Skerlic's four factors of the beginning of Serbian literature shows how history of literature takes over social role of literary criticism and how education itself is actually a condition essential for social development and creation of spiritual vertical supporting civilization.

In that sense Skerlic contextualizes and understands Slovene authors at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the last product of the old Serbian literature, monks from Raca, Zaharije S. Venclovic and Djordje Brankovic, the only layman amongst them, and opens the epoch of rationalism as Russian influence in Serbs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Russian-Slovene authors "as the first degree in transition from medieval literacy into modern literature". (Skerlic, 1997: 49). The most productive among them and the most important was Jovan Rajic (1726 – 1801), the author of *History of Serbs* (1768), the first systematic part which comprises history of Serbian people, very diligent, plenteous and for that time educated writer. Main idea of his work is: *Serbian patriotism* by means of which he wanted to "bring Serbs into historical world". By his side is historian and theologian Zaharija Stefanovic Orfelin (1726 – 1785), who introduces the history of Serbian literary criticism. Central character of the epoch and Skerlic's consideration of classicism, or *Josephinism*, is Dositej Obradovic (1742 – 1811), to whom thirty-six pages of this part of *History* are dedicated. Skerlic himself to certain extent took over Dositej's edificatory idea, which critics transform into "modern civil democratic form" and it "becomes even more visible sign of conversion and form of new rationalistic faith"(Pijanovic, 2014: 389). Skerlic's language, style and method reveal strong critic having in mind complex and not only social function of criticism: "Up to Dositej Obradovic Serbian literature lacks literary, real

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<sup>4</sup> Creating complete material and spiritual fundament which historically was basis of Serbian nation and literature as cultural expression, we quote some of important factors and facts implied by Skerlic:

After Gymnasium of Karlovci and seminary, the first Serbian teachers' college was established in Szentendre (1812) and transferred to Sombor (1816), when in Novi Sad the first Serbian gymnasium was founded. All this made Serbs "one of the most conscientious and modern nationalities in Austria" facing year 1848.

In Belgrade the Belgrade Higher School (1808) and Bogoslovija (1810), printing house (1831), *Novine serbske* (*Serbian Newspaper*) was published (1834), *Društvo srbske slovesnosti* (Association of Serbian cleverality) was formed (1841), growing into *Srpsko uceno drustvo* (Serbian erudite association) (1864) and *Matica srpska* (1826) in Pest, transferring to Novi Sad (1864), or "Serbian Athens" until the seventies leading cultural center where Serbian national theatre was founded in 1865 etc. Soon after, Belgrade takes over.

The spirit of progress is materially illustrated by number of published books: from 1740 to 1780 two Serbian books were printed yearly; in the following two decades seven, and from 1800 to 1820 even nineteen books a year. In the following decade on average 23 books were published, and from 1830 to 1850 45 books a year.

Splendor of Skerlic's *History* as proof of Serbs' whereabouts, direction and realized achievements is illustrated by the following examples:

Milos Obrenovic was convinced in 1820 that he being sovereign did not need to read or write when merchants marked debts on a piece of wood as lines.

The only two Serbian authors born in Serbia, Milovan Vidakovic and Vuk Karadzic, could not live or work in Serbia.

At the end of 1855 in Serbia with approximately 1 000 000 habitants there were around 350 schools and over two hundred people holding university degree. (Skerlic, 1997:127)

author (...) the first distinct and decisive Serbian rationalist, a writer whose works have not only historical but purely literary values as well, a man who brought revolution in Serbian spirits and put Serbian literature and culture onto a new, modern basis”.

From the position of auto-projection it is clear that Skerlic presents literature and history of literature in the context of general history and the notion wherefrom it *originated and developed* hence in the process of periodization he always begins from social political cultural circumstances. Criticism is based on *parallel disclosure* of flaws and values or merits of authors and works and promotes it as *creative or architectural act*, confirmed by constructive evaluation and role of Nedic’s criticism. In a word, there are no eternal esthetic forms of value and unalterable taste. They are merely some essential paradigms of comprehending literary criticism within the history of literature, literature as culture and their social and educational functions.

Creating history of literature and theory of criticism between requirements of *impartiality and subjectivity*, Skerlic was a democrat and an eminence “as something ultimate, which is not subject to criticism or doubt”, an authority, “a man with simple ideas with purpose (...) genius of audience (who) (...) considered himself responsible for the entire Serbian literature“. European, public person, historian, he always wrote with an attitude, as if speaking on “a historical assembly”, and “everything he mentioned was situated historically” in his vision of history, because each *why* has its own *because*. Great synthesist of movements and epochs, he was able to judge, because the world “was created for empirical, pragmatic spirit and not for philosophical thought”.<sup>5</sup>

The essay *Culture and poverty* written by Radomir Konstantinovic absolutely explains Skerlic’s engaged spirit as historian of literature and literary critic. He advocated for Serbs, who slaved long enough under “lower, inferior race”, to enter Europe performing social and spiritual reformation, he fought for the Serbian culture to meet European culture directly, he saw literature as *means*, school of life and life style for Serbs to liberate from the East, and in Dositej, “the greatest European moment of Serbia” and S. Markovic – the only idols. “Skerlic perceived literature from the perspective of national being. He is speaking of a man, but is thinking of a nation” (Konstantinovic, 1971: 20). By this principle he carried out his criticism. In proportion nation – culture he accepted culture as the factor of existence. His importance is a tragic magnitude born in poverty. For him “a book is not merely a book, it is the moment when it appeared”.

All these judgments confirm our fundamental thesis:

- that literature is an important factor of culture,
- that the history of literature grew the seed of literary criticism and
- that the histories of ideas nowadays are condition of understanding previous epochs and cultures and all phenomena important for a nation.

The idea of Serbian culture is born on the grounds of poverty and on the road to European culture, as the critic pointed out regarding Skerlic and how Skerlic himself historically considered and presented it in his *History* as critique, the main idea by means of which we may understand the status of Serbian nation and culture even today. His unique work left, over

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<sup>5</sup>“His basic nature, which he later turned into principle, was deeply anti-philosophical”. He “undertook the role of *life tutor*, he wanted to teach us how to live” (Konstantinovic, 1971: 20).

sixty years ago, as Konstantinovic wrote, “in heritage a powerful talent for synthesis, sense of empirical experience, hatred for metaphysics, fear of man’s personal inferno, strong word, courage to rise against consecrated values and to discover the neglected” (Konstantinovic, 1971: 20). Those are fundamental actors of the act of Skerlic’s criticism engagement that relied on facts illuminating its spheres where a hundred years later Serbian criticism and literature take place as culture and a part of educational process.

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#### Biographical note

**Ana Mumovic** was born in 1980. She earned Master degree in 2008 with thesis *Religious motifs in Simo Matavulj's tales* and doctoral degree in 2014 with thesis *Social and cultural significance of literary criticism*. Since year 2004, she has been an employee of the Serbian Cultural Institute, Department of Literature. She is currently engaged on the project *Material and spiritual culture of Kosovo and Metohija* (reg.no. 178028), financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. She is the author of the monograph *Faith in Creation* (2011). She has published 30 scientific papers, five presentations and participated in numerous national and international scientific symposiums.