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**On a “Small” Mediterranean
Language/Literature, “New Positivism”,
and Cultural Globalization**

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**On a “Small” Mediterranean Language/Literature,
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Abstract

Tracing the question put by the great Croatian physicist, philosopher, writer and humanist Ivan Supek (1915-2007): *Can we rely on globalization that covers up a nation's poverty and cultural ruin with leisure ads, political propaganda and “mass entertainment”?* - as a literary comparatist and writer, the author of the paper discusses the fate of a so called “small” (or “minor”) literature, such as Croatian – produced in a “small” language that has been used in the modern Mediterranean region.

Keywords: “Small” Language/Literature, “New Positivism”, Cultural Globalization

Several years ago when I wrote on what are considered small languages and the literature written in these languages, I compared the culture to which I belong to the Adriatic sea: as soon as you dip a finger into the sea, you actually touch the whole world. In other words: as much as the world belongs to you, you belong to the world.¹ The Adriatic, Mediterranean, Middle (Central) European (depending on one's point of view) position of this space in which I was born and in which I live – the space of “small” Croatia, with its so-called “small” literature – definitely cannot be compared to a space which belongs to some western, more “peaceful” part of Europe, a part of it which was not devastated and economically paralysed for the longer term by the storms of a merciless war at the beginning of the 1990's. This war took place in the space of the former Yugoslavia, which also occurred during the active ruin of a former political system, which meant that small national entities would rise from the debris and that socialism would be discarded: many in the former Yugoslavia believed that, when they would compare themselves to the other socialist states of Eastern Europe, their variant of it “was not so bad”. The economic situation in Croatia, as part of Yugoslavia of the time, was something that was considered by most to be acceptable; advantageous to life, “suitable for every person”. It was considered that there were very few without the bare necessities for life in former state. And yet, this was only one positive aspect of the entire picture; there were numerous negative ones as well: there was much in the economy and in politics that left a lot to be desired, as well as aspects concerning the often confused cultural identity of Croatian space. A turn of events took hold of a set of circumstances which were economically stable: international conflict which included Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, but which also found its reflection in the other republics of the former Yugoslavia and in other countries as well. However, my intention here is not to talk about the war. This introduction is only an attempt to elaborate the circumstances which held sway over the space in which I myself live, and also from the only perspective from which I can provide an overview of what we are discussing today.

Croatian literature has been written in a language which is spoken by a little over four million people, and in this sense it can be compared to the literary heritage of other languages with a small number of speakers, e. g. with Irish, Albanian, Catalan, Basque and many others. I am claiming here, as a principle, for the fate – whatever it may be – of small languages and the literature written in them – if we are not dealing with nations that are colonised – that „large“ languages (such as “global” English or an ever-expanding Chinese) are not to blame, but the difficulties small communities have when maintaining the riches of their heritage in the arts and presenting them to those

¹Peričić, Helena. 2005. Pišem da bih se prodao – prodajem se da bih pisao (Neka obilježja dodira suvremenoga hrvatskog sa stranim književnim stvaralaštvom) / I Write to Sell – I Sell to Write (Contemporary Croatian Literature and the Outside World) / . In: *Suvremena književnost i jezici Europe, 27 Zagrebački književni razgovori/ Contemporary Literature and Languages of Europe, 27th Zagreb Literary Talks*. Ed. Lara Hölbling Matković and Sofija Babić, Društvo hrvatskih književnika, Zagreb, 82-85.

outside their borders. It is in this context that we must make recourse here to some of the key points of *Girona Manifesto on Linguistic Rights* by PEN International which was proclaimed in Girona on the 13th of May 2011:

- 1) *Linguistic diversity is a world heritage that must be valued and protected.*
- 2) *Respect for all languages and cultures is fundamental to the process of constructing and maintaining dialogue and peace in the world.*
- 3) *All individuals learn to speak in the heart of a community that gives them life, language, culture and identity.*
- 4) *Different languages and different ways of speaking are not only means of communication; they are also the milieu in which humans grow and cultures are built.*
- 5) *School instruction must contribute to the prestige of the language spoken by the linguistic community of the territory.*
- 6) *It is desirable for citizens to have a general knowledge of various languages, because it favours empathy and intellectual openness, and contributes to a deeper knowledge of one's own tongue.*
- 7) *The translation of texts, especially the great works of various cultures, represents a very important element in the necessary process of greater understanding and respect among human beings.*
- 8) *The media is a privileged loudspeaker for making linguistic diversity work and for competently and rigorously increasing its prestige.*
- 9) *The right to use and protect one's own language must be recognized by the United Nations as one of the fundamental human rights.¹*

Language is here interpreted as a basic indicator of identity, an elementary component of culturalisation, and seeing that it is the basis of the literature which has originated from it – it must be protected. And yet, I will make point of what is already well known: the life of a language, like some philological organism, develops in the modern world when in contact with other languages which influence, modify and thus enrich it².

The historical and political climate (I must add, sometimes rather inclement) in the space from which I am from, specifically from that part by the sea, over which politicians drew the line between East and West after the Second World War, and which Alberto Fortis in his *Travels into Dalmatia* claimed to be the endpoint between a developed and civilized Europe as

¹<http://www.pen-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Girona-Manifesto-ENGLISH.pdf>

²Language is not only a means of communication, but also the result of the need to express one's cultural, natural, ontological etc. environment and sense of plenitude so that every community offers certain linguistic riches that do not exist in other languages and communities as they may have never felt the need to express them in their own space.

opposed to the exotic Levant (which, in the dimensions of Romanticism informed the imagination of *belles-lettres* in the 19th century)... – it is this location which represents the „cradle“ and point of departure, from which I travel as I interpret that which I see as my representation of the cultural and literary identity of small literatures in the great community of Europe and the world. My profession is comparative literature, and I am no adherent of the puritan view which sees a “small” Croatian literature as “self-sufficient”, which is based on a “self-sufficient” Croatian language, that was a characteristic of Croatia in the 1990’s, and this in Zadar as well, which was once the cultural stronghold of Dalmatia and the city in which I was born. (There are many who claim that Zadar definitely represents the conservative milieu of a particularly exulted expression of nationalist feeling.)

My personal endeavour, if I am allowed to say so, in those years of political turmoil and the extremities of war (which I will mention a little later), had as its basis a difficult task which I would characterise as cosmopolitan in nature – and this has been the beacon which has led my engagement as scholar and teacher of comparative literature. The primary task here was to inform students of their own literature, from the Middle Ages onwards, written in what we call the Croatian language and to place it in a European and world context; the language in which this literature was written and formed through the centuries is based on the works and discussions of older writers, especially writers from Dubrovnik and Dalmatia. Yet I would always emphasise the fact to my students that neither our literature nor that of Europe began without the influence of other literatures and cultures; from antiquity, through the renaissance, to that of the modern world. It was necessary that the spirit of identity, or what Slavoj Žižek would term as an „imaginative identification“, that which represents our presentation of ourselves, remain „uncorrupted“ during those days of war in the nineties, as the Croatian people faced the possibility of complete erasure from the geographical space to which they belonged. The Croatian language, spoken – as I said – by approximately four million people, and an almost equal number outside its borders – nurtured, or with nurture attempted in and through literature (and this certainly includes journalism, everyday business and private communication as well) – produced, through the centuries – I would say – great literature, yet largely unknown to the foreign world. I would like to point out here, I believe, an undeniable fact: Croatian literature – either when considering literary greats who belong to the past or contemporary authors – lacks presence in the world at large. This is a fact which we consider almost blasphemous, often putting it under the rug and telling ourselves that the opposite is the case. As a professor of comparative literature, academically – as teacher and scholar – engaged in the affirmation of the book, including the Croatian book – this is something I have tried to explain to my colleagues both from here and abroad. Should we visit the Czech Republic – another Slavic nation which linguistically, culturally, historically and politically might display affinities towards us; or visit Italy, England or Germany – we will quickly come to the conclusion that the average Czech, Italian, Englishman or German knows very little or virtually nothing about

Croatian writers. My colleagues often keep their eyes closed when facing the fact that Croatian literature – from Humanist and Renaissance times of Marko Marulić, Petar Zoranić or Marin Držić, to 20th century writers such as Ranko Marinković, Miroslav Krleža, Vladan Desnica, Antun Šoljan etc. – are unknown to that same world to which Croatia –like the Adriatic Sea mentioned earlier – is connected.

Furthermore, we are under the notion that the literary production of Tin Ujević, Janko Polić Kamov and other worthies, with origins in the heart of Europe, is something that this same Europe cannot do without. And yet, what have we, as serious scholars in Croatia, done to confer the Croatian book to the world? That little bit of Krleža's work which is known among a few Italian readers, from books published by Italian publishers; that little bit of Matvejević and Croatian writers writing in Italian; that little bit of Croatian literature known to Czech men and women (who study the Croatian language and literature), mostly consisting of some Krleža and the historical-sentimental novels of Marija Jurić Zagorka – and thus: those rare Croatian authors available to the Czech reader; portions of the work of Slavenka Drakulić and Dubravka Ugrešić who are among those Croatian authors whose works have been read during the last decades where German is spoken: those few Croatian writers of the younger generation who have *pop*-popularised (which is “O.K.”!) or “streamlined” literature (which might actually not be “O.K.”!), but who also organised tours and presented their work abroad in collaboration with their foreign colleagues and thereby attracting them to the small, so-called inferior Croatia, its topics and its cooking (a barbecue to be exact!). (In the meantime, when the question was raised as to why the works of Miroslav Krleža had not been translated into English, I was provided with a laconic answer from those who were competent: due to politics, the former policy of certain Western European nations toward ex-Yugoslavia and Croatia as one of its republics in the past.) Any lamentations in the future on the fate of Croatian literature in foreign lands must sooner or later return to its source: to the place in which this literature is, for the most part, produced, praised, and which is discussed at conferences and anniversaries. Yet – and this is the essential problem – the fate of Croatian literature and its reception is more or less ignored, or otherwise little attention is given to it.

It is expected of cultural institutions to promote the literature of their own nation, yet this is something that they rarely do in Croatia: rarely presenting and supplying Croatian verbal arts to libraries and bookshops abroad. It is even difficult to find books by Croatian authors in the libraries of our universities in which philology and the Croatian language and literature are studied. Initiatives to transmit, affirm and, honestly, to reclaim the Croatian book is often set into motion by anonymous individuals who do this at their own expense and it is almost certain that this is a task that they will not complete: they will find themselves discouraged and disappointed by the fact that myriads of Croatian books, sent to the correct address and packaged correctly, have been lying around for years, unpackaged and unclassified, in the hallways and storage rooms of various foreign cultural institutions which simply do not

have the appropriate space in which to put them. Translations of the work of August Šenoa, A. B. Šimić, A. G. Matoš or I. G. Kovačić either do not exist or are done badly, like some kind of grotesque, graduation hack work which only disgraces the memory of these great writers of Croatian poetry and prose. And yet this is what I am claiming here; it is we who are guilty of such translations. How can we expect the foreign reader to have any working knowledge of our literature, and to translate it into his or her respective language if we ourselves are unable to put our strengths together and adequately pay whoever will put in the effort to complete such a strenuous task?

In the atmosphere of certain catastrophic (and hopefully someday cathartic) episodes in the current experience of contemporary so-called civilization – from September 11th in New York, March 11th in Madrid to July 7th in London (these are all dates in which terrorist acts, based on /quasi/religious principles, were enacted) – the world came to realise how small and fragile it is. In a time in which it is possible, at all hours of the day, to see scenes of decapitation on a TV screen– not at a later hour when it would otherwise be permitted to show such scenes – over a table from which the flavours of a family lunch are now gently wafting – while the mind of the viewer is simultaneously undergoing a process of adaptation and desensitisation to such objectively monstrous impulses; in a time when self-called leaders with speech impediments are expounding the rules of Croatian grammar and orthography and the autobiographies of light entertainers are considered the most desirable and profitable literary genre – in such a time the actual production of literature is most likely the result of a definite degeneration of which we are, or are not, aware, just as we are and are not aware of all the ways in which the media has manipulated us.

The lack of interest, as well as the open disgust that both the book market and publishers have towards “difficult,” themes, such as the last war in these parts as a theme for fiction, especially when it is not presented as anathema – finds its reflexion as a lack of inspiration and motivation in the potential writer who is afraid of being judged beforehand (especially by politics and ideology) and discredited. It is in this way that criticism hinders the incorporation of certain themes. Furthermore, one finds a plethora of stories, poems, novels and witty, often lascivious commentary on the internet. The wisecrack and the punch line have become quite a commodity; a kind of wit that does not tire out the brain, quite often based on twice-told situations and relationships: homosexuals/heterosexuals, Serbs/Croats, promiscuity/celibacy... Literature has a preference for the “avant-garde”, not in the literary sense but as a world-view. Whatever that means! Croatian television celebrities become columnists, then novelists, then media “kings” and “queens”, and then authorities on literary publishing who organise important cultural *events*; they are – so the newspapers tell us – “media savvy”: they write works of prose which will be sold in these very same newspapers in the form of booklets printed on light recycled paper at an affordable price. This corresponds to what is going on in the world: writers write in order to sell, and sell in order to write. At the same time the reception of literature at universities is measured by the number of

hours spent reading and the number of ECTS points which this includes. This leads to a new kind of positivism on which I have written in an essay under a title which alludes to Rene Wellek's "The Revolt against Positivism": my point of departure here is the thesis that the purely individual, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and ethical approach to reading are now measured by so-called level descriptors and the criteria of the natural sciences¹. This practically destroys the humanistic and human-individual nature of the production and reception of literature and the arts in general.

Taking into consideration the criteria to which literary criticism both here and abroad now adheres, we will find ourselves in the space of the sensitive and subtle minutiae of the literary (semantically and expressively analogous to the work of art – the literary text/work/structure/sign). We might find firm anchor in medieval concepts such as "claritas – integritas – consonantia", and under such markers add language/style, theme, ontological qualities, etc... I quite often come to the conclusion that (unfortunately), in a Croatian environment, certain a priori and extrinsic markers for the evaluation of literature have precedence. Perhaps they are ideological, tribal, related to group-think, pecuniary and so on – this is something that deserves some thought. And yet I believe that the literature of other nations is suffering a similar fate. Let us pose this simple question: what will be regarded in the history of literature in the next few decades as relevant, what will actually remain of those works in the best-seller lists as immanent and of an enduring literary quality? – it is difficult to answer this easily as the fate of the writer in today's day and age is rarely in the hands of the reader; as the long road to the reader is now paved with the tricks of marketing, populism, the consumption of kitsch, critical lobbies and ulterior interests.

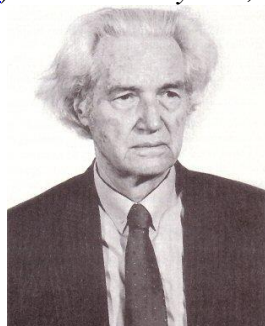
In 2001 the great Croatian physicist, philosopher and writer Ivan Supek posited some very difficult questions, asking us if what is offered to us as globalization may indeed be a hollow sham, an empty name for the impoverishment of the spiritual life of man². He also posited that what may appear as globalization might destroy cultural diversity. Such questions are not entirely off the mark: if the economy and industry of small countries become superfluous because they cannot compete with the great industrial giants which have forced their hyper-production and cheap production costs upon them, which the little ones cannot go against... – if this is the way things are, we can ask ourselves in the end: are small cultures about to take their last breath under *mass-culture* movements and tendencies? At any rate, what is at hand here are some not very optimistic predictions of the future, based on the premonition that a small group of economic giants will most likely take over, and this is

¹Peričić, Helena. 2008. "Pobuna protiv pozitivizma..." (Mali *hommage* R. Welleku kroz prizmu hrvatske/svjetske književnosti i kritike s početka XXI. st.) / "Revolt against Positivism..." (A Hommage to R. Wellek through the Prism of Croatian/World Literature and Literary Criticism at the Beginning of the 21st Century). In *Komparativna povijest hrvatske književnosti*. Ed. Cvijeta Pavlović and Vinka Glunčić-Bužančić, Književni krug, Split, 20-31.

²Supek, Ivan. 2001. *Za svjetsku zajednicu/ In Favor of a Global Community*, DHK / Hrvatski P. E. N. centar, Zagreb (Translated by Lara Höbbling Matković and Borislav Knežević).

certainly inextricably linked to the fate of certain literatures and cultures. Globalization is making its way through a melange of (neo)liberal, democratic, totalitarian, religious-fundamentalist, autocratic, social-democratic etc. communities and is definitely weakening the old power structures, but there are still contractions and paradoxes: the media and multinational corporations offer us a kind of postcard of a united globe (to borrow Supek's phrase) in which, in a variety of colours, meaninglessness, alienation, despair and misery are hidden (see Supek, 2001: X). Supek exhorts us to strive toward the good! Furthermore, he claims that courage and valour should stand by the side of spiritual freedom to protect it and maintain solidarity with it. Without an individual's humane courage – there is no good to speak of.¹

Figure 1. *Ivan Supek (1915 - 2007) - Croatian Physicist, Philosopher, Writer, Humanist*



Still, we should add a little light to this not quite rosy image of a globalized world. We will repeat what many wise men have said heretofore: there are no humanistic values outside of a world in which the life of man goes unprotected. In accordance to this, the loss of the past, I believe, leads to the loss of the future. To give up Mozart for mass techno-audio culture, to give up Michelangelo for the media distribution of visual hyper-product, I believe will lead to an utter loss of faith in human existence. The threat that knowledge will become the most valuable “capital,, (one that cannot be privatised) leads us to the conclusion that the creation of multi-national corporations do not make individual nations, nor do they make national and communal characteristics, nor do they downplay the influence of the individual and human potential. People become lax and apathetic when their lives are determined by distant

¹Following are the main Supek's humanistic principles listed as necessary in the process of integration of small cultures in a global community (In Supek, op. cit.):

- Respecting the past and preserving life;
- Affirming human equality;
- Affirming human liberty;
- Extending solidarity to all people;
- Searching for truth and respecting the principle of tolerance;
- Governing progress to general benefit;
- Nurturing beauty and the arts;
- Raising law into justice;
- Promoting world unity;
- Being good.

bodies like the heavens (to paraphrase Supek again). It is in fact thus: the affirmation of the universal cannot be achieved without the importance of education, science and culture; in other words with the values of the humanities. Yet this is culture – I firmly believe – that must have its own identity with firm roots in the primary, the foundational, the tangible (and not in the global or the heavenly). Should we maintain certain traditions in culture, while respecting individualism and certain communal achievements, we will also affirm humanistic values. With ideas such as these we build bridges to the Other, and at the same time to what appears so much different from our culture, our language, literature and world-view. An insistence on the “balkanesque,” quality of our culture has not brought us any good: in my conversations with foreign intellectuals and even historians who specialise in the history of the 20th century, I had to agree that the “Balkans” (a term etymologically linked to a Turkish expression for mountain) cannot represent either a geographical, political or cultural marker but only an artificial, temperamental label (something that belongs to the field of *mentality research*). The region to which this title refers is marked by difference and is not entirely homogenous, so that the term cannot be used as a collective appellation – even if we were to make recourse to the travel writing of Alberto Fortis or geo-political determinants as seen by Winston Churchill.

I will now return to the literary-comparativist problem of “small” literature. Literary creativity in Croatia lives at this level and it is from here that it finds its place in the world, although it is suffering from the ailments of childhood which afflict all the “transitional” national literatures from final decade of the last century. As is the case in the world, our language is also undergoing a transformation into a series of initials, abbreviations, numbers and mathematical formulas, which, by their very semiotic nature, do not allow any stylistic figures or aberrations from the norm. The (yellow) “smile” that one gets via a text message or e-mail replaces the physical gesture and transcends the domain of linguistic communication. The short story is now dominant (competitions exist for poetry but – who reads poetry?., one might ask – a state of affairs that we as scholars cannot accept), yet of a kind which lacks density, a completeness of composition and sense of some greater whole; the popular short story deals with the entirely mundane, the little episode and intellectual chit-chat that takes up five to six pages at most. The protagonists of such stories often have foreign, Latin-American names; citations and references in these tales are mostly from the domain of Anglo-American popular culture... all this only leads me to the conclusion that the literary production of the part of the world to which I belong, and its culture generally, really do correspond to the world outside, form a part of it, but that its influence is minimal, and that it is unforgivably inert, or as inert as the world outside allows it to be. Not the least little bit more. Not a drop in the sea more.