

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ



УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

II/2010

TEACHING FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY: A POSTCARD FROM SERBIA

Abstract: *In this text I summarize my experience in teaching feminist literary theory. The basic idea is that teaching literature and literary theory, especially feminist literary theory, is a process of personal development. This is why I compare my present experience with the text from 12 years ago, describing the process of moving from impersonal to personal approach in teaching.*

Key words: *feminist literary criticism, private, political, experience, teaching.*

At the very opening of his book with an indicative title, *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton states that “the golden age of cultural theory is long past”. The critical approach born out of the period 1965–80, has lost its sharp political end and socially effective orientation, turning into the field which “creates a seamless continuity between the intellect and everyday life” (Eagleton 2003: 3). In the situation in which intellectual matters are not any longer “an ivory tower affair”, but of much more mundane quality – which means that they rejoin everyday life, there is a great risk of losing the ability to critically rethink them. In other words, there is a danger of losing the ideological distance and awareness within the “reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions”, that is, theory as Eagleton broadly defines it. Eagleton’s view is that generations after ‘path-breaking figures’ usually ‘trade on the past’.

As feminism has been seen as a pioneering view in this theory of everyday life, its *gendered* segment, from my perspective, there are two issues important for the methodology of teaching feminist literary theory. The first one is the issue of cultural/feminist theory vs. literary studies, and the second one is the issue of ‘trading on the past’.

Approach

One of the first feminist slogans I have ever heard was *private is political*. Feminist criticism allowed and, actually, asked for, personal and private to be read out from and read into the literature. Reading has been understood as a process which shapes our *Weltanschauung* which is, inevitably, ideologically, that is – politically coloured. Therefore, in order to explain the teaching process of feminist criticism I have gone through during the previous 18 years in Serbia, I will stay as private/political as possible.

Twelve years ago I wrote a text entitled „How to teach feminist criticism: a personal view“ and presented it at a Belgrade Women’s Studies Center’s Conference held in October 1998 in Belgrade. I published the Serbian version in springtime – I remember that it was printed right before the NATO bombing of Serbia, which we all have felt coming up even during the conference in October. I came back to the text two years ago, and found out that my experience in the period of 1992–1998 differs at some points greatly from what I have been through in the last decade. At the same time, I found myself inseparable from that experience, as a part of my own *duréé*, the

time that has been present for me all these years and have shaped my own present teaching methods. Teaching methods? My identity, I meant to say.

In 1998, I wrote:

From impersonal to personal – that could be the easiest way to describe the modifications of my own approach to teaching. American feminist literary criticism was, in a way, an answer to formal criticism and its emphasis on impersonality of the poet, his catalyst-like position. As a student of theory of literature, the most sacred notions for me were these of the autonomy of literature and impersonality of a text. As a lecturer, I started from the point of impersonality, wishing to represent and not to interpret (although I was quite aware that my lectures were also a kind of interpretation), to 'hide' my opinion all the way till the concluding lecture. I had the strong reason for that at the time: I needed to concentrate on facts and information, since the topic of my entire course had been actually unknown here. Only at the end, when most of the major terms were explained, did I feel free to give my own assessment. Of course, I tried to provoke students and make them look from more angles to what was said, with different results.

Even at these 'critical' moments I tried to keep my 'neutral' position – but in the coming school years I decided to change the method of teaching, and to be open about my attitude from the beginning, comment and agree or disagree. I have not changed that style of lecture so far, more or less.⁴

So, what do I make of this now, twelve years later? The library of the Belgrade Women's Studies Center stores hundreds of books, including many classics of feminist theory, as well as the Center's own publishing production. In addition to that, there are digitalized texts on internet and, also, students travel, there are scholarships, opportunities to study abroad – there is no longer the need to inform them. Everything important or, at least, basic, can be read in paper or on the screen. So, what is the role of the teacher now – to provoke discussions, inspire?

'Trading on the past'

Do we in Serbia, teaching feminist theory, really 'trade on the past' now? Do I? Had the path been broken already, back then in the 90s when we started the feminist story? In a way, yes, because as neo-feminist ideas reached this region in the mid-seventies, the cultural context was that of former Yugoslavia, a socialist country consisting of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro. The most frequently mentioned date in the history of contemporary feminism and feminist theory in Yugoslavia has been 1978, when an international meeting, entitled "Comrade/ss woman: a new approach to the women's issue", was held in Belgrade's Student Cultural Centre.

A survey of certain special issues of magazines of the time shows us that the first thematic sections on feminist literary criticism and theory began to appear around the beginning of the eighties¹. If we adopt the controversial but useful dichotomy of "French feminist theory" and "Anglo-American feminist criticism", introduced by Toril Moi in 1985, it could be said that, from the outset, the prevalent mode in which feminist literary was represented in Yugoslavia, both in translations and authorial texts, was that of the French intellectual tradition.²

In 1986, in the literary magazine *Književnost* (Literature), there appeared a thematic section called "L'écriture feminine",

1 *Delo, Mesečni časopis za teoriju, kritiku, poeziju i nove ideje*, Nolit, Beograd, br. 4, 1981, /temat: Žena, znak, jezik/ thematic block: Woman, sign, language/; *Republika*, Zagreb, studeni-prosinac, 1983, br. 11–12 / special issue.

2 There were, of course, texts on – Angloamerican and even Nordic literary criticism, such as Ljubiša Rajić's text "Feminologija i književnost na anglo-američkom i skandinavskom području" (*Republika*, Zagreb, studeni-prosinac, 1983, no. 11–12, pp. 112–131), but the French approach was much more represented in the period.

which included texts, written for a conference held in Dubrovnik³, by Svetlana Slapšak, Novica Milić, Nada Popović-Perišić, and Slobodanka Peković. Even 20 years on, this particular thematic section should still be recommended reading for students of Women's Studies courses and especially, in *l'écriture féminine*. The section also offers interesting testimony concerning the extremely well-informed participants (also including one male participant) from Belgrade (all working at the Institute for Literature at the time) about the topic which is still relatively unknown within academic circles.

Therefore, when the Women's Studies appeared in Belgrade in 1992, with its first courses, the path had been already broken. The first courses did not include literature. Soon, however, the literature became the strongest part of the Centre's program, but the prevalent paradigm was somehow changed. By the mid-nineties, gendered readings became the prevalent mode in feminist criticism here. It is hard to date the turning point or identify the texts that would mark this turn, but around mid-nineties, the terms "gender", "feminist critique" and "gynocriticism" (the latter two taking into account the division made by Elaine Showalter), as well as "anxiety of authorship", "female gothic", etc., were all introduced to literary criticism in Serbia,⁴

That is, at the very moment when the cultural and geopolitical space has already become narrowed – the country is not socialist Yugoslavia (the SFRJ) any longer, but a Yugoslavia made up of Serbia and Montenegro. The war and the disintegration of the SFRJ did not, in general, cut the connections between women's groups or among particular women writers and critics. However, the stamp of trauma and life in isolation was inevitably imprinted. It may be that the traces of war are less apparent in literary criticism and theory than in sociology or anthropology, but they were nevertheless present, not least via the contemporary literary texts of the time.

Seen in this context, it seems that gendered readings offered the *other's* view not only of literature, but of reality, too. The elements that had been considered irrelevant to a text itself, through the notion of *gender*, became important for understanding it. Gender-based readings have immediately turned towards (mostly contemporary) women's literary production, thus evading the phase of feminist analyses of male texts which examine stereotypes of women and misogyny (Slapšak 1997: 14). Both readings of women's literary production and the sporadic discussions of men's work have been carried out mostly in a manner closer to the ideologically neutral "gender theory".

The moment at which "genderings" bloomed was marked by the formation of the Belgrade Women's Studies Centre (1992), as well as by the inception of a number of feminist magazines. Amongst the earliest of these were *SOS bilten* (*SOS Bulletin* 1993) which was renamed *Feminističke sveske* (*Feminist notebooks*) – a magazine mostly devoted to activism, and partially to theory, followed in 1995 by two maga-

3 *Književnost*, Prosveta, Beograd, knj. LXXXIII sv. 8–9, 1986, /tema broja: Žensko pismo (sa skupa u Dubrovniku), str. 1386–1490/.

Popović-Perišić, Nada, "Filozofske pretpostavke 'drugog pisma'", pp. 1421–1426; Slapšak, Svetlana, "Razgovor Hetere i Filozofa", pp. 1451–1458; Peković, Slobodanka, "Alibi i samosvest", pp. 1458–1461; Milić, Novica, "Nit – pletivo, čvorovi, beleške", pp. 1461–1471.

4 In addition to Lj. Rajić's text, some relevant translations appeared in the eighties: the part of the text by Elaine Showalter "The Feminist Critical Revolution", translated by Biljana Dojčinović, *Znak*, Beograd, 1986, br. 20, pp. 30–35; and Roman Selden's text "Feminist Criticism", translated by Snežana Nešić, *Književna reč*, Beograd, april 1989, br. 342, pp. 18–19.

The first book on American approach was published in 1993: Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, *Ginokritika: Rod i proučavanje književnosti koju su pisale žene* (*Gynocriticism: Gender and Research of Women's Writing*), Beograd Književno društvo "Sveti Sava".

zines of feminist theory. The first one was *ProFemina*, magazin za žensku književnost i kulturu, subtitled as a journal in women's literature and culture, then *Ženske studije*, časopis za feminističku teoriju (*Women's Studies, a Journal in Feminist Theory*), which was renamed *Genero* in 2002, and these two have survived till now, *ProFemina* publishing recently its 50th issue. This meant that the space for feminist theory, including feminist literary criticism, had finally been opened.

Teaching

Every theory is, in a way, a kind of autobiography. Interpreted, taught, it becomes a kind of oral history. And this is one thing feminists do know how to do. The shift in understanding *theory* actually enabled us to do so. Therefore, making grounds and developing the field marked for me the first years of teaching feminist literary criticism. There were founders in another culture and language and, also, founders or, at least, the academic path-breakers, at home too, but the path had not been broken yet in that private/political sense. Not for me, at least. The political context in the 90s degraded our lives and the ideas of emancipation kept the lights of dignity turned on for us and our students.

What did we struggle with in our classrooms? With the ideas of isolation, of the dangerous machoism in reading culture and history in order to support isolation and irrational self-praise, disintegrating the country we lived in and turning its pieces into patriarchal u/topoi, into nightmarish reality. History seemed to serve very well for the political rhetoric, and it is interesting how women's literature had its own way of talking back to it.

Examples of specific cultural signification in Serbian women's writing can be found at the end of the 1990s, when a number of women writers made use of historical male figures as literary characters, presenting them from the perspective of their private lives. In a brief period from 1995 to

1998, three texts written by three prominent women writers appeared on the Serbian literary scene, dealing with, as central or episodic characters, historical male figures, icons of Serbian history and culture. They are the novels *Bezdno* (Bottomless Pit, or Abyss) by Svetlana Velmar Janković (1995) and *Poslednji zanosi MSS* (The Last Fascinations of MSS) by Milica Mičić-Dimovska (1996), as well as a story entitled *Onaj drugi što čeka u tamnoj noći* (The Other One Who Waits in the Dark Night), which concludes Ljubica Arsić's collection *Cipele buvine boje* (The Shoes of the Flea Color, 1998).⁵

During the time when history was 'his story' of great deaths and deeds constantly retold for the purpose of justifying national identity, these women writers used the discarded, neglected, hidden, and marginalised material of private lives to weave a completely different picture. In such context it was impossible to dig into a text in an unpolitical way. There was no possibility to stay 'neutral', neither in writing, nor in teaching about literature. Questions concerning our reality were provoked by such texts, and the issues of literature and history reviewed from new perspective. Literature seemed to set history free from the burden of the ideological task, put on it in present times. Women's literature of the period pointed to the misuse of history, and it was enough to put historical texts, literary texts and mass-media comments side by side to stage the drama of the ideological interests which was marking our lives outside the classroom.

But, some time before I became aware of this literature – history relation I had a personal experience which influenced my teaching methodology, too. As I tried to explain it in the text from 1998:

5 Svetlana Velmar Janković received the NIN prize, for *Bezdno* Milica Mičić-Dimovska's novel was awarded Nolit's prize and prizes "Branko Ćopić" and "Bora Stanković". Ljubica Arsić was Given the *ProFemina* award for the manuscript of the collection *Cipele buvine boje* in 1998.

In the atmosphere of growing interest for women's studies, highly positive changes in the attitudes of students (each generation seems to be more open and more ready to take an active part) I came to a personal experience which made me make a turn in outlining the program. After becoming mother, obligations expanded and the time for lecturing and preparing lectures shortened. My strategy was to start from the experience, accepting it and putting it into theoretical frame, instead of trying to stay 'impersonal' and distanced from the 'field of science'. The idea of the course on motherhood and literature 'has actually chosen me', as Adrienne Rich put it at the beginning of her famous book.

And, as for the lectures ... for the first time I felt I was speaking not only from the theoretical but also from the deeply personal point of view, from my female experience...

I cannot help but smile at the enthusiasm these lines expressed. I remembered them vaguely two years ago, when I was talking about reading out history from women's texts, and took an excerpt from Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*. There is a scene in this novel, a vignette, actually, in which an older woman recognizes the frustration of a young mother in just one glance. I pointed to the scene as one of those places which count on 'private history' in provoking emotional reading. We spot some scenes in accordance with our personal history and mark them as important and deeply emotional signs without almost any intellectual effort. These spots are points at which interpretation comes closest to life itself, to the emotions of pain or happiness in everyday meaning. These places where we read out (or read in) without intellectual recognition are different for different readers, depending on their own experience, but the common denominator is that a reader does not think much about it, they just react to it. Such places I call 'engramic'.

However, some other dilemmas became more important for me back then in 1999, just after my text was published. How do you raise children, how are you supposed to read, think, lecture feminist literary criticism under the bombs? The NATO

bombing of Serbia in the spring of 1999 made our feminist theory classrooms empty for a while. If criticism is political, and political is private, how do we teach literature under the bombs? What do you read between two air raids? How do you explain values of ambiguity, irony, impossibility of truth, under the bombs? How does one teach about humanity while being maltreated in the name of it? The violent climax of 1999 came after the decade of degrading struggle, making me silent and political only in my privacy. I wanted to be left alone, could not even read during these three months. It made the engramic experience of fear, pain and rage in me – the emotions which I will always recognize and react to in life, and also when exposed to their corellatives in literature and art. After the spring of 1999 I made a turn towards women writers as predecessors, and found out many women who suffered misunderstandings, survived wars and even managed to develop their own theories

Narration

If in the first period of my teaching feminist theory I wanted simply to inform the students and simultaneously keep my opinion away from them for a while, in order not to disturb their process of understanding the material presented, ten years later I do not have any other ambitions but to tell stories. Just like those postcards consisting of more photos connected by the bright letters of a city's name, I want to give only basic directions about a topic. On the other side is my own, personal story of a city – what has happened to me there, how I see it, what is my own personal/political/poetical experience of it.

Narrating theory as a story is not an easy task, but for me it is the only way to make it trustworthy and memorable. The task of a theory teacher is partially the task of a translator – there are other peoples' discourses which she should translate into a coherent story for others. The perfect example for this could be a discourse on A

Room of One's Own in almost any feminist theoretical text discussing the category of gender. It is up to the teacher (in the role of the interpreter) to enliven the dialogue of the author⁶ with this iconic text and present it as a process. Why not just simply take the theoretical consequences and discuss it in a less dramatic way? Because, if political and poetical are private, then it means that we have to bring back to life this connection in the classroom, to stage it again for the new generations which, for instance, may not be aware of what it meant to discover that our bodies, our anatomy, did not really determine our lives. It has to become an engramic experience, and only literature makes it possible. Why is a figure (of speech), a trope (which means 'a turn') employed at every important turn in a theoretical text? Take, for instance, the figuration of a nomad in Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects*. Or, the usage of Margaret Atwood's novel in a text about feminist philosophy and globalization⁷. Using a literary work as illustration in a philosophical text is metaphorization of a problem. Once done, it falls (or rises) beyond abstract language and opens toward multiple meanings.

Teaching about literature in feminist ways and about feminist literary theory thus becomes the 'school of life', in the way Isadora Duncan said about dancing -- „To dance is to live, what I want is a school of life“. As a matter of fact, there were moments when I asked my students to per-

form the very first lecture Isadora gave in dancing – making wave like motions with arms. Just to remind them what rhythm is and how our bodies think.

P.S. on the postcard

It may seem that feminist literary theory takes us away from the literary qualities of a work of art, but it is so only if we consider them severely separated from life itself. The very issues of power, hegemony, the body, sexuality, ecology, producing and/or rethinking the key words and concepts such as gender, pleasure, desire, marginality, periphery tell us that feminist theory is an important part of the *theory of everything in human life*, which refers to our complete experience. Feminist literary theory teaches us to understand and assess the place and meaning of ideology in our lives, and ideology is a set of beliefs and ideas that permeate and influence our everyday decisions and appear as, or are hidden behind, certain means of representation in the society and works of literature. To make these mechanisms visible and veritable we need to turn to our own experience and refer to other peoples' experience. It is the privilege of literature and literary theory teachers to combine and play with images and concepts in their discourse, but it is the privilege of teachers of feminist literary theory to give this game the body of their own experience in order to make it engramic for others. Exercising this right has made the postcard from Belgrade so mosaic-like.

Bibliography

- 6 Take, for instance, the chapter on V. Woolf in Elaine Showalter's book *A Literature of Their Own*, the reading of this chapter in Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*.
 - 7 **Jennifer Eagan** from California State University in the text "The Feminist Desire for a Primordial Place, Or Why Feminist Philosophers Avoid the Issue of Globalization", published in 2005 in the internet journal *Globalization*, writes about Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* pointing that the struggle against homogenization is deeply connected with the struggle for one's identity.
1. Atwood, Margaret (2003), *Surfacing*. London: Virago Press.
 2. *Delo, Mesečni časopis za teoriju, kritiku, poeziju i nove ideje*, Nolit, Beograd, br. 4, 1981, /temat: Žena, znak, jezik/ topic of the issue: Woman, sign, language/; *Republika*, Zagreb, studeni-prosinac, 1983, br. 11-12 /special issue.

3. Dojčinović-Nešić, Biljana (1993), *Ginokritika: Rod i proučavanje književnosti koju su pisale žene*, Beograd: Književno društvo "Sveti Sava".
4. Dojčinović-Nešić, Biljana (1998), „How to teach feminist criticism: a personal view“, conference paper, manuscript in English.
5. Dojčinović-Nešić, Biljana (1999), „Kako predavati feminističku kritiku: lično iskustvo“, *Kreativno vaspitanje*, Beograd: broj 4, 1. mart 1999, str. 25–30.
6. *Književnost*, Prosveta, Beograd, knj. LXXXIII sv. 8–9, 1986, /focus of the issue: Žensko pismo (sa skupa u Dubrovniku/Women's Writing, Conference in Dubrovnik), pp. 1386–1490/.
7. Eagan, Jennifer (2005), "The Feminist Desire for a Primordial Place, or Why Feminist Philosophers Avoid the Issue of Globalization", *Globalization* 5 (2). <http://globalization.icaap.org/content/v5.2/eagan.html>
8. Eagleton, Terry (2003), *After Theory*, New York: Basic Books.
9. Milić, Novica (1986), "Nit – pletivo, čvorovi, beleške", *Književnost*, 8–9, pp. 1461–1471.
10. Peković, Slobodanka (1986), "Alibi i samosvest", *Književnost*, 8–9, pp. 1458–1461.
11. Popović-Perišić, Nada (1986), "Filozofske pretpostavke 'drugog pisma'", u *Književnost*, 8–9, pp. 1421–1426.
12. Rajić, Ljubiša (1983), "Feminologija i književnost na anglo-američkom i skandinavskom području", in *Republika*, Zagreb, studeni–prosinac, no. 11–12, pp. 112–131.
13. Selden, Raman (1989), "Feministička kritika", translated by Snežana Nešić, *Književna reč*, Beograd, April 1989, no. 342, pp. 18–19.
14. Showalter, Elaine (1986), "The Feminist Critical Revolution", translated by Biljana Dojčinović, *Znak*, Beograd, 1986, nr. 20, pp. 30–35.
15. Slapšak, Svetlana (1997), "Women Who Steal the Language", in *ProFemina*, Special Issue.
16. Slapšak, Svetlana (1986), "Razgovor Hetero i Filosofa", *Književnost*, 8–9, 1986, pp. 1451–1458.

PREDAVATI FEMINISTIČKE KNJIŽEVNE TEORIJE

Rezime

U tekstu rezimiram iskustvo u predavanju feminističke književne teorije. Osnovna ideja jeste da je, osim što je teorija autobiografija, pisanje i govor o sebi, i proces predavanja književne teorije lični proces samorazvoja. Upoređujući tekst napisan pre 12 godina i sadašnji odnos prema pitanjima javnog i privatnog, impersonalnog i ličnog u književnosti, zaključujem da je lično iskustvo bitan činilac odabira ne samo teorijskog nego i metodološkog pristupa. Naglasak na ličnom iskustvu je u samim osnovama feminističke kritike, ali upravo se taj njen aspekt ne može naučiti, već se mora doživeti da bi se razumeo. U teorijskom smislu, tu je reč o engramskom doživljaju književnog teksta – susretu dubokog, više ne i nužno svesnog ličnog doživljaja i njegovog književnog korelativa.