

Croatian Latin Writers - an International Nationalist Phenomenon in a Socialist Republic

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1 Introduction

"What can we say in our defence before Western Europe, which repudiates us from the beginning? The very fact that we have appeared in this region and that we have not faded away constitutes a proof of our guilt." This is how, in 1950, one of main figures of my story chose to open a preface to a catalogue of an exhibition of medieval art from Yugoslavia, displayed in Paris and then in Zagreb. At the same time, the same figure put forward another answer to the same question of our guilt and our defence before Europe. This other answer is today the main area of my professional interest, and this is a story about how this area of research became culturally and ideologically acceptable in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia -- and especially in one of its six constituent entities, the Socialist Republic of Croatia. The area of research I have in mind is Croatian Latin literature; that is, Latin texts written by people who were born or have lived in the regions that are today known as Croatia, from the Middle Ages until quite recently.

2 Croatian Latin literature

In 1971, two decades after my opening quote, an article on "The Basic Characteristics of Croatian Latinity", appearing in the 20th volume of the venerable "Humanistica Lovaniensia: Journal of Neo-Latin Studies", introduced the Western European neo-Latin scholars to "the territory of Croatia, where remains of the material and spiritual culture of late Antiquity met and were interpenetrated by those of early Christianity". This was a region where writing in Latin was present continually, in administration, in public life, and in culture, from the ninth century "and, as a literature fully mature in expression and content, from humanism until the middle of the nineteenth century" -- that is, until 1847, when in the Croatian Parliament Latin was finally displaced by Croatian as the official language (Croatia was at the time the weaker partner in the Kingdom of Hungary and Croatia and, through the common king, part of the Habsburg monarchy).

In the 1971 article the Croatian literature was presented as bilingual, with its Latin part equalling Croatian "both in scope and literary value." Therefore "few nations in Europe have such a continuous and thematically [varied] literature in the Latin language". Furthermore, until the year 1850 Croatian authors cumulatively published at least 30% more titles in Latin than in Croatian, as the most books by Croatian authors were printed abroad, and there it was easier to get into print if you used an international language.

3 Yugoslavia

To begin to understand the importance of neo-Latin literature in the long gone days between 1951 and 1971, in the priorities and inhibitions of

these days, let me sketch very briefly the history of the two Yugoslavias, and of Croatia inside it. The first Yugoslavia was formed after the First World War when Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia -- the Southern Slavic parts of the Habsburg Empire (which lost the war) -- joined the Kingdom of Serbia, one of the winners of the war. The first Yugoslavia was a monarchy, ruled by Serbian kings, an authoritarian and capitalist state of technological backwardness, low per-capita income, high illiteracy and massive poverty; when that Yugoslavia was attacked by Hitler's troops in 1941, not many people were eager to defend it. Occupied by Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria, Yugoslavia broke up into several Nazi satellite states, organised along the ethnic lines; one of them, the Independent State of Croatia ruled by the Ustaše regime, tried to exterminate parts of its population which were Serbs, Jews, and Communists. Terror and genocide resulted in a massive Yugoslavia-wide, Communist-led guerilla uprising, which managed by 1944-1945, mostly on its own (with only a limited help from the Soviets and the Western Allies) to expel the Axis forces from Yugoslavia. And so it came about that after the Second World War Yugoslavia was organized as a socialist federation of six national states, under the rule of the Communist Party and its leader, Josip Broz Tito.

Tito and the Communists tried to deal both with the inequalities of capitalist, bourgeois, Serb-dominated First Yugoslavia -- and with the wounds of the civil war and massacres of 1941-5; but they dealt with it in the Communist, totalitarian way, by not allowing any discussion of their solution. Then, in 1948, Tito and the Yugoslav Communist Party broke with Stalin, whose tactics and goals they understood only too well. The socialist Yugoslavia had to be refashioned: a country that was Communist, but not Soviet; open to the West, but not too open; neither behind the Iron Curtain, nor in front of it. And so, the rest of Tito's life, Yugoslavia will waver between dogma and democracy, between liberal "thaws" and rigid "freezes", "springs" and "winters". The most traumatic of such changes will come in 1967--1971. After the fall from grace of Aleksandar Ranković, vice-president of Yugoslavia and a proponent of centralization, the more liberal climate led to the so-called Croatian spring. Three different voices began to be heard: a voice of the radical left, more left than the Party establishment; a voice of Croatian nationalists, raised first against economic exploitation of Croatia, later proclaiming loudly that a free Croatian nation is the most important thing in the world; the third voice was those of Croatian Communist Party leaders, calling for decentralised, but federal Yugoslavia. The so-called "Mass Movement" was ended by Tito's decision, and by legal action against many of those involved in the "nationalist euphoria" and in the "liberalist-technocrat deviation".

4 Croatian Latin authors

The same period that I sketched just now -- period after Tito's break with Stalin until the end of the 1971 "Mass Movement" in Croatia -- saw the post-war study of Croatian Latin authors getting underway. It happened first with the book series "Croatian Latinists", published by the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, the learned society based in Zagreb (Croatia was the only Yugoslav federal state where the national learned society was not named after the state; at the same time, it was the oldest academy among the Southern Slavs; it was founded during the Habsburg rule, in 1866). Between 1951 and 1971, seven volumes of Croatian Latin texts appeared in the series. And in 1960 and 1962, two important survey articles were published in the newly started Yugoslav

Encyclopedia: the articles Humanism among the Southern Slavs and Latinity among the Southern Slavs. In 1968--1971, in a project sponsored by the Yugoslav Academy, Croatian bibliographer Šime Jurić put out the *Iugoslaviae scriptores Latini recentioris aetatis*, a bibliography which records some 5000 works printed between 1474 and 1848. Most of the works recorded there were written by authors which we would today consider Croatian Latinists. Finally, in 1969--1970 -- during the years of freedom leading to the "Croatian Spring" -- appeared the first modern anthology of Latin writing in Croatia: *Hrvatski latinisti - Croatici auctores qui Latine scripserunt* (vols I-II, Zagreb 1969-1970), edited by Veljko Gortan and Vladimir Vratović, professors of the University of Zagreb. The anthology, comprising more than 1700 pages, was at the same time the highly symbolic second title in the new series *Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti* (Five Centuries of Croatian Literature, published by Matica hrvatska in 180 volumes 1962-1995); first volume of the series was dedicated to Croatian medieval literature in Croatian.

It is important that in 1951 the study of Croatian Latin literature already had more than 80 years of tradition, though the phenomenon was not always studied with equal intensity. The research started in 1869, when the first scholarly essay on Marko Marulić, chosen as the representative national poet, pointed out that five sixths of Marulić's works was not in Croatian, but in Latin. Though Croatian researchers of the Habsburg period (mostly members of the Yugoslav Academy) for political reasons were not keen to stress Croatian unity with the West -- connections with the Southern Slavs were seen as strategically more important -- Latin literature as an important characteristic of the national culture could not have been avoided in authoritative histories of national literature. The study of Croatian Latin did not stop even in the period of the first Yugoslavia, 1918--1941, which focused on the Slavic national culture, presenting it as an opponent of everything non-Slavic.

5 Miroslav Krleža

And now, in Tito's Yugoslavia, the study of Latin literature written among the Southern Slavs was once again revived. This may seem strange if we know that people who wrote in Latin were mostly members of the clergy, or members of the bourgeois and landed gentry elite -- the classes which were the main enemies of the Communists ruling socialist Yugoslavia. Revival of interest for neo-Latin literature may seem even stranger if we know that people who wrote in Latin among the Southern Slavs belonged predominantly to one Slavic nation, to Croatia -- among the Slovenes and the Serbs writing in Latin was quite limited. Finally, writing in a language other than the vernacular could have been regarded with suspicion: such writers estranged themselves from "the people", from "the masses" whose liberation was the main goal of the Revolution.

In my opinion, the person deserving credit for making Croatian Latin literature acceptable in socialist Yugoslavia is the writer Miroslav Krleža. Krleža was the poetic and dramatic voice of the Croatian generation that went to the slaughterhouses of the First World War, an incisive critic of the bourgeois society and nationalist myths between the wars -- but also the most important and most vocal insider critic of the Stalinist wing of the Yugoslav Communist Party (the wing which, led by Tito, eventually organised the resistance and fought the Nazis and their collaborators). After 1945, because of this pre-war conflict, Krleža's fate was for a short time undecided, but mutual appreciation

between him and Tito prevailed, and Krleža became one of the most powerful figures of socialist Yugoslav culture, especially after the break with Stalin in 1948.

On the other hand, the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts was disbanded in the Independent State of Croatia by the Ustaša regime. From 1947 Krleža was active in reconstruction of the Academy (he was its vice-president 1947--1957), and when the Academy started its "Croatian Latin Writers" series, newspaper articles proudly claimed that precisely Krleža was its "introducer and a patron of sorts". In the same period Krleža organised the exhibition of medieval art from Yugoslavia, on display in Paris in 1950 and in Zagreb in 1951 (for which he wrote the words I quoted, on "us before Europe"). From 1950 Krleža was the director of the Zagreb-based Lexicographical Institute, founded at Krleža's initiative; the Institute published the Yugoslav Encyclopedia (which, as we have seen, included two key articles on neo-Latin literature among Southern Slavs).

In socialist Yugoslavia, important decisions were made far from the public eye and public discussion; people had to master the Aesopian mode of expression, to read between the newspaper lines. We can only guess exactly how Tito and the other most influential Yugoslav leaders were won over to Krleža's ambitious project of reinterpreting the Yugoslav cultural heritage to represent the Yugoslav "third way" both abroad and at home; an essay published in 1953 in a literary journal, a version of the keynote speech given in 1952 by Krleža at the plenary conference of all six republic editorial boards of the Yugoslav Encyclopedia, testifies to both the rhetoric and the arguments Krleža must have successfully used in the corridors of power as well. There "our Latinist authors" are represented as a "vivid example" characteristic for the challenges that await the Yugoslav Encyclopedia, appearing just before the concluding pages of Krleža's essay, described like this:

The Yugoslav Encyclopedia has to remain as a modest monument of our unique civilisation. (...) To produce, under muzzles of Turkish cannons, several hundred renowned painters, writers, builders, strategists, and ideologists, and several hundred Latin writers (of which more than fifty enjoyed European-wide fame in their time), this is not an episode that should be glossed over by the Encyclopedia; without any pathos, but not without pride. In enumerating problems of this Encyclopedia of ours, let me linger awhile over the case of our Latin writers, because this example testifies vividly to the complex problematic of our task, which in many aspects has to be a pioneering one. Our Latinists, these four centuries of our "Globus intellectualis", remained in their very nature extraterritorial. The history of our literature covered just a few of our Latinists, just the loudest few, and just tangentially, just to rescue them from oblivion, since they, as unknown strangers, were not being studied by anyone. And these Latinists of ours include in their writings several thousand classical and West European authors. They are ideologists, strategists, politicians, scholars, economists, technicians, astronomers, poets, they are fanatical historians of their own nation and its problems, they are philologists, grammarians, dreamers, diplomats, propagandists, and agents; at international level, they stand out not only for the scope of their knowledge, abilities, or poetic gift, for the brilliance of their commitment and dignity of their character; they provide us with an inestimable proof that in our country the common sense of humanity did not capitulate even as the fates sunk us down to the darkest pit of history.

This is neither Greek or Latin philology, but note how Krleža speaks persistently about "our civilisation", "our Latinists", "our literature", "our literature history", "our Globus intellectualis" (note also how he discreetly adapts Bacon's metaphor for the totality of human knowledge to a national culture). Note how he chooses not to say whose civilisation is this, whose Latinists: Yugoslav? Croatian? Communist? Krleža also presents "our Latin writers" as "in their very nature extraterritorial", and, for that reason, "forgotten" both at home and abroad. And lastly, Krleža states that in their time these Eastern Latinists were acknowledged in Western Europe -- implying that they were acknowledged not out of courtesy, but because their talents were needed, and because these talents were brighter and greater than those from the rich, vigorous, cultured and educated Europe herself.

Krleža here makes several moves at once -- he takes a relatively "unmarked" historical phenomenon (that is, untainted alike by bourgeois interpretations and by nationalist mythologizing), stresses its international importance, and seductively hints to scholars that it is not only ideologically acceptable, but underresearched as well. Krleža brought out the Latin writers' respectability by choosing carefully the titles to be published in the "Croatian Latinists" series -- there we find (as you can see on the handout) a sixteenth century pan-Slavic vision by Vinko Pribojević, a Martial-like critique of Rome by Janus Pannonius, who impressed Italy by his Latin verses, later to rebel against the king of Hungary, a merciless political and private chronicle scandaleuse of 18th century continental Croatia by Baltazar Adam Krčelić, a collection of Latin verses by Ignjat Đurđević, an author who was also a famous poet in Croatian, a collection of testimonies to the resistance to Pope's authority by Matija Vlačić Ilirik, and -- only after all these authors -- the first printed book of poems by a Croatian author, the 1477 book by Juraj Šižgorić (which at the same time contains one of earliest literary reactions to Turkish attacks on Croatian Dalmatia).

6 Conclusion

Krleža's cultural projects were successful -- and not successful. The Yugoslav Encyclopedia and other editions of the Lexicographical Institute were published; the Yugoslav Academy published eleven volumes of Croatian Latinists series; the specialist task of editing and translating Croatian neo-Latin literature was recognized both as important enough to be done, and neutral (and hard) enough to be done by people who knew Latin, regardless of whether they were members of the Communist Party or not; more often, they were not. Furthermore, by 1957 Croatian cultural heritage in Latin was recognized as sufficiently valuable to be used as an argument in a campaign for the continuation of classical secondary schools, against one of the many egalitarian reform plans. But, regarding Croatian Latin writers, Krleža's project was also not completely successful: these authors were not interpreted only as symbols of resistance to Europe on an equal footing, as dreamers of world revolution ante litteram -- but as part of Croatian national heritage as well, something that can be used to differentiate (even in an unspoken, Aesopian, between-the-lines allusive way) against both Yugoslav and Serbian culture. Krleža was a personality complex and contradictory enough that he must have been aware of this outcome as well -- he knew that only an equilibrium between all nations can keep Yugoslavia alive -- but his attempt to create a cultural component of such an equilibrium eventually proved ineffective.