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The Yugoslav imaginary of Marko Vidojkovic in the novel *E baš vam hvala*.

In 1991, after the declaration of independence, first by Slovenia and then by Croatia, the SFR Yugoslavia practically ceased to exist. The dramatic disintegration of the federation and its long-term political, economic and social consequences brought about natural questions: could it have been otherwise? Did Yugoslavia have to fall apart? And also: what if history had turned out differently? The latter seems to be answered by Marko Vidojković in his novel *E baš vam hvala* (*Thanks a lot*) (Vidojković, 2017), in which he projects an alternative vision of the history of Yugoslavia. A novel that escapes unambiguous genealogical classifications, and therefore requires consideration in the context of close, though not identical, literary genres: science fiction and alternative histories.

Considerations on the possible, but never existing, course of historical events do not constitute a new phenomenon in literature. After all, as Natalia Lemann points out, projections of variants of history alternative to extra-literary reality appear in ancient texts (Lemann, 2016: 86). Nevertheless, alternative stories as a literary genre, usually situated in the genealogical framework of fantasy literature, long remained outside the mainstream of literary studies. Yet the question:

What if? is one of the most common ones that a person sets for themself, not only in relation to their own individual fate, but also to the community to which they belong, both on a local and global level (Wąsowicz 2016: 93). This alternative scenario of the life of (post) Yugoslav society is proposed by Marko Vidojković in his novel, which brings it closer to the genre framework of alternative histories. In her definition of the genre, Natalia Lemann lists its essential features:

(...) It is a genre of fictional, speculative prose, the plot of which takes place in a world where historical events took a different course than in reality. Thus, alternative histories creatively develop probabilistic speculations by answering the “what if” question. The mechanism of alternative histories consists in showing different variants of the course of the historical process which, although possible, did not come true. (...) The species principle is the so-called POD, *point of divergence*, i.e. an event initiating the divergence of official and factual history with virtual history. (...) The author of alternative stories, choosing the moment at which the paths of history diverged, has to plot the consequences resulting from a different course of events. (...) Alternative stories are as much based on the past as they are on the present, being a resultant of social and political news. (Lemann, 2012: 380-388 in Wąsowicz 2016: 94)

In the novel *E baš vam hvala*, socialist Yugoslavia not only does not fall apart, but by 2017, when the novel takes place, has achieved the status of a world superpower, military, economic and technological power similar to modern China. The turning point, the novel's *point of divergence*, with which the alternative course of history begins, is the date June 3, 1989, when the leaders of all the Yugoslav republics die as a result of a tragic air accident. This is how the main character of the novel, Mirko Šipka, a forty-year-old officer of the Yugoslav secret services recalls this event:

A kod kuće, na sva tri kanala, ista vest: srušio se avion u kome su bili svi članovi Predsedništva SFRJ i svi predsednici jugoslovenskih republika, i to baš kada su poleteli ka Dubrovniku, na prvi, i to tajni, sastanak o budućnosti zemlje. (...) Mislili smo došao je kraj. Ko će da brine o zemlji ako je celo rukovodstvo izginulo? Srećom, predsednik SIV-a Marković i vojni vrh nisu bili u avionu, pa se stradanje Novih narodnih heroja pretvorilo (...) „u signal jugoslovenskim narodima da se trgnu iz reakcionarne apatije, te da smognu snage za još jedan veliki napor kako bi nastavili putem bratstva i jedinstva i ekonomskog napretka, pod senima šesnaest mučenika, njihovih sekretara i sekretarica, te članova posade boinga 737-300, koji su u to ime položili svoje živote”. (Vidojković, 2017: 21)

After the party members and the military who were absent from the plane took power, SFR Yugoslavia entered the path of rapid economic development under the conditions of the socialist system, leaving behind not only the countries of the former Eastern bloc, struggling with the challenges of capitalist transition, but also the countries of Western Europe, and even the United States. In 2017, the life expectancy of the Yugoslavs reaches 85 years, cancer is practically non-existent, and state-owned enterprises are becoming economic giants. Technological progress – symbolised in the novel by, among others, the highest-class electronic equipment produced by domestic enterprises, the YUNEBO satellite, computer software developed by native IT specialists, the Yugoslav Internet search engine (and coverage of the entire territory of the country with access to free wireless Internet), or the Juskipap communicator – makes Yugoslavia independent of any import needs, apart from cheap labour from Central Europe. In the international arena, the state maintains contemptuous neutrality. Economic progress goes hand in hand with a kind of moral liberalism – drugs are legal, open relationships are not condemned by anyone. The high level of control of citizens by the state security services, signalled from the very beginning of the plot, casts a shadow on this idealised picture.

According to the genre definitions, alternative stories focus on the past and their distinctive feature is the presence of a clearly defined moment of change in the course of history (Wąsowicz, 2016: 95). These conditions are met to some extent in Vidojkovic's novel. The past serves only as a peculiar point of reference, illustrating the scope and pace of Yugoslavia's economic expansion. On the other hand, the POD is a fictional event, simulating only a historical fact, and its credibility is to be given by the historical figures¹ participating in it. The plot is also credited with the use of dates when describing more or less significant (fictional) moments in the history of Yugoslavia's development – e.g. the construction of a system of underground expressways in 2000-2010 or the legalisation of marijuana in 1995.

Magdalena Wąsowicz, in the article *Alternative stories in Polish literature: typology, themes, functions*, presents a proposal for the division of functions of alternative histories, developed on the basis of Polish books representing the genre: 1. compensatory, allowing to react to national traumas, constituting a remedy for improving well-being; 2. historiosophical, consisting in reflection on the course and meaning of history and the mechanisms that govern it; 3. revisionary – allowing reflection on national myths and symbols; 4. educational, increasing the

¹ Ante Marković, who appears in the novel, was in fact the prime minister of Yugoslavia in 1989-91 who, by introducing economic reforms, stopped galloping inflation which led to a recovery in the economy, but suffered political failure as a result of which he resigned.

historical awareness of readers, 5. cognitive – a strategy for understanding history better; 6. politico-social – alternative history is a commentary on the past but also engages in a discussion on current political events and social problems; 7. entertainment – the historical background in such novels is a pretext to show an interesting, adventurous adventure, and the change in the course of history is an element that is intended to make the plot more attractive (Wąsowicz, 2016: 99-103). *E baš vam hvala* fulfils four out of the seven mentioned by the researcher:

1. compensatory: alternative Yugoslav history, at least in terms of their economies and economic successes, allows us to deal with the difficult post-Yugoslav reality.
2. historiosophical: the plane crash that changes the course of history turns out to be in fact a deliberate action, planned by several security officials in order to halt the break-up of Yugoslavia in the political reality of the time.
6. political and social: in the alternative Yugoslavia refugees from the Middle East are not accepted, the Roma are still called gypsies, the society is xenophobic.
7. entertainment: the reader from the area of the former Yugoslavia will easily read the references to the absurdities of reality before the collapse of the state, which return in an alternative version of events.

Although the structure of the plot of *E baš vam hvala* meets a number of features that distinguish the genre of alternative stories, it goes beyond its limits. Alternative history is only one of two parallel storylines. It is the first to appear, and under the influence of the supernatural factor (the crack of the seam between the two alternative worlds and the opening of a portal that allows the inhabitants of one dimension to enter the other), it is joined by a second, parallel plot set in the post-Yugoslav realities. The event that led to the survival of the SFRY in an alternate course of history did not take place on a parallel plot level, as a result of which the further development of events in this plot scheme is in line with the historical truth: Yugoslavia collapses in a bloody war, and the newly created nation states struggle with their economies and economic backwardness, social anxiety and political instability. This way of conducting the plot brings the novel closer to the genre of science fiction. However, taking into account the fact that science fiction is “a genre of speculative prose, which, with the help of scientific or pseudoscientific means, gives the optimistic or pessimistic appearance of possibilities impossible from today’s point of view” (V. Graaf in: Pater, 2011: 33), and the futurism of science fiction is one of its main genre distinguishing features, great caution should be exercised when trying to classify *E baš vam hvala* as

a science fiction novel. First of all, the plot does not meet the basic determinant of the genre, because it is not about the future, but about an alternative past and present. Scientific or pseudoscientific means are relatively few – although there is a supercomputer calculating the date of the overlapping of two dimensions, the characters express theories in the field of quantum physics, there are finally two parallel dimensions and portals that allow people to move from one dimension to another, but they are more an element making the world presented in the novel more attractive than its dominant. And although Serbian literary critics delightfully describe the novel as a science fiction work, it seems more reasonable to place it within the convention of science-fiction novels, and not strictly assign it to the genre. Undoubtedly, some elements of the presented world, as well as the features of the plot structure, refer to science fiction literature, but a series of allogical sequences of events somewhat distances the presented novel from classic science fiction literature.

The main character and first-person narrator of the novel, Mirko Šipka, a devoted communist, son of an even more devoted communist Yugoslav, a retired high-ranking security officer, is an inspector at the Office for the Analysis of Unexplained Phenomena at the Secretariat of the Interior. The unexplained phenomena that he researches are most often supernatural phenomena straight from local folk mythology – vampires, nymphs or strigoi – in view of the development of science, confirming the existence of UFOs, only the above-mentioned phenomena meet the conditions of unexplained phenomena. The work is a source of frustration for a hero who dreams of being a “Yugoslav Fox Mulder,” but actually only verifies (most often false) reports of supernatural beings in various locations. Through the prism of the main character, the novel first presents the world of the ideal SFRY. The situation becomes more complicated when in this universe (current for Mirko Šipka and possible for the reader) Chetnics and Ustashas start appearing from somewhere, although they have been presumed dead for 25 years. More or less at the same time the protagonist meets his son from the second dimension in a dream. In order to explain this phenomenon, he slowly discovers the existence of a parallel universe (possible for him and valid for the reader), which, it seems, is a mirror image of the real world of separated, independent South Slavic states, humiliated and disregarded by Europe and the world.

The theory of possible worlds with its main opposing binary current-possible pair was created in quantum physics in the early 1990s, and due to the growing interest in literary studies in fantasy and science fiction, it was also implemented in literary studies. If we assume, following Umberto Eco, that literature is “a machine for producing possible worlds, then among all of its varieties, the most pre-

destined for this task is probably fantasy literature, including science fiction.” In her book *Virtual Narration* Snežana Milosavljević Milić distinguishes about 10 key places, or more precisely simplified discussions of the assumptions of quantum physics, which in the mid-1990s radically shook the foundations of classical physics, and significantly influenced the fact that the theory of possible worlds had become the basis for explanations of the multiverse narrative. To understand the functioning of parallel worlds in the novel *E baš vam hvala* we distinguish the following assumptions of quantum theory: removing the linear principle of processes in nature in favour of discontinuation; the existence of an intermediate possibility, i.e. hazy positions or intermediate states, which are mutually exclusive in classical theory and the logic resulting from it, so that in quantum physics, truth and falsehood may also be allowed. The quantum world is a world of superposition that “collects alternatives” and allows states that combine YES and NO, possible and impossible, here and there, and creates a context in which the phenomenon of multiplication of literary heroes can be explained; in the quantum world there is the principle of complementarity, according to which the alternatives do not refute each other, but complement each other (Milosavljević Milić 2016: 76-77 in Bečejski 2020: 265). The narrative universe depicted in the overarching story first functions as up-to-date, but then, through the Epilogue we measure the possible concept that the entire story is a virtual narrative (Bečejski 2020: 271). For in a novel it is impossible to draw a line with absolute certainty between what is actualised and what is not, because in the text itself there is no signal that the events in the world of the story did not actually happen: the narrative truth of the “first” world penetrates more and more into the “other”, introducing fantastic events into it, i.e. relativising each narrative truth. Thanks to this, you can move from one dimension to another, be alive and dead at the same time (and even go to your own funeral), have a son and at the same time not have one, find and “evacuate” the person who died in the first universe. In the novel, occultism and mysticism are intertwined with science fiction, you can meet real and mythological creatures (e.g. a meeting with a crow, which makes the protagonist in one universe realise that he is dead in another, or with fairies who warn him that “between the two universes; a wound sustained in one universe also hurts in another, etc.), contacts coexist and migrate between both worlds. Thus, both worlds in the novel seem to be both possible and actual worlds at the same time.

In both universes, events take place in the narrative present, so temporal axes multiply on a synchronous level (temporal alignment occurs), but also a diachronic perspective, most often in the form of dialogues and short digressions-memories, when the narrator compares the events taking place in the past in one

universe with events taking place at the same moment and in the same space, but in another universe. Such looks into the past, however, are limited: in both worlds they are possible only until June 3, 1989, the day when the universe split and two alternative versions of events emerged, one of which is worse (historical reality is the prototype) and the second, at least the first impression, is better (which is the realisation of the (anti) utopia).

In Marko Vidojkovic's novel, critics and researchers see a specific form of Yugonostalgia (Bečejski, 2020: 264). The homeland he longs for no longer exists (and in this dream form it has never existed, unless as a collective utopia and a subjective vision, in which the longing for childhood and dreams about the future are also projected). From worlds in the mental consciousness of the reader, the historical knowledge of readers from the South Slavic area who spent their childhood or youth in SFRY and witnessed its tragic disintegration is also necessary, to nostalgia, which is the result of empathy, but also of genuine empirical experience.

It is important to mention here that yugonostalgia is not given here as a feeling which “means turning to the past and least of all a longing for teleportation to some happier and less complicated epoch”; it is about a different form of yugonostalgia “than babbling about a red passport welcome at every border crossing, smuggling from Trieste, cheap Adriatic holidays and other myths. Yugoslavia is a name for me for a specific future, or for many of them, which never came true, but whose promise continues, even in its craziest form. This kind of “yugonostalgia” could best be described as nostalgia for the future, as Dinko Kreho (2017) emphasises (Bečejski 2020: 264).

By referring to the “first” dimension of the historical past before the break-up of SFRY, the two timelines of diachrony are connected and the theme of a shared history is introduced, which quite clearly reveals the yugonostalgic position. Invoking the elements of the historical SFRY world, in which the economy, education, social policy, tourism, sport, external politics, etc., flourished on the foundations of brotherhood and unity, was emphasised by the introduction of specific brands and symbols: giant factories, such as EI Niš, Obod Cetinje, Gorenje, Zastava from Kragujevac (which in the present-day novel of the first dimension produces electric cars Yugo 655, 556 and the most modern weapons, clothing and footwear factories “Varteks” and “Yassa”, “Startas”, “Sport”, Sarajevo Drina and Filter 57 cigarettes, Kokta and Jupi drinks, Borba and Politika newspapers (which survived the collapse of SFRY). All these brands and products remain deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of post-Yugoslav society. Before Christmas on May 1, and in the classroom (through mental simulation,

the reader “moves” to the desk). They evoke strong yugonostalgic feelings, which is the best proof that “paradise lost”, or at least the vestibule of paradise, in some form really did exist at one time. The creation of Yugoslavia as the best state in the world was made possible by an air accident (staged by the security service) on June 3, 1989, in which all the presidents of former republics and members of government, the so-called new national heroes, whose monument in the form of symbolic black hands protrudes from the ground on the left bank of the Danube, can be seen from many parts of Belgrade. And while civil wars break out in the “second” dimension and the population suffers the hardships of a life limited by sanctions, threatened by bombs and crime, in the “first” world the state continues the path of prosperity in all areas. An underground motorway network built in the period 2000-2010, three underground lines built in the late 90s that solved the traffic congestion problem, electric cars, magnetic levitation railway, JNA satellite, Juskipap instead of Skype, Yugoslav encyclopedia online, work of Yugoslav policemen comes down to removing cats from trees, helping lost children and sobering drunkards”, only in the tourist season” they have to deal with savages who come to our seas and our mountains, mainly from Western Europe” – these are just some of the examples of prosperity, which the whole world envies. The pinnacle of cynicism is the respect world powers have for the SFRY (an example is the agreement between Yugoslavia and the US, which requires any CIA agent to offer direct help to a member of the Yugoslav security services if their life is at risk). Vidojković replaces the Eurocentrism that is present in the non-fictional reality with fictitious yugocentrism, ironically distorting Yugoslav xenophobic images as well. The inverted image of the world through which the novel activates the issue of memory and forgetting the second, traumatic experience (disintegration of the state, experienced and perceived cruelty, corruption, the murder of the prime minister in 2003, etc.) is shown through the prism of inevitable irony from the title itself *E baš vam hvala* (Thanks a lot) until the very end of the book. It destroys the narrative truth and tells us that also in this progressive Yugoslavia not everything is as perfect and socially healthy as it seems at first glance.

The call for the social responsibility of individuals tramples over all individualism and independence, developing a collectivist spirit in which all are good soldiers of the communist state. Orders are obeyed without discussion or consideration of their ethical aspect or possible effects. The main character, admittedly, undertakes several independent actions, but thanks to his good socialist upbringing, which tells him that the enemy never sleeps, he returns to the right path; accepting a punitive assignment, although he considers the death penalty to be a slightly lighter life sentence in the “second” dimension for life. In the face of

the influx of undesirable newcomers from the “second” dimension, Goli Otok² is also reactivated, therefore, instead of a memorial park, it also serves as a concentration camp in the “better” universe, and the elimination of parallel Yugoslavs takes place with the same shouts as the “raising” of Stalinists in the former SFRY: “Death to the gang – freedom of Yugoslavia!” with the same willingness of the authorities to announce the mass killings of innocent people as a side effect of the pursuit of higher goals. Numerous organisations, boards, councils, assemblies and other institutional bodies of the communist one-party system assigned to celebrate jubilees and conceal the insidious political killings carried out by the security service, which can be identified by the endlessly long list of multi-segment names along with their abbreviations, have been parodied, and have also left their mark on the former Yugoslavia. With a few allusions and ironic statements about Serbian nationalism, the face of “brotherhood and unity” was shown (Croats are consistently overlooked in the division of prominent positions). The “better” SFRY has banned accepting refugees from the Middle East, but drugs can be obtained through official distribution. Marijuana was legalised in 1995, and production and trade remain under the monopoly of Kosovar and Macedonian Albanians.

Alternative stories are entangled in a whole network of cultural, social and political relationships. These relationships become clearly visible with careful reading. For what matters is not only the way in which the novel shows the past, but also what historical event is chosen as the point of divergence between real and fictional history, the consequences that this event has for the reality of the novel (they are connected with the assessment of both the past and the present). History’s entanglement in social and cultural relations is also evidenced by their plot structure and the intertextual games they undertake with the reader. This game with readers is undertaken by Marko Vidojković in his novel, and apparently the readers from the former Yugoslavia feel at home in it, since in the year after its premiere in Serbia, the novel had ten editions, and it was also published successively in Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia, symbolically uniting the reading community of all the countries that made up the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia more than thirty years ago.

² Goli Otok is an uninhabited island in the northern Adriatic Sea, that was the site of a political prison, which was in operation between 1949-1989.

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Abstract

Although it has not formally existed for over thirty years, Yugoslavia continues to be an attractive subject for literature. Against two dominant currents of prose orbiting the SFRY – the settlement and nostalgic one, Marko Vidojkovic's novel *E baš vam hvala* stands out with its attempt to answer the question: what would Yugoslavia be like in 21st century if it had not fallen apart. In this article this alternative scenario is considered in the context of close literary genres: science fiction and alternative histories.

Key words: Yugoslavia, alternative history, science fiction, theory of possible worlds