

**MARKO JUVAN (ed.): Med majem '68 in novembrom '89. Transformacije sveta, literature in teorije** [From May 1968 to November 1989: Transformations of the world, literature, and theory]

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The collective monograph *Med majem '68 in novembrom '89. Transformacije sveta, literature in teorije*, edited by the prominent literary theorist and comparatist Marko Juvan, is the outcome of the international conference “From May 1968 to November 1989: Transformations of the World, Literature, and Theory”, held in Ljubljana in November 2019, which was itself part of the research project *May '68 in Literature and Theory: The Last Season of Modernism in France, Slovenia, and the World*, financed by the Slovenian Research Agency. Its main goal was interdisciplinary research on the period between these two political milestones (1968 and 1989) that radically transformed the previous world order in all forms of social and everyday life. The group of authors from the Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies under Juvan's leadership have methodologically drawn from Franco Moretti's concept of the “world literary system”, which was founded with reference to Immanuel Wallerstein's analogy concerning world economics, in order to understand the political and economic relationships between the developed center and the dependent semi-peripheries. Nevertheless, there is a clear attempt at a specific approach, inspired by Juvan's reflections about the “margins” of world literatures, which can be methodologically exploited in the recognition of the process in the former Yugoslavia or in Central Europe more broadly. Thus, the emphasis is on the connection be-

tween literature and theory, the phenomenon of censorship, emigration, suppression of dissident culture, and various types of “otherness”.

A convincing testimony of Juvan's international influence was his opening lecture, “How to Think World Literature from Its Edge?”, at the 23rd World Congress of Comparative Literature ICLA/AICL in Tbilisi, Georgia, in July 2022. By showing a new and non-traditional conception of worldliness and world literature as an open “interliterary network” or a type of “unity in plurality” determined mainly by economic factors, his Tbilisi presentation methodologically reflected the thematic frame of this collection, whose international composition also includes 28 other authors from 11 countries (while the majority are Slovenian or from neighboring countries like Austria, Hungary, and Italy, there are also contributors from the UK, France, Germany, Serbia, Turkey, the USA, and Australia). Despite the natural heterogeneity of approaches to this complicated period of social history, the volume has a groundbreaking structure, because the editor has created a thematically compact ensemble with a significant informative value. Although the volume itself is published in Slovenian (including the contributions by international scholars), it includes a summary in English, and 12 of the articles were published separately in English in the Trieste-based journal *Slavica Tergestina* (2020, vol. 24, no. 1).

In the so-called “Eastern Bloc”, as a result of the fall of Communism, the year 1989 – in relation with 1968 – meant the beginning or the revival of democratic society. At the same time, this volume asks various questions: to what extent did art and culture participate in such a changing process? What was the relationship between the semi-periphery of the modern world and its western center? Here, the function of literature and literary theory is interpreted through the French situation, where left-wing concepts contained in the artistic avant-garde were reflected in a radical disruption of traditional artistic procedures, in a revolution of poetic language, and in a reverberation of surrealist and existentialist trends. In Slovenia, with regard to the structuralist circle influenced by the Parisian magazine *Tel Quel*, a crucial role was played by the activities of the so-called Situationist International (1957–1972) promoting a link between the aesthetic sphere and everyday life. The student revolts did not really coincide with traditional Marxism or social-democratic revisionism but were based on a strong anti-Americanism and criticism of late capitalism, which paralyzed the working class with activities of cheap consumerism and the availability of mass popular entertainment.

Juvan’s introductory study, “Literatura in teorija od ‘dolgega leta ’68’ do ‘dolgega leta ’89’” (Literature and theory from the ‘long year ’68’ to the ‘long year ’89’), shows that the links between modernist literature, the revolutionary student movement, and western mental concepts were characteristic not only for Paris, but also for cities of the socialist semi-periphery, like Ljubljana, Belgrade, Prague, Warsaw, etc. With reference to the Canadian comparatist Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Juvan discusses the example of Yugoslavia, with its peculiar economic and political socialist system different from the Soviet type. Here, the Central and Eastern European context is understood as post-colonial, referring to the so-called second colonization through ideological or cultural means. Indeed, in Central and Southeast-

ern Europe, the “postcolonial influence” of the West started to compete with the mass consumer culture imported from the United States, and any attempt at imitating western culture was perceived as a desire for integration (in the case of Czechia, as a return to historical roots). By referring to Moretti’s interpretation of the relationship between center and periphery of the world literary system, Juvan defines this semi-peripheric status as “halfway between imitation and innovation” (12). At the time of the Slovenian student movements, the artistically experimental and intermediating activity of the OHO group, which produced performances, ready-made products, comics, land-art, etc., played a dominant role. Besides the above-mentioned group, French developments were also followed by the supporters of Slovenian structuralism, who gathered around the Lacanian circle in Ljubljana (one member of this circle was Slavoj Žižek). They were strongly inspired by anti-empirical, Marxist determinism, according to which events are determined by hidden societal structures functioning on the basis of previously defined laws. This process was adopted in historiography by Fernand Braudel and the Annales school, in psychology by Jacques Lacan, and in semiotics by Roland Barthes. Within political practice, it led to a sort of utopic “social engineering”, based on the idea that social science sectors must look for these “laws” and act according to them, by interpreting the world as a theoretical model rather than as an empiric reality. For this reason, the events between 1968 and 1989 might be interpreted as a failure of the great progressive narrative, an unsuccessful and utopic attempt at global transformation, and at the same time as a prolongation of 1968, which resulted in ecological, feminist, antiglobalist, and other initiatives of 1980s civil society.

The volume is subdivided into five thematic sections. The first of these, which contains articles by Gáspár Miklós Tamás, Simon During, Suman Gupta, Antonia Birnbaum, and Zdravko Kobe, offers a multifac-

eted analysis of the ideological, institutional, and cultural-theoretical aspects of the social developments between 1968 and 1989. The interesting chapter by Gupta, a British cultural historian, analyzes the direction taken by western universities from politicization to digitalization. Kobe's text assesses the transformations of Maoism or neoliberalism, as well as the methodological "exhaustion" of structuralism as an originally left-wing concept in the interwar period, which became an "élite doctrine" inaccessible to the broader public.

The second section, with contributions by Rastko Močnik, Jernej Habjan, Andraž Jež, Ivana Perica, Vladimir Gvozden, and Branislav Jakovljevič, concretizes the aspects of the development in the Yugoslav context, where global forms of student revolts – although inspired by the French experience – had their own specific characteristics. As shown by Jež's article, these specific features were manifested, for example, in the formation of the so-called new left movement and its vital anarchism, which found shelter in the pages of the magazine *Praxis*.

The third part, dedicated to Slovenian cultural and literary history, includes chapters by Lev Centrih, Aleš Gabrič, Andrej Tomažin, Irena Novak Popov, Marijan Dovič, Darja Pavlič, and Varja Balžalorsky Antič. Its emphasis is on the constitution of a pluralistic movement of the civic society, which was created rather by isolated critic intellectuals, without strong contacts with the working class and with other social layers. Novak Popov characterizes the heterogeneousness of Slovenian poetical neo-avant-garde. Similarly, Dovič treats the phenomenon of "reism", i.e. the moment of the departure from anthropocentrism towards a world of objectivity and nature, not only in the Slovenian neo-avant-garde poetry, but also through the interpretation of two national literary theorists (Taras Kermauner and Dušan Pirjevec). The essay by Balžalorsky Antič falls within the paradigm of literary and intermedia streams, by shedding light on the beginnings of *écriture féminine* in Slo-

venia, in connection with its French source from May 1968.

The fourth section, whose authors include Lev Kreft, Miško Šuvakovič, Kaitlyn Tucker Sorenson, Gašper Troha, Branislava Vičar, and Alenka Koron, also reflects the evolutionary trajectories of Slovenian art and culture, by exploring the transition from the neo-avant-garde revolutionary spirit of 1968 to the consumeristic postmodernism of the 1980s with its nationalist connotations. This process is monitored through theater (in Troha's and Koron's contributions) and alternative culture, as Šuvakovič shows in the activities of the OHO Group or NSK-Neue Slowenische Kunst.

The last section includes studies by Emiliano Alessandroni, Izabela Rakar, Charles Sabatos, and Matteo Colombi, mapping the development between the two "long years" of 1968 and 1989 in Western, Southern, and Central Europe, and clarifying the larger contingencies of Slovenian or Yugoslav transformations. Alessandroni focuses on the production of the Italian essayist and poet Franco Fortini. Rakar analyzes the production of Rolf Dieter Brinkmann and Thomas Kling, two West German poets with different philosophical and stylistic features. The intense oscillation between neo-avant-garde and postmodern trends reflected the politicization of art, with experimental eccentricity and an awareness of social responsibility in the post-fascist era.

The most interesting chapters from a "Czecho-Slovak" point of view are the comparative studies by Charles Sabatos and Matteo Colombi. In his discussion of the Czech and Slovak literary figures (Jan Skácel, Milan Kundera, Libuše Moníková, Jáchym Topol, Pavel Vilikovský, and Mila Haugová) who received the annual prize awarded at the Vilenica International Literary Festival, Sabatos examines their artistic and critical work as a reflection of the so-called "normalization" period (while his English-language summary refers to Vilikovský as "the only Slovak winner" of the Vilenica Prize, the article was updated before publication to

reflect Haugová's award as the first woman Slovak laureate in 2020). Colombi's chapter on Czech dissent focuses on the emotionally conceived metaphor of "life behind the curtain". In his view, the reaction of the hardline political regime against the Charter 77 movement led the "non-political" civil society to the creation of its own *paralelní polis* or parallel state. Here, we might add that this process has been well described in the collected volume *Česko-slovenské reflexe: 1968 (Jazyk – literatura – kultura)* (Czecho-Slovak reflections: 1968 (Language – literature – culture), 2009) edited by Ivo Pospíšil, who considers that the fatal problem of Czech literature with regard to the years 1968 and 1989 is the fact that "regardless of the strong media and ideological pressure, there is essentially no deep literary works about such years [...] that could be classified as world literature" (213).

The volume *Med majem '68 in novembrom '89* is an exceptional work that maps the cultural-historical and artistic-literary development between two "long years" (1968 and 1989). On the one hand, it analyzes the

crucial and interpretatively unstable period of the second half of the 20th century; and on the other hand, it uniformly evaluates these landmark years in compliance with John Neubauer's and Marcel Cornis-Pope's concept of "ingressive" literary history as "nodal points". Indeed, they have entered the consciousness of subsequent generations as collective archetypes oscillating between reality and myth. It is obvious that this twenty-year period will permanently attract scholarly attention, because it is at the root of the critical "post-factual" situation of the 21st century. Nevertheless, one can agree with Juvan's optimistic conclusion, according to which the transformative processes concentrated in these "long years" clearly signal that it is still possible to transcend the global present.

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