

## INTRODUCTION

### Forms of Engagement in Contemporary Southern and Western Slavic Literatures

The category of engagement in contemporary Southern and Western Slavic literatures, which burgeoned under the totalitarian communist regime for the few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is charged with a range of negative connotations, the memory of contexts predominantly associated with ideological pressures, propaganda and abuses of power. That is why, after the fall of communism, it was treated with suspicion and connected with bias and the lack of artistic autonomy, while the adjective “engaged” when referring to literature had negative connotations.

A change of this can be noticed since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fostered by contemporary theoretical proposals, including various schools of cultural studies, concepts inspired by the affect studies, performativity studies and many others belonging to the explorations in the new humanities. The notion of engagement, along with the accompanying category of the political, have made a comeback in literary studies. There have been attempts to delineate their semantic fields and referring them to specific literary practices. In contemporary literature, many literary texts have encouraged this interpretative vista. Issues they address, including discrimination and social marginalisation of certain groups, reconciliation with the past, the future of the world in view of the looming climate catastrophe, evidently locate them in the sphere of engaged reflection.

The articles gathered in this double issue of *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae* pose the questions about a kind of reflection literature as one of the cultural symbolic practices can stimulate, and about its potential contribution to processes leading to social and cultural changes. In the authors’ opinions, the fundamental strategy entails challenging dominant narratives functioning in culture as obvious and obligatory through showing such perspectives that destabilise them, work subversively, and reveal systemic presuppositions responsible for the marginalisation of these subversive perspectives as well as specific power relations.

The issues begin with Alexander Kiossev's series of three articles "The Disintegration of 'Power/Knowledge': Post-Socialist Studies as Decolonial Studies? A Personal Point of View," in which he "settles accounts with" the most important scholarly discourses on postcolonialism and decolonialism, and offers a critical reflection on the application of these terms with regard to the post-communist countries. He puts special emphasis on the question of the Balkans, and giving up objectivity, he leads the readers through the meandering history of his readings and considerations. This finds a continuation of sorts in Dominika Kaniecka's "The happiness of Sisyphus or the need to revise one's own engagement: The Case of Ivan Lovrenović," in which the author investigates various forms of Lovrenović's presence in the social life of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Likewise, the other articles do not conceive of engagement as entanglement with any particular ideology, but it is understood as a reflection about the impact of specific ideologies (such as the capitalist, nationalist, and racist ones) on forms of social life, ways of representation (or the absence thereof) of different experiences and identities, as well as communication within a society. So, in "Victims of Modernity. The Image of Capitalist Modernisation in Jaroslav Rudiš's Fiction," Adam Zygmunt takes up the question of the identity of contemporary Czechs in the context of the transformation of the political system and its consequences, including social marginalisation. In most recent literary works, the question of cultural representation and acknowledgement concerns not only contemporaneity, but also the sphere of memory which is gradually furnished with suppressed content, deliberately forgotten and silenced. The question of unforgetting of traumas with the help of literature features in two articles. In Magdalena Pytlak's "Narrative strategies for reclaiming the memory of historical events in Theodora Dimova's novel *The Defeated*," the author examines the relationship between forms of narration and shaping of collective memory in today's Bulgaria. In turn, in "Unwanted neighbours, unwanted memory. Slovak–Roma relations in Marek Vadas's *Six Strangers*," Rafał Majerek looks into the problem of suppressed memory of violence against disadvantaged groups. Another dimension of engagement concerns issues transcending the communities defined in national, state or local terms, that is, those connected, for example, with the increasing degradation of the natural environment. These questions are tackled by Croatian poet Monika Herceg, whose poems are analysed by Aleksandra Wojtaszek in her article "Poetry and Engagement: Monika Herceg in the Labyrinth of Herstory and Itstory." The last article by Gabriela Abrasowicz, "Aesthetics of Responsibility in the Latest Post-Yugoslav Theatre Projects" goes beyond literary studies and brings up the theatre studies. Abrasowicz discusses theatre performances entangled with a dynamic network of contemporary social reality, which problematises the director's personal responsibility (and also responsibility of spectators and actors).

The attitude of engagement, connected with the need to express through artistic means concern about the individual, the shape of one's community and the world, is an important and inspiring one in contemporary literature and, more

broadly, in Southern and Western Slavic cultures. The articles collected in this issue show only its selected examples, however, we hope that they allow at least to some extent a better understanding of the problems perceived as important in a given culture, requiring in-depth reflection and specific actions.

Dominika Kaniecka, Rafał Majerek, Magdalena Pytlak  
*Translated by Katarzyna Bazarnik*