

Bojan Mitrović, Marija Mitrović, *Storia della cultura e della letteratura serba*. Lecce: ARGO, 2015.

Reviewed by Bojan Aleksov¹

Italian publishing house Argo from Lecce in Puglia promotes the lands on the other side of the Adriatic Sea either with studies on the Balkan past or the translations of works of Balkan authors. Among hundreds of titles it published in recent years unfortunately only two address Serbian culture and history specifically – the Italian translation of Dositej Obradović's memoirs and Marija Mitrović's monograph on the Serbian culture in Trieste. Now professor Mitrović has teamed up with her son, historian Bojan Mitrović, to change that and produced a volume that introduces to the Italian public the Serbian culture and literature from its Byzantine origins right to contemporary times. Given the interest and a great sympathy for Serbia and Serbian culture among Italian readers this book has been long overdue. It is thus with great relief to learn that the Ministry of Culture of Serbia recognised its value and supported the publication.

Written decades after previous attempts this volume not only updates them but brings a fresh and modern perspective. It rightly sees and interprets Serbian culture and literature as symbiosis of foreign influences whereby both commonalities and particularities are singled out. This is a must when presenting a culture to an audience in the country whose art and culture have so powerfully radiated beyond their confines and inspired so many Serbian authors. First Serbian books were published in Italy after all and from Dositej Obradović via Njegoš, Ivo Andrić, Laza Kostić, Jovan Dučić to recent times all significant Serbian authors spent time in Italy or grew with Italian culture. Many of these links and inspirations are dully illuminated by well-versed Mitrović team.

Another novel and very useful approach in this volume is Bojan Mitrović's historical contextualisation of all literary and cultural trends and achievements. Furthermore, even though essentially a non-referenced textbook in its genre and thus necessarily of general nature, this literature and culture overview on almost every page brings a citation, a footnote or a comment that explain or frame the material discussed. Usually these little vignettes discuss in more depth some interesting, often disputed issue, such as explaining the origins and development of *slava* celebration and its later day appropriation by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The most numerous and relevant are those aimed at the Italian audience, documenting either political or cultural encounters between the two peoples, or making parallels, comparisons, links to Italian history and culture. Very usefully Italian translations of literary works mentioned are always pointed out in footnote and often other information on the publication given. Sometimes these vignettes take much longer form and become small essays about Njegoš, Dositej or Ivo Andrić. Marija Mitrović dedicates much space and attention to four most well-known Serbian literary authors of the late 20th century (D. Kiš, B. Pekić, M. Kovač, F. David) as well as authors recently translated and popular among Italian readers (M. Pavić, D. Albahari, D. Velikić) which is necessary given that this is the first book to encompass and critically assess their work. Marija Mitrović also analyses at contemporary literary production even though she is largely critical of it. In this regard, also praiseworthy is the inclusion of Serbian born authors who live and write abroad or even those fully integrated in American culture such as Charles Simic or in Austrian such as Milo Dor given their inspiration and links with the old country in the age of mass migration and cultural transfer and entanglement.

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Eventually, the volume's richness in focus and diverse length of its subject matters act a useful way of maintaining reader's interest and keep the story dynamic. Similarly, while the narrative is divided in sections representing established movements and periods they are often interspersed with discussion on previously largely ignored women authors or for contemporary audience in Italy very relevant literary works with Holocaust as subject.

This reviewer would appreciate more balance in favour of popular instead of high culture which is difficult given that book's main focus is literature, a mainstay of high culture. Also some minor factual errors creep in as in the portraits of Mehmed Paša Sokolović and Arsenije Jovanović Šakabenta. More troublesome is what is left out when selection had to be made. Anyone ever working on a text book, anthology and/or chronology knows how cumbersome if not impossible that task is. But if i.e. (Austrian) military border is mentioned then an explanation is necessary let alone a reflection on its place in Serbian history and culture. Similarly, there is no mention of bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović or any other modern religious figure or author which is an evident gap.

The volumes boasts very useful appendices including maps, index, basic historical chronology, and the bibliography of key secondary works on several languages as well as of all translations of literary works from Serbian to Italian.