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IN MEMORIAM



Mirjana Detelić

(1950–2014)

Mirjana Detelić, a folklorist, literary theorist, fiction writer, was born and educated in Belgrade. She graduated from the University of Belgrade (Faculty of Philology, Department of Literature and Literary Theory) in 1974, from which she also received her MA (1984) and PhD degrees (1992). She was employed as assistant to the Committee on the Study of Literary History of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) from 1974 to 1994, when she joined the SASA Institute for Balkan Studies and remained its member until her death. In the academic year 1999/2000 she taught Folk Literature at the University of Niš. She was deputy director and director of the Language and Literature Department of the Centre for Scientific Research of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the University of Kragujevac from its inception in 1995 until its dissolution in 2011. She participated on a permanent basis in the work of two SASA committees, on the Study of Literary History and on Folk Literature, and was subject editor for folk literature for the *Serbian Encyclopaedia*.

Mirjana Detelić was concerned with the poetics of literary forms from the perspective of folkloristics and literary theory. Her book *Mitski prostor i epika* (Mythic Space and Epic, 1992), which was awarded the Stanislav Vinaver Prize (1993), set new parameters for the study of epic space predicated on structuralist-semiotic premises, and laid the groundwork for a new approach to the study of this cognitive and poetic category in folklore and beyond. In this book she demonstrated that epic space, unlike mathematical or physical space, which are homogeneous and continuous, is a discreet series of points, or fields, which have different semantic ranges. On the horizontal level, she identified closed and open spaces as carriers of opposing symbolic meanings: house, palace/tower and city – as the centre (because the epic perspective is shaped in relation to the hero) – take positive connotations, whereas mountain/forest, water, road and field – as distant peripheral points – tend to attract negative meanings. She also explored the vertical stratification of both open and closed spaces, identifying the centre (“central”, human space) and two (peripheral) poles of the vertical axis as points of symbolic and ideological marking. This seminal study with its basic stratification of epic space opened two other directions of research. The study of the *city*, a type of closed space, gave rise to the multimedia CD edition *Gradovi u brišćanskoj i muslimanskoj deseteračkoj epici* (Cities in Christian and Muslim Decasyllabic Epic Poetry, 2004; in co-authorship with Aleksandar Loma and Istok Pavlović), the monograph *Beli grad. Poreklo epske formule i slovenskog toponima* (*White City. The Origin of the Epic Formula and Slavic Toponym*, 2006; in co-authorship with Marija Ilić), and the encyclopaedic lexicon *Epski gradovi. Leksikon* (*Epic Cities. A Lexicon*, 2007), for which she was awarded the Vuk Foundation Prize for Scholarship and the Golden Serbian Literature Award (2008). The other direction of research was focused on the atypical semantics of the *house* in oral epic and of closed space in a broader sense (tower/palace, inn/tavern). In a series of studies Mirjana Detelić (in co-authorship with Lidija Delić) dealt with distinctive properties which dislocate the house in relation to the cultural standard.

One of Mirjana Detelić’s fundamental contributions is the one she made in the area of epic formula studies, both as an author: *Urok i nevesta. Poetika epske formule* (Evil Charm and the Bride. The Poetics of the Epic Formula, 1996), the already mentioned monograph *White City*, and a number of articles focused on particular formulaic combinations; and as an editor: the thematic block in the journal *Balcanica* (2013) and the volume *Epic Formula: A Balkan Perspective* (in co-editorship with Lidija Delić) resulting from it. The latter volume, which assembles contributions by both widely recognised and younger scholars of linguistics and folklore studies, looks at the Serbian oral material from a different angle and in the broadest framework of the study of formulaity in traditional cultures, from Indo-European

and Homeric to the still living oral traditions of the Balkans. The volume shifts the focus of research from virtually the only South Slavic corpus that is somewhat more widely known, Parry's and Lord's Harvard collections of songs recorded in the 1930s and 50s, to broader Balkan traditions, above all the classical recordings made by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić but also Albanian and Greek klephtic epic, as well as the Turkic epic tradition which was in indirect contact with Balkan folklore over a long period of time. Mirjana Detelić studied the stages undergone by an oral formula (the degree of the fixedness of oral text), its types and functions, using the example of concrete motifs, such as slavery, time, fog and, especially, burial in the mountain/forest, as well as the use of white as a modifier.

She also sought to develop a theoretical articulation of the influence of oral poetics on the work of Ivo Andrić. She edited or co-edited the following volumes: *Od mita do folka* (From Myth to Folk, 1996); *Kult svetih na Balkanu* in two volumes (The Cult of Saints in the Balkans, 2001 and 2002); *(Zlo)upotreba istorije u srpskoj književnosti 1945–2000* ((Mis)use of History in Serbian Literature 1945–2000; 2007); *Moć književnosti*. In Memoriam Ana Radin (The Power of Literature. In Memoriam Ana Radin, 2009); *Saints of the Balkans* (2010); *Živa reč*. Zbornik u čast prof. dr Nade Milošević Djordjević (Word of Mouth. A Festschrift in Honour of Nada Milošević Djordjević, 2011); *Ptice: književnost, kultura* (Birds: Literature, Culture, 2011); *Guje i jakrepi: književnost, kultura* (Vipers and scorpions: Literature, Culture, 2012) and *Aquatica: književnost, kultura* (Aquatica: Literature, Culture, 2013). She closely collaborated on the Leicester-led international project Transnational Database and Atlas of Saints' Cults (TASC).

Of fundamental importance was her work on the digitisation and electronic databases of oral folklore material. As part of the activity of the SASA Committee on Folk Literature, she designed a digitisation project for the Ethnographic Collection of the SASA Archives, an exceptionally important project given the fact that this material of outstanding national significance is threatened with irreversible deterioration due to the very nature of manuscripts and inadequate conservation treatment. The collected material is invaluable not only as a testament to a rich oral tradition, but also as a supplement to the classical corpus collected by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić since it comes from the areas that he did not get to cover (Kosovo and Metohija, eastern Serbia). With the technical support of the engineer Branislav Tomić, she created the database *Decasyllabic Epic Poems* which consists of twenty-one volumes of Christian and Muslim epic poems (classical recordings, more than 330,000 verses), available at: <http://www.mirjanaDetelić.com/e-baze.php> and <http://www.monumentaserbica.com/epp/>. She prepared (with Snežana Samardžija and Lidija Delić) an electronic edition of the Erlangen Manuscript (1716–33), the earliest known

collection of Serbo-Croatian folk poems written down in an exceptionally complex orthography, now available at: <http://www.erl.monumentaserbica.com>. The electronic medium has made it possible to present, side by side, the original manuscript (kept in Erlangen), Gesemann's transcribed edition (1925) and the new annotated reading, which is exceptionally important because of the diversity of the interventions made: from correcting the recorder's obvious mistakes to details the deciphering of which required a broader knowledge of oral poetics. A particular problem was the reading of the letter *yat*, which has three legitimate reflexes (Ekavian, Ikavian and Ijekavian). With her work on the digitisation of manuscript recordings and the development of electronic databases of oral epic poetry Mirjana Detelić not only contributed to the preservation of an invaluable aspect of intangible cultural heritage but she also made it available to all interested persons worldwide (statistics shows that the databases have been searched on all continents, even in Greenland!). Moreover, they usher in an entirely new era in the study of oral epic because they enable the user to handle an exceptionally large material with great precision on a micro-level (e.g. lexemes, syntagms, toponyms).

Last, but certainly not least, Mirjana Detelić has put humanities and story lovers in her debt by her splendid novel on *dorkasi*, ancient magicians who unravelled the mystery of time and, travelling through time, accumulated human experiences (*Legenda o nestanku*, Belgrade: Tardis, 2012). Through this imaginative and witty retelling of the legend of Atlantis, she left a testimony of herself. In her vision, the goddess who creates the city of Atlantis does not create humans. Atalanta comes down flying in the form of a large white bird, like the epic pen about which she wrote a remarkable study, and improves human life without asking anything in return. Being a shape-shifter, a deity capable of assuming a variety of forms, Atalanta abolishes the very possibility of being offered anyone or anything as a sacrifice on religious pretexts:

The structure of her being must have been fluid, for she was able to change shape easily and quickly, from a human to a beast to a bird, then to a fluid or a plant. Other deities later could do the same, but Atalanta was doing it in public, for all to see, and nobody in her city would lightly raise their hand to other beings, for they could never know for sure whether Atalanta herself was one of them.

When such a deity was nowhere to be found, Mirjana Detelić invented one to her own liking: one that gives and asks for nothing in return, one that has found a simple way to put an end to man's violence against other species, against nature and against other men. Her children's novel "Blue Fern" has remained in manuscript, a story about a boy, a girl and a dog who are trying to save a mountain forest with the help of fairies and two

aliens who have stayed in the forest longer than planned. A splendid storyteller and a splendid connoisseur of oral traditions, Mirjana had no trouble incorporating folklore motifs into various genre patterns, giving them a new life in an altered circle of reception.

In Mirjana, scholarship and literature and humanities in a broader sense lose much on the pan of the scales that weighs competence, hard work and a sense of responsibility towards others and towards one's profession against superficiality, improvisation and carelessness. To those who were fortunate to know her and to be her friends, the loss is much greater.

Lidija Delić

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