

“The Time of Silence Has Passed”

The interview with Slobodanka Peković was conducted by Ana Kolarić and Stanislava Barać.

Slobodanka Peković had built her scientific and research career at the Institute for Literature and Arts in Belgrade before retiring holding the highest position, that of a scientific adviser. At the Institute for Literature and Arts she worked on such projects as *Rečnik književnih termina* (*The Dictionary of Literary Terms*), *Istorija srpske književne kritike* (*The History of Serbian Literary Criticism*), *Istorija srpske književne periodike* (*The History of Serbian Literary Periodicals*). She is the author of numerous studies and monographs, among which are *Osnovni pojmovi moderne* (*The Basic Concepts of Modernism*) (2002), Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Niša o haremima* (*Letters from Niš on Harems*), editing and foreword (1986), Velimir Živojinović Masuka, *Odabrana dela* (*Selected Works*; editing, selection, afterword, chronology of life) (2005), *Isidorini oslonci* (*Isidora's Supports*) (2009), *Književnost u funkciji „prinude“* (*Literature in the Role of “Coercion”*) (2010). Since 2011 she has been taking part in working on the project *Knjiženstvo – Theory and History of Women's Writing in Serbian until 1915*.

The primary reason for an interview with Slobodanka Peković on the study of women's and feminist periodicals is her latest book *Časopisi po meri dostojanstvenog ženskinja* (*Magazines Tailored to Dignified Women*) (2015).

For several decades you have been dealing with women's periodicals first and foremost, as well as women's writing and culture in general. How did you take an interest in this particular field? What did the very beginnings of your research on women's periodicals look like?

If there is also an **in** and an **out** in literary research (and I think there is), then in the seventies, as well as the eighties, the notion that somebody would dedicate themselves to “women's writing” was far from any sort of serious study. Prose, poetry, drama and criticism were studied. They were parts of the mainstream and they were the only ones garnering recognition if you wanted to deal with serious matters. The Institute, however, was a special institution with possibilities which appeared sporadically. Large projects such as *Sveske* (*Volumes*) or *The Dictionary of Literary Terms* were merely windows which offered insight into the possibilities of the most diverse research. But only with *The History of Serbian Literary Criticism* did the first cracks in the armor of “seriousness” appear. Politically unsuitable authors, forgotten elite and religious thinkers were included in that edition. The “periphery”, as an exhilarating area of a different approach, appeared. It was in London where I discovered that there were many roads to be taken.

Literature of exile, minority literature, insufficiently studied literary genres – children's literature, worker literature, proletarian literature... and women writers.

With my colleague, Zoran Paunković, I attempted to propose to the Scientific Council that emigrant literature be researched and that “women's studies” be founded as a project. Both proposals were rejected. Dealing with women was considered frivolous, because there were good writers or bad writers, literature or kitsch. It was advisable to study little-known and lesser-known writers, but not women writers, although they, too, created the spirit of the times,

cultural and literary streams.

It was only when I transferred to the project *The History of Serbian Literary Periodicals* and received a task from Dragiša Vitošević to speak about *Domaćica (The Homemaker)* on the project meeting that I discovered what treasure lay hidden in magazines and what treasure women's magazines truly were. I do not know whether Dragiša Vitošević believed that women's magazines were a reflection of the epoch of sorts, or if I had received that task because nobody else was doing that; nonetheless, I have been studying magazines and women's magazines ever since.

The title of the proposal which you submitted in the seventies to the Scientific Council of the Institute for Literature and Arts was „Žene i književnost – prisustvo i doprinos književnica u novijoj srpskoj književnosti“ (Women and Literature – the Presence and Contribution of Women Writers in Newer Serbian Literature). From today's perspective, it would seem that the proposal was written at the right time, at a moment when in USA the first departments of women's studies were formed and first significant journals in this area were founded; therefore, the proposal was historically and politically and theoretically relevant. However, it was rejected. Did you, either at that time or later, receive an explanation as to why? Did you have any difficulties continuing to deal with women's periodicals after that?

On the contrary, that proposal was not written at the “right” time. It was too early for a scientific institution to deal with such problems. There was, however, an interest in “women's writing”. Many men and women researchers dealt with women's work and historical and theoretical researches. Svetlana Slapšak organized a conference on trivial literature, thus definitely demonstrating that also the “periphery” of literary creation can and should be studied with full responsibility. Nada Popović defended her doctoral thesis (albeit in Zagreb) on *l'écriture feminine*. Work on women's magazines could be continued and conducted without any difficulties, but within a general project on magazines.

In the aforementioned proposal you deal with the notion of feminism quite tentatively. Although you advocate researching the feminist movement in Serbia, you simultaneously warn that that notion is narrow and partly restrictive since it can exclude some authors – such as Jaša Tomić – who are important for the “female” context. How do you perceive this problem today? What are your thoughts on the introduction of this term in the very title of the field of study: feminist approach in periodical studies (methodological) or feminist periodical studies (research subject)?

I am still wary of the notion *feminism*. I think this notion would narrow the field of research. Feminism is an important movement at the beginning of the twentieth century; it is also significant today because, regardless of all political and legal proclamations, the stereotypes of the place, abilities and possibilities of women are still present. The feminist approach in periodical studies or feminist periodical studies are unavoidable terms when working on women's periodicals. However, we should not limit ourselves solely to that form of research. Where, then, would we place those magazines which are protofeminist, feminophile, or merely intended for women? All magazines which have enabled women to express themselves, which encouraged or approved of their activities and achievements, are equally important. Even those

which are on the opposite side, extremely against feminism, against women's engagement outside of the household – are relevant, because they represent the other, dark side of a mirror which reflects the degree of human – women's rights, i.e. minority rights.

Although one cannot speak of a universal or superior position which women's magazines took, or claim that they had a crucial role in determining women's position, or that they profoundly influenced their artistic expression, they did accentuate the problem of identity and confirm the existence of the "other". With their help the heterogeneity of thought and, most importantly, the doubt in the autonomy of literature, politics, science and culture as domains where **they** have nothing to say, were expressed.

As it turned out, due to your research and patient work, the critical and scientific (re)evaluation of the work of several women writers in Serbian literature was set in motion. We are referring mostly to the work of Jelena J. Dimitrijević, Isidora Sekulić and Danica Marković. Are you satisfied with the results which followed your first editing, i.e. scientific endeavors?

Although I do not believe that accomplishment to be mine, I am satisfied.

When we perceive your research on women's and feminist periodicals in the context of your entire research preoccupations (fiction, travel literature, letters and journals, literary communication, modernism) and the points in time when you began each of them, it would seem that you always dove as a pioneer into the fields and methodologies which would only later gain full academic legitimacy. Would you agree with such a perception?

At a certain point it was as if both the academic institutions and all other who dealt with literary research grew tired of seriousness and dignity. Neglected literary genres and those which were on the border of literature, such as travel books, letters, reportages, journals, love stories and crime novels, became a real challenge. I have always believed that neglected subjects, genres or writers represent a research field which enables significant personal freedoms in interpretation and innovations in the perception of the relationship between culture and creation.

In 1984. Đorđije Vuković writes the manifesto „Za jednu istoriju književne periodike“ (“For a History of Literary Periodicals“) in which he points out the theoretical and methodological problems which might arise during such an endeavor, but also its relevance. Do you believe we have enough material for a similar project in the field of women's and feminist periodicals today? What do you foresee as difficulties in writing a history of feminist press?

The study of periodicals is a difficult endeavor in which no solid methodological or theoretical postulates can be established. Magazines are a miscellaneous material, they are reminiscent of a container full of liquid. While the container is still, you have one image, but each motion causes change. In magazines everything is elusive, even the question whether the magazine is a stable or dispersive literary form. What is certain is that magazines are a true image of their time, culture, and relations in a society; and that they form, or at least establish, literary norms and fashions.

When you look at today's feminist publishing, by which we mean both academic journals (Genero and Knjiženstvo, for instance), as well as web portals (Libela, Vox Feminae, Muf...),

how would you describe our feminist (counter)public, its reach, openness, effects?

It could probably be bigger and better and louder, especially in these unstable times in which extreme political options are reappearing; therefore, the voice of the (counter)public becomes necessary. There are, however, *Genero*, and *Knjiženstvo*, which gather a large number of researchers, and the project itself is constantly renewed and spread, so the time of silence or marginality has passed.

Radojka Jevtić

Translated by