

UPDIKE IN BELGRADE: (UNTIL) 1978

Prolegomenon. The October meeting of writers 1978: event, names

John Updike visited Belgrade in 1978 on the occasion of an important international literary event – the 15th October meeting of writers. The meetings were traditionally held in honor of the liberation of Belgrade in WWII¹ and gathered not only writers, but also honorary guests who were not in the literary profession – such as the Belgrade City Assembly President or ambassadors. In 1978, Peruvian and Portuguese ambassadors in Belgrade, Jorge Llosa Potra and Alvaro Gera, took part in the conversation. The international spirit of the October meetings, and the city back then, was evoked by the City Assembly President's welcoming speech to the guests: "If others are more present here with us and within us, we ourselves become more versatile and progressive."

The event brought together about sixty prominent writers, including domestic and foreign guests. The USA, France, German Federal Republic, Italy, the UK, Spain, Greece, Morocco, Portugal, Argentina, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Poland, German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Peru, Panama, Tunisia, Syria – all of these countries had their "representatives" at the Meetings. The general public recognized the following as the key names: Bernard Noel, Jean-Pierre Faye, Andre Stil, Mark Strand, Peter Elstob (the then secretary of the International PEN club), Dušan Karpatsky, Julian Kornhouser, Nils Ake Nilsson, Lamberto Pignotti. However, on those days Belgrade daily newspapers did not write about any of the abovementioned authors with much enthusiasm or excitement; what is more, they were announcing only Updike's arrival. "Updike is coming to Belgrade" was an often encountered title of a text conveying basic information not primarily about the American author, but about the October meetings themselves. Updike was the most popular guest of the event, probably thanks to his novel *Couples*, the fourth edition of which had been published that year, staying on the top of best-seller lists for months.

The Meetings implied round table discussions on three primary topics: "Communication possibilities of contemporary literature", "Possibilities of contemporary information and communication theories application in the interpretation of literary works", "Communication

¹ Which was on October 20, 1944.

among the literatures of different linguistic regions.” The domestic participants particularly discussed the topic of the possibilities of translating Andrić. Taking into account the abovementioned, the fact that the international conference hosted more theoreticians and critics than poets and prose writers appears self-explanatory. In his short oration, French author Bernard Noel expressed in a meaningful and concise manner the sense and the significance of both the topics and the event itself: "Inviting foreign authors to think together about the communication of literatures represents in itself the answer to the topic set by the organizers.“

Updike in Belgrade: meetings, conversations

By 1978, the following Updike's works had been translated into Serbian: collection of short stories *Pigeon Feathers*, novel *The Centaur*, as well as the already mentioned *Couples*, and novel *Rabbit, Run* was being prepared for publication. Apart from a very good translator into Serbian, Aleksandar Petrović, the author had already had the audience of readers who enthusiastically followed his literary career.

During the conversations with several Serbian journalists, Updike was informed of the great popularity of his novel *Couples* in Yugoslavia. He did not miss the opportunity to express and reiterate how unexpected the situation was for him, and while being interviewed for the daily newspaper *Novosti*, Updike described the surprise he had felt when he was sent copies of the Serbian translation of the novel. He interpreted the information on the number of readers in the following way: “It appears that the wave of extinction of some old moral values in a society and the emergence of sexual revolution are not solely an American theme.” Indeed, one can say that Yugoslavia kept pace with the “American trends” in this regard.

In his interview with Updike, published in the weekly magazine *NIN*, Stevan Stanić commented on the writer's style in the aforementioned book. Regardless of the somewhat careless choice of words, his observation should be quoted as its substantiality attests to a careful and devoted reading of Updike's works. „You have a seemingly simple, but a peculiar style. At first everything flows smoothly, but then the reader is abruptly stopped and stunned by one single word or a metaphor which appears to be unfounded. Suddenly, the next sentence deliberately turns its back to the previous one, disrespecting the logical flow and yet when the reader moves further away from that part, he concludes that some close contrapuntal attachment

is present.“ Updike pointed out in surprise that such a deeply accurate description of his style said a lot about the quality of the translation, thus giving an indirect, subtle and tactful praise of Aleksandar Petrović.

What is interesting is that during the period when *Couples* were extensively read there was almost no mention of Updike in professional literary journals. The only real exception is the *Eros Rampant* review written by Ljiljana Šop for literary journal *Književne novine* in 1979; the same year publishing house *Rad* published the very collection of short stories. In 1977, only Ljiljana Đurđić could be regarded as “almost an exception“ – she did not write a critical essay about an Updike's work, but a poem titled "A Dream for John Updike“. Later on, while writing about the most current American prose for *Književne novine*, Gordana Todorović omitted the writer of one of the most read American novels in Serbo-Croatian region. Relying on Bellamy's interviews with writers, Todorović made a sample of sorts consisting of twelve writers, exactly half of which were older than Updike. It can therefore be concluded that the wider audience of readers responded more promptly to Updike's unique talent (and generally speaking, to a literary novelty) than the academic environment did.

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Certain endearingly humorous information about Updike's visit to Belgrade was preserved and is worth mentioning. The welcoming committee, made up mainly of prominent figures – the famous author was welcomed by Serbian writer, translator, and scholar Erih Koš, award-winning translator of Updike's works Saša Petrović, journalist for magazine *NIN* Stevan Stanić (who at that time interviewed prominent artists and writers across Europe), all of whom were followed by a photojournalist – took the “starting position” at the Belgrade airport Nikola Tesla, which was particularly crowded on that day. Stanić described for his readers the atmosphere which Updike found himself in: an accordionist was playing the anthem ‘Hey, Slavs’ at the airport, but only after the euphoria caused by the welcoming of the Serbian basketball players, the then world champions, had subsided. Immediately upon arrival, the American author could detect a powerful local and national feeling.

The account of the whole situation and the conversation that ensued was imbued with cheerful and humorous descriptions: the Updikes had lost a suitcase, consequences of which the reader will recognize in the conversation between the *Novosti's* journalist Milidragović and Updike, in which it is pointed out that he had worn jeans to the ceremony on the premises of the

Association of writers of Serbia, apologizing and explaining that one of his suitcases (exactly the one containing his suit) was lost. The welcoming committee was apprehensive about guests being too anxious, especially bearing in mind that the very reception, this “unfortunate failed reception”, as Stanić says, had got off to a bad start because the author had been waiting for the welcoming committee for hours. However, the welcoming committee had been moving around in close proximity, not recognizing somewhat aging Updike. Therefore, it is not surprising to read that the Updikes seemed “violently happy” in their treatment of the hosts. A bouquet of flowers in cellophane had been prepared for the writer’s wife, but it had started to wilt due to a long wait.

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In his conversations with the journalists, Updike readily gave meaningful answers to the questions about art and writing in general – it is almost possible to reconstruct a kind of ultra-succinct poetics from the interviews printed in the dailies and weeklies – and, with mild disapproval, he commented on the current American literary scene. Namely, he took exception to American writers’ preoccupation with the problems of fiction itself, which caused them to turn their backs on depicting their own contemporary world. He was also embittered about the growing number of scripts for film, television and pop music industry at the expense of literary production, remarking that scripts are “not literature”.

When Stanić, maintaining the emerging skeptical tone of conversation, stated the idea about the possible death of art, Updike reacted in a humorous and insightful way: he pointed out that an artist had become a popular figure in America, and that people, even if they had nothing to do with art, often try to imitate a superior and imaginary “artistic” lifestyle, at least through their dressing style. Conjuring up these images made Updike laugh: that being the case, he said, one could not talk about the death of art in a simple manner – an insight that remains valid even today. This theme was developed “on two fronts”, at the airport and at Hotel Moskva (where the author was staying), “on the mezzanine of a café, with quite inappropriate breezy Viennese sounds of Offenbach and Lehar played by an old tavern orchestra” – the journalist, it seemed, had not yet relaxed.

Epilogue. Reconstructing Updike's poetics.

“Christian morality on which [the heroes of my books] had been raised created a moral confusion in their consciousness. I do not want my opinion, as a kind of an answer, to be felt in my books. I just put characters in particular situations and the readers seek the answers themselves.” This is an excerpt from Protić's interview with Updike for the daily newspaper *Politika Ekspres*. Avoiding simple answers, the writer explained that the heroes of his novels were, from a moral perspective, simultaneously good and bad. This attitude, in its many forms, reappeared in most of the conversations. Thus, Updike emphasized that his literary principle was to merely depict occurrences, and not to comment on them. In *Couples*, for example, the author depicts, and therefore analyzes, the environment of moral confusion, but his intention is not to reach a conclusion in the form of an axiologically positive or negative judgment of the presented world – similar to Flaubert's indifferent deity, the writer is invisible in his work, albeit omnipresent.

Describing this novel of his as “American” and almost “local”, in regards to time and space, Updike suggested that it was important for him that fiction had a basis somewhere in reality, and, for him, the crucial basis was the ethics of married life in America in the second half of the twentieth century. Another way to express, if not the same, then similar content is his declaration of the relevance of the topic of writing, as well as the approach to that topic. He values “humility before reality” as a particular quality, which he finds in Salinger and Saul Bellow.

Even though he gave a lot of elaborate answers to the journalists' questions about literature, the writer formulated extremely succinctly the most beautiful poetic comment. Encouraged to think about what writing was, in one of the interviews, Updike explained that it was simply – providing satisfaction.

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