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Seeing Croatian Islands as Something Other than Paradise

(Anna Boguska, *Życie na wyspach. Chorwacka współczesna proza insularna*. Instytut Slawistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk & Fundacja Slawistyczna: Warszawa, 2020, 232 pages)

Croatia's tourist industry portrays the country's 1,244 islands as unspoilt and idyllic, free of the mundane troubles of daily life, and full of luxuries and pampering during the best time of year – vacation. Yet Croatia's insular geography is more than touristic promise. It is seemingly predestined as the backdrop for literary utopias, the hope of rest and recreation dovetailing with a hope for a different way of life – any one of its islands is a possible new Utopia. While pedestrian observers may accept this simplified, idealized conception of Croatia, Anna Boguska's published dissertation *Życie na wyspach. Chorwacka współczesna proza insularna* [Life on Islands: Contemporary Croatian Insular Fiction] (Boguska, 2020) seeks to challenge this commercialized view

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by examining Croatian writers' own literary examinations of life and living on islands. In so doing, Boguska reveals a multifaceted landscape of diverging interpretations of islands that is at odds with the well-known stereotypes; she embarks on a journey into the often-hidden borderlands of European literature, uncovering jewels of Croatian writing unknown outside of Croatia and yet tied to well-known European philosophers and writers.

The 232-page book is structured in five distinct parts. As is typical of a doctoral thesis-turned-book, Boguska begins with an excursion into the theoretical framing of her study, but the clarity and brevity of the introduction is untypical of such books. In the first part, she draws on the comments of Croatian writers and publicists, such as Damir Miloš and Radovan Marčić, as well as the American historian John Gillis, to make two things clear in regard to the topic and methodology. First, despite any deeper objective authentic attributes, islands are functionalized as a place for the projection of human needs and dreams. Rather than depicting islands realistically, literature and culture describe them in order to meet humans needs and desires. Second, Boguska takes care to let Croatians' views on Croatian islands be heard while also reflecting general scholarship on insular literature in general, thus promising a balanced scholarly approach.

This is also the crux of her methodology. In combining Paul Ricoeur's approach to symbols with close textual readings of the works of 20th and 21st century Croatian authors, she expands the meaning of islands beyond their local significance (although this is also part of her contribution) to include their broader meaning in universal categories. Thus, rather than an ethnographic discussion of life on Croatian islands, she examines human concepts of possible ways of being and how these concepts are projected onto the islands of the discussed works. She identifies four types of symbolic projections on islands: an island as a desert or emptiness; an island as a prison; an island as *Theatrum Mundi* (the Great Theater of the World); and, finally, an island as a garden. Each chapter is dedicated to one of these concepts and centers around the discussion of two key, thematically relevant works, although other pertinent examples appear in the margins.

The book's first chapter, "Island-Desert," first elucidates the meaning of desert, recalling Michał Paweł Markowski's question "What kind of 'thing' is a desert?" (Boguska, 2020, p. 22) to set the frame for the examination of the image of an island as a desert by visiting Petar Šegedin's *Mrtvo more* [The Dead Sea] (1953) and Damir Miloš's *Otok snova* [The Island of Dreams] (1996). The study

draws on Polish philosopher Barbara Skarga's understanding of the term 'desert', comparing and contrasting it with Jacques Derrida's essay on the Greek term *khôra*. Following Skarga's argument, Boguska sees a *khôra*, and subsequently an island, as both a place of complete solitude and aimless wanderings without a final destination, as well as a luring mirage of a potential horizon that, unlike its biblical use, ultimately disappoints. The title of Šegedin's novel, *The Dead Sea*, indicates a sense of hopelessness that Boguska fleshes out in readings in two sections: "The desert as a void" (Boguska, 2020, pp. 25–35) and "The desert as a *khôra*" (Boguska, 2020, pp. 35–41). With the help of the select quotes she has painstakingly translated, Boguska highlights the sense of enduring emptiness pervading Šegedin's *Dead Sea*, as is summarized in the quote "There was no one, only emptiness" (Šegedin, 1953, p. 7). The village of *The Dead Sea* is seemingly lifeless, immersed in quiet, save for the buzzing of flies – a lifeless place amidst the waves. The protagonist finds himself in a twofold emptiness: both alone in his thoughts and cut off from the world surrounding him. His mental battles with demons in solitude do not lead him to some biblical clarity for his future path but rather are an ever-repeating vicious circle, thus illustrating Skarga's first concept of the desert. The second finds its expression in the protagonist's attempts to reinvent himself and his reality through the act of writing in order to evade death and not forget the past; yet, as Boguska points out by drawing on Borge and others, the achievement of this goal is out of reach as the writer is constructing his world as he writes, not simply narrating it.

In the first chapter's second part, "the Mirage in the Desert" (Boguska, 2020, pp. 41–65), Boguska turns to Damir Miloš's *Otok snova* [The Island of Dreams]. Miloš portrays an island as a place of promise, a projection of the touristic expectations of islands as a return to a place of eternal youth, sensuality and sexuality during vacation and outside the confines of everyday mores and life. Rather than an Arcadian idyl, Boguska sees in the protagonists' actions and words a warning of increasing immaturity and infantilism, thus reflecting Francesca Cataluccio's views of islands. In Miloš's text, the island has been reduced to a commodity to be consumed and offers no form of deeper enlightenment associated with Utopia. Although one is inclined to agree with this assessment, the remarks would have benefited from a closer examination of how this is specifically typical for modern humans.

Boguska continues to demonstrate how Miloš's text does not simply reject the tourist cliché but rather engages in the art of parodying a range of classical texts, its title referencing the Island of the Blessed, whose plot and characters

prominently feature in the text. In this way, the author leaves no doubt as to Croatian literature's place in the longer Western classical literary tradition, even while it challenges older conventions. Like Šegedin, so too does Miloš do this in typical postmodern fashion by turning to the construction of the text itself and questioning the creation of meaning as well as the author's moral obligation to his characters. In the end, the meaning of the text is a mirage, not a dream, offering no unequivocal answers.

Returning to the motif of an island utopia, Boguska thus concludes that both Croatian texts are anti-utopian, not merely dystopian, in the sense that they reject the utopia of an island as a new, positive non-place. Rather than a utopia in More's sense, Boguska reveals these first examples of insular literature to be treacherous mirages of a better way of being. Certainly, on the basis of the two texts analyzed here, one must agree with this conclusion.

Following the first chapter's rejection of an island as a utopia, the second chapter, "Island-Prison", engages with the concept of an island as a prison in Croatian insular literature. In keeping with the previous chapter's structure, the author illustrates this symbol of an island with the help of two novels: Slobodan Novak's *Mirisi, zlato i tamjan* [*Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh*] and Renato Baretić's *Osmi povjerenik* [*The Eighth Commissioner*].

In the first part of the second chapter (Boguska, 2020, pp. 67–86), the author examines Slobodan Novak's novel against the backgrounds of Croatian history, world literature and philosophy. Expanding on Tatiana Jukić's assertion that the *krugovaši* – a group of Croatian writers who contributed to the journal *Krugovi* after World War Two and dedicated themselves to deconstructing previous black and white depictions of war and politics – Boguska summarizes the plight of the former comrade Mali as a prisoner on an island. Trapped at the bedside of a dying old woman, first questioning and then accepting his fate for causes unknown to him, the author compares the experience to Kafka's *K.* and views the isolation and lack of privacy as a variation on Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* and a reflection of Zygmunt Bauman's criticism of modernism and the automatization of the individual. Here, as elsewhere, the author takes care to place Croatian insular literature in a broader context in order to make its larger relevance clear, but the reader occasionally wishes for more information on the cultural specifics. A brief remark on the former prison island, Goli Otok, itself the subject of more than one fictional text, would have further anchored the author's arguments, accented the frequency of portraying an island as a prison, and acquainted readers with Croatian realia.

The longer second part of the second chapter (Boguska, 2020, pp. 86–104) is dedicated to Baretić's award-winning *Osmi povjerenik* [The Eighth Commissioner], a modern literary utopia. Boguska oscillates between drawing parallels to Jean-Jacque Rousseau's rejection of civilization and Thomas More's *Utopia*, pointing out topographical similarities to the latter as well as accenting the contrast with the protagonist's corrupt city of Zagreb and the idyllic vision of a fictional island, Trečić, as a juxtaposition typical of literary utopias. Although the island stay transforms the protagonist Šimiša from an egotistical politician to a compassionate, thoughtful islander, thus echoing the plot of classic utopias, Boguska argues that his return to the island of Trečić is also a prison and an illusion. Here, one may come to a different conclusion. Trečić certainly has its dark sides (one need only think of the fate of the seals) and it is not an image of perfection, as most modern utopias are not; however, it may be considered more positive than the trap (Boguska, 2020, p. 102) suggested here: if the world itself is not entirely transformed, the protagonist, at the very least, has been transformed and finds a better way of being.

Boguska's third chapter, "Island–Theatrum Mundi" (Boguska, 2020, pp. 107–143), highlights islands as a symbol of the world as theater in Ranko Marinković's *Never More* (1993) and Pavao Pavličić's *Koraljna vrata* [The Coral Gate] (1990). Marinković's novel, which is set during the Second World War, depicts an island as a modern Ithaca to which the protagonist, Mateo Bartol Svilić, desires to return as an idealized place of his youth. As the title's homage to E. A. Poe suggests, Svilić learns there can be no return to the past, and Marinković engages in the art of intertextual references beyond Croatian literature, citing not only Poe but also incorporating characters from Tolstoj, Sienkiewicz and, of course, Homer. Relying on Bergson and Kristeva, the author reflects on the protagonist's view that everything experienced on an island is simply a farce and not authentic. The predominating melancholic humor may be read as the protagonist's reaction to a tragic loss. This hopelessness is also shared by the author, Marinković, who fell silent shortly after the book's publication.

The stage of Pavličić's novel is the island of Lastovo, on which the protagonist Krsto Brodnjak arrives. Lastovo is idealized as an ideal place, free from evil, awaiting "resurrection" both from its winter sleep and in a metaphorical sense (Krsto's name evokes Christ). Like Marinković, the writer and literary scholar Pavličić engages in postmodernist intertextual play with Boccaccio's

Decameron as well as the myths of Pandora and literature's origins, echoing Macpherson's *Ossian*. He uses the protagonist's island experience in order to portray the search for differentiation between "Sein und Schein" and to explain how evil can exist in a world created by God. Boguska reads Pavličić against the backdrop of the "paradox of perfection" of the Polish philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz, Odo Marquard's *Glück im Unglück* [Happiness in Unhappiness] and Gottfried Leibniz's theodicy. In her analysis, she argues that Pavličić rejects the teleologization of evil, and she places his work in the tradition of a utopian hermeneutic of seeking a better way of being rather than literary utopias per se. The precise reading of key passages of Pavličić's work are a welcome addition to the ventures into philosophy, and one is inclined to wish for more of the same for the benefit of readers not familiar with Croatian literature, particularly for such works that have not been translated. Boguska concludes by stating that the novels can be summed up by a rule from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* which states that "men must learn by suffering", making an island not an earthly paradise but a testing ground for ideas, inseparable from earthly suffering elsewhere.

The study's final chapter, "Island–Garden" (Boguska, 2020, pp. 145–195), returns to a more conventional, widespread motif tied to islands, recalling the earthly paradises presented in much European literature and art's depiction of the South Seas: an island as a garden. As in previous chapters, two works are visited to illustrate this symbolic use of islands: Slobodan Novak's *Izgubljeni zavičaj* [The Lost Homeland] (1954) and Senko Karuza's *Vodič po otoku* [A Guide to the Island] (2005).

The first two sections of the author's discussion of Novak's *Lost Homeland* accent two aspects of a closely related theme: the garden as an earthly paradise and as an Arcadian garden. Boguska differentiates between the two terms, arguing that the bliss of working and its rewards are foregrounded in representations of earthly paradise, while an Arcadian garden shares the primitivism of the genre of the idyll and pastoral and focuses on the harmony of humans and nature. Boguska does not accept Novak's visions at face value but argues that the text's final sections lend it an allegorical note, viewing the lost paradise as the protagonist's idealized childhood, to which it is impossible to return after breaking off all contact with his family home (Boguska, 2020, p. 161), leaving him forced to forget his former life (Boguska, 2020, p. 162) and to live in a world without his own place. In this way, the author argues that Novak's vision is an illusion, placing his work in the sequence of Croatian insular fiction that

views the modern world as a desert and the condition of human existence as melancholic and depressive. In her summary, Boguska argues that such representations demystify the image of Croatia as a tourist paradise, a point that could be expanded upon in this subchapter and convincingly tied to the results of the first chapter. For while Novak rules out a return, tourism presents a temporary escape from the modern world, selling the illusion of escape to the illusion of an idyll, an idea developed in the discussion of the book's last work, *Vodič po otoku* [A Guide to the Island].

Boguska argues that Senko Karuza's collection of short stories breaks with the negative appraisal of the island motif, giving special consideration to the short stories "Selo" [Village], "Vinograd" [Vineyard], "Turisti" [Tourists] and "Magarac" [Mule]. In the first, the author reflects on Karuza's depiction of the island of Vis as an unmasking of the touristic vision of an island as a product to be consumed, a vision performed by the inhabitants of Vis for visitors, challenging the island's symbolic meaning and echoing the treatment of islands as commodities that is found in the work of previous authors. The theme of authenticity, illusion and the typical visitor to a supposed utopia is fleshed out in the following discussion of the collection's other stories; then, an island as a philosophers' garden is examined in the sections dedicated to Gaston Bachelard's "oneiric house", Martin Heidegger's "being-in-the-world", Montaigne and Socrates. Boguska employs these authors' views to note an affinity between the existence of Karuza's characters and a mode of disclosing the truth, understood as *aletheia*, to argue that Karuza creates a new type of character and represents a break from modern and postmodern melancholic tendencies in Croatian insular fiction. Unlike previous texts, Boguska argues that Karuza combines a vision of paradise with a dynamically changing vision of one's home that differs from the static commodity that is found on tourist postcards. This chapter, unlike previous ones, makes an uncomfortable break from frequently citing the primary literary text in its philosophical discussion, thus giving readers unfamiliar with Karuza pause to question the assertions' validity.

The study concludes with a short overview of the presented materials, rephrasing the individual chapters' conclusions, before accenting the special place of Senko Karuza in escaping the postmodernist negation of meaning and immersion in play as offering a fresh, new approach to islands and discovering humankind's place in the world. These are all valid remarks; however, the curious reader would relish an outlook on Croatian insular literature's trajectory since the appearance of Karuza's collection, as well as a more detailed

evaluation of islands as a utopia as either an irrelevant motif of the past or one that has further potential. An outlook on unstudied insular texts would help quench readers' thirst for more knowledge on this understudied subject and would indicate points of departure for future studies.

There can be no question that the book is an invaluable contribution to the study of Croatian insular literature that goes beyond the specialized interests of scholars of Croatian literature or utopian studies. By engaging with the thoughts of philosophers and writers in her analyses, Boguska goes to great lengths to contextualize the multifaceted aspects of the island motif as so much more than a touristic or earthly paradise. Her study thus shows how such ideas may open up new understandings of these texts, as well as how prominent thought has been drawn on by Croatian authors, thus demonstrating, once again, how Croatian literature is tied to well-known Western European thought and traditions. Enthusiasts of Croatian literature will welcome this survey's potential to make discussion of the tradition of Croatian insular literature available to a broader circle of readers. These readers will also cherish the bibliography, the footnotes and the hints for further reading, while those new to the subject will perhaps wish greater attention had been paid to the chosen texts' cultural specificity.

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Inne spojrzenie na chorwacką wyspę jako raj

Recenzja monografii naukowej *Życie na wyspach. Chorwacka współczesna proza insularna*, autorstwa Anny Boguskiej (Warszawa: Instytut Slawistyki PAN & Fundacja Slawistyczna, 2020, 232 ss.).

Słowa kluczowe: recenzja, *Życie na wyspach*, proza insularna, literatura chorwacka, raj, wyspa

Seeing Croatian islands as something other than paradise

This article is a review of the study entitled *Życie na wyspach. Chorwacka współczesna proza insularna* [Life on Islands: Contemporary Croatian Insular Fiction], authored by Anna Boguska (Warszawa: Instytut Sławistyki PAN & Fundacja Sławistyczna, 2020, pp. 232).

Keywords: review, *Życie na wyspach*, insular fiction, Croatian literature, paradise, island

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