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Canadian Giants: The Reception of Alice Munro and Leonard Cohen in Serbia

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Abstract

This article considers two Canadian literary 'giants' whose reception in Serbia has differed tremendously because of the media in which they work: short-story writer Alice Munro and singer, songwriter, poet and novelist Leonard Cohen. Even before the 1990s Leonard Cohen was present in Serbia on radio and television; Alice Munro only became more popular here well into the new millenium. Seven of Munro's short-story collections have been translated into Serbian so far. Cohen, on the other hand, has not been as extensively translated – *The Energy of Slaves* and another collection of selected poems, both published in the 1980s, and *The Favorite Game* and *Beautiful Losers* (2013 and 2014 respectively). Whereas the recipient circle of Munro in Serbia may be somewhat limited to those who specifically appreciate the short story genre and students and teachers of English, much of Cohen's popularity is owed to factors that go beyond language barriers and translation conundrums.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur deux « géants » de la littérature canadienne, Alice Munro et Leonard Cohen, dans le but d'examiner la réception de leurs œuvres en Serbie, qui se diffère extrêmement à cause de moyens de transmission de messages. Leonard Cohen était présent à la radio et la télévision serbes même avant des années 1990, alors qu'Alice Munro n'est devenue populaire en Serbie qu'au nouveau millénaire. Sept de recueils de nouvelles de Munro ont été traduits en serbe jusqu'à présent. Par contre, les œuvres de Cohen n'ont pas été traduites à si grande échelle – *The Energy of Slaves* et un autre recueil de poèmes choisis, tous les deux publiés dans les années 1980, et aussi *The Favorite Game* et *Beautiful Losers* (publiés respectivement en 2013 et 2014). Tandis que le cercle de lecteurs de Munro en Serbie pourrait être limité à ceux qui apprécient tout particulièrement le genre de nouvelles, mais également aux étudiants et professeurs d'anglais, la plupart de la popularité de Cohen est due aux facteurs au-delà des barrières linguistiques et des enjeux de traduction.

Introduction

Exploring the literary reception of artists whose work reaches individuals beyond the limitations and rigidity of specific cultures may seem a justified task for it is, in fact, an investigation into the universal qualities of art and the grand narrative works of art relate. However, the cultural, political and social circumstances of the lucky recipient impose themselves on the investigator as they reveal the barriers the narrative is bound to face on its journey to the individual reader or recipient. These barriers are not restrained only to linguistic differences but also extend to the cultural context of the creation of the literary work and therefore to the author as well as to the literary tradition of the recipient. Literary conventions and the established habits of the readership also play their part in the popularization of particular genres and authors. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the reception of a literary work will be influenced by the cultural models of the recipient's community. The question is how it is then possible for the Serbian audience to enjoy Leonard Cohen's music or read Alice Munro's short stories and understand the nuances and quality of culture-referential knowledge they relate through their respective work.

On Alice Munro

The winner of the 2013 Nobel Prize for literature was Alice Munro. The daughter of a fox- and mink-farmer and a teacher, who ambitiously clawed her way out of the family farm in southwestern Ontario, Munro is often read in the context of biographical details or resemblances to the characters of the short stories she produces. On the one hand, elements that may be deemed biographical or autobiographical in Munro's work relate to the social, cultural and political atmosphere directly linked to small town Canada – the backdrop of Munro's characters' lives. On the other hand, Munro does not shy away from utilizing her personal experience in molding her stories around female characters whom she could have, at one point or another, identified with to a large degree. Her characters radiate a realism that corresponds with the reality of small-town life, and yet these vibrant inhabitants of the outwardly dull worlds Munro creates are repositories of secrets, personal tragedies and dramas. She exposes these everyday characters' social masks and strips them to the bone. In the foreword to the special movie tie-in edition collection of three of Munro's short stories that originally appeared in *Runaway*, Pedro Almodóvar elaborates on his fascination with Munro's stories:

> Despite the cultural and geographical distance, I have always felt very close to Alice Munro's themes: the family and family relationships in a rural, provincial or urban setting. And also

> the desire, the need to escape from all that; always one thing and the opposite, without that meaning the slightest contradiction. (Almodóvar 2016, xi)

What Almodóvar explains to be central to Spanish culture and tradition in the foreword to the *Runaway* collection seems much closer to Serbian culture than it does to Canadian culture. Yet Munro's stories and characters subtly implicate and seduce the reader, wherever they come from, so that those aspects of her work pertaining to culture and politics are uncovered and external, and the characters left to be only human, individuals the reader can empathize and identify with. The reader of Munro's short fiction may not recognize the colourful Canadian landscape nor identify with eyes that have had the experience of its vastness and diversity, but what this author achieves ultimately surpasses any limitations pertaining to geographical, social or political differences, for she focuses on the human element. The characters, testing the limits of their origin, gender roles, political and social status expectations, and of their own personal desires, no longer exist in the isolated geographical location that inspires Munro – they are drawn from the collective unconscious and may well be renamed to illustrate someone else's existence in a different culture.

For these reasons, it is certainly no wonder that Alice Munro's short stories have been an inspiration not only to Canadian and American artists but to one European director, Pedro Almodóvar, who used three short stories from *Runaway* (2004) – "Chance," "Soon" and "Silence" – as the basis for his movie *Julieta*, featuring the main character of the three stories, now renamed to fit the Spanish setting. The Serbian media mention the *Runaway* collection as the inspiration, and quote Almodóvar from unknown sources commenting that the movie is "a homage" to the Nobel Prize winner (*Blic*), even though this Spanish version takes its own course to accommodate the specific cultural and social relationships the director focuses on.

Prior to the Nobel Prize, only three of Munro's books were available to the Serbian readership in translation. The first, *Runaway* (*Bekstvo*), appeared in 2006, and this was followed by the publication of her quasi-novel *Lives of Girls and Women* (*Životi devojaka i žena*) in 2010 and the collection *Too Much Happiness* (*Previše sreće*) in 2011. Besides these works, however, there have been sporadic translations of short stories, for example "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" ("Nešto sam htela reći"), translated by Jelena Bođanac and published in the literary journal *Sveske* (No 95, March 2010). As might be expected, most of Munro's short story collections were translated into Serbian after she received the Nobel Prize. This began in 2013 with *Dear Life* (*Goli život*) and was followed in 2014 with *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (*Mržnja, prijateljstvo, udvaranje, ljubav, brak* 2014); 2015 brought two translations, of *The View from Castle Rock* (*Pogled sa edinburške stene*) and *Dance of the Happy Shades* (*Ples srećnih senki*). *The Love of a Good Woman* (*Ljubav dobre zene*) has been announced for 2018.

All of her books have appeared with Agora, a highly-regarded publishing house that focuses on the work of high-quality contemporary prose by both foreign and Serbian authors. In the case of Munro, it has not been difficult to catch up with her work since she has remained true to her promise and stopped writing since 2013, a decision she made three months before the Nobel Prize award was announced. This self-imposed literary retirement will not diminish the significance of her achievement. The 110th recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature, and the 13th woman, since its inauguration in 1901, Munro is in fact the only Canadian author who ever received it, and the only author whose oeuvre consists almost exclusively of short fiction.

In an article published on the occasion of Munro receiving the prize, Radio B92 commented on the author as a "Canadian feminist writer" (B92), a label Munro somewhat accepted and confirmed in the interview with Stefan Asberg after she received the Nobel Prize in 2013. The article quotes the chief editor and founder of Agora, the poet and literary critic Nenad Šaponja, who here comments on Munro as an author that "unstoppably enters our lives and reality." Šaponja recognizes Munro's style as "seemingly simple, and yet one that enables her to explore masterfully what is truly real, to penetrate human relationships and human desires." In the same article, Anđelka Cvijić, a retired editor and the translator of two of Munro's works, describes Munro as an author whose themes are "unique and authentic" and whose style is "refined." In an article published in *Politika*, Šaponja is quoted rather interestingly as dismissing the claim that Munro's writing is feminist, even though her characters are predominantly women – daughters, mothers, sisters, wives, lovers, neighbours, friends – and deems her writing as "dealing with the fundamental, and not the political" (Vulićević 2013). She is further described by Šaponja as intriguing to critics worldwide because she "manages to reach what is the most subtle in human relationships, to reach the reality that is stripped of all illusions, rough, different. Munro attempts to uncover that 'little soul' that is left in the end."

When speaking of the reception of her work, it is interesting to compare the views on Munro with comments offered by some contemporary authors – Julian Barnes, for example. He claims that

> Alice Munro can move characters through time in a way that no other writer can. You are not aware that time is passing, only that it has passed – in this, the reader resembles the characters, who also find that time has passed and that their lives have been changed, without their quite understanding how, when, and why. This rare ability partly explains why her short stories have the density and reach of other people's novels. (*The New Yorker*)

It is curious that Serbian critics have not identified this quality of Munro's technique. Likewise, not having had any direct contact with the author, who never vis-

ited Serbia, they could not recognize certain qualities of her personality which emanate from her work, but which are most easily experienced in live contact. Canadian writer Sheila Heti was lucky enough to receive a card from Munro when she was a child: "It showed me that a writer could be kind and still be a master. One didn't have to play the aloof or superior game. Indeed, the best writers are probably the best because they have a surfeit of love and generosity toward the world, not the reverse" (*The New Yorker*). Love and generosity are definitely qualities propagated in Munro's stories, regardless of the plot in question. American short fiction writer Jhumpa Lahiri is very close to Šaponja's interpretation of Munro's stories: "Her work proves that the mystery of human relationships, of human psychology, remains the essence, the driving force of literature" (*The New Yorker*).What goes beyond the specificities of particular and different cultures, what is universal to human existence – the fundamental themes and phenomena such as love, life and death – Munro's stories explore in the manner of the greatest masters. In his review of *Dear Life*, the cultural critic and popularizer Zoran Janković sees Munro's understanding of life as "a collision of unspoken melancholy and the determination to push forward and enjoy the gifts of life however rare or unreliable they were" (Janković 2014). Šaponja's epithet for Munro in the previously mentioned article in *Politika* – "uncompromising" – corresponds to Janković's understanding of Munro's style and perception as natural, ever-flowing, with an effortless precision of detail and episodic characters whose individual stories flow into the main narrative seamlessly, and without any artificial sentimentalism (Janković 2014). Another writer quoted in *The New Yorker*, Lorrie Moore, appreciates Munro's genius for the strange detail that resurfaces, but also acknowledges the translation work, which is a very important aspect for the reception of a foreign author: "It is also a triumph for her translators, who have done excellent work in conveying her greatness to those not reading in the English she wrote down. This may have to do with her enduring themes and sturdy if radical narrative architecture, but these qualities seem to have been served well by careful translation" (*The New Yorker*). Anđelka Cvijić, commenting on the experience of translating Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (sometimes referred to as a novel), calls the work a "literary pearl, at its beginning rather minimal, and in its later shaping complicated to such an extreme extent that it is difficult to translate it in its entire, flawless, beauty" (B92). It is interesting to note that the responses to Munro's work are very similar regardless of cultural and other differences.

Leonard Cohen: A poet before a singer

Some great artists get our full attention either when they get the Nobel Prize, or when they die. Leonard Cohen was a singer, songwriter, musician, poet, novelist and painter whose work, similar to that of Alice Munro, delved into the deepest and most delicate human relationships, sexuality, sadness, loneliness and isolation, as well as religion and politics, never failing to provide a disturbingly personal and sincere take on personal choice, circumstance, life and death, and love and suffering. In 2008, Cohen began his second World Tour, and in July 2009 he reached Europe where, on 2 September, his first and last concert in Serbia took place in Belgrade.

The concert was attended by around 15,000 people, which is almost the full capacity of the Belgrade Kombank Arena. It lasted for three hours and eight minutes, including the break, and began with the iconic song "Dance Me to the End of Love." The media reports were plentiful. The *Blic* journalist Aleksandar Novaković informed those who had been unable to attend that the performance was "incredible" and "unforgettable" (Novaković 2009). In his article he states that the performer himself admitted that the concert was "without a doubt the best concert on the entire tour." The audience, enchanted by the "perfection" of Cohen's performance, as well as the respect and rapport, created an atmosphere where the entire band returned no less than four times for encores. Novaković describes the magnificent atmosphere created by the performer at his greatest, and praises the audience, which recognized his passion and radiated the same energy back. The standing ovations and the singing on the part of the audience during the three-hour spectacle testify both to the exceptional nature and professionalism of the late artist, as well as to the Serbian audience's profound understanding of the depth of Cohen's work. Čolaković, a journalist for *Politika*, adds that the audience ranged from teenagers and young couples to older ones and entire families, and goes on to describe Cohen as "disarmingly charming" and "gentlemanly," which is why the concert was received in such an authentic and sincere manner (Čolaković 2009). Nevertheless, the reception of the concert was interpreted by certain Leonard Cohen fans as confused. This was because the Belgrade crowd did not seem to find it necessary to hold back on emotional reactions and applause, which led some to believe that the audience did not really know all of the songs performed at the event because the clapping would begin before the actual end of the songs. Some fans went as far as to blame the poor quality of Bulgarian CD rip-offs available to the Serbian audiences before the advent of the Internet and YouTube (Marić 2009). Far from such comments diminishing the extraordinary experience and exchange with Cohen that September night in 2009, they serve to highlight the fact that, due to the country's isolation, the Serbian public, especially in the nineties, was not even aware of the complete works of

international artists. Cassettes and records were only rarely available and one could rely only on television and radio and, sporadically, pirated CDs from abroad.

Even so, in spite of the isolation and scarcity of sources, it is not only Leonard Cohen's music that has reached the Serbian public, powerfully influencing its music taste, but his poetry collections and novels as well. Granted, Cohen is known to the general public mostly as a singer and songwriter, but his poetry first reached Serbia in the 1980s when three books appeared, *The Energy of Slaves* (*Snaga robova*, 1981) and a selection of his poetry from 1956 to 1968 entitled *Šta ja radim ovde* [What I am doing here, 1987], both translated by Vladislav Bajac, as well as *Napredovanje stila* [The progression of style, 1988], selected and translated by Bogdan Mrvoš. Cohen's 1964 novel, *The Favorite Game*, was published in Serbia in 2013 by Geopoetika. This particular novel is described by Vladislav Bajac, the chief editor of Geopoetika, as "an ode to the poetic spirit and language, a prayer of beauty; a perfectly pure adoration of beauty, a woman, the body, a woman in a body" (Bajac). He further adds that *The Favorite Game* is as contemporary a novel as could possibly be, regardless of the fact that it was written half a century ago and by a twenty-nine-year-old Leonard Cohen. *Beautiful Losers*, dating from 1966, was also translated and published by Geopoetika, in 2014. A part of the national canon, Cohen's novel is considered by Linda Hutcheon to be one of the first to formally introduce postmodernism in Canadian fiction (Hutcheon, 27). In 2014, the Serbian publisher Dereta released the translation of a biography of Leonard Cohen entitled *A Broken Hallelujah: Rock and Roll, Redemption, and the Life of Leonard Cohen* (*Leonard Koen: Muzika, iskupljenje, život*) written by Liel Leibovitz, who was the sole person to have access to Cohen's personal correspondence and archives. *You Want It Darker*, the last album Cohen would release, became available to the public in October 2016, less than three weeks before the singer's death. The eighty-two-year old artist's death was noted and commented on by the majority of media in Serbia – television, radio and Internet. Cohen's greatness was acknowledged by respectful comments and homage to the artist in the form of remembering and playing his greatest hits.

Canadian giants: before and after

Although both Alice Munro and Leonard Cohen established themselves in short fiction and poetry, respectively, in the 1960s by gaining recognition for their extraordinary talent, it is only with the rise of the Internet and Serbia's opening to the world literary and music scenes starting from the late 1990s and 2000s that their work has become more available to a wider public. With the rise of Canadian Studies and an increase in interest in the Canadian literary canon, Alice Munro's

work became a popular subject of academic interest. More recently, this acclaimed writer also began to be welcomed by the wide Serbian readership, initially with a dose of skepticism due to the specific nature of the genre she excels in. Influenced by the long and prestigious tradition of the Western European and Russian novel, Serbian readers took an amount of persuasion to take up the extraordinarily satisfying task of exploring the world of Munro's characters. In 2013, when the Swedish committee announced the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, the broad Serbian readership was more acquainted with the works of, among others, the novelists Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. However, the worldwide recognition for Munro prompted even those not specifically interested in the genre to discover the complex, yet relatable and masterfully composed stories set in, to an average Serbian reader, the remote Canadian setting.

Leonard Cohen, on the other hand, reached the Serbian audience long before Munro – as an artist with an authentic husky voice, deeply moving lyrics and irresistible charisma. This Canadian gentleman whose songs manage to reconcile folk and rock, sentimentalism and optimism, nostalgia and hopefulness, cruel realities of the contemporary society and a message of love and peace, reached the Serbian audience through European channels, and his reputation as a performer helped maintain a steady body of fans in the region. Undoubtedly, Cohen's popularity in Serbia is owed to his successful career as a singer and songwriter. Even before his death, the Serbian audience showed their deep respect for this artist and attended promotions of books about him, such as the one by Liel Leibovitz, which was launched on 7 November 2015, a year before his death, at Youth Forum in Novi Sad. The editor, Aleksandar Šurbatović, and two music critics, Momčilo Rajin and Vitomir Simurdić, helped the audience learn more about Cohen. The publisher of this book, which was unassumingly named *Cohen*, is Dereta. However, the fact that Cohen was already well known to the Canadian public for his poetry and fiction never escaped the Serbian readership and academic community. In the 1980s, Cohen's poetry, and a few decades later his novels, inspired a small circle in the Serbian academic community to start the process of translating his earlier body of literary work. Granted, only three collections of Cohen's poetry have been translated, as well as two novels and his authorized biography, but these have led to a greater interest in Cohen's music, whose perhaps strongest point lies in the lyrics. Certainly, at the moment of Bob Dylan's being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Leonard Cohen's words could not but cross one's mind as equally deserving of the recognition in the literature category.

In retrospect, many believe that Cohen's releasing his song "You Want It Darker" a month before his 82nd birthday was a farewell to his friends and audiences all over the world. Less than two months later, on 7 November 2016, he died a quiet, dignified death, very much in tone with his melancholy songs. Katarina Tomović quotes him as

saying that he planned to live for 120 years (Tomovivić 2016). He definitely will live on through his music and literature.

Conclusion

The obvious delay in Munro's work reaching the Serbian readership cannot be interpreted in terms of a lack of interest but rather of the inaccessibility of the body of her work as well as, to a lesser degree, an undeveloped taste in Serbia for the genre of short fiction. However, it has become evident that this author is gradually captivating the Serbian readership, and that her short fiction is here to stay. After the initial craze, the interest in her work is not slacking. Various cultural institutions include her in their programmes. For example, the Cultural Centre of Novi Sad organized an evening in honour of Alice Munro as part of its Prosefest on 20 April 2015, and it was a great success. Alice Munro is also the subject of serious academic research and teaching, as illustrated, for example, by the conference "Canada in Short: Contemporary Canada in Short Fiction," organized by the Serbian Association for Canadian Studies in April 2015, where the keynote address and several of the papers presented were devoted to the work of Alice Munro. All this contributes to spreading the renown of Alice Munro in Serbia.

Leonard Cohen's work, on the other hand, was less restricted in terms of the medium of transmission – radio, television, records, cassettes and CDs – despite the obvious language barrier. Moreover, Cohen had become popular with the Serbian audience long before the translations of his lyrics became available with the rise of the use of the Internet in early 2000s. For this reason, the news of his death echoed widely in Serbia and many commemorative articles were published. Sanja Gligorić, among many other journalists, emphasized exactly the quality of Cohen's poetry that is an everlasting aspect of his lyrics. She calls him "a man for all seasons," clearly alluding to More's many moods and skills, which made him, as well as Cohen, immortal (Gligorić). Now, two years after Cohen's death, most of his work has been translated and various celebrations have been organized in his honor. On 22 August 2017, for example, the music publicist Mićun Ristić delivered a talk entitled simply "U čast Leonardu Koenu" [In honour of Leonard Cohen] at the Student City in Belgrade, proving that the reception of Cohen's work has not diminished – quite the contrary.

Finally, whatever the differences in the reception of these two giants, it can be safely claimed that the Serbian readership will be feasting on the riches of their works, if only in translation, for many generations to come.

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