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## THE FOREST SPACE AS A METAPHOR FOR THE EXISTENTIAL

### *Abstract*

*Literary geography, as a subdiscipline of cultural geography, interprets the representations of landscapes and geographic phenomena in the literary discourse, and the connection between human subjectivity and emotions on the one hand, and space on the other. The forest is a mythical Slavonian space, depicted in Slavonian literature as an emblem representing paradisiacal plenty. The paper explores the forest space portrayed by selected Slavonian authors, who depicted it in their short stories and novels as an Arcadia, mirroring a variety of curious and wondrous events from the everyday life. The purpose of these mini itineraries, which take us for a walk in the forest, is reflected in the need to keep the authors and the readers alike from shutting themselves inside the myth of their personal smallness, and to make them speak and read about themselves in a way that pushes the boundaries, which are arbitrarily drawn, always from the outside, by another arbitrary myth: the one about greatness, grandeur, and great people. The great story about the Slavonian forest, as the owner and guardian of boundaries, the military and state ones as well as the private and intimate ones, in itself positions and constitutes the power of Slavonian authors. The paper provides an incentive for and a contribution to the development of so-called green literature within the cultural and creative dimensions of the European Green Deal project.*

**Keywords:** forest; Slavonian (Šokci) literature; cultural and literary geography; Slavonia; document; green literature

### I.

The forest is a mythical Slavonian space, depicted in Slavonian literature as an emblem representing paradisiacal plenty. The forest is more than a toponym; first and foremost, it is a metaphor for the “original state” of beings, the place where all possibilities coexist, before the boundaries of any landscape and its corresponding identity have been established: “Immersed in the Slavonian landscape, like in Daphnis’ and Chloe’s Arcadian dream, like in a work of singing imagination by Corot, Bellini, Patinir, Rubens or Generalić, in the reflections of water, flowers, leaves, animal thighs, the passenger, bursting with joy, travels eastwards, seemingly unable to stop anywhere, as if the perspective has no limits. The memory of Chekhov’s steppe, Gogol’s Ukrainian paeans, Kozarac’s forest, and Kosor’s wanderers from one end of the interfluvium to the other...”<sup>1</sup> Defining this space in terms of language, authors often note that the forest “will, after all, resist being deceived by names”, but that it also murmurs in “words from all dictionaries, the book it is just writing”<sup>2</sup>. In this paper, we will take a *walk* in the forest space portrayed in the prose of selected Slavonian authors. As the emblem representing the existential connection with the land and with Slavonia, the forest is often depicted in their short stories and novels as an Arcadia, mirroring a variety of curious and wondrous events from the everyday life. The purpose of these mini itineraries, which take us for a walk in the forest, is reflected in the need to keep the authors

<sup>1</sup> Tomić, Zlatko. 1996. 'Arkadski san slavonskog krajolika' [The Arcadian dream of the Slavonian landscape]. *Slavonijom, zemljom plemenitom* [Through the Noble Land of Slavonia]. Vinkovci: Privlačica, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bachelard, who discusses the “immensity” of the forest in a similar fashion. The speech about it is a variation of the “limitless world”, “the original attribute assigned to all images of the forest”. “For this ‘immensity’ originates in a body of impressions which, in reality, have little connection with geographical information. We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of ‘going deeper and deeper’ into a limitless world.” (Bachelard, Gaston. 2000. *Poetika prostora* [The Poetics of Space]. Zagreb: Ceres, p. 185).

and the readers alike from shutting themselves inside the myth of their personal smallness, and to make them speak and read about themselves in a way that pushes the boundaries, which are arbitrarily drawn, always from the outside, by another arbitrary myth: the one about greatness, grandeur, and great people. The great story about the Slavonian forest as the owner and guardian of boundaries, the military and state ones as well as the private and intimate ones, in itself positions and constitutes the power of Slavonian authors. “What is the Adriatic Sea dreaming about under the Vrbnik and the stolen Rijeka, all the way to the lovely Boka and around the lonesome emerald of Lokrum? Which secret, mysterious power of the karst binds its children with olive oil, grapevine, the love of rosemary, the glory of laurel wreaths, the song of the Montpellier maple, the chastity of violets, the silent life of the quivering sage, *Helichrysum* and feather grass? Which book lesson is mightier than the symphony woven by spruces, bushes, pines and firs of Velebit and Gorski kotar, and the lindens, beeches, hornbeams, elms, field maples, ashes, black poplars, aspens and white poplars of our lovely primary and oak forests? (...) The Spirit of the Lord, which, in Croatia, is a Croatian spirit, hovers over our waters, the Sava, the Drava, the Kupa, the Neretva, the Krka, the Vrbas and the Danube, and Velebit’s forests, mountains of Risnjak, Biokovo, Sljeme and Bitoraj, the Sahara of the naked littoral Podgorje, as the antithesis of the proud Slavonia and extravagant Srijem, with its lindens, monasteries and vineyards of Fruška gora...”<sup>3</sup> In Slavonian literature, forests symbolise the pride and defiance of the Šokci, the desire to overcome melancholy, the archetypal symbol of ascent, the space where man and nature come together. The authors regarded the forest as an important epistemological tool: the forest can be a place of refuge or a place of danger, a utopia or a dystopia. Almost always, the forest was a crucial economic resource, providing lumber, fuel and food. It had specific ideological roles too, and served as a symbolic and specific ecocritical space. Often, it was also a safe haven, or a refuge for those persecuted by the authorities. In essence, the forest was a *wild* space. However, every culture and every society have different views of the forest space. The forest’s role as a symbol, or a metaphor for a specific culture, is recognised every time. Furthermore, the forest is identified as a critical space, where one rebuilds oneself.<sup>4</sup> Although an entity in itself, the forest serves human interests and activities. Hoffmann describes this approach as a model of interaction<sup>5</sup> between nature and culture. To enter the forest means to enter the past, since many of the trees there took many years or even decades to grow. This approach to the forest space is advocated by cultural geography,<sup>6</sup> which studies the relationship individuals and communities have with their natural, cultural and social environment on the local, regional and national level, as well as the influence of the space shaped and organised by culture on people. It questions the ties between culture and landscape, place and space on a material, behavioural, functional, affective, perceptive, and symbolic level. German geographer Otto Schlüter is considered its founder, and the American school of cultural landscape and Carl Sauer helped build it further, focusing their research on explaining why cultural landscapes are shaped, and what kind of relationships people have with the natural landscape. Cultural geography studies the cultural landscape. The cultural geographer decodes it and interprets its natural, social, and cultural context. Yi-Fu Tuan, who is credited with the introduction of humanist ideas of place into geographic studies, also reflects on the experiential

<sup>3</sup> Matoš, Antun Gustav. 2003. ‘Lijepa Naša Domovina’ [Our beautiful homeland]. *Vidici i putovi; Naši ljudi i krajevi* [Views and Paths; Our People and Regions]. Translated by Dragutin Tadijanović. Samobor: “A. G. Matoš”, pp. 296–297.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Harrison, Robert P. 1992. *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 65–67.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hoffmann, Richard C. 2014. *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Šakaja, Laura. 1998. ‘Kultura kao objekt geografskog proučavanja’ [Culture as the object of geographic study]. *Društvena istraživanja*, year 7, no. 3, pp. 461–484.

features of space. In *Space and Place* (1977), he suggests that no particular scale is associated with place; rather, it is created and maintained through *fields of care*, which are derived from emotional attachment to people. Employing the ideas of *topophilia* and *topophobia* to refer to desires and fears people associate with certain places, his work draws the geographers' attention to the sensory, aesthetic and emotional dimensions of space.<sup>7</sup> People develop the *sense of place* through their visual or aesthetic experience of the place in question, and through the *fields of care*. They experience places emotionally from within, differentiating them from *public symbols*, which they experience visually from without.<sup>8</sup> Some forest spaces are assumed to be more authentic than others, and the community is assumed to have a sense of *belonging* and a *sense of place*; in other words, the connections between people and the forest are deeply rooted (the Slavonian forest is the most authentic example). Literary geography<sup>9</sup>, as a subdiscipline of cultural geography, studies and interprets the representations of landscapes and geographic phenomena in works of literature, as well as the connection between human subjectivity and emotions on the one hand and space on the other, the meanings, values and views associated with the landscape, and its place in the literary discourse. William Sharp first used the term in 1904, and William Lloyd and Christopher Salter revitalised it in 1977. Geography and literature are brought together by the process of writing, describing and presenting space in the text. An important point is that literary representations of landscapes and places are observed not just as a *truthful reflection of reality*, but also as *representations of the author's experience of the space* (the literary space is inscribed with the author's emotions, ideas, symbols and values), creating a sense of place<sup>10</sup>. Literary geography, in short, studies how a space is described in a work of literature, explores the author's connection with the natural, social and cultural space, looks into how the individual and the community experience the landscape and the space (representation – both as an art and as a complex system of meanings)<sup>11</sup>, studies the emotions associated with these spaces and the meanings ascribed to them, and establishes whether they identify themselves with the spaces, and what sort of an identity they shape. In the context of literary geography, the Slavonian forest can be analysed as a space the authors have inscribed with values, meanings, beliefs, orientations and emotions, as their *genus loci*, because the literary space is a subjective and social construct, established through cultural, social and ideological representations.<sup>12</sup> The Slavonian forest is a priceless place of internal emotional reserves, life's emotional heritage – *Arcadia* – both the nurturer and the oppressor, the carrier of the cultural and historical memory, but also a sacralised place. In conclusion, the forest has three manifestations in Slavonian literature: a landscape, a natural phenomenon, and an economic matter.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hubbard, Phil. 2008. 'Prostor/mjesto'. *Kulturna geografija: kritički rječnik ključnih pojmova* ['Space/Place'. *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*]. Ed. David Atkinson, David Sibley, Neil Washbourne. Translated from English by Damjan Lalović. Zagreb: Disput, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1979. 'Space and Place: Humanistic Perspectives'. *Philosophy in Geography*. Ed. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson. Dordrecht; Boston; London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, pp. 387–427.

<sup>9</sup> Šakaja, Laura. 2015. *Uvod u kulturnu geografiju* [An Introduction to Cultural Geography]. Zagreb: Laykam international, pp. 61–72.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hashemnezhad, Hashem; Heidari, Ali Akbar; Hoseini, Parisa Mohammad. 2013. 'Sense of Place and Place Attachment'. *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development*, year 3, no. 1, pp. 5–12.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mitchell, Don. 1994. 'Landscape and surplus value: the making of the ordinary in Brentwood, California'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, year 12, no. 1, pp. 7–30.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Brković, Ivana. 2013. 'Književni prostori u svjetlu prostornoga obrata' [Literary spaces in the light of spatial reversal]. *Umjetnost riječi*, year 57, no. 1–2, pp. 115–138.

## II.

Analysed from a literary and historical point of view, the Slavonian tradition becomes an inexhaustible source of literary inspiration. As a cultural space, Slavonia will be regarded as an open communication space, within which authors, works of literature, and periodicals communicate textual information to the readers about their own biographies, social and cultural socialisations, historical conditions, and relationships within their social and cultural systems, as well as the corresponding ideologies. The essence of this system's native component lies in the authors' vital explorations of the individual and universal human existence through its connections with the land in the native space<sup>13</sup>, as well as the need felt by those who no longer reside in Slavonia to return there in their texts in certain existential moments. The geographic space has often dictated that the literature originating within it should be named 'Slavonian literature', or 'the literature of Slavonia'. In this context, our research focuses on the continuity of literature in Slavonia. The production of Croatian literature in Slavonia still lacks a systematic and synthetic perspective of the cultural energy it has produced, which would attest to the historical continuity of Croatian literature in Slavonia. Through textual communication, if it takes place via literary text, a special artistic and literary system is materialized, in addition to a certain general social, linguistic and cultural system. In this respect, Helena Sablić Tomić and Goran Rem<sup>14</sup> differentiate between four comparatively determined literary and historical strategies, among them in particular: 1) The Slavonian text from the beginnings of literacy to romanticism, as a subcorpus often referred to as Slavonian literature, according to J. Forko, D. Prohaska, B. Vodnik and K. Čorkalo, denotes the literature originating in Slavonia before and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It deals with life in Slavonia in and before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Given the specific social and political conditions in the region, this life proceeded in two worlds: the world of the border guards, and the world of the serfs, who lived in villages, and formed village cooperatives. From this time onwards, we can observe the *locus* of the Slavonian village, and the theme of border guards in the works of Croatian authors in Slavonia (Matija Antun Relković, Antun Kanižlić, Vid Došen, Antun Ivanošić, Matija Petar Katančić); 2) Slavonia in literature is an element present in the texts written in Slavonia from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1950, attesting to the prevalence of a strong Slavonian thematic and style complex in the literary works of the most significant authors in certain periods who were active in Slavonia, or gravitated towards it. The codes of the Slavonian thematic and stylistic complex are manifested through three poetic principles in the textual structures: *theme* – life in Slavonia (Slavonian villages and towns), relationship with tradition (descriptions of Slavonian customs, Slavonian songs, descriptions of folk costumes), return to the native land as the space of the existential, connections with the space (land, forest, river, street) of borders and crossroads; *subject* – description of the Slavonian man, his appearance and his character (the mentality of the Slavonian village and urban communities), the sentimentality of the soul; *style* – simplicity of expression, humour, irony, latent passion, didacticism. The model of Šokci-themed literature can be viewed as a separate poetic matrix within Croatian literature in Slavonia, manifested in the works of literature inscribed with the traditional social, political and anthropological characteristics of a specific group called Šokci, which belongs "to the Catholic religion, and due to certain historical circumstances becomes an ethnic feature, albeit within the Croatian national

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Marijanović, Stanislav. 1985. 'Slavonska zavičajna književnost' [Slavonian regional literature]. *Regija – činilac integralnog razvoja* [Region – A Factor of Integral Development]. Ed. Tibor Karpati and Mirjana Rebić. Osijek: University, pp. 190–197.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sablić Tomić, Helena; Rem, Goran. 2003. *Slavonski tekst hrvatske književnosti* [The Slavonian Text of the Croatian Literature]. Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, pp. 17–21.

being.”<sup>15</sup> The corpus of Šokci’s literature includes names like Josip and Ivan Kozarac, Iso Velikanović, Joza Ivakić, Antun Lešić, Nikola Tordinac, Mara Švel-Gamiršek... Josip and Ivan Kozarac hold an especially prominent place in this model, having captured the spirit and the soul of the Slavonians and the Šokci in their literary works. Their image has a different interpretation today, drawing attention to the anthropological matrix of the Slavonian village and its inhabitants in the cultural dynamics of the Slavonian space. Due to its uniqueness, Slavonian literature confirms once more that Croatian literature is strong enough to support diversity within a firm unity.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the forest motive is regarded as a crucial motive in Slavonian literature and tradition, which has become a fundamental source of literary inspiration, embodying the mentality of the Slavonian subject, and the deep focus on alcohol and the Slavonians’ hedonism, which will later lead to the so-called *stereotype of wanton Slavonia* in literature. The ties to the Slavonian forest space proved particularly important in the period of Croatian literary realism, allowing authors to truthfully reproduce typical characters in typical circumstances<sup>17</sup>, and achieve a *mimesis* and a maximal authenticity in their literary discourse. In conclusion, authors often attach themselves to their home country, the land and the forest in the native space, drawing inspiration from the places where they grew up. However, the attachment to the forest space does not end with Croatian realists, but persists in the literature of Croatian modernism as well. The exploration of the experience of the forest space will prove that the Slavonian space has its own qualities, reflected in geographic, political, economic and worldview specificities. It is a unique space, a unique identity of a place, filled with a meaning, and reflecting the cultural identity of the local social community.<sup>18</sup> We can therefore speak of land as the motive and thematic backbone of *Pannonism*, which owes its importance, and the incessant drive of the Slavonian authors to dwell significantly on this motive, to the fact that the Slavonian soil is among the most fertile soils, its fertility measured by the realisability of the human existence, which gives rise to the awareness of this existentially important, real interdependence of the land and the people, implied in literature through the ultimate motive pair land-man.<sup>19</sup> Vlasta Markasović underlines the importance of land as the crucial motive in the works of Slavonian authors, discussing the so-called *homo faber*, the working man, welcomed by land, who finds meaning in his work or, conversely, finds meaning completely obscured by his preoccupation with farming.<sup>20</sup>

### III.

Forest miniatures in the prose penned by Slavonian authors offer a fascinating illustration of the subversive power of individual memory, individual poetics about the forest, which is very often just a proxy for loneliness. The forest obscures the view of the trees. Matoš dissected border-related problems with surgical precision, exposing their very essence: the problems of the demarcation line separating the small from the big, the visible from the invisible, the important from the trivial, the high from the low, the academia from the street, myth from reality. The forest serves as a boundary, while allowing this boundary to be crossed; it unites and separates; protects ones from the others; and questions the boundaries of the author and his corresponding *real space*.

<sup>15</sup> Rem, Vladimir. 1993. *Tko su Šokci* [Who are the Šokci]. Vinkovci: Privlačica, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Peić, Matko. 1984. *Slavonija – književnost* [Slavonia – Literature]. Osijek: Revija, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Flaker, Aleksandar. 1976. *Stilske formacije* [Stylistic Formations]. Zagreb: Naklada Liber, p. 150.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Brešić, Vinko. 2004. *Slavonska književnost i novi regionalizam* [Slavonian Literature and New Regionalism]. Osijek: Matica hrvatska, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jukić, Sanja; Rem, Goran. 2013. *Panonizam hrvatskoga pjesništva; Studij Slava Panonije* [Pannonism in Croatian Poetry: Glory of Pannonia Studies]. Osijek: Croatian Writers’ Association, the Branch in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Markasović, Vlasta. 2011. *Rukopis ravnice* [The Manuscript of the Lowlands]. Osijek: Croatian Writers’ Association, the Branch in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem, p. 111.

For Josip Kozarac<sup>21</sup>, the forest is a metaphor for the penetration into the space where the invisible, dubious and unclear resides, where one pursues awareness of one's own identity, and existential experience. In his short story *Slavonska šuma* [Slavonian Forest], this mythical space very quickly becomes a metaphor of the forest. As he transforms the forest into a symbol of a lyrical state, he reaches for epithets conveying containment and darkness. In doing so, he draws attention to his intimate self, and to the inspiring nature of the established relationship. The forest transforms into a space that can serve as a home, a spiritual cave housing an entirely personal world. The forest metaphor is in fact a metaphor of solitude, a signal of imaginational restoration of the landscape, and the return to one's origins: "...it is not black, deaf, or dead, as it presents itself on the horizon from afar; it breathes with life, and with the original, natural world, where nature creates and destroys, tries time and again, in plain sight, like nowhere else. For those who pass through it without heart and emotion, without the sense of the wondrous wisdom of nature, of course, it will remain a dead forest, that is to say, a space covered in trees; but for those who understand all the secret voices that bring the forest space to life, where gentle song mixes with dying vails, where thousands of distinct voices echo, small and thin, or big and deep, as soft and pleasant as any music, or as painful as a poor mother's sigh, will feel closer to themselves and their own emotions in this semi-dark, massive space..."<sup>22</sup> In this same forest, in Katica Čorkalo's view, Kozarac finds refuge from the unsettled and chaotic reality of Khuen's Croatia, where he was unable to find meaning and harmony, the vividness of his speech confirmed through personifications and anthropomorphism.<sup>23</sup> Slavonian authors very often weave myths about forest deities, trees and animals cast as their own entirely personal deities. In these expressive and associative depictions of the forest, scents are described, and personal recollections shared of time spent in the forest, presented as a vast expanse filled with mysteries: "Grasses and flowers are in bloom in the meadows, forming yellow, red and purple spots reminiscent of Mašić's or Domac's paintings; herds of horses and cows, sounders of swine and flocks of sheep scattered about the space complete the experience of this region, blessed with everything in abundance: water, land, herbs, and living creatures, touched by the hand of prosperity and abundance. Oaks, hornbeams, ashes and field maples greet the passengers from the forest; pheasants come flying out; a large ginger rabbit flees, halts, and lifts his ears, listening to what goes on around him. An occasional bustard runs by."<sup>24</sup> This reproduced nature is portrayed with a sense of measure for the man who takes up residence in it as in a lonely cocoon. The characters and personalities in the forest are focused inwards, on their own feelings, experiences and secrets. The echo of the crowd (village, town etc) then reverberates through the forest, the collective memory impressing on it, combining the mythical and the historical experience, heritage and modernity. The narrator is primarily focused on the myth of nature, where he listens to his instincts and his intuition, whose laws he follows, and whose lifecycles he understands. The forest thus becomes powerful, magical and demiurgic:

<sup>21</sup> Croatian author, born in Vinkovci on 18 March 1858, died in Koprivnica on 21 August 1906. He earned his diploma in forestry in Vienna, and worked as a ranger in Lipovljani and Vinkovci. He was also the editor of *Šumarski list* [Rangers' Herald]. His most important works include: *Tartufov unuk* [Tartuf's Grandson] (1879), *Mrtvi kapitali* [Dead Capital] (1889), *Među svijetlom i tminom* [Among Light and Darkness] (1891), *Slavonska šuma* [Slavonian Forest] (1888), and *Oprava* [Gown] (1899). In the context of Croatian realism, he stands out by introducing a new thematic system into the narrative spaces (discussing the economic and social problems of the Croatian village). Short prose forms, strongly influenced by I.S. Turgenev, are the most polished part of his literary opus. They hint at the slow transition from Kozarac's realism to the upcoming modernism. (Cf. Kozarac, Josip. 2021. *Hrvatska enciklopedija: mrežno izdanje* [Croatian Encyclopaedia: online edition]. Accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=33565>).

<sup>22</sup> Kozarac, Josip. 2005. 'Slavonska šuma – sličice i doživljaji' [Slavonian forest – images and experiences]. *Slavonska krv: izbor iz djela* [Slavonian Blood: A Selection]. Ed. Helena Sablić Tomić. Zagreb: Znanje, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Čorkalo, Katica. 2003. *Slavonica 2*. Zagreb; Vinkovci: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309–317.

“And so, whenever I walk through this ancient oak forest, a thousand senses come alive, a thousand thoughts swarming in my head about all the things that have happened here in these two hundred years...! A beau waited for his darling in its shade, a murderer stalked his victim there at twilight, secret pacts were struck in its bushes, murderous rifles and stolen treasures were hidden in its hollows... There is no tree that could not tell you a secret; no human passion that was not roused in its shadows... Whenever I walk through this forest, a magical secret peace descends upon my soul, speaking in a hundred languages, and telling me about a thousand horrors and a thousand wonders, so that my hearts stops beating in my chest, and I feel in my soul that I am a step closer to the great being that the human spirit strives in vain to reach...”<sup>25</sup> The fundamental idea of Kozarac’s entire art is that people should pursue their happiness in full cooperation, and not conflict, with nature.<sup>26</sup> To a Slavonian, Kozarac concludes, the forest is a second home: he knows every tree, every bird, every voice; he speaks to the forest as he speaks to his mother. Ivan Kozarac<sup>27</sup> tells the tale of Đuka Begović by breaking the *mimesis* down into metaphors, and condensing it into suggestive symbols, striving for the maximal semantic density – but also the maximal artistic expressiveness – without too much *effusiveness*, or too many descriptions and details. His forest resembles a mythical space, filled with sensations and visions. The primacy of the personal, emotionally coloured experience takes precedence over the exactness of depiction. Traces and movements, changes and durations have been moved to another dimension, while his dreams, actuality and imagination, reality and memories converge and interweave in the forest. Space and time lose their tangible determinants there, making the fields, houses, meadows and grasses simultaneously a part not just of symbolic nature, but also of an imaginary mythical abstraction, reaching the faraway, timeless, halted spaces. The inception is not recognised in it then, or in Đuka: “– There are the willows! Flocking together, hovering over the silent waters of the lowland and the plain. Always silent... The lowest, thinnest long branches touching the smooth surface, and plunging underneath. And it is sunset... Yes. It was usually sunset when he approached the willows. He remembers seeing the sun set behind the horizon, far away, somewhere behind the copse of plum trees. The willows blush with its reddish glow, which plays on the shimmering leaves and the rough bark of the old, twisted trees, painting the silent waters of the creek red. Almost like fresh blood, they seem to the eye. And there she comes... Always, he spots her, walking up from the village! There she comes, he tells himself, not taking his eyes off her. Her eyes are cast down, her scarf hiding her face. Looking up, she shields her eyes with her hand, and peers into the willows. There is a small hollow in the ground where he is lying, and she cannot see him. He, however, sees everything on her. Her shirt, her red apron, her skirts embroidered with blue thread, and he already knows she has them tucked underneath her left hip. He clearly hears the blooming meadow rustle under her feet, clad in yellow sandals. And still she is far away... The crimson sunset rushes to meet her, creeping in long strips down the meadow, wrapping itself around her, flickering, smiling over her and her youth. Even the willows seem to

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Jelčić, Dubravko. 1988. 'Josip Kozarac danas' [Josip Kozarac today]. *Josip Kozarac: književnik i šumar* [Josip Kozarac: Author and Ranger]. Vinkovci: Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Croatian author, born in Vinkovci on 8 February 1885, died in Vinkovci on 16 November 1910. He left secondary school to get a job as a clerk intern at the District Court in Vinkovci. In 1909, he was hired as a scribe at the Publishing Fund with the Croatian writers' and directors' association in Zagreb. He published poems and short stories in contemporary literary magazines, and in 1906, he published his first short story collection, *Slavonska krv* [Slavonian Blood] (1906). Three of his books were published posthumously: *Pjesme* [Poems] (1911), *Izabrane pripovijetke* [A Selection of Short Stories] (1911), and the novel *Đuka Begović* (1911). The extraordinary storytelling talent he exhibited in these works of literature, his temperament, and his vivid interest in all his characters earned Kozarac a place among the most significant prose authors of his time. (Cf. Kozarac, Ivan. 2021. *Hrvatska enciklopedija: mrežno izdanje* [Croatian Encyclopaedia: online edition]. Accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=33564>).

see her and whisper: here she comes, here she comes!... The quiet valley waters seem to awaken too, their surface rippling slightly, carrying the willows' murmurs to the skirrets, waterlilies, reeds and farther away... She will be here any minute now! Twenty more steps... ten... nine.... eight. A hop. He feels as if he is growing. His hands reach out to her of their own volition, and the grass, silent thus far, seems to speak up in an appreciative murmur. She reaches him... Sits by his side... Her dark face flushed, her lips moist. They lean close, pressing against each other. The willows fall quiet, magnificent in their silence. The sunset's red glow dissipates and fades away, and shadows seem to be dripping down from the willows. The creek grows dark, and the thin branches caressing its waters fall asleep, as if on a soft pillow. Small shadows merge into bigger ones. They are all around them now. The grasses rustle and whisper underneath the two of them, the weeds quiver with desire, and a strong smell of mint wafts from the edge of the hollow. They speak... And how! Madly! What are they saying! Laughing over their casually uttered words. And then they fall silent for a moment. Something touches a willow branch briefly, shaking its leaves, and she speaks again, whatever about. You can hear her heart in her voice. It seemed to Đuka he could hear her heart in her voice, her soul speaking through it. And she told him how she had been thinking about him all day long, and about what happened there beneath the willows last night, and how no one knew about their love yet, and how she enjoyed the mystery."<sup>28</sup> Literary critics recognised Ivan Kozarac as a markedly regionally oriented author, who focuses on themes characteristic of the Pannonian literary discourse, whereby the Slavonian space becomes a literary space as well. The function of a literary space provides it with a modelative function as well, giving it the ability to express non-spatial relations, such as the social, religious, ideological and moral worldview aspects.<sup>29</sup> Ivan Kozarac, analysing the *small everyday world* of the family communities in Slavonia, thus penetrated into an entire complex of the Slavonian society and its mentality, as a spatial metaphor for the existential. In the context of Anica Bilić's studies, it is very important to note that the forests of this region were destroyed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, leaving the Vinkovci area a bare plain, which is vital for the understanding of the existential anxiety that a number of Kozarac's characters struggle with. The bare lowland space left the essence of the Slavonian subject equally bare, often putting him in a state of anxiety, because such a space was not able to satisfy the contemporary man's basic human need for a stable and structured place. Anica Bilić observes that the natural forest space is in harmony with the return to the instinctive and sensual concept of life, and to the truth of heart and the emotional elementality that Đuka Begović is yearning for. For him, the forest is a space of freedom, happiness and pleasure, because, "in the natural forest space, its dynamic and vitalism, he experiences the ecstasy of unbridled life, an explosion of freedom as he drives his horses through the forest, the euphoria of movement in a space that retreats before him, mostly because he can be completely free there in his thinking and behaviour."<sup>30</sup>

For Slavonian authors, a trip into the forest is a ritual, both in their own private life and in the lives of the characters they write about. This ritual could be interpreted as a way for older generations to pass their deeper experience onto the younger ones. Another example of this is

<sup>28</sup> Kozarac, Ivan. 2005. 'Đuka Begović'. *Slavonska krv: izbor iz djela* [Slavonian Blood: A Selection]. Ed. Helena Sablić Tomić. Zagreb: Znanje, pp. 254–256.

<sup>29</sup> Bilić, Anica. 2006. 'Ivan Kozarac i literarna Slavonija' [Ivan Kozarac and literary Slavonia]. *Dani Hvarskoga kazališta: grada i rasprave o hrvatskoj književnosti i kazalištu* [Hvar Theatre Days: Materials and Discussions about Croatian Literature and Theatre], year 32, no. 1, p. 433.

<sup>30</sup> Bilić, Anica. 2018. *Slavonska književna geografija – iz atara ratara i bečara* [Slavonian Literary Geography: From the Region of Farmers and Rakes]. Zagreb; Vinkovci: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts; Centre for Scientific Work in Vinkovci, p. 59.



found in the literary work and opus of Mara Švel-Gamiršek<sup>31</sup>, a representative of the literature of Šokci of Slavonia, Baranya and Srijem, or, more precisely, according to Bogdan Mesinger's interpretation, the prose of the post-military border period.<sup>32</sup> Her short story collection *Šuma i Šokci* [The Forest and the Šokci] is based on authentic stories, initially originating from the economic and social setting of Šokadija. The writings of Švel-Gamiršek (who is somewhat unjustly considered Josip Kozarac's successor, even though she isolated the forest- and Šokci-related themes from the interest sphere of Kozarac's opus and the works of other authors, especially *Slavonska šuma* [Slavonian Forest], *Tena* and *Proletarci* [Proletariat]<sup>33</sup>), are a testimony to the Šokac's connection to the forest, land and customs. At the beginning of the said short story, the author elaborates on the history of Slavonia, obsessed by forest and centuries-old oaks: "New trees have been planted in the distant spaces around these ancient oak trees, and I only have one wish: I would like our new generations to see these new forests mature more consciously than their ancestors, and benefit from them in the way the foreigners benefited from the old forest at a convenient time, aided by unconscious or unconscientious people, sadly, from our own community."<sup>34</sup> Oak exploitation was at its peak in the 1890s, and Mara Švel-Gamiršek recounts in her literary work, for example, the reminiscences of old Stipe Adamčić about a time when the cooperatives had flourished, and forests were plentiful. He remembers giant logs transported somewhere far away, and he remembers that life used to be different in those times: "The forest belonged to us."<sup>35</sup> The plentiful forest was disappearing. In conclusion, in her entire opus, Mara Švel-Gamiršek positions Šokci-related themes in the poetics of proto-existentialism<sup>36</sup>: "Then came winter, covering the paths and village roofs in snow. The forest the young woman walked in told her stories only she could understand. And she told the old oak, its shaggy head streaked with frost, about her dreams of a wonderful life in two, the heart harbouring no doubts, and repeated to the cold and pale rays of moonlight the gentle words that Davor used to tell her once, a long time ago."<sup>37</sup> The oak is also thematized in the novel *Hrast* [Oak] (1942), widely considered Mara Švel-Gamiršek's most ambitious work, portraying, in chronotope fashion, the period of Croatian history between 1915 and 1945, with a special emphasis on the region of Slavonia, known for its centuries-old oaks, whose rootedness symbolises stability, steadfastness and persistence, pointing to an allegoric approach (the time of the assassination of Stjepan Radić).

<sup>31</sup> Croatian author, born in Srijem on 3 January 1900, died in Zagreb on 7 December 1975. She graduated from the Sušak grammar school in 1918. In terms of its themes, her literary work is bound to Slavonia. In her two short story collections, *Šuma i Šokci* [The Forest and the Šokci] (1940) and *Portreti nepoznatih žena* [Portraits of Unknown Women] (1942), she explores the intimate tragedies of ordinary people faced with major historical events. In terms of content, she continues exploring the themes of blood and instinct that dominate the works of Josip and Ivan Kozarac, and Joža Ivakić, adding a spiritual dimension, and on the formal level adding lyrical segments and a technique mimicking oral storytelling to her realistic narrative. She is also the author of the political novel *Hrast* [Oak] (1942), a chronicle of the events in Croatia between 1915 and the beginning of World War II. Since she did not fit into the dominant modernist poetics of her time, her texts have mostly been forgotten. She was also a translator from German. (Cf. Švel-Gamiršek, Mara. 2021. *Hrvatska enciklopedija: mrežno izdanje* [Croatian Encyclopaedia: online edition]. Accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=60075>).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Mesinger, Bogdan. 1997. 'Diskurs slavonskog mita u djelu Švel' [The discourse of the Slavonian myth in Švel's work]. *Mara Švel-Gamiršek: prilozi sa Znanstvenog kolokvija* [Mara Švel-Gamiršek: Contributions from the Scientific Colloquium]. Drenovci: Hrašće, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Čorkalo, Katica. 1993. 'Šuma i Šokci Mare-Švel Gamiršek' [Šuma i Šokci by Mara Švel-Gamiršek]. *Slavonica*. Vinkovci: Matica hrvatska, Vinkovci branch; Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Centre for Scientific Work Vinkovci, p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> Švel-Gamiršek, Mara. 1990. *Šuma i Šokci* [The Forest and the Šokci]. Vinkovci: Privlačica, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Sablić Tomić, Helena; Rem, Goran. 2003. *Slavonski tekst hrvatske književnosti* [The Slavonian Text of the Croatian Literature]. Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, p. 183.

<sup>37</sup> Švel-Gamiršek, Mara. 1994. 'Snaša-Terzina posljednja ljubav' [Terza's last love]. *Portreti nepoznatih žena* [Portraits of Unknown Women]. Vinkovci: Privlačica, pp. 164–165.

One thing is for certain: the Slavonian forest is a topical theme in literary and historical heritage, as well as in Slavonian literary discourse. It is a metaphor for the existential, because its space has been a constituent part of life for the local residents from time immemorial. To them, the forest has provided food and refuge, and has been their ‘green religion’ (the term rangers used to describe their love for the forest). In conclusion, the forest serves as a boundary, while allowing this boundary to be crossed; it unites and separates; protects ones from the others; and questions the boundaries of the author and his corresponding *real space*. “Jumping over the high brick fence, and stepping underneath the whispers of old beech, hornbeam, linden and sweet chestnut trees, I stumble onto a castle, an ordinary old, spacious house with elegant high windows, and my body shudders with happiness, wonder, joy, and whatnot, because I spot the balcony, my balcony. (...) The leafing and blooming iron branches are like a fan, inflated by the wind, swollen with the breath of love that used to emanate from the house, whose doors and windows are now silent, abandoned, mummified, locked.”<sup>38</sup>

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## PROSTOR ŠUME KAO METAFORA EGZISTENCIJALNOGA

### *Sažetak*

*Književna geografija, kao poddisciplina kulturne geografije, interpretira reprezentacije krajolika i geografskih fenomena u književnom diskursu, odnosno vezu ljudske subjektivnosti i emocija s prostorom. Šuma je mitski slavonski prostor koji se u slavonskoj književnosti prikazuje kao amblem rajskog obilja. U radu će se istražiti prostor šume iz pera izabranih slavonskih književnika koja je u njihovim pričama i romanima prikazivana kao Arkadija u kojoj se zrcale različita čudna i čudesna događanja iz svakodnevlja. Svrha se tih malih itinerara o šetnji šumom ogleda u potrebi da se niti autori, a ni čitatelji ne zatvore u mit o osobnoj malenkosti nego da o sebi prozbore i pročitaju ono što pomiče granice koje im, uvijek izvana, arbitrarno ucrtava jedan drugi proizvoljni mit: onaj o veličini, o velikome i velikima. Sama po sebi, ta velika priča o slavonskoj šumi koja je vlasnik i čuvar granica, onih vojnih, državnih i onih privatnih, intimnih, pozicionira i konstituira moć slavonskih autora. Rad je poticaj i doprinos razvoju tzv. zelene književnosti unutar kulturne i kreativne dimenzije projekta Europski zeleni plan.*

**Ključne riječi:** šuma; slavonska (šokačka) književnost; kulturna i književna geografija; Slavonija; dokument; zelena književnost