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## Anica Savić Rebac (1894–1953)

Many cultured readers, from within academic circles or without, could have encountered Anica Savić Rebac without knowing her name or anything about her. For instance, a reader of Thomas Mann's »Legends of Joseph« probably remembers the definition of love given by Pharaoh: these are the words of Anica Savić Rebac from her study on erotology (the term she herself coined), or the philosophy of love. She managed to publish the first part of the work she planned, the preplatonic erotology. In her research on the topic, she corresponded with many intellectuals of her time, sending them her work in German, in order to get their opinion. More spectacular is Anica Savić Rebac's presence in Rebecca West's classic travel book »Black Lamb, Grey Falcon«, in which Anica, under the name of »Milica« appears not only as a new friend at the least expected place (Skopje in the 1930'), but also as the intellectual guide who eventually reveals to Rebecca West the rituals which would lead the author to the clue-metaphor of her vision of the Balkans. Rebecca and Anica maintained correspondence until after World War II. Rebecca West's admiration for this woman is remarkable; Ludwig Radermacher, Anica Savić Rebac's professor with whom she studied in Vienna, wrote in one letter that she was his best student ever ... Who was this extraordinary woman, who exchanged thoughts with Denis Saurat, Gershom Sholem, Thomas Mann, Rebecca West, and was nearly forgotten in her own country?

Anica Savić was born into the wealthy family of Milan Savić, a well known intellectual in Novi Sad, secretary of Matica Srpska (»Serbian Queen-bee«), an important Serbian cultural institution in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Her god-father was Laza Kostić, a famous Serbian poet, philosopher, dramatist, translator and political representative in Budapest for a while, and the people that gathered in her father's home were the elite of both Novi Sad and Beograd. As a young child, Anica was taught languages. Her first translations of Pindar were published when she

was ten; her translation of Verhaeren was published a year later; she wrote dramas when she was twelve. In one of her three preserved dramas, a pagan priestess of Athena is sequestered and destroyed by a primitive, vulgar and violent Christian priest. Obviously, the lesson of contemporary atheists especially of Anatole France, was popular in the circles where she was growing up. As a girl, she could not attend the public school, her father and mother so cultivated her intellectual development. She was accompanied by her mother to the university of Vienna, where she studied classics. One of my professors, Milan Budimir, remembered her fancy hats and her long and tight skirts; her colleagues usually carried her onto the platform of the Viennese trams. It was a glorious time in Vienna, where students from the Balkans and from the Austro-Hungarian territories imagined the future state of the South Slavs, constructing the ideological framework of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Budimir recalled that after one of the rallies the students had against the imperial politics in the Balkans, Radermacher himself came to prison to liberate his Balkan students: the best of the dying empire invested into the force that was going to destroy it. Anica could not present her PhD because of the World War I. She went back to Novi Sad, and met Hasan Rebac, a »Serbian Muslim« as he presented himself, a wounded hero of the guerrilla movement for the independence in Bosnia & Herzegovina from the Austro-Hungarian empire, and a specialist in Balkan Muslim oral tradition. They married, and had to leave Novi Sad. When her father died, the magic atmosphere around his home disappeared, and in the circles she frequented, all that remained was the intolerance toward her husband. They could not stay in Beograd either, although Anica's PhD received the best evaluation at the university there, because both had strong republican and socialist beliefs. They were sent to Skopje by the end of the 20's, where Hasan taught in the local medresa, and Anica in the local high school. This is where



Rebecca West found them, thanks to information from Stanislav Vinaver, a Beograd Jew and her Yugoslav guide, one of the most talented, multilingual and original Serbian authors of the first half of 20th Ct. (»Constantine« in Rebecca West's book.)

Anica Savić Rebac situated her work in the history of ideas. Her great plan was to write a history of the ideas of love, erotology, from the early Greek period to Dante. She managed to publish the first book, and fragments from the rest of her project, but did not finish it. Her approach in this study is both philosophical and anthropological. Philosophical texts do not have a meta-textual status, they are constantly compared with the immanent ideas in the literary and non-literary texts (myths, oral tradition, sayings, images). Eros, as the symbol-bearer of meaning, is the central topic of investigation. His multiple identities, forms and deriving ideologies are presented, discussed and compared in order to re-construct a possible history or development of the concept of love. Disciplined philological work is questioned through an anthropological perspective. At the end, history of religion appears as a parallel »narrative« within her main line of research. Maybe the most interesting aspect of her study is the status of myth: it is not presented as a system, or a kind of »lateral« epistemic set of tools. Myth is a form of poetry, which excludes any need of accuracy, explains many conflicting versions and liberates myth from the historic investment.

Despite discrimination in her academic career, Anica Savić Rebac produced a monumental work which might look fragmented, but in fact witnesses a precise intellectual quest and the necessary study along the main line of interest and main problematics. For instance, she translated Lucretius' »De rerum natura« into Serbo-Croatian as a by-product of her analysis of his philosophy. In order to define the thought on love and on beauty, she decided to contradict Benedetto Croce and his disbelief to the existence of an ancient concept of aesthetics, and eventually wrote the History in Ancient Aesthetics. In this polemic and powerful book, she wrote, among other original ideas, that Piet Mondrian's painting corresponds with Plato's aesthetic demands.

Most exemplary of all is her intellectual quest about the poetic work of the most celebrated romantic poet of the Yugoslav tradition, the Montenegrin archbishop and secular ruler, Petar Petrović Njegoš, who lived a short life in the first half of the 19th Ct., and left a huge poetic work – epic, lyric, and dramatic. Anica Savić Rebac was inte-

rested in only one, the most mysterious and the least read of his works, his mystic epic »Ray of the Microcosm«, which translates his religious and Orthodox doubts, his fascination with fallen angels, especially Satan, heresies and mystic experiences. In order to understand this very complicated text, she had to research into the early Christian mystic literature, the Ancient mystics, the Hebrew tradition, Caballa ... She could not communicate her ideas and ask for specialists' opinion without the text itself, so she made the ultimate effort and translated »Ray of the Microcosm« into English and German in order to discuss it with Gershom Sholem, Hans Leisegang, and other specialists in the field. The two translations were published only after her death. The studies on this topic reveal another project that could not be effectuated by one person, maybe not even by a whole imaginary research center, but the fragments were researched meticulously and in depth.

Anica Savić Rebac ceased to write poetry after the 20's, but never ceased to translate, publish criticism, essays and commentaries. Besides ancient authors, she translated Thomas Mann's short stories, poetry by Stephan George, John Milton, Robert Browning, Sally Prudhomme, John Keats, and also several poems by her favorite poet, Percy Bish Shelley. She admired his political ideas as she admired his poetic force and elegance. Convicted socialist and feminist, she wrote a number of essays on Serbian women authors. Her scattered critical writing, especially criticism and essays, were collected only 30 years after her death, and appeared in a thick volume in which a critical system is not less firmly construed than her disciplinary work on classical topics.

Only after World War II had she a chance to teach at the university of Beograd. Her suffering during the war – the nationalist Serbian paramilitary, Chetniks, were constantly after her husband – was finally rewarded. In the enthusiastic post-war years, she published an article on Shelley's socialism, and she translated a collection of partisan oral poetry into English. Her position at the Department of Classics included the teaching of courses on Roman literature and Ancient philosophy, and there she met old colleagues, like Milan Budimir. Her courses on Roman literature remain unpublished. In a short time from 1945 to 1953, she published most of the studies she had worked on for more than twenty years.

The work of Anica Savić Rebac covers a vast area of topics, but all of them are related in quite a convincing way: beside the great topics already mentioned, she wrote

on Platonic and Christian love, on Spinoza's concept of love, on Ancient Greeks mystic and tragic thought, on Goethe's Hellenism, on Athenian democracy, on the concept of »classical«, on the number three in Herodotus, and many others. The overall view of that work offers an amazingly rich intellectual panorama, the intertwining systems of thought that come from the same source but demand specific approaches; a breath-taking accumulation of knowledge. What threw this brilliant mind's work into oblivion? Anica Savić Rebac was not easy to fit into any restrained system. She endured the consequences of her life choices with a Muslim husband, their shared political beliefs in the Yugoslav monarchy, and the new Yugoslav communist rule granted her a short moment of acceptance. But her socialism had almost nothing to do with Marxism, especially in the new sovietized version. Unfortunately, she maintained her friendship from the common prewar exile years in Skopje with the hated Dean of the School of Philosophy in Beograd, who later became a stalinist tyrant. Therefore, she was not popular anywhere, except with her students. When her husband suddenly died in Summer 1952, she attempted suicide several times, and was put under a kind of private, friendly surveillance by her students. In one moment without supervision, she managed to kill herself in 1953. Her student Ljiljana Crepajac published her manuscript on Ancient aesthetics, but the rest of her work was silently removed, although all of her manuscripts were kept by her friend, the Director of the University Library in Beograd, available for reading and publishing. Some of her essays were collected and published in the 60's. Her complete works were finally gathered and four volumes were published in 1989. The Yugoslav war put an end to this project: the complete correspondence is still not published.

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Anica Savić Rebac and her husband, probably 1919