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*Laughing in the Face of Death:
Comic Elements in the Poetry of Mirjana Stefanović and Milena Marković*

Summary

Mirjana Stefanović is the first Serbian poetess to combine humor and poetry, and Milena Marković, although belonging to the younger generation, shows a similar sensibility by treating the loftiest themes, such as birth, love, and dying, in a humorous manner. The theme of love is treated through comic elements, which are for both authors a way of deconstructing the romantic cliché and finding a new, unexhausted language of love.

Mirjana Stefanović uses laughter to tame death, to mock it, tease it, dethrone it, and thus make it less frightening. This poet also uses humor to undermine the great national myths and to unmask the political abuse of the Serbian tradition and history. The comic elements in the poems of Mirjana Stefanović offer awakening and liberation from a cynical war logic – her poetry promotes the value of an individual human life and thus is essentially of an anti-war character.

Milena Marković, on the other hand, finds the lyric characters of her poems among the young people from the marginalized groups of the suburbs, who are angry, vulgar and of unpromising prospects, and who resemble the heroes of the British new drama. The space she is talking about is Belgrade suburbia, full of alcohol, drugs, sex, dirt, but also beauty, love, and sense of humor. For this poet, the social margin is not a place of social banishment, but a place of freedom from the petty-bourgeois norms. Although her poetry seems to be dark, her representation of love often throbs with life, and her view of death is marked by a sophisticated humor. She is writing down harrowing laments for the lost generation, but death is not only a source of sadness for this poet. It is also an exit strategy and salvation from an empty mediocre life.

The poetry of both poets carries a reversed carnival image of the world. The poetry itself is the space of this carnival, it is liberated from the social norms and owing to humor, it is possible to express anything that would in ordinary circumstances have to be suppressed. Laughter is liberating, it is a way of facing the darkest and most frightening aspects of life. It is not a cold laugh governed by the suspension of compassion; quite the contrary, it is a cathartic laugh which upsets the readers, changes and connects them with the surrounding world and other people.

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