

Tamara Babić*

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology

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KSENIJA ATANASIJEVIĆ AS INTERPRETER OF NJEGOŠ

Abstract: This chapter discusses the interpretations of the ideas in the literature of Petar II Petrović Njegoš by Ksenija Atanasijević. First, we present Atanasijević's findings in a chronological manner within the historical context of academic studies of Njegoš, with special attention paid to relations between her, Branislav Petronijević and Anica Savić Rebac. Further, we discuss the most important ideas and original findings of Atanasijević's studies of Njegoš, where we highlight the position of human existence within the context of religion, philosophy and mysticism, alongside the metaphysical question of evil. Finally, we present the position that Njegoš has among other philosophers and poets in Atanasijević's studies and her work in general. This text aims to closer determine Ksenija Atanasijević's position among the various interpretations of Njegoš and his writing, seeking to make her a more visible source for future interpretations of this Serbian poet.

Keywords: Njegoš, ethics, Serbian philosophy, Serbian literature, theodicy, mysticism, dualism, history of the ideas

Exploring the philosophy of Njegoš within the framework of Serbian culture

Ksenija Atanasijević conceptualized her research (the end product being the study entitled *Penseurs Yougoslaves*) in a time when she, together with several other philosophers, turned towards national (South Slavic) sources of wisdom as the basis for new philosophical concepts (Marić, 2014, p. 69). For Atanasijević, the history of Serbian philosophy is divided into the western (rationalist) and the eastern (Slavic) current (Marić, 2014, p. 70). It seems that she is more interested in the eastern current because she considers it more communicative, due to the origins

* ORCID iD: 0009-0008-4253-172X • e-mail: tamaracezar59@gmail.com

and originality of this way of thinking. Her study, *Penseurs Yougoslaves* was written in order to present the intellectual heritage of the South Slavic nations (primarily Serbs), mainly emphasizing their originality and differences to the western intellectual canon. In addition, she highlights the arguments that promote the intellectual values of these peoples. The fact that the book was originally published in French indicates who the target audience was. However, when we think about the significance of her study in the Yugoslav (Serbian) context, several things need to be pointed out. First, at the time of writing, her opinion of Western Europe was not positive. These were the decades after World War I, which showed all the flaws and dangers of a Eurocentric worldview, typical of Western civilization from the period of the Renaissance or perhaps even before (Atanasijević, 1936, pp. 8–9). In her view of the Slavic nations, their culture and philosophy was that these cultures ought not blindly follow and copy the Western European models, which are usually neither relatable nor close to them. Certainly the historical context in which national cultures were developed in the eastern and western parts of Europe, had the role of determining the primary philosophical issues and their solutions. The characteristic of South Slavic nations is that in the modern age they have long fought for their political, national, and religious independence, often against Western Europeans and their Asian allies, such as Turkey (Marić, 2014, p. 83) – thus their historical experience is very burdensome. All of this could affect the choice of primary problems in the philosophy of the South Slavic philosophers, which can be seen by the fact that they have always striven to find an explanation of human suffering. As an innovative poet, Njegoš drew upon folk traditions, and so it can be said that his poetic self-awareness unites the personal human experience with collective memory and knowledge. Thus, it is clear why Njegoš was a representative figure of the Yugoslav (Serbian) national thoughts for Atanasijević. The fact that she chose him, declaring him the most important poet, and placing him at the center of her studies shows that Atanasijević, as a philosopher, understood her national culture, which is a vital factor, in our opinion, that enables her to present her culture to the foreign academic public.

The metaphysical in Njegoš's poetry

If we want to roughly group interpreters of Njegoš in the history of Serbian literary criticism by to their conceptual orientations and disciplines, Ksenija Atanasijević could conceivably be sorted into the group that sought to unite the philological and philosophical methods of interpretation. There are two reasons why we are considering her work in this context: first, because she primarily reads his poetry from the philosophi-

cal point of view (she begins with her own philosophy, and follows it up by explaining which aspects of Njegoš's work she recognizes as philosophical); and second, because her argumentation aligns closely with religious and other philosophical interpretations. We will compare her methodology with four other interpreters, to present the differences and similarities between them. We think that this would be the optimal way to understand the relations between these researchers and the various perspectives that can be employed to assess the intellectual heritage of Ksenija Atanasijević.

*Njegoš as a philosopher: Ksenija Atanasijević versus
Branislav Petronijević*

From the perspective of the history of Serbian philosophy, there is a very interesting and significant difference in how Njegoš is perceived between Atanasijević and her professor, the Serbian philosopher Branislav Petronijević. Petronijević is acknowledged as the first philosopher who sought philosophical answers in the work of Njegoš (Marić, 2018, p. 139). And although he launched important theoretical and scientific issues in Serbian culture (such as the relationship between philosophy and poetry), the problem with his conceptions is their narrow approach to Njegoš and their diminishing results (Marić, 2018, p. 144). This can be seen in the reduced literary scope of Petronijević's analyses (he exclusively focuses on *The Mountain Wreath*): he is primarily interested in a specific issue – Njegoš's attitude towards Darwinism (Marić, 2018, p. 144). The particular properties of his interpretation stand in stark contrast to those provided by Atanasijević after him. What does Petronijević do in his interpretations? He focuses on universal philosophical issues, not taking into account the cultural and historical context, and without any attention paid to the actual figures¹ that are the main subject of his research (Marić, 2018, p. 150). It would seem that it is this consideration of Njegoš that Atanasijević has in mind when she says that anyone who adhered only to the principle on logic was doomed to intellectual darkness. Furthermore, Petronijević's way of thinking can lead to similar misconceptions in others (Atanasijević, 2005, p. 26). There are two main points that separate their opinions – one is the issue of pessimism and the other is the issue of theodicy in Njegoš – B. Petronijević believes that Njegoš is a pessimist because he gave up on the notion of an immanent God, while Atanasijević believes that Njegoš solves the problem outside the field of logic, and thus is not a pessimist (Marić, 2014, p. 91).

1 That figure is, of course, Njegoš.

*Njegoš as a religious thinker: Ksenija Atanasijević
and Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović*

Notable among interpreters of Njegoš's religious and philosophical thought is Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, who in 1911 published a book titled *Njegoš's Religion (Religija Njegoševa, Knežević, 2018, p. 60)*. According to notes by future interpreters, the book was a first attempt at trying to respond to the meaning of religion for Njegoš, in the context of his own spirituality and writing, and Velimirović's book attempts to resolve the many problems that arise in this regard (Knežević, 2018, p. 60). Let us compare the starting point of his interpretative methodology to that of Atanasijević. First, they are completely different when it comes to objectivity: Bishop Velimirović approaches Njegoš subjectively, intending to systematically reconstruct and present Njegoš's thought, so Velimirović fully immerses himself in the role of the hero which he is to interpret (Knežević, 2018, p. 61). By contrast, in her short study on Njegoš, Atanasijević uses her critical method to objectively approach the text, its author and the origins of the text. However, their views do not completely diverge, agreeing on the following point: Njegoš is, according to them, a poet who creates his works almost exclusively from the strength of his life experiences and feelings. In addition to the assumed limitations of such an approach, Velimirović is the first who discovered many religious layers in the works of Njegoš, which interpretation will be taken up by many other subsequent researchers. At this point, we should emphasize that there is a strong connection between this interpretation and the Platonist and original idea of preexistence, as well as a connection to Manichaeism and Stoicism (Knežević, 2018, p. 69). It turns out that, among pre-World War II interpreters, Atanasijević was one of the first to try to bring these complex conceptual systems closer to a well-known idea of Njegoš as a poet and philosopher. Bishop Velimirović, following his own views in relation to Orthodox dogma, asserts that Njegoš affirmatively solves the problem of theodicy, believing in God's presence in the world (Marić, 2018, pp. 91–92). In this respect, the Bishop is closer to Atanasijević than Petronijević. Despite her distance from the religious and dogmatic interpretation of evil, Atanasijević's reading of Njegoš is much closer to a theologian's point of view than a philosopher with whom she once had much in common. This divergence of opinion has its roots in the ideas the two philosophers studied, and can also be understood through their differing contexts.

*Njegoš and European culture and literature:
Atanasijević, Schmaus and Rebac*

When comparing Atanasijević with other interpreters of Njegoš, it is important to note that her essay, "A View of Njegoš's Thought" ("Jedan pogled na Njegoševo mislilaštvo," from 1937) came out after *Study of The Ray of Microcosm by Njegoš* (1927) by Alois Schmaus, but before Anica Savić Rebac's *Njegoš and Bogumilism* (1951) and *Njegoš, Kabbalah, and Philo* (1952). Unlike the texts by Schmaus and Rebac, which are relatively lengthy and independently published, Atanasijević's text is considerably shorter and part of a larger study published under the title *Penseurs Yugoslaves*. This fact underlines the difference in intention of these three authors: while Schmaus and Rebac provide detailed philological and philosophical interpretations of various literary problems in Njegoš's poetry, Ksenija Atanasijević places Njegoš in a much broader context that encompasses the entirety of Serbian² philosophy. Similar to Schmaus and Rebac, Atanasijević reads *The Ray of the Microcosm* (*Luča mikrokozma*) and *The Mountain Wreath* (*Gorski vijenac*), both considered Njegoš's important works. This methodological and conceptual perspective also conditioned the shortness of Atanasijević's essay. Despite the length, however, she agrees with the themes presented in Schmaus' and Rebac's studies: dualism, mystical philosophy, the problem of evil in the world, as well as biographical issues surrounding Njegoš. Nearly everything that Schmaus and Rebac discuss is also present in Atanasijević's essay. What then are the differences between their studies? Atanasijević devotes most of her argumentation to personal (and existential) experiences that can be read in the lines and stanzas of the aforementioned epics. While this aspect was not absent in the other two authors' texts, the primary focus of their studies is the problem of Njegoš's poetic and philosophical originality. Based on Atanasijević's text, it is possible to assume that she had read the studies of Bishop Velimirović and Petronijević, and probably Schmaus' study, which mainly deals with the relations between Njegoš and the European classics of Milton, Dante and Goethe. On the other hand, in her research, Rebac, who scrupulously explored Platonist, ancient and esoteric layers in those books, truly delves into the domain of the history of ideas (Lompar, 2018, p. 182). In our opinion, there is a very important, deep and conceptual similarity between her results and those of Atanasijević, which we will discuss presently. For now, it is important to say that, compared to the other

2 In those times the name Yugoslav was used, but nearly all of the philosophers and poets from her studies declared themselves as Serbs.

two authors, the issue of potential sources in Njegoš's two main epics is secondary for Atanasijević. She writes about the cultural substrates and consciousness, mentioning famous mystics, but without dwelling on finding specific links between them and Njegoš (which aligns with the general topic of the study itself). Even more important is that her approach is in agreement with her opinion that all mystical experiences, though similar in nature, are always the results of an individual's plunge into the self; which implies that the source of Njegoš's philosophy is his own existence.

*The history of ideas: Ksenija Atanasijević
and Anica Savić Rebac*

We previously mentioned that we consider Atanasijević to be ideologically close to Rebac because both sets of research of Njegoš stem from the domain of the history of ideas. This opinion is corroborated by a study in which Milo Lompar analyzes the intellectual contributions of Rebac's interpretation of Njegoš's poetry. Lompar's study shows that some of the features attributed to the historians of ideas could also be attributed to Atanasijević. The first and most general refers to anyone who deals with changes in ideas and their interpretations during moments of cultural development (Eriksen, 2013, p. 7). Atanasijević dealt with many questions in the context of national philosophy, deliberating which ethical questions are the most common, and she handled these questions by following the ways they were resolved in folk literature, the works of Dositej Obradović, Božidar Knežević, Njegoš, as well as the works of modern Serbian poets. Unlike Rebac, who did not particularly pay close attention to the history of national mentality as a branch of the history of ideas (Lompar, 2018, p. 182), the studies of Atanasijević enter the domain of representing the Serbian, Slavic and Balkan mentality. By interpreting the various layers of literature written by Njegoš and other Serbian poets, Atanasijević demonstrates an exceptional interpretation of ideas and opinions, as well as the ability to understand their cultural and historical context. And she infuses her research and interpretations with her own philosophy which is an important feature of cultural historians (Eriksen, 2013, p. 11). She additionally chronicles the history of two motifs (good and evil), which is another aspect of the cultural historian's vocation (Eriksen, 2013, p. 19). Rebac does not mix ideological discourses and problems into her scientific research (Lompar, 2018, p. 182), while the case of Anatasijević is such that our judgement of it can influence how we perceive her shift towards eastern philosophy. In our opinion, although some of her ideas can be used in politics, generally politics is just outside its purview. The vital difference

in their approaches to studying Njegoš is that Rebac values the literature that she interprets implicitly (Lompar, 2018, p. 183), while Atanasijević does so explicitly.

Njegoš from the perspective of Ksenija Atanasijević

A human existence in history

Ksenija Atanasijević sees Njegoš as a man with a trying existential situation who attempted to exhaust the potential of his mind to its very limits, so that he could shed light on the problem of living in a world with evil (Atanasijević, 2005, p. 17). His problem was that he was the sovereign of a very small state, which had been part of Serbian territory in the Middle Ages, before the arrival of Ottoman Turks to the Balkans. He had a double responsibility: toward a state that he ruled, but also toward a much broader national community with whose suffering he sympathized. This situation can be characterized as a borderline case because, at that moment, Njegoš and his country faced an existential problem. Of course, the mention of borders in the context of philosophy is associated with the notion of Karl Jasper's boundaries, and we can think of these borders as a possible perspective for the interpretation of Njegoš's works (*The Mountain Wreath*, *The Ray of Microcosm*, *The Fake Tsar Stephen the Little*). And although Atanasijević's essay cannot be said to make references to Jasper's philosophy, it focuses on human existence, and by using logic and independent thought, it generates the use of some distinctive existentialist terms. Thus, from the composition of this essay, we can conclude that for Njegoš the existence in such a borderline situation is the first prerequisite for fulfilling unconditional requests and for meeting God (or in Jasper's terminology – transcendence), ideas that will remain central to Jasper's subsequent studies (Jaspers, 1973, pp. 162, 154, 168).

Theodicy: Mystics as an answer to human questions about God and evil

Although Njegoš's religiousness was not disturbed by the question of God's presence in the world, his approach to this problem, according to Atanasijević, is not orthodox, but mystical, because his cosmology in some aspects is different from the Christian dogma (Atanasijević, 2005, p. 18). She values this approach more than the rational one, because the mystical journey involves the deepest plunge in the essence of phenomena, and as such, it allows salvation. The path which Njegoš takes in order to come to,

what Atanasijević called, “an esoteric notice” begins from the original pessimistic awareness of human existence. In that pessimistic perspective, a human is powerless, full of deep flaws and is thrown into a pitiless nature governed by an all-out war (hence Petronijević and predecessors linking Njegoš and Darwin). But for Njegoš, man is a being torn between the lowness of matter and the immortality of the soul. If a poet rested at this conclusion, it would mean that existence was meaningless and that there was no belief in good itself. However, since Njegoš is, in Atanasijević’s view, *the one who seeks God*, she observes that he chooses to continue his faith that the spirit is more valuable than the material part. (It can thus be said that theodicy is the most important point and problem of Njegoš’s philosophy). It follows that the entire universe is managed by a higher mind: some phenomena that previously functioned as indicators of permanent chaos, are now seen as manifestations of harmony. When man encounters such a law, the human spirit itself, while still connected to the material life on Earth, can find something worth striving for. This is the essence of Njegoš’s representation of heroism, which is refined by metaphysics and can become the universal essence of human life and existence in general.

What is the result of the philosophy expressed in *The Ray of Microcosm* and *The Mountain Wreath*? As Atanasijević writes, the result lies in achieving “transcendent places where the only acceptable thing to do is to examine human existence on Earth” (Atanasijević, 2005, p. 19). Specifically, in her reading of *The Ray of Microcosm*, Atanasijević emphasizes the idea of the preexistence of the soul – noticing that Njegoš equalizes the forces and arguments of God and Satan who fight for power in the Universe. Njegoš’s dualism (in which spirit is good, and matter is bad) was the direct result of his reflections on the problem of the presence of evil in God’s world, in which it was impossible for spirit to have anything to do with evil, and thus evil had to be wholly transferred to matter (Atanasijević, 2005, p. 25). This is how, in Atanasijević’s opinion, Njegoš solved the problem of theodicy in his philosophical poetry.

The source of ethics in a world with evil

For Njegoš, God’s cosmos, as an expression of poetic harmony, is infinite. This means that in Njegoš’s texts, the cosmos is not unlike the “harmony of spheres” (influenced by Pythagorean philosophy). We see that Atanasijević, as well as Bishop Velimirović, pointed out the role of poetry and poets in the world, which for Njegoš was similar to God’s. What is clear and established is that the central principle of metaphysics and ethics within Njegoš’s philosophy is God himself is an “eternal and inexhaust-

ible life source for the survival of the Universe” (Atanasijević, 2005, p. 25). The way Njegoš shapes and understands the principles of ethics is very important for the philosophical research of Atanasijević: her philosophical preoccupation was ethics with a metaphysical-mystical basis, which she understood as a path from initial human weaknesses, through practical moral training, to the final ethical equilibrium within the field of transcendence (Petrović, 2006, p. 9). For the purposes of this chapter, it means that Njegoš the philosopher is conceptually close to Atanasijević’s philosophy. Namely, when she turned away from the intellectual philosophy of Petronijević, she oriented herself toward the practical application of philosophical problems (Marić, 2014, p. 91). Although she knew ancient philosophy very well, she reasoned that its detachment from religion made it in some way incomplete (Marić, 2014, p. 119). This also applies to ethical issues, because although she wrote about Socrates, the Sophists, Epicureans and Stoicism (Marić, 2014, p. 119), she also draws attention to eastern wisdom, which united philosophy, religion and literature (Marić, 2014, p. 119). This approach shaped her opinion that human behavior cannot be evaluated and explained without insight into transcendence. Following eastern thought, which is represented by Dostoevsky (Marić, 2014, p. 119), Atanasijević believes that Njegoš managed to resolve the question of human destiny, in which man has submitted himself to a force higher than any human (the exact opposite of the Sophist principle of man being the measure of all things). This also means that Njegoš did not set boundaries to rational knowledge, and did not deny the existence of God, as Petronijević claimed. What is extraordinary about Njegoš is the mystical element of knowledge and experience that he attempted to present through the language of poetry.

Njegoš among the Serbian philosophers

We come to the question of Njegoš’s position in the pantheon of Serbian philosophers and poets, as chosen by Atanasijević. When it comes to philosophers, Njegoš and Božidar Knežević are the ones who went furthest in resolving the question of human existence on Earth, precisely because they took God as the supreme principle in their way of thinking. There are further similarities between Atanasijević and the other two philosophers. First, there is the fact that both of her essays about these philosophers can be seen as a polemic with Petronijević, which we can see from their conflicting opinions on the philosophy of Knežević (Marić, 2014, p. 93). Nevertheless, Petronijević still considers Knežević a great Serbian philosopher; and although Petronijević seems to appreciate Njegoš

more, he denied the poet the status of great philosopher. By contrast, Atanasijević is consistent in her evaluations of the intellectual contributions of the philosophers, both Njegoš and Knežević, who, in her opinion, represent the eastern way of thinking. Unlike Petronijević, she believed that an existential approach to larger philosophical issues is better than an intellectual one, as the former is not separated from life experiences and practice (Marić, 2014, p. 95). Petronijević's inclination to consider philosophical questions purely intellectually, according to Atanasijević, leads to the aphoristic (unsystematic) thinking that resonates strongly with the ordinary man. As an example of differences in philosophical approaches, she contrasts Hegel with Pascal, Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy (Marić, 2014, pp. 96–97). For Atanasijević, what connects Njegoš and Knežević is their striving to establish ethics in humanity, thus resolving the issue of immortality of the soul (Marić, 2014, p. 97). They come to the solution by two different paths: Knežević deductively and Njegoš inductively (Atanasijević, 2005, p. 17). They nevertheless come to the same idea of the universal reconciliation between man and cosmos, which is a reality that exists beyond the domain of the rational and logical, but is also by far superior (Atanasijević, 1937, p. 11).

Ksenija Atanasijević in the history of Serbian literature

Njegoš among the Serbian poets

When it comes to Njegoš among Serbian poets, Atanasijević classifies him in the same category as Jovan Sterija Popović, Đura Jakšić, Milan Rakić and Sima Pandurović, and her criteria are the same as the ones she uses for the group of Serbian philosophers. Her insights and argumentation concerning the relations between these authors are very important from the point of view of Serbian literary history. The main reason her approach is so crucial is that by “connecting them to a single poetic line” (Svirčev, 2020, p. 301), she notes the poetic and conceptual continuity of Serbian literature, which turns out to be a key problem of its history. Of course, she does so from a philosopher's perspective and on a quantitatively small sample, but it does not make her insights any less valuable. On the contrary, we can say that it shows her exceptional research intuition. Moreover, this accomplishment connects her on a deeper level to the European existentialist tradition of literary interpretation. This connection manifests above all in her choice of authors, those most successful at expressing views on an individual's life on Earth, but with a tendency towards a negative or pessimistic outcome. Further, arguably Njegoš is

the least pessimistic among these poets, because the metaphysical point of view is much stronger for him than for those coming after him – maybe because they were grounded in non-religious, Stoic ideas (Sterija and Rakić), or are simply and radically individualistic (Jakšić), or else are modernists (Pandurović). However, if each of them simply retained their pessimistic attitude toward life, Atanasijević would certainly not value them as she did, because ultimately each of them overcame their initial pessimism in their poetry by entering the field of transcendence (Svirčev, 2020, p. 301). This shift in the poets' attitudes fulfilled the necessary condition for Atanasijević to perceive them as outstanding philosophical poets in Serbian literature and culture, able to come to an ethical resolution of human existence in the world.

Researching Njegoš: past, present and future

When it comes to “Njegošology,” we will emphasize a few things. First, the passage of time has not disproved the arguments that Ksenija Atanasijević made and it has not influenced the cohesion of her conclusions on Njegoš's philosophy, making her studies comprehensive and current. This is not negligible, because some great literary critics have failed in interpreting these aspects of Njegoš's poetry. We must mention the fact that Pavle Popović has completely neglected the metaphysical aspect of *The Mountain Wreath* (Nikolić, 2018, p. 171), which certainly diminished the commentary's aesthetic and conceptual value (and oriented its future interpretations!). It is also important to note that Popović was a member of the committee that wrote the report on Atanasijević's work and consequently got her expelled from the University of Belgrade (Marić, 2014, p. 47). An important limitation of her analysis of Njegoš is the fact that the corpus she used to discuss Njegoš's pessimism, did not include *The Fake Tsar Stephen the Little*. It is in this poem where one can observe that Njegoš's pessimism borders on nihilism, calling into question the belief in God's immanence (which is the ideological summit of Njegoš's two previous pieces of writing). This neglect is not a problem stemming from Atanasijević as a philosopher and interpreter of literature, but from overall Serbian culture, and in a broader sense “Njegošology,” which was silent about *The Fake Tsar* until 1998 (when Milo Lompar published the first study about it). Yet, although her interpretation of Njegoš was suppressed (much like the rest of her writing), it is still, by its content and concepts, one of the most important and impactful Serbian interpretations of Njegoš. This is what makes Atanasijević a model interpreter of the thought and legacy of Njegoš in Serbian culture and literature.

Conclusion

As a final assessment of the contributions that Ksenija Atanasijević made to interpreting Njegoš, we can say that she, above all, expressed the hermeneutical quality inherent to the best interpreters of poetry and philosophy: the ability of the interpreter to adapt their personality to that of the poet, while providing an interpretation that will be relevant to the understanding of that specific poet and simultaneously to the understanding of poetry and philosophy in general. Atanasijević based her interpretations on her own views of nature and the essence of philosophy, thus recognizing Njegoš as a Serbian cultural figure eligible to represent Serbian intellectual heritage as a genuine Eastern European, and yet capable of providing universal and practical understanding of the human condition. By conducting her research, in this personally inspired hermeneutical dialogue, Atanasijević has left an authentic and representative view of Njegoš in Serbian culture and in “Njegošology.”

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