

David A. Norris: *Haunted Serbia. Representations of History and War in the Literary Imagination*, Legenda: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2016, 189pp; with bibliography and index.

Norris's study examines Serbian literature of the last three decades, and finds it haunted by the spectres of history and war: initially by revisiting and examining the official history of the Second World War during the last decade of Communist rule, and subsequently by coming to terms with the Wars of Yugoslav Succession 1991-1999. Norris finds that the corpus he analysed – a long list which includes the most important works of narrative fiction published during the period – demonstrates a remarkable presence of the motifs usually found in Gothic literature. The author, however, does not propose the idea of a Gothic revival, but interprets Gothic motifs – spectres, ghosts, the uncanny, the grotesque, etc. – as the means Serbian literature employed in the process of political, intellectual and moral transition from old certainties to new visions. The first chapter deals with the political position awarded to literature in the Communist 'order of discourses' following the Second World War, and by presenting evidence that mechanisms of constraint and low-key censorship continued to operate until the very end of the state's existence, Norris corrects those researchers who have recently emphasised the relative liberality of Yugoslav cultural policy. The second and third chapters analyse the literature of the 1980s – the period between Tito's death and the start of a new war – in which the official history of the war and revolution was re-examined: the suppressed, inconvenient aspects of the former here return, literally, as ghosts to haunt the reader. Some of these works were discussed by political scientists in the large body of literature that accompanied the wars of the 1990s, and these discussions were rarely informed by the analytical skills which one would expect of anyone writing about literature in the twentieth century. For example, a political scientist accused the works which thematised Second World War of presenting it from the 'standpoint of national suffering' – to which Norris calmly replies that war literature indeed always focuses on suffering. What else could you expect in a war novel? Norris's main issue with this kind of reading is, however, that it tends to simplify complex literary texts, to eliminate everything literary from them, to disregard the complexity of meaning production in fiction, and to read them 'according to a mimetic code of representation'. Norris demonstrates that the narrative fiction produced in this period was less concerned with imposing a particular version of the war and revolution, and more with exploring the ways in which historical knowledge is constructed. In this respect, the contemporary historical novel (not only those within Serbian literature) has more in common with discussions on historiographical method than with actual histories: the question is less 'how it really happened' and more 'what is the nature of history and memory as narrative processes'. The fourth chapter consolidates this claim by examining the works of authors who apparently have little in common – Danilo Kiš and Antonije Isaković, for example – and demonstrates how fruitful a reading can be when it is no longer under any obligation to focus on the immediate link between literature and current political events. The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters examine the literary production of the 1990s which accompanied the Wars of Yugoslav Succession: here Norris demonstrates how the reality of war, over and above any mimetic code of representation and explicit messages, can be presented through the tension between the narrative requirement to tell a coherent story and the essential incoherence which expresses the chaos and senselessness of events. As the literature of the preceding decade all but discredited any idea of an official narrative of the Second World War and put into question the logic of coherent narrative representation of complex historical events, the literature of the 1990s could not but follow in its steps. In the fictional narratives which accompanied the wars in the 1990s, Norris sees, in addition to the uncanny motifs which mark the whole period examined, 'wry laughter challenging the official pronouncement of all sides'. Norris also places all his findings in a larger comparative context, and shows that Serbian literature in this period was in line with global literary trends.

This is a remarkable study, which accomplishes a lot more than a brief review can mention. One of its greatest merits is the convincing and coherent narrative which strings together a large number of apparently disparate works around an axis which is at one and the same time a literary one – the uncanny and its Gothic repertoire – and extra-literary: searching for meaning in both recent past and in contemporary events. Admirably well researched, *Haunted Serbia* offers an invaluable insight into a turbulent though fruitful period of Serbia's literary history, which up until now was uncharted territory.