

## LETTER S: SARGASSO SEA<sup>1</sup>

### I

“Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea” (Ezra Pound, *Portrait d'une Femme*)

The Sargasso Sea lies in the North Atlantic. Its waters are bounded by the North Atlantic Drift on the north, the Canary Current on the east, the North Equator Current on the south and the Gulf Stream on the west. In the elliptical space they create, the only “sea that has no shore” is formed. Its surface is always in a relatively dormant state “ –a zone of calm at sea” – and due to the anticyclone that covers it, the weather is mostly calm and dry. The cloudless sky makes it strikingly light blue, and it has the highest degree of transparency among the world’s seas. Due to the absence of heavy rains, its level of salinity is one of the highest in the Atlantic, and plankton cannot develop in significant quantities. The diversity of fish and other animals is therefore minimized. And it is precisely these high temperatures and calmness, due to which it is often called the “desert in the ocean”, that help the flowering of specific brown Sargassum algae that give the sea its name.

Although the Phoenicians were reportedly the first to sail the Sargasso Sea – as, superficially, any mention of dense seaweed was attributed to sailing through these waters – the first reliable description is found in Christopher Columbus’ logs from his first voyage across the Atlantic in 1492. The sea covered with green and yellow algae made the crew believe that the land was nearby. At that time, it was still considered that weeds were found only near the shores. The unexpected, protracted continuation of the journey caused confusion and fear. The secret (and accurate) double notes, which Columbus kept simultaneously with the “official” ones that calmed the panic, thus became the first in a series of imprecise truths from which the legends about these waters would develop. In the past, sailors were faced with serious problems caused by eddy currents in that area of the ocean and with algae in which sailboats became entangled and could not get out without enough wind. Tragedies gave birth to legends. Simple, logical explanations have not completely ousted the sagas about ghost ships, the Bermuda Triangle mysteries of disappearing or the search for the lost Atlantis. In this way, the Sargasso Sea was constructed into a myth, written over its geographic area.

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the palimpsest of Sargasso stories was significantly contributed by a discovery of the Danish biologist Johannes Schmidt, who, after substantial research, finally managed to explain (in the unscientific public) the mystified life cycle of eels when he realized that this marine “biological desert” was their place of spawning and dying. It is an amazing process during which small eels hatch as the eggs rise to the surface, traveling along the Gulf Stream. On the surface, they divide into two groups. The first swim to the east and three

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<sup>1</sup> The monograph *The Inventory Box of Marija Dragojlović* was written in 2015 in the form of a dictionary. Among the numerous terms chosen then by Mileta Prodanović and Marija Dragojlović there are: “The Adriatic”, “Sea”, “The Sea of Marmara”, “The Collection of postcards from the seaside – Sunset”. This text is intended as an additional entry under the letter S.

years later reaches the European shores. The other group moves west and in a short time reach the American coast. As they travel towards the rivers where their parents lived, they grow. On reaching full maturity in fresh water, they begin their journey back to the Sargasso Sea, where they spawn in warm and salty water and then die. Remembering his journey to these waters in 1932, Mihailo Petrović Alas called it a sailing "to the cradle of the eel". He also noted how excited everyone was "having realized that they found themselves on the stage of a great and fantastic science novel" while admiring the observant mind and perseverance of the researchers in putting together all these "mysterious episodes". As he pointed out, the excitement was even greater at the thought that only their contemporaries managed to solve "the centuries-old naturalist problem from ancient times".

My first knowledge of the Sargasso Sea comes from *Diznijevo sveznanje*, a popular children's encyclopaedia published in Yugoslavia in the early 1970s. In the "adventures on five continents", through which we learned about history and geography, Christopher Columbus was presented as the "Admiral of the Great Ocean". In the time that valued him as a seafarer and explorer, an adventurer and a daredevil, a sailor who embarked on "the boldest endeavour in the history of mankind", his complex biography was (still) not too complicated to inspire. The awareness of the untold tragedies on which this powerful myth was founded, the unspoken apotheosis of an individual, pragmatic and uncompromising, came later as a multi-layered testimony of the unstable finality of history. But, in fact, it is a story about the Sargasso Sea – from Columbus, tragedies and strange phenomena, through the biological desert, mystified life cycles and amazing scientific discoveries, to the way young people today hear about it for the first time: as an area of environmental disaster where plastic is retained in "stagnant water". Every day environmentalists warn about the newly created areas of floating waste, indestructible garbage that arrives in the "shoreless sea" from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, from West Africa, through the Caribbean belt to the east coast of the United States. In the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is again a symbol of interest and the value system of the time in which it is discussed. The Sargasso Sea successfully eludes the final interpretation.

## II

Every evening we saw the sun go down from the thatched shelter she called the *ajoupa*, I the summer house. We watched the sky and the distant sea on fire – all colours were in that fire and the huge clouds fringed and shot with flame." (Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*)

In his pioneering text on American luminism in 1954, John I. H. Baur talks, among other things, about the attitude of these artists to nature, emphasizing that it is as important as the attitude to light. He further insists on the idea that their way of expression is so subjective that the artist's feelings are reflected directly in what is presented. Smooth surfaces, devoid of clearly visible brush strokes, direct the viewer's attention exclusively to the content. The simple, almost abstract form contributes to this impression. The pronounced horizontal organization of the painting, almost mathematically arranged, makes the landscape classic and timeless. Because of its spiritual qualities, their painting is often associated with the teachings of American transcendentalists. Indicators of the terrible power of God and the immersion in the sublime are

replaced by repose in the silence of nature. Yet, the fact that luminists refrain from great drama does not mean that they are calm or serene. Discomfort, silence that suggests emptiness and denudation, are present as much as unity with nature; a feeling of alienation often appears in the representation of "barren places".

*Seascape: Sunset* (1861) by Martin Johnson Heade is one in a series of luminist coastal views at the end of the day. Minimalist, wide and low. The line of the horizon emphasizes the sky. The artist's interest in topography is negligible – the focus is on the atmosphere, mood and light effects. It is real and ideal at the same time. During his life, Heade often painted the Atlantic coast; he travelled to Brazil between 1863 and 1864 to work on a series of smaller formats depicting hummingbirds. Later he returned to the tropics; in 1866 he travelled to Nicaragua and in 1870 to Colombia, Panama and Jamaica. In 1883 he moved to St. Augustine, Florida, to stay. His scenes from Jamaica are used sporadically to illustrate the presentation of Jean Rhys' book *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

### III

"Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger" (Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*)

In 1966, after more than twenty years of creative silence, Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Written as a sort of prequel to the Victorian classic, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, the book deals with the life of Antoinette Cosway / Bertha Mason, the marginalized, *mad*, first wife of Mr Rochester. And since any intervention in the canonical primarily speaks about the values of the time in which it occurs, and only then about the time in which the intervention is performed, when she destabilizes the figure of the "madwoman locked in the attic", the author does not talk (only) about the controversial nineteenth-century model of silencing a *free* woman but testifies about the attitudes of feminists in the 1950s and 1960s and their struggle to unhesitatingly push strict Victorian morality into the finished past. In the same wave of civic activism, as the world went through the final phase of decolonization, it is no coincidence that the novel is set in the British West Indies after the entry into force of the Slavery Abolition Act (1833). Rhys writes about the complex social consequences caused by this document impartially and without overemphasizing its virtues. She exposed the Eurocentric colonial model in the full complexity of its brutality. All the layers of Creole *otherness* are there, unconcealed. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has become a classic of postcolonial literature.

In 1958, hesitant about the title, Rhys addressed her friend and colleague Francis Wyndham:

"I have no title yet. 'The First Mrs Rochester' is not right. Nor, of course is 'Creole'. That has a different meaning now. I hope I'll get one soon, for titles mean a lot to me. Almost half the battle. I thought of 'Sargasso Sea' or 'Wide Sargasso Sea' but nobody knew what I meant."

The fear she mentioned "that no one would know what she meant", refers to a simple detail – the Sargasso Sea is not mentioned in the novel. Apparently, she was also not sure whether to expect the reader to know or find out that it was about the sea with no coast, in the lobby of the Caribbean belt through which European ships arrived. It required a lot more effort to learn that in the middle of the twentieth century than it does today. In her writing, Jean Rhys is a perfectionist who frees the text from everything superfluous. She achieves persuasiveness through simplicity. Most critics believe that she seeks the perfect "golden ratio of words". She herself claimed that she had never overcome the desire to "be clear". However, a few years later, she finally decided on the title she originally had doubts about. And just like when luminists neutralize their painting process, when they reduce the stroke only to a discreet touch in order to offer the viewer direct movement through the content, Rhys leaves the reader to learn without a loud trail.

The author's other dilemma, about "Creole", was shaped by the changeability and social flexibility of language that made the term imprecise and unacceptable. In its original meaning, it referred to the descendants of the Europeans born in the colonies. It emphasized the difference of the white from other native islanders. Then it began to be used for slaves and animals to distinguish the indigenous from the imported ones. To avoid any racial doubts, the adjective white or black was added to it. In time, everything that was intertwined, mixed, European, African and indigenous in the Caribbean pastiche of cultures was called Creole. Jean Rhys experienced the travesty of the term personally, too. Due to her childhood in Dominica as a "white Creole", and later her departure for Britain, the experience of those who no longer belong to the country of their ancestors, but neither to the country in which they were born was familiar to her. In her novel, with British contempt, Rochester describes his wife, "a Creole of pure European descent she may be, but they are not English or European either." The tragic persistence in differences divided the communities of "black Creoles", too, distanced from each other by the imposed differences of the European colonies to "their" islands, but also by the attempt to keep their belonging to the ancestral country from which they were forcibly taken. Rhys sees them all, lost and unhappy, in the Sargasso limbo. People who have no land in the sea that has no coast.

#### IV

"But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?" (Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*)

The idea of the Sargasso Sea as a symbol which transcends the actual waters between 20<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> parallel north and 30<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> meridian west is quite logical if we keep in mind that every idea of every sea is shaped by historical, social and cultural space within which it is thought about. What does the sea mean for a geographer and biologist and what does it mean for a painter and writer? What did it represent to the Renaissance man and what is it for the modern man? How did the imprisoned slave see it and how does today's tourist see it? How do researchers cross it and how do emigrants cross it? Do the waters connect the lands or separate them? The arrogant perception of the "empty" open sea as a symbol of danger and alienation (for whom?), as an "uninhabited" place (although useful for exploitation and belonging) is completely anthropocentric, just like the idea of the sea as a space of lovely enjoyment and

frivolous pleasure. Microhistories, postcolonialism, "new thalassology", that focuses on the "cultural history of the sea", are just some of a number of ways of thinking about water surfaces.

How does Marija Dragojlović "intervene" in the canonical representation of art history, such as a painting of the sea? What is the theme of her latest paintings? Are they seascapes? There is no topography in these large canvases. Without a title, it is not possible to distinguish which are these seas or even whether they are representations of the sea at all. In some of her earlier cycles, the sea was the subject of direct observation, a subjective experience of the atmosphere, a smell and noise of an experience, a detail of intertwined personal and collective history... She has never been on the Sargasso Sea. This makes it an imagination of the real space, a snippet of the imagined reality. When she explains why these *seven seas*, Marija Dragojlović mentions the North Sea as her great love, as wind, cold and rain. She believes that the names of the seas are significant per se. Looking at them, following the etymologies of the names, she simply sees some of them. And some she does not. She sees the Black Sea black. The Red Sea red. The Sea of Marmara is marble, Istanbul, Constantinople, Byzantium... The Dead Sea causes discomfort at the thought of dead water, halted. The Mediterranean Sea is infinitely blue and hazy from the heat. It is her "chalk circle". She became fond of the Sargasso Sea a long time ago. Without explanation, as a premonition of the uniqueness of the only sea with no shore. There are, of course, eels, their travels, spawning in the great depths in which they die. That story sounds like a fairy tale to her. Then visually, the ochre algae that float and, at sunset, have a golden glow of bubbles that keep them afloat. All of the mentioned is completely and deeply personal, without explanation. She wonders why we love someone and something at all. All seven seas are painted in one geometric, strict story " –as if I set the coordinates so as not to get lost".

Marija's seas, although not classical, are geometrically controlled; abstract representations of an unlimited space where horizontality is equated with sublimity. In Heade and other luminists, we find the belonging spirit of the time, "the idealization of nature simultaneous with industrialization; faith in the inevitability of the future and selective remembrance of the past." What does the controlled certainty of the golden ratio mean for Marija Dragojlović in the time of environmental disasters, megalomaniac projects and a future whose *inevitability* has been replaced by *uncertainty*? In these paintings, as before, she looks. She watches attentively. This time, however, the subject of that gaze is not the surrogates of human presence. Inversion is also noticed in the approach to narration. If previously *small* things were monumentalized, now *big* ones are translated into intimate. Before, objects were enlarged, while the seas are now "reduced". She has reached for the coordinates "not to get lost", searching for the "line of the golden ratio and the divine proportion". And, she wonders, where else could the starting point of that path be if not in the sky and water, the origin and the beginning of everything, the perfection of relationships, a look that is always fixed on the horizon.

The way in which contemporaneity is drawn into a work of art is often unconscious. In the time of new "big" questions, when ecology is becoming a new ideology, while every "awareness" is conditioned by noisy activism, Marija Dragojlović gives us back the delicate space of "silent" narratives. Deprived of too loud, "great ideas" or those that believe they are great, this painting discreetly leans on all the mentioned Sargasso diversity, while letting the viewer comprehend the

last in a series of current finalities. It is a look that signifies. Also not to be overlooked is that the Sargasso Sea, although bounded by strong currents, is "a zone of calm at sea".

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