

## LITERARY TERMS AND HISTORY

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Basic notions of the scientific study of literature have a life of their own, which means that they have their own history too. Terminological innovations reflect trains of thought that have their own movements and paths; the movements may be fast or slow, and the paths may diverge or turn on themselves. What Dante said about language in general, as far back as 1305, still applies to any branch of terminology: ". . . since man is an unstable and wavering human being his language can be neither stable nor unvarying, but, like other things that belong to us, such as customs or clothes, it must change with the change of place and time."<sup>1</sup> This change, which takes place over the course of time, can not be checked in any way: terminology itself, at its initial stage at least, is subject to the will of the individual, and thus departs from the subconsciously omnipresent desire to be unique and unequivocal.

We speak or write with the purpose of conveying the content of our thoughts to others. In order to communicate in this way we use words (signs) which help us express the *intellectus* and the *conceptiones* of the mind. Such a sign, as has been confirmed by modern linguistics, is *rationalis signum et sensuale*, or to again quote the author of *The Divine Comedy*, who formulated it more clearly: "Necessarily a sign of reason, because it must emanate from and lead to reason; since nothing can be transmitted from reason to reason without the senses, the sign is necessarily the sign of the senses."<sup>2</sup> It follows that meanings are not attached to terms by some natural necessity but that they are the consequence of the free will of men and their linguistic practice. Every term has, then, its physical and psychological entity, which means that its semantic extension is artificial or conventional rather than natural and free. The pairing of sound and meaning is a natural capacity of man, whereas its actualization has been left to the human will, which again reflects the freedom of human intellect. All this points to the following fact which is relevant to our discussion: as has been pointed out by F. de Saussure, the linguistic sign is arbitrary. *Aliquid significare ad placitum* is one of the inherent freedoms of the human mind.

The basic import of all science (and this includes the scientific study of literature) is to make available attained knowledge, expressed in a certain form, and thus to provide an opportunity to use that knowledge. The commonly held view that scientific quality is determined by degree of reliability is wrong, as wrong as the claims that follow from it, as, for example, the claim that mathematics and logic are sciences in the truest sense because only in them--owing to their overall *a priori* character--is there an undeniable certainty of knowledge. It is true that this characteristic can not be denied; but it does not endow mathematics and logic with a greater scientific quality, for this is not based on reliability but on the systematic forms of attaining knowledge. The truth is manifested by being evident; it is impossible for the scientific study of literature to give the ultimate proof of everything, i.e., there is always some unproved residue. All its proofs, after all, boil down to intuition, which does not demand proof because the whole universe of reflection is based on intuition, in which it is rooted.

The aspiration toward the controlled and precise use of literary terms with stable meanings seems legitimate only if it is not pushed beyond a certain limit. It is essential that on the synchronic level contemporaries and research workers reach consensus on basic terminology. It is, for example, relatively easy to agree on what characterizes a gazelle; but on the other hand a term like *Romanticism* is susceptible to many, often quite contrary,

connotations. Yugoslav literary history provides a striking example of this: the Slovenes, for example, applied this term without any reservations to the period between 1830 and 1854; the Croats had unwarranted qualms about the use of the term; and the Serbs applied the term to movements that had little or no connection with Romanticism. S. Petrović was right, therefore, when he said,

“We err—we would err—if we believed that the terminology of a hypothetically universal science of literature could replace what we recognize as literary terminology at present and that it would make obsolete and dead those terms that it does not comprise, and deny those meanings of terms that it does not attest. We would err, in fact we regularly err, when we believe that only one meaning should be chosen among the different legitimate meanings of a term and that the differences between national or regional uses should be given up, and synonyms and old uses of a term should fall into oblivion.”<sup>3</sup>

As a case in point, to illustrate the hypothesis that there is a close interdependence between literary terms and their historical context, we have chosen a very instructive, even a drastic example from Slovene cultural history. Studies that have not taken into account the above-mentioned interdependence have misinterpreted a literary term and arrived at far-reaching but essentially incorrect conclusions, which require radical modifications of the average picture of cultural and historical events in the nineteenth century.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the lexeme *kvanta* in Slovene literary publications. The frequency of its use points to the fact that it had considerable functional load, and that it was a central notion of literary practice of the time. In his 1823 discussion of Slovene oral tradition M. Kuralt, a culturist and follower of the Enlightenment, related its thematic orientation to the notion *kvanta*.<sup>4</sup> In 1846 J. Bleiweis, the editor of *Novice*, mentioned a minor Austrian poet whom Slovene didactic poetry should take as an example, because his texts “do not contain empty *kvantas* which spoil innocent hearts.” In another article, Bleiweis argued that the main difference between Prešeren and Koseski consisted in the fact that Koseski “likes exalted pictures and is never lost in *kvantas*.”<sup>5</sup> The rightist magazine *Zgodnja danica* published an article about Greek and Roman literature in which the author severely criticized Horace and Vergil; he found in their works traces of paganism, sensualism and rationalism. Constituents of this sort, being sensuous and supported by the Neo-Platonic conception of art, were termed by the author “unreasonable *kvantas*.”<sup>6</sup> Anton Janežič, editor of *Slovenska bčela*, promised in his statement of editorial policy for 1853 that “every amorous *kvanta*” would be avoided, and then voiced the following opinion: “If love should be spoken of, for example in short stories, then it should be spoken of decently and in such a way that nobody could take offense at a magazine of fictitious literature.”<sup>7</sup>

The cultural ideologue J. Kopitar claimed as early as 1809 in his reply to J. Dobrovský that Slovene oral poetry dealt with “predominantly erotic themes.”<sup>8</sup> His premise concerned the thematic component and in this respect it is close to Kuralt’s, which we took for the starting point of this discussion. Kuralt and Kopitar were both educated in the Zois Rationalistic circle and therefore the assumption seems justified that their value judgments were, in principle at least, identical. In other words this means that we are interested in the relationship between the notion *kvanta* and the erotic content of oral poetry.

The Dictionary of the Contemporary Slovene Literary Language gives three meanings for the lexeme *kvanta*: (1) “an obscene, indecent joke;” (2) “an obscene, indecent poem;” (3) “a fabrication, gossip.”<sup>9</sup> These meanings do not however provide any clue to the

above-mentioned linguistic and terminological practice and its connotations. What the dictionary of the contemporary language gives as the semantic content of the lexeme *kvanta* was, in the nineteenth century, expressed by the word *klafati* and its derivatives (*klafa*, *klafač*, *klafalo*, *klafanje*, *klafar*, *klafariti*, *klafarski*, *klafast*, *klafavec*).<sup>10</sup> We should therefore consult sources either contemporary with or preceding the linguistic usage we are investigating. In this search, we find in M. Pohlin's dictionary (*Tu malu besediše treh jezikov*) the following entry, dating to 1781:

KVANTA, E. ž. -	Lyrisch Gedicht	Aeolium carmen
	Ein Märchen	Anilis fabula

The second gloss is less significant in the present context. *Ein Märchen* = *bajka* ('fairy tale') is a term that derives from the verb *bajati* ('to charm'), whereas *anilis fabula* may be freely translated as a story, narrative or fairy tale narrated by old men and women. The first German gloss given for *kvanta* is more instructive. *Gedicht* means 'poem', especially a lyric poem. The Latin equivalent is especially relevant to the understanding of the meaning of *kvanta*. According to Pohlin, Slovene *kvanta* corresponds to the Latin notion 'Aeolic poem', and this leads us closer to the solution of the problem. The adjective 'Aeolic' originally applied to particular metres of classical verse (a combination of dactyls and anapests, or trochees and iambs) used in the so-called 'Asclepiad' verse. It was used by Sappho and Alcaeus, and later became the theme employed by Catullus, the Roman elegiac poets, and Horace.<sup>11</sup>

This means that at the end of the eighteenth century *kvanta* was a literary-historical term designating a lyric (primarily erotic) poem; or, to put it differently, this means that there was full congruence between Kuralt's nomenclature and Kopitar's description.

The above descriptions do not however solve the problem. For Pohlin distinguishes two more lexemes: *kvantam* ('plaudern, blaterare') and *kvantač* (an agent noun meaning 'Plauderer, Locutulejus'). The meaning of both lexemes ('chatter, prattle' etc.) points to the fact that their semantic content began to change during Pohlin's time, with the ensuing semantic change being in the direction of the present-day meaning. The new semantic nuance had not yet gained the upper hand, for V. Vodnik considered *kvanta* a poetic term. In the dictionary Vodnik was compiling *kvanta* was etymologically derived from the verb *kovati* 'to forge' (*kovanta* → *kvanta*), in accord with his literary adherence to Classicism. His explanation of the meaning of the lexeme *muza* 'muse' (viz., from *izmišljanje* 'inventing') is equally interesting; *das Gedicht* is 'an invention,' whereas *Gedichte schreiben* means 'to compose poems,' which, again, is compatible with the view that creation is forging in the furnace.<sup>12</sup> A radical semantic change occurred by 1833, for in his dictionary of that year Murko defined *kvanta* as 'unnützes Geschwätz' or 'Possen,' whereas its derivatives were already given single interpretations (*kvantati* 'Possen treiben,' *kvantač* 'Possenreisser.')<sup>13</sup>

What has been said above sheds light only on the external side of the problem, while the conditions under which and the reasons why the semantic change occurred have not yet been addressed. The answer to this question is provided by the central dilemma that occupied the Slovene cultural and literary public in the period 1830-66. The dilemma concerned the concept of literature, but in practice it boiled down to the following opposition: Prešeren or Koseski. Literary criticism of the time described Prešeren as the poet of love and Koseski as the poet of seriousness and magnificence. The critic F. Malavašič explained his evaluation of Prešeren by saying that the poet

"seeks what he cannot find, craves for what he was fated to do but cannot

accomplish; because of this, in the sorrow of his heart he sighs in sweet voices or in distress, bitterly realizing the uncertainty and illusiveness of the happiness that he violently laments.”

It follows that Prešeren's poems are “sensitive (sentimental) and predominantly breathe sorrow, bitterness and unhappiness.”<sup>14</sup> The background to this attitude is Plato's conception of art, but the use of the term *sentimental* forces us to take into consideration the context of Schiller's division of poetry into naive and sentimental, or (as has become customary in literary practice) into objective and subjective. This division was a *signum temporis* of Slovene literature of this period; it did not just remain a distinctive criterion, but because of the specific cultural and historical circumstances it turned into an evaluation metric. In this connection it was emphasized that subjective lyric poetry softens the reader psychically, and even Levstik remained within the bounds of those interpretations of ideas and aesthetic values which claimed that lyric poetry “deals with only one feeling of the human heart, love; only rarely does it take up other themes.” The world that it treats is depicted “piecemeal; it does not deal with complete events,” and because of this a nation which may have excellent lyric poetry “cannot boast its own, complete literature.”<sup>15</sup> Sentimental (subjective) lyric poetry was, then, subordinate to the utilitarian pragmatism of the historical reality in which aesthetic categories were given different, but always radical and exclusive, meaning.

The reason for this biased interpretation was the fact that the tendency opposed to subjective poetry overemphasized the role of the literary recipient. This was the case with the literary practice of both Bleiweis and Levstik. Bleiweis worked out a program for the art of letters within the framework of moral, educational and patriotic criteria--and these were the valid criteria of objectivity in his time; this is supported by his favorable evaluation of Koseski and his only partial acceptance of Prešeren's poetry. Bleiweis did not deny the aesthetic perfection of *Poezije*, but Prešeren's reflective and erotic poetry was beyond his ken (and the ken of his contemporaries). In this respect there was no difference between Bleiweis and Levstik, the latter of whom thought that Prešeren's lyric themes were essentially constitutive elements of the genre, and therefore renounced the genre and advocated social and analytic story-writing. Both of them accepted linguistic and formal criteria as evaluation metrics of literature, in accord with their spirit of the Enlightenment. Their ideal was, to put it figuratively, Prometheus; i.e., their ideals were social and political activities and pragmatic works of art. In such an ambience, Koseski's success was inevitable and there is evidence that the audiences listening to recitals of his poetry cried with enthusiasm for national consciousness and the Enlightenment.<sup>16</sup> His ‘objective’ themes pushed the *kvanta* on to a side track, at first because it dealt with subjective themes and later because it was considered a less valuable or completely unacceptable creative activity. These were the main reasons for the semantic transformation of the term *kvanta*, which originated as a literary term and came to mean ‘morally lax or inappropriate talk.’

Terms are subject to semantic changes and the changes in connotative meanings over the course of time. They are entitled to this right and this is, after all, their internal logic. This leads to just one unequivocal conclusion: the meanings of basic notions of literary study are actualized in individual, generational, or temporal contexts. Literary historicism must take this context into account because its basic premises would be otherwise problematic and wrong. The Slovene example, which--having been wrongly interpreted--served as the basis for very radical, fundamental cultural and historical generalizations, points to the dangers lurking behind the neglect of hard and fast principles of philological criticism in this area. The determination of the true meaning of the term *kvanta* destroys many essential

layers in the contemporary picture of ideas, aesthetic values and cultural events in Slovenia in the nineteenth century. The notion which has been discussed, and the fallacies which stemmed from it, are both a warning and a signpost.

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## REFERENCES

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2. Dante Alighieri 435.
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4. Cf. Lino Legiša, *Slovenska poezija od Vodnikovih Pesmi za pokušino do priprav za Kranjsko čbelico* (Ljubljana, 1938) 17.
5. Janez Blejweis, "Baron Klesheim," *Novice* (Dec. 9, 1846) 196, and "Napačna primera," *Novice* (Jan. 2, 1850) 4, respectively.
6. See Luka Jeran, "Moč klasiškiga slovstva v vedo in besedo novših časov," *Zgodnja danica* (Feb. 12-Mar. 11, 1852) 25, 30, 41.
7. See "Pogovori uredništva," *Slovenska bčela* (Nov. 18, 1852) 384.
8. Cf. J. Pogačnik, *Bartholomäus Kopitar* (München, 1978) 73-78.
9. *Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika, II* (Ljubljana, 1975) 538.
10. Cf. Maks Pleteršnik, *Slovensko-nemški slovar I* (Ljubljana, 1893) 400.
11. See W. Borgeaud, "Analyse de quelques mètres éoliens," *L'Antiquité classique* 26 (1957).
12. For Vodnik's manuscript, see the Manuscript Department of the Narodna in Univerzitetna Knjižnica, Ljubljana, ms. 803.
13. Anton Murko, *Deutsch-slovenisches und Slowenisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch* (Graz: Greiner, 1833).
14. F. Malavašič, "Domorodni list II," *Novice* (Feb. 17-24, 1847) 28, 32.
15. From Levstik's programmatic paper "Popotovanje od Litije do Čateža" of 1858.
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## POVZETEK:

### KNJIŽEVNOZNANSTVENI POJMI IN ZGODOVINA

Študija obravnava v naslovu označeno vprašanje na dveh ravlinah, in sicer: a/ Praktična ravnina je razčlemba semantičnih sprememb, ki jih je v slovenski kulturni zgodovini doživel pojem "kvanta". Prvobitno je bil to terminus technicus za lirsko pesem /das Lied/, iz kulturnozgodovinskih razlogov, ki so lirsko pesem vrednotili nižje od epske, se je pojem sprevrgel v negativno moralno oznako. b/ Teoretične predpostavke, ki iz tega sledijo, opozarjajo, da gre tudi pri književnoznanstvenih pojmih za variable, katerih pomen je mogoče pravilno "prebrati" samo v kontekstu časa in prostora, v katerem so bili uporabljani. Slovenski zglede opozarja na to dejstvo z vsjo ostrino. Nezdgovinsko sprejemanje vsebine pojma "kvanta" je namreč privedlo do zelo težkih zablod v kulturni zgodovini, v kateri bo marsikatera ocena morala pasti, obilo vrednotenij pa dobiti popolnoma nov predznak.

