

ANTON OCVIRK AND SLOVENE COMPARATIVE LITERATURE TODAY

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The spring of 2007 marked a century since the birth of the prominent Slovene humanist Anton Ocvirk (1907–80). Ocvirk was a faculty member at Ljubljana University; a literary historian, theorist, editor, and critic; and a leader in research. The hundred-year anniversary was marked by numerous events in Slovenia and it offers an occasion to recall his various scholarly activities, describe the breadth of content and critical foci of his work, and evaluate their significance.

Ocvirk is best known for having established Slovene comparative literary studies as a discrete university and scholarly discipline. It was soon after the founding of the University of Ljubljana in 1919 that individual lectures were delivered on comparative literary studies, which became a special university major in the academic year 1925–26. Initially, two Slavic specialists, Ivan Prijatelj and France Kidrič, and occasionally one Germanic specialist, Jakob Kelemina, lectured on comparative literature. The first specialized comparativist, Anton Ocvirk, joined the university only in the late 1930s. Soon after the Second World War, comparative literature, which had been part of the Slavic studies department, developed into an independent department, staffed by Ocvirk himself with the help of just one assistant. In the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s, when the number of students dramatically increased, a second and a third professor joined the department: Dušan Pirjevec and Janko Kos. After several decades, today's department employs seven full-time university instructors, in addition to several retired, junior, and external instructors. In addition, a few comparativists also teach at other faculties of the University of Ljubljana and other Slovenian universities; however, comparative literature as an independent program exists only at the University of Ljubljana. The discipline has its second base in the Institute of Literary Studies at the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. The institute, which was established in 1948, does not carry out educational activities, but focuses on research and preparation of scholarly publications. The Slovenian Comparative Literature Association significantly complements the institutional base of comparative literature. Since it was established in 1973, it has been organizing professional lectures and other events, and since 1978 it has published the journal *Primerjalna književnost* (Comparative Literature); to date, thirty volumes have appeared. In recent years, the society has attempted to increase its cooperation with the International Comparative Literature Association and with several European comparative projects. The journal has also become active internationally

with the topics it has addressed and by attracting new contributors from abroad. In light of all this, it can be concluded that, at least externally, the development of Slovenian comparative literature has been (if I may indulge in a frequently used phrase) a “success story.” This story is inseparably connected with the discipline’s founder.

Anton Ocvirk studied Slavic philology and comparative literature in Ljubljana, having completed a year of study of philosophy in Vienna. After receiving his doctorate, he studied at the Collège de France and the Sorbonne in Paris, and for a short time in London. He was awarded a faculty rank based on his book *Teorija primerjalne literarne zgodovine* (Theory of Comparative Literary History, Ljubljana 1936), one of the rare, early, and detailed systematic presentations of the discipline. From 1937 until his retirement in 1974, he taught at the University of Ljubljana. Many successive classes of comparativists matured under his aegis, and they established themselves at the university, through their research, in scholarly and cultural journalism, on publishers’ editorial boards, in newspapers, and on radio and television.

Ocvirk also played an important role in the organization of scholarly research and journalism. From 1948 to 1963, he was the editor-in-chief of the central Slovenian linguistics and literary journal *Slavistična revija* (Slavic Review). From 1965 up until his death, he was the director of the Institute of Literary Studies at the Slovenian Academy. Here, he designed and edited the collection of theoretical studies *Literarni leksikon* (Literary Encyclopedia), which was published from 1978 to 2001. Prior to this, he headed two major publishing projects connected with external publishers and aimed at a broader audience. From 1946 until his death, he edited the collection of critical editions *Zbrana dela slovenskih pesnikov in pisateljev* (Collected Works of Slovenian Poets and Writers), which is still being published today and has significantly helped shape the Slovenian literary canon. From 1964 to 1976, he edited the collection of translations from world literature, *Sto romanov* (One Hundred Novels), which helped broaden the literary horizon of Slovenian readers with its selection of authors and works, and their detailed companion studies.

In light of such a workload and his extremely self-critical attitude towards his own writing, it is not surprising that Ocvirk himself did not publish a great deal. In addition to the monograph on comparative literature mentioned above, the core of his scholarly works can be summarized in four volumes of papers, articles, and essays, as well as several studies written for the *Literarni leksikon*. Ocvirk was a charismatic teacher that transcended the frameworks of his classes with his engaging and persuasive lectures. By opening up perspectives on contemporary European and American literature, and the main movements and issues in literary studies, his lectures undoubtedly contributed to the flourishing of Slovenian literary and

cultural life and left a trace in contemporary criticism and journalism, and probably even in creative writing.

In the second half of the 1950s, his career was interrupted by a severe illness, which Ocvirk persistently struggled with to the very end. Despite this and many other obstacles, he not only continued with his prior plans, but also designed and helped set in motion completely new collected works; in addition, he prepared a representative selection of his essays for publication. All of this still commands respect today.

After several decades, the memory of Ocvirk's literary criticism, cultural journalism, editorial work, and other complementary activities mainly relevant for his time has faded somewhat. However, he is generally recognized as the founder of scholarly comparative studies in Slovenia. This does not mean, of course, that comparative studies were unknown in Slovenian literary studies before Ocvirk. Its important representatives from the early twentieth century (e.g., Ivan Prijatelj and France Kidrič, and Matija Murko before them) took comparative perspectives into account in their works, but the conceptual categories of the national and international, Slovenian and European, and domestic and foreign in literature that enable comparative research appeared and took root in critical and literary-programmatic essays as early as the nineteenth century. The most outstanding of the early comparative treatments of literature in Slovenia measure up to contemporary European achievements. However, they do not yet establish comparative studies as an independent discipline, but subordinate it as an addendum to national literary history. In addition, these early examples are not sufficiently established to be able to purposefully and systematically develop specific theoretical and methodological dimensions.

The main task facing literary historians at the beginning of the twentieth century, who had their roots in general Slavic studies and later assumed the leading role at the new University of Ljubljana, was how to establish the history of Slovenian literature as an independent discipline following the example and criteria of modern literary studies. At that time, this primarily meant that the discipline should limit itself to national territory and language and, at the same time, include in its discussion the cultural, social, political, and historical processes that influence literature and art; research on these processes should be based on empirical material, be directed towards historical development, and discover the causal rules of events.

In the 1920s and especially the 1930s, Slovenian literary studies also became mature enough to accept changes, as the literary studies of more developed European nations had done earlier. Without mentioning other significant reasons, the one-sided orientation to the national area alone was in contrast to readers' receptionist horizons, which were formed on the

basis of automatic inclusion of Slovenian and international literary works. This demanded a suitable counterweight in literary studies, which emerged with the establishment of independent comparative studies, focusing on the issues that national literary history was unable to address appropriately because of its own definition of the subject and the methods and criteria adapted to this definition.

Anton Ocvirk is among those that deserve the most credit for this necessary developmental step. As a scholar, he was significantly influenced by the French comparative school. He encountered the majority of central orientations in literary studies of that time: renewed positivism, German intellectual history, Marxist literary sociology, the Russian formalist school, Romanic stylistics and verse theory, the beginnings of immanent interpretation, and the prior practice of Slovenian and Slavic literary and cultural history. After critical analysis, he selectively borrowed their individual components, reshaped them, and united them in two complementary directions.

He developed his own model of comparative literary history, which includes a series of issues from bilateral contacts to broader international phenomena (e.g., schools, movements, directions, and periods), and strives for a synthesis at the level of European and world literature; he systematically incorporated the literatures of small nations into this synthesis. This is already evident from his early theoretical and methodological establishment of the discipline, and its practical application is shown in his essays in literary history. These focus on literary periods and movements from realism and naturalism to twentieth-century avant-gardes; in specific areas, such as the history of the novel, they even reach back to the eighteenth century. However, a synthetic image of European literary phenomena and processes is not the author's only goal; his studies consistently refer to Slovenian literature within a comparative context and ask what these phenomena meant for Slovenian literature, how it encountered them, built on them, or rejected them, and what consequences all of this had for its further development.

A further basic component of Ocvirk's scholarly oeuvre is literary theory. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this area was relatively neglected in the face of the predominant positivist historical ideology and methodology. The model of national literary history sought to connect literature with a complete group of extra-literary events and to understand its course as a component or product of the entire development of a nation. This is why national literary history acted primarily in accordance with historical developmental criteria and, because of this, it frequently neglected the artistic or esthetic characteristics of literature. In contrast, comparative treatment was based on the recognition that a series of other literary facts must be taken into account in order to adequately present any kind of

national literature (e.g., incorporation into international literary processes) before reaching for extra-literary factors. Here, a path opens to the question of what the basic features of literary art are as a relatively independent area – that is, a path to literary theory, which, from this perspective, naturally combines with comparative literary history. Ocvirk focused on literary theory because of the same loyalty to *belles lettres* that led him into comparative studies. In his fundamental concept, the historical and theoretical perspectives are combined at several levels. According to his demands of principle, such as in systematic overviews of the discipline, the treatment of a subject should be carried out consistently from the historical developmental perspective, and at the same time be based on theoretical findings. As a rule, the findings of his studies on concrete literary issues are the result of a combined procedure that explains the essence of literary theoretical categories from the historical developmental process, whereas it determines the essence of literary historical processes using theoretical analysis.

These comments on the basic features of Ocvirk's works are of course inevitably insufficient. They do not include the theoretical methodological definitions by which he separated himself from older, relatively factographic analytical positivism and defended the modern synthetic method, which ought, however, to remain loyal to the basic empirical historical orientation. In addition, his internal development was not taken into account because over several decades he significantly supplemented or modified his initial standpoints and findings in many places. Despite this, I hope that at least in the main points it has been demonstrated how his work opened new dimensions for Slovenian literary studies in comparison to prior practice.

Something similar also applies to Ocvirk's teaching and organizational activity. In this regard, a short remark on the work of two of his most important students and successors will suffice. Dušan Pirjevec (1921–77) abandoned Ocvirk's empirical historical orientation and, through several intermediary steps, introduced hermeneutic phenomenology and an ontologically existential understanding of literature into the discipline. Janko Kos (born 1931, now professor emeritus) remained closer to the established models of literary studies, but subjected them to systematic methodological reflection and, in rebuilding them, combined scholarly and philosophical components equally. Ocvirk must have observed such drifting away from his premises with some objections and quiet doubt; occasionally, this led to misunderstandings and ongoing conflicts. However, chronological distance allows Ocvirk's basic stance to be revealed more clearly; this stance oscillated between silently allowing this development and enabling and actively supporting it. This proves that Ocvirk also had a productive impact on the discipline in this regard.

Following Ocvirk's retirement and Pirjevec's untimely death, Janko Kos assumed chief responsibility for the discipline's progress. At least two generations of comparativists matured under his leadership. The youngest of them no longer had direct contact with Ocvirk but knew him only by his works, which were considered classics, although they no longer had a dominant position in the scholarship.

At that time, Slovenian comparativists closely followed what was occurring in contemporary European and North American literary scholarship and they contributed to it in certain areas. The Slovenians relied on Ocvirk's work but also moved away from his positions, as happens in any scholarly development.

The discipline's expansion enabled younger scholars to specialize more narrowly. It is impossible to enumerate all of the foci, but I will note some general trends. In the area of comparative literary history, European and American late modernism and postmodernism received significant attention, in particular Latin American magical realism and American metafiction. Research on early modernism, which Ocvirk had placed on a solid footing, continued and became more thorough, while there was renewed interest in certain older periods and trends, especially, perhaps, in Romanticism.

Research on literary genres and forms—mostly in narrative writing (especially novels), less so in lyric works, and drama as connected with the theater—increased sharply in literary theory (in the strict, more traditional sense of the word). Interest in stylistics all but disappeared—that is, it became part of linguistics' domain; the study of versification was preserved, and alongside it research in rhetoric expanded.

Activity in literary theory more broadly understood has been much greater because of the connection with the epistemology and methodology of literary scholarship. Slovene comparativists came to grips with the turns and challenges that late structuralism and poststructuralism brought with them. Deconstructivism was a large topic. The new semiotics, the theory of intertextuality, and discourse theory motivated individual research projects; theoretical psychoanalysis, on the other hand, was more influential in other disciplines and in esthetics and popular criticism than in comparative literature. In addition to "internal" approaches to literature, questions of its external relations once again became legitimate. Certain basic tenets of philosophy and the methodology of hermeneutics became generally acknowledged in literary scholarship and mitigated objections to questions of literature's reception. There was a discussion among Slovene scholars of literary history's achievements, limits, and possibilities that was spawned by recent trends, such as new historicism, culture studies, and cultural history. Finally, in recent years some Slovene comparativists entered the debate over the current state of comparative literature and made detailed,

well-argued presentations for preserving its identity and independence within literary scholarship and the humanities.

In sum, within comparative literature in Slovenia, as in literary scholarship in general, there is a plurality of ideological and theoretical stances, research goals, evaluative perspectives, and methodological approaches. This situation, which some see as a threat to the discipline, is ambivalent and requires fundamental reflection, yet one has the sense that in the current situation as it is there are latent promising possibilities. It is thus understandable and proper that the field once again returns to its roots and critically attempts to evaluate afresh the works of its founder, searching them for possible analogies with today's situation and inspiration for the future.

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