

The Literary Activities of Mid-Nineteenth-Century Politico-Cultural Societies: A Systemic Approach

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The revolutionary year 1848 ushered in very favorable conditions for forming politico-cultural societies. Societies had previously existed without government permission. The Imperial Patent of 17 March 1849 provided for the freedom of national associations, gatherings, and organizations. At this time, and following the introduction of absolutism in 1851, political societies were continuously under close scrutiny. However, the February 1861 patent, which permitted the formation of non-political societies, and the legislation of 1867 eased the situation. Among the key nationally minded societies that assisted in reorganizing national life and constructing a cultural and literary life in the 1850s were the societies Vienna Slovenia, Graz Slovenia, the Slavic Association in Trst, Slovene societies in Celovec and Ljubljana, and the Slavic Reading Society in Gorica.

Theatrical Activities

These societies focused on the emancipation of the Slovene language and spread of national ideology, for which literary ideology was also instrumental. Colloquia played an important role in the communication and reception of ideology on a mass scale. At society meetings with educational and entertainment agendas, held under the banner of Slovene cultural and national consciousness, there was a preference for staging original Slovene works. In actuality, most of them relied on German pretexts and the achievements of proximate, historically and culturally related Slavic literatures, which symbolically united Slavic peoples. German essayist and theatrical organizer Leopold Kordesch's efforts helped spark the development of theatrical activities, which can be traced in the records of reading rooms after the fall of absolutism. Kordesch published numerous feuilletons in the newspaper *Ilirski list* in 1848, presenting his idea for a professional Slovene theater and writing about the significance of drama writing and staging for national formation.

We find a fair amount of factual information about productions in Karel Glaser and Ivan Prijatelj, yet it must be noted that their data do not always agree, and that a number of things that they omitted have been uncovered by fresh and thorough reviews of the most relevant sources from the time. Foremost it has been necessary to resolve the lack of clarity regarding literary sources. Slovene productions sometimes relied on other

productions—for example, on a French one via German, on a Czech one via French—so that their links with the originals were sundered. The translators' and adapters' of plays give superficial citations. Besides both Linhart productions, which remained in the repertoire during the reading room period, the play *Goljufani starec*, translated by J. Babnik, was adapted for the Slovene milieu. Judging by the reviews, it was produced according to a French pre-text, while Dušan Moravec claims (1963: 148) that the source was August von Kotzebue's comedy.

In 1848 in Ljubljana, J. N. Štěpanek's *Tat v mlinu ali Slovenec in Nemeč* was staged in Jurij Kosmač's translation. Bleiweiss reported in his newspaper *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* that "there was such a throng that a half hour before the start of the show it was no longer possible to get into the theater, and many ladies tore their clothing and lost jewelry in the violent tussle before they could reach their seats."¹ There was great enthusiasm for the show in Idrija and Trst as well.²

From this time we have documentation of the "original" comedy *Zmešnjava za zmešnjavo* by Babnik,³ even though it is in fact a farce adapted from the German comedy by Kotzebue *Wirrwarr* (1803). Kosmač had adapted the Czech pre-text *Dobro jutro* by V. K. Klicpera. Gymnasium students in Celje staged it, as well as *Goljufani starec*, *Županova Micka*, and Drobnič's adaptation of *Raztresenci*, which derives from Kotzebue's farce *Die Zerstreuten* (1810) and later was known as *Starost slabost* (1859). Jeretin in Celje published it together with *Dvoboj*. It is possible to conclude that a number of works were translated that were not necessarily published and staged. Thus I suspect that there existed at the time an adaptation of *Berounské koláče* (1818), which Štěpanek wrote on the basis of the German farce *Das Kolatschenfest in Kumrowitz* (1817) by J. A. Gleich, and which Bleiweiss probably rendered in Slovene as *Bob iz Kranja*, and an adaptation of Kotzebue's comedy *Der gerade Weg der beste* (1817) in Bernard Tomšič's translation (*Ravni pot najboljši pot*, 1852). We find references to his comedy *Lahkoverni*, published in 1864, in correspondence. Moravec assumes the same for Klicpera's plays *Čudodelni klobuk* and *Na mostu* (1963, 153), which S. B. Žepič and F. Rebec translated and which appeared on reading hall stages.

The most complete reports we have are on the accomplishments of the Slovene society in Ljubljana, which for the most part produced shows in the Stanovsko Theater, although there was plenty of activity elsewhere: in Idrija, Maribor, Ljutomer, Kamnik, Novo mesto, and Celje. The reports do not go into detail, but the national formative role of theatrical activity is

¹ 29 November 1848, 202.

² *Novice*, 2 October 1885, 170; *Jadranski Slavjan* 1850, 174.

³ *Novice*, 6 December 1848, 208; *Illyrisches Blatt*, 12 December 1848, 400.

apparent, functioning in the revolutionary period like a sort of national classroom. We read in connection with *Županova Micka* how it did “so much for forming and raising the Slovene language,” touching the Slovene heart, “because it was suited for Slovene life.”⁴ Other works were likewise “suited” to Slovene conditions. We can discern the breadth of the Slovene in the settings—the Slovene countryside or market, occasionally a manor house in which “little” people, the bearers of positive characteristics, celebrate a happy ending, and in the lively, nationally uplifting atmospheres of the works. This atmosphere flows either from a wedding of socially (un)equal representatives or from the “victory” of clever, talented, and worthy characters, which resolves dramatic contradictions and symbolizes a desirable outcome of individual and collective (national) fates.

Let us consider some examples. The action of the musical comedy in two acts entitled *Dobro jutro* takes place in a large village with a tavern, the value of which is enhanced by a spreading linden, the symbol of Slovendom. The central characters are of the peasant class, corresponding to the majority social class of the Slovenes at the time. Peasant households are the focus. They are represented by the small farmer Grega, his nephew Primož, and the mother Marjana; on the other side are the farmer Martan and his daughters Ciljka and Barbka. The main conflict stems from the widower Grega and the young, clever Primož’s contest for the hand of Martan’s daughter, Ciljka. Old Martan, who has been thinking for quite a while about uniting the two households by marriage, cannot decide to whom to give his daughter, so he tests the suitors. The ultimate test is a competition in saying “Dobro jutro!” (Good morning!). After numerous funny complications, Primož finally wins with the help of the girl. Yet the conflict between Primož and Grega is smoothed over because the latter wins Martan’s older daughter. The future is in the hands of the young, but the double wedding affirms both peasant households’ strength and symbolizes a favorable national fate. Grega says of himself that he conscientiously cares for his farm and is peaceful, quiet, devout, gentle, pleasant, kind and likeable, and Ciljka is hardworking and a good housewife.

The denouement of Drobnič’s *Raztresenci* is similarly contrived. The absentminded and forgetful fathers (a major and a captain) in the comedy of errors give the hands of their daughters Jelica and Dragotina in marriage. This means smoothing over social inequalities between the major’s well-to-do and the captain’s poor families, predicting the union’s success. At the end, the captain instructs the young couple: “And I remind you, in marriage avoid any absentmindedness and discord. When man and wife are confused, they are headed for unhappiness! (Drobnič 1850: 78).

⁴ *Slovenija* 12 September 1848, 84.

The five-act farce *Zmešnja za zmešnjavo* takes place in a manor house. The central characters are the count and countess Borovski, daughter Dragana, and the housekeepers Gvozdenka and Šalko Dobrič, who are in love. They occupy the lowest place but after innumerable complications it is they who advance. Šalko Dobrič, a joker and do-gooder, successfully resists the countess's attempts to marry him to her daughter Dragana in order to get his inheritance of half a million. He wins Gvozdenka, who among other things reads Prešeren. Once again, the clever one has the reins, but the busybody countess realizes that his "victory" is deserved.

Tomšič's *Lahkoverni* is set in a nameless market in Ilirija. The viewer recognizes the stupid marketgoers with revealing names—the judge Tomaž Bedastoča (sad case), the clerk Delnik (dealer), the organist Cepec (loudmouth), the customs clerk Potrošnik (spendthrift), the cobbler, weaver, carpenter, tailor, and so on—for they surround the cunning Rodogoljuf (hoodwinker), who passes himself off as a magician and convinces them of his ability to raise the dead. Yet the ending is optimistic. The captain, with the equally telling name Modrijanski (wise one), sets them on the right path. He delivers them from superstitions and persuades them that the one true way is faith in God and trust in their own abilities.

Reading activities

Among the societies nationally oriented activities were reading, which in the context has been overlooked, since it is usually associated with reading rooms. Society members and friends gathered in group reading places. *Novice* was prominent among the newspapers. It was of significance in terms of literature as well. Jurčič, Levstik, Trdnia, and Jenko's works appeared in it; Vilhar, Bilc, Toman, Pesjakova, and the most prominent poet, Koseski, published patriotic poems in it. In general, "national" literature that could strengthen national unity was held in highest esteem. The cultural society of the Gorica reading society served "the political goals of national liberation and fulfillment." Its program emphasized "all that benefits Slavs in this day and age."

The purpose of the society is, in reading Slavic newspapers and bulletins, and aware of all that benefits Slavs in this day and age, to keep [...] to the path of the organic renewal of the Slavic nation and aid its rise [...], assist unification, which sooner or later all Austro-Slavs must embrace [...]—in a word, the purpose of the society is to advance Slavic well being on the organic path of self-formation and learning in Slavic languages and literatures (Pahor 1998: 147–48).

The Trst society also recognized the importance of reading. It was the first to get involved in political organizing and the introduction of

Slovene in government offices (*kanclije*) and schools (*narodne učilnice*). In a record of “News and newspapers held by the society in its quarters,” published in the first issue of the society’s monthly *Slovjanski rodoljub* (27 March 1849), we see that the society subscribed to, collected, and loaned a number of Slovene, eleven Slavic, twelve German, and thirteen Italian and French newspapers. Non-literary and political periodicals, which however contained literary works, were in the majority. *Vedež* was a purely literary periodical. Among the non-Slovene periodicals were *Illyrisches Blatt* and *Karinthia*, *Danica Horvatska*, and *Slavonska i Dalmatinska / Danica Ilirska* (Zagreb, 1835–37), which Ljudovít Gaj published as a supplement to *Novini Horvatski / Ilirske narodne novine*. In the list, the title *Zora* probably refers to *Zora: Dalmatinska* (1844), a nationalist periodical from Zadar that carried Peter Preradović’s poem “Zora puca, bit će dana” on the banner of its first number. *Zora* contained translations of Homer, Catullus, and Dante. The supplement to *Agramer Zeitung* was called *Luna*.

The Ljubljana society played a central role among the societies of the 1850s. The foreword to the *Letopisa slovenskega društva na Krajskim* (1849) urges the standardization (*izobraževanja*) of the suppressed Slovene language, which required more than dictionaries, writings, and publication—“people should be able to get books at the lowest prices” (3). Bleiweiss, the society president, wrote about these “most important steps to achieving the ultimate goal”: “The people regularly read newspapers with a variety of content” (7). The constitution of the Ljubljana Slovene society mentions “bravnice” (reading rooms) in the first section, right after promoting Slovene language and letters (10). The newspaper *Slovenija* carried invitations to a “bravna izba” (reading hut) at Virant’s house.

In Celovec, a reading club was formed under the direction of Andrej Einspieler for the comprehensive cultural, political, and economic advancement of the Slovene people. On the ethnic periphery, literature and societies were among the chief supports for the realization of national culture and the unification of its members. The reading activity of Grac Slovenia was similarly directed. It was organized on the model of school and college literary societies. Society secretary Muršec deserves considerable credit for progress in reading culture, which was supposed to unite conscientious Slovenes and advance literature. Largely because of his connections in Carniola he was able to distribute books to society members, inspiring a culture of reading. The report in *Slovenija* mentions a Carniolan society in Radovljica that had a reading room in the Prešeren coffee house: “A Radovjican can come to the reading room and read German, but more Slovene and Slavic newspapers. Here all of the members of the municipal commission and other locals who are excited about our native language gather three times a week. Mr. Lovre Pintar (praise him) teaches the sweet sound of the Slovene language. And so a day doesn’t pass without singing “Živi, živi, duh slavjanski,” and the German type quickly runs off because

he can't stand hearing that" (Sinobad 2000: 235; Mal 1993: 670). There were reading societies in Kropa na Gorejnskem, Postojna, and Cerknica. Ivan Prijatelj surveys reading groups in Železniki, Borovlje, and Št. Jakob, although their organization was quite lax.

A number of non-Slovene scholars (Dann, Stipčević, Dobrić) of the politico-cultural and reading societies of the mid nineteenth-century have also investigated reading as a means of awakening national awareness. In their opinions, it was a European phenomenon. Due to the similarity of historical contexts in which they treat the founding, meaning, and role of the culture of reading, their conclusions can to some degree be applied to Slovene conditions. These scholars categorize societies in different ways but agree that the development of reading culture was one of the focal points of the societies' existences. In the first place, there was an emphasis on organized gatherings of individuals, regardless of their social origin, connected by common ideas, interests, and goals. Second, there was the point of organizing jointly to acquire and read materials. Here we can distinguish between smaller reading groups, reading societies, and library societies that found collections. The Slovene societies belong to the latter type. Some societies, however, had almost solely political characteristics (Dobrić 2003: 10–13).

Referencing the German historian Engelsing, Dobrić adduces the circumstances of capitalism in printing and the spread of print media as key explanations for the "revolution in the culture of reading." This signals a transition from intensive to extensive reading. The "revolution" is thought to have occurred at the turn of the eighteenth century and meant a shift from an almost single text, the Bible and religious literature, to mass consumption, reading, and purchasing of books and periodicals. Dobrić attributes the societies' spread of reading culture in the nineteenth century to the socio-political development and an educated working class. Reading was no longer the privilege of an intellectual elite, but became part of the general national culture. Thus Dobrić agrees with Dann that societies and the formation of mass readership in the nineteenth century stand in a causal relationship with national movements (2003: 20–22). That was the driving force behind the rise of societies, which provided space for national organizing and articulating common, national political interests. At key moments of the national project, reading was a means of receiving information; it aided the change of opinion and shaping of a national political ideology.

Collecting and preserving

Reading activities required the collecting and preserving of materials—a fact to which literary history has likewise failed to devote much attention. Plans for libraries, which were to give literature a solid

footing, can be found in societies' programmatic directions, although because of unreliable data it will probably be impossible to ascertain exactly what kinds of collections individual societies actually had. Words also had to be stored for theatrical presentations. As shown above, we can figure out which newspapers the societies subscribed to. Group collecting was the more important because of members and supporters' financial restrictions. In the first part of the *Chronicle of the Ljubljana Slovene Society*, the establishment of a library is the second goal, after reading. They aimed to supply periodicals and (scholarly) literature (e.g., linguistics, history, geography, and reference works) from the society's funds. Materials of "national relevance" were given priority (*Letopis slovenskega društva na Krajskim 1849*: 10). Bleiweis called for collecting materials for "for everyday learning and use." Prijatelj surmises that the Ljubljana society must have had a "nice library" in the 1850s (1955: 128). It is difficult for us to imagine what that might have meant, but the society must have had more than four hundred Slovene and Slavic books when it was founded. Lovre Toman's initiative to join with the seminary reading society, given their shared goals, probably helped.⁵ The Ljubljana society's library stored and lent books and Slovene, Slavic, and German newspapers with general, political, and literary contents: *Slovenija* (1848–1850), *Novice* (1843–1902), *Vedež: Časopis za šolsko mladost* (1848–1850), *Pravega Slovenca: Lste za podučenje naroda* (1849), *Zgodnjo Danico* (1849–1902), and *Celjske slovenske novine* (1848–49), which published literary and utilitarian contributions of national importance.

The Gorica and Celje societies collected domestic and foreign newspapers (Italian, German, French). Andrej Einspieler was enthusiastic about the existence of society reading rooms and libraries in an article in *Slovenske knjižnice*, where he notes a network of private, society, and parish libraries and urges the establishment of public libraries⁶ to nurture a lively literary life and body of literature of national breadth. He publicly called for patriots to contribute their efforts. "Patriot sirs! [...] Now take up this benevolent cause [...] Do all that you can for Slovene libraries." The libraries were of course responsible to societies as founders and owners (Shera 1966), as we see, for example, from the chronicles of the Ljubljana and Trst societies. The former emphasizes ensuring the spread of literature that is "pleasing" to most members; the latter would strive to arouse Slovene national sentiment: "Most of all the society will have in the rooms of its quarters newspapers, books, and maps for everyday use and for its members to learn about current conditions and the states of well-know peoples." The fact that the societies functioned as libraries we can implicitly conclude from subscriber lists. Sinobad (2000) points out that we find them

⁵ *Slovenija* 13 October 1848, 120; *Novice* 11 October 1848, 174.

⁶ *Slovenija* 1 June 1849, 173.

among subscribers to Mohorjeva books, including the obligatory *Koledar* and *Slovesnke večernice*.

Notes on the book trade

Let us now have a look at notes about the book trade that have been preserved in public forums. In the second (April 1849) and fourth (June 1849) issues of the Trst society's bulletin were published two articles—entitled “A Note on the Sale of Slavic Books” and an “Announcement of a Book Sale”—from which we learn that society benefactor and Trst bookseller (at Cankova House 507, St. Sebastian Street) Anton Živic had decided to open a bookstore. He planned to sell Slovene and Slavic fiction. In the inventory of his store we find Lovre Toman's *Glasove domorodne*, Prešeren's *Poezije*, Vodnik's poetry, Malavašič's *Erazem iz jame* (the first Slovene prose narrative), poems by Preradovič, book 5 of *Čbelica*, and Slomšek's *Drobtinice*—all of which societies no doubt had as well. Ivan Macun calls Živic's enterprise “a patriotic publishing house and bookstore.” Živic later expanded into school texts. In Macun's “Advertisement for School Books” there are mostly readers and primers. Available were Vodnik's *Pismenost*, *Povestice za prvo začetno šolo*, *Abecednik za šole po mestih*, *Nemška pismenost za male šole*, *Kršanski katolški nauk za drugo pervinskih šol*, *Mali katekizem v prašanjih in odgovorih*, *Abecednik za šole na kmetih*, *Berilo za drugi klas malih šol na kmetih*, *Berilo ali listi in evangeliji v nedelje in praznike celiga leta*, *Abecedna tabla in Poštevanka*.⁷ In advertisements in *Novice*, *Slovenija*, and *Slavjanski rodoljub*, which were in fact society bulletins and helped book sales with ads, the following booksellers are listed: A. Ferlinc in Maribor, Sigmund in Celovec, the book dealer Jurij Lercher, the publisher Hohn and Blasnik in Ljubljana, and Jeretin in Celje. They also had for sale the majority of newspapers.

The number of books sold was often a financial burden for bookstore owners; disorganization in publishing houses cause problems. An anonymous bookseller complains in an article entitled “A Note on Buying Slovene Books” that he cannot make a living from his business because he pays for rent and newspaper ads, while the mark up from the publisher is so low that he has little left.⁸ One person frequently combined printing, publishing, and book selling functions (e.g., Blasnik, Giontini). From book advertisements in *Slovenija* and *Slavjanski rodoljub* we know that Dr. Bučar in Ljubljana, a clerk of court in Kranj named Anton Globočnik, and the attorney Rozinat in Novo mesto were in the book trade. Book selling was extra income for them, and they also depended on the societies for advertising and sales.

⁷ *Slovenija*, 21 November 1848, 164.

⁸ *Slovenija* 5 June 1849, 177.

Yet it was members of the clergy and teachers scattered throughout the ethnically Slovene territory that were most involved in the book trade as a means of extra income. They were located in Brežice (Pastor Drobnič), Šmarje (Dekan Fajhtinger), Celje (Abbot Vodušek), Gornji Grad (Dean Bruner), Šentmartin pri Slovenj (Dean Novak), Slovenska Bistrica (Dean Stepinšek), Maribor (Professor Matjažič), Ptuj (Pastor Trstenjak), Ormož (Fr. Vovk), Radgona (Pastor Kreft), Velika Nedelja (Dean Vogrin), Grac (religion teacher Razlag), Dean Dagarin in Kranj, Dean Kramer in Škofja Loka, Dean Krivic in Zgornje Gorje, Dean Kos in Idrija, Dean Grabrijan in Vipava, Fr. Marinket in Logatec, Fr. Janež in Lož, Fr. Cigler in Višnja Gora, Fr. Okotn in Žužemberk, and Professor Terlep in Novo mesto. In Krško and Metlika Dean Vovk and his assistant were responsible for book selling, while in Kamnik Dean vojskat took on the work. There was said to be a book dealer named Javornik in Celovec, in Velikovec the catechist Puher, in Dravograd the pastor Čarman, the teacher Zomer in Borovlje, Dean Pečnik on Rožek, and Pastor Majer in Žabnica. Professor Macun in Trst, with the support of cultural-political societies, assumed the role of patriotic “book selling”; in Gorica it was the religion teacher Pelhan.⁹ Sometimes an author was forced into the book trade. Mayor Placid Javornik, who had translated the Old Testament (1848), invited sales of the translation by proclaiming love of the nation and continually thanked patriots for their purchases.¹⁰ *Ivan Macun publicized an anthology, Cvetje slovenskega pesništva* (1850) and *Cvetje, jugoslavjansko s dodanimi cveti drugih slavjanskih vertov I. cvetje slovenskiga pesništva* (1850), which contained Prešeren and Vodnik.

The ways of distributing and accessing literature that I have presented worked together to create the basis on which the national community could more easily take part in the national project. Therefore they are today characterized as part of a national political project. Yet before the appearance of reading rooms, public libraries, and large publishing enterprises, such as Slovenska matica and the ambitious Dramatično društvo (1867), it was the societies that helped set up a distribution apparatus by spreading literature in various ways and undertaking book trading. Society libraries were also a basis for public libraries that came later. And society events, which promoted literature of “national significance” with theatrical activities, recitations, and declamations, led to the formation of a mass reader and theatrical audience. From there in successive phases the literary field could become autonomous.

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⁹ *Slovenija* 8 December 1848.

¹⁰ *Slovenija* 8 December 1848, 46.

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