

Christianization and Love of Homeland in Prešeren and Bevk: A Comparison of Motifs and Values in *The Baptism on the Savica* and *Umirajoči bog Triglav* (The dying God Triglav)¹

Zoran Božič

Both texts were created during pivotal moments of Slovene history: Prešeren's poem at a time of German political, economic, and cultural supremacy and newly emerging demands for a united Slovenia, and Bevk's during the time of Italian fascism and the occupation of the Slovene Primorska region.

At first glance, Prešeren's poetry of high Romanticism and Bevk's supposedly trivial work have nothing in common apart from the topic of paganism and Christianity. However, they both convey a hidden message that could not be stated outright due to the censorship policies of the authorities at the time, to condemnation of aggressive foreign rulers, to appeals to national unity, to heightened patriotic consciousness, and to a relationship with nature that establishes the here and now as the highest value, and not the hereafter. The comparison and interpretation presented here sees in Bevk's work a direct connection to Prešeren's poem, its thematic continuation, temporal adaptation, and interpretation.

Key words: Christianization, France Prešeren, France Bevk, national awareness, paganism, Christianity, romantic poem, historical story, censorship, *The Baptism on the Savica*, *The Dying God Triglav*, Bled, Bohinj, Kobarid

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that in Slovene art, culture, and national consciousness the position of France Bevk in no way parallels that of Prešeren: if the latter, given his social role, significance and position in the Slovene capital city, has become a national myth (Božič 2010) or even a national saint (Dović 2017), Bevk is a rather marginal author and cultural figure as viewed from the perspective of the center.² Not a single sign in Ljubljana reminds the alert local or a passing visitor that once there lived a writer, a national worker, and even the president of the Primorska region national liberation council, who after all deserves some credit for the fact that nowadays Slovenes have an

¹ The article was translated by Darja Teran.

² It is true that, unlike Prešeren, Bevk was a respected and widely read author in his lifetime.

independent state. Moreover, if we look at secondary school literature education curricula as one of the most important literary canon criteria, it is evident that Bevk's opus no longer holds the position that it used to, before the establishment of Slovenia as an independent state: even the once indispensable *Kaplan Martin Čedermac* is no longer found among the selection of required readings (Božič 2014b). France Bevk differs in this respect even from his close compatriots Ivan Pregelj and Ciril Kosmač, who maintain their positions as important Slovene authors, at least on the basis of their novellas *Matkova Tina* and *Tantadruj*, respectively (Božič 2014a).³

The situation in the Primorska region, or more precisely in the area of Goriška or the town of Nova Gorica as the center of this westernmost Slovene region, is, however, completely different. Not only is there a bust of Bevk on his grave at the western wall of Solkan's cemetery, and even a life-sized monument by the main town avenue, his bronze statue embellishes the entrance to the impressive, almost luxurious library of Nova Gorica, which is itself named after France Bevk, as is the central town square. This is, indeed, rather unusual for a boy born in a mountain village above the steep and narrow Bača Valley. The authorities of the young town of Nova Gorica, which in 2018 celebrates seventy years of existence, were obviously aware of Bevk's exceptional role during the times under Fascist rule and WW II, when the Italian occupiers endeavoured to assimilate or expel a large portion of the people from the region.

To paraphrase the famous quote by Julius Caesar,⁴ it could be said that Prešeren managed to become the first in town, while Bevk, who could not even compete to be the second, became first in a village.⁵ Regardless of this difference in their respective prominence it is possible to compare two literary texts with the central topic of Christianization of the Slovenes—namely, Prešeren's poem *The Baptism on the Savica*,⁶ and Bevk's *Umirajoči*

³ This may have been influenced by the fact that during the interwar period France Bevk published a respectable number (twenty-three) stories depicting country life (rustic tales), in what was then and even today considered an inferior literary genre (Hladnik 1990).

⁴ I had rather be first in a village than second at Rome.

⁵ Bevk's regional significance may be confirmed by the fact that *Umirajoči bog Triglav* was a topic at the Late Christianization of Slovene Territory Symposium in Kobarid in 2017, and a reprint was published there in 2018.

⁶ In the introduction to *The Baptism*, Prešeren describes young Črtomir, a pagan Slovene military commander who falls in love with Bogomila, a sixteen-year-old pagan priestess living on the island of Bled, with whom he shares a year of happiness. Then the Christian troop commander Valjhun comes to Carniola, attempting to Christianize and subjugate the Slovene people with his vast army. After the siege of Ajdovski Gradec and the final battle all pagan warriors are dead, while Črtomir breaks free from the enemy's encirclement and waits for Bogomila on the Savica. The latter has become a Christian during the siege and

bog Triglav (The dying God Triglav),⁷ in order to show a direct connection between Prešeren and Bevk and draw attention to the fact that it was not until the wording by France Bevk that the identification of his contemporaries with the pivotal moments of Slovene history was possible, which in turn helped raise national consciousness. In other words, with his literary, cultural, and political activities Bevk, too, made his own contribution to the present national status of France Prešeren.

2. Similarities and differences

The comparison presented here is based on an analysis of similarities and differences: *The Baptism on the Savica* was self-published in 1836, while *Umirajoči bog Triglav* was published by Goriška Matica publishing house in 1930, almost a hundred years later. Prešeren's time, Slovenes were divided into provinces and were one of the subjugated nations within the Habsburg Monarchy, while a century later the Slovenes of the Primorska region lived within the state boundaries of the Kingdom of Italy, to which the Slovene territory lying west of the line Rateče – Snežnik was assigned by the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920.

2.1 Similarities between *The Baptism on the Savica* and *Umirajoči bog Triglav* (with regard to content and the time of writing the text)

2.1.1 The topic of Christianization

The most obvious and perhaps most meaningful connection between the texts is undoubtedly the topic of forced Christianization—in Prešeren, of Slovenes in general at the end of the first millennium after Christ; in Bevk, of a rebellious Kobarid people in the first half of the feudal fourteenth century. Both authors are inspired by historical material, although with the intention also to speak about and convey a message regarding their own times. It may

informs Črtomir, who still nourishes hopes of their marriage, of her decision to become a nun. Črtomir, too, converts to Christianity and goes to Aquileia, a well-known Christian center, to become a missionary.

⁷ The story describes the course of events in Kobarid, a village in the upper Soča Valley, in 1331. Peasants are Slovenes, while the lay and church rulers are of Roman descent. Most villagers are Christians; however, some are the followers of native faith who worship a holy tree and a sacred spring, dedicated to the ancient Slovene god Triglav. Two love stories which should have united Jasna, a pagan, and Jožut, a Christian, and Volkica and Mikuš, also a pagan and a Christian, develop through the story, but both end in death or helplessness. When exploitation leads people to start resisting rulers, and paganism starts spreading again, a crusade campaign is organized from Čedad (Cividale del Friuli), during which mercenaries cut down the tree and fill up the spring. In spite of the forced renunciation of their native faith, the local people are triumphant, since the foreigner is replaced by their local priest who understands and helps them.

be no coincidence that both texts present the motif of Triglav as an ancient Slovene deity: in Prešeren already in his famous metaphor at the beginning of *The Baptism*, when he says that “and bright / Sunrise now gilds the threefold peaks unbowed / Of Carniola’s grey and snowbound height”;⁸ in Bevk, as a carved marking on the holy lime tree by the sacred spring. In both cases Christianity is stronger than the old religion: rebellious Črtomir is baptized at the end of the poem; the rebellious Kobarid people reconcile themselves to accepting the Christian faith.

2.1.2 Slovenes without language rights

In 1836, Slovenes were a politically, administratively and culturally subordinated national community. German language dominated the political life, offices, and courts of Carniola. Instruction in secondary schools was conducted in the language of the masters, and Slovene language was not taught at all (Ciperle 1987: 57). Even the correspondence among the educated people was written in German, as evidenced by Prešeren’s letters that have been preserved.⁹

In 1930, Slovenes in the Primorska region were in a much worse situation, though. In terms of language rights and cultural inequality it was comparable to the situation in the previous century. In order to achieve assimilation as quickly as possible, Italian Fascist authorities only permitted Slovene language to be spoken privately: in 1926, all Slovene primary and secondary schools were abolished and signs with the inscription “Qui si parla soltanto italiano (only Italian is spoken here)” appeared in public places. Foreigners Italianized the names of places and Romanized personal and family names in official documents, and even on tombstones.

2.1.3 Ideological division among Slovenes: The pagan camp and the Christian camp

In the introduction to Prešeren’s *The Baptism*, the ideological division into two opposing camps is presented as one of the most tragic disasters that can afflict a national community. The poet dramatically expressed this in well-known verses: “For six long months the earth with blood is blighted, / From fratricidal Slovene malefaction; / How frightful is mankind, and how dim-sighted!” In the same way, two opposing camps are formed in Bevk’s story, again establishing a conflict among close relatives. The village is divided

⁸ This and following translations from the poem and lyrical poems by Prešeren are from Cooper and Priestly (1999).

⁹ The educated people found it easier to correspond between themselves in German, the language that was also used for communication among upper social strata in Ljubljana; some Slovene cities, such as Maribor, had become almost completely German-speaking.

between supporters of Gorazd and of Ančura, and even the tragedy of death fails to decrease the conflict between paganism and Christianity:

there, at the graveyard, blood could have been shed but easily. The members of Jakobeč's family opposed the murderer's sister being buried next to Ančura. The vicar delivered the verdict: "Jasna was not baptized; I am not allowed to bury her the way we bury Christians." (Bevk 1930b: 59).¹⁰

Both Prešeren and Bevk perceive the ideological division as a factor which fatefully weakens the strength of the national community.

2.1.4. Successful strategy against censorship

Under Metternich's absolutism, Prešeren frequently faced censorship of his poetry, for example, when he attempted to publish "Zdravljica" ("The Toast") in 1844 and in 1846.¹¹ It is therefore unusual that no objections were raised to publishing *The Baptism on the Savica*, although it includes as provocative a verse as "Most of this world belongs to Slavdom's races." With an attractive story about Bogomila and Črtomir's conversions from paganism to Christianity, Prešeren managed to express the thoughts which had been expunged by censors Pauschek and Stelzich in his elegy written in German, "Dem Andenken des Matthias Čop," immediately before the creation of *The Baptism* (Božič 2012b):

You see no more how to the ground is trodden
What the most noble life holds in store,
How what is needed by all is given but to the rare,
How an arrogant braggart receives only praise,
He who knows not the value of man;
How often the work of those the best is lost.¹²

France Bevk, who stayed in the Primorska region and, contrary to many other educated people, decided not to escape to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, had frequent problems with censorship and, as the editor of satirical newspaper *Čuk na palci* (A little owl on a stick), often landed in prison. In 1938, when his patriotic novel *Kaplan Martin Čedermac*

¹⁰ All excerpts from *Umirajoči bog Triglav* are translated by Darja Teran.

¹¹ "The Toast" was able to be published in its intact form (all eight stanzas) only after the March revolution in 1848.

¹² In *The Baptism on the Savica*, depicting the defeat of Črtomir, the pagan troop leader, and his conversion to Christianity (which pleased Catholic priests who practiced censorship over written communication), Prešeren can only identify himself with the defeated Črtomir (he has lost his position, property, comrades, freedom and his beloved), and thus, between the lines, the author draws attention to his own cultural and national subordination in the first half of the nineteenth century.

was published in Ljubljana, it was signed with his pen name, Pavle Sedmak. Before that, in only four years (from 1927 to 1930), he had written and published five voluminous historical narrations, all dealing with events in the remote fourteenth century.¹³ These stories were published in several thousand copies and were even reprinted. Through historical material he outwitted the censors, since some of his narrative characters, who find themselves in the grip of destiny at the meeting point of the German, Roman, and Slavic worlds, serve as hidden expressions of the author's patriotic sensibilities (Božič 2012a).

2.2 Basic differences between *The Baptism on the Savica* and *Umirajoči bog Triglav* (regarding the form, the audience, and final message)

At first glance, there are no essential differences between the narratives, since the titles themselves aim to express the supremacy and final triumph of the Christian religion. The conclusions of both narratives also seem to be the apotheosis of Christianity: Bogomila will become a nun; Črtomir a monk; the auxiliary priest Primož will officiate at the holy service in Kobarid, which is subordinated to the authority of Aquileian patriarch. Apart from the difference between demanding classical poetry and readable realistic prose there are other important dissimilarities. The first basic difference is in the audience or potential readers of the literary text: if for Prešeren it is the educated elite, for Bevk it means all the Primorska people who can read Slovene, regardless of their social position. The second basic difference is in the resolution of the story: while Prešeren's Črtomir and Bogomila and their adherents are defeated, Bevk's Gorazd and Primož with their followers emerge triumphant.

2.2.1 Potential readers of Prešeren's poem and Bevk's novella

At several places in his writings, Prešeren clearly declared that he wanted to compare himself with some world classics from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, and so he wrote, under the influence of Antique and Baroque poetry, exceptionally demanding classical poetry in his central poetic period¹⁴. He was criticized for this by Jernej Kopitar, who claimed that

¹³ Their respective order is: *Krvavi jezdec* (Bloody riders, 1927), *Škorpionji zemlje* (Scorpions of the Earth, 1929), *Črni bratje in sestre* (Black brothers and sisters, 1929), *Človek proti človeku* (Man against man, 1930), and *Umirajoči bog Triglav* (The dying God Triglav, 1930). These texts are written in a very expressive literary style and stricter literary commentators criticized the author for Romanticism.

¹⁴ This means the 1830s, when both sonnet cycles were created, including the sonnets preceding and following the Wreaths, and all the poems where the tercet or stanza was used by the poet ("Farewell to Youth," "Nova pisarija" (New Writing), *The Baptism on the Savica*, etc.) A crucial change in Prešeren's poetry

peasants would not understand his poems. Matija Čop agreed with Kopitar, pointing out that Prešeren's poems (particularly those in sonnet form) were not intended for them,¹⁵ but they would easily be read and understood by those who were versed in reading poems in foreign languages. In other words, only a rare few educated Slovenes. That *The Baptism on the Savica* was challenging for readers is confirmed by Stanko Vraz's statement of how difficult it had been for him to understand the poem, and by the fact that thirteen years after the publication of the booklet no more than a third of the edition had been sold.¹⁶

If Prešeren, with his intention to raise the Slovene literary language to the level of great European languages, decided to write demanding classical poetry, Bevk, as a citizen of the Primorska region during Fascist rule in the late 1920s, found himself in a completely different situation. He was aware that his stories would be published in the space marked by the language deficit caused by the abolishment of Slovene schools and the expulsion of Slovene language from public life.¹⁷ This could be achieved mainly with prose, which was supposed to be readable and accessible to every Slovene reader of the Primorska region, but first of all it had to be sufficiently attractive so as not to let the written texts become but dead letters. A detailed analysis of the story, in contrast to Prešeren's romantic poem, then logically reveals quite a few elements of triviality. First, there is the attractive story,

occurs in the 1840s, when, criticized for his incomprehensible poetry, he starts writing more accessible poems (such as "Pod oknom" ["Under the Window"], "Strunam" [To the strings], "Nezakonska mati" ["The Unwed Mother"], etc.), which are, because they ease the transition to more demanding poems, included in the first section of his *Poezije*, entitled "Pesmi" (Poems).

¹⁵ In this way Čop defended Prešeren against Kopitar's reproaches that his erotic poetry corrupted simple peasants.

¹⁶ Certainly, there are huge differences in the number of eligible readers and their purchasing power between the time of Prešeren and Bevk's time. However, our findings are confirmed by comparing it to the reception of poetry by Simon Gregorčič: Prešeren's *Poezije*, published in 1,050 copies, had not been sold out at the time of its reprint in 1866, while Gregorčič's *Zlata knjiga* (Golden book) of poetry, self-published in 1500 copies only thirty years later, was sold out in six months.

Recently, the difficulty in understanding *The Baptism* has been confirmed with empirical studies. For example, a secondary school student understood the initial verses in the third part of the poem describing the ceasing of the night battle and the end of a stormy night, and the morning dawn illuminating the summits of Triglav, in the following way: "When the night is dark, not even an army can be seen, when there is daylight, one can even see the chieftain." Chieftain (*poglavar*) refers to Mt. Triglav as the highest mountain in the range, but students failed to see the connection between Triglav and *poglavar* (Božič 2010: 405–407).

¹⁷ This awareness is confirmed by Bevk's publication of a very popular satirical newspaper *Čuk na pal'ci*.

where powerful love intermingles with strong hatred (“Mikuš could not forget Volkica, and thus he saw Jožut’s behavior and his mother’s hatred in a different light, he judged it differently. When his brother hit him, they were both instantly ready to fight to the end; Jožut too felt a silent and lasting hostility towards Mikuš” [Bevk 1930b: 51]). Mikuš could not forget Volkica, and thus he saw Jožut’s behavior and his mother’s hatred in a different light, he judged it differently. When his brother hit him, they were both instantly ready to fight to the end; Jožut too felt a silent and lasting hostility towards Mikuš). There are several instances where eroticism is included in the description (“And every time the naked girls, girdled with wheat ears and green garlands, started to dance, all was so silent ...”), numerous dialogues are strongly expressive (“I curse you, I curse you! By the radiance of a night fire, by a dead black hen, by the blood of a virgin...”). Violent scenes are frequent (“Somebody picked up a stone and threw it. It hit one of the bars [of the cage], the stone bounced. Already the second stone fell, hitting Volkica ...”), as well as heroic behaviour: “In one leap he rushed over his mother’s body and threw himself amidst people. He spread his arms and caught blows like divine gifts” (Bevk 1930b: 12, 38, 66, 54).

Another basic difference, the difference between the defeat in Prešeren and triumph in Bevk, is connected to Bevk’s narrative plan, which may be understood as a reiteration, adaptation, and interpretation of Prešeren’s *The Baptism on the Savica*.

3 Bevk’s narrative plan (interpretative thesis)

3.1 “The Dying God Triglav” as a reiteration of *The Baptism on the Savica*

Bevk’s work, which is set several centuries after Prešeren’s *The Baptism*, makes reference to this Romantic poem as regards the position of Slovenes and their relationship to foreign rule. However, both Bevk and Prešeren actually discuss the present: the memory of former times of freedom, the presentation of Slovenes’ subjugation, and the condemnation of the behaviour of foreign rulers. The only difference is that in Prešeren the evil comes from the German North, in Bevk from the Roman West.

3.1.1 Memory of the former times of freedom and independence

The loss of national independence¹⁸ is connected by both authors with Christianization. When addressing his soldiers before the fatal battle, Črtomir

¹⁸ The loss of national freedom should be understood as a Romantic and post-Romantic projection of contemporary views onto the Medieval period, particularly in terms of cultural identity or cultural inequality.

clearly tells them they may lay down their arms, but at the price of losing their freedom, while in the shelter of the dark and stormy night they would find the way to other Slavs, who are still free to choose their own religion and set the laws themselves. Later, in dialogue with a Christian cleric, a former pagan priest, he opposes Valjahun's establishment of the new religion by force. In Bevk's story, too, the loss of freedom is a clear-cut topic, a new religion imposed by the sword is clearly problematized:

Locals who had adopted the new religion out of fear of the death penalty and rarely out of inner conviction often prayed to double gods. To one God in the church, but to the old gods in their hearts. They prayed to one out of fear originating in a whip and sword, while to the others out of their great sweet memory of the days of freedom. And through centuries, not only in their hearts, but also in their customs, in joys and in sorrows, they remained pagans. (Bevk 1930b: 87)

3.1.2 Presentation of Slovene subjugation and condemnation of their unequal rights and worth

Prešeren and Bevk are both inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, which they understand as the equality of people and also the equality of nations.¹⁹ These ideals, later to be repeated in "The Toast," Prešeren intentionally puts in the mouth of the Christian cleric: "May there be peace for all men on the earth, / Thus did the angel voices sound their call / In choirs on high at the Messiah's birth; / We of one Father are the sons withal, / He taught that we all mutual love are worth, / All people brothers, brothers nations all." Bevk, explicitly indicating that Slovene serfs are exploited by lay and clerical lords (both foreign), polemicizes with that idealism, since his protagonist, also a Christian priest, perceives the situation as completely different:

They teach and demand subordination, but they rebel among themselves. They swear, drink and gamble, but they insist that their subjects abstain from dissipation? They rob and steal, but require their servants to respect the property of others. They assault women slaves in the fields, yet expect the male slaves to live chastely. They commit murder and arson, yet the serfs, who are wild as wolves and simple as sheep, are expected to refrain from fighting one another!... (Bevk 1930b: 46)

The subordination after the loss of national independence was described in detail by Prešeren at the very beginning of *The Baptism*:

¹⁹ Certainly, the influence of German Romantic philosophy should not be neglected, specifically in Prešeren's views of relations among people.

Old pillars of Slovenedom are cast down,
 And all our laws on ancient habits based;
 All bow before Bavarian Tesel's crown,
 The sons of Slavdom 'neath his yoke are placed,
 And haughtily the aliens strut and frown,²⁰
 Within our homeland, by bright fortune graced.

Bevk's story also presents Slovenes as subordinated and exploited: "Patriarch Pagano della Torre ruled in Aquilea. He levied taxes, collected the tithe, recruited soldiers and gathered slaves" (Bevk 1930b: 7). In contrast to Slovenes, foreigners are a privileged social class: "The vicar's service was connected to precisely defined earnings, so foreigners competed for these posts without understanding the language, and caring more about a comfortable life than about the souls of the faithful" (Bevk 1930b: 26). Naturally, with this historical scene, Bevk draws attention to contemporary conditions in the Primorska region, where nationally conscious Slovenes, even the educated ones, could not find a job; consequently, there were massive emigrations to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, to Western European countries, and even to South America.

3.2 Prešeren (Črtomir) as a persecuted swan and Bevk (Gorazd and Primož) as a sharp-sighted eagle

In his monograph *Prešernov pesniški razvoj* (Prešeren's poetic development), Janko Kos emphasizes in several places that a recurrent theme in Prešeren's expression is a discovery that he possesses great abilities (talent, knowledge, experiences), which, however, are not acknowledged by Slovene society of the time, particularly by its governing elite (Kos 1966). It is completely logical that again and again he feels underprivileged, inferior, outcast—in short, defeated by life. In his interpretation of *The Baptism*, Boris Paternu (1977) perceives Črtomir before the battle at the Heathens' Fort (Ajdovski gradec) as a Romantic hero, and after the defeat as a man bereft of all illusion and resigned to his destiny. In my discussions in *Three Kinds of Prešeren's Guilt: The Interpretation of The Baptism on the Savica and The Squaring Problem of The Baptism: Prešeren's Poem as an Expression of Cultural Inequality*, I understand the whole poem as a metaphor and its message as criticism of the subordinated Slovene nation in which the poet's abilities cannot be sufficiently recognized (Božič 1993 and 2012b).

This hidden message originates in Črtomir's duality: before the battle he is a prince, a commander and a fortunate lover, after the battle he is

²⁰ At the end of the nineteenth century, Austro-Hungarian educational authorities still required the modification of this verse in textbooks (it read "And haughtily the winners strut and frown"), so that inhabitants of German nationality in Slovene lands would not be offended.

a fugitive, a subordinated and unhappy person. Before the battle for their religion and power, Slovenes are independent, after it they are without freedom and culturally inferior. To sum up, in the same way as Črtomir's social position depends on the position of his nation during Christianization, Prešeren's social position depends on the position of the Slovene nation in the first half of the 19th century. The key to such an interpretation of this poem is the fact that the omniscient narrator (= the poet) identifies himself solely with the defeated Črtomir, but not with Črtomir the hero: "Let other poets of the ardour write / Which blossomed in their hearts all summer through: / How Črtomir came by whene'er he might, / How, watching them, her father younger grew; / For him, though not for me, a known delight, / His breast their happy love did long imbue ..."

Considering that *The Baptism*, in which Prešeren laments misunderstanding and his ill fate, is his central poem, but not the only one with this type of message (similar thoughts are found in his signature poems *Farewell to Youth*, *Sonnets of Unhappiness*, *Glosa*, *Reburial*, *Fisherman*, *To the Poet* and *The Still Beating Heart*), Fran Malavašič was justified in writing in his famous critique of *Poezije* soon after its publication that Prešeren resembles "a swan which, persecuted and wounded by the merciless storms of fate, swims in the solitary lake of life". In contrast to Prešeren, he perceives Jovan Vesel Koseski, who at the same time established himself as an important patriotic poet, as "a sharp-sighted eagle whom destiny gave the gift of strong wings that he may rise to bright heights" (Malavašič 1847).

It is absolutely logical that the forthright Koseski was a poet more suitable for the national awakening than the mournful Prešeren, and only the critique of the allegedly hermetic poetic style of the former enabled Prešeren to be installed as the leading poet on the Slovene Parnassus. However, due to the need for heroic national poetry, literary historians had problems with Prešeren's radical pessimism: this is most evident in the interpretations of his confessional poem *To the Poet*, when some experts on Prešeren forcibly transformed a persecuted swan into a sharp-sighted eagle (Božič 2014c).

France Bevk, whose story *Umirajoči bog Triglav* was directly inspired by the themes and motifs of *The Baptism on the Savica*, as explained before, was evidently aware that at a time when the very existence of Slovenes in the Primorska region was threatened, he could not address his readers in the same way as the despondent and world-weary Prešeren; on the contrary, his literary characters had to be closer to the encouraging poetry of Koseski.²¹ In contrast to Prešeren, who could only identify with the defeated Črtomir, his two crucial male characters had to be heroes. And they had be

²¹ A heroic figure, similar to Primož and Gorazd in *Umirajoči bog Triglav*, is the priest in Bevk's novel *Kaplan Martin Čedermac*, published under his pen name Pavle Sedmak in Ljubljana at the outset of WW II (Bevk 1938).

that till the end. The old Gorazd and the young Primož thus resemble Črtomir the commander before the battle: both are respected in their communities. In *The Baptism*, Črtomir has such convincing power that none of the fellow fighters he commands abandon him before the intended attack (“No one will leave him in this time of trial, / Each ready for his sword this pledge endorses; / No single man will opt for safe betrayal”), and in the same way Bevk’s heroes are accepted by Kobarid village folk.

Gorazd, a pagan and a newcomer from the mountains, quickly won the locals’ trust with his actions: “The reputation of the healing power of Gorazd’s water and his herbs spread not only in Kobarid, it went further to the villages close by, to Bovec, Tolmin and farther towards Čedad. First, Gorazd tried to drive people away, but he gave in, although they demanded the impossible of him. His advice helped, his water did no harm: he was old and experienced, he knew nature and plants. This gave him a reputation, it built trust in him.” (Bevk 1930b: 28). Similarly, the educated assistant priest Primož knew how to deal with simple folks: “People looked approvingly at Primož. They trusted him. Day in and day out he visited houses with his crucifix in hands and spoke to them. Not as a ruler, but rather as a father, not with threats, but with love and persuasion, like one speaks to children” (Bevk 1930b: 168).

Gorazd and Primož are religious adversaries, but they are both Slovenes, involved in the life and existence of the Slovene community. If Prešeren’s Črtomir is idealized as a warrior for the old faith, Valjahun is demonized, since even the wounded are not left alive by his soldiers: “While one yet breathes he stays not their destruction / Until the last each man is harried, / For whom their faith is the supreme instruction.” Both Bevk’s protagonists, the follower of native faith and the auxiliary priest, are idealized: “Gorazd was the son of nature, a mountain wolf, a greying oak. His eyes flashed, every single feature of his face spoke whole pages of a written book” (Bevk 1930b: 22). and “His word affirmed God more clearly than the sun affirms a bright day. Probably because his word was smooth, familiar. But also, because he burned for it and lived just like he was teaching” (Bevk 1930b: 43).

In crucial moments, when the foreign inquisitor horribly tortured young Volkica, both acted in the same way, both heroically, both as “sharp-sighted eagles with strong wings”:

He came to the market and instantly knew what was happening. He heard the call of his daughter. He rushed through the mass, in one leap he was on the scaffold. His eyes were burning, his grey beard fluttering. He pushed the executioner aside and shoved the pan from under his daughter’s feet so that the embers scattered. (Bevk 1930b: 159)

Further:

Primož the priest, half-clad as a shepherd, such as he was, red and breathing heavily, jumped on the scaffold. He hit the galley-slave who was crouching over Gorazd, shoved the executioner in the chest so that he staggered and fell from the scaffold under the tree. He stood at the scaffold alone, great, with dishevelled hair, gleaming in anger and beautiful.” (Bevk 1930b: 159–60)

And they are not the defeated, but the victors.

3.3 Prešeren and Bevk’s relationship to religion and nature as the supreme ideal

If Bevk in his story, out of need for real heroes and literary characters with whom Slovenes in the Primorska region, subordinated and oppressed under Fascist rule, could identify, went beyond *The Baptism on the Savica* and distanced himself from Prešeren’s radical pessimism with respect to his relationship to religion, Bevk the writer actually refers to his poetic predecessor. When the defeated Črtomir (in the name of the poet) pronounces the famous words “The faith of Bogomila I accept, / In love and peace and concord the belief, / I know that idols and their slaves adept / Imagined are by those within their fief, / ‘Twas for my fathers’ sake those laws I kept, / Which now by force of arms have come to grief,” it is absolutely clear that he accepts Bogomila’s new religion only as a creed that brings love and peaceful coexistence among people. There is no trace of a new God or of life hereafter; hence, it is religion in the service of people and not people in the service of religion. The same mentality permeates Bevk’s people of Kobarid: “We believe in a god who helps us in our need and distress, who does not impose corvées and tithes” (Bevk 1930b: 147).

An essential point in *Umirajoči bog Triglav*, which confirms such an interpretation, are the moments in the chapter “Šiba božje jeze” (The scourge of God’s wrath), when the people of Kobarid, fearing that hail would devastate their yet unharvested wheat fields, thus threatening them with famine, first turn to their vicar, and then to the pagan Gorazd. However, he only performs the pagan ceremony after he has discovered, relying on his experiences and knowledge of nature, that the storm will pass by the fields. Gorazd’s real god is thus nature and, as the son of nature (“he grew up in wild mountain solitude, high above under the rocks and mists, under the clear sky and the sun, amidst forest trees, amidst stones, amidst thunder and lightning, amidst mountain flowers and flocks of sheep, amidst the terror and beauty of the mountains” (Bevk 1930b: 22), can help people. I refer to the key scenes of these events:

The vicar was afraid of the people. He knew that if he failed to deter hail, in their anger and sadness they would attack and knock him on the ground. This is what had happened to the vicar in Bovec. As he distrusted the power of his spells, he preferred to stay safe at the nobleman's place and used God as an excuse. 'God can stop the hail. Pray! /.../ As the storm was approaching, he stepped in the garden. This son of nature was bonded most closely to the nature when she was at her most forceful and intense. When he used to live high in the mountains, he always gazed with rapt admiration at the raging storm, shaken all through. After a storm he felt purified. /.../ The first drops fell, the people roared. Thunder rattled the sky, rumbled down the valley and tumbled into the deeps of the Soča's river channel. The growling clouds came nearer. The first lashes of a frozen whip struck above the hill of Volnik. One after another bolts of lightning flared above Krn. /.../ Gorazd moved. He wanted to approach the lime tree and risk everything. Once again, he looked at the sky. He knew the directions of clouds, to the last fibre of his being he knew the laws of nature. He smiled. /.../ Gorazd took a handful of water from the spring and threw it to all four sides of the sky. Three times he circled the lime tree from the East towards the West, placed his hand on the carved sign, lifted his eyes ... (Bevk 1930b: 80–82)

This relationship with nature as the supreme ideal is shown in many places in the story: "Nature's merry wedding ceremonies. Each animal, each tree and plant expressed the soul, which nurtured itself and whooped." and "Green branches, leaves of lime and apple tree arched above her, blossoms hid her body that was a coffin and a grave to her unborn child." and "They lifted bread towards the sun and repeated the act three times; the same was done with wine." and "A tree grows and falls, a spring is eternal, it has its own laws and its own path, written according to its own will from the beginning of time." That this is no coincidence is confirmed also by the elegiac ending of the story, depicting Volkica and Matic: "Every morning, the sun rose again as the living spirit of the earth and wrapped them in its light" (Bevk 1930b: 171).

With the circle concluded, this finding can be transferred to the interpretation of *The Baptism on the Savica*. Prešeren's poem also presents nature as a powerful force, particularly in its metaphors (for example in the Introduction, the assault of Valjhun's ninefold larger army is compared with a torrent).²² Even more expressive is the key octave, when Črtomir waits for

²² The motifs of nature in Prešeren's poem were also treated by the Polish researcher Marta Cmiel (2012).

Bogomila at the Savica waterfall, and Prešeren symbolically depicts the transformation of the hero into a defeated person:

Our hero listens to the thund'ring falls,
 Next morning, thinking as the banks bellow
 Are shaken by the water as it brawls
 And roars, while undermining in its flow
 The trees and cliffs and tow'ring mountain walls,
 And in its wrath its foamclouds skywards blow!
 Thus hast'ning youth its pace but first corrects
 In later life – so Črtomir reflects.

In his analysis, Paternu concluded that the description of the waterfall is much more expressive than the description of the pool beneath it, which means that Prešeren's longing, in spite of perceiving himself as defeated, goes to Črtomir the hero (Paternu 1977). Moreover, in this stanza Prešeren confesses his thought that the waterfall as a primordial expression of nature is more powerful than heaven, that here and now is a value more important than the hereafter.

The interpretation that nature is the supreme ideal in *The Baptism on the Savica* can be confirmed with yet another crucial Prešeren poem, namely the romantic ballad "Neiztrohnjeno srce" ("The Still Beating Heart"), which is a kind of poetic rationale of Prešeren or a swan song of his confession of love. When gravediggers first discover the corpse and then the beating heart of Dobroslav, a poet unfortunate in love, the miracle first leads them to assume that the grave belongs to a saint. This possibility is negated by the testimonial on the tombstone that the poet lived no saintly life nor received the final sacraments: "He lived not as a saint, but his duties he denied, / Without the holy oil and the final rites he died." When the mourners accept the fact that no religious miracle happened, a wise old man explains that this is a miracle of poetry, which has eternal life; he suggests that they cut the heart open and expose it to natural forces: "Let gentle breezes cool it, let it be damped by dew, / Let sun and moon and starlight what they his long life through / Inspired in him, those dreams, now take back all that they gave. / If in that time it's mouldered, then back into the grave."

In one day, the heart completely disappears, which means that the poet was continuously receiving his inspiration from nature as the supreme ideal. Bevk's narrative strategy in *Umirajoči bog Triglav* is thus not only a reiteration and an adaptation of the subject of *The Baptism*, but also an interpretation of this key Prešeren poem. And this is not a solitary example in literature of the interwar period. In Prežihov's novella *Boj na požiralniku* (Battle at Požiralnik), the topic of which is the possibility or inability to survive on wet land, the end of the story, when the children prepare for the burial of their father's corpse, shows that dry land represents the sacred land for the young Dihur children. Father Dihur, whose greatest value is dry

weather, dies on a clear sunny morning, while Dihur's wife, whose maiden name is Sušnik (the name refers to drought) and who longs for water, dies in the moment when it starts raining. For both, father and mother, heaven is linked to here and now, and not to hereafter (Kuhar 1940; Božič 1998).

4. Conclusion

We can thus conclude that Bevk's activities in the interwar period, when he remained among his compatriots living under conditions of aggressive Italianization, and wrote appealing historical stories for a mass readership, were of vital importance in preserving the Slovene literary language and, most importantly, in strengthening national consciousness. In this regard, his *Umirajoči bog Triglav* especially stands out as a direct connection to Prešeren's fundamental work *The Baptism on the Savica*, with respect to theme, motif and structure. Bevk, similarly to Prešeren, succeeded in outwitting the censors and in reaching readers with a text that indirectly discussed the contemporary situation, particularly the relationship of subordinated Slovenes to superior foreigners. In contrast to *The Baptism*, in the story about the old faith in the Kobarid area, Bevk's main literary characters are not defeated in the end but rather are the victors. The author thus encourages his readers and conveys the idea that it is appropriate to persevere and resist, even at the price of innocent victims. In so doing Bevk re-evaluated the radical pessimism of Prešeren's Romantic poem and, for the Primorska region, became a sharp-sighted eagle, endowed by destiny with strong wings.

If Bevk's role in a wider Slovene space is reconsidered, we may conclude that first with this writing engagement before WW II, and then, during the war, with his active participation in organizing and leading the Liberation Front, he made an important contribution to the mosaic of cultural, political and military activities that enabled the Primorska region to be included again in the homeland. Consequently, it can be said that Bevk's work on the preservation of the nation may be justifiably compared to the state-building role attributed to Prešeren at the time of Slovene independence in 1991.

University of Nova Gorica

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POVZETEK**POKRISTJANJEVANJE IN DOMOLJUBJE PRI PREŠERNU IN BEVKU: PRIMERJAVA MOTIVOV IN VREDNOT V KRSTU PRI SAVICI IN UMIRAJOČEM BOGU TRIGLAVU**

France Prešeren in France Bevk sta živela in ustvarjala v različnih stoletjih in tudi njun kanonični položaj je močno različen; če je Prešeren najpomembnejši slovenski pesnik in v zadnjem času že kar slovenski kulturni svetnik, je Bevk prvi samo na deželi, in sicer v Novi Gorici, središču goriške regije. Ne glede na to lahko primerjamo njuni domoljubni besedili (pesnitev Krst pri Savici in povest Umirajoči bog Triglav), ki se obe ukvarjata s tematiko pokristjanjevanja Slovencev.

Obe besedili sta nastali v prelomnih trenutkih slovenske zgodovine: Prešernova pesnitev v času nemške politične, gospodarske in kulturne nadvlade in porajanja zahtev po združenji Sloveniji, Bevkova povest pa v času italijanskega fašizma in okupacije Primorske.

Na prvi pogled Prešernova visoka romantična poezija in Bevkova prejkone trivialna povest razen tematike poganstva in krščanstva nimata nič skupnega, vendar pa gre v obeh primerih za prikrito sporočilo, pogojeno s cenzurnimi postopki tedanje oblasti, za obsodbo nasilnih tujih oblastnikov, za pozive k narodni enotnosti, za poudarjanje domoljubne zavesti in za odnos do narave, ki kot najvišjo vrednoto vzpostavlja tostranstvo in ne onostranstvo. Pričujoča primerjava in interpretacija pa vidi v Bevkovi povesti tudi neposredno navezavo na Prešernovo pesnitev, in sicer kot njeno tematsko nadaljevanje, časovno prilagoditev in razlago.

Če je po Franu Malavašiču osrednja Prešernova pesnitev izpoved Črtomira – ranjenega laboda, ki toži zaradi življenjskih tegob, je Bevkova povest podobna pesmim Koseskega: njegova osrednja moška lika Gorazd in Primož sta kot bistrovidna orla, ki se zmagovalno upreta tujim osvajalcem.