

THE NATIONAL AND THE UNIVERSAL IN SLOVENE LITERATURE*

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The present theme can be understood and dealt with in several ways. One of them is a comparative approach and a comparative treatment of the national and the universal in Slovene literature. This means that we would approach Slovene literature with the methods of contemporary comparative literature, that we would understand Slovene literature as a monoliterary system within the macrosystem of European literatures or even within world literature. Such an investigation would establish and mutually link influences and typology. We would discover empirical links between Slovene literature and other literatures, which can be really proved and we would discover its thematic as well as ideological similarities with the literatures of other nations. The starting point of such research is the concept according to which literature is a part of spiritual and social changes within the framework of an unrestrainable, but also not completely understandably totally encompassing process in the world. Of course, our aim is not to establish only inter-literary relations among national literatures, be it European or world-wide. It is not our purpose either to throw light on the literature of one nation merely in its developmental dynamics. The present theme is understood much more broadly, so that when presupposing a comparative view of this subject-matter we should ask ourselves primarily about the deeper and permanent characteristics of a national literature and simultaneously about the permanent or

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invariable characteristics of other literatures. The theme can thus be defined as particularities and universalities in national literatures, its national and universal invariables.

Language occupies the first place in all particularities of national literatures, including Slovene literature. This well-known, almost common finding is not so obvious as it may appear at first glance. Literature, as the art of language or national language, differs from other arts particularly in this aspect whereas other arts, let us say music, painting or sculptures, speak to everybody in a language that is understandable, beyond national characteristics, truly universal. Literature is national just because it uses a national language. The link between literature and a national language is therefore the most logical, the most natural fact, which has a special significance in the literatures of small nations. Even the development of a standard language is — with the Slovenes, as with many other — parallel with the development of literary or aesthetic language. Our language was first constituted with the literary language and then gradually cultivated in a process of mutual effectiveness. Therefore it is understandable that the language has meant so far and still means the first and absolutely binding value to our poets and writers. Let me quote in support of the above statement only two examples. First, France Prešeren, the Slovene poetic genius, who lived in the first half of the 19th century. The poet had a German education. He attended grammar school in Ljubljana, where at that time a large bourgeoisie group spoke German, he studied at the university in Vienna, in a linguistically foreign city. These circumstances are undoubtedly the reason why Prešeren wrote some of his first poems in German, as well as why he translated some of his own poems from Slovene into German and also translated some Polish poems into German. In this way he proved his command of German, however, as a human being and as a poet he kept to his mother's language, no doubt the language that every man masters best in its highest perfection, knowing it in its most subtle nuances of meaning and sound. Prešeren created in the Slovene language poetry of high aesthetic quality, equal to the contemporary European Romantic literature, but which remained unknown to the world for a long time just because it is written in a language not used by a numerous population.

Ivan Cankar, the other classic author in Slovene literature, experienced a similar fate to Prešeren's. He also spent a period of his life in the German-speaking world, although in a different historical period. Cankar lived for more than ten years in Vienna, and this was when he was still relatively young for he returned to his native country at the age of thirty-three. In the Austrian capital he had a fiancée with whom he spoke German, with many of his

contemporaries he corresponded in German, in his youth he even wrote some lyrical poems in this language. Nevertheless, the Slovene language was and remained for him the instrument of his creative writing and one cannot even imagine him writing in any other language. As a master of the Slovene language he felt restricted even when using his mother tongue. He often lamented over "the awkward and weighty world, how it hides, and how it is afraid." The word, which was for him insufficient and hardly suitable, appeared to him as "hardly a sign, hardly the memory of what he saw with his own eyes," in as much as he did not despair over the language, saying that "the last, for ever decisive, redemptive word does not exist yet, it has not yet been heard or spoken by anyone" (*Podoba iz sanj*, 1917). In an even more direct way he declared his pessimism about aesthetic verbal expressions in his literary biography in which he wrote: "In that depth, in which joy is pain and pain is joy, there where God has proved the eternity of the human soul, there is silence" (*Moje življenje*, 1914). After all this one cannot imagine that Ivan Cankar, who was displeased with his own language, which he had mastered best, would emigrate to some foreign linguistic area, where he would encounter another language, which would be for him just as much, if not more, insufficient. Although due to his high, hardly conceivable demands he could not express everything in Slovene, he persisted in it from the beginning to the end. The Slovene language was and remained the national identity of his literary creativity.

Exceptions to this conclusion can, of course, be found among all nations, including the Slovenes. Stanko Vraz, Prešeren's contemporary, became a Croatian poet, Louis Adamic established his reputation as an American author, if only two cases are to be mentioned. And therefore we can state on the basis of such and similar exceptions that the language plays an exceptional role among small nations. The literary creator is placed before a dilemma with two extreme poles, either to accept a passionate adherence and loyalty to the national language or to change over to another linguistic area, which is, no doubt, a dangerous temptation. In spite of all this there is a rule that the mother tongue is the basic characteristic of national literature. For a writer and indeed any individual has an intimate relationship with his first, or national language, and only this circumstance can elucidate the primeval, hardly comprehensible linkage between a man and his mother tongue, particularly with writers belonging to nations which are not very numerous. Extremely prolific translating through the world confirms the above statement, because it primarily proves the endeavors to make national literatures accessible to readers of another language in order to make literature universal in the sense of its reception.

The language used in literature is not, of course, used for its own sake, but it serves communication, as in practical, everyday life. In literature this process takes place on a higher, aesthetically formed level, and the contents of the communication is that sphere in which it is possible to ascertain the relationship between the national and the universal. From this point of view the differences between the realistic and the non-realistic literary trends in European history is clearly visible at first glance. This difference is noticeable enough in Slovene literature too, when one should only compare realistic movements with non-realistic ones to be persuaded about the above-mentioned statement. In the 19th century the realistic movement, also called classical realism, put narrow limits to Slovene literature in its content and its themes. Fran Levstik demanded that Slovene writers should write "on the basis of native life so that a Slovene can see a fellow Slovene in the book." For this purpose he enumerated themes worthy of fictional treatment as well as themes from the contemporary life of a simple peasant and also from national history. As a possible example he mentioned one of the English authors from the 18th century. Otherwise, the literature of our realistic period should be an image of the national life and hold "the mirror up to nature." He was straight in warning writers against the contemporary literature of "the over-fed French and Germans," which only helped to strengthen the national basis of our literature in his time (*Potovanje od Litije do Čateža*, 1858). An approach to universal elements can therefore only be noticed first in the psychological dimensions of our literature of the realistic period, in Christian spirituality, which is noticeable in the thoughts and feelings of literary personages, and then in the first beginnings of Liberalism, where several prominent Slovene literary artists were involved. A similar relationship between the national and the universal also exists in social realism, which became established in Slovene in the 1930s and which was a dominant literary movement for quite some time after the Second World War, until a turn to modernist literary movements and then to the post-modern. Social realism also limited itself in contents and themes within national boundaries and even concentrated itself within that sphere to certain social strata of the Slovene nation, mainly to the peasants and working class. The psychological treatment of characters and the Marxist idea, which became more or less organically included in Slovene literature of the social-realist movement, gave a deeper dimension to a relatively narrow thematic framework.

The relationship between the national and the universal in Slovene literature is more intricate with non-realistic styles, although it is still discernible. In the period of the Enlightenment, in Slovenia from the end of the 18th century to the appearance of the Pre-romantic movement, the beginnings of aesthetic literature

were partly linked to folk poetry, and partly they are under the influence of the Austrian-German literatures, but under that part which was retrograde in style, some decades after the Western European development. As a spiritually autonomous and aesthetically highly demanding art, Slovene literature has its beginnings only with the Romantic period, with Prešeren, whose creativity is placed mostly in the period between 1830 and the March revolution of 1848. It is characteristic of Prešeren that he turned to South Slavic literatures, as can be particularly seen in the forms of his versification and poetry generally, as well as in his attempt to make amends for the delay. Therefore all the main developmental stages of European poetry are echoed in his poetry: Ancient Roman, Late Medieval, Renaissance, the Enlightenment or Neo-classical poetry, Pre-romantic and Romantic poetry. Prešeren's inner inclination to these phenomena enabled him to establish contacts with all the above-mentioned periods; however, the poet was also strong enough to form a creative relationship with European poetry. He independently used his knowledge of European poetry, traditional and contemporary, for the expression of his most personal as well as generally valid, common human experiences and realizations.

Our second, non-realistic stylistic period, which shows an ambivalent relationship between the national and the universal, is symbolism. This manner of writing in Slovene literature encompasses the period between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the First World War in 1914, maybe even a few years more. Our symbolism, headed by Ivan Cankar, received its individual stamp from the preceding period. In the second half of the 19th century Slovene literature did not acquire a stylistic individuality. It did not develop realistic writing, which became established in other European literatures, and which is characterized by a deep critical analysis of social reality. And thus it happened that the function of social criticism in the arts was taken over by Slovene symbolism. This national speciality in the development of our literature had a strong influence on the forces within the Symbolistic movement. It strengthened the realistic, essentially non-modern literary tendencies in conflict with the new poetics. The result of such stylistic syncretism is a special form of Symbolism, which was established by Ivan Cankar, the main representative of this period in our literature. Owing to numerous national themes and motifs we cannot find in his work symbols having an irrational origin or metasymbols, as, for example, in the works of Maurice Maeterlinck and Emil Verhaeren. Cankar's symbolic language, however, preserved some of its essential characteristics, but it became noticeably rationalized. Along with the obvious prevalence of Christian allegorisms one can find in his

work also archetypal figurativeness and numerous images from national mythology.

A similar relationship between the national and the universal or the European can be noticed, for example, in the Expressionism of the 1920s or in modernist endeavors in more recent non-realistic periods of Slovene literary development from the 1960s onwards to the Post-modern period and to the present day. When comparing our literature with the literatures of the more numerous nations we come to the conclusion that poets and writers created mainly from two basic sources, First, from already existing literary structures, from the so-called literary pre-existence, which is composed of norms, customs, and conventions. The second source are new stylistic movements, which intrude into the national literary canon from the outside, when they try to change, to subdue or even to deny it and its generally acknowledged tradition. The most obvious representatives of Slovene literature have never been only passive observers in the above described process of interaction, but they took part in this process with their active co-operation. Therefore Symbolism in Slovene literature cannot be called a reductive model of this movement, but Symbolism *sui generis*. The same is true of other stylistic trends including the recent ones. The Slovenes have not invented any new literary style — even much more numerous nations have not succeeded in such literary invention — but they accepted innovations from abroad with sovereignty, with endeavoring creativity. On the basis of the above-made observations we can draw the following conclusion: since Prešeren's time Slovene literature experienced a broad and dynamic dimension. It remained, on the one side, to a large degree faithful to its own tradition and national identity, and on the other, it took an active part in the development of the European universum. In the realist periods of its development its stress was on the national, and in the non-realist periods on universal or European stimuli of literary creativity.

Slovenska Akademija Znanosti in Umetnosti

POVZETEK

NACIONALNO IN UNIVERZALNO V SLOVENSKI
KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Članek obravnava posebnosti in splošnosti v nacionalnih književnostih v primeri z invariantnimi značilnostmi drugih književnosti. Najprej in predvsem se ustavlja ob jeziku, ki ima zlasti v književnostih majhnih narodov poseben pomen (in razumljivo je, da je pomenil in pomeni slovenskim pesnikom in pisateljem prvo in absolutno zavezujočo vrednoto), - in ob Prešernu, v katerega poeziji odmevajo vse pogloblitve razvojne stopnje evropske poezije. Tematsko se slovenska književnost pričinja približevati univerzalnim prvinam šele po Levstikovem realizmu, najprej s psihološkimi razsežnostmi slovenskega realizma, v krščanski duhovnosti in v socialnem realizmu v post-realističnem razvoju slovenske književnosti - od konca 19. stoletja dalje z vrsto modernih obdobj, Cankarjevega simbolizma, ekspresionizma in drugih, tudi najnovejših slogovnih smeri - sui generis. Slovenci res niso izumili nobenega novega literarnega sloga, so pa sprejemali inovacije od zunaj suvereno, s prizadevno ustvarjalnostjo.