

SLOVENE LITERATURE AND ITS TIME IN HISTORY

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The question of literature and history can be addressed in several ways, the most straightforward—and traditional—of which is to investigate the thematic dependence of literature upon national history in order to establish when and in what form historical, as well as contemporary, themes appear. Such an analysis, as instructive as it might be, does not lead to a deeper understanding of the problem posed. The real question is how Slovene literature exists in time, how it is understood and accepted (or rejected) in different periods of history. The question is proper because Slovene literature, as the literature of a relatively small nation, has a special function. During the course of its history—that is, for at least the past two hundred years that we can speak of Slovene literary art—it has been part of the process of constituting the Slovene nation. Literature performed a role that usually belongs to the state and its institutions; it had, in addition to its artistic function, a state-building function, which, according to this logic, ceased only in 1991, when Slovenia for the first time in its history became an independent state. This function has distinguished Slovene literature from literatures of European nation-states, while at the same time connecting it to them, for Slovene literature has the same or similar features as these literatures. Slovene literature has been at the same time, then, specific and typical.

There have been periods in Slovene history, though not many, when literature was received as literature—as an artistic phenomenon. Generally speaking, such was literature's first encounter with the public, when the artistic novelties were still fresh and constituted exceptions. In this way Ivan Cankar entered among his contemporaries. Not only those rare critics who approved of his work are meant; for example, the reviewers who held social-democratic political views and some who held liberal views, but the traditional critics who were mainly of a Catholic persuasion. They rejected Cankar, with the rare exceptions of some of his works—for example, *Križ na gori* (*The Cross on the Mountain*, 1904) and *Podobe iz sanj* (*Dream Visions*, 1917). They rejected mainly the writer's reflective message or message of idea, but they accepted the form of his works. Such a

reception of Cankar can be substantiated by considerable evidence found in the reviews of his early but also his later works. Among such general features the traditional critics attributed, for example, to Cankar "artistic talent," "brilliant talent," even "genius"; they praised his language. They termed it "beautiful," "masterful, ineffably beautiful," "wonderfully eloquent," and "worthy of admiration." They highly praised his style, which they found "original," "smooth and piquant," "wonderful," "glittering, powerful," and "exemplary"; and they found his diction "elevated, full-sounding, euphonic." Critics found Cankar an excellent narrator, "a giant in the drawing of milieu," "a master at creating mood," a writer of "shining storytelling." "Psychological mastery" and "rich, creative imagination" were considered to be his typical features. Critics state that "extraordinary technique, psychology, and plasticity" are joined in his work. Nonetheless, the critics to whom I am referring rejected Cankar as a writer. This attitude towards Cankar was defined precisely by the critic Ivan Lah in his review of the novel *Nina*. He wrote that in Cankar's work he "admired the brilliant form but firmly rejected the content." Similarly, but even more vehemently, the writer was rejected by an anonymous critic of his novel *Na klancu* (*On the Hillside*, 1902), who said that "in a nice form [was a] a rotten core."¹ These and similar cases show Cankar's literature in a certain period of Slovene history. They show one model of reception of literary art, a total reception, which stresses the reflective message of works but when evaluating them does not ignore esthetic qualities. It should be stressed, however, that the esthetic evaluation of literature by Slovene critics and literary historians generally does not occur independently, but rather simultaneously with the evaluation of reflective components and narrative content—that is to say, within a multidimensional or total model of reception. The Slovenes do not recognize proper art-for-art's-sake criticism.

Unlike esthetic evaluation, the reflective-thematic reception of literature became independent at an early stage, and it began to judge the value of literary works by itself. A case of such reception is the

¹ Ivan Cankar, *Zbrano delo*, ed. France Bernik, et al, v. 7 (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1969) 376–78; vol. 11 (1972) 307–13; vol. 13 (1973) 241–42; vol. 12 (1970) 388–90; vol. 13 (1973) 288; vol. 7 (1969) 364; vol. 10 (1971) 324–25; vol. 12 (1970) 397; vol. 11 (1972) 314–15; vol. 11 (1972) 290.

poetry of France Prešeren, particularly his *Krst pri Savici* (*The Baptism at the Savica*, 1836), a lyrical-epic poem treating a historical theme. The poem was read differently, and onesidedly, by various reviewers at the beginning of the century. The difference between them is particularly apparent in their estimation of the central part of the poem and of its protagonist, Črtomir. The liberals and their social democratic allies interpreted Črtomir negatively due to their world view: They defined him as an anti-hero, a servile character, a changeling.² Their reading of Prešeren was removed to the level of worldview and Črtomir became a negative myth. Catholic critics, whose reading of this poem was also circumscribed by ideological outlook, acted similarly and made of Črtomir a positive myth: His character was interpreted as that of a Christian and a priest, a man of virtuous heroism.³ There have been, in Slovene history, essential changes in reading Prešeren's poem, the most radical of which occurred after WW II, when official Marxist scholarship recognized only the "Uvod" ("Introduction") and overlooked the body. The situation is different today; all ideologies have equal opportunity to orient themselves in relation the Prešeren's writings—freely and without censorship. If one is willing to surpass the dogmatic "horizon of expectation" ("Erwartungshorizont" is the basic notion of the esthetics of reception), it is necessary to consider this lyrical-epic in its totality.

Therefore, it would be inadmissible to focus solely on the "Uvod." No part of the poem should be arbitrarily rejected or transformed in accordance with some worldview. A reduction as well as a supplementing of the text according to an external point of view are characteristic of non-scholarly interpretation that mythologize the character. Only by avoiding such transformations can one achieve an authentic image of Črtomir. This image may be presented as follows: If Črtomir, at the point of losing national freedom as his highest value, discovers a new meaning of life in eroticism, in his love for a woman, this change can be explained in complete accordance with his character. Moreover, if Črtomir is afterwards nearly destroyed by his

² Oton Župančič, "Daj, drug, zapoj," *Čez plan* (Ljubljana: Schwentner, 1904). See also France Bernik, "Črtomir kot nacionalni mit," *Sodobnost* 35.11 (January 1987): 1037–42.

³ Ivan Prijatelj, "Drama Prešernovega duševnega življenja," *Naši zapiski* 3.10–11 (October 1905): 172.

recognition that love is not in his favor any longer, and he therefore opts for a new, impersonal meaning of life, this cannot be defined as a negative change. One cannot fault the protagonist for his inner weakness or passivity, as was done by critics at the beginning of the century, the more so because he reaches such a turning point after serious reflection and being fully aware of his act. It should be obvious that the protagonist, after a military defeat, rediscovers his connection with the people, that he again begins to serve them, although in a different way, now as a priest and a herald of a new religion that connects his fellow-men with Western culture. The stress is then on Črtomir's finding new meaning in life, a new spiritual identity. The theme of Christianization, which was frequent in the Romantic period, should be understood as a historical theme, one dealing with the fatal encounter of the Slovenes with European history. Therefore, it can be understood as the European component of Prešeren's poetry.

Even the reflective-thematic reception means that literature is constricted to the themes and content of a literary work. Even more narrow and partial a view is inherent in an ideological reception, guided by only a rational or ideological view. Such reception appears mainly at the juncture of historical periods and is often practiced by adherents to a totalitarian system that advocates dogmatic control of culture. Such was the situation in Slovenia after WW II, and it is not difficult to find examples to illustrate this thesis. One of the best known cases is that of Edvard Kocbek, whose collection of short stories, *Strah in pogum* (*Fear and Courage*, 1951) deeply disturbed the political authorities. As a result, they barred him from public life for almost ten years.

All of Kocbek's writing was ideologically, if not politically engaged. It was particularly so in the extremely complex and turbid situation during and immediately following WW II, because at this time Kocbek endeavored to achieve a synthesis of evangelical Christianity and Marxism. Therefore the themes of his prose works dealt with contemporary history, but their problems were defined by two incompatible, mutually exclusive views of the world and history. This incompatibility was expressed by Kocbek in several ways, frequently within the same literary work, and this on the basis of a recognizable scheme which is evident in *Strah in pogum* as well, in particular in two short stories. In "Blažena krivda" ("Blessed Guilt") it is the command given by the Partisan commanding officer and commissar to a student of

medicine that he should shoot a suspected traitor. The student is at first strongly opposed to the directive because of his moral, Christian principles; however, at last, though still uncertain, he consents to kill based upon the logic that in war every participant is simultaneously executioner and victim. At this level of the story and with reference to the Partisan movement, in his personal meditations and in the dialog, Kocbek's protagonist is a heretic, but in his final decision he is a follower. The student finally fires a shot at the traitor but only wounds him severely, which might be an indication of the writer's hesitancy even when unifying the theme of the story, written within the guidelines of postwar socialist realism. A similar but more consistent duality is found in the final story of the collection, "Črna orhideja" ("The Black Orchid"). Here the Partisan commander is also obliged to carry out a death sentence against a suspected traitor who in the meantime becomes his girlfriend, almost his bride. The scheme of the previous story is repeated. In their personal reflections and conversations the main characters, the so-called traitor and the commanding officer, intimately oppose the judgment of the Partisan court. The heroine does not admit guilt but she does acknowledge the punishment according to her "conscience" and for her "sins."⁴ On the contrary, the officer is certain of her guilt but he rejects capital punishment out of Christian love of neighbor. Nonetheless, he kills his girlfriend and the story ends according to the esthetic principles of socialist realism after WW II.

Summarizing our observations on Kocbek's prose, we arrive at the following conclusions. Kocbek's aspiration of synthesizing Christian ethics and a Marxist concept of history, which the writer advocated while political active during and after WW II, finds a corresponding place in the structure of his works. Kocbek expressed his personal reflections on the existential and moral questions of an individual taking part in the war in the revolution, based on Christianity and the personalistic philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier, in the reflections and dialogs of his protagonists. The idea of guerrilla warfare and revolution was embodied in the content of his short stories, particularly in their outcomes, which generally had an unusual and contradictory effect. As Kocbek's utopian political project was self-

⁴ Edvard Kocbek, *Strah in pogum: štiri novele* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1951) 219–20.

contradictory and practically unrealizable, so too the essential components of his prose structures are inconsistent. Be this as it may, Kocbek's prose works, born of contemporary history and written for it, enabled and stimulated ideological reception, albeit from antagonistic positions. The ideological opposition in the post-war totalitarian period of Slovene history saw as the main value of Kocbek's literature the meditations and dialogs of his protagonists, their heresy concerning the Partisan struggle and the revolution, whereas the official critics could have found support in defending Kocbek—on the basis of his logic—in the endings of his stories. But this did not happen. It seems that they did not consider Kocbek as one of their own authors during his lifetime.

It may be asserted that esthetic reception is disappearing from literary criticism and even from scholarship as a whole. In some places attention to artistic language is preserved because the language has been and has remained the essential characteristic of national identity throughout Slovene history; therefore, it will likely continue to maintain its validity within the hierarchy of literary values. The reflective model of reception, which prevails nowadays, is centered solely on a literary work's worldview; all else seems less significant. The starting point for understanding literature today is the belief that it primarily expresses the cognitive world of humans and society, as well as the social and political circumstances of the time. This way of understanding literature is not new. It has a long and deeply rooted tradition in Slovenia, for literature has served the national idea in different periods of Slovene history through the present, when it remains a part of the Slovene cognitive systems, including political, which are evaluated, accepted, or rejected by criticism and scholarship. The third model of reception, the ideological, represents a more advanced stage than the former. It originates in the tenet that literature functions as contemporary history. To the extent that literature reaches into the past by its motifs, it makes history more timely and transfigures it in the spirit of contemporary ideologies. Ideological reception practices an a priori reductionism of literature without any embarrassment and it rejects non-ideological values of the arts—their form and language. Such reception is convinced that literature not only describes and discloses history but also creates it.

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POVZETEK**SLOVENSKA KNJIŽEVNOST IN NJEN ČAS V ZGODOVINI**

Razprava o sprejemanju in razumevanju slovenske književnosti v 20. stoletju je odkrila tri prevladujoče modele recepcije. Najprej celostno recepcijo, ki je sicer usmerjena k miselnemu sporočanju književnih del, ne pozablja pa njihovih estetskih posebnosti. Pozornost za jezik in obliko besedne umetnosti pa se postopno, a vztrajno umika iz slovenske literarne kritike in literarne vede. Vedno bolj prevladuje model idejnovsebinske recepcije književnosti, ki ob sporočilni vsebini upošteva še druge plasti književnega dela, predvsem tiste, ki so neposredno povezane s spoznavno vrednostjo umetnosti. Tretji model recepcije—ideološki—pomeni stopnjevanje pravkar omenjenega. Izhaja iz prepričanja, da književnost deluje v funkciji sodobne zgodovine, zato taka recepcija pristaja na redukcionizem pri razumevanju književnosti in se odpoveduje njenim neideološkim sestavinam, posebno jeziku in estetski obliki. Oženje pogledov na književnost in redukcionizem v njenem razumevanju pripelje naposled—v skladu s splošnimi razvojnimi težnjami v duhovni in materialni kulturi našega stoletja—do pojmovanja književnosti kot ideološkega oz. filozofsko spoznavnega fenomena.