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The “Prešernian Structure” and the Literary World System

The present study explores the asymmetrical relations between a peripheral literary field, such as that of Slovenia, and the world literary system. The author focuses on the notion that Slovenian literature sacrificed its intrinsic individualism and artistic function because of its 19th-century engagement in the national movement. It was thus supposed to suffer from aesthetic insufficiency, underdevelopment, collectiveness and belatedness. This frustrating self-image evolved from comparisons of Slovenian literature with Western cultural centers, whereby Slovenian letters were seen by its actors as a unique case. With reference to the Slovenian “national poet” France Prešeren (1800–1849), this generalizing notion has been termed the “Prešernian structure.”

The first part of the book deals with the history of the idea of world literature, especially from the point of view of its relevance to current theories of the “world literary system” (Moretti) or the “world literary space” (Casanova). Using examples from Slovenian literary history from the 18th to the 20th centuries, the explanation situates the Slovenian literary field among other European literary (semi-)peripheries, especially in the company of “weak” or “small literatures” that emerged as quasi-aesthetically autonomous and “nationalized” systems during the enlightenment and romanticism.

The idea of world literature originated from a longer history of global mobility, cross-national networking and cosmopolitanism (*respublica litterarum*), bibliomigrancy, translations, newspapers,

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archeological discoveries, writing of systematic world histories, etc. Through launching and practicing his universalist notion of *Weltliteratur* in the late 1820s, Goethe pursued not only cosmopolitan ideals, such as peaceful understanding among nations and the affirmation of “generally human” values, but also aimed at more particular ends: he attempted to establish himself as an internationally renowned “classical national author,” to advance Weimar as the cultural centre of politically fragmented Germany, and to transform German literature – which appeared to lag behind Western metropolises – into an important global mediator of literary traffic. From this perspective, Goethe saw world literature as the circulation of literary artworks across linguistic and national borders. To him, the expression *Weltliteratur* also meant cultural exchange between continents and civilizations, as well as the creative drawing on global literary resources. Most importantly, *Weltliteratur* appeared to Goethe in the guise of the modern capitalist market going global.

The recent renaissance of the Goethean idea of world literature is a symptom of socio-political shifts in literary studies in the context of globalization and the global crisis following 9/11. Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur*, as adopted in current literary transnationalism and comparative literature, refers to the practices, markets, media and institutions of the cross-national and cross-cultural circulation of literary repertoires, which are always already localized in a multitude of languages, semiospheres, national literary systems, inter-literary communities, etc. World literature is thus a “glocalized” reality.

Weltliteratur was originally launched through the ideologeme of “national literature.” Inclusion of the national in the world, the presence of the world in the national, and nationality as a necessary condition for the appearance of world literature are symptoms of the interlocking ideologies of post-enlightenment cultural nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and the aesthetic understanding of art practices. Modern European nations were established within a new

geopolitical reality that was perceived as inter-national. In literature, national identity was established relationally, through realizing one's position among other languages and within the global cultural market. In their *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels followed Goethe's economic metaphors, connecting the planetary expansion of the capitalist economy to the beginnings of the transnational system of world literature.

Indeed, the world system of capitalist economy, with its cores and peripheries (Wallerstein), shows striking analogies with the "world republic of letters," conceived by Casanova as a hierarchical social space in which established and emerging literary fields interact from asymmetrical positions, either as centers of cultural influence or as peripheries with poorer cultural capital. According to Damrosch, world literature is reserved for the diffusion of literary texts that, after having been recognized by some global metropolis, exceed their original linguistic boundaries and become actively present in major languages or cultures. Drawing on Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, Moretti also portrays the "world literary system" as analogous to – but not identical with – the world economy. Strong and developed literatures, which now function as centers of the world literary system, used to be peripheral during their emergence. Without interference with peripheral productivity and the resources of "small" or "weak" literatures, even central literary systems would stagnate. No cultural system is self-sufficient. Centrality and peripherality are thus variables that depend on various historical factors and systemic evolution.

The modern world literary system has imposed its asymmetrical relations (of unequal distribution of cultural power/capital) upon the existing multi-directional flows between languages and literatures. Many of these interactions preceded the establishment of the transnational literary market at the turn of the 19th century; many of them still avoid or bypass systemic pressures. The positions determined by the global system are not occupied by national lit-

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eratures only because the system also configures other components, such as inter-literary communities (Đurišin), migrant writers, diasporas, border zones, etc. Moreover, transnational literary circulation and international canon building do not depend solely on systemic relations between centers and peripheries; the role of “temporary sub-centers” (Thomsen) and semi-peripheries in inter-literary circulation should not be underestimated.

After a brief discussion of the transnational approach to literary processes, and having offered a theoretical outline of cultural transfer as a potentially useful concept for comparative literary studies, the third part of the present monograph discusses the “worlding” (Kadir) of Slovenian literature and the “Slovenizing” of world literature from the enlightenment to the 1930s.

Slovenian romanticism is considered as the starting point in the history of the idea of *Weltliteratur* as reflected in Slovenia as a European (semi)periphery. From 1828 to 1835, when Goethe was introducing his idea to the European public, in Slovenia Matija Čop and France Prešeren were carrying out the complex process of culturally transferring the Schlegel brothers’ romantic cosmopolitanism. In this way, they sought to substantiate the emerging Slovenian literature, which was embedded in the national movement, with the universality of esthetic humanism and, through references to the repertoires of European literary traditions from antiquity to romanticism, to establish it as a modern classic at the global level. Slovenian literary identity was formed by adopting the structure of the national classic that was patterned upon the ancient classics and the post-medieval vernacular European canon as embodiments of the law-giving Other: Prešeren envisioned his poetry in the universality of the aesthetic realm and intertextually drew on the classics of world literature, attempting to cultivate the poetic register of the Slovenian language.

Čop and Prešeren carried out Goethe’s idea of world literature without using this concept. However, it is likely that Čop also be-

came acquainted with Goethe's first remarks on *Weltliteratur* from the 1827 and 1828 volumes of *Kunst und Alterum*. The term *Weltliteratur* was first mentioned in Slovenian periodicals only in 1866 (in German) and 1884, respectively (in Slovenian as *svetovna književnost*), but it was implied and discussed in Josip Stritar's critical essays of the 1860s and 1870s. Stritar dealt with the following issues: the evaluation of Slovenian literary and artistic achievements in the light of the world literary canon, the classical tradition, universalist notions of humanism, aestheticism, and "the world culture"; the proper proportion between original and translated literature with regard to national identity; the unequal historical position of different national literatures in the development of European culture; and the international circulation and success of contemporary authors or literary trends. Key to Stritar was to demonstrate that the role of Prešeren as the Slovenian "national poet" was equal to other world classics.

The majority of mentions of the term *svetovna književnost* around 1900 presupposed the normative and canonic understanding of the concept. It was used with reference to prominent authors of foreign literatures; the newly established book series devoted to translations of world classics; the role of translations of world literature in the development of Slovenian language and literature; the underrepresentation of Slovenian authors in recent foreign surveys of world literature; and the problem of the passive, dependent Slovenian relationship to more renowned literatures and the resultant lagging behind their development. The comparative view that enabled Slovenian intellectuals to recognize that, despite adopting the highest standards of world literature (Prešeren), Slovenian literature was in fact globally peripheral, like many other non-Western European literatures, marked Anton Ocvirk's conceptual and institutional transfer of (French) comparative literature to his homeland's academe, where national literary history prevailed. In the 1930s, Ocvirk provided the first in-depth comparative, historical and theo-

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retical description of the concept of world literature from a Slovenian perspective.

The last part of the book returns to the notion of “Prešernian structure” and the understanding of the “national poet” as a national representative in the aesthetic canon of world literature (Nemoianu). Dimitrij Rupel’s sociological theory on the “Slovenian cultural syndrome” (SCS) of 1976, as well as Dušan Pirjevc’s philosophical and literary historical elaboration of the “Prešernian structure” (PS) of 1969, explain the aesthetic and ideological belatedness of Slovenian literature as a consequence of its national function, i.e., serving as a substitute for politics and the ideological “superstructure” of a national movement lacking statehood. Both theories have become a commonplace in representing Slovenian literary history. Although Pirjevec’s PS and Rupel’s SCS are meant to be meta-descriptions of the role of literary discourse in Slovenian society, they are themselves embedded in the very practices and ideologies they criticize. Both theories respond to the tensions and pressures of their time. In the unpredictable conditions of Titoism, Pirjevec and Rupel – both being critical intellectuals active in Slovenian modernist literary culture – employed sociological or philosophical discourse in order to advocate the autonomy of art, the plurality of artistic and (to some extent) political fields, as well as the emancipation of the individual.

The theory of SCS has been reproached recently with being derived mainly from self-perceptions of 19th-century Slovenian writers (Prešeren and others). It further neglects the role of music and visual arts, as well as other cultural, educational and political practices, which had no lesser part in nation building (e.g., reading societies, choirs, newspapers). The SCS thesis, above all, lacks a broader comparative scope, which would show that the meta-language that diagnosed a pathological “syndrome” of Slovenian literature was rooted in the same ideological tradition as its object of study. From the perspective of recent nationalism studies (Smith,

Hobsbawm, Anderson, Thiesse, Leerssen, etc.), it turns out that SCS is not a Slovenian peculiarity, but only one variety of European cultural nationalism. This is throughout a transnational discourse that in the course of the 19th century involved many other European literary systems, not only those that were peripheral and lacking statehood (e.g., the Icelandic) but also imperial, such as the Russian. Slovenian national and comparative literary histories originate from this very ideological matrix, hence they have not only observed literature, but, with their categories, have also helped to establish and reproduce "Slovenian literature" as a special cultural unit. While national literary history (Priatelj, Kidrič) strived for the reflection of national identity through the canon of aesthetic accomplishments of Slovenian authors, comparative literature scholars interpreted Slovenian literature in the broader international context, but in such a way that its national identity remained its main focus and reference (Ocvirk, Kos). While national literary history explained literary processes mainly with the factors of the Slovenian ethnic space, comparative literature scholars based the "great narrative" about the development of Slovenian literature on external factors, i.e., by establishing connections of Slovenian literature with the general and respected models of historical development, mostly derived from the Western core literatures. Due to the prevalent comparison with the central spaces of European and world literature, rather than with other "small" literatures and the periphery, the thesis of SCS was able to gain ground in Slovenian cultural discourse.

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