

# National and Comparative Literary Histories in Slovenia: Their Histories, Current Status and Prospects

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## 1. Introduction

In the present article I address the following issues:

1. Literary historiography as a social discourse, which is involved in the identity politics of nations and communities;
2. Literary history as a great genre of literary historiography, whose synthetic narratives represent the existence and changes of cultural totalities, such as nation;
3. The emergence and history of national literary histories and their dependence on the post-enlightenment discourse of cultural nationalism (in Slovenia in particular);
4. The relationships between national and comparative literary histories in Slovenia;
5. The current state of Slovene literary historiography in the contexts of post-communist transition, globalization, new media, commercialization of artistic production, and economically modulated reforms of scholarship and education;
6. The problem of relatively conservative structures of recent Slovene literary histories (in comparison with the “progressive” and radical transformation of the genre elsewhere);
7. Prospects for more radical reconstructions of literary historiography in Slovenia.

My premises are, *first*, that literary historiography is a kind of discourse, or more precisely, a subset of historical discourse, and *second*, that literary history (as a text sort) is its most prominent genre. Both points are meant to stress that literary historiography, like any other scholarly discipline, has its own history and that both its emergence and developments have been strongly influenced by socio-cultural contexts in which and for which it has been produced. I will attempt to demonstrate this by the example of Slovene literary history.

Literary historiography is a discourse because its knowledge is subject- and context-dependent. What is and can be known in historiography is produced intertextually, through a chain of propositions and utterances, as well as constituted by disciplinary practices of agencies and institutions within a special field of social interaction. Like any

other human competence, historical knowledge is a cognitive and experiential resource employed and tested by taking up various tasks, in this case to solve problems posed by a given discipline (e.g., to adequately present a newly discovered document to the scholarly community). By speaking of literary historiography in terms of discourse, I also endorse Johansen's recent typology of social discourses that are essential to any culture's existence and reproduction (Johansen 2002: 89–109, 415–32). One of them is historical discourse, whose function is to form collective identities by enacting and regulating cultural memory through the narrative mode. Historical discourse and its narrative form are, thus, the backbone of any collective identity.

Literary history is the most prominent genre produced by the discourse of literary historiography. It is a great genre, which draws together data, perspectives, interpretations, and findings of various separate studies and transforms them into a coherent narrative synthesis. Literary history's extensive narrative structure pretends to be a representation of a totality; grand narrative gives the impression that it is able to cover, present, and interpret the "whole" of literature's historical life and change, as well as unfold the forces that, from beneath the superficial facticity of antiquarianism, control the flow of historic time and inform the contingent deeds, texts, and documents of individuals. Such a totality (e.g. Slovene, French, European, or world literature) can be constructed only by reductions of complexity—by exclusions, abstractions, generalizations, and, above all, by building a literary canon. The canon is generally acknowledged as one of the most important tools for establishing cultural memory and collective identities. Literary history can thus be called a great genre not only thanks to its synthesizing narrative and claims to totality, but also because of the decisive role it plays in the process of canonization (Juvan 2006).

Literary history has recently undergone three significant changes that have seriously challenged the shape it had taken during the time of its emergence. Critics nowadays dispute its delimitation of the subject field, which has been dependent on the genre's former cultural functions. They also cast doubt on the epistemological foundations of its major forms of representation. The third change has affected the present social realities of the genre's central reference, i.e. literature. This inevitably casts preceding literary processes in another perspective.

First, as it is commonly known, in Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literary history emerged under the aegis of a broader process—the formation of modern nations as “imagined communities” (Anderson 1998). Their identity was based primarily on the media, which, communicating in the same standard language, spread common topics among otherwise dispersed literate individuals and groups populating—ethnically, politically, and geographically—relatively homogeneous territories and sharing cultural memories. The ideology of cultural nationalism then born engaged the discourse of literary historiography on a large scale enlightening and educational project of raising national consciousness. Hand in hand with “national” philology, “national” literature (being such because of language and the represented world), and other “national” arts, ethnology, and folklore, literary histories—by displaying the achievements of their cultural powers—legitimated nations’ claims to cultural, administrative, or political autonomy (Casanova 1999: 110–15; Thiesse 1999; Leerssen 2006). Representations and canons provided by literary historiography were promptly absorbed by the media and education, through which they helped to “interpellate individuals as subjects of a nation” (to rephrase Althusser’s notorious wording). Since literary history emerged in the pragmatic context of nineteenth-century national identity policies, it cannot surprise us that it remained firmly bound to the idea of nation. It is still the prevailing factor that delimits literary history’s field of reference and cultural functions.

Today, it cannot go without saying that nations figure as founding concepts of historical narratives. In the context of late capitalism, post-colonialism, and globalization—with their migrations, displacements of cultural patterns, and transnational working of economic and political power—we are witnessing a paradoxical phenomenon: radical critiques of the nineteenth-century notion of nation, deconstructing its ideological essentialism and attacking its “othering” (i.e., political exclusivity or chauvinism), are put forward mainly by scholars from academic institutions of the “old” European nations (which experienced fascist exaltation of the national), whereas scholars who promote the identity of “new,” emerging nations embrace obsolete, yet successful strategies of old “national” historiography (Hutcheon 2002). Nevertheless, in the present rise of “post-national paradigm” in economics, politics, as well as in human and social sciences several concepts abound that supplant or replace “national literature” and propose different organization of historical narratives; for example: multicultural areas, border zones,

peripheries, hybridity, diasporas, or migrations. (Hutcheon's comment also applies to other—e.g., gay, women's—literary histories.)

The second recent change in literary histories is epistemic. Whereas “old” historicism, conceived as a meta-methodology of the humanities, still believed, with Leopold von Ranke, that it was possible to access past events and facts “as they really happened,” and understand them hermeneutically, “new” historicisms of the late twentieth century, while demanding radical historicization, are highly skeptical about any possible meta-position in the historical processes. They also stress that representations of the past as conveyed by literary histories are nothing but narrative or rhetorical constructions, which are always perspectivized and biased (Rusch 1985; Ankersmit 2001; White, 2001).

The third change that affects the current state of literary history has occurred in the present-day realities of its research subject, i.e. literature. Whereas the dominant bourgeois attitudes towards literature in the nineteenth century were esthetic and nationalist, twentieth-century commoditization of the arts and the “merchandization of knowledge” (Lyotard 1984: 5) on the one hand, and emancipatory usages of literature on the other hand, brought into being quite a different atmosphere of literary life. Literary texts are either consumed mainly hedonistically, as part of free-time cultural activities, or, conversely, they are seen as political weapon of subalterns. Public, educational, and political discourses have almost ceased to portray literature as the pillar of a nation state as they used to do through the nineteenth century. Dissident discourses, which used to oppose totalitarianisms by employing literature as Aesopian preacher of freedom, practically disappeared from the post-communist scene as well. Literature is increasingly challenged by new media (film, TV, video, computer, and internet). Such radically changed realities of present-day literature throw new light on its past. Thus, for example, literary history has to take into account non-esthetic consumption and “wordliness” of older literary genres, as well as the crucial role that print media used to play in the development of literary culture before the advent of film (Briggs & Burke 2002).

## **2. Slovene literary history and cultural nationalism**

The changes briefly presented so far may serve as a frame to the history and current state of the Slovene literary history (see Kmecl 1971; Dolinar 2001, 2007). Slovenes belong to nations of East-Central Europe whose identity policies were, throughout the

nineteenth and deep into the twentieth century, largely motivated by cultural nationalism. The discourse of literary historiography in Slovene lands has been, since the late eighteenth century, dependent on scholarly context of “national” philology, history, and polyhistoric and folkloristic studies. Its task has been to collect, record, evaluate, and present the corpus of texts that could legitimize the aspirations of the emergent “imagined community” of Slovenes for cultural autonomy and the Habsburg monarchy’s recognition of their political existence and needs. Slovene scholars have thus written mostly national, i.e. Slovene literary histories.

Slovene literary history has evolved from genres of polyhistoric studies of homeland as well as from bio- and bibliographic registers, which were introduced as early as the mid-sixteenth century Reformation. These sources, which had shaped the genre blueprint of literary history in its pre-scientific phase, kept influencing the dominant structure of many subsequent literary histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is the notorious rendering of “lives and works” of individual writers that still bears witness to this fact.

The greatest achievements of the pre-scientific literary historiography in Slovenia are Baron Valvasor’s biographic and bibliographic inventory of Carniolan writers, which was included in his monumental polyhistoric description of Carniola’s geography, history, folklore, ethnography, and arts (*Die Ehre des Herzogthums Crain*, 1689), and the discalceate Pohlin’s *Bibliotheca Carniolae* of 1803, which listed curricula vitae and bibliographies of Carniolan writers in alphabetical order, as on shelves in an imaginary pre-modern library. Valvasor’s work is an excellent example of baroque erudition and provincial patriotism, whose aim was to celebrate the glory of a particular traditional land (i.e., Carniola) that belonged to a monarchy (i.e., Habsburg empire)—regardless of the land’s linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity (Valvasor himself wrote German). Pohlin, however, starts a new, Enlightenment era of “national awakening.” Although he, too, did not differentiate between Slovene and non-Slovene texts of Carniolan authors, Pohlin’s other activities (as a grammarian, editor, and poet) clearly display the goals and strategies of cultural nationalism; that is, to found ethnic identity on “national” language, literature, and culture (Vodopivec 2006: 15–21).

The emergence of literary history, conceived as a scholarly genre, starts with the librarian Čop's manuscript *Literatur der Winden* of 1831 (Juvan 1987), which was submitted to Šafařík's *Geschichte der südslavischen Literatur* (published posthumously in 1864). Čop, a close friend and esthetic "mentor" of the romantic "national poet" Prešeren, ordered his presentation of religious, learned, practical, and also belletristic writing in the Slovene lands of Austria mainly along the lines of traditional bio- and bibliographical list. He also included texts in Latin, German, and Italian. However, his great innovations are three: first, historicist methods, which allow syntagmatic presentation, segmentation, and periodization of cultural processes; second, focusing on Slovene national identity (*die Winden*; he systematically comments the progress and "cultivation" of the Slovene language); third, post-Kantian esthetic awareness, which makes him envision literary art as the *telos* of Slovene cultural development. Historicist interpretation of the linkages between the facts of the past, "nation" as the referential focus of a historiographic text, and distinguishing esthetic literature from utilitarian or religious writing have become the cornerstones of Slovene literary history.

Slovene literary history's "classical" period begins only in the first third of the twentieth century, after "national" literary historiography had become one of the prominent university subjects in 1919. It was introduced at the very moment of the founding the University of Ljubljana, conceived as the highest cultural and educational institution of Slovenes, who, for the first time, played the role of a constitutive nation in the new state of the South Slavs. The discourse of literary historiography could at last take the form of an academic discipline, whose methods, subjects, and goals are explicitly formulated, as well as systematically pursued. The "classical" model of national literary history, established and practiced by the university professors Ivan Prijatelj and France Kidrič, was characteristic of its historicist positivism and implicit linguo-centrism, closely associated with the notions of nation and art. Prijatelj, in his inaugural lecture of December 1919, shortly after the founding of the University of Ljubljana, set forth the program, claiming that "literature is the final expression of the spirit of a people at the highest stage of its development, when it has achieved the fullest degree of self-consciousness in the persons of its elect: the artists of the literary arts;" based on this, Prijatelj demanded from literary history to "hold up a mirror to the nation" by synthetically "reconstructing" and "interpreting" the past in "sequential and parallel orders of experience and meaning"

(Prijatelj 1952: 1–36).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the historical narrations since Prijatelj and Kidrič have for the most part foregrounded texts written in Slovene standard literary language and tried their best to fashion clearly “Slovene” national profiles out of authors whose ethnic identities were in fact ambiguous or historically preceded the modern politicization of national self-awareness; on the other hand, “nationalized” historical narratives marginalized, neglected or downplayed literary production that circulated in dialects, Latin, German, and other languages. Entrapped by this model of thinking, Kidrič, in his *Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva: od začetkov do Zoisove smrti*, called the period from the sixth century to the beginning of the reformation in the 1550s “centuries of sporadic records with no literary tradition” and, by his meticulous positivism, paradoxically empowered Prešeren’s nationalist poetic myth that portrayed millennial suffering of peasant Slovene people under foreign rule and alien aristocracy; additionally, in striking discrepancy with implicit nationalist ideology informing his scholarly endeavors, Kidrič also fueled the collective memory of Slovenes with complexes of having poor if any pre-modern tradition of “high culture,” and of being “latecomers” (*zamudniki*) on the stage of European literary progress (Kidrič 1929–1938: 1–16).

The bilingualism or biliteracy that marked even the work of the “national poet” France Prešeren (figuring as Slovene literature’s founding hero), also disturbed the imaginary *incipit* of the great Herderian story about the rise of the nation out of the spirit of its mother tongue and poetic literature. Following the “classics” of national literary history, the character and developments of Slovene literature have been explained by referring primarily to “national” contexts and factors (political, social, cultural, spiritual, psychological, linguistic, artistic, etc.); even though transnational historical frameworks and foreign influences upon the evolution of Slovene literature were—more or less marginally, to be sure—taken into account (especially in Kidrič’s work), the Slovene belles lettres were represented mainly as a self-enclosed entity.

Due to the needs of cultural nationalism, which were not fully satisfied before Slovenia lately became an independent state, the “classical” pattern of national literary history has persisted until recently, although it has been significantly modified and modernized under the influence of succeeding methodological shifts in literary scholarship

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Prijatelj translated by Lena Lenček.

(e.g., Marxist sociology, *Geistesgeschichte*, stylistic interpretation, formalism and structuralism, reception esthetics).

It has been comparative literature, which has, since the 1930s, vigorously challenged the self-enclosed national model. Slovene university professors of comparative literature (Anton Ocvirk, Dušan Pirjevec, Janko Kos, and others) rejected the notion of Slovene literature as an autonomous entity, whose processes are best explained by factors and contexts that are internal to Slovene ethnic territory and its social or cultural structures. Ocvirk, in his *Teorija primerjalne literarne zgodovine* of 1936, one of the earliest founding monographs on comparative literature worldwide, shifted the historicist perspective across the ethnic and linguistic borders. By methodically comparing Slovene literature with other European and world writings and by tracing foreign “import” and “influences which have creatively stimulated and shaped” what Ocvirk called “Slovene national and cultural individuality,” the Slovene comparative literary history attempted to “elucidate relationships of Slovene literature with great international currents—such as reformation, counter-reformation, enlightenment, Jansenism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, and neo-romanticism” and find out “parallels of our [i.e. Slovene -MJ] cultural evolution with a general European one” (Ocvirk 1936: 5–6).

Students of the “national” literary history often accused comparatists of having reduced Slovene literature to a derived, secondary writing, dependent on foreign influences. It may be true that the study of foreign influences upon Slovene literary works and tenacious comparisons of Slovene writers with major classics of “world literature” created, in the scholarly and general publics, the impression of Slovene literature’s peripherality, parochialness, and notorious belatedness. But, at least in my view, this only fits into a general, not particularly Slovene pattern: world literature, conceived as a space of texts that circulate beyond the cultural territory of their production (Damrosch 2003: 4), is and has always been a complex world system that is structured hierarchically. It consists of “national” or other literary fields that are unequal, disposing with lesser or greater “cultural capital” and political power; Slovene is only one among several “small,” peripheral literatures (e.g., Danish, Macedonian, or Kenyan), which can become internationally recognized and, consequently, influence the world literary system only after their repertoires and innovations have been “consecrated” and their internal temporality



taken to be “modern” or up-to-date by some cultural metropolis (Casanova 1999; Moretti 2000, 2003).

However, Slovene comparative literature—withstanding its cosmopolitan image, opposed to national narrow-mindedness—has not been immune to cultural nationalism at all. To wit, comparatists have often attempted to show that the Slovene literature is integrated in major cultural, esthetic, and literary currents of European or world literature, precisely because it adapted and absorbed outer influences. Slovene cultural identity is thus constructed with respect to criteria of some universally recognized evolutionary model, which permit to portray “national literature” as “cultivated” and “completed”, as well as located in a respected and potent supra-national area, such as “the Western world” or “Europe.” Comparatists, too, are susceptible to a consolatory fiction, typically embraced by students of “national” literature and other intellectuals of “small” nations: Slovene literature’s greatest achievements—so the argument goes—could be able to contribute original ideas and innovative forms to world literature, if the foreign reception of those masterpieces were not hindered by non-artistic factors, such as lack of political power and a language spoken by only two million people.

Regarding scholarly methods and practice, it is clear that Slovene comparative literature—along with the French school, which influenced its beginnings—still sticks to the national model. It is not only that Slovene comparatists are no exception in the discipline’s innate and persisting general tendency to treat “national literatures” as basic conceptual units that delimit the space of comparison or, as Lucia Boldrini puts it, “the building blocks of comparative literature” (2006: 19). What may actually be characteristic of the “Slovene school” of comparative literature is its enduring practice of “nationalizing” all comparison. That is to say, Slovene literature, observed in relations with other national literatures and within international literary currents, remains the main focus of the Slovene comparative studies, which occasionally gives the impression that it is merely a sub-discipline of national literary historiography. In this respect, one of the Slovene complit’s greatest achievements is Janko Kos’s *Primerjalna zgodovina slovenske literature* of 1987, a single-authored monograph that is beyond compare elsewhere: on the one hand, in contradistinction to “nationalized” historical syntheses, Kos’s laborious tracking of foreign influences in Slovene texts from the eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries succeeded in representing national literary history as an open network of inter-literary relations with

various Classic, Germanic, Romance, and Slavic literatures; on the other hand, the monograph, especially by its underlying method of *Geistesgeschichte*, builds yet another “master narrative”; instead of representing the evolution of Slovene literature intrinsically—e.g., as the emanation of individual, particular *Volksgeist*, mentality, or reflection of changing historical realities on sub-Alpine territory—Kos’s discourse establishes narrative coherence extrinsically, by founding Slovene literary processes on the succession of general periods in modern European intellectual (spiritual) history.

### 3. Current status and future prospects

When compared to recent developments in the most “progressive” fields of literary historiography in the world, the structure, methods, and scope of contemporary Slovene literary histories seem rather conservative. Recent collective works, such as *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), *A New History of French Literature* (1989, 1994), and, above all, *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History* (2004), and *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (2004–), show modern and postmodern metahistorical concepts at work (they are discussed in Dolinar & Juvan, eds., 2006). Users of those volumes can judge how aptly and successfully they apply innovative principles of writing literary histories: for example, history as an interpretive construct; fragmentation of grand narratives; plurality of views and experiences of the past; grasping literary texts in social and media contexts (i.e., within a literary field); affirmation of minor, marginal or subaltern cultural practices, which were excluded from the national canon; de-essentialization of “national literature” as the once privileged field of reference and protagonist of historical narrative; viewing the inner and the outer multiculturalism of literatures; observing literatures in their interdependencies within a broader geo-cultural area (e.g. Central Europe), etc.

In Slovenia, however, not much attention has been paid to such issues in the prevailing discourse of literary studies. Symptomatically, the Slovene edition of the volume *Kako pisati literarno zgodovino danes?* (Dolinar & Juvan, eds., 2003),<sup>2</sup> which attempted to provide an in-depth reconsideration of methods, tasks, scope, and

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<sup>2</sup> This collection of papers is based on the eponymous international conference that was organized by the Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies of the Scientific Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts in the fall of 2002. See Timothy Pogacar’s review in *Slovene Studies*, vol. 24, nos. 1-2, 2002 [published August 2004].

presentational forms of literary history at the turn of the century, has been received with skepticism and ironic undertones by prominent proponents of the established methodological varieties, settled genres, and authorities of literary historiography in Slovenia (see Paternu 2005; Virk 2006). Especially in Virk's paper, it is sometimes quite difficult to discern at whom (in Slovenia or abroad) his criticism is actually aimed. If I have understood his points correctly, it seems that, among the ideas appearing in *Kako pisati* either as topics of discussion or as newly devised proposals (Virk's critique does not clearly distinguish between textual and metatextual levels of discourse), his main targets are those that question the received theories of literature's autonomy, attempt to rethink the discipline in contexts of "cultural turn" and social sciences, and seek alternatives to traditional narrative modes in order to undo their "totalizations" of the past. Even though generational, methodological, and disciplinary gap between Virk (as a comparatist) and Paternu (as a Slovenist) is considerable, I feel that what bothers Paternu is very similar to Virk's troubles with what he calls "renovators" (*prenovitelji*) of literary history.

Reading *Kako pisati*, Paternu and Virk must have got the impression that certain "radical" ideas proposed there might unsettle the mainstream discourse of literary studies in Slovenia—methodologically a vague, flexible complex of textual interpretation, existential philosophies, hermeneutic, phenomenological or structuralist theories, framed by evolutionist historicism—and even subvert its fundamental value system (expressed by the use of notions such as "the Slovene nation," "literary work of art," "spirit," "esthetic structure," "meaning," etc). I am convinced that careful and close reading of "renovators" that haunt the volume *Kako pisati* would undoubtedly show that their disciplinary self-reflection is a far cry from uncritical advocacy of what is sometimes superficially understood as "fashionable" or radical historicist concepts, invading the humanities from the aggressive neighboring fields of cultural studies and social sciences. Still less grounded would prove to be the fear that Slovene "renovators" (if there are any, their positions in Slovene academic establishment are, by the way, rather marginal) might impose those concepts as a new orthodoxy. What is at stake, are rather efforts to open up, to air, and maybe democratize disciplinary discourses, which have been, especially in Slovene humanities, until recently often dominated by scholarly "patriarchs" and their nationally esteemed schools of thought, reluctant to enter into international scholarly confrontation.

During the post-communist transition, several intellectuals called for various revisions to the national literary canon, for example, by including émigré authors, paying more attention to women, by a more balanced attitude to non-liberal cultural traditions and values, etc. But it seems that such revisions, and, perhaps, eclectic appropriations of more up to date methods are about all that is expected from current Slovene literary history. I will not even mention expectations that may be triggered by the global “merchandization of knowledge,” which has lately colored Slovene academic and educational policies as well. To know something about things like the essence of being, values and structures of literature, or the nation’s past, is no more valuable in itself, because the grand narratives, which used to legitimate and organize particular disciplines and kinds of knowledge into a coherent, encyclopedic system of humanist education, have been ruined in modern and postmodern societies (cf. Lyotard 1984: xxiii–xxv, 3–11, 31–51). Thus, in the US, European Union, and Slovenia, the traditional Humboldtian university is converting into the institution of mass higher education, in which the dominant criteria for evaluating professors’ and students’ outputs have nothing to do with the *contents* of their knowledge, but merely with various utilitarian *effects* of their “competences” (their “excellence” is measured by bureaucratic and quantitative standards; see Culler 2006: 90–91). In this context, literary historiography that we know from its “classical” age may soon die out unless it, too, succeeds in proving instrumental efficiency (for example, in form of handbooks and textbooks, CD encyclopedias, and the like).

Still, I am moderately optimistic about the future prospects of more radical transformations. The weakening need for one single and common (“national”) collective identity in our pluralist, culturally differentiated societies, in which every group, community, and individual seek their own “identity story,” can, at least in my view, free both Slovene literature and its history from their commitments to cultural nationalism. The discourse of literary history may become more relaxed, daring, experimental, but also more modest, detached or “technocratic.” It need not pretend to play the role of national Holy Scripture any more.

Several recent developments, although rather sparse, may promise different future of Slovene literary history: for example, Janko Kos’s comparative history of Slovene literature (discussed above), Miran Hladnik’s empirical history of peasant or rural prose, which includes trivial literature; Silvija Borovnik’s historical survey of Slovenian women’s

writing; Franci Just's accounts of regional genres and authors writing in dialects; Janez Strutz's comparative studies of Slovene borderland authors in the broader and multilingual Alp-Adriatic area; an extensive overview of Slovene diasporas; Marijan Dovič's history of Slovene literary producers, which takes into account developments of the entire literary and media system ... What is needed, is perhaps a well defined collective project that could join individual efforts to create an open, plural, multilayered, hypertextually structured, comparative, and intercultural history of the Slovene literature. If we venture to analyze and present the literary culture on the Slovene ethnic territory within broader geo-cultural areas and interliterary centrisms or communities, such as East-Central Europe, the Habsburg empire, slavisms, or Yugoslavia, we will be able not only to better understand both its idiosyncrasies and patterns that are typical of wider areas, but also contribute significantly to a more accurate representation of the world literature's complex system.

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