

The Aesthetics and Politics of Belonging: National Poets between “Vernacularism” and “Cosmopolitanism”

Marko Juvan, ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana

In his famous essay of 1986, Jameson claims that “third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (69). However, Jameson does not limit allegorical structures to post-colonial situation, claiming that they are unconsciously present in first-world literature in which “political commitment is recontained and psychologized or subjectivized” (71). Thus, national allegory seems to be ubiquitous: it is implicit and unconscious in Western literature, the Hegelian master caught in idealism, and explicit and strategic in literatures of the global East and South – playing the role of Hegelian slave, a dependent literature “can attain some true materialistic consciousness of its situation” (85).

In my view, Jameson’s thesis about national allegory is pertinent for the nineteenth-century First-World literature and its dialectics of “longing and belonging” because of two reasons. First, “longing” of writers-intellectuals, who recognized their subaltern position not only in their respective societies but also within the emerging world literary system, proves to be an aesthetic form articulating their libidinal investment in “belonging” to their nation’s imagined community. Second, since Linda Hutcheon taught us that literary historical narratives of postcolonial literatures, with their seemingly outdated teleological national model, often emulated their Western postromantic predecessors (Hutcheon 3–4, 14–18), it is reasonable to assume that, in literatures, too, allegorizing identity politics through aesthetic discourse has its roots in (post)romantic Western nationalism. Henceforth, the twentieth-century postcolonial “desire for national self-determination” (Hutcheon 16) echoes the same longing of peripheral national movements across nineteenth-century Europe. Their representative writers were also able to grasp their dependencies created by the asymmetries of the world-system.

It is worth noting that, in some literatures, the very word “longing” epitomized national “belonging.” For example, the notorious “longing” of Irish expatriates for their homeland or the Slovenian word “hrepenenje” (‘longing, yearning’) directed towards an unattainable object/person, a better future or lost and idealized past. The couple “longing and belonging”

corresponds to Lacanian notion of “desire.” Desire is for Lacan “the surplus produced by the articulation of need in demand” and thus “can never be satisfied; it is constant in its pressure, and eternal” (Evans 38). What gives desire its insatiability of “longing” is the lack of recognition of the subject by the Other, the craving for being loved or desired by the Other (38–39) – that is, the need to “belong.”

Experiencing various facets of subalternity, the protagonists of the nineteenth-century national movements in East-Central and Northern peripheries of Europe understood their dependency on foreign imperial powers and ruling classes. Consequently, as subjects of national ideology whose transnational laws they were applying to a particular community *in statu nascendi*, they needed recognition of their subjecthood by the Other. Since they acted both as bearers and servants of nationalist ideology, their desire for being desired was split between two unequal Others. Firstly, the role of the Other was assigned to the imagined community of their proper nations. Secondly, their longing for being recognized was directed towards the universal, law-giving Other – the symbolic order of “generally European” normative cultural tradition. In the emerging inter-state and world-literature systems, it was core European powers that claimed possession of this cultural capital and thus figured as the only legitimate representatives of the symbolic universality of cultural values, such as aesthetic perfection, cultivated language, and well-developed media and institutional infrastructure.

In romanticism, the Greco-Latin classical canon was finally replaced by the canon of world/European literature, consisting of remnants of the ancient classics plus selections from medieval and modern writing of major languages. Virgil Nemoianu argues that before romanticism any poetic achievement was measured “by the extent to which it approaches the standards and values prescribed by a venerable and firmly reliable tradition” (249). With the nineteenth-century “emergence and/or consolidation of the nation-state” and especially among the stateless national movements, “validation of an ethno-linguistic (‘national’) group by a personal and autonomous literature” became indispensable, not only in eastern Europe but also in its southern and northwestern parts (249).

Ever since the late eighteenth century, when First-World literatures began to produce national allegories, the newly invented figure of “national poet” started to play the role of an instrument calibrating the level of a particular national literature against canonic standards of world literature. From among a host of literary producers, the poets elevated as “national,” such as Schiller, Burns, Moore, Mickiewicz, Petőfi, Eminescu, Hallgrímsson, or Prešeren, had to meet at least two sets of expectations. They had to intervene importantly in the ideology

and politics of a respective national movement, mainly through what Even Zohar calls “culture planning,” while their literary texts had to have topmost merits for the aesthetic cultivation of vernacular and the narration of nation. That is to say, for the ethnic community of their native country, the work of national poets, proving international standards of their literary language, articulated or invented the national past, pronounced national longing, and envisioned national future. National poets thus represented their respective nations in their need for recognition by the Other symbolized by the emerging space of world literature and empowered through the inter-state system dominated by core countries. Or, as Nemoianu succinctly put it: “Establishing a ‘national poet’ was a kind of shorthand, a summary of the achievements and of the profile” of a particular nation on the imagined “Olympian plateau” of *Weltliteratur* (254–255).

Cultural nationalism of ethnicities dependent on Western, Eastern, or Central European empires established ambivalent relationships to aesthetic standards deemed universal. For instance, in 1867 Titu Maiorescu accused modern Romania for copying the forms of Western culture without providing them with genuine substance (Terian, “National” 4). Commenting on such positions Romanian critics took vis-à-vis world literature, Andrei Terian draws on Martin’s recent theory of “cultural complexes.” These “emerg[e] from the comparison (constantly detrimental to the subject) with an Other,” that is, the established and universally respected western canon (Terian 4). In Terian’s view, the “refusal to accept the peripheral role of a literature” resorts to several different strategies that he summarizes in an opposition between “vernacularization” and “cosmopolitanization.” The former creates a protectionist image of a strong, independent, and individual national literature, while the latter strives for “affiliation” and “acculturation” of “universal” tradition (8).

It seems that European national poets, involved in politics of pre- or post-1848 national movements, generally showed anti-classicist vernacularist tendency, demonstrating that romantic literature did not amount to individual fantasies. Hence, oeuvre of several national poets tends towards creative emulation of folklore, expressive individual spontaneity, originality, historicist or antiquarian evocation of national past, and an openly political or satirical discourse. As a rule, by conferring upon his vernacular a kind of aesthetic allure, the national poet dignifies his mother tongue and sublates its heteroglossia. Canonization of his literary texts thus essentially contributes to the standardization of language.

In Nemoianu’s opinion, it was Germany, with Schiller and Goethe, that represented another model of national poet. It is based on the universality of the classical tradition merged with

romanticism (253–254). Such a “cosmopolitan” and “affiliative” orientation towards universal canon is also characteristic of Slovenian national movement and its national poet, France Prešeren (1800–1849).

Granted, Prešeren did also write according to the “vernacularization” strategy: he adapted folk songs and ballads, wrote casual couplets and love poems intended to be welcomed by peasant young men. However, the canonization process marginalized the vernacular Prešeren. It seems then, that in Slovenian long nineteenth century, Prešeren was more relevant as a figure of the singular “national classic” whose oeuvre compensates for the apparent lack of classical and modern traditions in Slovenian language and who is on par with the peaks of European hyper-canon. Slovenian cultural nationalism, backing Prešeren’s canonical afterlife, thus preferred to affiliate Slovenians to the values of the dominating Other, while sublimating the resulting inferiority complex in several defense mechanisms. At the turn of the twentieth century, the ambitious desire for national subjecthood, blocked by realities of being peripheral and small latecomer, finally produced a persistent self-denigrating auto-image of Slovenians as *hlapci* (serfs), launched by the dramatist Ivan Cankar (see Žižek).

All that being said, in comparison with national poets, such as Petőfi or Botev, Prešeren’s oeuvre does not appear so politically engaged. This should not come as surprise if we consider shifts of Prešeren’s canonic image: dubbed “the poet of love” in romanticism and post-romanticism, he was regarded existential poet in modernism, and meta-poet in post-modernism (see, e. g., Stritar 16–17; Martinović; Paternu; Juvan, “Poèzija”).

Correspondingly, in his 1847 collection *Poezije*, the most frequent content words is *srce* ‘heart’ (112). Words related to the semantic network of ‘politics’ represent less than 2% of the total 16.878 different word forms (see Scherber), while the share of texts with political topics is roughly 16%. In Prešeren’s ‘political’ vocabulary, words with the highest frequency refer to ‘nation and ethnicity’ (7 – *narod* ‘nation, people’, 8 – *kranjski* ‘Carniolan’, 10 – *slava* ‘Slavdom, glory’, 10 – *slovenski* adj. ‘Slovenian’, 19 – *Slovenec* n. ‘Slovenian’). The majority of Prešeren’s politically colored texts is about ‘cultural struggle’ (8%), ‘national cause’ (4%), and the ‘poet’s social condition’ (2%), while proclaiming liberal ideas finds its way in 1% of Prešeren’s poetry.

The apparent paucity of political overtones in the texts of Slovenian national poet partly results from Austrian censorship, much harsher in provincial Carniola as elsewhere in the empire. Moreover, smothered political voices in Prešeren’s poetry seem to be in line with his troubled middle-class and bohemian life (see Slodnjak) devoid of heroic deeds. Coming from

a peasant family, he spent his youth far away from home, dependent on his priest uncles, scholarships, and precarious jobs. He excelled at the Vienna university to become a promising doctor of law, but he experienced social pressures of the “micro-physics of power” (to borrow Foucault’s term) quite early in his career. As an outsider, he repeatedly made efforts to find his place among Carniolian *Bildungsbürgertum* by trying to secure economically solid professional standing, which would allow him to pursue his poetic vocation. In the subject role of Hegelian/Jamesonian slave who is capable of grasping the materiality of being, Prešeren, in his poem *Glosa* of 1834, reveals how marginal poetic labor is in the eyes of Slovenian petty-bourgeois society. Here, he encourages himself to insist on writing poetry in spite of limitations typical of a peripheral capitalist society by adducing intertextual *exempla* of world-literature classics and metaphorically evoking the autonomy of art as the inversion of capitalist economy (Juvan, *Literary* 79). Historical documents of censorship and the police testify that Prešeren was often under surveillance of local authorities. They suspected him of being *Freigeist* (a free-thinker) and were scandalized by his increasingly bohemian life-style. Although Prešeren kept friendly relations with Slovenian and Slavic liberal nationalists and persecuted revolutionaries, such as the Polish deportee Emil Korytko, his political views hardly came out of a closet.

However, Slovenian national poet did not confine his political discourse to privacy as one might infer from the lexical statistics. The prominence of the political in Prešeren’s poetry does not arise from mere quantity of ‘political’ words or themes, but from the semantic power and context of his poetic speech acts. For instance, Prešeren dared to translate literary works that disturbed reactionary Europe. He paid tribute to revolutionary movements between 1830 and 1848 with original poems, such as *Zdravljica* (Toast), later canonized as national anthem. *Zdravljica* was written in 1844, censored, and published on the occasion of 1848 Spring of Nations. In the seemingly innocent genre frame of a drinking poem, Prešeren, inspired by Paine’s *Rights of Man*, subversively packs radical political pronouncements. He links ideas of French Revolution (liberty and equality) with cosmopolitan vision of peaceful co-existence among free European nations and calls for Slovenian national emancipation and Slavic solidarity. The thrust of his political ideas is advocating national emancipation of Slovenians and other Slavic peoples of Austrian Empire by way of cultural nationalism, primarily through aesthetic literature and the establishing of nationalized print media and cultural institutions.

In his study of 1952, Anton Slodnjak suggests that Prešeren's task "to sing about his own life in such a cultivated language and art form to arouse interest for poetry in every educated man" was, given the historical context, "not only artistic, but also – or even more so – political." Slodnjak's finding is a premonition of Jameson's concept of subjective, seemingly personal, private, and desire-driven literature as allegory of national longing and belonging. The political is thus omnipresent in Prešeren, however mostly implicitly. First, it shines through national allegorization of the poet's existential drama, erotic desire, and belletristic commitment. In his 1834 *Sonetni venec* (The Sonnet Wreath), inspired by Kollár's sonnet cycle *Slávy dcera* (The daughter of Sláva), he turns the virtuoso mannerist composition (14 sonnets plus a master theme) and Petrarchan imagery into a romantic symbol of interlacing his erotic longing with an Orphean mission of the national poet to cultivate and politically unite his compatriots, bring them back on the stage of national history after their millennial slavery. Second, political is the very founding of intentionally autonomous and "worlded" aesthetic discourse in Slovenian language. The ruling cultural politics in Carniola, relying on post-Herderian conservative Enlightenment as propagated by the Slovenian linguist and imperial censor Jernej Kopitar, preferred what Terian would call "vernacularization" of Slovenian letters. Struggling against this ideology, Prešeren took up another model of relating Slovenian literature to the norm-giving Other of European inter-literary system – that of cosmopolitan "worlding" (for the term, see Kadir; Hayot). Paradoxically cosmopolitan and nationalist at the same time, Prešeren's tendency to cultivate his vernacular according to the highest canons of world literature challenged the dominant ideology in Carniola that allowed only popular genres of religious, educational, and morally faultless easy vernacular reading to be addressed to the lower classes.

Prešeren's elegy *Dem Andenken des Matthias Čop* (In the memory of M. Čop) depicts his friend's untimely death in the aestheticized setting of native ethnoscape, simultaneously letting Čop's body and "genius" be embraced by the world spiritual space through a chain of sublime symbols (*Weltgeist, Urlicht, Krystalle*). In his lament, Prešeren stresses both national and world importance of Čop's huge polyglot literary learning that mastered what Goethe at the time began to call "world literature." With the help from his friend, the polyglot humanist and critic Matija Čop, "the brain of Slovenian romanticism", Prešeren was aware of the dawning of Goethean world literature in which the core European tradition – antique, Italian, Spanish, English and French – was joined as an equal by the (semi)-peripheral literatures of Central and South-Eastern Europe, including German and Slovenian literatures (Juvan,

“World Literature”). In the light of this, Prešeren developed a poetic language, saturated with the voices, stories, images, and forms of world literature, allowing a singular voice to be articulated through a language that internalises a polyphony of historical periods, languages, and cultural spaces. It was Prešeren’s singular poetic individuality that became canonized as a voice that – to paraphrase Althusser (170–186) – interpellates other individuals, its addressees, to become the subjects of the nation.

The lyrical variety of the Slovenian language that was to gain access to the world canon was conceived by Čop and Prešeren as a strategy to compensate for the deficiencies of the native community with the symbolic capital of aesthetic universality and expressive individuality. The Slovenian national movement, located at the periphery of the emerging world capitalist system, was economically and politically dependent, lagging behind culturally, and socially incomplete due to its weak bourgeoisie. Drawing on early romantic universalism of the Schlegel brothers, Prešeren and Čop programmed the transfer of the repertoires and norms of world literature to Slovenian as a catalyst that was to encourage the development of public discourse in the Slovenian language amongst intellectuals.

To conclude, in addition to Prešeren’s implicit and explicit ‘political’ themes, aside from his poetic narration of the nation (e.g., in his historical verse tale *The Baptism on the Savica* of 1836), it is also his cosmopolitan intertextuality, imaginarily worlding his position of the Slovenian classic, that played the role of national allegory.

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