

# Slovenian World Literature after 1960: An Introduction

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**Abstract** In this article, I present a brief outline of Slovenian literature, combining its history with the history of Slovenians. Although the generally accepted theses referring to the development of Slovenian literature include the lateness thesis, its development has nonetheless proceeded in the same rhythm as that of the rest of Europe. After 1960, the main literary movement became modernism, which was followed by postmodernism and, after 1990, a period of diverse authorial poetics. In Slovenian literary history, Goethe's concept of world literature has been discussed since the first decades of the twentieth century. Today, there is a growing belief that synthetic presentations of world literature are impossible.

**Key words** Slovenian literature; world literature; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; Anton Ocvirk

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The story of Slovenian literature begins about a thousand years before the 1991 foundation of the independent Republic of Slovenia. After the Slavs settled the eastern Alps in the sixth century, very few Slovenian texts were created during the Middle Ages; the majority were texts that Christian priests used during

their rituals. The oldest known Slovenian text and at the same time the oldest text written in Latin script in any Slavic language is the Freising manuscripts (*Brižinski spomeniki*). The text was created around 1000 and includes two general confessional forms and a sermon on sin and repentance. Literary history ascribes it aesthetic value. Slovenian secular texts from this period have not been preserved, but this does not mean that Slovenian was not used by the upper classes as well; for example, it is well known that the ritual of enthroning Carinthian dukes was conducted in Slovenian until 1414.

In 1550, the Lutheran reformer Primož Trubar published the first two Slovenian books: *Catechismus* (Catechism) and *Abecedarium* (Abecedary). Trubar is considered the father of standard Slovenian, which, according to his own words, he fashioned after the language spoken in his home village. During the Reformation, the Habsburg Monarchy, which included the majority of present-day Slovenia, strengthened its centralist policy. From the mid-seventeenth-century onwards, members of the nobility, including the London Royal Society fellow Johann Weikhard von Valvasor, became increasingly interested in science outside theology. They primarily wrote genealogical, historical, and geographical works in Latin and German, through which they sought to demonstrate the importance of their social class. The majority of the lower classes remained illiterate until the 1774 introduction of compulsory education.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the share of ethnic Slovenians increased in towns. The most important members of the Enlightenment, including the pioneer of Slovenian playwriting, Anton Tomaž Linhart, and the author of the first Slovenian poetry collection (i.e., *Pesme za pokušino* “Poems for Sampling,” 1806), Valentin Vodnik, were also of urban middle-class descent. During this period, the Slovenian national movement was formed, demanding the introduction of Slovenian into public life and schools. Initially, the movement was not extensive, with individual intellectuals being its main promoters. After 1848, when demands for uniting the Slovenian lands into a Kingdom of Slovenia were presented, the time arose for the Slovenian people to form a political union of the Slovenian people. The Slovenian rural population supported the nationalist demands, whereas the nobility and the urban middle class began to increasingly divide into Slovenian and German camps.

France Prešeren (1800–1849) — the first and, according to the general belief, the greatest Slovenian classic writer — himself connected his poetry writing with nation-building efforts. In the seventh sonnet of his “Sonetni venec” (The Wreath of Sonnets), with which he created a unique literary genre at the global level (the

wreath includes fourteen sonnets, in which the last line of each sonnet repeats in the first line of the next sonnet, with the repeated lines forming an additional, fifteenth sonnet) — he expressed his wish for a new Orpheus to unite Slovenians of all backgrounds. Based on Prešeren's poetry, the Slovenian literary historian Dušan Pirjevec developed an influential thesis that "in Slovenian history poetry established itself as the foundation of the nation" and that "until the beginning of the twentieth century . . . literature has been the only body of our national identity, self-establishment, and legitimation" (Pirjevec 58). According to Pirjevec, literature took on the responsibilities of a nation-state and its bodies because the Slovenians did not have their own state. As established by younger literary historians (cf. Juvan "Slovenski"), this was not something typical only of Slovenians because similar processes took place across all of Europe during the nineteenth century.

The generally accepted theses referring to the development of Slovenian literature also include the lateness thesis. For example, Anton Ocvirk, the author of *Teorija primerjalne literarne zgodovine* (*Theory of Comparative Literary History*), a seminal work published in 1936 — that is, during the early period of the constitution of comparative literature as a scholarly discipline, wrote the following: "Among us Slovenians, who have always been a little late to adopt foreign stylistic initiatives, the reactions to individual styles have also been late, weaker, and less pronounced. However, our literary development has nonetheless proceeded in the same rhythm as that of the rest of Europe, from which we cannot separate it completely; we cannot get to the bottom of it merely from our own cultural perspective" (62–63). Hence, it is not surprising that studies of the development of Slovenian literature follow the development of European literary movements and that discussions on literary works are often based on determining the characteristics of individual movements. Thus, for example, in the first Slovenian novel, *Deseti brat* (*The Tenth Brother*, 1866) by Josip Jurčič, literary historians identify the characteristics of romanticism and realism, and in the works of poets and writers (Ivan Cankar among them) from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century they recognize the characteristics of naturalism, decadence, and symbolism.

Ivan Cankar, a classic Slovenian narrative author and playwright, developed a political critique and satire that are still relevant today. Just like Prešeren's lines from his poem *Zdravljica* (*A Toast*) — "God's blessing on all nations, / who long and work for that bright day, / when o'er earth's habitations / no war, no strife shall hold its sway, / who long to see / that all men free / no more shall foes, but neighbors be" (which became the Slovenian national anthem after Slovenia gained

independence) — Slovenians also internalized Cankar's words from his play *Hlapci* (*Servants*, 1910): "Servants! Born to be servants, raised to be servants, created to serve! The master keeps changing, but the whip remains and shall remain forever because the back is bent, used to whipping and longing for it!" (54-55)

However, Slovenian political history could reject the eternal serfdom hypothesis. After Austria-Hungary's defeat in the First World War, Slovenians declared ethnic independence and joined a new state together with the Croats and Serbs. After the Second World War, during which the Communist Party led by Josip Broz Tito assumed control over the Partisan armed struggle against the Axis powers, Slovenia was among the founding members of the new Yugoslavia. Initially, the one-party state was officially named the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, and later on it was renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After Tito's death in 1980, the economic situation in the country deteriorated and there were growing demands to end the centralist system and introduce democracy to Yugoslavia. Because agreement on this was practically impossible, Slovenia proposed that Yugoslavia be dissolved. In the Slovenian plebiscite held in December 1990, 88.2% of voters were in favor of Slovenia's independence. After declaring independence in June 1991, on its way to international recognition Slovenia had to first thwart the Yugoslav People's Army's attempt to discipline it by force. During the Ten-Day War, seventy-six people lost their lives, and after a temporary ceasefire the Yugoslav army withdrew from Slovenia.

Today Slovenia is a democratic country, a member of European Union with a capitalist economic system. The country has a population of approximately 2.06 million, with ethnic Slovenians predominating by far. The majority of population enjoys a relatively good standard of life; according to official data, the rate of inequality is relatively low compared to other developed countries and the at-risk-of-poverty rate stood at 14.3% in 2015. Slovenians like to think of themselves as hardworking and fair; they are proud of their country's natural beauty and internationally successful athletes, and they are critical towards politicians, the judiciary, and greedy managers. Particularly on anniversaries of Slovenia's independence, comments can be heard that Slovenians have indeed fulfilled their millennium-old dream of having their own nation-state, but they have failed to become a "second Switzerland."

With the establishment of independent Slovenia, according to some publicists, Slovenian literature lost its nation-building role and hence its former social importance, but, on the other hand, it attained complete aesthetic freedom. Today's

literary works are published in small print runs, but more novels (around one hundred a year), poetry collections (around 250 a year), and works of other genres are being issued than ever before. Taking into account the theory of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, according to whom politics is a combination of living, ways of acting, and ways of uttering, literature also maintains its political role throughout.

So where does the story of Slovenian world literature start? In this thematic issue, which has been prepared for the prominent journal *Forum for World Literature Studies* at the kind invitation of Professor Shang Biwu, its beginnings are placed in 1960. Of course that does not mean that prior to that Slovenian literature was not part of world literature. As already determined by Ocvirk in 1936, “without a doubt, today individual national literatures are only passages in overall human creativity and European literature is only one part — of world literature” (70). In his understanding of world literature, Ocvirk relied heavily on Goethe, emphasizing the connection between national and world literature. According to him, world literature is “no shallow, atypical international literature, but a profound universally important art that originates from the bases of the ‘internal nature’ (Goethe) of individual national organisms” (71). In this regard, the representatives of Slovenian world literature include all poets and writers that are not only considered the classic or best Slovenian authors, but also that promote general or universal values. The first two places among them are taken by Prešeren and Cankar, already mentioned above. However, the more recent past proves to be a harder nut to crack and it is by no mean easy to determine which Slovenian writers belong in the national canon and subsequently among the world’s top authors. Slovenian literary history associates the year 1960 with the beginnings of Slovenian modernism, which was followed by postmodernism and, after 1990, a period of diverse authorial poetics. The wealth of various literary orientations and personal poetics presents a special challenge for literary evaluation, which largely relies on aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical criteria. In addition to the authors presented in this thematic issue, many others would also undoubtedly deserve to be covered as well.

By relying on Goethe, Ocvirk expanded the concept of world literature as the selection of the best literary works of individual national literatures with the concept of a developmental interconnection of all literary creations. He placed the study of international influences at the forefront, highlighting the fact that a literary historian must also reach into Asia. As far as Slovenian literature is concerned, since its very beginnings it has formed the strongest links with western cultural circles (i.e., European and recently especially American). In his *Primerjalna*

*zgodovina slovenske literature* (*Comparative History of Slovenian Literature*, 1987), the literary historian Janko Kos summarized the studies of these types of relationships, and studies on reception have also continued in more recent times. Here it should be noted that, despite intense international exchanges, contacts between Slovenian and Asian literatures are still relatively rare and understudied.

One of the challenges that the Slovenian literary historians face is the issue of unilateral influences, or the question of what influence (if any at all) Slovenian literature has on other national literatures. Ocvirk was convinced that international influences do not belong only into this or that national history because they operate collectively and can therefore only be understood within a broader or global context. Among the questions that comparative literary historians have to deal with, he highlighted the question of “whether a cause-and-effect relationship exists between all literatures in the world” (73). An answer to this question was provided by the Slovak (not Slovenian!) literary historian Dionýz Ďurišin through his concept of interliterariness. According to Ďurišin, literary phenomena are connected genetically or typologically. Literary contacts are the precondition for the development of literature, in which a distinction can be made between those that do not have a special influence on the literary process (external contacts) and those that have a direct influence on literary creativity (internal contacts). The exploration of typological similarities between literatures reflected in the use of similar topics and literary procedures reveals non-causal forms of interliterariness; in this case, the reasons for similarity between literary works are economic, political, social, or psychological.

Ďurišin’s concept of interliterariness and interliterary communities met with a positive response in Slovenia; in their works on the modern concepts of world literature, both Tomo Virk (*Primerjalna književnost na prelomu tisočletja* “Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Millennium,” 2007) and Marko Juvan (“Svetovni literarni sistem” “The World Literary System,” 2009) mention it favorably. Theoretical discussions on the relevance of the term “world literature” in the modern globally connected world and various proposals for updating it (as presented by Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, David Damrosch, and others) naturally influence literary-history studies. There is a growing belief that synthetic presentations of world literature are impossible because the use of any method would “yield only the most general structures and development principles of world literature” (Juvan “Svetovni” 205).

A fragmentary approach that focuses on individual authors and their works is something that all of the articles collected in this thematic issue have in

common. The authors largely follow the established concept of world literature as the selection of nationally and universally important works. However, there is no uniform answer to the question of whether translations into the major world languages are a necessary precondition for inclusion in world literature. In her article, Alenka Koron shows that the precondition for the writer Boris Pahor becoming part of world literature was his “consecration” in Paris as one of the centers of the world literary system. According to Darja Pavlič, the Slovenian poet Dane Zajc experienced national canonization and translations of his works, but his international profile has remained limited to narrow poetry circles. In her article on three Slovenian novelists (Vitomil Zupan, Berta Bojetu Boeta, and Lojze Kovačič), who belong to the very apex of Slovenian and world literature, Alojzija Zupan Sosič advocates the expansion of the world literary canon through representatives of minority literatures, including Slovenian. Tomaž Toporišič focuses on Dušan Jovanović, the most important author of Slovenian neo-avant-garde plays, and Matjaž Zupančič, who is one of the leading modern Slovenian (post)playwrights and also the Slovenian playwright with the most frequently staged plays both in Slovenia and abroad. Toporišič’s article and the contribution by Mateja Pezdirc Bartol, who analyzes the works of the most important Slovenian female playwright, Simona Semenič, show that Slovenian (post)playwrights belong to world literature because of the quality of their works. In contrast, the works by modern Slovenian poets discussed by Varja Balžalorsky Antić become part of world literature primarily because of their intertextual links with the works of more or less canonized authors from other areas of world literature. In conclusion, it can be summed up that Slovenian world literature is simply the best works that Slovenian writers have produced.

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