

Literary Histories: From the National to the Post-National Perspective

In the last decades of the twentieth century, it became increasingly clear that the writing of *national* literary histories in the past was not only one of the main vehicles for the formation and dissemination of national literary canons – as one of its most manifest consequences – but that this also had other functions. One of the answers to the question of the role of literary historiography in various European regions, be it “in West or East, in great or small cultures,”¹ is obviously related to the fact that national literary histories, even when applying the facets of the comparative approach, served as an instrument of *cultural nationalism*, the overall ideological matrix that strongly determined European literary cultures, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (cf. Leersen 2006). Facing the growing corpus of knowledge about the dynamics of national movements in Europe, many literary scholars insisted on a self-reflective, critical reevaluation of the disciplinary past and on moving beyond the prevailing national(ist) orientation.

On the other hand, the hardships of the national approaches coincided with the much deeper, even fundamental crisis of historiography; a crisis that stretched far beyond the binary opposition of *national* vs. *post-national*. In order to cope with its consequences, many interesting theoretical models have been discussed. Instead of resuming this impressive debate or taking sides, my paper starts from the simple ascertainment that, regardless of theoretical doubts,

¹ All of the conceptual issues that were raised at the conference *History of Literature as a Factor in a National and Supranational Literary Canon* (Tartu, 2009) are highly relevant and should be taken seriously. Although some are left out due to lack of space, I attempt to provide insights into many of them in this article.

historiographic accounts of quite different kinds are still being produced, and that in practice the “application” of new theoretical concepts is often restricted to the context in which the texts are being produced. After outlining the *constructivist* epistemological presumptions that seem to render possible a non-exclusive observation of contemporary enterprises, I will illustrate some of the practical difficulties regarding the problem of “national” in Slovenian literary history and comment on how this can be redirected towards a post-national perspective, such as indicated by the ambitious attempt to write a historical survey of literary cultures of east-central Europe (cf. Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2004).

Literary Historiography “in Reconstruction”: A Constructivist Viewpoint

By presenting and interpreting literary histories as “grand narratives,” postmodern criticism has seriously subverted the opportunities to write texts of this genre, especially those of a more ambitious kind. At the same time, many have tried to offer supplementary models for such writing, and there are several theories designed to back up the “reconstruction” of literary history.² Among those that called for methodological renovation of the writing of literary histories, the empirical science of literature, such as represented by Siegfried J. Schmidt and others, was among the most explicit. The main reason for this was the adoption of the framework of *radical constructivism*, a revolutionary epistemological theory derived from very different sources – from biology and neurology to sociology.³

² “In reconstruction” is a reference to Marko Juvan’s book *Literarna veda v rekonstrukciji* (Literary Studies in Reconstruction, Ljubljana 2008), which deals with the issues of new literary historiography in a highly qualified manner (see also Juvan 2006).

³ Decisive seems to be the notion of *autopoiesis* of the preeminent Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, a notion that also has a certain background in contemporary neurology (e.g., Gerhard Roth and Heinz von Foerster), and the constructivist epistemological models of Jean

According to the constructivist views, the past is an intellectual construct used to organize sensual and mental experience into a coherent system. This is done by creating “narratives,” by linking fragments through the operational schemata of causality, intentionality, and conditionality. These “narratives” – biological, philosophical, literary-historical, or even “quotidian” – have an internal coherence, although the coherence is always merely constructed. By using causal schemes, we link a multitude of elements and episodes into an intelligible and synoptic whole. Because the past is not directly accessible to human experience, it can be neither empirically verified nor experimentally reproduced within a scientific framework. History can do no more than construct narratives on the basis of given “documents of the past” and verify these against other sources and other histories. It cannot be tested against “historical facts.” History is never anything more than an interpretation whose validity is measured by the single criterion of probability or, more precisely, plausibility; indeed, perspectivism, relativism, and subjectivism are the *conditio sine qua non* of every historical account.

Reconstructing the past through the use of “objective”, empirically documented data is impossible inasmuch as texts are themselves not objectively given artifacts, but are always interpretations. For Schmidt himself, the most problematic aspect of literary history concerns the production of relations, connections, and transitions, the “networking” of facts into coherent units such as periods, genres, and concepts that are used to mediate between the literary and the social (causality, innovation, continuity, structure, or evolution). Acknowledging this, old-fashioned literary history, which predominantly concerned itself with authors and their works and tended to be motivated by ideological interests, must step back. The new literary history should no longer attempt to find a way out of the loop of subjectivism, but should accept these restraints as a necessary burden and counter-pose new standards to evaluate them: historical plausibility and applicability. Instead of aspiring to universality, it should

Piaget and Ernst von Glasersfeld. The “empirical” model of literary history is also significantly indebted to *systems theory* as developed by Niklas Luhmann (cf. Rusch 1985, Glasersfeld 1995, Maturana 1998, Luhmann 1984).

occupy itself with *explicit articulation of assumptions*, requiring that historians clearly establish for what, whom, and which needs they construct their histories (Schmidt 1985).

To be sure, the “revelation” of the fact that literary history serves to legitimate certain interests (usually political, but masked under intellectual, cultural, or aesthetic agendas) is not innovative in itself. On the contrary, it is becoming a common ground of recent discussions. In practice, every history exists to satisfy some need. One of the most obvious of these needs was political, both in the nineteenth and in twentieth centuries, when literature served the interests of national movements – which was especially important for cultures in subordinate positions. On the other hand, a growing consensus can also be presumed regarding the key constructivist assumptions about *narrativization*. Although not supported by biology and psychology, similar observations have already appeared in very different theoretical contexts; for example, in the works of Hayden White, who is often cited in connection with these issues. His term “*emplotment*” indicates that a wild chaos of past events can only be captured and interpreted by fabulistic patterns, which are usually taken from other, often fictitious, genres (White 1987). This especially becomes obvious when constructing synthetic, large-scale historical surveys with impressive titles such as “a literary history of ...,” which can be labeled a “great genre” of literary historiography – a term attached to this kind of enterprise by the Slovenian theorist Marko Juvan. Historians’ dilemmas – how to start, which events to choose, and how to arrange them and bring them to an (effective) conclusion – have an aesthetic dimension. One has to consider tension, wit, suspense, the sense of dramatization, and so on. Not only Hayden White, but also Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, David Perkins, and others have shown that *a story* was actually always a privileged element of (successful) *histories*. Usually it is possible to reveal a certain “idea of the whole,” a certain *in-depth motive*, which gives coherence to a particular historical account. At the same time, due to this acquired coherence, the story becomes cognitively manageable and aesthetically convincing, even *charming* – which is something completely opposite the chaos, multi-levelness, and diversity of the “real world” (cf. Juvan 2006, Kralj 2006).

Such organizing principles – a basic idea, coupled with specific strategies of narrativization – have been continuously creating numerous specific histories, or, rather, stories. The principles may be modified, but, as shall be seen, they seem to retain much importance even in the most recent historiographic treatments.⁴

National Literary Histories: The Slovenian Case

Although in theory certain signs can be interpreted as a growing consensus on how to reconstruct literary historiography (or at least, how *not* to do it), in practice, historical accounts of very different levels, ranges, and qualities are being produced. This brings us to another important question raised at the Tartu conference: how has theory been related to the practical creation of literary histories in different cultures? It seems that, alongside highly innovative surveys stimulated by theoretical discussions (such as Hollier's much-debated history or the large-scale ICLA projects), other, more traditional approaches are still possible that do not show any allegiance to contemporary theoretical quarrels. In many respects, the heritage of *methodological nationalism* obstinately persists and is not even close to being surpassed.

A brief overview of literary historiography in Slovenia, for example, reveals a typical story from a small central European culture. In its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century and later, as it tended to be established as a scholarly discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century (with Ivan Prijatelj and France Kidrič), Slovenian literary history bears a strong national emphasis, even an enthusiastic sense of a national mission (Dolinar 2006). The prevailing perspective retained a national character during the twentieth century (major historiographic texts were produced as part of

⁴ What can illustrate this assertion better than Schmidt's own ambitious attempt to (re)write German eighteenth-century literary history in terms of theory of literary systems, an attempt that itself definitely reads as a compelling story (cf. Schmidt 1989)?

Slovenian studies), and the situation has slightly changed only with the emergence of comparative literature.⁵ The Ljubljana comparative school has substantially widened the focus of literary historiography, especially by treating Slovenian literary phenomena as a part of greater environment. The most impressive achievement in this respect may be the monograph *Primerjalna zgodovina slovenske literature* (Comparative History of Slovenian Literature, 1987) by Janko Kos, which treats Slovenian literature in a (European) comparative context. As the title itself suggests, the object is still the *national corpus*, whereas the treatment – focusing on foreign influences – is by no means nationalist.

Recently, Slovenian scholars have taken part in contemporary discussions on literary historiography, especially with the conference *Kako pisati literarno zgodovino danes?* (How to Write Literary History Today?, 2003) which resulted in the English volume of proceedings entitled *Writing Literary History: Selected Perspectives from Central Europe* (2006), edited by Darko Dolinar and Marko Juvan. This dialogue has brought most of the contemporary issues to the fore and also managed to offer some reflexive critique of past practices. In this respect, it seems quite impossible to imagine a new scholarly account based on anachronistic presuppositions. However, things may not be so simple. In the remainder of this article, I will comment on three recent historiographic projects that I have been involved in myself, demonstrating how different the starting points are that “historians” start constructing from when working on a project, how divergent the objectives of their enterprise can be, and what kinds of recipients their work is designed for.

The first case is a textbook for Slovenian high schools.⁶ The text follows conventional generic patterns: it includes literary passages, basic historical remarks, text-oriented questions, illustrations, reference to external contexts, and so on. The choice of authors and texts

⁵ Comparative literature was brought to Slovenia by Anton Ocvirk, an apt representative of the “French school,” who established and consolidated the discipline in the mid-twentieth century.

⁶ Darja Pavlič et al. *Berilo 2. Umetnost besede*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2008. I contributed with a chapter on Slovenian romanticism.

is very limited because they are already prescribed in the national curriculum. When writing this kind of text, there is a *hidden agenda* in the background, which should be respected and followed: the “reproduction” of well-educated, literate, and nationally aware Slovenian citizens that appreciate their roots and, if possible, possess a broad general and literary background. This educational mission creates some obvious *side effects*: only slight deviations from traditional views are allowed and one has to rely on existing interpretations and evaluations to an unusually high degree. Focus is placed on pre-selected canonized texts and authors, and there is very little room for innovation, as well as the tension to avoid ambiguity and uncertainty. Even if stimulating freer interpretation of literary passages is encouraged, the “facts” (such as periods, genres, and evaluations) have to be presented in a rather authoritative manner.

The situation is almost the opposite when writing a scholarly historical account (on the evolution of the role of the literary producer in the Slovenian literary system) because the anticipated audience is members of the Slovenian research community, scholars, specialists, and students.⁷ In accordance with the internal norms of the field and the research funding policy, the “mission” here seems to be completely different: production of an explanatory framework that is innovative and persuasive. In seeking to create something new, something to transcend traditional approaches, all new and relevant findings can be presented, including more skeptical positions toward canonized authors, opuses, interpretations, and so on, which is quite in contrast to the textbook situation. However, in constructing such a large whole, a need arises to connect the scattered historical fragments into a story of some kind, into a suspenseful narrative. It is possible to control this narrativization (and keep it in the boundaries of a “good taste”) through methodical self-reflection, but it still remains there – trying to convert a history into a nice, readable story.

⁷ Marijan Dović: *Slovenski pisatelj. Razvoj vloge literarnega proizvajalca v slovenskem literarnem sistemu*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2007.

The Post-National Paradigm and the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe

In the end, in both cases mentioned above, the focus inevitably remains national. Even more, in the first case it is almost impossible to move beyond or at least relativize the strong national orientation imposed by the prescribed curriculum.⁸ The opportunity for such innovation is only offered in the context of writing a text for an international project, such as the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*.⁹ This ambitious project, supervised by ICLA and edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, deserves special attention as one of the rare historiographic enterprises of such breadth. It introduces two major shifts. The first is a highly critical attitude towards *nationalist reductions*, so characteristic for traditional literary historiography. The second is the *innovation of the contextual framework*: not only in the (typical) sociological sense, but also in the spatial and temporal sense. The concept of east-central Europe (ECE) seems arbitrary at first, but in the course of the argument it turns out to be at least as legitimate as other influential concepts such as eastern Europe, central Europe, the area of the “Habsburg myth,” “Mitteleuropa,” and so on.¹⁰ Recalling Peter Handke’s ironic remark regarding central Europe, it does turn out to be more than a “meteorological” concept. Even if the connections among individual cultures were weak or mediated, the *structural analogies* among the

⁸ This tension between the research process as something inquisitive, disrespectful, and almost subversive in comparison to the stiffness and simplifications of the (dogmatic) canonical handbooks was not perceived early (Kralj 2006: 62).

⁹ The project will finish with the fourth volume (in preparation), for which I have contributed the article on the canonization of the Slovenian “national poet” France Prešeren.

¹⁰ The concept of *Mitteleuropa*, launched by Friedrich Naumann’s book in 1915, was resumed by writers and intellectuals (e.g., Kundera, Konrád, and Miłosz) towards the end of the communist era as a catchword in the resistance against totalitarian rule.

cultures that have been developing in a narrow strip from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, squeezed between the areas of hegemonist Russian and German cultures, are simply striking; and these analogies themselves are a sufficient reason to take the ECE concept as a plausible one.

The specific position of most cultures in this area in the last two centuries – namely, a periphery “in-between” – led to certain similar developments. The common historical mechanism in the region that the project tends to reveal was the *invention of distinct national identities* (a process mostly led by poets and philologists) through the construction of both *institutions* and *texts*. In this process newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, theaters, operas, libraries, national academies, and university chairs for vernacular literatures were set up; on the other hand, oral literature was collected and published, historical texts were pedantically edited, and new literature was enthusiastically produced, including historical genres that tended to “reconstruct” the national past (epics, novels, and plays).¹¹ In this way, vernacular literature became canonized and included in the school curricula, and literary history has played a very special role in this process. As John Neubauer states in one of his introductions, the production of literary histories was one of the vital tasks of the new imagined communities and their contribution to the “social construction of reality” was enormous; in ECE, literary histories not only served as a basis for teaching and dissemination of (national) literatures, but also included the self-representations of entire nations.

What exactly, however, remains hidden to national(istic) historiographic approaches? According to Neubauer and Cornis-Pope, it is the fact that the entire region was once characterized by multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the plural coexistence of various communities. Such diversity was efficiently suppressed by nationalist unifications in the last two centuries. From Odesa to Gdańsk, from Trieste to Tallinn, surprisingly similar stories can be followed. The focus on national identity, culture, and literature has at the same time stimulated provincialism and intolerance: minorities were dying out,

¹¹ In addition to Neubauer’s articles in vol. 3, see also the anthology *History and Its Literary Genres* (Troha et al. 2009).

and the possibility of multiple ethnic and linguistic identities along with them. Therefore, among the immediate motives for revising existent historical accounts, is the *cognitive* one: the traditional national views are to be corrected because the historiography bound to the national matrixes has produced reductions and deformations. However, even more than the cognitive dimension, the *ethical* dimension is the one that obliges the revision of anachronistic national self-representations. The main reason for this, to put it in Neubauer's words, is because "they continue to foment alienation, hostility and aggression against minorities and against neighboring states" (2004/III: 345).

Conclusion

Like any ambitious project, this one also deserves to deal with the last set of questions prepared by the Estonian Comparative Literature Association for the 2009 Tartu Conference; namely, whether "a stylistic and conceptual unity can be achieved in literary histories," and whether "a comparative literary history of a larger region (Europe, world) is possible beyond compilations of national literary histories or thematic treatises." Regarding the first question, this project evidently does not even intend to emulate such a unity: its authors do follow certain editorial guidelines, but remain recognizably individual. The other question does not offer such a transparent answer. As some of the responses indicate, the project may have certain methodological and conceptual difficulties.¹² Especially when comparing the coverage of individual cultures, it is hard to avoid the impression that the entire selection has an arbitrary flavor. The list of objections from the point of individual literary cultures could grow

¹² Marko Juvan has properly highlighted the lack of a real comparative approach (Juvan 2009). Many articles remain rooted in the national tradition. However, even simply treating the national cases one after another yields interesting effects.

quite long indeed.¹³ However, to mangle the collection from the comfortable wicker-chair of the established “vernacular” disciplines would be to miss the point completely. As the editors have emphasized in advance, the project has no goal of being an encyclopedic literary history, and the problems treated should merely be regarded as *specific illustrations* of general patterns. The fact that there can be no individual “polyhistoric” mind that could master the kaleidoscope of literary cultures in a region of such linguistic complexity is compensated for by a network of individual contributions, loosely connected by introductory articles that indicate possible “nodes of coherence.”¹⁴

Despite certain weaknesses, in the end it has to be acknowledged that we are dealing with an important achievement of literary historiography of the day. In this light, the project deserves all due attention from the national scholarly traditions that it openly challenges. Although the details and overall balance are sometimes contestable, its general aim – the shift from isolated national perspectives towards a post-national view – seems to be well achieved. The lesson on the structural affinity of the literary cultures in the region, even if at this stage insufficiently backed up with comparative research, is highly instructive and should become compulsory reading, especially for practitioners of “national” literary historiography. Apart from this, the innovative concept of ECE tries to surpass that tradition of European comparativism that is only apparently supra-

¹³ In a review for the Slovenian journal *Primerjalna književnost* (Comparative Literature) I have highlighted some factual lapses and several spots that can be seen as “unbalanced.” From the point of view of Slovenian literary studies, certain relevant problems were treated relatively extensively whereas others, equally relevant, were not even mentioned; and marginal names and events were sometimes treated whereas certain crucial names and schools were left out (Dović 2009). The conclusions of another reviewer were quite similar (Koron 2009). Still, at the same time most reviews have concluded that the overall advantages of the approach prevail in the end (see also Baár 2006).

¹⁴ “Nodes of coherence” should be understood as a slightly metaphorical reference to the *temporal nodes*, one of the key organizational concepts of the entire survey.

national, whereas in fact its hidden agenda is to map the trajectories of influence and expansion of the dominant cultures – which the small cultures only passively and belatedly accept.

Of course, in the spirit of the constructivist principles outlined above, it would be irrelevant to ponder whether this history comes close to *an ideal one*. Actually, the question “how does theory envisage an ‘ideal literary history’” is superfluous. Once again, this is a mere construction, one that is based on the spirit of its time and on a specific agenda that intends to leave nationalist concepts behind – to offer an account more viable than the “national” compilations ever could. Together with other recent historiographical efforts – from those that radically neglect tradition to those restricted to the reproduction of vernacular canons – it proves that there is still a variety of ways that literary history can be written even in the circumstances when many have renounced it completely. On the other hand, it also proves that narrative structure, once labeled a “grand narrative,” retains some importance. The crucial change might be that, after a series of critical interventions, literary histories have turned into a genre that is by no means “great” any more; on the contrary, it became a highly hazardous and suspicious enterprise. This is why the demand to *explicate* the goals, agendas, methodologies, and target readers as precisely as possible is becoming even more important. The same should be said for inexorable *self-reflection*, another indispensable companion of any credible writing of literary histories in the new century.

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