

*The Trans-national Literary Canon and
Shared Literary History between
Supra-national and National Dimensions,
Ideologies and Literariness*

This article wants to address the question of relations between comparative literature (and cultural) studies and national literature (and cultural) studies whose function is (among others) constantly to restore the literary canon(s) formation. (According to the results of a short revision of one from the plentitude of European national literary canons, the cultural studies' view seems to be reasonably included in this question.)¹

The three types of literary canon, mentioned in the title of this article, i.e., the national, the supra-national, and the trans-national, refer to two words ("literature" and "nation") which in the context of a single historical culture activate an abundance of connotations and restore many different historical concepts; this "production" of meanings will be of great importance for the cultural spaces of Europe considered as a space where the concepts of nation and national state were invented (see Hobsbawm). Probably none of these different conceptualizations of literature and nation can avoid more or less transparent ideological factors being at work in their cultural spaces (even the most neutral comparative literature representation of a certain literary period or movement can be more or less clearly recognized as a representation of cultural imperialism, at least from the cultural studies' point of view, etc.). Therefore, the central

¹ According to M. Riffaterre (1995: 71), the canon means "cultural appearance of a text", the frame of "a certain type of worship" being at work in an appointed "social context".

question addressed in this article should refer to dynamic relations between the concepts of literature(s) and nation(s).

Contemporary literary theory can designate the identity of literature with the term “literariness”: this concept of literature should be at work in the literary canon formations as their *differentia specifica* in cultural systems which generate different kinds of values. Briefly described, “to reflect on literariness” mean “the suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility [i.e., fictionality], reflection on the implications of means of expression [i.e., semantic polyvalence], and attention to how the meaning is made [i.e., auto-referentiality of a literary text]” (Culler 1997: 41). In Pettersson’s opinion, “literature in the modern western sense could be understood, approximately, as *presentational discourse produced with pretensions to being culturally important, and/or well formed, and/or conducive to aesthetic experience.*” (Pettersson 2006: 16)

On the other hand, literature as the art of words necessarily refers to a langue, or more precisely, to the “natural language of a certain culture”,² which, according to J. M. Lotman’s description of semiosphere,² belongs to the group of “the most developed and structurally organized languages”, i.e., those languages which reestablish the “centre of semiosphere”. In Lotman’s opinion, no language (not even a natural one) can be at work outside semiosphere; and no semiosphere can exist without “its” natural language, which plays the key role of a certain “organizing nucleus” (Lotman 2006: 180). In the course of European history, especially since the period of Romanticism in European cultural history, natural languages have been identified with national languages and their (literary) representations, comprised in the traditions which are associated with the foundations or origins of a single national community and at the same time as the actual (contemporary) centres of national culture, or cultural history.

² “Permanent restoration of the codes [...] synchronically occur in the whole space of semiosis.” A certain language can function just because of its co-operation with the whole semiotic space, into which it has sunk. Therefore, a semiotic unit is not a single language; this is a whole semiotic space which belongs to a certain culture: this space is semiosphere as a result of culture, as well as a condition of its development and operation. (See Lotman 2006: 175)

Therefore, in the context of European cultural history literature, written or orally performed literature in a national language inevitably represents not only the art of literariness but also the inner dynamic of “its” semiotic space as a result and condition of a single national culture. In other words, in the context of European cultural history neither national nor supra-national literary histories can be even theoretically separated from the dynamic³ space of interactions that generate the single national cultural histories; on the contrary, literary histories and their canon formations operate in the semiosphere(s) which can be observed as a result of and at the same time as a condition of the (otherwise historically multifaceted) “European” culture(s).

In such conditions of cultural history, ranging from the concepts of national identity to the concepts of literary identity (cautiously named literariness), the answer to the question about the literary canon could take into account the principle of predominance of either the criterion of literariness or the criterion of national identity in a certain historical moment of a certain culture, in order to illustrate *pro and contra* arguments for the supra-national and the national types of the literary canon. The trans-national literary canon should tend to find a possibility of some balance between them, directed to the same way as the aspirations of one of the contemporary historiographical concepts or even sub-disciplines, i.e. “shared history”.

Comparative literary history has given the impression of being able to create and continuously re-create the supra-national literary canon by taking into account the aesthetic dimension of literature as the dominant criterion of literariness in literary texts. The idea of the supra-national literary canon refers to the possibility of transcending the differences of literature(s) produced in an abundance of single national languages and represented in the single national literary canons; however, the selection(s) of literary texts which should serve as representation of this aesthetic transcendency, reveal(s) an in-

³ This description tries to follow Lotman’s opinion: in each synchronic section of semiosphere each single language struggles with other languages. (See *ib.* 178)

teresting picture of “presence”: it reminds us of a family fresco in whose spatial frame many of the relatives, “wearing” somewhat different “clothes”, i.e., speaking partly unfamiliar language(s), are missing. The same principle of representation (as “exclusion”) which in the name of aesthetic value tends to transcend the different images of literature (in this case more obviously recognized in the frame of time)⁴ as a result of different historical poetics, generates of course the fresco(es) of the single national literature(s) where, on the other hand, the missing unfamiliar “relatives” with their unfamiliar linguistic clothes or voices are from abroad (see Juvan 2008).

The first case of the same principle of representation, being at work in forming the supra-national literary canon, can be observed through representations of the period of Romanticism from the aspect of comparative literature: this period seems to be of the greatest importance for the discussion of the supra-, trans- and –national literary canon (see note 4). The second case of the same principle of representation, which is at work in forming the national literary canon(s), can be observed through the historical cultural functions of literature which, through the Romantic heritage, can be considered

⁴ Formations of the national literary canons are associated mostly with the period of Romanticism which argues its identity as a historical one, i.e., through the concept of an irreversible time course characteristic of western history and intensively based on the selfconsciousness of modernity. Modernity which should generate the (western) New Age culture(s) as its central myth reflects/produces the difference (and at the same time recognizes identity) predominantly as a time-difference (historical, or more precisely *geistesgeschichtlich* difference) between “now” and “before”, namely between modern times and the Old Age (brothers Schlegel, also Mme de Staël); György Lukács (referring to F. Schlegel) associated this consciousness of irreversible time or the modern consciousness – of proceeding modernisation – with one’s very concrete perceptions of all-embracing (historical) change caused by the French Revolution and its effects on everyday life (see Lukacs 1978). At the same time Romanticism is considered as the “birth” period of one nation’s selfconsciousness, i.e., recognition or invention of national identity different from the others; mostly since J. G. Herder’s essays, one folk or national identity refers to one folk or national tradition, i.e., cultural characteristics developed through the time course or through history.

even as the “highest” expression of the linguistically based identity – according to the presupposition that language articulates imagination of one’s (or one linguistic community’s) reality. In this perspective, the aesthetic dimension of literature can also be considered as the modern mode of transcending the differences which of course appear in the historical course of *one* national literature. (Not to forget that the differences recognizable in this historical literary course are associated with the single historical poetics as well as with the single historical ideological re-interpretations of literary tradition or the literary canon).

This article tries to juxtapose some very concrete fragments of these two cases in order to confirm the importance of the concept of literariness in forming the literary canon (especially in transcending different (political) ideologies which are historically at work in the single cultural communities) and to be at the same time aware of the fact that even comparative literary history, which can tend to the supra-national literary canon, cannot ignore the concepts of nation in literary history.

Pro and contra: Case 1: “*pro* literariness”: the national literary canon between ideologies and literariness, or why at least the “supra-national” concept of literariness should not be ignored

An example which can serve as an argument for the predominance of the criterion of literariness (i.e., its aesthetic dimension) in literary canon formation is borrowed from the history of modern Slovene literature. During the second half of the 20th century (more precisely, during the period 1941–1990) the Slovene literary canon was obviously divided into three cultural applications or variants which functioned as cultural signs, representing two oppositional political ideologies (political Catholicism and communism) and their aesthetic opposition. The third application, i.e. the aesthetic variant, represented the literary canon as a selection based on the literariness of the literary texts which were accepted in the national literary canon. The three more or less parallel canon-formation variants co-produced, i.e., were generated by an intensive and unhidden discourse of the two political ideologies and by (at first merely hidden) attempts

of transcending them both in the case of (national) literature. These three applications of literature can be represented by three tendencies of interpretations discussing the lyric poetry of France Balantič (1921–43).

Briefly described, the cultural-historical conditions in which Balantič's poetry appears as probably the most significant literary sign were as follows: after 1945, i.e., after World War II, Slovene cultural politics in the Republic of Slovenia (as one of the federal republics of former Yugoslavia) was directed by the communist ideology,⁵ which programmatically stressed the cultural importance of writers and poets who directly – or indirectly – supported the partisan movement.

Regarded from the aspect of literary cultures, the literary canon represents “one of the central means of social cohesiveness; it is an institutionalized medium of preserving the traces of cultural memory” (Juvan 2006: 227). In fact, literature (together with its canon formations) in the Slovene cultural history has kept the most important role (consciously since the Romantic period). According to the historical conditions of a nation which was recognizing itself through feeling the deficiency of the final (namely political) confirmation of its emancipation, i.e., as a nation without its (national) state, the functions of this non-existent state should be projected onto the culture.⁶ Moreover, the most important cultural function (also substituting for the functions of a state) was ascribed to literature, considered as the highest expression of language as a basic generator of national identity.

⁵ In autumn 1944, Boris Zihelr who in the next decade and after directed Slovene cultural politics based on communist ideology, stressed the artistic currents which were considered as (“bourgeois”) ideological opposition (*Marksistično-leninistična teorija umetnosti*, 1944). Among other things, impressionism and expressionism appeared on his list. (see Gabrič 1995: 27; see also Gabrič 2004).

⁶ This phenomenon (which in varieties of differing intensive degrees presumably could be recognized in many other European national communities) was described by literary historian D. Pirjevec and others under the name of the “Slovene cultural syndrome”.

For this reason, it is not surprising that during World War II (interpreted as the age of the Slovene national liberation movement and communist revolution)⁷ many of the Slovene partisan units were named after the Slovene literary classics, for example: Prešeren's, Cankar's, Gregorčič's (etc.) brigade. The cultural(-political) application of the national literary canon seemed to be intensified to the highest degree. This can be illustrated by the fate of Balantič's poetry in the national literary canon – the fate of poetry whose literariness has been extremely reduced for about fifty years while it was identified with its author, i.e., his ideological gesture: after publishing some poems in 1940, Balantič joined the Slovene anti-communist army and lost his life in 1943 as a member of the White Guard. How can the fate of Balantič's poetry illustrate the insufficiency of literariness, or even the aesthetic dimension as the central factor which should generate (the national) literary canon formations?

Balantič's literary opus appeared in "index librorum prohibitorum", made by the government (27.7. 1945).⁸ In 1950 Balantič was represented as a "betrayer of the nation",⁹ his poetry was designated by the terms "decadent" and "expressionist".¹⁰ Similar connotations suggested the pre-war term "mystical realism", which referred to the religious variant of literary expressionism. On the other hand, the poetic expression of modern religious re-questioning started to be programmatically appreciated in the ideological context of political

⁷ These two aspects of the partisan movement were intertwined by the Slovene Liberation Front which was founded an ideologically pluralistic organisation; however, in March 1943 its leadership was taken over by the communist party.

⁸ Public libraries should eliminate the literary texts of thirteen writers and poets from their book collections. Some of these thirteen writers emigrated to Argentina, some of them lost their lives on the "wrong side" of the political history. The texts of some other well known pre-war writers were not allowed to be published.

⁹ Ivan Bratko: "Nekaj misli h kulturnim rubrikam naših dnevnikov in tednikov", *Novi svet*, 1950 (see Pibernik 2003: 41).

¹⁰ In the left-oriented literary reviews, these terms suggested the socially dysfunctional kind of art since the last decade before World War II.

Catholicism: Balantič's lyric poetry¹¹ was posthumously published in 1944. The glorifying foreword designated Balantič as a White Guard in the service "of the homeland and God".¹² The importance of Balantič's lyric poetry for the Slovene national literary canon was continuously stressed by the Slovene political emigration¹³ after 1945, especially in Argentina where the Slovene community developed an impressive cultural activity, including publishing the texts¹⁴ of Slovene literary classics, the writers and poets who lost their lives on the anti-communist side of the war, and the contemporary writers who in 1945 and later emigrated from Slovenia/Yugoslavia.

Balantič's lyric poetry (among the literary texts of many other writers) therefore appears on the stage of the Slovene national literary canon as a transparent cultural sign: the ideologically argued reception of Balantič's poetry clearly represents the cultural function of the national literary canon in the Slovene linguistic (national) community, existing both within the territory of the Republic of Slovenia and outside it.

During World War II, especially between 1944 and 1945, and in some later decades, the Slovene national literary canon was obviously divided into two variants which reduced the *literariness*, i.e., the basic condition of any literary canon, to the minimum.

The cultural values of national literature in the context of Slovene political emigration refer to the Slovene national identity, the Roman Catholic religion, (mostly) anti-communist stands which can be (though not necessarily) associated with the ideology of political catholicism, based on the cultural struggle in Slovene history since

¹¹ Its title (*V ognju groze plapolam*) refers to Balantič's death in a fire caused by the partisan attack.

¹² Or: a "soldier" wearing the "blue helm of Poetry". The foreword was written by probably the most prominent Catholic literary critic and editor Dr. Tine Debeljak, who emigrated to Argentina at the end of World War II. (See Balantič 2003: XXIV)

¹³ Three poets (V. Kos, F. Papež and Z. Simčič) wrote essays on Balantič and his poetry.

¹⁴ Slovene bibliography in Argentina 1945–1987/90 includes literary and philosophical texts, journals etc. (see Pertot 1987 and 1991).

the end of the 19th century (see Pelikan 1995). In this ideological variant of the Slovene national literary canon, Balantič's poetry appears *in praesentia*. On the other hand, the cultural values of (national) literature which were at work in the Slovene national community inhabiting the territory of the Republic of Slovenia (as one of the federal Yugoslav republics) refer to the Slovene national cultural tradition (despite the fact that the concept of national identity actually represented an opposition to communist universalism), social engagement and the modern myth of progress, which were officially associated with the communist ideology based on co-operation with the Soviet Union and after 1948 on the principle of nonalignment. In this ideological variant of the Slovene national literary canon, Balantič's poetry appears *in absentia* (in which only the poet's condemned military "career" was stressed).¹⁵ Most of the Slovene literary classics were included in both variants of the national literary canon; classics born after 1900 and younger authors were included in one of these two ideologically motivated variants of the clearly split national literary canon.¹⁶ Both variants of the national literary canon were reproduced continuously by two educative and publishing "policies"; both of them were generated by two different ideologies (political Catholicism and communism) which undoubtedly tended to universalism. (However, in the Slovene case they paradoxically reduce even their universalist dimension in order to stress the value of national identity.) How could the (Slovene) national literary canon in these cultural-political conditions restore the criterion of its *differentia specifica*, which represents it as the *literary* canon?

¹⁵ The ideological transformation of (Balantič's) literature into a cultural sign was significantly described by the secretary (Franc Šetinc) of the Executive Committee of the Slovene Communist Party: "as soon as the poet declared for [...] collaborational political movement, his poetry, apolitical by itself, acquired a political dimension". (*Obramba*, October 1976. See Pibernik 2003: 46, 48).

¹⁶ Literary authors included in the variant of the national literary canon formed by political emigration are Z. Simčič, F. Balantič, I. Hribovšek, V. Kos, V. Truhlar, etc. Their texts are included in the contemporary Slovene literary canon.

The fact is that in the whole of Balantič's (preserved) literature there is not any thematic sign of any political ideology, not even political catholicism;¹⁷ it is far from any pragmatic literary engagement and thus from the possibility of any ideological reduction of its literariness. It undoubtedly articulates the Christian-based world view; however, the religious belief is thematized through the ambivalent, subjectively uncertain quest for metaphysical transcendence of (the Christian) God. This thematics, including "the aesthetics of ugliness" and the concept of modern "homo duplex", takes shape in the intertextual relations or literary discourse of modern lyric poetry from Charles Baudelaire to Georg Trakl, mostly referring to the tradition of so-called (Central-European) religious or Catholic Expressionism.¹⁸ This intertextuality is in the domain of *literary discourse*; the later reductions of its literariness, which was transferred to the domain of political ideological discourse, are signs of the pragmatic and secondary ascribed intertextual relations of Balantič's poetry. This *literary* intertextuality namely settles Balantič's lyric poetry in the national literary canon: shortly after World War II in the aesthetic variant of the national literary canon as the third variant of three parallel ones.

During the period of the most extreme circulation of ideological discourses, i.e., during World War II, including some years before and after the war, the third variant of the national literary canon of course was at work, referring to its pre-war tradition, which appreciated the aesthetic value of many brilliant and at the same time ideologically "useless" literary texts; however, this variant of the national literary canon obviously proceeded as a quiet voice to the fifties, when some first signs of it re-appeared. These signs could be recognised mostly in the light of annihilating attempts, i.e. in the discourse of the official cultural politics which also argued against every trace of "bourgeois" "intimism". One target of these attacks

¹⁷ None of Balantič's lines refer to his military activity in the White Guard (see Pibernik ib. 25).

¹⁸ This literary current also characterizes a significant part of Slovene literature before World War II; it refers to the former or contemporary currents of literary Decadence, Post-Romanticism and Symbolism from Maeterlinck's to Rilke's poetic works (J. Kos 2001: 340, 292, 296, 300).

was also the “intimistic” lyric poetry of Ada Škerl, the poetess who (according to oral tradition) had tried to call some readers’ attention to the (artistic) literary value of Balantič’s poetry in an essay published in 1951 in a paper copied and distributed “underground”,¹⁹ probably meant for a straitened circle of readers, i.e., at the utmost half-public status of discourse.²⁰ Balantič’s lyric collection²¹ actually appeared on the book market in Slovenia no earlier than 1984, when many literary authors, reviewers and editors, literary historians and other “actors” of (the national) literary system discussed the undoubtedly aesthetic value of Balantič’s literature in public discourse.²² Although postwar Slovene literature since about the sixties has not been necessarily identified with the ideological stamps and gestures of its authors any more (at least, not in the politically non-critical moments of those times), *literariness* as the predominant criterion of (the national) *literary* canon formation could not have been officially confirmed until the eighties when Balantič’s name as the clearest sign of this regained (relative) autonomy of literature appeared in literary-historiographically oriented publications. The third “application” of literature, i.e., the third (aesthetic) variant of the national literary canon, predominated over the two ideological applications. (For now?)

¹⁹ This paper should have been provided by a group of Ljubljana’s art-fanciers named *Osamela kočija* (Lonesome carriage). (See Pibernik 2003: 42, 39)

²⁰ This more or less quiet, i.e., “underground” “voice” of literary readers was followed by the next sign of the ultimate ignoring of ideological stamps in literature in the name of its aesthetic value: university professor Dr. Anton Slodnjak mentioned Balantič’s poetry in a monograph on the history of Slovene literature, published in Germany; in 1958, sanctions were imposed on him.

²¹ Entitled *Muževna steblika* (a little branch of tree or bush, full of spring sap, which can be used for making a simple flute).

²² The second convention of Slovene poets (1982) addressed the question “The Responsibility of Poetry?” which contributed to transcending ideological classifications of literature. Thus, the second, critical publication of Balantič’s poetry (*Zbrane pesmi* [Collected Poems]) was published in 1991. Etc.

To conclude this aspect of *pro and contra* arguments, the national cultural history as a possible factor of reducing literariness in the national literary canon formation(s) cannot give an assurance of the sufficient and absolutely decisive point of departure for any “transcending”, i.e., the supra-national literary canon formation while it is submitted perpetually to this or that historical (ideological, or any other kind of pragmatic) application of literature.

Pro and contra: Case 2: “pro literariness”, or against it? from the aspect of the supra-national canon

The aesthetic criterion of the supra-national literary canon also serves as a means of transcending ideological, i.e., pragmatic applications of literature. By this means, the (aesthetic) autonomy of literature was restored in many national European cultural contexts towards the conclusion of the “Age of Extremes”, as E. Hobsbawm denotes the period 1914–1991 (which is characterized by the phenomenon of totalitarian ideologies). In this aspect, the contemporary question about the supra-national literary canon somehow “uses anew” the aim of restoring the aesthetically considered *modern* totality as the transcendence of differences which are necessarily produced by different single national languages/cultures as the conditions/products of the single national literatures, i.e., the art of words.

The previous paragraphs described the Slovene case of ideological applications of literature in the “age of extremes” to illustrate the radical, i.e., extremely clear variant of the (political-) ideological application of literature. However, the “pure” aesthetic argument, considered as opposition against different supra-national political ideologies can easily be used as a way of fortifying national ideology: contemporary cultural studies and post-colonial theory (etc.) are re-questioning the ideological implications of the concepts of national literature, too, namely, the possible applications of literature to support radicalizing national ideology into nationalism(s).

The myth of a 'national tradition' is employed not only to legitimise a general idea of a social group ('a people') but also to construct a modern idea of a nation-state, in which all the instrumentalities of state power [...] are subsumed and legitimized as the 'natural' expression of a unified national history and culture. [...] The confusion of the idea of the nation with the practice and power of the nation-state makes [...] nationalism] an extremely contentious site, on which ideas of self-determination and freedom, of identity and unity collide with ideas of suppression and force, of domination and exclusion. (Ashcroft 2002: 150–151)

As with any other forms of institutionalization, the institutionalized forms of national culture can adopt more or less the characteristics of ideological regimes, moving the literature in the language of a single national community to the service of the totalizing concept of nation. In other words, what was undoubtedly legitimized by the single nation's emancipation process, can probably be questioned since this process has been concluded (usually by establishing a national state which can provide conditions whereby literature is relieved of the duty of supporting this process). From this standpoint, the *art* of literature should re-establish the artistic autonomy in such pragmatic domains of "domination and exclusion".

It seems to be a fact that the literature of many of those literary authors whose status has proceeded from the ideologically argued (national) betrayers to the (national literature's) aesthetic heroes, could not be ascribed to the supra-national literary canon. The Slovene case of many of Balantič's poems, as well as of the majority of some other literary authors' work confirm this assumption: they certainly play an important role in the national literary system by being involved in the process of the national literature's self-reflection, i.e., reflection of the grounds, or principle(s) of the national literary canon formation(s); however, some of these literary works represent rather thematic and formal responses to the poetics from beyond the borders of one "nationally" centred semiosphere: they do not seem to be very autonomous creative answers or even great individual innovations which can co-produce the perpetual series of literary ruptures, or historical poetics, dynamically keeping literature alive as a (relatively) autonomous – transnationally com-

municating – “language”. In short, from the purely aesthetic aspect, which in these days seems to be a conservative one, single literary texts which are of special importance for one national literature (articulating national cultural history), could hardly be considered in a (relative) aesthetic autonomy: they do not seem to radiate enough innovation and at the same time self-sufficient artistic power which would enable them to cross (national cultural and chronological) frontiers. Does this mean that national literary canons should be subordinated to the supra-national literary canon, which should only be capable of being founded on the pure aesthetic value?

In this case, the initial question is about the repository of the texts to which the aesthetic selection or canon formation refers. Probably the best known image of the supra-national literary canon, i.e., Harold Bloom’s *Western Canon* (1994) clearly represents the problem with this. Critical remarks on Bloom’s favouring Anglo-Saxon literature/authors are well-known: just a quick look at Bloom’s list of 26 literary works/authors from Dante to modernists, which are suggested as forming the Western canon, reveals that many of the literary/linguistic areas from which Bloom makes his selection by way of aesthetic deduction are simply missing.

But let us look at the very basic principle of Bloom’s canon formation, i.e., the aesthetic principle. Can his “supra-national” literary canon, supposedly founded on this timeless principle, really avoid the historicity of literature, generating/being a product of culture(s)? In other words, can Bloom’s project absolutely transcend at least the New Historicism’s perspectives (as one of the other “pupils” of the culture-critically engaged “School of Resentment”) (Bloom 1994: 526)?

The first argument against his attempt is precisely the fact that so many literary/linguistic areas as a repository for Bloom’s canon formation are missing. Although Bloom declaratively takes into consideration the single linguistic/literary areas (implicitly also some national literary canons) which obviously represent the referential repository from which “their crucial figures” (see note 27) have been selected, Bloom’s image of these linguistic/literary areas does not extend across the frontiers of literatures written originally in the most widely-spoken “western” languages (Italian, English, French,

Spanish, Russian, German).²³ Even one New Historicist can agree that there is an implicitly reasonable argument for (Bloom's) referring to such a limited repository of selected literary works/authors – in the circulation of literary discourse, the literary texts written in the widely-spoken languages can certainly radiate their artistic power to the largest extent: meta-literary documentation, such as essays, authorial correspondence, diaries, etc., can prove this very fact. However, Bloom's image of the Western canon seems to imply that this (obviously presupposed) circulation²⁴ is unmistakably centred on the English-speaking areas while the lines of influence in the domain of the aesthetic autonomy of literature, which were decisively at work in the "other" Western linguistic areas (even of the widely-spoken languages like French, German or Russian), have simply been excluded (!); and just another short look at Western literary history confirms this simple fact with some of the most obvious observations (for example, A.S. Pushkin's creative answer to the Byronic hero and to the genre of romantic poem was of utmost importance for the literary creativity of the East-, Central-East and South-East European cultural areas in the Romantic period; C. Baudelaire's creative answer to E.T.A. Hoffmann's (thematic and structural) radicalisation of Romantic dualism was of the greatest importance for the literary expression/construction of modernity in most areas of continental Europe; not to mention the basic influence of F.M. Dostoevsky's psychological insights or his dialogical modernisation of the novel, as well as P. Verlaine and S. Mallarmé's extraordinarily influential Symbolist rupture to the literary discourse which changes the paradigm and prepares the conditions for different courses of literary modernisation on the continent, etc.) Although Bloom lists these and many other authors/literary works in the Appendix, they remain somewhat in the position of fellow passengers of the (Western) supra-national, aesthetically established literary canon. Therefore, not only Bloom's (variant of) the Western

²³ Some of the smaller linguistic communities are barely mentioned in the *Appendix D* ("Serbo-Croat", Czech, Polish, etc.).

²⁴ The term has been widely spread especially by the New Historicism.

canon, but also its aesthetic foundation, to which Bloom refers, appears rather questionable.

This questionable result maybe derives from the fact that Bloom does not explain very precisely what the aesthetic criterion as the ground of “his” canon should actually mean: “Aesthetic value is by definition engendered by an interaction between artists, an influencing that is always an interpretation.” (Bloom 1994: 24) The sense of his definition seems to try to amalgamate the “pure” aesthetic dimension as somehow universally effective aesthetic experience in Kant’s sense²⁵ with, on the other hand, the historical inventions in poetics, transcending both of them under the designation “the autonomy of the aesthetic” (10): although Bloom stands by the (timeless?) aesthetic principle, it is at least implicitly associated with historical changes (which can only confirm the timeless effect of the aesthetic object) – for this implied historicity, it does not really matter that in Bloom’s voluntaristic belief this historical change is reduced and ascribed to the individual, i.e., the single artist. Namely, the question is how a single prominent literary author “meets” a prominent literary work of art to which he/she creatively responds in the course of the “anxiety of influence”: a pure individual coincidence certainly should not be excluded from the range of conditions; however, nothing less than the impact of precursive literary values formed in the (historical and culturally supporting) tradition should be taken into account (Bloom for himself mentions the role of the educational, i.e., school programme). Bloom also argues his selection on the principle of the “strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated [such as *The Divine Comedy*], or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange [such as Shakespeare’s works, i.e., their “powers of assimilation and of contamination”],” “adding strangeness to beauty” (Bloom 1994: 3). This “strong literary originality” (25), “power and authority” (36) certainly are a cogent argument for Bloom’s project of the (Western) supra-

²⁵ I.e., as a pleasure without any interest which cannot be grounded on any other (aesthetic or reasonable) judgement and – in the context of this writing – certainly not on any pragmatic ideological application of the artistic “object”.

national literary canon, which could easily be subscribed to by many (more, or even less educated or experienced) readers – even from the widely-accepted contemporary methodological aspect of the literary system which is generated by its relative autonomy as a product of a consensual aesthetic autonomy, too, Bloom's arguing the aesthetic autonomy gives an assurance of freedom to an individual reader,²⁶ who through the aesthetic experience can (at least relatively) cross the momentary borders of his/her historical culture and its socially pragmatic applications of art ("the aesthetic is, in my view, an individual rather than a societal concern") (Ib. 16). However, this – romantic – stand cannot solve the above-mentioned problem with the literary repository: even if one accepts Bloom's principle of taking into account just the most Western-referential authors, who have motivated the most diverse "misreadings", or the "anxiety of influence" in the history of Western literature, one would wonder why Baudelaire with his powerful figurative language (or at least Mallarmé, especially in the frames of the first possibility) did not deserve a position among the selected 26 authors, and, on the other hand, why not Dostoevsky²⁷ (in the frames of the second possibility): among some others declared as "the greatest", their works seem persistently to evoke the aesthetic experience in different cultural historical conditions, i.e., across the historical changes of reception – and therefore give the impression of their (Western-)universal aesthetic value.

²⁶ "[...] a solitude only the two could share" (Wallace Stevens. See: Bloom 1994: 36).

²⁷ Dostoevsky is mentioned many times. However, in Bloom's opinion Dostoevsky obviously does not represent "the crucial figure" of the Russian national literary canon ("I have tried to represent national canons by their crucial figures") (Bloom 1994: 2). This standpoint (explained in the *Preface*) is in contrast to the prevailing principle of "the anxiety of influence" which should take into account the Western literature as a whole.

“*Pro and contra*: Case 3: “*contra* literariness” from the cultural aspect of ignoring the aesthetically grounded supra-national literary canon, or does this viewpoint neutralize the dominance of some cultures/literatures in representing international interactions?”

To address this question, a contemporary representation of a certain literary/cultural historical period, i.e., the period of Romanticism, can serve as an interesting example. As was said before, this period forms conditions for the so-called “birth of the nation”, supported/generated by literatures written in languages of the nationally self-identified communities and is in this aspect also of special historical importance for the (European) national literary canon formations. The example entitled *Romanticism* was written in 2005 as an “Oxford Guide” (edited by N. Roe).

The fact is that this “guide” through the Romantic period (slightly centred on the English-speaking areas) carefully presents an array of dominant themes of the period in the contemporary aspect of considering literature as an incessant factor of culture, i.e., being at work in a circulation of discourses and dynamic interactions between different (influential) phenomena. The programmatic complexity of this access to literature/culture is clearly represented under the titles: *Romantic orientations* (which include the historical context, the literary background, sensibility, classical inheritances, science, philosophy and religion, print culture, visual arts and music in different cultural spaces from Europe to the Americas), contemporary *Reading Romanticism* (which takes into account critical aspects and additions/corrections from the domains of New Historicism, feminism, ecocriticism, psychoanalysis, Post-Colonialism, and formalisms), *Romantic forms* (which address the questions of romantic popularisation, innovation, or (pre)conceptualisation of lyric, epic, drama, the novel, fragment, essay, biography, letter and diary, travel writing) and *Romantic afterlives* (which include the 20th century’s applications of romantic inventions for considering poetry and the author, etc., romantic sources for the film, romantic foundations of contemporary environmentalism, etc.) From the (historical-) cultural point of view, there is just one problem with the practical application of this access to complexity – the same one which appeared in the

completely different methodological aspect of Bloom's arguing the aesthetic principle. In contemporary Oxford's decentralizations/ dissemination of artistic canons performed by co-positioning literary and non-literary texts in circulative and dispersed interactions of very different kinds (or aspects), many brilliant and influential literary texts, literary innovative authors, and even some important movements, like national movements which decisively characterize the Romantic period in many historical cultural contexts – are either hardly mentioned²⁸ or are simply omitted.²⁹

However, in contrast to Bloom, the writers of this great monograph at least seem to be aware of (the slightly English-centred) representation of Romanticism: "If we look at it [i.e., the Romantic age] in conjunction with the British scene, it is apparent that some characteristics are shared by some 'national' Romanticisms and other traits by others, while it would be very difficult to name a number of features shared by all. The picture that emerges is maybe best summed up by the [Wittgenstein's] concept of 'family likeness' ..." (Bode 2005: 134–35). Moreover, the authors seem to be aware of the problems with literary/cultural diversity which (of course within the universalisation, *geistesgeschichtlich* considered as the modern, i.e., romantic phase) constructs its theoretical foundations precisely with the factor of romantic individualism: "[...] even the apparent contradictions and seeming incompatibilities within European Romanticism have common roots in that they form diverging responses to the same set of cultural changes: the fascination of the past [...] as well as dreams of a utopia to come, the lure of the exotic as well as the cult of domesticity and the familiar, revolutionary cosmopoli-

²⁸ For example, the Italian *Risorgimento* (indicated just by the name of its leader Garibaldi, in a short description of Byron's impact on liberation movements), the Polish patriotism of Mickiewicz and the Catholicism of Słowacki, etc.

²⁹ There is no sign of the presence of (national) literatures (not to mention the ethnic communities) in the following languages: Czech, Slovak, Slovene, Croatian and Serbian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Ukrainian (etc., including the majority of the cultural spaces of Eastern Europe, with the exception of three Polish authors) and their collaboration in creating the literature/cultural history of Romanticism.

tanism as well as rampant nationalism, active political partisanship as well as cautious withdrawal from the political sphere – they all form possible answers to a unique historical situation in which, it seems, nothing can be taken for granted any more...” “In that sense, Romanticism is an ongoing, undeniably European project, whose very diversity is, paradoxical as it may sound, the hallmark of its unity”³⁰ (Bode 2005: 135).

One can agree that the diapason of this romantic diversity could hardly be precisely represented by even the most ambitiously conceptualized (European) supra-national literary/cultural history. However, despite this diversity, the Oxford selection seems to be clearly too exclusive. The majority of (national) literatures generating the so-called “smaller” nations (or the less internationally influential national, ethnical and cultural communities of the period) have remained either in the cursorily glanced “periphery” of this image of Romanticism or – in the worst case – are simply “absent” (together with most of the referential literary works and authors of their national canons as if nothing happened in so many parts of the European literary/ cultural map). If there could be any explanation for such “vague places” in the romantic texture, one could agree that Bloom’s aesthetic principle, however subjective it is, represents a more cogent argument than culturally oriented access to the historical period. However, from the aspect of these “blanks”, the results tend to be similar: even in the multifaceted textualisation of Romanticism, the Oxford monograph pays attention to the most influential (national) literatures of the period, i.e., those literatures which in the romantic circulation of inspirational literary and non-literary texts gained a privileged position based (at least partially) on their widely-spoken languages (like English, German, French, Russian), i.e., the linguistic “support”.

³⁰ This viewpoint cautiously follows Friedrich Schlegel’s opinion: the identity of the romantic *poetry* is defined by the fact that it has no identity (*Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, 1794).

Comparable problems³¹ appear in the literary historiographical image of Romanticism, published by ICLA/AILC (!) in the collection *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*.

There is of course a differential factor of impact which prevents us from mechanically equalizing the circulative impact, or role of literatures of long traditions, with literatures which started to develop their (relative) aesthetic autonomy, i.e., *differentia specifica* of literary discourse no earlier than after the Romantic period. However, this fact cannot mechanically mean that literatures of this “smaller” or developing kind did not produce any aesthetically top-level literary works of art, or individual creative “answers” to the romantic challenge of dynamic relations between national-centred and transnational-crossbordered dominants of semiosphere(s). Even from the “pure” cultural aspect, the single (“small”) national Romanticisms fully created some central preoccupations of the Romantic period precisely in the course of emancipation and therefore should not be ignored: romantic representations of either personal or national individualism were spontaneously articulated by the cult of poetry /literature according to its unique ability to speak from the interactive position between the individual and the community, i.e., between linguistic/literary/cultural common memory and the individual creative *ré-emploi* of it in a transcendent work of art. Furthermore, even from the “pure” aesthetic aspect, such literary works of art which sometimes (also explicitly) refer to the national self-awareness, do not necessarily reduce their artistic dimensions to the bare (national) ideological application of literature: this could hardly be ascribed to Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*, some of Leopardi’s *Canti*,³²

³¹ T. Virk’s review of some of the issues on Romanticism “demonstrates that the international comparatists heading the CHLEL project are still (ideologically) burdened by western-centrism” (Virk 2009: 22).

³² G. Leopardi is mentioned twice. Romantic literature in Italian is represented in a range comparable to the representation of literature(s) in French. Literature(s) in German is stressed much more (Fichte is mentioned twice, as is E. T. A. Hoffmann; Novalis/F. von Hardenberg four times, the Jena circle is described more precisely, as well as the work of I. Kant and the Schlegel brothers) and in French. Russian A.S. Pushkin is mentioned twice, M. J. Lermontov once.

Prešeren's *A wreath of Sonnets*, Mažuranić's *The Death of Smail Aga Čengić*, etc. On the contrary, these romantic literary works of art represent a literary artistic "application" of the promoted idea of nation.

To conclude, different romantic literary currents, ideas and concepts which were circulating in their (more or less creative) inter-textual exchange, travelled across very different literary and cultural traditions of the European area. Single concepts (like *romantic novel* or *romantic poem*), ideas (like *nation*) and currents (like *gothic*) were commonly accepted/developed and at the same time creatively modified in different ways by the individual artists speaking from these different traditions: following F. Schlegel (as this *Oxford Guide* in principle somehow does), the European romantic literary image is extremely complex and multifaceted. According to the Schlegelian fact that romantic theory by itself realizes these "characteristics" of the period, the "vague places" in the romantic literary/cultural European map made by the Oxford contemporary view on Romanticism should not grow to such an extent; otherwise the image of Romanticism seems to become just another historical falsification. And certainly it cannot serve as a reliable foundation for comparing the national literary canons in order to draw up the trans-national literary canon.

However, the principle of dispersion by itself can be of assistance in creating the trans-national (European) literary canon.

Conclusion, or why the national literary canon should not be completely ignored

In Lotman's opinion, "[...] the model of semiotic structure of the European Romanticism could be constructed by an approximate chronological limitation. But one could hardly find homogeneity even in such a completely artificial spaciousness, while different degrees of iconicity create the situation of just conditional adequacy" (Lotman 2006: 177). Romanticism occupies just a certain domain of semiosphere, where different traditional structures co-exist too. And besides, no single stage of this progress is secure from attacks by

texts that come from outside, from the cultures which were previously placed behind the semiospheric horizon. These invasions of texts and cultural scopes chaotically transform the inner settlement of the ‘image of world’, organized by a certain culture. (See Lotman 2006: 178)

An image of (European) Romanticism, considered in this way, can be extended to an image of the (European) literary past forming the trans-national literary canon as a project which is characterized by a conceptual shift from the “infinite project” – as G. Vattimo denoted Modernity – to a (more) post-modern “dispersive project” – dispersive in the sense of de-centralization, i.e., taking into account the concrete literary/linguistic/cultural diversity and at the same time the complexity of the literary past. The only centre or dominant of such a project should be literature, characterized by its discursive *differentia specifica*, i.e., literariness.

According to the obvious fact that already in contemporary literary historiographical practice (where one could hardly imagine the (European) supra-national literary canon formation), the majority of literary texts and authors considered as significant in the creation of literary tradition come from literary/linguistic/ cultural communities of widely-spoken (national) languages. For this reason, it seems indispensable to take into account the single national literary canons for the trans-national literary canon formation. If a nation is defined (less rigidly than in the above quotation from post-colonial theory) as “a named population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for its members” (see Smith 1995), the trans-national literary community should share awareness of the complexity of “its” literary past. The starting-point for this could hardly be the principle of so called common history, which chronologically records past events which are considered as of special importance for the community: in the case of trans-national literary history and its canon formation the dates/events of special importance (such as publishing single literary texts and literary works of art and their translations, or publishing single influential meta-literary texts and their translations, or the appearance of documented reception of phenomena which collaborate in the further

creation of literature(s), etc. – research into which is a usual task of comparative literature) are too dispersed. Therefore, the possible “shared” literary history as a ground for trans-national literary canon formation cannot strictly follow the direction of the so-called shared history in looking for similarities and differences in the ambiguous imaging of a certain event or a certain course of events, important for at least two historical subjects which consider each other as “the other”. However, the possible shared literary history and its trans-national literary canon formation’s (dynamic) result can look for similarities and differences between single literary communities’ ambiguous or multifaceted imaging of a certain theme, genre, a historically characteristic complex of figurative semantic paradigms, i.e., imagery, ideas and concepts, which could be recognized as shared in considering literature. Therefore, the starting-point for the trans-national literary canon formation, founded on these shared *ambiguities*, should take into account every single national literary canon which collaborates in creating this shared literary past. The trans-national literary canon at least re-employs the effect of the national one: “While the same texts repeatedly appear in new contexts, [...] the literary canon enables us to disperse meanings, ideas, and values across the narrower historical contexts of their production.” (Juvan 2006: 277)

Does this oppose the aesthetic principle as a means of (relatively) transcending the synchronic canon variants, or the ideological applications of literature which were illustrated by the Slovene case? Does this oppose the aesthetic principle as a foundation of the trans-national literary canon? – At least, the obvious cultural differences which intensify difficulties in the aesthetic experience of the literary “the other” are implied – and, moreover, aesthetically creative in themselves – in a literary work of art.³³

³³ “Literature is [...] the only discourse which is by its very ‘essence’ paradigmatically open for the otherness. While – as fiction – it does not have any real reference,” by its special nature, i.e., literariness (suggested through different accesses, such as Aristotle’s concept of *catharsis*, Ingarden’s concept of *quasi-reality*, Iser’s concept of *leere Stellen*, Adorno’s considering literature), it also does not transform the relation with “the cultural other” into a unanimous thesis. (See Virk 2007: 132, 131)

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