

*Literature of Slovenians in Italy:
A Subsystem of Slovenian Literature or
a Supranational System?*

Systemisation

The (poly)systemic theory, developed by Itamar Even-Zohar and thoroughly researched on the Slovenian territory by Marijan Dovič, can also be applied to the so-called “smaller” literary systems, like for example the literature of national minorities.

One of these “smaller” literary systems is the one created by Slovenians in Italy: a diverse and dynamic corpus of texts, relations and structures, which are – despite being constantly researched in bio-bibliographies – in many aspects still open to new analysis.

One of these aspects is offered here as food for thought.

The contemporary researchers of this system (Miran Košuta, Marija Pirjevec, Lojzka Bratuž, etc.) agree on the fact that it should be analysed as an autonomous system which is not completely separated from the system of Slovenian national literature. Researching a literary system that is not completely autonomous, like the literature of the Slovenian community in Italy, can be demanding, because it is difficult to detach it from its original matter, namely from the Slovenian literary system. The latter is conceived as a large contextual net uniting and interweaving the literature created on the geographical area of Slovenia (canonised “national Slovenian literature”), the literature created on the linguistic area of the Slovenian language (the “literature of Slovenian minorities in Austria, Italy and Hungary”), and the literature produced in areas where Slovenians live (the “literature of emigrated Slovenians”).

The threads of this contextual net are therefore diverse and interwoven and provide many opportunities for research. The system cannot be severed from its body and it may be researched as a micro-cosmos inside a macro-cosmos, where the macro-cosmos is the Slovenian literature, the micro-cosmoses are the fore-mentioned national Slovenian literature, the literature of Slovenian minorities, and the literature of emigrated Slovenians. Our research is focused on the literary system of the Slovenian minority in Italy.

Miran Košuta, who has been working on this system for a long time, is the only scholar who has tried to define this literature typologically. His predecessors did not work so much on the theoretical systemisation and their work was limited to recording data and writers. At that time the analysis of Slovenian literature in Italy was at its beginnings and it did not lead to adequate results. The first analysis of the literature from "across the border" was presented by Martin Jevnikar in 1967 in the literary journal *Mladika*. He called it "zamejska literature" ("cross-border-region literature") and named at the same time its most prominent authors. His work was later continued by Jože Pogačnik in *Slovensko zamejsko in zdomsko slovstvo* (Slovenian Cross-Border-Region Literature and the Literature of Emigrated Slovenians) in 1972. He revised Jevnikar's work and published a first comprehensive publication that described the so-called cross-border-region literature, which is today outdated. Later on, the research work on this system has been sporadically continued by Lojzka Bratuž (especially in her so-called "older literature"), Marija Pirjevec (concentrating mostly on the literature written in Trieste), Roberto Dapit (who researched the work of Slovenians in the Benečija Region), Diomira Fabjan Bajc, Boris Paternu, etc.

Recently, a renewed interest in the structural analysis of this system has emerged and although there are still certain evident scientific problems to be solved the research has been yielding some interesting results.

In addition to the difficulties at finding a suitable denomination for this literary system, there is also the problem of the previously mentioned premise which poses the question: is researching of this (sub)system possible only in connection with its over-system (Slovenian literature), or is it possible to consider it as an autonomous

literary system that depends on both neighbouring literary systems (Italian and Slovenian) but that is at the same time focused on overcoming them and aiming at being considered as a supra-national literary system?

Literary system of Slovenians in Italy, naming dilemmas

The first dilemma arose at naming the literature written by members of the Slovenian minority in Italy.

Martin Jevnikar (1967: 142) believed “that today the cross-border-region literature presents many uniquely original and characteristic features”. It is obvious that he defined the Slovenian literature in Italy as “zamejska” (“cross-border-region”), even though he included in this definition the literature of Slovenians in Austria and even the literature of emigrated Slovenians: the term “zamejski” gained thus a very wide range of meanings. Jože Pogačnik (1972: 5) expressed his doubts about the suitability of the denomination and in fact the term “zamejska književnost” (“cross-border-region literature”) has not been widely accepted yet. For similar reasons it was refused by Košuta as well (2008: 26) as the term “zamejska književnost” implies a centralistic point of view and excludes the fore-mentioned network of the Slovenian literature system, which also includes the authors living and working outside the national borders. In fact, the borders delimitate a geographical area not an ethnical or literary one. Besides, the terms “zamejec” (Slovenian living in the cross-border area), “zamejstvo” (cross-border area), “zamejsko” (of the cross-border) have become a kind of silent synonym for “foreign” and “unconventional” compared to Slovenian specifics. This can be rather offensive to Slovenians in Italy (and Austria and Hungary), considering their efforts to resist assimilation by means of “Slovenian” activities, way of life and thinking: these are indeed characteristic of areas at the border but they are not less Slovenian than those in the inland.

Another incorrect denomination is the *pars pro toto* definition “tržaška literature” (“Trieste literature”), which appeared in Slovenia as a term used to define literary achievements of Slovenians in Italy,

arguing that Trieste is an “economic, social and cultural centre where the strengths from the whole region converge” (Pogačnik 1972: 48). Due to the fact that Slovenians in Italy live in various areas and towns (Trieste, Gorizia, S. Pietro al Natisone, Cividale, Tarvisio and the Resia Valley), the term “Trieste literature” is inappropriate even though it is the capital city of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, with the greatest density of Slovenian population in Italy. Later on, some more international definitions were coined within Slovenian literature. The term “Trieste literature” however did not succeed in becoming the official denomination and it today denotes literature produced in Trieste and its surroundings.

The term “manjšinska književnost”¹ (littérature mineure, minority literature) might be more appropriate, even though Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari used it for literature produced by a minority in a major language (and not for literature written in a minor language). They defined its three main characteristics: a high degree of “territorial independence” of the language, the linkage of the individual to the political moment and the collective value (Deleuze – Guattari 1995: 24–25). The two researchers analyzed the writings of Kafka (a Czech Jew) in German language and their conclusions about minority literature should therefore be interpreted with regard to this fact. It is possible to draw many parallels between the “minority literature” as described by Deleuze and Guattari and the literature of Slovenians in Italy. However, the adjective “manjšinska” (minority) is too tight and could possibly be used just for a part of this literature, certainly not for all the literature.

Flaker’s term *Grenzliteratur* (border literature) is also problematic. It cannot be used for just “one side” of the border (the border has always two sides and “border literature” means thus “literature on both sides of the border”). Moreover, the term seems obsolete at a time when borders between nations are disappearing. Today, it is inappropriate to define literature produced in the area where Slovenians in Italy live with adjectives as “on-the-border”, “close-to-

¹ The Slovenian translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s definition made by Vera Troha denotes a connection with the adjective »minority«. Perhaps it would be more correct, yet less aesthetically successful, as »minor«.

the-border”, or “across-the-border”. Firstly, because the point of view of the subject is non-selective (as it encompasses Slovenia as well) and secondly, because it is too narrow (it describes the geographic area on the border only and does not take into account the fact that Slovenian literature in Italy can be produced both in towns on the border and in towns far from it; although the latter is rather improbable, as the chances of its production in areas with no Slovenian reference – in our case the reference would be the Slovenian community in Italy – are very small if not completely unreal).

This literature’s geographic connotation is evidently one of the most important factors of the analysis and is therefore taken well into consideration by the majority of the researchers. Taras Kermauner even suggested the term “poetry of the Slovenian west”, which is indeed geographically borderless. Nevertheless, the term is unfortunately (still) inappropriate for the reason that it does not include only the literature of Slovenians in Italy. Janez Strutz described this kind of literature as “regional”, which might be an acceptable denomination as it puts the geographic connotation in the right place. Miran Košuta, “due to a lack of a more appropriate proposal” (2008: 27), uses the definition “Slovenian literature in Italy”. So far, this is the most modern and probably the best definition as it refers to the Italian geographical area with the addition of the term “Slovenian”. We have to understand that Košuta wanted to point out the linguistic specifics of this literature in connection with Slovenian, the language in which the works in this area are written.

In order to avoid possible misunderstandings, we would like to suggest at this point a somewhat improved name for the Slovenian literature in Italy, namely “literature of Slovenians in Italy”. This implies a formal tie to the area but excludes a complete linguistic predominance of the Slovenian language.

A subsystem or a supra-national literary system?

The linguistic influence of the Slovenian language is probably a major obstacle to new interpretations of this literary system’s structure.

Slovenian language is the dominant means of expression in the literature of Slovenians in Italy, unlike in the literature of Slovenians in Carinthia in Austria, where both German and Slovenian are used. Košuta says (ib. 44) that “the mother-tongue is the bearer of deeper, extra-artistic, trans-aesthetic values”. This causes feelings of constraint that result either in an increased lexical activism or in linguistic discomfort. Writers fight for their identity through the word-language. At the same time, especially among younger authors, it is possible to observe the development of relativism of the national moment named by Košuta “relativism of the national” (ib. 36). Younger authors do not try to avoid minority and identity issues or complexes. They instead try to live their situation in an unburdened and untroubled way. In some cases this makes them choose Italian as their dominant linguistic code, or they even opt for bilingualism.

This phenomenon, which is not very common, implies two things:

- a) the Slovenian language *is not* (anymore) the only linguistic code in the over-system of Slovenian literature as other languages (in our case Italian) appear in its sub-systems;
- b) the above discussed term “the linguistic area of the Slovenian language”, denoting the area of literary production in which minority literatures originate, becomes problematic and needs new consideration.

In our view these two issues allow the possibility of analyzing the literary system of Slovenians in Italy (and consequently any system of Slovenian minority-border literature) as an autonomous entity.

A comparative study of literature implies a thorough knowledge of parallel or related phenomena that link, influence and enrich the respective literatures. Contacts between Italian and Slovenian literature, especially in the area close to today’s western Slovenian border (or eastern Italian), have been well recorded and rich since the very beginning of Slovenian literature in this area. For its specifics, this literature has always demanded bi- or multi-lingual social interactions (the evidence for which is found in manuscripts and records of Stara Gora – *Starogorski rokopis* (1492–98), Udine – *Videmski rokopis* (1458) and Črnejša – *Črnejški rokopis* (1497)). Even though these manuscripts are not literary writings as they were

written for administrative purposes, they provide evidence of an early and practical use of more languages (Latin, Friulan, Slovenian, Italian) as early as in the 15th century.

Such phenomena unveil the peculiarity of this geographic area enriched by a network of different cultures that do not function as monolithic and closed systems, but rather as systems in a reciprocal and vivid relationship throughout history. The following works provide ample evidence of how the Italian and Slovenian cultures have always kept alive the interaction, creating a new literary space, which was in many aspects quite different from that of central Slovenia: the Italian – Slovenian dictionary (*Vocabolario italiano e schiauo*, 1607) by Alasia da Sommaripa, an Italian monk who came to serve to Devin/Duino and understood the importance of mastering the Slovenian language and who immortalised it in a unique dictionary, which indeed contains mistakes but has a priceless imagological value; an attempted Slovenian grammar (*Saggio grammaticale italiano-cragnolino*, 1811) by the Italian nobleman Vincenzo Franulo de Weissenthurn from Trieste; the correspondence in Slovenian between the noblewomen Maria Isabella Marenzi and Ester Massimiliana Corraduzzi, which proved that Slovenian was not used only by the peasantry or by uneducated people; and finally the very interesting and still not thoroughly researched influence of Italian futurism on Slovenian literature.

This however is not a sufficient reason to abruptly separate the literature of Slovenians in Italy from its over-system and neither is this our intent. On the other hand, if we agreed with Claudio Guillén (1992: 101–102), who offers three different types of supra-national forms and states that supra-national groups or phenomena are those which

- a) imply internationalism,
- b) imply common historical-social conditions,
- c) are independent in their origin,

we would immediately notice that the literary system we are analysing satisfies all three Guillén's conditions and that we could accordingly call it a supra-national phenomenon.

Even though Guillén is concerned with phenomena and not with systems, we can still accept his theories as appropriate enough in the case of literature of Slovenians in Italy. In fact, this literature has internationalism right in its core as it is a literature of a nationality inside another nationality. It is just as well possible to observe the common historical-social conditions, in part already mentioned before. Especially in the border areas, the Italian and Slovenian peoples have often come into cultural contact, not only historically but most often socially. The constant crossings of the border that divided a once-common land have brought a new understanding of the purpose of that border region that does not belong to just one of the two peoples – or to one of the two nationalities – but is in the cultural ownership of both. This is why the literature of Slovenians in Italy is mostly “Slovenian” due to its language, but it is also “Italian” due to its cultural influences. The independent origin of this literature as a need for artistic expression of “intra-border” and “intercultural” features is a further proof of the international nature of the literature of Slovenians in Italy. Besides, this literature’s specifics differ considerably from the specifics of the central Slovenian one. Miran Košuta (2008: 29–45) defines them as “typological denotations” and divides them into ontological, ethical, national, spatial and linguistic. They define the literature of Slovenians in Italy as an autonomous phenomenon.

But the road from a phenomenon to a system is still long. And if we agree with Marijan Dović (2004: 142), who in his researches about Even-Zohar’s poly-systemic theories draws the conclusion that a system, before being recognised as such, has to be internally stable or rather independent from other systems that surround it, it becomes quite obvious that the literature of Slovenians in Italy has to go a long way before reaching its systemic independence. It would be incorrect to claim that the literary system of Slovenians in Italy is completely autonomous as it is strongly influenced both by Slovenian literature and Italian culture. It differs from them because of its intercultural characteristics which link the two (Slovenian and Italian) entities, connect them and shape them into a third entity. We could also interpret it as a system that follows Even-Zohar’s communication principles on the relation “producer – receiver”. These

are an adaptation of Jakobson's model and they regulate the network of relations needed for a system to work, as the understanding of the whole depends more on relations that take place around the text than on the text itself (see Dovič 2004: 142).

There are enough of these relations within the literature of Slovenians in Italy that justify its classification as an independent system aspiring to a complete independence from its over-system and striving to become a connecting intra-space between Slovenian and Italian culture. In contemporary poetry in particular it is possible to perceive the pursuit of a new understanding of the border-line reality, where the "border" is as a phenomenon of contact rather than division.

Even though the literature of Slovenians in Italy cannot be considered a fully independent literary system yet, it has all the chances to soon become a supra-national literary system connecting the Italian and Slovenian culture into an interesting unity. This unity would be historically important, socially interesting, and would most probably lead to a reinterpretation of the area at the border. Consequently, the border could become a meeting point for cultures, a place of exchange and a confirmation that it is possible to overcome the outdated ideas about the physical and intellectual seclusion of the area at the Italian-Slovenian border.

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