

## CONSERVATIVE AND TRADITIONALIST TENDENCIES IN CONTEMPORARY SLOVENE, CZECH, SLOVAK, POLISH, AND RUSSIAN LITERATURES

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Avtorja prispevka obravnavata konzervativne in tradicionalistične tendence v sodobni slovenski, češki, slovaški, poljski in ruski književnosti, pri tem pa poudarjata pomen nostalgije po preteklosti in aksiološko vlogo takšne poetike v procesu konfrontacije starega in novega v družbenem, filozofskem in estetskem smislu.

konzervativne tendence v sodobni književnosti, aksiološko upoštevanje preteklosti

The authors of the present article deal with the conservative and traditionalist tendencies in contemporary Slovene, Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Russian literatures, stressing the function of nostalgia for the past and the axiological role of this poetics in the process of confrontation between the old and the new in social, philosophical and aesthetic thought.

conservative tendencies in contemporary literature, axiological respect for the past

The epoch of great social and political changes towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> brought a crucial transformation of culture in general, including literature. In spite of these radical developmental changes, the relatively strong undercurrent of rather conservative, retrogressive tendencies appeared motivated, from our standpoint, by several factors. 1) They express disagreement with the kernel of these changes rooted in conservative political views characterized by different degrees of radicalism. 2) They might express a certain form of nostalgia, i.e. for the return of the old, which is not acceptable in this new period. 3) They demonstrate an attempt to find a new evolutionary alternative. 4) They represent a certain tendency to at least partly moderate the disappearance of some cultural and aesthetic values, as well as a certain pattern of behaviour.

Each epoch brings with it criticism of the past, satire, irony and mockery, parody of past

values and patterns of behaviour, even sarcasm or, by contrast, fragments of humour; there is movement between the poles of the comic, ridiculousness and seriousness; nevertheless in literature these positions have always been associated with human lives, with experiences of temporal relations, i.e. with the process of a generational conflict and aging. Moreover, the aspect of general humanity does not cease to play an important role, as well as attempts at reconciliation, apology, repentance and forgiveness, and moments of strife. In boundary epochs the basic function of literature does not disappear, i.e. general humanist values, human life which represents something more valuable than ideas and convictions (Victor Hugo, *Quatre-vingt-treize*, 1874). Traditionalism and conservative values are manifested on several levels: 1) traditional approaches and thematic intentionality; 2) permanent returns to the past and to specific historicity; 3) the construction of enclaves of tradition and conser-

vative values in the midst of new currents (e.g. tendencies to sentimentalist poetics even in postmodernism). Traditional and conservative trends appear where the new currents make way for them: either the manifestation of tolerance of views or the expression of weariness with the new and the first symptoms of the clash of the new ideology with everyday, practical life. The tendencies towards the traditional style and subject together with attempts to defend the traditional values even in peculiar contexts appear in nearly all Central and East European literatures towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> (Pospíšil 2008).

It is extremely difficult to differentiate between the different roots of the conservatism expressed in literature: all the inspirations, nostalgic returns, resistance etc. might permeate even the work of one author. I would not agree with the sweeping characterisation of these phenomena as »nationalistic« or, simply, as a manifestation of »nationalism« or even »national fundamentalism«. In some of the post-communist countries, for example at the »essay conference« in Ljubljana in autumn 2009, I have encountered the view that everything national or patriotic, rural or regional was very often regarded as extremist or nationalistic. This meaning of the national should not, however, be generalized; any love of one's homeland, fatherland etc. need not directly demonstrate the hatred of another nation, country or race. All the conservative tendencies, including regionalism, the return to one's roots, ruralism etc. – though having different backgrounds – tend to unite or synthesise as the expression of a protest against the hasty, rash adoration of anything new, against the boom of the fashionable, often short-winded, shallow trends the new period or even epoch could bring. It may all, including the criticism of postmodernist poetics and the abandonment of its principles, have the same roots. Sometimes this synthesis of different conservative elements with sharply different

backgrounds and pasts may give surprising and paradoxical outputs: e.g. the interlinking of Soviet communism and the Orthodox Church in Yuri Bondarev's novel *The Bermuda Triangle* (see below). These paradoxes, controversial views and nearly surrealistic convergence are, after all, the core of any artistic motion towards the formation of a new poetic and aesthetic system. Thus in each country conservative tendencies could be represented by different ideological and poetological factors, e.g. regionalism, ruralism, a nostalgic desire for the beautiful past etc. Conservatism is not the simple conviction that everything local, provincial, regional, old, past, traditional and rigid is axiomatically better than the opposite qualities; it just expresses the view that not everything new, dynamic, global, unconventional and untraditional is better than the traditional, old, past, conventional etc. According to this concept – newness has not automatically an axiological superiority. Conservatism as a *Weltanschauung* relativises the automatic progressiveness of the new and of the present; very often development turns back to the past (the terms defining this situation are usually restoration, counter-revolution etc.).

In our opinion, traditional and conservative values in contemporary Slovene prose are clearly defined and represented by authors closely connected with a specific region. We can certainly find such examples in the local version of magical realism, the main representatives of which are Marjan Tomšič and Feri Lainšček. The work of both writers is characterised by the interpenetration of a geographically well-defined reality and a magical world of folk mythology which appears in the form of unusual events presented by the narrator.

Marjan Tomšič in his collections of short stories *Olive in sol*, 1983 and *Kažuni*, 1990, or his novels *Šavrinke*, 1985, *Oštrigeca*, 1991 and *Zrno od fermentona*, 1993, draws a portrait of the territory of Slovene Istria, where he combines a world based on ancient faith

and mythology and on the complicated history of Istria with the real-life world of specific local residents; archaic and contemporary components are interlaced. However, such an approach may easily slip into idealisation or mythicisation when we compare it with the typical prose of Florjan Lipuš from the 1980s (*Odstranitev moje vasi*, 1983, *Jalov pelin*, 1985) in which the Austrian-Carinthian countryside, confined to a vicious circle of suspicion and hostility, full of pettiness and narrow-mindedness, rigorously controlled by sacred tradition and a still strongly patriarchal Church, is marked in a decidedly negative way.

Feri Lainšček has his small homeland in the Prekmurje region in eastern Slovenia. His novels include *Namesto koga roža cveti*, 1991, *Ločil bom peno od valov*, 2003, *Muriša*, 2006, and *Nedotakljivi. Mit o Ciganih*, 2007. Lainšček understands it as a unique region characterised by a broader »Pannonian identity« distinguished from the rest of Slovenia, although the author feels some sort of inexplicable spiritual closeness to the opposite pole – Istria. If we compare Lainšček's and Tomšič's prose works, we can find many identical features: a symbolic territory where difficult existential questions are unravelled, the heroes deeply rooted in the legacy of their ancestors etc.

With end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the new millennium a substantial segment of Slovene society began to pay more attention to the countryside and its culture. The growing interest was not caused by the mere fact that many people, regardless of their current social status, came from the rural environment and tried to find their own roots in different regions of Slovenia. Slovene prose also began more closely to examine the consciousness of rural communities, the inner connecting lines, and to penetrate to the real motives of the declared conservative/traditionalist views and opinions. For objective knowledge, it is necessary to observe the rural communities in typical and atypical situ-

ations, to contrast these communities with the urban model of technological civilisation, to gather the still preserved heritage of the traditional culture; while Marjan Tomšič collected and edited the folklore wealth of Istria (*Noč je moja, dan je tvoj*, 1989, *Glavogor, uha dol*, 1993, *Začarana hiša in druge istrske pravljice*, 1994), Feri Lainšček was attracted by the enclosed world of the Roma community in the Prekmurje region. The traditional rural identity has undergone significant changes which were being reflected in the continuing conflict between the religious and an ever-stronger hedonism, between traditional conservatism and the acceptance of a new civilisation, between loyalty to the local and moving into other areas of interest, between authenticity and false imitation. The authors try to approach and understand a specific system of provincial values and find in this system something general and universal that is permanently valid and that can effectively address even the reader of the postmodern era. Thus authors cannot reject the traditional approach – a novel with a realistically constructed story, especially if their works are derived from the genre of the family saga or if they are closely connected with the folklore epic tradition. Such a model is represented by Tomšič's novel *Šavrinke*, which is full of conservative and archaic thinking based on ancient folk wisdom, customs and – last but not least – on the specific local dialect. The patriarchal rural world with its many elements of folk epic is also the basis of Vlado Žabot's fictions (e.g. the collection of short stories *Bukovska mati*, 1986, the novel *Stari pil*, 1989) which, with their mysterious swampy atmosphere, are even darker.

In Czech literature this tendency is represented by the prose work of Jindřich Zogata (born 1941), especially by his trilogy in the form of a novel chronicle *Dědictví zmizelých píšťal* (1996, The Heritage of the Disappeared Pipes), *Oves na střechách* (1996, Oats on the Roofs) and *Dřevěné pyra-*

*midy* (1998, *The Wooden Pyramids*). The closed structure of the chronicle (Pospíšil <sup>1</sup>2003, <sup>1</sup>2005) is permeated by stories coming from outside (the First World War, emigration to America, the foundation of the new Central European states), but the dominant values are connected with the locality of the Beskid Mountains on the borderline of several states, cultures and mentalities (Zogata 1996, 1998). The kernel of the axiological structure is art, creativeness and inventiveness, existing in spite of all the social and political pressure (Pospíšil <sup>2</sup>2005): »Pavel zpíval. Čemu brání se, čemu brání? Kdo chtěl hranici, převraty a vojny? Němci, Poláci, Češi?« (Zogata 1998: 287.) The characteristic feature of Zogata's chronicle is the fragmentariness of artistic expression, a specific language, Czech, but permeated by the layers of a local dialect, the main role of the action and of a story rich in artistic detail, and based on the prevalence of verbal expression, a protest against a priori given axiological hierarchies (nobody knows which is more important: the events of the First World War or the movement of a bat's wings) (Zogata 1996: 106). The three parts of the novel chronicle form a colourful mosaic of forces, themes and phenomena outside causal bonds, placed in juxtaposition.

Though she started her professional career much earlier, in the 1950s, Květa Legátová's (a pseudonym for Věra Hofmanová, born 1919) cycle of short stories *Želary* (2001) or the novella *Jozova Hanule* (2002) surprised all the reading public. As the well-known Czech literary scholar and critic Vlašín (2003) notes, Květa Legátová-Hofmanová did not – as some critics wrote with ardour – appear on the Czech literary scene like a meteor because she – under the name of Věra Podborná – had published book of short stories *Postavičky* (Little Characters) as early as 1958 and the novel *Korda Dabrová* in 1961.

A specific role in Czech literature is played by the prose of virtual authenticity – e.g. by the historiosophic novels of Miloš

Urban (born 1967), who is connected with the British literary tradition by the period of his life spent at the Czechoslovak Embassy in London in the 1970s and by the study of English and Nordic languages at Charles University. His novels which, using the creative methods of documentary literature, remain ambivalent in their endings, include *Poslední tečka za Rukopisy* (1998, *The Last Full Stop after the Manuscripts*), *Sedmikostelí* (1999), »a Gothic novel from Prague«, *Hastrman* (2001, *Water Sprite*), »a green novel«, *Stín katedrály* (2003, *The Shadow of A Cathedral*), a divine criminal comedy, *Santiniho jazyk* (2005, *Santini's Tongue*), and *Pole a palisáda* (2006, *The Field and the Palisade*). In his »novel of virtual authenticity« (Pospíšil 2007) the author confronts topical problems, but in general he stresses the historical alternative through permanent confrontation with and permanent return to the past (Urban 1999: 326).

In Slovak literature a similar tendency has been expressed by several authors, including Ladislav Ťažký, in several of his novels and novellas. His interpretation of the Second World War years and his national criteria, as well as his accentuation of the national roots of his heroes and heroines were expressed in his prose works *Dunajské hroby* (1964, *The Danube Graves*), *Amenmária* (1964), *Pivnica plná vlkov* (1969, *A Cellar Full of Wolves*), and *Ozvena svedomia* (1969, *The Echo of Conscience*), which were scrapped as a consequence of the Soviet occupation in 1968; as well as *Před potopou* (1988, *Before the Deluge*), *Útek z Neresnice* (1999, *An Escape from Neresnica*), and *Porazení vítězi* (2009, *The Defeated Victors*), a kind of intertextual novella. Out of a relatively great number of such Slovak authors we have chosen Josef Hnitka (1913–1992) and his novel *Křížové štácie* (1949, *Wayside Crosses*), a chronicle confronting the old and the new, and finding its point of departure in general humanism, tolerance and respect for the past (Pospíšil 2004).

It is characteristic that due to the homology of forms, the subject and axiological criteria are closely connected with the genre expressing conservative and retrograde tendencies, often a classical realist novel in the form of a chronicle (the chronicle novel) based on the oscillation of the locality and totality, the home and the world (Pospíšil 1986, 1998, <sup>1</sup>2005, 2006).

The beginning of the so-called literature of small homelands in Polish literature (the Polish term: »literatura małych ojczyzn) was formed by the myth of the Borderlands (Kresy – eastern regions of pre-war Poland). The migration of peoples and borders after World War II meant that these areas are today in Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. Though they are outside Poland, they have always occupied a prominent place in its national imagination. An inability to speak about it directly has contributed to the birth of mythic borderland literature, especially in prose, and a long line of works with a high degree of complexity and sophisticated literary manners. Tadeusz Kownicki (e.g. *Kronika wypadków miłosnych*, 1974; *Bohiń*, 1987) mythologized his childhood in the Vilnius region, Andrzej Kuśniewicz transformed multinational Galicia in the specific literary oecumena (e.g. in *Strefy*, 1971), Julian Strykowski brought to life the world of murdered Jews of Galicia, and we can mention many other representatives of this trend, such as Czesław Miłosz, Leopold Buczkowski, and Włodzimierz Odziejewski (Štěpán 2003).

Although the authors of these novels were literally searching for the lost time and journey into their own memory, the phenomenon was primarily a literary one and had little in common with the wave of sometimes nostalgic, sometimes justificatory memoirs that appeared mostly in exile. Meanwhile, in the late 1970s and early 1980s they underwent a new systematic reading. Their value consists prevalently in their original and expressive topography. They started to be read like authentic records of a lost place and time.

Mythic borderland literature evolved into a literature of small/personal/minor homelands.

In the Polish literature of the 1980s and the 1990s this nostalgic trend became one of the most representative, as is shown by authors such as Wiesław Myśliwski (*Kamień na kamieniu*, 1984, *Widnokrąg*, 1996), Piotr Szewc (*Zagłada*, 1987, *Zmierzchy i poranki*, 2000), Paweł Huelle (*Dawidek Weiser*, 1987), Stefan Chwin (*Krótką historią pewnego żartu*, 1991, *Hanemann*, 1995), Andrzej Stasiuk (*Opowieści galicyjskie*, 1995, *Biały Kruk*, 1995) and Anna Bolecka (*Biały kamień*, 1994). But this is a highly differentiated phenomenon, as evidenced by the fact that the authors are members of different generations, have very different poetics, and the geographical map of their small homelands is also very diverse. Nevertheless, all the books have one common key word – nostalgia – linked to sadness, sense of loss, preservation of memories, idealisation of the past, impermanence, fear of the future and finally the return to values which represent continuity of tradition.

In Russian literature, axiological value has often been associated with the revival of Old Church Slavonic language strata in the midst of modern language: the language itself is a manifestation of human character, permanent returns to the past aesthetic values, to times of spiritual solemnity that show the insufficient character of the modern and post-modern epoch and its apocalyptic nature.

One of the striking examples is Yuri Bondarev's novel *Бермудский треугольник* (2000, *The Bermuda Triangle*) which, against the background of the struggle between the champions of perestroika and the old conservatives after the break-up of the Soviet Union, depicts the archetypal clash between the pro-Western forces and those of the neo-Slavophiles criticising the chaotic development of the 1990s in Russia in general and in Moscow in particular (Pospíšil 2002, <sup>1</sup>2003). The leading poetological role is played by the

language, that has an axiological function: the defenders of old orders who are in the author's view represented both by Orthodox Christians and the communists use the solemn language of Old Church Slavonic origin, their progressive, pro-Western opponents speak more or less the vulgar and schematised language of the mafia or that of the mass media (Бондарев 2000: 5).

One of the most striking examples of the permeation of postmodernist, progressive tendencies in philosophy and aesthetics and those of rather conservative currents is the Russian philosopher and aesthetician Alexey Gryakalov (born 1948), the author of studies and short stories in which the Old Church Slavonic language also plays an important axiological function (Gazda, Pospíšil 2007). In his collection of short stories *Последний святой* (2002, *The Last of the Saints*) he tries to thematise the type of text: in spite of language trivialities there is a solemn layer of Old Church Slavonic in its spiritual quality:

Туда – в исход твой – заглянуть мне, как и всякому, невозможно, но зрак мой сиюминутный – вот вылупились и схватывают лепоглазольные твои словца – призрак мой маломощный, рассветный, дворовый санкт-петербургский бродяжка корыстно потянулся вслед твоим будням и праздникам. (Грякалов 2002: 205.)

The conservative tendencies in quite recent literary works of several Central and East European literatures show a complicated situation in contemporary Europe, which is trying, with great difficulty, to overcome the past and present controversies anchored in its contradictory history. It also shows that the real scholarly battlefield will be situated in the sphere of axiology, spirituality and other values.

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