

LOCAL SPACE AND UNIVERSAL BEING IN THE SLOVAK POETRY FROM VOJVODINA

SPAȚIUL LOCAL ȘI EXISTENȚA UNIVERSALĂ ÎN POEZIA SLOVACĂ DIN VOIVODINA

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the relationship between aspects of being and the local space in the poetry of Slovakian minority literature in Vojvodina. Minority literature is treated as a type of an interliterary community where the influences of minority literature, national literature and world literature interweave, based on bilingualism and biliteracy of the authors. Bilingualism of the authors does not determine biliteracy but rather identification with the tradition and culture of the other. Biliteracy is treated as an expression of dynamic dual identity which can be based on the local space and the universal being.

Rezumat

În acest articol examinăm relația dintre aspectele existenței și spațiul local în poezia minorităților slovace din literatura din Voivodina. Literatura minorităților este tratată ca și un tip de comunitate interliterară unde influențele literaturii minorităților, literatura națională și literatura lumii se îmbină, în baza bilingvismului și biliterăției autorilor. Bilingvismul autorilor nu determină biliterăția ci mai degrabă identificarea cu tradiția și cultura celorlalți. Biliterăția este tratată ca o expresie a unei identități duale dinamice care este bazată pe spațiul local și existența universală.

Key words: *bilingualism, biliteracy, interliterary community, intertextuality, space and being*

Cuvinte cheie: *bilingvism, biliterăție, comunitatea interliterară, intertextualitate, spațiu și ființă*

Slovak poetry, which is created in Vojvodina, belongs to the minority enclave literature where Slovak is the minority language and Serbian is the majority language. Literature in this space represents specific form of midspace rootedness. The specific position of this literature is most determined by language because the mother tongue of minority literature belongs to the country of origin, which is both near and far and so, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, the mother tongue becomes the language of *the other* (VEGEL, 2013, 64). That is how the literary reality of minority authors becomes dual in nature – while the mother tongue becomes the language of the other, the foreign language becomes the language of the reality one lives in. The world of meanings of such literary works is characterised by a multi-layered (hybrid) cultural identity, which is based on bilingualism of the authors and multicultural context.

Theoretical aspects of intercultural intertwining in literature, which are taking place in Slovak works written in Vojvodina, have been researched by the Slovak theorist Dionýz Ďurišin, who called such phenomena interliterary communities. In interliterary community literature the experiences of national, cultural and linguistic identity do not need to overlap (TOLDI, 2014, 386), so space and being in poetry do not need to depend on each other. Creative work in one language

can absorb the culture and tradition of another nation it coexists with which may lead to the stratification of identity. This is exemplified by minority literature of Vojvodina. Some of the works written in Slovak language contain explicit local motifs (Serbian, Vojvodinian like flat land, thirst, fog), other create the implicit poetic image of local space or objective correlatives connected to feelings of local themes (poems of Viťazoslav Hronec *Border (I)*, *Sons (I)*, *Sons (II)*, *Fathers (I)*, *Fathers (II)*). The poetry of various authors also contains elements of national poetics (Slovak sensualism). On the other hand, there are works which transcend the boundaries of national literary tradition in the poetics (Slovak sensualism is intertwining with Serbian concretism) and the motifs of local space reflect a universal being (in the poetry of Ján Labáth, Michal Babinka, Viťazoslav Hronec).

This experience of bilingual authors is exemplified in the poetry of Slovak poets from Vojvodina. Juraj Mučaji (1919 – 1945) and Paľo Bohuš (1921 – 1997) were the first authentic poetic talents who were considered key to the establishment of Vojvodinian Slovaks' poetic tradition. Mučaji's poem *Roads* describes the local space: "Those roads of ours – crossing after crossing. / Over flatland flies crispy morning, / Every day is sweet, it is also grudging / And a soul unploughed by love adorning."¹ (HRONEC, 2012, 63); Bohuš's poem *Thirst* considers the local motifs but through them it opens up deeper layers of the human being: "Sometimes at midnight, sometimes at noon time / secretly I descend on the ladder / into myself / as a well driller / into a well." (HRONEC, 2012, 73); Also, Bohuš recites a prayer in the poem *Psalms 23rd*: "And lead me not into temptation, / so I would live longer / as is proper for a tired man. / Under me put soft soil, / may my fall be quiet, / when I once from Your hand / fall down." (HRONEC, 2012, 74). In these three extracts from Tušjak and Bohuš's poetry we can see local motifs of land, soil, flatland, which show that the space has important, ontological and mythological meaning in this poetry. The Rusyn literary author, theorist and scholar Julijan Tamaš, from Vojvodina, wrote about "the deep connection between people and space, man and land, regardless of nationality, culture and language" and argued that "the connection between man and land connects individuals and peoples more than language and church can divide them" (TAMAŠ, 2008, 24). There are also other motifs, such as thirst, the well, man as a well driller, showing the speaker's main feeling of being (from the space of Vojvodina), which is shortage, deficiency, but also showing his dynamic nature, his will to change this state of being. In the last extract from Bohuš's poem *Psalms 23rd* we can also see the speaker's deep religious conviction but also the author (in Bohuš's poetry we can identify the speaker with the author) which characterizes the Slovak population in Vojvodina. Other local motifs, typical for national poetics and semantics, we can find in Michal Babinka's (1927 – 1974) poem *Birthplace of Fogs*: "Here a man grows up like a scream / of jingling frosts on border of a morning brindle / of absurdities"² (HRONEC, 2012, 93) and *Visit I*: "Alone in the field a man and so many voices / alone in the field waiter and the field is not a pond with abrupt / explosions of birds (...) / The field has secret words and naive acts in a pulse"³ (HRONEC, 2012, 95). These examples also illustrate the feelings of the speaker, who lives in this geo-cultural space, such as the feeling of absurdity, loneliness. The local motifs represent the reality of foreign language, the reality one lives in. This poetry is an expression of Slovak national tradition, based on the tradition of romanticism, symbolism and sensualism. The sense of being in this poetry is not always highly dynamic, but is full of will to change and get over the difficulties.

On the other hand, there are works which transcend the boundaries of local space using mythological motifs and universal meanings, such as the poem *Sons (I)* of Viťazoslav Hronec (1944): "A column of smoke rises as a young oak, mists / Father's face in front of the son's pure forehead, chases down gods and / Once more commemorates the duke of hurricanes all the way to /

1 The poems were translated by Andrew Ušjak and published in *The Anthology of Slovak Vojvodina's Poetry*, edited by V. A. Hronec).

2 „Tu človek vyrastá ako výkrik / zvoniacich mrazov na rozhraní rána strakatého / nezmyslami“ (HRONEC, 2007, 99)

3 „Sám v poli človek a tak mnoho hlasov / sám v poli čakateľ a pole nie je močiar s prudkými výbuchmi vtákov (...) / pole má tojomné slová a naivné skutky v pulze“ (HRONEC, 2007, 101)

The face of glassy wings knotted in our dream.” (HRONEC, 2012, 114). In the original, the initial letters of Hronec’s poem *Sons (I)* spell out the acrostic “Stephen Dedalus”, the name of the character of Joyce’s novels.⁴ Another example is Hronec’s poem *Prayer (I)*, which also shows motifs and verses connected to myths and archetypes: “Seminal hail, / As when lightning reaches / God’s iron hut, / And old women start to weep / After procession of cithers / In the lobby of almshouse”⁵ (HRONEC, 2012, 155). In the extract from *Prayer (I)* there is an intertextual relation with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 11th tablet, connected to the flood myth: “Did in the night let a plentiful rainfall(?) pour down . . . (?) / View’d I the aspect of day: to look on the day bore a horror, / (Wherefore) I enter’d the vessel” (EPIC OF GILGAMISH, Last modified April 8 2016, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/eog/eog13.htm>). Later it says that the goddess Ishtar cried: “Cow ’ring like curs were the gods (while) like to a woman in travail / Ishtar did cry” (EPIC OF GILGAMISH, Last modified April 8 2016, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/eog/eog13.htm>). In Hronec’s poem the flood has a symbolic meaning referring to the end of one period. It is the period of early poetic works and also the beginning of full-grown life when the speaker tries to achieve immortality through lasting works of literature and culture. The universality of the poetic expression surged from a specific local space, but reached the univesal meening.

The basis Prerequisites for the creation of interliterary works are familiarity with a second language as well as engaging with the other culture and its traditions. Biliteracy represents an attempt to enter into a dialogue with centers (countries of origin but also centers of the majority language and literary tradition). One of the first authors to write about biliteracy was Dionýz Ďurišin in his *Teória literárnej komparatistiky (Theory of Literary Comparatistics 1975)*. Ďurišin explains that biliteracy does not represent an idyllic coexistence of two literatures in a given era but a mutual functional exchange of values. The notion of biliteracy, according to Ďurišin, stands for the intermingling and mutual engagement of two literary systems, two traditions and conventions: “The changeability of the historical validity of biliteracy contributes to its methodological flexibility and functionality” (ĎURIŠIN, 1975, 314). Michal Harpáň, who applied Ďurišin’s theory to Slovak minority literature and developed the notion of multicontextuality, writes about translations of bilingual authors. Harpáň states that bilingualism is indeed a prerequisite for biliteracy but does not guarantee its emergence: “Bilingual balance is a rare occurrence (...) the mother tongue is usually the dominant one. Slovak authors’ poems written in Serbian in the Yugoslav era most often function as self-translations which, in fact, provides evidence that bilingual intent does not result in biliteracy.” (HARPÁŇ, 1999, 21).

Biliterary works absorb the poetics and cultural sensibility of *the other* and express it through a specific multicultural identity and entangled poetics. An example of biliteracy can be found in Vítázoslav Hronec’s book of poetry *Mlin za kafu (Coffee Grinder 1984)*, which was originally written and published in Serbian. The poetics of sensualism were replaced by concretism and verism, already present in Serbian literary tradition. It represents a radical shift from anything

⁴ „Stĺp dymu košatie ako mladý dub, zahmlieva
Tvár otca pred čistým čelom syna, štve bohov a
Ešte raz nám pripomína knieža víchrov až
Po tvar sklených krídel zauzlené v našom sne.
Horčičným plameňom vzbĺka hranica jarného
Ekvinokcia, havranie sa nebo nad nami; na dne
Nezmernej tíšiny hrebieme sa v popole a
Dvojhmatom ladíme žeravé struny jeho rúk.
„Efialta zasiahla kopija z bieleho kovu
Dnes ráno, keď pred chrámom veštil z preletu vtákov
Astrálne vrstvenie bronzových bleskov na prilbách
Lebo len skrže živý ker búrka sa mení v jas.
Uvzatí vzdúvanie zrkadiel, tlmiace skutky
Synov a dcér, napĺňa veštbu – a znie to, znie to v nás.“ (HRONEC, 1981, 11)

⁵ „Semenné krupobitie, / Ako keď blesk zasiahne / Železný klobúk boha, / A stareny začnú nariekať / Za sprievodu citár“ (HRONEC, 2007, 121)

written before not only in terms of the language it was written and published in, but also in terms of the poems' poetics and reality. For example, Hronec's poem *Eclipse*, was written in Serbian (later translated into Slovak by the author himself) and in the tradition of Serbian poetry of concretism: "I am his image on a plane, / That's why I see even what doesn't exist. / I feel everything, what can be associated / With our common being. / It stands on a rock above lake, / Looks to water. / If it jumps, / Emptiness after my being / Will fill up something else. (...)"⁶ (HRONEC, 2012, 125). Comparing this poem with *Sons (I)* or *Prayer (I)* we can see the abandonment of the poetics of sensualism, which was the result of absorbing Slovak literary tradition. Therefore, in the case of Hronec, in addition to bilingualism one also finds dual identity of the author/poet, i.e. we see a typical example of biliteracy.

In the next short extract from Hronec's poem *The Oak* we can see another example of the mutual functional exchange of three literary systems: the poem was written in Serbian, then translated into Slovak and through the intertextual relations we found an encounter of Slovak, Serbian and world literary tradition. Vítázoslav Hronec (HRONJEC, 1984, 23) wrote: "I stride around the room branched / humming against the draught / between doors and windows"⁷ (Translated from Serbian by M. Š. S.). The Serbian tradition is present in the poetics of concretism. The Slovak tradition can be recognized in the quotation of Mučaji's motifs of the poet's / human identification with a tree and in the motif of wind/draught: "Poet is a big tree on a threshold of all occasions / Wind plays with its most beautiful vision"⁸ (HRONEC, 2012, 105). World tradition occurs in the quotation from Pound's poem *The Tree*, which can be found at the beginning of *Personae*, meaning someone's/a persona's identification with the tree: "I stood still and was a tree amid the wood, / Knowing the truth of things unseen before" (POUND, 1961, 17). Hronec also uses a persona in his poems. We can list numerous quotations that abound in Hronec's work of the second half of the 60's, 70's and 80's of the 20th century. These connections were given special focus in the monograph *Podoby intertextuality v tvorbe Vítázoslava Hronca* (ŠIMÁKOVÁ SPEVÁKOVÁ, 2015). Intertextuality is also a specific semiological feature of this poet and leads to stratifications of identity.

In Vojvodinian Slovak literature there are writers who, during one creative period, attempted to engage in the literary context of the foreign/the other. In an attempt to reach biliteracy via bilingualism these writers attempted to produce their works in Serbian: Paľo Bohuš (1922-1997) in the book *Život unapred doživotan* (1977), Viera Benková (1939) in the anthology *Dan medzi ružama* (1979), Zlatko Benka (1951) in the book *Demon ali gde* (1973) and *Oklopnik* (1986); in prose, Zlatko Benka with the novel *Boginja na prestolu* (1996) and Martin Prebudila (1960) with the novel *Ma, daj nasmeši se* (2007).⁹ On the other hand, there are examples of Vojvodinian Slovak writers who have decided to completely abandon the Slovak literary context and have entirely blended into the context of their surroundings. Such writers are the poet Ana Dudaš (1936) and prose writer Daniel Pixiades (1931), who have lately begun returning to their primary literary context by translating poems from Croatian into Slovak. The conclusions arrived at by reading the works of those writers who have switched languages is that changing languages does not imply a change of identity. The old, "disused" language continues to function in the background of the new one, determining the view of the world and poetics. In this case then, even though we speak of bilingualism, we cannot speak of biliteracy.

In contrast, in the poetry of Vítázoslav Hronec one can speak of a specific shaping of identity which is multilayered and continuous, what we might term *identity in motion*. This means

⁶ „Som jeho odraz na hladine, / Preto vidím aj to, čo nejestvuje. / Tuším všetko, čo sa môže prihodit' / Nášmu spoločnému bytiu. // Stojí na skale nad jazerom, / Hľadá do vody. / Ak skočí, / Prázdnotu po mojom bytí / Vyplní niečo iné.“ (HRONEC, 2007, 132)

⁷ „Koračam po sobi razgranat / Šumeći na promaji između vrata i prozora...“ (HRONJEC, 1984, 23).

⁸ „básnikjevelký stromnaprahu všetkýchčias / Vietor sa pohráva s najkrajším jeho snom“ (HRONJEC, 2007, 111)

⁹ All this works were originally written in Serbian, but the poetics were not different from earlier works of these authors, written in Slovak.

that in addition to semantics, poetics is also a reflection of interliterary associations and the work as a whole is the result of the interweaving of the poetics, mythology and mythical reality of the region.

Biliteracy depends first and foremost on the author's integrity and his ability to include and weave into his work two or more literary traditions. For this to happen, however, specific historical, geographical and cultural circumstances are required and these do exist in Vojvodina. Biliteracy has brought dual literary identity or, in the case of an encounter of several traditions (minority, majority, world literary tradition) – hybridization of identity. The universality of poetic articulation in the best poems of Slovak Vojvodinian authors almost always corresponded to the offset from their local and national specifics when encountering the other traditions rooted in Vojvodina's space.

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