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Ethnic Literature and Slovak-American Research

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Abstract

The article outlines the beginnings of ethnic literature research in the United States of America with regards to its reception from the 1960s to the 1980s. Aesthetic merit as a leading consideration in the evaluation of literary works, in view of the opinions of numerous critics, is quite problematic to apply in the case of Czech and Polish literature. Considering the output of Slovak-American research in the field of literary criticism and literary history, the results are not satisfactory either. There are a few works that provide valuable insight into the literature of the Slovak diaspora.

Ethnic Literature

If we look at the very beginning of American ethnic literary contributions in the second half of the 19th century, we find hardly any critical or analytical work concerning their aesthetic value, not only at the time but also in the following decades.

The study of ethnic literature has made significant progress along with the rise of ethnic awareness in the academic milieu in the 1960s, when specific ethnic studies programmes were established (Newman, 1980, p. 3). From that time many scholars turned their attention towards the research of ethnicity in literary works. It became easier when the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States was founded in 1973. Subsequently, the journal *MELUS* (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 1974) started to be published and Katharine Newman became its first editor. It constituted a fundamental step in extending critical-theoretical research on ethnic literature covering Latino-American, Native-American, African-American, Asian- and Pacific-American, and Euro-American works. It is then right to highlight that in many cases ethnic literature was and still is very much interconnected with a “college trained readership” (Ostendorf, 1983, p. 157).

A significant role was played by the “new ethnicities”, a revival of ethnicity in the 1970s which resulted in people of third- and fourth-generation immigration starting to question their identity and researching their roots in southern and eastern European countries. Michael Novak, an American Catholic philosopher with a Slovak background and the author of the idea of new ethnicity, reflects the reasons for this turn as follows:

“Ethnic identity persists among individuals, it appears, by being passed on in unconscious, tacit ways in their early nurture [...] It

appears that in some families the mother and in others the father – perhaps sometimes in different respects – pass on some of the values and expectations that he or she internalized from the long line of human tradition [...] No one of us represents all the cultures of humanity, yet each of us carries social meanings and values not invented by ourselves. The reason for studying such sociality in our individual makeup is not to promote ‘ethnic pride’, for not all that we carry forward is wholly admirable. The primary reason is to obtain self-knowledge” (Novak, 1996, p. 382).

A study by Werner Sollors shows that the English words *ethnic* and *ethnicity* are derived from the Greek word *ethnikos* meaning ‘gentile’, or ‘heathen’. On the other hand, the noun *ethnos* Greeks used not only to refer to people in general but was also used to describe people who were seen as ‘others’. Therefore, the previous meaning of the word altered, and it was used to refer to ‘non-Christian’ people. In America, *ethnic* has become a synonym for being perceived as other, as nonstandard, as not being fully American (1995, p. 219-20).

This might have led to the characterisation of the books portraying stories of immigrants as ‘regional’ – writing intended to represent the values and interests of a group which feels itself penalised, even threatened, by the disregard of the larger community” (Fiedler, 1964, p. 74). Irving Howe adds: “Most of this writing turned out to be of small literary value, the very urgencies behind its composition hardening into narrowness of scene, parochial return, and mere defense” (1976, p. 585). What József Gellén observes is therefore significant: “In fact, most immigrant prose writing (not only that by east Europeans) is to some extent documentary and, quite logically, autobiographical in character” (1985, p. 25). A possible interpretation is, as Miller argues, that ethnic “writers strive to make the materials of their cultures known to others by presenting them in a relatively straightforward manner” (Miller, 1978, p. 11).

Nevertheless, Berndt Ostendorf argues that the first immigrant writers had to fight for their literary place. It was even more difficult when we take into account the requirements they had to meet. He found two different and contradictory examples: “the traditionalists wanted a literature loyal to their vision of the home country (...in theme and form), and the progressives did not want to be held back from Americanization by uncomfortable truths” (1983, p. 150). Many works crossed over into other literary genres, for instance, the pastoral novel, the farm novel, the radical novel, the city novel, and so on (Boelhower, 1981, p. 3)¹.

It seems that early ethnic literature has, in a simplified way, become more a contribution to sociology than to literary history. The realistic portrayal of life in industrial America seems to be more typical for Slavic and other immigrant writers than the implementation of unusual artistic experiments with form or language.

Czech and Polish literature: criticism and praise

Aesthetic merit as a leading consideration in the evaluation of literary works, with regard to the already mentioned opinions of numerous critics, is also quite problematic to apply in the Czech and Polish cases. For example, in *Proceedings of Comparative Literature Symposium* at Texas Tech University published in two parts under the title *Ethnic Literatures Since 1776: The Many Voices of America* in 1978, Rudolf Sturm in his paper on Czech literature in America writes that most Czech-American fiction is not of high quality (1978, p. 165); therefore, he focuses on the poetry. On the contrary, Clinton Machann publishes an article on Hugo Chotek saying that his novelettes *Galveston* and *Suffering* “have special value as one measure of the shifting dynamics of American society” (Machann, 1979, p. 39). In *History of Czechs in America* written by Jan Habenicht in 1901 we are informed that Hugo Chotek

“translated and wrote a large number of short stories, but most of them are plagiarisms” (1996, p. 517). Habenicht is critical of the works of Czech immigrants in general: “Quite a few novels, short stories and other works have been written in Czech America and have met with readers’ favor, it is true, but despite the fact that they were treated as original works, most of them actually were compositions of plagiarism of old English or German stories, novels, etc., lacking features of the Czech spirit. Such novels certainly are far from any literary value” (1996, p. 507).

On the other hand, Habenicht devotes nearly 30 pages to the *Outline of Czech American Literature* pointing out that “we would like to avoid forgetting those who did their best to bring some Czech reading material to the people and perhaps to express their emotions” (1996, p. 507).

A very similar situation emerges when analysing Polish immigrant poetry and prose. Franciszek Lyra in a 1985 article argues that the evolution of Polish-American poetry “stopped at the ‘rising genius’ level”. Moreover, he says that the results of three generations of poets did not mutate into quality and that the novels have hardly outgrown artistic infancy (Lyra, 1985, p. 63-64). Yet a selection of articles on American women writers of Polish descent has been published in the monograph *Something of My Very Own to Say*, edited by Thomas Gladsky, an expert on Polish-American literature, in 1997. His encouraging monograph *Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves* (1992) became a milestone in Polish-American ethnic literary representation. Gladsky in his book concentrates on the prose writers that are considered to be a part of the Polish diaspora, even if they deny it, as it is obvious in the case of the “problematic” Czesław Miłosz (Gladsky, 1992, p. 286).

It is evident that as Czech and Polish scholars criticise their literature, they at the same time praise it by writing articles and books on their compatriots. Through this act they call upon the human spirit, which had prompted those writers to preserve their memories, to revive.

Slovaks and the New World

Slovaks, among other Slavic nations such as Poles, Croats, Ukrainians, Russians and others, emigrated to the United States of America in the last decade of the 19th century.

There were several factors which in different ways compelled Slovaks to travel to America. A few Slovaks emigrated in the 19th century as a result of Magyarisation; however the greatest loss was caused by economic reasons (Stolarik, 1981, 927). In 1873 many of them perished in the outbreak of cholera and famine, leaving broken homes without breadwinners (Čulen, 2007, p. 29). Because the majority of people were illiterate peasants, their living standards depended on the fertility of the soil. In parts of the Austria-Hungarian Empire where rates of emigration were highest, such as the Šariš, Zemplín, and Spiš regions, planting conditions were very poor. Ján Puci gives us a realistic representation of these adverse conditions. He writes that “there was high unemployment since there was no or little industry in those parts of the country populated by Slovaks” (2006, p. 120). Puci also mentions the fact that Slovaks “owned no land at all, or if so, small patches only” (ibid). Moreover, Arne B. Mann points out other rare reasons for emigration, such as “misbehaviour towards authority, demonstrative defiance towards traders or representatives of the Hungarian aristocracy; well-known were also incidents of escape from military service”² (Mann, 1982, p. 163).

Consequently, all the events mentioned above resulted in them leaving their homes and taking a ship to an unknown country somewhere overseas. America became a promised land which carried the values of a free and fair life in their eyes. Yet, Slovaks, who were seeking work, did not intend to stay there for their whole lives but wanted to earn money to improve living conditions for their family and children. Furthermore, buying a small patch of land became a fundamental motivation in coming home. The first emigrants were usually men who travelled

back and forth bringing not only money but also agricultural implements and hints on how to use new technologies when building houses or instruments used in farming (Mann, 1982, pp. 164-165). Overall, Slovaks did not see much improvement or change in their native land, and young girls could not find a husband so they travelled to the New World in the hope of finding marital and economic stability.

The situation in America was not as easy as they thought but still better than in Austria-Hungary. Because the northern states of America such as Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Ohio and Illinois were the nearest to incomers, and the work opportunities were ample, Slovaks as well as other emigrants settled there. Men worked mostly in mines, steel mills and sawmills as unskilled workers for very low wages. Working conditions were unsatisfactory, and deadly explosions in furnaces were not extraordinary. In addition, Slovaks faced a language barrier because they spoke Slovak only, and the majority of them were illiterate. As a consequence of this linguistic disadvantage, Slovak emigrants did not feel comfortable; hence they organised parishes or associations to overcome the feeling of being outsiders (Čulen, 2007, p. 75). Furthermore, other nations such as the Irish, who spoke English and had emigrated to America earlier, acted superior to them. This resulted in a conviction that only education could enhance their chances and those of their children to be accepted by other immigrants and natives in America.

It should be said that the hopes and ideas which the early generation of Slovak emigrants had brought along with them when they went to America were not accomplished completely. They dealt with the same problems from which they had fled their mother country; for instance, contempt by earlier immigrants, lack of skills, deficient knowledge of language and so on.

In conclusion, adaptation to the new lifestyle, figuratively speaking from fields to factories, on the one hand, led to consolidation of relations within the Slovak community, but on the other hand, subsequent generations of Slovak emigrants (descendants) gradually set themselves apart from their roots.

Research on the Slovak literature of America

Works of Slovak-American provenance have not been accorded adequate significance as of yet. The lack of interest in the literature of Slovaks published in America is from the point of view of the Slovak literary milieu influenced mainly by the fact that early Slovak immigrants were illiterate peasants who did not speak English; moreover, they did not express their experiences in literature – so were they presented in novels. Second and third generations educated in American schools started to write in English, but these books are still to be translated and published in Slovakia. Another reason for the lack of research in this area is that in the former Czechoslovakia it was forbidden to disseminate the literature of Slovaks from capitalistic America, or, occasionally, the immigrant experiences were misinterpreted and thus translated in favour of the ruling socialist party.

Considering the output of American research in the field of literary criticism and literary history, the results are not satisfactory either. We can hardly find any work concerning the literature of Slovaks and their descendants. There is not the merest mention of the books of our people in European ethnic literature proceedings organised in the 1970s and 1980s, at the peak of the search for identity and “self-knowledge”.

The fact that in the already mentioned *Proceedings of Comparative Literature Symposium at Texas Tech University* Czechs, Slovenians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Italians and even Rusyns have keen scholars who systematically and actively research this area is quite disappointing. The same applies to the book *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature: Selected Essays on the European Contribution* edited by R. Di Pietro and E. Ifkovic in 1983. We find Polish, Hungarian and Greek contributions, but no Slovak. Some explanation for this unflattering

situation is presented by the Slovak Studies Association, which ran from 1977. Based on concise information from its *Newsletter*³ (1977-2009), it turns out that two topics have always been crucial for academics interested in Slovak matters in America: history and politics. Most dissertation theses⁴ and articles were written about the situation in the former Czechoslovakia, and subsequently in Slovakia, and relatively few about Slovaks in America. If some of them published books, the authors were concerned about immigration (Mark Stolarik), the history of Slovaks in America generally (Konstantin Čulen, Joseph Stasko), or more often about the local history and activities of a particular town or region: Cleveland (Jan Pankuch, Susi Megles, Martina Tybor, Mark Stolarik, Josef Barton, John Sabol), Florida (Andrew Hudak), Yonkers (Daniel Tanzone), etc. Books about the Church and religious activities of Catholics and Lutherans of the Slovak communities have a significant place too (Michael Novak, Alexander June Granatir, Robert Zecker, etc.). Even if we find announcements of some writers about their new books, there are not any scholars who read *Newsletter* and offer their articles to Slovak journals in America, such as *Slovak Studies*, *Slovakia*, *Almanac-Kalendar*, or *Most*, and are at the same time interested in literary studies.

There are, however, two significant articles published in MELUS which bring a little insight into the topic. In *Women's Work in Novels of Immigrant Life* Mariolina Salvatori focuses on several women characters some of which appear in the most famous novel by Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace*. Moreover, there is an essay *The Garden in the Mill* written by Patricia Ondek Laurence which portrays the Slovak immigrants' view of work. She as a descendant of a Slovak immigrant tries to understand the notion of work in her grandfather's life. Ondek finds the versatility of Slovak workers and also the Slovak appetite for work peculiar and compares it with other literary works. The significant work of Betty Ann Burch *The Assimilation Experience of Five American White Ethnic Novelists of the Twentieth Century* (1990), written as a dissertation, analyses Bell's contribution from the ethnic point of view. Burch emphasises the occurrence of ethnic features such as assimilation, marginality, identity and displacement in the novel⁵.

In fact, Bell's novel became the most analysed work emerging from the Slovak diaspora. The most discussed feature is the notion of work and characters' relation to it. We do not find it surprising because of the setting, which is predominantly the steel mill in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Bell pays a lot of attention to portraying the working conditions of Slovak immigrants. Furthermore, the "subtitle" written on the cover page *A Novel of Immigrant Labor in America* also anticipates these presumptions. The mill's surroundings lead to contact with other ethnic groups, but they often result in a clash of cultures.

It is a paradox that the first attempt to characterise the literature of Slovaks in America appears in the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature* (2005), edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson.⁶ Slovak literature in America has been given its metaphorical voice because there are a few entries on authors who claim Slovak origin, for instance Michael Novak, Mary Ann Malinchak Rishel, and Paul Wilkes. These entries were documented by Gerald J. Sabo. The entry on Slovak American Literature, written by Charles Sabatos, also covers Anton Bielik, Gustáv Maršall-Petrovský, Miloš K. Mlynarovič, Alvena Seckar or Jozef Pauco. Some of the books published by these writers are written in the Slovak language, but they are not well-known to readers.

As there are not many sources in the field, it is useful to browse bibliographies that provide a compact perspective. Such perspectives are provided by Michael Lacko in two Slovak Studies editions on bibliography entitled *Bibliographica: Slovak Bibliography Abroad 1945-1965* and *Bibliographica 2: Slovak Bibliography Abroad 1966-1975*. Both editions are comprehensive and extremely important for Slovak academics worldwide. Unfortunately, efforts to publish a third edition have not been successful. Another valuable source is also *Czechs and Slovaks in North America* compiled by Esther Jerabek. In one chapter she focuses on "Literature, Drama,

Essays, Fiction, Poetry”. Although it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the Czech and Slovak entries, the effort Jerabek has made is undoubtedly noteworthy.⁷

Conclusion

The aim of the article was to outline how early ethnic literature was perceived by numerous critics from the 1960s to the 1980s. Most of them concede the insufficient aesthetic quality found in the works of immigrant writers. Because of the need to acknowledge one's ethnic and cultural identity, strengthened by the quest for “self-knowledge”, it is then not surprising that many authors gave priority to a straightforward realism in their early literary contributions. The works emerging from the Slovak diaspora are totally unknown to the American academic milieu and the public. The reason lies in neglected research that has not been revived after more than a century. Slovak and American research should create a more rewarding relationship, enabling literary history and literary criticism to flourish.

¹ For a more concise picture on American ethnic literature see an overview by Sollors, W. “Literature and Ethnicity”. In: Thernstrom, S. (ed.), 1981, 2nd printing, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, pp. 647-665.

² priestupok voči vrchnosti, otvorené vystúpenie proti obchodníkom či predstaviteľom uhorskej moci; známe boli tiež prípady úteku pred vojenskou službou (translated into English by D.Ž.).

³ Slovak Studies Association website archives the *Newsletter* from 1977 to 2009 at <http://www.slovakstudies.org/?q=node/11>

⁴ An interesting bibliography of dissertations and Master's theses written on different scientific fields related to Slovakia: Kona, M. M., 1996. *Ph.D. Dissertations in Slovakiana in the Western World*. Martin: Matica slovenská.

⁵ Salvatori, M., Women's Work in Novels of Immigrant Life. In *MELUS*, 1982, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 39-58; Laurence, O. P., The Garden in the Mill: The Slovak Immigrant's View of Work. In *MELUS*, 1983, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 57-68; Burch, B. A., 1990. *The Assimilation Experience of Five American White Ethnic Novelists of the Twentieth Century*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc.

⁶ *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*. 2005. Nelson, E. S. (ed.) Westport: Greenwood Press.

⁷ Lacko, M., 1967. *Slovak Studies 7. Bibliographica: Slovak Bibliography Abroad 1945-1965*. Cleveland – Rome: Slovak Institute; Lacko, M., 1977. *Slovak Studies 17. Bibliographica 2: Slovak Bibliography Abroad 1966-1975*. Cleveland – Rome: Slovak Institute; Jerabek, E., 1976. *Czechs and Slovaks in North America: A Bibliography*. New York & Chicago: Czechoslovak Society of Arts & Sciences in America.

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