

## Romantic imagination in a comparative perspective: English and Slovak Romantic literature

Anton Pokrivčák<sup>1</sup> & Silvia Pokrivčáková<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Slovakia, anton.pokrivcak@ucm.sk

<sup>2</sup> Trnava University, Slovakia, silvia.pokrivcakova@truni.sk

### Abstract

The paper discusses Romantic imagination in two, relatively distant, national literatures. The first part is concerned with the problems comparative literature has faced in recent decades. In the second part, the work of two Slovak Romantic writers, Ján Kollár and Janko Kráľ, is compared to the poetry of Lord Gordon Byron and William Wordsworth. By identifying certain affinities between the discussed literary works, the authors point to the importance of the concept of national literature which has not lost its role even in contemporary literary studies.

**Key words:** Romanticism, national literature, postcolonial literature, English, Slovak

Since the 1958 lecture of Wellek entitled “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (Wellek, 1964) there have been constant speculations about the nature and sense of this literary discipline. The speculations included the name, method and object of comparison as well as reflections about parallels between comparative literature, national literature, and, perhaps, general or world literature. One could write a lengthy article, if not a book, about each of these concepts. In many discussions, it has been pointed out that the concept itself is not a happy one (at least in English), since the term *comparative literature* has come to denote not literary works (poems, novels, etc.) expressing some comparative aspect, as in the case of national literature which is usually assumed to be an accumulation of literary works of one nation, but rather the theoretical, historical and critical works focused on comparing literary texts based on various criteria. Thus, what is called comparative literature could perhaps better be called comparative literary studies.

In spite of theoretical disagreements, crises and the confusing name, one must say, after all, that comparative literature, in the sense of the theorising about literary works of different nations, regional groups or minorities of various kinds, and comparing them with regard to certain criteria, has been very productive in enriching literary studies by many useful theoretical categories used permanently outside the discourse of comparative literature – in what can be called general

literary studies. This has been pointed out by Saussy (2006, p. 3) who claimed that “[c]omparative literature [has], in a sense, won its battles”, since it can take credit for, he seems to indicate, the acceptance of the transnational dimension of literature and culture, interdisciplinarity, and theory. Indeed, looking back at the twentieth century one must acknowledge the fact that many of its important theorists were working in comparative literature (Wellek, de Man, Bloom, to mention just some “Anglophone” comparatists), drawing in their conceptualisations on what Saussy called “comparative reflex”, or, “comparative way of thinking” (2006).

But the inherent capitalisation on the “comparative way of thinking” did not end in the twentieth century. Almost everything important recent literary studies has brought to the discourse on literature has also originated based on comparisons, implicit or explicit, comparing at least 2 systems, 2 worlds, 2 perceptions or expressions of being, 2 views of cultural or literary artefacts. As to a model example illustrating this claim one could point to postcolonial studies. This very fashionable movement of contemporary literary theory initially emerged because of cultural tensions between the so-called developed western nations and their former colonies, mostly in Africa and Asia, using the coloniser-colonised dichotomy and fostering the literature and culture of the colonised peoples to achieve cultural independence from the colonisers. A variation of such cultural and literary revival occurred also in Central European literary studies, as it is testified by the recently published collection of essays entitled *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures* (Pucherová & Gáfrík, 2015) exploring the attempts of Central European national literatures (the colonised) to get rid of the grips of ideology imposed on them by Communist totalitarianism.

Our aim, however, is not to analyse postcolonial studies, which use the principle of comparison to include literature into a wider social-political-ideological spectrum, but to point to it as to one of the strongest examples of the continuing vitality of the local, the particular, or the national, in literary studies, since what many postcolonial critics, in fact, do is highlighting their otherness and independence from colonial centres on the spatial, cultural, linguistic, or national basis. Thus, one can say that postcolonial literary studies have a very similar aim as when in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe “literature and literary scholarship acquired a political justification, and social as well as academic prestige, by becoming as it were the keeper of the national soul” (Neubauer, 2013, p. 100).

Stressing that “all literature has always been comparative, watered by many streams” (2006, p. 5), Saussy also sees its clear beginning, like Neubauer, in the era of nationalisms which created a need for it, and the history of which is full of negative moments and traumas. Some of those moments, unfortunately, caused that the concept of the national has been discredited and made controversial and suspicious. What we would like to say, however, is that despite the past abuses and

totalitarian manipulations, the experiencing of national consciousness within modern nations does not have to be, and mostly it is not, the one of chauvinism and exploitation – material or cultural. On the contrary, if one looks around, one finds many positive examples of the expression of national belonging in various areas of life. Thus in spite of the turbulent history and current general tendency towards the transnational, regional, areal, multicultural, world, global, or planetary dimensions, we would venture to say that it is not possible to ignore the national dimension, since it was one of the main instruments in the creation of modern nations which are still very much with us at present, and whose symbolism does not show any tendency of weakening even in the space of transnational EU. So instead of getting rid of the nations-based Europe and moving to the sphere of the postnational one, we “recognize that the conventional nationalistic picture of Europe is partial and clearly based on (if not biased by) a self-explanatory and contemporary notion of Europe” (Buescu, 2015, pp. 13-14). Therefore, in this paper discussing Romantic imagination in English and Slovak literature, we will not get discouraged by common pressures in academic circles to avoid the concept of the national, especially because it played a crucial part in the formation of Slovak Romantic literature in which the period of Romanticism is often called a period of national revival, as in many other European literatures. But that national would in no way be nationalistic.

Being aware of these distinctions (i.e. between the national and the nationalistic, which, however, could get slightly blurred in English, unlike, for example, the Slovak language where there is a clear difference between the *národný* – *national*, and *nacionalistický-nationalistic*), one cannot be surprised by finding a strong national emphasis in British Romantic literature as well. It is emanating, on the one side, from the nature of Romanticism as such, from its birth in the times of the decline of enlightened rationality and “the revival of indigenous mythologies” (Brown, p. 35), and, on the other side, from the political, revolutionary and military tensions of the Europe of French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. These events were of enormous significance especially for the two greatest British Romantics to be discussed here – William Wordsworth and Lord George Gordon Byron, though in different ways. While to Wordsworth one could absolutely apply Crocco’s claim that the Romantic poet was the “bard-like national figure who wrote to and for his [English] fellow men and women” (...) “the inspired solitary poet [who] speaks to and for a singular people or nation (2014, Kindle Location 63), Byron turned, for example in his *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, rather towards other nations of Europe (Portugal, Spain, the Balkans). Not even the more metaphysically oriented S. T. Coleridge was free of national sentiments, when in “Fears in Solitude” he directly addressed the nation: “O Britons! O my brethren! I have told / Most bitter truth, but without bitterness.” (...) “...O dear Britain! O my Mother Isle! / Needs must thou prove a name most dear and holy” (2013, Kindle Location 13077, 13095).

Naturally, equally strong, if not stronger, emphasis in British Romanticism is its ontological, transcendental orientation, manifesting itself in the expression of a different kind of imagination, in strong emotionality. Literary criticism has made this emotional, existential, ontological almost the sole qualifier of Romanticism throughout most of the twentieth century (Abrams as well as the above-mentioned Wellek, de Man, Hartman, etc.). Its importance, however, should not efface the importance of the feelings the poets had towards their nation which in many cases were expressed indirectly, through the transcendental musings in nature. What else could Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" be than the poet's universalizing of a particular place and time, so typical and unique for him as well as for England and, at the same time, so invested with the spirit of human predicament.

As far as Slovak Romanticism is concerned, there are many articles and book-length studies discussing its importance and place in national culture, since, as we have already mentioned, the period was very important in the history of the creation of Slovak national consciousness. However, there are very few works which would situate Slovak Romantic literature into an international context (outside general literary history books). By the international context we do not mean the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire. In it Slovak Romantic literature was in the natural context of the languages of the peoples making up the Empire (German, Czech, Hungarian). There are almost no extensive comparisons of individual writers (some attempts were done in the discussion of the influences of Byron), not speaking of an almost total lack of translations of English Romantic literary works into Slovak (with an exception of Byron and some American romanticists, like Poe and Emerson).

The Croco's "bard-like national figure" and "solitary poet" are the qualities which could easily be attributed also to Slovak Romantic writers, since in the area where the Slovaks lived (Upper Hungary) the Romantic period saw a strong manifestation of national consciousness, with literature playing crucial role in its emergence. As Pišút claims (1974, p. 12), by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century literature in this cultural territory has its culmination in the works of Classicism with the first symptoms of Romanticism which was manifested especially by the cult of national past and folk song. Even though the use of the national past can be found in other Romantic national literatures, what makes Slovak Romantic literature slightly different is the fact that Slovakia did not have its own fixed political space, but formed one part of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian monarchy. This fact significantly strengthened both individual and social anxieties of almost all most important "Slovak" Romantic writers who found themselves torn between the romantic feelings of individual alienation or love (to a woman), and love to one's country, resulting in the necessity to fight for its people's independence, the cultural and political one.

The first major writer embodying the conflictual emotionality of Slovak Romantic imagination, and the one who can be credited with the introduction of the motifs of Romantic being into Slovak literature, is Ján Kollár. Although he is generally classified as a neoclassical poet, in the sonnets of his main work *Slávy dcéra* (*The Daughter of Sláva*) he expressed both the feelings of the "loneliness of the thinking soul in the midst of confusion and pain from disillusionment" (Pišút, p. 14, translated by authors) as well as his love to a woman (Fredericka Schmidt) and to the country. As the title suggests, by the country Kollár did not mean a political nation, but rather a place of Slovaks within a broader cultural unity of Slavs. This was a reason of his later disagreement with the generation of younger Romantic writers for whom the issue of language and national independence were of utmost importance.

Kollár was compared to Petrarch, Dante, as well as, most importantly, Byron, especially to his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. He in fact did not mind being compared to Petrarch or Dante, but vehemently denied Byron and the Byronic tendency in modern poetry. The poet "without hesitation condemns the Byronic stream of modern poetry. He sees it as sentimental and oversensitive, fanatical, overexcited and feverish, in short: unnatural and non-aesthetic, originated from repletion and flatness of spirit and feeling. Byronic irony is a blasphemy for him, strong images of human misery and depravity, a Satanism, huge contradictions of fire and ice, laughter and crying, love and hate, virtue and vice, heaven and hell, an aesthetic tyranny. Modern poetry is an excess of romance, it is the same in art, what is fanatical delirium in religion, is a decline of taste and the autumn of education" (Vlček, translated by authors). However, in spite of the author's own disagreement with the connection, Vlček further insists that the Byronic elements were instrumental for the *The Daughter of Sláva* which "would hardly have seen publication in its current form without the journal-like, snippety form of travelogue entries, without a strong protest against the bloody animosity of kindred nations and without the elegy over the past historical greatness, as well as without a strong pathos of freedom. As it was all said in an unattainable way in 'Childe Harold' by the denounced Byron" (translated by authors). Vlček further claims that the dependence is not only in ideas and composition, but in the external, technical relationship. There are formal reminiscences, tropes and figures allegedly taken over by Kollár from the German edition of the Byron's poem published in 1821.

Undoubtedly, the strongest similarity between the two works is the form in which they were written – a kind of poetic travelogue. In both cases, lyrical heroes travel - Byron from England, through Portugal, Spain to Greece and Albania, Kollár from the German city of Jena, through the Czech lands to the land under the Tatra mountains, as Slovakia has frequently been referred to. Although the lyrical heroes in both poems are significantly different, Childe Harold representing what has become famous as the Byronic hero, the disillusioned bored young man fleeing his

own country and seeking wild experiences, and Kollár's hero rather a romantic figure torn between love and patriotism, they have one thing in common – a romantic pull towards freedom. Kollár expressed it most forcefully in his "Prologue" to the *Daughter of Sláva*, in unforgettable example of quantitative prosody, combining hexameter and pentameter:

Ai, zde leží zem ta, před okem mým selzy ronícím,  
 někdy kolébka, nyní národu mého rakev.  
 Stoj noho! posvátná místa jsou, kamkoli kráčíš, (Kollár

Here lies the country, alas, before my tear-laden glances,  
 Once, 'twas the cradle, but now – now 'tis the tomb of my race;  
 Check thou thy steps, for the places are sacred, wherever thou turnest.  
 (Selver, p. 42)

Kollár here laments over the destiny of the Lusatian Serbs, a Slavic people who were assimilated to the surrounding Germans. This can be prevented in the future if other Slavic people turn to Russia "the mighty old oak, that stands there yonder (Selver, p. 42). The ancient oak as the symbol of Russia protecting the Slavic people against, in case of Western Slavs, the Hungarian and German elements, was very frequently used in the cultural and national struggles of Slovak Romantic writers. The motif of inclination to Russia as a way out of the grips of the "spoiled" West can be found in the famous *Das Slawenthum und die Welt der Zukunft* by Ľudovít Štúr (1931), the author of modern Slovak language and the leader of the coming generation of Slovak Romantic writers (who, by the way, was also torn between love to a woman and love to his country – the country finally winning in that internal struggle).

The motif of national freedom appears also in the Byron's poem. However, it is not the freedom of his own nation that he worries about, for England is not in danger of occupation, and it is the country from which he flees, a place of his boring and spoiled life:

Whilome in Albion's isle there dwelt a youth,  
 Who ne in virtue's ways did take delight;  
 But spent his days in riot most uncouth,  
 And vexed with mirth the drowsy ear of Night.  
 Ah, me! in sooth he was a shameless wight,  
 Sore given to revel and ungodly glee;  
 Few earthly things found favour in his sight  
 Save concubines and carnal companie,  
 And flaunting wassailers of high and low degree.

(Byron, *Kindle Locations* 31-34)

Since "loathed he in his native land to dwell," (42-43) he sets on a journey through Europe, reflecting on the history, culture as well as politics of the countries of his travels. Like Kollár, he laments over the fate of a nation, here Greece, which lost its freedom. But unlike Kollár, he is much more revolutionary:

Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not  
 Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?  
 By their right arms the conquest must be wrought?  
 Will Gaul or Muscovite redress ye? No!  
 True, they may lay your proud despoilers low,  
 But not for you will Freedom's altars flame.  
 Shades of the Helots! triumph o'er your foe:  
 Greece! change thy lords, thy state is still the same;  
 Thy glorious day is o'er, but not thy years of shame.  
 (Byron, *Kindle Locations 855-859*)

If comparing Byron and Kollár, in addition to the just discussed similarities, it is necessary to point to a crucial difference between them. While Byron was an extremely liberally minded nobleman engaged in various scandals – sexual, social and political, Kollár was an evangelical priest whose love was much more "civilised". Moreover, even though Byron is considered, despite his early death, to belong to the second generation of English Romantic writers (together with Shelley and Keats), Kollár was a person who struggled with the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism, writing in sonnets, though already beginning to express the personal gloom and grief of Romantic writers in which Byron was an absolute master. Although the differences in mood between the two writers, emanating from their place in the development of respective countries' literary sensibilities, are undeniable, it is paradoxical, however, that even here one can find some similarities. Namely, the use of Spenserian stanza by Byron brings him close to Kollár's sonnets than to, for example, balladic verse of Wordsworth.

Of course, their greatest similarity remains their European vision which, on the one side does not ignore the national features of its cultures, but, on the other one, sees them as belonging to larger wholes, though in case of Kollár this would be a highly controversial Pan-Slavism safeguarded by Russia - the country which alone would supposedly be able to stand against the cultural domination of the West - while Byron, despite the fact that his journey initially takes him also from West to East (from England to the Balkans), remains firmly entrenched in the Western cultural space. As we have said above, Kollár's "geopolitical" musings were taken up by Štúr and his generation and, in a sense, they have not been totally abandoned even nowadays. But this can be an expression of the natural indecisiveness in the search for identity in Central European cultural space.



Byron, however, was only a secondary author in the English Romantic context. Its founder and the most important representative is William Wordsworth who, unlike Byron, was considered much less present in Europe, or, for that matter, Central Europe. The reason for this could be the fact that Wordsworth is a different type of poet than Byron - much more related to the English nature, countryside, than to a political and cultural strife, though he was not free of it either. Thus, while Byron was a "bard of foreign nations", Wordsworth's Romantic imagination was put to the service of the English people.

Crocco has clearly summarised these qualities of Wordsworth's verse when discussing his most famous collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*. He maintains that "Lyrical Ballads exemplifies Wordsworth's bardic poetics by combining the simple language and style of the popular ballads with rustic characters and pastoral imagery. In so doing, Wordsworth appeals to forms of continental Romantic nationalism that evoked nationalist images of country folk and to anti-urban populism in Britain that developed in reaction to the dislocating effects of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. Lyrical Ballads further enacts its nationalism by positing a link between landscape and the collective memory of an ethnîe, thereby producing national space. Finally, the prevalence of English characters and places drawn from the Lake District for an ostensibly demotic bardic poetics reinforced the existing hegemony of an English ethnîe within representations of the British nation" (Kindle Locations 1137-1149).

Almost all that Crocco said about Wordsworth, especially his simple language, the style of popular ballads, rustic characters and pastoral imagery, could be said about the poetry of another Slovak Romantic writer discussed here, Janko Kráľ, adding such other universally agreed upon qualifiers of Romanticism as emotionality, individualism, and, last but not least, revolutionary spirit. As Wordsworth in his young age observed and admired the events of French Revolution, so Janko Kráľ engaged himself in the revolutionary struggle on behalf of his people during his whole life. This can be illustrated by many of his shorter ballads in which he combines the past and present, the folklore elements with contemporary suffering and national woe. But again, his is not only a narrow national vision. In this regard, Milan Rúfus, a Slovak poet and critic, points to Kráľ's autostylization into the form of an eagle – a universal spirit of the European format, who with his own philosophy of history and the cosmogony of being, carries in himself the fate of his nation (4).

Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* is generally taken to be a "manifesto of romanticism". The author himself may have provoked this with his "prefaces" in which he deliberately stresses the emotionality of his poems, considering them to be "spontaneous overflows of powerful feelings" in contrast to more rationally elaborated works of the preceding period. What needs to be stressed here, however, is that the strong feelings come from the nature the author moves in, from



the English countryside in which Wordsworth was taking long walks, sometimes alone, sometimes with his sister Dorothy. Long solitary walks in nature were also characteristic for Janko Kráľ, to such an extent that he was nicknamed "Divný Janko" (Strange Johnny). Nature is the source not only of his philosophical broodings, but it is the most direct setting for the materialisation of the spirit of his people, expressing both its pleasurable as well as dark folklore-based irrational facets. Thus, like Wordsworth, also Janko Kráľ employs natural elements to reflect the dark human prospects. The dark natural setting, reflecting the hero's uneasiness, highlights one of Kráľ's first, and best, ballads entitled "Zakliata Panna vo Váhu a Divný janko", the one in which, as Pišút has observed, "he expressed ...all his contradictions, his sadness and the dissatisfaction with the world as well as his love to the people and a will to disenchant the 'enchanted virgin' even at a price of his own life" (2005, p. 22, translated by authors).

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the reasons of the current crisis of the European Union, one can say that one way of its solving is to "re-credit" the concept of national culture. The crisis shows us that Europe is still perceived as a Europe of nation states with their unique cultures, and ignoring this is a flight into the realm of the unreal. Romanticism is a "good" period to demonstrate the strength of the national, since it was a movement not restricted to one country or nation, but was Pan-European, if not global in nature. And as the above discussed literary works from English and Slovak literature demonstrate, despite the nations' geographical distance, the works have common denominators which do not stand in the way of their being perceived as unique expressions of the respective national spirit, and, at the same time and because of that, of the "spirit of unified Europe". The concept of postnational literature is then perhaps promising, but it seems to be rather a political wish than the present commonly felt and lived reality.

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**Contact**

Anton Pokrivčák  
KAA FF UCM  
Nám. J. Herdu 2  
917 01 Trnava, Slovakia  
anton.pokrivcak@ucm.sk

Silvia Pokrivčáková  
KAJL PdF Trnavská univerzita  
Priemyselná 4  
918 43 Trnava, Slovakia  
silvia.pokrivcakova@truni.sk