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# Literary Criticism as Cultural Ideology: The Slovenian and the Canadian Perspective

La critique littéraire comme idéologie culturelle :  
les perspectives canadienne et slovène

**Marcello Potocco**

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## **Abstract**

The article compares instances of nationalist-oriented literary criticism in the Slovenian and in the Canadian literary systems. It does so by contrasting work by, especially, Josip Vidmar, Dušan Pirjevec, Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood. Their work is interpreted as a late example of the transnational phenomenon of cultural nationalisms. Canadian and Slovenian cultural nationalisms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as their late offsprings in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are partly interpreted as a consequence of a specific colonial position of the two countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in a politically non-radical, loyalist nationalism.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, Canadian literary systems, colonialism, Northrop Frye, Dušan Pirjevec, Josip Vidmar

## **Résumé**

L'article compare les instances de la critique littéraire de langue slovène d'orientation nationaliste et des systèmes littéraires canadiens. L'analyse porte, entre autres, sur les œuvres de Josip Vidmar, Dušan Pirjevec, Northrop Frye et Margaret Atwood. Leur travail est interprété comme un exemple transnational des nationalismes culturels. Les nationalismes culturels canadien et slovène du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, ainsi que leurs successeurs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, sont en partie interprétés comme une conséquence d'une position coloniale spécifique dans les deux pays au cours du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, entraînant un nationalisme politique loyaliste non-radical.

**Mots-clés :** Margaret Atwood, systèmes littéraires canadiens, colonialisme, Northrop Frye, Dušan Pirjevec, Josip Vidmar



In his article “Northrop Frye in Margaret Atwood: Njun Odnos Do Kanadske Samo-bitnosti in Kulture” (Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood: their view of Canadian identity and culture), Mirko Jurak argues that Frye and Atwood played a crucial role in defining and even more so in popularizing the question of Canadian identity (Jurak 1997). The impact of their thought is indisputable, in spite of the very different interpretations this thought has achieved. The placement of Jurak’s work among articles in a collection focusing on the Slovenian literary historian France Bernik is not out of place. Indeed, the article itself and Jurak’s short introduction to the text indicates parallels between the roles of Frye and Atwood and the collective striving of Slovenian literary criticism. Jurak, however, does not attempt to present a more detailed comparison of the two literary criticisms and their endeavours to define the two national identities. His claims are worth further investigating, since the Canadian and the Slovenian literary system share at least some common points regarding cultural self-perception and its role in the national literature, as well as in the national and comparative literary criticism. In these pages, I will try to sketch some of the convergences, pointing out the most conspicuous authors and their cases.

In 1978, one of Slovenia’s most prominent literary theorists, Dušan Pirjevec, published the book-length essay *Vprašanje o poeziji. Vprašanje naroda* (The question of poetry. The question of nation). It soon became one of the most influential theories on the question of Slovenian national literature. With his definition of nation as a collective subject, Pirjevec envisaged some of the discussions that later became particularly forceful shortly before the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Definitions of nation by Janko Kos and by the philosophers Tine Hribar and Ivan Urbančič, each of whom strived to establish a philosophical foundation for Slovenian independence (see Kos 1996; Hribar 1987; Urbančič 1987),<sup>1</sup> were mainly based on the Hegelian view of nation (ein Volk) as an entity whose substantial aim is to be(come) a state and preserve itself as such in the history (of Spirit) (Hegel 1971, para. 549; cf. Moland 2011, 78; Potocco 2011, 127). Pirjevec defined the Slovenian nation as a “blocked movement” because of the lack of its own state, as well as because of its defensiveness and non-expansiveness, suggesting that in the absence of the usual state apparatuses – such as an army, police, school system and cultural institutions in general – literature, i.e. poetry, provided the only possible media and thus became the agent of national self-fulfilment and identity creation (Pirjevec 1978, 64–68). This is due to the fact that the national idea could be expressed only through the media which sought as little institutional support as possible, but according to Pirjevec this also entailed changing literature into the means of what could be defined as national ideology.

At about the same time, in the essay “Slovenski kulturni sindrom” (The Slovenian cultural syndrome), Dimitrij Rupel suggested that almost until the Second World War

1) All translations from Slovenian are my own.



the Slovenian national idea had been expressed almost exclusively by way of cultural media (Rupel 1976). Compared to Pirjevec, Rupel was even more heavily indebted to the early work *Kulturni problem Slovenstva* (The cultural problem of Slovenianism), published in 1932 by one of the most renowned Slovenian literary critics, Josip Vidmar. In his book, Vidmar defined culture as the core value of what he called Slovenianism and as an existential basis of the Slovenian nation. Vidmar was one of the first critics to note that Slovenian history lacked influential military or political figures and events that could serve as the basis of what Friedrich Meinecke defined as a political nation, i.e., “Staatsnation” (Meinecke 1969). Instead, Vidmar argued, “Slovenia [would become] a temple of beauty and spirit. [Slovenians would] synthesize the achievements of their neighbours and instil them with their own spirit, as France Prešeren had done in his lyric poetry. [They would] create a new Athens or a new Florence on our own soil” (Vidmar 1932, 37).

Vidmar’s mentioning of the main figure of Slovenian Romanticism – France Prešeren (1800–1848) – is no coincidence. Although Prešeren’s opus is regarded as the first mature work of Slovenian poetry, on publishing his selected poems (*Poezije*) shortly before his death, Prešeren was a victim of a specific cultural situation. Particularly the conservative circle led by Janez Bleiweis (1808–1881), a politician and the editor of the first Slovenian journal *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* (Peasant’s and Craftsman’s Journal), rejected his mixture of love poetry and a rather openly expressed patriotic sentiment. Bleiweis’s stance generally led to ignorance of Prešeren’s work (Paternu 1960). It was only on issuing a posthumous edition of his poems in 1866 that the young critic Josip Stritar (1836–1923) elevated Prešeren into a national poet – with the rather romantic idea of Prešeren as a misunderstood genius – and at the same time explicated the idea of Slovenian poetry as a medium of national self-fulfilment. Stritar explicitly expressed the belief that Prešeren’s poetry suffices as a justification for the existence of the Slovenian nation (Stritar 1955, 45–46). Pirjevec thus concludes that Prešeren’s fate is typical of the reception of poets in a “blocked movement,” which ignored the value of poets during their lifetime only to canonise them posthumously as misunderstood victims, and he even designates such a pattern as “Prešernian structure” (Pirjevec 1978, 77–80).

The ideas proposed by Vidmar, Rupel and Pirjevec and by several other historians, such as Boris Paternu, France Kidrič and Ivan Prijatelj (see e.g. Prijatelj 1958; Paternu 1989), who each at least partly defended the notion of nationally oriented literature, were not put under scrutiny until the beginning of the new millennium. The perception that the Slovenian nation is unique in expressing national interpellation through the medium of literature was systematically questioned at the latest in Marko Juvan’s “Slovenski kulturni sindrom v nacionalni in primerjalni literarni vedi” (The Slovenian Cultural Syndrome in the National and Comparative Literary History) (2008).



According to Juvan, the ideologically oriented model of national literary criticism is an integral part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural nationalisms that spread across the majority of Europe. And since this was not merely a European model (see e.g. Anderson 1991), it is not surprising that it is also easily discernable in Canadian literature and literary criticism.

In both cases we may speak of late cultural nationalisms, although with their source in the previous centuries, there are several specific features binding the Slovenian and the Canadian literary systems. The most obvious similarity lies in the fact that in both systems literature was believed to be the main if not the exclusive medium of national ideas. I have just argued that such was the case in the literary criticism of the Slovenians Josip Vidmar, Dimitrij Rupel, and especially Dušan Pirjevec. In Canada it is also not difficult to show the prevalence of such notions, especially in the years between 1867 and 1980s. One only has to consult the collection of essays and manifestos *Towards a Canadian Literature*, edited by Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman, to see that one of the main preoccupations of, for example, Julie Catherine Hart, Thomas D'Arcy McGee and Edward Hartley Dewart was the need to reinforce national self-confidence by way of literary endeavours, along with the doubt that the actual Canadian literature would be able to create non-derivative writing (Daymond and Monkman 1984, 37–45, 74–89; Dewart 1864, ix–xi). The latter, especially, was also one of the concerns of Archibald Lampman's essay *On Two Canadian Poets* (Lampman 2005), written amidst an intense debate on the future of Canada and its literature and partially as a response to Charles G.D. Roberts' statements in his 1897 *History of Canada* (see D. R. M. Bentley 2005).

Echoes of the same discourse are to be found in the Canadian criticism of Northrop Frye and even more so in the metaliterary works of Margaret Atwood – not only in the famous *Survival*, but even more intensely in her other essays and public appearances, such as and *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) and “On Writing Poetry” (1996). Atwood's essays sustain Barry Cameron's and Michael Dixon's claim that some of Frye's followers ignored “the liberal spirit” of his general theory and that it is debatable whether Frye's remarks are responsible for the “critical anachronism of thematic criticism” (Cameron and Dixon 1977). But even in his so-called general theory, Frye defines criticism as one of the unifying structures of a society (Frye 1957). Moreover, it cannot be neglected that in his “Canadian essays,” especially in the famous “Conclusion” to the 1965 *Literary History of Canada*, Frye understands both literature and literary criticism as a means of national cohesion, at least in a not yet autonomous literature in which authors do not “naturally think metaphorically but descriptively” (Frye 1965, 836; Sanfilippo 1994). In spite of his general theory, Frye thus presupposes that literature is a favourite medium of the ideology of Canadianness – and as such a medium of cultural ideology. This leads us to a distinctive



feature of the literary history that tends to function as a national interpellation. The so-called thematic critics, Atwood in particular, took up Frye's notions of the "garrison mentality," "unconscious horror of nature," and especially the idea of the social myth as a unifying structure of a culture, although they reduced them to defining typical subjects and themes in Canadian literature. Contrary to Frye, they also thought that elements of cultural unification tend to be present in every piece of literature, while Frye warned that such elements can be present only in a literature which is ideologically overloaded. Despite the differences between Frye and the thematic critics (Potocco 2006, 87–88; cf. R. M. Brown 1978) (and despite my reservations in regard to the mainly poststructuralist and deconstructionist charges against Frye – such as the charge of Frye's "environmental determinism" (cf. e.g. Surette 1982; Pontuale 1994; Sanfilippo 1994)), Barry Cameron correctly suggested that in focusing on the "social and historical setting" rather than on literature, the essays of both Frye and the thematic critics have implicitly become cultural studies (Cameron 1990, 111–12).

This should be emphasised because a similar tendency can be observed in Josip Vidmar's *Kulturni problem Slovenstva*. Vidmar was one of the most renowned Slovenian literary critics. Yet, with the analysis of the politically repressed nation and its cultural nationalism, Vidmar expanded his working area, taking his prevailing literary criticism well into the area of cultural criticism. It is not difficult to understand the reasons for such a similarity between Frye and Vidmar. In both cases, literary criticism – along with literature itself – became one of the most important media for taking over the role of ideological interpellation in the absence of the more common apparatuses. There is a Slovenian example that shows very well the nature of such interpellation. In 1854, the literary critic and historian Anton Janežič issued his first version of the Slovenian Grammar, supplemented by a short sketch of Slovenian literary history. The Austrian authorities forbade the use of Janežič's book in the classroom and it was only after the withdrawal of the historical appendix three years later that the book – in its second edition – was not prohibited (Schmidt 1988, 64–91, 316–400). This shows that the authorities of the Austrian empire understood very well the ideological role of national literary history.

The underlying assumption of Vidmar's and Frye's ideas is, in fact, the division of two types of nations and nationalism, regardless of whether we speak – following the tradition of Meinecke – of political and cultural nations, or whether we approach the problem in modern terms of centralist (political) and separatist (i.e. ethnic) nationalism (Juvan 2008, 10). This second type of nationalism develops its own media and institutions, such as literature, literary history, ethnology, historiography etc., in the absence of political, bureaucratic and other more common institutions. But cultural nationalism itself may also be understood as a product of a colonial position. It is not surprising that Frye, in his "Conclusion," also coined the term "colonial mentality"



designating the presumably non-radical mindset of Canadian literature and society. In fact, the assumption of a Canadian colonial position was at the latest evident in E. K. Brown's *On Canadian Poetry* (E. K. Brown 1943, 12–19) – and was later reiterated, for example, by Frye, Dennis Lee and William H. New (Frye 1965, 827; Lee 1973, 39–49; New 1991, 17). Such a mindset, particularly in the early Canadian poetry of Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Cary or William Kirby, may be seen at two levels at least. Firstly, in the non-radical acceptance of literary forms and ideas, and especially as a tendency towards classical forms and a didactic or utilitarian literature (E. K. Brown 1943; Frye 1965; New 1991; Mazoff 1995; Djwa 1975, 44–46). And secondly, at the level of political ideas – that is, as a non-radical cultural nationalism that avoids the claim for a political autonomy, which was evident in the post-Confederation period and especially in the poetry of Charles G. D. Roberts. William D. Lighthall's "Introduction" to the *Songs of the Great Dominion* is but a typical example of the mentality that stresses the positioning of a culturally autonomous Canada as part of the British Empire (Lighthall 1889, xxi–xxii). The idea that Canada would galvanize the strength of the empire (Ross 1986, 168) that was present in the post-Confederation period was supported by the British models used in the school system (see, e.g., Gaffield 2011; Troper 1978; Harper 1997), by the horizon of expectation of the British readers in the publishing system (see, e.g., Parker 1976; MacDonald 1979; Doyle 1979), as well as by the linking of the poetic "classes" with the British oriented conservative "elite" (Newton 1972, 46–48).

Although it might seem strange at first glance to use the terminology of postcolonial studies in the context of the Austrian empire, Marko Juvan and Katherine Arens have shown that even in the Habsburg empire the relation of the centre to the cultures "of lesser diffusion," including the Slovenian relation, was in some respects colonial (Arens 1996; Juvan 2000, 138). The Slovenian cultural system shares characteristics of Frye's "colonial mentality," namely, non-radical inclusion of foreign ideas and cultural forms, as well as a politically non-radical cultural nationalism. Janko Kos, in particular, shows that Slovenian literature was rejecting the radical extremes at least during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kos 2001); the two most prominent examples are Prešeren and Janko Kersnik. Prešeren neutralised the radical ideas of German Romanticism by combining them mainly with the traditional form of the Petrarchist sonnet, as well as with several other formal influences, e.g., that of Ludwig Gleim's Anacreontic poetry (Kos 2001, 75–110). A few decades later, in 1890, Kersnik's criticism advocated the use of realistic "sheer truth under the golden, transparent veil of idealism" (Kersnik and Ocvirk 1952, 315). At the same time, Kersnik's novels, while sporadically influenced by Turgenev's realism, mainly preserve the characteristics of the traditional *Dorfgeschichte* (Kos 2001, 152–53), thus neutralising the more radical versions of realism. These are but two cases that demonstrate the defensive non-radicalness of



Slovenian literature that – according to Boris Paternu – requires “comebacks into the ‘safety system’ of solid moral, social and religious values, and along with it, the norms of rationalist poetics” (Paternu 1974, 74). It is probably not necessary to point out the similarity of Paternu’s description of Slovenian literature with the “unquestionable moral and social values,” characteristic of Frye’s garrison mentality (Frye 1965, 830). Paternu also rightly notices that Slovenian poetry is non-radical in that it rarely shows traces of political revolt (Paternu 1974, 74). According to Pirjevec, what distinguished Slovenian identification in relation to European cultural systems was its defensiveness and its pessimism (Pirjevec 1978, 65), which could be interpreted as an impossibility of wishing to act as a political nation. In much the same way as some Canadian post-Confederation writers, the Bleiweis circle – the most influential current in the cultural and journalist waters of the post-1848 Slovenianism – was strongly in favour of a merely cultural autonomy. Despite the growing nationalism elsewhere in the Austrian empire, France Prešeren was thus undervalued not only because of his love poetry, but even more so because of his overly radical national idea, i.e. his moderate Pan-Slavism that openly opposed the idea of a Slovenian cultural autonomy limited in the political frame of the Austrian empire – an idea favoured by the Bleiweis circle. It is precisely because of such cultural autonomism that, even in the decades following Bleweis’ death, literature and literary history became the main medium for expressing the national idea.

Finally, there is another common point in the criticism of Vidmar, Pirjevec and Rupel on the one hand, and Frye and Atwood on the other. I have already pointed out that both Vidmar and Pirjevec grounded their criticism mainly in the poetry of France Prešeren. It is true that Pirjevec never claimed that all Slovenian literature was affected by cultural ideology – he indicated that the role of national self-fulfilment in poetry was mostly emphasised by processes of its reception, and believed that national ideologisation was receding from the Slovenian literary system in the process of its differentiation (Pirjevec 1978, 70–71). Nevertheless, he stressed almost exclusively the role of major authors, such as the poet France Prešeren, the prose author Fran Levstik, and Ivan Cankar, Slovenia’s seminal author of novels and short stories. Similarly, Frye bases his imaginary of Canadian literature mainly in the analysis of selected poets in A.J.M. Smith’s *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (cf. D. M. R. Bentley 2006, 4). It would not be correct to attribute Frye’s thesis merely to this selection or even to Frye’s paranoia, as D. M. R. Bentley does. After all, analogous ideas had been expressed earlier, at least in Lightall’s *Songs of the Great Dominion*, with its editor introducing the notion of “northernness” as a characteristic feature of Canadian poetry (Lightall 1889, xxiii). However, another, more important influence can be traced in Frye’s “Conclusion.” It is not only that Frye often returned to analysing the poetry of E. J. Pratt, the convergences of his mythopoetic theory and Pratt’s mythopoetic poetry, especially in





*Brébeuf and his Brethren* and *Towards the Last Spike*, are more than obvious. The surrounding “huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting” described by Frye in the “Conclusion” is not merely the setting of these two Pratt poems, but of virtually all of Pratt’s poetry, with its mainly Darwinian imagery of uncontrollable, menacing, chaotic nature (Djwa 1975). Even when writing *The Titanic*, as Sandra Djwa observes, Pratt “uses nature as a frame in which to explore the psychology of human response” (Djwa 1977, 65) – which is fairly close to Frye’s claim that “the unconscious horror of nature and the subconscious horrors of the mind coincide” (Frye 1971, 141). “It is this nature,” Djwa adds, “which Northrop Frye was to elevate to the status of a national myth [...] as he viewed the Canadian tradition [...] through the perspective of Pratt’s poetry” (Djwa 1977, 65–66).

Frye, Atwood and their Slovenian counterparts therefore all ground their descriptions of the respective national imaginary in a rather narrowly selected group of literary works. This is not to say that these works weren’t crucial in forming the two literary canons and national imaginaries, but it is clear that accounts of the national imaginary by Frye, Pirjevec and Vidmar cannot be understood as an analysis of the two literary systems as a whole. There also exists a circular referencing in the relation of literary texts to national ideology. While national interpellation may be mainly constructed by literary criticism, it must be at least partly grounded in the textual basis, as acknowledged by Juvan. Pirjevec’s claims may overemphasize Prešeren’s national idea, but they are based in Prešeren’s patriotic sentiment, as observed in several of his poems (Juvan 2008, 5–6). In Pratt’s case, it is hardly debatable that at least *Towards the Last Spike* contains more than a trace of national ideology, but the same is true of his *Brébeuf and his Brethren* (Buitenhuis 1987, 143; see also Redekop 1985; Tschachler 1989). Moreover, it is evident that the mythopoetic quest was – via Frye and Atwood – transmitted to the poets of the 1960s, such as Atwood, John Newlove and Al Purdy (Djwa 1977, 65).

All this demonstrates that Frye’s and Atwood’s – or Stritar’s and Vidmar’s – mythopoetic quest was by no means a Canadian or even a Slovenian speciality or curiosity. Juvan claims that the Slovenian cultural syndrome is part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century trans-European ideology of cultural nationalism. The fact that in the Canadian literary system we can observe the same ideology well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century merely proves that such cultural nationalism was neither limited to the 19<sup>th</sup> century nor to European literature and literary criticism alone.



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