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“Minority” Literature: A Case Study in the Literary Production of the Italian Minority in Slovenia and Croatia and of the Slovenian Minority in Italy

Jadranka Cergol

Abstract

The article problematizes the use of the term “minority” literature in the literary context, proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. According to the author of the paper, their definition proves to be too narrow and applicable only to a part of this literature and not to its entire corpus. The aim of the article is therefore to provide a new definition of “minority literature” by taking into account literature written by Slovenes living in Italy and literature written by Italians living in Slovenia and Croatia. As for the typological elements characteristic of literature written on the both sides of the Slovenian-Italian border, the article points out that the two literary systems are marked by the ontological dimension, interculturalism as an ethic value, pronounced national, linguistic and spatial elements, and historical memory. The article even goes a step forward and poses the question whether “minority literature” could be regarded as a completely independent supranational literary system.

Key words: minor literature, regional literature, literature of Slovenes in Italy, literature of Italians in Slovenia and Croatia, literary system, interculturalism.

1 Introduction

The emergence of interculturalism and increasingly globalised cultural flows has also triggered the reverse process, i.e. the process of promoting and exposing region-specificity and the characteristics of the local area in which the symbols of identity, history and roots gain a new level of significance in the lives of individuals and communities. These symbols mainly perform the function of self-affirmation, as each community has the right to be placed in its own historical, social and cultural environment; a crucial role is also played in this by the process of literary production. Exploring this topic also involves an exploration of minor communities, which includes minority communities. This term is currently used either to indicate historical ethnic groups that have been present in a given territory for various centuries or to refer to new, immigrant minority communities, that are appearing in major cities around the world as the result of massive migration flows. In this paper I will confine myself only to those historical ethnic minorities that have emerged after the Second World War at a time when the border between Italy and the former Yugoslavia was defined in the area that today divides Italy and Slovenia. One of the consequences of this division was the formation of two minority communities: the Slovenian minority in Italy and the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia.

The valuation of minority literature and the related form of regional literature is becoming a significant element at the level of local communities and regions because it provides a sense of identity while at the same time its diversity encourages tolerance and respect for the other. Minority or regional literatures comprise one of the first examples of transnational interculturality and their research is a priority since it promotes sustainable development and consolidates the value of respect for one’s neighbour. The need for the re-definition of the term “minority literature” has already emerged in literary criticism along with the need to

research the related deeper psychological forces by which it is marked.

2 Minority Literature

The researchers who first defined the theoretical and methodological basis of minority literature were Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their monographic work on Kafka. The work is derived from the authors' experience of their research of Kafka as a Jew who used the German language for writing literature in Prague, the Czech Republic. However, the French researchers defined the system by the term *littérature mineur*, i.e. "minor" or "smaller" literature. Deleuze and Guattari defined minority literature not as literature created by a minority in their own minority language but as literary production that is created by a minority using the majority language. The primary characteristic of this type of literature is revealed by the process of de-territorialisation, i.e. distancing from the mother language. Another feature mentioned by the researchers is the political integration of minority literature. A third characteristic, closely linked to this feature, is the collective value that the Frenchmen interpreted as being related to the fact that minority literatures belong to communities without many members, and therefore tend to lack options for describing individual destiny, which is certainly always very closely related to the collective destiny. It is only thus that any literature can actually become a tool for collective expression; only thus it is able to address issues properly (Deleuze, Guattari 1995: 25).

The term "minority" literature as applying to the literary creations of Slovenes in Italy was employed by David Bandelj, who wondered whether it would not be possible to talk about minority literature in terms of a completely independent literary system, separate from the national one and caught up in its own space and time. An example of such a transnational literary system could be observed in the concept of "Trieste literature", within which all the authors who were in one way or another connected to Trieste would be addressed: James Joyce, Srečko Kosovel, Italo Svevo, the brothers Stuparich, Alojz Gradnik, Julius Kugy, Boris Pahor, Alojz Rebula etc. In this case, we could write about transnational literature.

However, since this shift has not yet occurred, the above-mentioned authors are still discussed within their national literature systems; minority literature has not (yet) become an internally stable, independent literary system. Similar arguments could be made regarding the literary system of Italians living in Slovenia and Croatia, as the substantive forces that connect both literary systems are very similar, as will also be shown later on in this paper.

3 The case of the Italian literature in Slovenia and Croatia and the Slovene Literature in Italy

I have decided to make an in-depth analysis of two historic ethnic minorities – the Slovenian minority in Italy and the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia – the topic of my research. Given the geographic closeness of their national country and due above all to ties of language and culture, the members of both minority communities feel a sense of national belonging to that national context, and would therefore like to be discussed within the national linguistic, literary and cultural system, i.e. the Italians in Slovenia and Croatia feel part of the Italian cultural space, while the Slovenes in Italy feel that they belong to the unified Slovenian space. At the same time, both communities claim that their literary systems contain at least a few different elements which are not found in the core literatures, as these are related to the society, state and the system in which the community lives (Košuta 2008; Bandelj 2009; Milani, Dobran 2010; Bandelj 2011; Pirjevec 2011; Smotlak 2011).

The literary works produced by members of minority communities tend to be an expression of the time and space in which they are created, thus the motifs of both literary systems are in many ways alike: e.g. both write about their attachment to their own native land, about the conservation of their own roots, the existence and development of the spiritual and cultural heritage left to future generations by ancestors, about their relationship to the other, the close yet at the same time so different neighbour, the language issue, memory and about the strong connection with the past. Another interesting trait is the fact that the authors of these regional literatures continuously struggle to avoid extreme hermeticism and postmodernism as well as language experimentation especially in poetry form, which in a way is also understandable, because they see their language as a value which they both have to safeguard.

Therefore, when researching minority literature, I suggest taking into account some dimensions that are common to the minority literary systems under scrutiny.

3.1 The ontological dimension

Miran Košuta understands the ontological dimension of Slovenian literature in Italy as having an emphasis on "anti-nihilism with a Sisyphean endurance in the middle of an absurd and inhuman world, which for older authors is the world of barbaric fascism and Nazism, while for the younger it is the overly bureaucratic and technocratic present" (Košuta 2008 : 29). In the writings of Christian writers this anti-nihilism was mainly reflected in religious emotion and faith in God's transcendence (Rebula Saksida, Vetrih, Paljk, Bandelj), while secular authors are motivated by fundamental, natural human resistance and defiance, the desire for meaning and sense, but also faith in humanity (Mermolja, Čuk, Pangerc). A very similar dimension can also be found in the literary creations of the Italians, especially during the late seventies and eighties after they broke away from neorealist prose and politically-engaged writing. The themes that emerge with the generation born after the Second World War focus on the intimate sphere, the search for meaning in the general human values, with a particular emphasis on the concept of love, and among which we can also find the themes of the relationship between man and nature, issues of identity, search for meaning, escaping to places from the authors' childhood (Milani, Dobran 2010: II, 333) One of the most pronounced motives is certainly the motive of faith in man, in spite of the imprisonment of the human soul in the natural world, and despite the cultural and economic dehumanisation of modern society.

3.2 The value of interculturalism

Miran Košuta presents another typological guideline for Slovenian literature in Italy as an ethical marked trait; he identifies it as a basic humanism that is "rooted in the specific chronotope of the minority: an intellectual, a writer who lives and works in a multicultural environment, a man of the border is naturally aware that the humanistic values of coexistence, tolerance and dialogue are as essential to his existence as the air he breathes" (Košuta 2008: 35). Rather than employ an ethic of general stigmatisation of people belonging to ethnic minority communities, I prefer to employ a more specific ethical value that marks the literary production of minorities, i.e. the value of interculturalism, in which the minority members live and function from the day that they are born. It is a kind of *status quo* of interculturalism, which members of minority communities can not avoid. They are constantly faced with this phenomenon and they adapt very different views on it. However, since in this case the coexistence of two different ethnic and linguistic groups is permanent, the value of respect for your neighbour and cultural inter-ethnic dialogue is in essence a day-to-day issue, and consequently also present in literary creation.

3.3 Ethnicity

I would argue that it is precisely in the value of ethnicity that we should look for the drive that is the most typical of minority literature, also referring to the assumption that I had set at the beginning of this paper: we cannot yet speak of a separate minority literature because the latter is still bound to and closely linked with its national literature due to their link to culture and language. Language and ethnic origin are still the closest ties that characterise minority literature: "national identity is still a topic that has not yet been surpassed, which is also a result of being torn between the Slovenian and Italian worlds, between homeliness and cosmopolitanism" (Smotlak 2012: 42).

The literary creation of Slovenians in Italy can even be characterised by national activism, which, as argued by Miran Košuta, is not immune to the bacteria of nationalism, but on the other hand may even raise criticism and the consequent relativisation of the concept of "national", especially with younger authors. However, this does not mean that it consists in an attempt by minority artists to escape from their nation or to exchange their own Slovenianness with Italianness but is rather a way of looking for ways to overcome the ethnic threat and to accept national origins as naturally or as free of burdens as possible – "in other words an attempt to be Slovenian without experiencing complexes of smallness and vulnerability" (Košuta 2008: 26). The Slovenian language remains largely the artistic expression of choice in the literary creations of Slovenians in Italy, although we can find some examples of authors (e.g. Ivan Tavčar, Igor Pison, Miha Obid), who write in Italian. In Austrian Carinthia, the practice of Slovenians writing in German is more established, while writing in the majority language is yet unpractised among the Italian minority in Slovenia and in Croatia. But the fact remains that, especially over the last five years, some members of various minority communities have been deciding to write in the majority language (e.g. Maja Haderlap), which proves that the "younger authors are no longer struggling with minority and identity complexes, but are rather trying to live [their] Slovenian reality in an unburdened and trouble-free manner, which has also led to cases where Slovenian writers have selected Italian or German for their privileged language code or even decided to create bilingually" (Bandelj 2010: 437). Because of these assumptions, the concepts of national character and the closely associated linguistic character are becoming problematic, which will need to be addressed in more detail in the future and be framed into a broader context of social and societal change.

Despite these concerns, it can still be argued that the question of national identity remains one of the key questions that is also present in the works of younger artists on both sides of the Slovenian-Italian border. Also a group of younger Italian artists (Marco Apollonio, Maurizio Tremul, Ugo Veselizza, Roberto Dobran, Laura Marchig, Lino Scotti, Robert Dubac Aljoša Curavič, Franco Juri), who experience the world differently from their predecessors, prove that the community has got over the pain caused by historical events and seek to redefine their position in a newly organised society, where they still speak in a language other than the language of the environment and the language of the majority. Questioning and proving one's identity is therefore still very topical, since the works by these authors discuss topics related to identity, identity crisis, generational conflict, loyalty to one's roots, tradition, or on the other hand, rebellion against them (Milani, Dobran: 2010).

3.4 Attachment to the native soil

Attachment to one's own native soil, descriptions of the native land, escapes to idyllic surroundings from one's memory, are also very common themes both in the prose and poetry of minority artists. The sense of belonging to one's territory is also one of the main elements

that characterise a nation or ethnic group (Smith, 1988). Already Deleuze and Guattari have defined the first characteristic of minority literature to be the deterioration of a man's identity, i.e. his geographical distancing from his people. When it comes to minority communities, we cannot talk about the nation-state as the homeland of this community. Minority communities do not regard the nation-state as their homeland, as already identified by Sosič in his novel *Tito, amor mijo*, in which the main protagonist wonders what his homeland actually is, because he has heard it defined by different concepts:

"Do take me on a school trip if I successfully finish the year, so I will be able to see the Republic of Slovenia, which everyone says is my homeland. A small homeland within a large homeland, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, there across the border, in Sežana. Help me understand what the homeland is because Uncle Albert says that our homeland is the whole of Yugoslavia, while Mrs. Slapnik says that our homeland is only Slovenia and Mum says that we are Slovenians living in Italy, and that there are so few of us that we will be gone if there are not enough children, and she says that we have two Presidents, Mr. Saragat and Marshal Tito, who is not a Mr. but a comrade." (Sosič 2005: 15)

Therefore, if the nation-state is not the homeland for these writers, there is a tangible attachment to their own native soil, which belongs to another country. Descriptions of landscapes, native villages and familiar environments and much more, especially in the lyrical subjects in poetry, where this attachment and related feelings come much more to the fore.

3. 5 The value of language

In a minority literature, language acquires a particular valency, which even matures into a value. The value of language is otherwise closely related to the value of ethnicity since it is the bearer of the existential dimension. There is a feeling expressed in works written by minority members which they all share common: it is the feeling that they will never be able to be perfectly fluent in their mother tongue, which they are forced to learn with difficulty in an environment that does not use that language.

It is the same linguistic tension that Miran Košuta writes about: a tension that can also lead to enhanced care for the language because the use of Slovenian words represents a fight for their own threatened identity and freedom (Pirjevec 2011: 360). In relation to language, it is typical of both minorities to avoid extreme forms of linguistic experimentation, Luddism, dadaism etc., while it is also possible to detect a continuous quest for literary content, consistent classic beauty, with the result that it is also a search for aesthetic beauty in poetic terminology (Milani, Dobran 2010: II, 338).

3.5.1 Writing in dialect

In relation to the linguistic value, it is necessary to mention a specific phenomenon that has been ignored for many years by literary criticism, but which has in recent years been gaining particular valency: the phenomenon of writing in dialect. Dialect writing in the wider European area is becoming a new form of expression of those roots, without which no one would be able to access the vital energy necessary for their own existence. This is particularly evident in the works of dialect poets but also in the output of storytellers who persistently and unconventionally write in dialect. Literary production in dialect among Slovenians in Italy as well Italians in Slovenia and Croatia is extremely rich; its particularity also lies in the fact that it is original. While most Italian dialect texts are produced as the result of translation from

literary language to the dialect form (Sobrero 2006: 355), most minority dialect authors create their works completely originally and write about events, people, places, environments and feelings that they themselves have experienced. Due to its unusual and exuberant boom especially in the poetic form, writing in dialect represents one of the most important and most characteristic phenomena of the Italian minority literature in the Istria-Kvarner region (Milani, Dobran 2010: 511). The presence of one or more dialects is of paramount importance for the area and should therefore be maintained and developed as an important part of the intangible cultural heritage. However, the diversity and multiplicity of dialects can also be an obstacle for the study of dialect poetry because there is a large number of dialects; on the other hand, the different poetries also have common characteristics. This is true both for Slovenian dialects in Italy as well as for Italian dialects in Slovenia and Croatia.

3.6 Historical memory

One of the connecting threads of both minority literatures is an additional typology that Miran Košuta does not state in his essay but which is mentioned by Maja Smotlak in her research work: this is a historical memory, which the researcher described as one of the elements of self-defining of minority ethnic communities (Smotlak 2012: 43). Historical traumas among minority members are still very much present, although clearly to a lesser degree. If one analysed the resulting work chronologically one would probably notice that the historical memories of events before, during and after the Second World War and of the time of fascism slowly start to fade out; by about the year 2000 they were already much less likely to occur. Due to the historical and social conditions at the time of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, the subject of historical memory flourished rather late, following the democratisation of both countries after 1990. An analogous argument could probably be made about the Italians, i.e. that the motif rarely occurs in recent years, though it is still quite persistent. Historical memory allows a national community to preserve the testimony of events that characterise and define this same community. Several times we have witnessed an excessive idealisation of the past that is now gradually turning into a more subjective experience of historical events. Hence, historical memory gains specific additional value in literature because it allows the reader to unveil the experiences, emotions, feelings that permeated the people who actually experienced these historical events. This is therefore a subjective aspect of historical memory that remains enshrined in the genes of a nation and community.

4 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to add some evidence and reflections on the literary-theoretical concept of "minority literature". The previous definition of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari has proved to be insufficient and too narrow, since it only took into account the German-speaking Jew Franz Kafka in Prague, Czech Republic. Based on two other cases of minority communities in Europe, which formed after the global devastation of World War II – namely the Slovenian minority in Italy and the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia – I have tried to redefine the term "minority literature". In doing so, I have taken into account the socio-political situation of these historical ethnic communities, but not the "new minorities" arising from migratory flows. Given the fact that both minority communities have developed a very rich and diversified literary creative output, it was also possible to define those common themes that connect the literary work of members of linguistic and ethnic minorities along the Slovenian-Italian border. I sensed the contact points of the two minorities in their ontological dimension, intercultural values, linguistic and national values, attachment to place and attachment to historical memory.

The research has brought to light a number of unresolved issues since both literary systems are still very dynamic and are constantly intertwined with other cultural and ideological currents running across Europe. I have also mentioned the possibility that the minority literary system may someday become a supra-national entity, which would be no longer strictly tied to the language and culture of the nation of origin, but rather to the space and time in which it originates and lives. Just as David Bandelj has observed before me, the times are not (yet) ripe for this development; however, the fact that the idea is being discussed and written about and the fact that some minority writers choose to write in multiple languages, indicate a shift in this direction; a direction which would be sensible to continue exploring it in more depth.

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