

SLOVENE IMMIGRANT LITERATURE IN THE
POSTMODERN WORLD: THE RISE OF
MULTICULTURALITY AND MULTI-ETHNICITY IN
AUSTRALIA, THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AND CANADA

I g o r M a v e r

*"Men may change their clothes, their
politics, their wives, their religions,
their philosophies, to a greater or
lesser extent: they cannot change
their grandfathers."*

Horace Kallen¹

The impressive body of the recent studies in the field of immigrant/ethnic literature, in the context of which can be placed also the extant literary creativity of Slovene immigrants, points to some kind of convergence of the new critical approaches in the various discussed English-speaking countries: a common orientation towards multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. This short contrastive survey of individual national attitudes will help to set Slovene immigrant literati in a contemporary, post-modern perspective, which is characterized by decanonization, decentralization, demarginalization and suchlike processes of the (trendy) deconstruction of cultural and literary monocentricity.

It has gradually become evident that it is close to impossible if not downright ridiculous to talk about some sort of Anglo-Celtic 'monoculture' in Australian literature. The ethnic pluralism of the policy of multiculturalism, introduced in 1977, has become a means whereby Australian literature was on a larger scale and for the first time 'officially' recognizing the significance of foreign influences, thus trying to rid itself of the past overstressed 'nationalism' and the assertion of 'Australianness' only to emerge as a composite, cosmopolitan cultural/literary entity. Leaving the colonial 'cultural cringe' attitude behind, the submerged literatures of the various immigrant societies have star-

ted to gain ground also in the Australian 'mainstream' literature, although, of course, the problem of the language remains. All immigrants to Australia have experienced at least a double displacement: physical and spiritual, the latter of which consists of the dispossession of language and culture. Feeling at home in a 'new' cultural environment (and the consequent inclusion/ integration and acculturation rather than assimilation) begins with being competent in one's language. An immigrant to a certain extent always feels the pain and grief at the loss of the tools of communication and the distress at having to learn (and thus master) the world around him. One of the consequences of cultural dispossession is the necessity to build a 'new' self in a 'new' world, taking into account the constrictions and constructions imposed by the dominant culture. Even in the climate of at least stated but merely partially valid multicultural tolerance, the clash continues.

A different social perspective on immigration has had its effect on literature, which now tends to be written by immigrants, as well as about them. Ethnicity is shifting towards becoming a badge of pride rather than shame. The contemporary Australian literary scene is becoming and less divided into a marginalising, monocultural Anglo-Celtic 'centre' and the marginalised ethnic 'fringe', in the accepted and fashionable post-colonial literary theories.² Manfred Jurgensen, the editor of *Outrider* (A Journal of Multicultural Literature in Australia) argues, for example, that recent attitudes have confined immigrant/ethnic writing to the margins of a supposed monolithic 'Australian' culture. He therefore states that *Outrider* does not wish to imply or to endorse any further academic concepts, or distinction between, of the so-called 'mainstream' and 'fringe' or 'minority' Australian literature.³

The word 'immigrant' (or migrant, which is predominantly used in the Australian context) covers all those who were not born in Australia, regardless of the questions of ethnicity. The word 'ethnic', on the other hand, includes only those immigrants whose native language is not English, although it usually comprises also their children.⁴ 'Ethnics', therefore, are not necessarily 'immigrants', but in such cases the immigration of a parent or grandparent will be part of their identity. Ethnic identity is really the result of the interaction between how I see myself and the group I belong to, and how I and my group are seen by ot-

hers. However, within Australia today the groups which are perceived as 'ethnic' are seen by many as second-class citizens, and a large percentage of the individuals in these groups see this word as part of the strategy which is used by the founding (Anglo/Celtic) group of Australia to dominate the late comers. They therefore reject the word 'ethnic', which is why it is unwise to use the word even in the purely descriptive way, for it has too strong a negative emotional charge. Con Castan in this light interestingly suggests that from the point of view of ethnicity Australia's population can be divided into three categories: the native ethnicities (individual Aboriginal tribes); the founding ethnicities (the English, Scots, Welsh, Irish); and the diversifying ethnicities (including Slovene immigrants in Australia), also referred to as 'ethnics'. The last group carries a positive charge and best avoids the offensiveness of the word 'ethnic'.⁶

Although the diversifying ethnicities in literature achieved much, literary criticism in Australia has been slow in recognising the artistic merit of their literary achievement. These writers are still grossly under represented in the major mappings of the Australian literary field, although their modernist and post-modernist sense of alienation and exile could enable them to realize more fully the literary possibilities of the post-modernist displacement, exile, centre and margins. The literary strength of multiculturalism remains an important factor in the ongoing struggle against a monolithic cultural 'nationalism' in Australia. Australian society has seen in a relatively short period of time a development from the view expressed by the P.M. Harold Holt in 1952, namely that "*Australia, in accepting a balanced intake of other European people as well as British, can still build a truly British nation (emphasis mine)...*", to that of the P. M. Gough Whitlam, who quite differently maintained in a 1974 speech:

*"We do not want migrants to feel that they have to erase their own characteristics and immitate and adopt completely the behaviour of existing Australian society, we want to see that society enriched by cross-fertilization that will result in migrants retaining their own heritage."*⁶

In the United States of America the concept of the 'melting pot' has seen a development towards multi-ethnicity.⁷ The Greek word ethnikos originally meant 'gentile, heathen - beeing other, being a migrant'; it also referred not to people in general, but to

'others', only since the 19th century the adjective 'ethnic' has begun to signify nowadays "*peculiar to a race or nation*".⁸ From J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, who in 1782 saw the emerging new Man, the American, as the beginner of the new race ("*Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will some day cause great changes in the world*"⁹), to Jeremy Leven, who in 1981, comparably with the Australian multicultural model, wrote:

*"Potato salad has always seemed to me to be a particularly apt dish for 4 July, representing an ingenious conglomeration of unlikely elements to make something fairly tasty. That these vegetables are able to get along all in one dish is a miracle to me akin to the ostensible melting pot we have all come together today to make a lot of noise about. This, of course, is a myth. There is no more a melting pot here in America than a dish without lettuce and tomatoes is a salad."*¹⁰

The essential question in the field of ethnic/immigrant studies is thus whether America is something like a 'melting pot' or, on the contrary, is it a mosaic of coexisting and ultimately 'unmeltable' ethnic elements? In the re-examination of the melting pot Michael Novak likewise defined the PIGS (Poles, Italians, Greeks and Slavs) along with the blacks and Indians as "*unmeltable ethnics*".¹¹ It can be concluded that the American development has been from the initial assimilation policy, the 'melting pot' myth, through the stage of cultural pluralism to multi-ethnicity; "*America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!*" (Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot*, 1908); "*The point about the melting pot (...) is that it did not happen.*" (Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 1963).

In comparison with Australia the subject of ethnicity in the U.S.A. is so vast that there is a genuinely American genre, which is entirely devoted to the issue of 'growing up ethnic', namely the 'coming-of-age' novel and story or the novel of initiation. With the more recent prominence of 'ethnic' literature in the United States and the rediscovery of hitherto undeservedly neglected texts outside the so-called 'mainstream', almost every aspect of growing up ethnic has been given literary treatment (Chicanos, Blacks, Chinese, etc). This pattern provides a represen-

tative approach to the (pluralistic) study of the United States as a 'nation of nations' or an ethnic 'salad bowl'.¹²

The development from 'melting pot' to 'multi-ethnicity' reveals the changing concepts of American identity. At the end of the eighteenth century, eight out of ten white Americans were of British extraction. Thus, for obvious reasons, the ethnic aspect of the problem was kept in the background and American national identity was thought of in terms of ideology rather than ethnicity. This early attitude might be called an (almost unconditional) assimilation, which was in the middle of the nineteenth century, with the rising 'American nationalism' and the threat of the enormous influx of Catholic Irish peasants to the Protestants, replaced by a growing demand for Americanization. Thus, the question of American identity was no longer answered in terms of political conviction and ideological concerns, but under the aspects of ethnic background and religion.

This narrow-minded ethnocentricity was in the early 1920s replaced by an anti-assimilationist stance: cultural pluralism. According to this view, the melting pot concept is simply an untenable myth.¹³ It was the position of cultural pluralism that finally led to the contemporary attitude towards the complex problem of American identity, an attitude that shows a renewed interest in the cultural/literary expressions outside the 'mainstream'. Oscar Handlin, for instance, began his study *The Uprooted* by the 'famous' sentence: *"Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history."*¹⁴ This new attitude is generally referred to as multi-ethnicity: Michael Novak thus rejects the earlier concept of Americanization as nothing but a euphemism for 'WAS pification'.¹⁵ As one of the main spokesmen of multi-ethnicity, Novak further elaborates on an 'ethnic dream' and passionately argues for 'new ethnic politics', setting out to 'liberate' the 'PIGS' (Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs).¹⁶ In this short survey of the history of American identity (including cultural and literary) we have seen the development from the initial assimilation, 'melting pot', Americanization, cultural pluralism and the present attitude of multi-ethnicity.

In reconstructing American literary history frequently an opposition between the narrowness of racism, sexism and elitism, as well as the openness of cultural pluralism is established. The

editors of *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature* from 1983 write:

*"Ethnic pluralism, once the anathema to those who espoused the melting-pot theory, has become a positive, stimulating force for many in our country... Transforming the national metaphors from 'melting pot' to 'mosaic' was not easy. Indeed, the pieces of that national mosaic have been cemented in place with much congealed blood and sweat. We must all continue to work at making the beauty of our multiethnicity shine through the dullness of racism that threatens to cloud it."*¹⁷

One of the essential issues in the reexamination of literature from the point of view of multi-ethnicity is the canon. Very many contemporary American literary historians speak about 'transethnic procedures' that ought to increase the understanding of the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different backgrounds, the ethnic innovations and cultural mergers that took place in America.

Many Canadians and even non-Canadians believe that Canada's experience with ethnicity has been different from that of the United States. The simplification of seeing America as the 'melting pot' and Canada as an 'ethnic mosaic' ignores the fact that the mosaic attitude has not always been the prevailing approach towards immigration in Canada, and that the history of racism, 'nativism' and discrimination has been very similar in the two countries. As in America, also in Canada the theories of assimilation have dominated the discussion of immigrant adjustment: 'Anglo-conformity', 'Franco-conformity' and 'cultural pluralism' which refers to the Canadian 'mosaic' or 'multiculturalism'.¹⁸ Anglo-conformity in Canada was not as powerful as the 'melting pot' approach, which prevailed throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁹

During the 1960s and 1970s a number of factors helped to make cultural pluralism more acceptable in both Canada and the United States: in Canada in the form of 'multiculturalism', which has been the official Canadian government policy since 1971, and in the United States as the 'new ethnicity', which was clearly reflected also in literature. We could say that ethnicity has nevertheless remained a more significant aspect of contemporary Canadian life than the American one, which is especially due to the fact that circumstances were in favour of maintaining a regional-

ly concentrated French-Canadian culture, and that immigrants have continued to come to Canada in great numbers in proportion to the total population, which made it easier for them to avoid assimilation.²⁰ The existence of the French part of Canada, as well as the absence of a strongly developed sense of 'Canadianness', as was the case with the U.S.A. and Australia that was the result of Canada's colonial past, remain among the basic differences between Canada and the United States of America.

In such diverse circumstances the literary creativity of Slovene immigrants to Australia, the U.S.A. and Canada has been forged over the years, from Louis Adamic to Bert Pribac. The common trait is that individual literary histories are being rewritten from the now commonly accepted views of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity: Slovene immigrant literature is thus, along with others, being given a more rightful place in contemporary literary histories. The same has been done in the recent Slovene literary criticism, which is, however, still in the process of performing the formidable task of striking a balance between the axiological, artistic criteria and the historical value of Slovene immigrant writing. For, as Edward Said wrote in his book *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, "criticism is wordly and in the world so long as it opposes monocentrism, a concept I understand as working in conjunction with ethnocentrism, which licenses a culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over others."

NOTES

- 1 Quoted by Werner Sollors, *A Critique of Pure Pluralism*, in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, Sacvan Bercovitch ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- 2 A strong disagreement with this predominant view was expressed by Robert Dessaix in *Nice Work If You Can Get It*. Australian Book Review, February/March 1991, No. 128, pp. 22-28.
- 3 Manfred Jurgensen, *Outrider* 1987. Brisbane: Phoenix Publications, p. 3. Also M. Jurgensen, *Multicultural Literature*, *Outrider* 1986, p. 86.
- 4 Cf. the articles by Philip Grundy, Colin McCormik and Margaret Diesendorf in *Writing in Multicultural Australia* 1984: An Overview. Sydney: Australia Council for the Literature Board, 1984. Also A.L. Epstein. *Ethnos and Ethnicity. Three Studies in Ethnicity*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1978.
- 5 Con Castan, *Migration and the Diversification of Australian Poetry*. *Earth Wings: The Outrider* 91 Almanach, Manfred Jurgensen ed. Bris-

- bane: Phoenix Publications, 1991, p. 120. Cf. also Sneja Gunew, *Constructing Australian Subjects: Critics, Writers, Multicultural Writers*, in Peter Quartermaine ed. *Diversity Itself: Essays in Australian Arts and Culture*. Exeter: University of Exeter, 1986.
- 6 Quoted in *Outrider 90: A Year of Australian Literature*, M. Jurgensen ed. Brisbane: Phoenix Publications, 1990, ii.
 - 7 Cf. David Dorsey, *Minority Literature in the Service of Cultural Pluralism*, in *Minority Language and Literature: Retrospective and Perspective*, Dexter Fisher ed. New York: MLA, 1977.
 - 8 In more detail about these issues in Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.
 - 9 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of 18th Century America*, ed. by Albert E. Stone. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981.
 - 10 Jeremy Leven, *Creator*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981, p. 309.
 - 11 Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnic: Politics and Culture in the Seventies*. New York: Macmillan, 1972. Also Howard F. Stein and Robert F. Hill, *The Ethnic Imperative: Examining the New White Ethnic Movement*. University Park and London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1977, p. 166.
 - 12 As to the enormous amount of ethnic diversity in the U.S.A., consult the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. by Stephen Thernstrom. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1980, which deals with 126 ethnic groups.
 - 13 Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York*. Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T. Press, 1963, especially p. v.
 - 14 Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: From the Old World to the New*. London: Watts and Co., 1953, p. 3.
 - 15 Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnic: Politics and Culture in the Seventies*. New York: Macmillan, 1972, p. 114.
 - 16 As to the definition of the difference between ethnic and mainstream American culture see Howard F. Stein and Robert F. Hill, *The Ethnic Importance: Examining the New White Ethnic Movement*. University Park and London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1977, p. 166. Also *America and the New Ethnicity*, ed. by David R. Colburn George E. Pozzetta. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1979.
 - 17 Robert J. Di Pietro and Edward Ifkovic, eds., *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature: Selected Essays on the European Contribution*. New York: MLA, 1983.
 - 18 Neither 'mosaic' nor 'multicultural' is an accurate description of Canadian social reality, but both terms have been used in criticism to convey the image of Canada as a multi-ethnic society. See Jean Burnet, *Ethnic Policies and Ethnic Relations in Canadian Society*, in F. Henry ed., *Ethnicity in the Americas*. The Hague, 1976, pp. 23-40.
 - 19 See for example Philip Gleason, *The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?*, *American Quarterly*, Spring 1964, pp. 20-46.
 - 20 Cf. Donald Avery, *Canadian Immigration Policy and the Foreign Navy*, Canadian Historical Association, Reports, 1972, and Robert Harney, *Immigrants*. Toronto, 1975. For a fairly extensive chronicling of pa-

ttens of discrimination against a number of minority groups in Canada see Morris Davis and J.F. Krauter, *The Other Canadians*. Toronto, 1971.

POVZETEK

SLOVENSKA IZSELJENSKA KNJIŽEVNOST V POSTMODERNEM SVETU: VZPON MULTIKULTURALNOSTI IN MULTIETNIČNOSTI V AVSTRALIJI, ZDRUŽENIH DRŽAVAH AMERIKE IN KANADI

I g o r M a v e r

Obsežen sklop novejših študij s področja izseljenske oz. etnične književnosti, kamor sodi tudi književno delovanje slovenskih izseljencev, kaže na svojevrstno približevanje kulturno-literarnih kritičkih pristopov v obravnavanih angleško govorečih deželah - Avstraliji, Zdrženih državah Amerike in Kanadi - v smislu vse večjega upoštevanja multikulturalnosti in multietničnosti. Ta proces je moč umestiti v okvir obstoječe postmoderne paradigme, ki jo označujejo decentralizacija, dekanonizacija in demarginalizacija. Posamezne 'nacionalne' literarne zgodovine so takó v obdobju prevrednotenja (dekonstrukcije) ob enakopravnem upoštevanju izseljenskega/ etničnega literarnega delovanja, ki temelji na aksioloških umetnostnih kriterijih.