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Breaking through History. Genius and Literature among Slavs without a State in the 19th Century¹

In the generation between 1820 and 1850 writers of genius emerged in almost all East European peoples. For the historical observer the effect is that of an explosion such as had never been before in literary history. Language and literature of these peoples were re-created. This movement is regarded as a rebirth and is thereby reminiscent of the Renaissance of Antiquity in the 15th century, which likewise led to a re-awakening of the spirits, as Ulrich von Hutten said at the time.

¹ [This is the text of a lecture Professor Hans Rothe held at the University of Milan on April 15, 2010. We decided to publish it in the same shape as it was delivered. Indeed, it reflects the nature of “spoken text”. I hope readers will appreciate the direct approach of the orator, intended to put questions, to challenge generally accepted ‘truths’ and opinions given for ‘granted’, to provoke scholars rather than list results of more or less erudite learning. To be sure, erudition is not lacking: the present text gives best evidence of the author’s vast knowledge and familiarity with all Slav literatures and their relationships with the European culture. It testifies also of his sensibility for the analysis of poetical devices and aesthetic value. The “spoken form” allows however a more immediate treatment of a very large spectrum of issues and open questions. Some of the relevant turning points of the history of ideas and the concept of literature of European Romanticism are analyzed in an extremely broad comparative spectrum, which permits the Author to unveil both analogies and deep differences between European and Slav Romanticism, and to discuss the function of some basic interpretative principles of the multifarious world of East European literature and culture. Rothe’s lecture touches upon the questions of nation building, the role of poets and education, the interpretation of the heritage of Herder and Rousseau. His enquiries into the nature of Romanticism in the Slav countries do not simply investigate the role of the main actors of the period in the formation of nation, in politics and literature, they reach the core of fundamental ethic problems which affect some of the most disquieting and controversial issues not only of the Nineteenth, but also of the Twentieth Century, and even of the world we live in now, in our present days.

The editorial board of the journal and I myself hope that Professor Rothe’s challenging – sometimes provocative, indeed! – considerations may stimulate scholars to suggest new answers, to propose new approaches, to express polemical opinions or to push forth investigation in breadth and depth for a better understanding for the movement who gave origin to our own modern world. We will be glad to take into consideration for possible publication the contributions which may be inspired by this rich and multifaceted text (Giovanna Brogi Bercoff)].

It began relatively early among the Serbs with Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864); he was later followed by the Montenegrins Prince Petar II Njegoš (1813-1851); among the Slovaks it was led by Ján Kollár (1793-1852) and Ljudovit Štúr (1815-1856); then among the Czechs by František Ladislav Čelakovský (1799-1852), Karel Hynek Mácha (1810-1836) and Franz Palacký (1798-1876); the Slovenes came next with Bartholomäus Kopitar (1780-1844), the poet France Prešeren (1800-1849) and the great philologist Franz Miklosich (1813-1891), the Croats with Ljudovit Gaj (1809-1872) and Ivan Mažuranić (1814-1890), the Ukrainians with Taras Ševčenko (1814-1860) and the Hungarians with Szandor Petöfi (1823-1849). Of course for the Russians we need to mention Puškin (1799-1837) and for the Poles Mickiewicz (1798-1856).

In addition to the many Slavonic nations all the other peoples in Eastern Europe were involved, especially the Hungarians, also the Balts, particularly the Lithuanians, Romanians, also Albanians and Greeks, and in fact the Turks, too. Their national aspirations may be considered as particularly characteristic of the situation.

To be sure, the close links between concern for linguistic purity, literature and the awakening of a national consciousness have characterised the culture of many other European peoples since the late 18th century. We find them also in the aspirations of Germans and Italians for unity, in the national self-determination of the Irish, Scots, Norwegians and Finns. In the initial period this general movement was consistently supported by literature, occasionally even led by it. Yet it is the Slav peoples which form the bulk of this movement; it is on them that we shall mainly concentrate our attention.

1. Historical Premises

The phenomena I will now focus on in some detail are familiar to any educated person in Eastern Europe. However, this does not necessarily mean that people everywhere in Eastern Europe are aware of them as general phenomena to the same extent, in other words as something which is not only true for one's own nation, but also for the whole of Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, on the other hand, educated people often do not even know the names of those involved. What follows should therefore be regarded as the account of an outsider about the East European situation, where the outsider observes these unfamiliar phenomena and finds them everywhere, not only in one country.

In the first half of the 19th century, in Eastern Europe – using this geographical expression in its traditional vague sense – only the Russians had a state of their own. The Poles had one after 1815, but lost it again in 1831. Serbs and Montenegrins had just acquired one, even though it did not yet really work, and the Hungarians aspired to one. All the other peoples were living as members of one of the great multi-ethnic empires (Russia, Turkey, Austria, Prussia) with a standard language which was different from their own.

One remark needs to be made about the dominant national group of the Russians. After being the first to shake Napoleon's power, they pondered what their role in Europe should be. It emerged that they were gripped by a profound sense of insecurity. Peter, the founder of the imperial state, was suddenly criticised for suppressing the national individuality of his people. From 1810 onwards Russians increasingly questioned their own state. In 1829 such feelings found their expression in an unprecedented critique of the Russian people itself. In his *First Philosophical Letter* Petr Čadaev (1795-1856) accused the Russians of lacking everything that had made other European peoples civilised nations: in religion a scholarly theology, the influence of Antiquity in Humanism and Renaissance, a codified legal system, and academic educational institutions. Russians, he claimed, just lived off the imitation of foreign models. They were not able to create anything of their own. As a nation they lacked legitimacy. Therefore, though with reservations, we have count Russians too, as being among the nations of Eastern Europe who were, in some way, lacking intellectual independence.

We can therefore advance the hypothesis that in the early 19th century Eastern Europe was characterised in its entirety by attempts at national self-determination by all its peoples, including the Russians. This longing for self-determination found its expression primarily in the language of each national group – albeit not exclusively in it. This is true up to the middle of the 19th century.

Certainly, such a hypothesis needs to be expanded in some respects. For example, it will be expedient to assume close links with the intellectual world and political thinking in Germany as part of the intellectual history of all the East European peoples; in the case of Croats and Slovenes also with Italy. Other aspects may need to be added, but as a starting point of our analysis this assumption can stand. Before we go on to focus some details, two historical premises and three additional criteria need to be examined.

The historical premises are: 1) politically, the assumption that the awakening of a national consciousness in Eastern Europe was a result of the French Revolution; and 2) in the field of intellectual history, that an essential part of this self-determination was that Slavs were understood as a closely linked family of peoples, or rather, as one nation.

The three additional criteria of self-determination are: 1) the contention that it was primarily poetic geniuses who by their writings in their own language had enabled a historic breakthrough; 2) that this was made possible by the new school of Romanticism; and 3) the result had been a national renaissance, a rebirth, at least in some cases.

We now need to examine the consistency of these premises and criteria.

2. *Nation vs. Revolution*

The political premise that the rebirth of peoples was a consequence of the French Revolution was of course particularly popular during the communist period, but this was often the direct continuation of liberal ideas prevalent even before the First World

War. The attitude prevailed that the events in France had indeed acted as a revolution, as a striving for freedom and equality, i.e. for the destruction of the status quo. This could be partly substantiated by the Polish November rising of 1830/31 and the events in Hungary in 1848/49. Nevertheless, this explanation is too general and not correct as it stands.

The relevant factor in Eastern Europe prior to 1850 – in contrast to Germany, and particularly Prussia – was not social demands for liberty and equality. The salient factor was the new concept of the nation, a new national feeling which the Revolution had created, above all for the French themselves. The effects of this national feeling varied a great deal. In Poland and probably also in Hungary it was initially the aristocracy which was involved. The peasants did not take part at all in the revolts of the 1840s. With the Ukrainians and Czechs it was different. In their cases the aristocracy, which was Russified or Germanicised, was not involved. Hence, we need to examine carefully what the concept of the nation implied.

3. Slav Unity and Nations

As far as intellectual history is concerned, it is almost the whole of Slavs that we are concerned with. They were often understood as one single people, i.e. ‘the Slavs’. This attitude goes right back to the 15th century. However, this had always been determined by state-oriented thinking. People spoke of ‘the Slavs’ and the states which they formed rather than of nations; since the 17th century this idea of ‘unity’ had been linked to the idea that a large state, i.e. Russia, should take over the leadership for all of them. The most recent advocate of this idea was Leibnitz (1646-1716), who had developed this conception as adviser to the Russian tsar Peter.

The approach taken by J.G. Herder (1744-1803) was different. He spoke of individuals and peoples rather than of states and territories. The most important impulse for this new approach had been given by J.J. Rousseau (1712-1778). The latter’s basic idea was that the life of human beings was corrupted in the civilisation of states. In their primeval, pre-state condition without property and state human beings had been good and peaceful, and this was the condition to which humans needed to return. In order to substantiate this cultural critique in Rousseau’s teachings Herder found, so to speak, a ‘historic nation’ in Eastern Europe, viz. ‘the Slavs’. This clearly occurred before the same discovery affected French and English literature, when Chateaubriand (1768-1848) represented blacks and – outside Europe, far to the West – Cooper (1789-1851) represented Native Americans in this function. Puškin made the same discovery in gypsies and in the Caucasus.

Slavs have been happy to accept Herder’s teachings right up to the present day. To my knowledge, it has not been investigated whether the ideas of the French Revolution also stimulated Herder’s thinking. Such a possibility exists. Herder probably wrote his famous chapter on the Slavs in 1790. I regard a direct link as likely. Among the Slavs

– and in Eastern Europe in general – both the national concept of revolution and Herder's ideas on peoples and the Slavs acted in concert.

It was Herder again who made another idea of Rousseau's even more influential. Rousseau had attempted to substantiate his basic idea that humans in their natural primeval state had been good and peaceful by saying that people at that time did sing and dance. Since 1774 Herder had been collecting folk songs and began to publish them from 1778 onwards. They achieved their greatest impact beginning with the third edition, which was published posthumously with the title *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (*Voices of the Peoples in Songs*) in 1807. The concept of the folksong was born. People began to collect them everywhere, especially the Slavs. They felt that this idea, which had originated in Rousseau and Herder, viz. that they were a peaceful people in a peaceful family of peoples, gave them historical legitimacy.

At that point, a criterion had been found which enabled all the East European peoples to achieve self-determination and self-perception, even if they had no state of their own and lived among other nations who possessed their own states. Moreover, they were convinced that creating literature with the 'common touch' was what made the greatness of a poet. The main feature of this 'national' literature was the use of one's own language in the form of the language of the common people. Now Ukrainians could have the same status as Russians, Slovenes as Germans or Italians; similarly Hungarians, Croats, Czechs, Slovaks etc.

As we have seen, in the changes that took place after 1820 there is more of history and tradition involved than the doctrine of the Romantic movement of geniuses would have us believe.

4. Romanticism: Rebirth and Restoration

We now come to the three additional criteria which are said to apply to the new movement: Romanticism – genius – rebirth. Taken together they imply that in the new approach to thinking and feeling of Romanticism writers of genius, so to speak, broke through traditional history with their works, leading their peoples first to a realisation of themselves, and subsequently to international recognition.

Let us take first Romanticism as a vehicle of rebirth. The statements made are usually too sweeping. As far as I know, a comparative description of political and literary Romanticism in all East European literatures, together with their historical roots, their main focus and their effects, has not yet been written. What is particularly important here is to take into account the familiar distinction between Early and High Romanticism in German literature, with which all the Slavonic literatures were linked. In Early Romanticism, until shortly after 1800, the interest in the Christian Middle Ages predominated; in High Romanticism, which is regarded as completed by 1815, historical interest in the national past, again mainly that of the Middle Ages, was paramount. The aesthetics of Early Romanticism were entirely dominated by the concept of the open

form, i.e. of the fragment, of a work of art which was meant to be incomplete in order to become a gateway to the world of ideas, while phenomena are only representations of the latter, following the well known device of Platonic philosophy. Late Romanticism is characterised by a more intense play and experimentation with complex forms.

Romanticism did not emerge among the Slavs – and the Hungarians as well – until Romanticism was concluded in Germany, the land of its origin, and in Britain. Therefore, the movement hardly contains any links to Early Romanticism among the Slavs. It is always more than simply poetry; as in German High and Post-Romanticism, it is always supplemented by academic components, primarily historical linguistics, history and ethnography.

One more aspect is rarely mentioned and was practically ignored during the communist period. I have in mind the following: it is true that Early Romanticism was triggered *inter alia* by the French Revolution and was up to a large extent a consequence of the revolutionary phenomena of disintegration; however, in a political perspective, High Romanticism supported the restoration of the old order which took place after the victory over Napoleon in 1815. This is also – and perhaps particularly – true of the Slav literatures of Romanticism, since they developed during the period of restoration after 1815. Here too we are in disagreement with the main bulk of traditional scholarly interpretation.

5. *Genius and Academic Learning*

The idea of genius breaking through the prevailing order does not get us very far either. The idea is certainly true of Puškin, who was considered by Dostoevskij to be the first poet in Russia who was able to express Russian individuality and the Russian character; this holds for Mickiewicz as well, although he celebrated ‘Litwa’ (Lithuania) as his native land, rather than Poland, and never visited Warsaw or Cracow as long as he lived. It is also true of Vuk, Ševčenko and Prešeren, possibly of Njegoš. But is it true of Čelakovský, Gaj and Ivan Mažuranić, of Štúr and Kollár? And in any case, whose names should we mention in that period for Lithuanians and Belarusians, Sorbs and Kashubians? During this period they were already experiencing a national revival, but did not yet have outstanding writers until a generation or so later.

Presumably the concept of the great language genius as a national leader is a red herring. Should we not consider that other elements may have been more important, among others because they may be accepted as valid for all the writers of the period under consideration in all East European nations? I have in mind, first, the fact that intellectuals and ‘nation builder’ writers were given academic training at grammar schools and universities. These educational institutions were almost always located in the old Imperium Romanum, i.e. in Germany or Italy; in other cases the new institutions had been set up on German models, as is the case for Puškin’s Carskoe Selo, for Mickiewicz in Wilno or for Vuk in Karlowitz. It seems to me that we need to focus on the erudi-

tion of writers and their academic training in the national Late Romantic movement in Eastern Europe to a much greater extent that has been the case to date. It weighed more heavily than the sparks of genius. And this erudition is an element of tradition, not of revolutionary innovation. It complements the political restoration of the old order.

To conclude, I would suggest that in Eastern European countries Romanticism was dominated by national themes rather than by religious ones, and by academic training rather than by genius. It was a national much more than a revolutionary ideology, at least in the majority of cases and in the early years.

6. Nations in Multiethnic Empires

What about the concept of the nation itself? If we examine this issue, we must above all realise that right from the outset it was contradictory and elusive, even during the revolutionary period itself. The French defined their nation in the Revolution as “une et indivisible”. This implied, in conflicting cases, that in France you had to be French, nothing else. And it was this discourse which set the agenda all over Eastern Europe as well. Indeed, a people that demanded its right as a nation was ready to make sacrifices, sometimes major sacrifices. Yet it was generally not prepared to grant the same right to liberty to another nation with which it lived together, on the same territory. Some of the smaller peoples in the multi-ethnic empires particularly became trapped in a dual dependence – Belarusians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Macedonians: like all the others they opposed the dominance of Russians, Germans or Turks. But then, overwhelmed by Herder’s idea of the Slav family, they were threatened by additional dependence on a larger “brother-nation”.

Here are some examples, beginning with the dominant national groups in multi-ethnic empires:

- Russia had maintained its freedom in the fight against Napoleon, suffering great losses; but the aspirations to independence of Slavonic brother nations within the Russian Empire were obstructed and suppressed. Even the use of Ukrainian in literature was to be forbidden.
- Prussia had successfully defended its independence against the French universal monarchy with even greater losses; yet the same aspirations to liberty of the Poles did not receive acknowledgement, even though legal requirements were upheld. It is especially worthy of note that the famous liberal reformers in Prussia (Stein, Gneisenau, Scharnhorst) who had breathed new life into the Prussian monarchy only wanted to permit the Poles to use their own language in the first generation; after that they were to be assimilated.

Now let us turn to the dependent nations:

- As is well known, the Poles fought repeatedly for their national independence for many generations. Yet the aim of the November Rising in 1830/31 was the restoration of Poland within the borders of 1772, i.e. before the partitions; in other words Poles, more precisely the Polish aristocracy, wanted Lithuania, Belarus, large parts of Ukraine, wherever national movements were active, to be restored as parts of a national, purely Polish aristocratic state.
- Hungary suffered the greatest losses in fighting against Austria and Russia in 1848/49 for its independence, achieving it in 1867 after Austria was defeated by Prussia in 1866; however, this success in having independence was immediately followed by an extreme form of nationalism unprecedented elsewhere: Slovaks, South Slavs and even Germans were magyarised.

Finally let us deal with what has been termed Illyrianism, among the South Slavs. The situation here is different, since this movement was entirely non-violent. However, Illyrianism is particularly instructive, because it illustrates the failure of Herder's concept of the 'family' on which, *inter alia*, it was based.

Since the 15th century the name *Illyrian* had been important in early pan-Slav conceptions, most recently among the Serbs around 1800. This is the background to its use by Gaj after 1830 to counteract initial Hungarian attempts at assimilation. Gaj wanted, if possible, to unite all the South Slavs as Illyrians and ultimately lead them to independence. Herder's idea of a family of nations was an important element in this project. It began, as was usually the case throughout Eastern Europe, with attempts to create a uniform orthography and grammar which were to be binding for all the 'Illyrian' peoples.

But that was as far as it got. Bulgarians in their remote home within the Turkish Empire were scarcely able to join in or reject it, and in any case even at this stage they mistrusted the Serbs. The Slovenes stayed aloof, for which they could be grateful to the foresight of Prešeren. There were exceptions, such as Stanko Vraz, who became a convinced Illyrian. Serbs soon became suspicious of the dominant position of the Croats.

Hence the Illyrian movement was essentially a matter of its Croatian initiators, and the striving for South Slav unity appeared to be restricted to the choice of Štokavian, which united them with the Serbs, while their own dialects of Croatian literature (Čakavian and Kajkavian), though rich in tradition, had to give way.

7. Lasting Consequences of Romantic Movements

I would now like to focus on the changing situation in the 20th century: though with some limitations, this will enable us to gain greater clarity.

As early as the second half of the 19th century the politicisation of national movements increased, thereby resulting in a radicalisation. It is common knowledge how

and where the First World War began. Politicians with foresight, such as Bismarck and Lenin, had foreseen that a large-scale war would destabilise a situation which had hitherto been under control. In 1919 the basic principle of the treaties of Versailles and Trianon was that of the self-determination of peoples, an idea which has its roots in the French Revolution.

Rarely in history has there been a more unfortunate peace treaty. The principle of self-determination dissolved the multi-ethnic monarchy of the Habsburgs and the Turkish multi-ethnic state, creating at the same time four new multi-ethnic states: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Lithuania. In all these cases a large number of minorities were dominated by one nation which saw itself as the nation state itself. The most moderate were the Czechs towards Slovaks, Ukrainians, Hungarians and Germans. The most intolerant were the Poles towards Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Germans, Kashubians and Jews. To be sure, Serbs in the Yugoslavian monarchy were not far behind them. These circumstances contributed heavily to the beginning of the Second World War. The guiding principle of Versailles, viz. nations' right to self-determination, continued to smoulder like a spark in a barrel of gunpowder, and it was only a matter of time before it turned against the new multi-ethnic states which applied the national idea much more strictly against other ethnic groups than the old multi-ethnic empires had done before 1914, if we disregard Hungary's magyarisation.

This kind of national idea continued to have consequences before and during the Second World War. The attempt was made to create new nation states for Slovaks, Croats, Albanians and Poles too. The way *how* that attempt took place is well known.

Some decades later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, the guiding principle of Versailles asserted itself once more. We know under what conditions this took place, particularly in Yugoslavia, and we cannot comfort ourselves with the hope that the process has at last attained final equilibrium in all the regions and among all the peoples of Eastern Europe. We need only to think of Kosovo and Ukraine.

In the final phases of this evolution a contribution from literature was no longer required or enlisted. On the contrary, as mentioned above, in the early days of the movement literature played a leading role, and its ideologemes were relevant. For this reason we shall now return to literature.

8. *Literature and Nation in Slav Romanticism*

I will disregard, for the considerations to come, the role played by individual poets for their people and limit myself to ask: how and what did they actually write? We shall leave aside Puškin and Mickiewicz, who stand above most of the others, since their national poems *Boris Godunov* and *Poltava*, *Dziady* and *Pan Tadeusz* are not unknown, even in the West. Yet, even without these two giants of literature, the picture is not unambiguous.

Five important poets stand out from all the others: of equal importance are Prešeren and Ševčenko, followed at some distance by Ivan Mažuranić, Njegoš und Petöfi. Whatever the differences between them, their status in the history of their literature is clearly dominant compared with that of all their contemporaries and predecessors. Some of them are conspicuous by their particular command of forms, e.g. Prešeren, others by their reinvigoration of the language of their people, such as Ševčenko and Njegoš.

What is manifest is the ease with which Prešeren mastered the most complex and difficult forms of poetry: sonnet, ghazal, tercet and octave. They require that the rhyming is carried out three and four times, not simply twice, with this being done in a pre-ordained arrangement of lines. This not only made it difficult to create the rhyme and rhythm, but also to develop ideas and linguistic images.

Yet Prešeren was a master of poetical techniques, ideas and imagery: he overcame all sorts of difficulties. It is the pinnacle of artistic achievement when such ideas and metaphors occur as part of the external form, when rhythm, rhyme, every repetition of sounds in general become the medium for ideas and are consonant with their development, nay when the structure of ideas can be gauged thanks to the effect of external forms. This may then be defined as internal form, a form which may be reached via the external form. Prešeren was consummate in this, the equal of Puškin and easily surpassing Mickiewicz.

The pattern was different with Ševčenko, Mažuranić and Njegoš. The greatness of their achievement lay in reinvigorating history via the medium of language: in the case of the Ukrainian poet this happened in his historicising poems (first *Hajdamaky*, 1841); in Mažuranić this happened in the kindred free rendering of the two missing cantos from Ivan Gundulić's (1589-1638) great epos *Osman* (1624/38), which became part of Illyrianism because it was first published in 1826. The *Gorski Vijenac* (1847) by Prince Petar II Njegoš of Montenegro (Crna Gora) also belongs to this category: it celebrates the resistance by the Montenegrins to the Turks and Islamicisation. This conflict is not only conveyed by describing the fighting, but also by repeatedly inserting folksongs.

9. Plurilinguism of National Poets

Yet we must now focus on a specific trait in the language used by many of these poets, and particularly the greatest of them. It is just as striking as it is rarely made mention of. It is probably especially striking for outsiders, for non-Slav foreigners.

None of the poets mentioned made use only of their native language, to which they assured widespread attention and recognition by their writings. All of them also wrote important works in another language.

Sometimes this can be explained as due to the early stage of their literary career, for example in the case of Mažuranić, who published his early poems in Hungarian in 1832 at the age of eighteen, or Mácha, who also began by writing in German as a young man.

In other cases the use of German in the Habsburg Empire should probably be considered as the consequence of Josephinism and of the pattern set by Dobrovský, for example in Šafarík's *Geschichte der slavischen Sprache und Literatur nach allen Mundarten* (The History of the Slavonic Language and Literature in All Its Dialects) of 1826, or in Jan Kollár's major work *Über literarische Wechselseitigkeit der verschiedenen Stämme der slavischen Nation* (The Literary Reciprocity of the Various Parts of the Slavonic Nation) of 1837. Both of them reflected Herder's idea of a family of nations in their very titles. But does that match with the idea of the rebirth of a nation, of *obrození*?

Palacký's famous *Geschichte von Böhmen* (History of Bohemia) is a peculiar case, which is very instructive. The first three volumes were written in German and were published between 1836 and 1848. Palacký then began the Czech version. In it he shifted his emphasis. In both versions the core theme is the Hussites, but in the Czech version Palacký put greater emphasis on the antagonism between Czechs and Germans. By all evidence, the major work of the 'Father of the Nation' underwent an internal transformation, which apparently was relating to the political development shortly before 1848. However, one needs to be careful here, because it was precisely in 1848 that Palacký, as a Slav, declared his support for the Habsburg Empire against the revolutionary Frankfurt Parliament, which proclaimed in the Paulskirche a German Empire based on the principles of parliamentary democracy.

What is even more striking and incompatible with the factors just mentioned are the cases of Ševčenko and Prešeren. They lie very far apart and took place in completely different states, but present striking analogies.

In Russia, for the treatises that criticised so sharply their state and people, some Russian polemicists chose to write in French. On the other hand, the Ukrainian national poet and painter, who was bitterly aggrieved by all the evil that Russians did to him, wrote his diary – i.e. the most personal of items, far from any censorship – in Russian.

Prešeren is an even stranger case. As was already mentioned, Slovenes mainly owe it to him that their modern literature and language did not become ensnared by Štokavian Illyrianism. His Slovenian poems appeared above all to outsiders as miracles of the mastery of form in intimate literature based on personal experience. His friendship with the Polish émigré Emil Korytko (1813-1839), a friend of Mickiewicz's, played a part in this. However, Prešeren translated the poems of both Polish poets into German, not into his mother tongue. In 1835 he wrote in German a dedicatory poem to the death of his friend Matija Čop (1797-1835), who had assisted him in his conception of language: he translated it into Slovenian only a year later. Even more striking is the fact that he carried out almost his entire correspondence in German: to be sure, German was a natural lingua franca within the Empire and it seems natural that letters were written in German among persons who had a different native language; Prešeren, however, did this not only with people belonging to other nations, like the Czech Čelakovský, but even with Slovenian friends and kindred spirits, such as Čop.

To recap: this phenomenon is disconcerting, particularly for an outsider. One explanation could be found in the way of thinking prevalent in Late Romanticism, viz. in the internal link with political life in the first two decades of the restoration of the old order, the peace framework of the Congress of Vienna. An ideology-free, unpretentious use of different languages in addition to one's own mother tongue, the poetic interplay of forms, and even the devotion to a historical and pre-historic past, its revival and the revival of older forms of language themselves – does that not all form part of a view of the world which aims to make use of all the possibilities whilst at the same time securing and conserving rather than overturning the status quo? This brings us back to the question pointed out earlier: is not the revival aspired to in that period conservative, does it not represent the restoration of the old?

The basic problem remains the question of the concept of the nation and the culture expressed by its language. In the French Revolution we can observe how the idea of the people, in which all persons are equal, changes into the idea of the nation, which soon sets itself above others. Furthermore, in Eastern Europe we can observe how this transformation from the people to the nation results in a change from the aspirations for freedom of one people to rivalry with other peoples which are also striving for liberty, leading to domination of one people by another.

From all these processes we draw a three-pronged conclusion:

- 1) Since the French Revolution concepts like liberty, people, nation, self-determination have become the basis of our political self-perception, and they have remained so to this day. Yet, at the same time and right from the outset, these concepts have revealed their darker sides, because we see them again and again as bearers of disasters.

The question is not only whether life for Poles in Prussia, Austria or Russia until 1914 was more or less pleasant and dignified than in their own state after 1919, likewise for Czechs before 1914 or after 1919; the main question is whether there was more justice for Poles and Czechs before 1914 than for those who were not Poles after 1919 in Poland or those who were not Czechs in the Czech state after 1919; similarly for Ukrainians and Belarusians in Poland, for Slovaks and Hungarians in the Czech state, and also for Slovenes in the Yugoslav monarchy or communist Yugoslavia.

- 2) The second conclusion we can draw is something, which I will formulate as a question. Now that the types of state which emerged from revolutions (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) have all failed, is it not time to re-examine the political and historical roots of their conception of the state? Does this not also imply a re-appraisal of the still prevailing doctrine of their revolutionary beginnings? Is it not time to re-evaluate literature in its forms and themes in connection

with this issue? Is it not time to scrutinise what is contradictory and unhistorical in the Revolution and its concept of the nation, in other words, to re-assess the disaster of its dogmatism?

And finally, also formulated as a question:

- 3) What in fact was national revival? Were Czechs and Croats not able to write in their languages even in the 18th century, and did they not do so? Were they not able to be Czechs and Croats before the 19th century? Did Croats win or lose when they accepted Štokavian and rejected Čakavian and Kajkavian? Did Poles after 1830, in the decades of their national *risorgimento*, place under scrutiny what had led to the loss of their own state? And did not those peoples – whose territories the Poles wished to regain (what they largely succeeded in achieving in 1920) – have the same right as them to be free, i.e. to be free of them? Or – on the other hand – did not Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians have a share in the Croatian *preporod*?

But all these questions lead to another set of issues and must be dealt with in a different paper.

Abstract

Hans Rothe

Breaking through History. Genius and Literature among Slavs without a State in the 19th Century.

Within a broad comparative framework, the Author analyzes some of the main patterns of the development of national self-consciousness and identity among the peoples of Eastern Europe between the 1830s and 1850s. He discusses the general assumption that the French Revolution played a major role in the awakening of national consciousness in the Slavic (and the Hungarian) cultures, and that an important part of the longing for self-determination was connected with the idea that Slavs were understood as a united family of peoples or even as one nation. The Author then addresses three main topics. It is generally accepted that in some countries it was primarily poetic geniuses who brought about a dramatic breakthrough in national consciousness thanks to the fact that their works were written in their own language (examples include Mickiewicz, Puškin, Ševčenko, Prešeren and others). Nonetheless, the importance of learning, academic training, gathering historical knowledge and folk tradition as primary sources of national consciousness should not be underestimated. These elements, the Author maintains, are connected rather with traditional ideas and mentality (and with Herder's way of thinking), than with 'revolutionary' innovation. Unlike the French model of development that followed the 1789 revolution and largely identified nation with revolution, Slav peoples were confronted with their belonging to multiethnic and plurilingual political structures: they were either dominant powers (such as Russia, which dominated many other peoples) or were dominated by 'others'. From several points of view, Herder's idea of Slav unity was often more of a hindrance than a way out for the definition of national unity. This was true for the dominated peoples, but for Russians too, although, politically speaking, they were effectively the only real state and a 'dominant' people. Later the Author discusses the many different ways in which a feeling of national identity grew up among the numerous peoples living in Eastern Europe as a whole, from the Balkans to the Baltic. At the end of his paper he presents the troublesome and puzzling issue of national poets using not only the language of their own people, but several other languages too – including the language of the dominant empire – when writing some of their more important works, beginning with the most intimate expression of thoughts and feelings in diaries and letters.