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ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: ITS MEANING FOR THE LEARNER*

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When it comes to the teaching of reading, materials in EFL courses tend to rum to 'functional' themes, e.g., how to decipher a bus schedule or manage an advertisement for a job. Much of the new methodology focusses on exercises that are practical, i.e., for teaching the kind of reading that relates to everyday affairs. At the same time, the teaching of literature, i.e., of creative and non-functional writing, appears to maintain its high prestige in the profession but no longer occupies the major attention of methodologists and textbook writers. In an effort to change this current state of affairs, McConochie[1] finds the teaching of literature to EFL students to be not only worthwhile as an aesthetic experience but also as a way to gain access to the cultural knowledge that native speakers bring to their reading. Widdowson,[2] writing in the same volume, also defends the teaching of literature as an integral part of language a new language. At the same time, however, he recognizes the difficulty of making the proper reading selections for classroom use.

Whatever pedagogical elaborations are made by teachers, the study of literature can sometimes forge a strong link of culture and ethnicity between the learners and the persons who created that literature in the target language. Such can be the case with those who study English as a foreign language. I refer especially to European students of American English but the same claim will hold, to a somewhat lesser degree, with reference to those who study English from other parts of the world.

We Americans are fond of soying that the United States is a multiethnic and multicultural country. In fact, John F. Kennedy called the United States 'a nation of immigrants' in the title of one of his books. Indeed, we are such a nation and a major segment of these immigrants trace their origins to southern and eastern Europe. These people—as those who came before them——suffered many of the pains of relocation and the fear of the unknown as much as they experienced the joys of adventure and achievement in a new land. The acquiring of English has been one of the most formidable tasks

* Članak je napisan za časopis *Strani jezici* na engleskom jeziku.

[1] See Jean McConochie, 'All this fiddle: enhancing language awareness through poetry,' *On TESOL '81*. Edited by M. Himes and W. Rutherford. Washington, D. C.: TESOL, 1982, Pp. 231—240.

[2] See H. A. Widdowson, 'The use of literature,' *On TESOL '81* (op. cit., p. 203—214).

faced by all Americans who come from countries other than England. Even for the English immigrants, the challenge to life style, cultural values, and links with relatives left behind in the old country cannot be avoided. With all ethnic groups in America, writing has served as an important outlet for the tensions created by the new life. This writing has also enriched American literature in ways few other literatures have been so enriched. In fact, America has always been best defined by its newcomers. The term 'melting pot', to take one example, was created by an immigrant, Israel Zangwill, around the turn of the century. Zangwill envisioned American society as one in which a new kind of people would be forged from the ore of many nations.

Regardless of the way we choose to investigate American literature, there are certain themes that are clearly ethnic in nature. These themes are the following: alienation from traditional family ties, isolation in face of the strangeness of the new land, the struggle to succeed in America, and, for the first American-born generation of newcomers, the question of identity.[3] The above-mentioned themes arise naturally from the way in which America was populated. In fact, the story of the peopling of America is one of the most remarkable ones in the history of the world. Throughout the nineteenth century, beginning around 1815, more than fifty million people came to America, most of them from Europe. From the earliest times of European contact with America (in the late fifteenth century) until 1680, most of the European settlers originated in England. However, with a change in home policies in Britain that had the effect of discouraged emigration, other countries began to offer their people to the new continent. These people included Germans, French protestants, Sephardic Jews, and many Scotch-Irish. While most of this early wave of immigrants came from northern and western Europe, there were also a few from southern and eastern Europe. In the early settlement of Virginia, one could find craftsmen from Croatia together with a group of Italian farmers and artisans. A possible indication of the Croatian presence in the earliest Virginia settlements is the mystical name of CROATAN that was found carved on a tree. This name was the only sign left of the colony of European settlers that disappeared at Roanoke, during the sixteenth century. Some historians say that the name refers to an Indian tribe that might have befriended the settlers. Others hink that it was simply the effort of a settler to leave an indication of his ethnic origin.

In any event, the new country of the United States began with an ethnically mixed population. The first census (taken in 1790) showed 60% of the population to be of English origin, 14% to be Scottish or Scotch-Irish, 9% German, 4% Catholic Irish, and 13% other groups. Black slaves were considered to be property and were not counted. Neither were the Indians who were not citizens in the new country. The percentages of ethnic groups became more equally spread between 1860 and 1914, with the arrival of the largest wave of immigrants ever to come to America. This wave consisted of some twenty million people predominantly from Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, and Greece. By 1930, 73% of the population of New York, the largest city in the new country was either foreign-born or of foreign-born parents. Around the same time there were roughly one million Yugoslav immigrants in Ame-

[3] The information given about the demography and the examples of Yugoslav-American literature is taken almost entirely entirely from *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature*, edited by R. Di Pietro and E. Ifković (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983).

rica: 500,000 Croatians, 300,000 Slovenes and 200,000 Serbs. Today, no ethnic group, including the English Americans, can claim more than 36% of the population. Certainly, two of every three Americans has had some relative—a parent, a grandparent, or, at least, a great-grandparent who spoke a language other than English.

To understand this fact of American life is to perceive an important aspect of American culture. While Hollywood and the news media of the United States have depicted a country that is seemingly Anglo-Saxon in nature, the truth is far different. The non-Anglo-Saxons have been in the numerical majority for some time and now these people—especially the children and grandchildren of Italians and Slavs—are beginning to become prominent in the affairs of the country. The remainder of this paper will provide a sketchy overview of the contributions to American letters of those Americans who have their roots in Yugoslavia.[4]

As might be expected, the first samples of Yugoslav-American literary output came not in English but in Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian. Newspapers were important to these early immigrants, to help them keep abreast of current affairs and to hold together as a community. In 1891, in Hoboken, New Jersey, the first Croatian newspaper, *Napredak*, went into print. *Napredak* was quickly followed by *Dalmatinska Zora* (1892), in San Francisco, California, on the opposite side of the country. *Danica—The Morning Star*, whose title reflects the growing state of bilingualism among the Yugoslav immigrants, was founded in 1894 by Zdravko Mužina and Petar Pavlinac. Probably the the best of these early newspapers was Frank Zotti's *Narodni List* (1898) which was chatty, informal and attractive to a readership that was still barely literate. *Zajedničar*, the organ of the Croatian Fraternal Union, first appeared in 1904 and is still being published. Ivan Mladineo's *Hrvatski Narod* appeared in 1909, in St. Louis, and represented an effort to keep alive the ways of the home country for those Yugoslavs who were already forgetting their origins.

The Serbs who settled in Pittsburgh, San Francisco and elsewhere, also produced newspapers such as the *Amerikanski Srbobran* (1905), and the *Radnička Borba*, in Cleveland. Among the English-language newspapers founded by Serbs were *Liberty* (1901—2) and the *Serb Independence*. Veljko Radojevich, the editor of these newspapers, can be considered the father of the new Serbian-American literature that began to emerge at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Slovenes who came to America had perhaps the highest level of education of any of the Yugoslav immigrants. In addition to founding their own newspapers such as the *American Slovene* (Chicago, 1891) and the *Voice of the People* (New York, 1893), they had already begun to influence mainstream American literature in the nineteenth century. Henry W. Longfellow's *Hyperion: A Romance* includes the story of Brother Bernardus, that is, the account of a visionary immigrant Bernard Smolnikar who was writing at the time of the American Civil War.

The period after the First World War saw the transition of Yugoslav writers from founding newspapers to writing books of verse or prose. The most famous Slovenian-American writer is Louis Adamic who began to write

[4] See E. Ifković, p. 266—307, in *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature* (op. cit.).

in the 1920s. His well-known *Nation of Nations* depicts the United States accurately as a land owing much to the Anglo-Saxon strain but also much to the other strains of people from many lands. But other Yugoslav-Americans also began to write significant books in English. For example, Anton Mazzanovich, son of a Croatian musician from San Francisco, assisted in the pursuit of the famous Apache Indian chief Geronimo. His 1926 book, *Trailing Geronimo,* is filled with the adventure of life the American far west. Gabro Karabin, a Croatian American born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, in the steel mill region of the country, gives a vibrant account of the life of factory workers, including the death of his own father and brother in industrial acoidents. His 'Honorable Escape', published in 1937 in *Scribner's Magazine,* won a thousand-dollar first prize. In it he narrates his personal feelings of isolation and alienation from the old ways of the family.

Perhaps the most famous Serbian-American writer was Michael Pupin. His book, *From Immigrant to Inventor* (1922), won the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Pupin was a brilliant scientist as well as a man endowed with remarkable poetic sensibility, as reflected in his writings. Other Serbian-American authors are Emilian Glocar *(A Man from the Balkans,* 1942) and Milla Zenovich Logan *(Bring Along Laughter,* 1947). Both Glocan and Zenovich Logan carry the same sense of optimism found in Pupin's works about success in the new country.

Among the contemporary American writers of Yugoslav extraction are Fred Orehek, an editor of the *Chicago Tribune* who has produced many short stories, Marie Prisland, chronicler of her journey from Slovenia to the new world, Charles Simic, recognized as one of America's major poets (see his volume *What the Grass Says,* 1967), and Steve Tesich, a distinguished playwright (see *The Predicators, The Carpenters,* and *Baba Goya).* Tesich's screen play, *Breaking Away,* was released as a movie in the summer of 1979 and won many honors. There is also William Jovanovich who is now the president of a major book-publishing house (Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich). Jovanovich wrote a novel, *Madmen Must,* in 1978 which develops one of the major ethnic themes—that of the search for identity.

It would be remiss not to include in an accounting of American literature the figures that comprise its folk-heroes. Prominent in the oral tradition of the country are Paul Bunyan, that mythical giant lumberjack who can cut down huge forests only a few swings of his ax and Wild Pecos Bill, who rides the Texan skies on a flying horse. But we cannot omit yet another folk-hero, one given to us by the Croatian steel workers of western Pennsylvania. His name is Joe Magarac and he was born inside an iron-ore mountain. He has muscles of steel and he uses them for the good of others. This American 'Joe' has a Yugoslav grandfather who was called 'Veli Jože' and is certainly known to many of the readers of this article.

The 'discovery of America' is an historical event generally known in the world. It took place in 1492 and was the accomplishment of an Italian navigator working for Spain. His crew was a mostly one of Spaniards, Italians, Arabs, and possibly Dalmatians and other Mediterranean people. At times, the nativist press of the United States attempts to discredit Columbus's feat by pointing to other, possibly earlier explorers and adventurers who happened upon the American continent. Even if there are people who deny Co-

lumbus this rightful praise, no one can deny that there was also an *invention* of America. This invention took place many centuries before the actual landing of any Europeans on American soil. Its most ancient roots grow from the Greek myth of the lost continent, Atlantis, where everyone is able to lead a completely happy life. That idea of Utopia was carried forth in the Renaissance and later got into the imaginations of many Europeans of many lands throughout the ensuing years. So, we can say that the 'invention' of America was pan-European in origin. The Yugoslavs first plawed their part in this invention and then gave their intellect, their industriousness, and their artistic talents to making the invention become a reality. Our America is enriched by them and anyone who would claim to know American literature cannot make such a claim unless he studies what they have given us on the written page.