

Robert B. Pynsent's contributions to the study of Slovak literature

CHARLES SABATOS

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2023.15.2.11>

Professor Robert Burton Pynsent (1943–2022), who taught Czech and Slovak literature for decades at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), now part of University College London, would have been an exceptional figure in any field, but in the area of Slovak literary criticism in English he was literally one of a kind. While his early work focused mostly on Czech literature, after 1989 Pynsent devoted increasing attention to Slovak writing, in his idiosyncratically erudite and inimitably iconoclastic style. This set him apart from his academic counterparts in North America, who worked almost entirely on modern Czech literature; there was almost no other scholarly research in English on Slovak literature, except by a few North American Slovak émigrés with a generally nationalistic bias. Fortunately for Slovakia, Pynsent's disdain for anything "popular" (which included the best-known Czech writers such as Karel Čapek and Milan Kundera) and his fascination with obscure works (which included all of Slovak literature) led to his insistence, almost unique in Anglophone Slavic scholarship, that Slovak literature was not only equally worthy of attention, but was often better than Czech. This did not mean, of course, that he followed the received wisdom of domestic Slovak literary criticism; indeed, it can sometimes feel as if Pynsent's statements are an attempt to provoke rather than to provide strictly objective analysis, but his claims are always stimulating and usually illuminating. As his colleague and successor at SSEES Peter Zusi observed, "No one who spent time with Robert could think of Czech and Slovak as 'small' literatures, and the intellectual energy he fostered in students and colleagues was generated from the conviction that no matter how much one read, it was never enough" (2003, 77).

In September 1987, Pynsent brought together leading British, Slovak, and international scholars for a conference on Slovak literature at SSEES, the first on this topic held anywhere. The participants included his mentor at Cambridge, Karel Brušák, who "initiated the serious study of Slovak in the United Kingdom," and his London colleagues David Short and Donald Rayfield, among others (1990, ix–xi). Their contributions were published in Pynsent's edited volume *Modern Slovak Prose: Fiction since 1954* (1990), which as Susie Lunt has noted "is the first such book to be

published in the West on this significant period in Slovak literary history and one of the first to present truly engaging, non-establishment interpretations of contemporary Slovak works” (2000, 116). In his introduction, with an extensive overview of the leading contemporary Slovak writers, Pynsent gives his insight into the inequalities within the federal republic, suggesting that Slovaks were more committed to the Czechoslovak idea than Czechs: “It is common for an educated Slovak to speak good Czech, but it is rare for an educated Czech to speak good Slovak. Among other things, that might suggest that Slovaks have a greater sense of Czech-Slovak unity than the Czechs” (1990, 23). He also claims that the international invisibility of Slovak literature reflects external social forces rather than quality: “It is the Slovak language that has hitherto kept most scholars and readers in the West ignorant of Slovak literature. [...] Slovak literature has not grown in isolation but a certain isolation has been imposed on Slovak literature” (37). His own chapter presents Ján Johanides, whom he considers the most original Slovak novelist of the 1980s: “One may see in his choice of blood as the foremost vehicle of philosophical metaphor a form of atavism or morbid sensationalism, but one may not deny that it serves the useful function of guiding the reader through his thought” (97). It is followed by a comparative Slovak-Georgian study by Rayfield, who later published the English translations of Peter Pišťanek’s *Rivers of Babylon* series in his own Garnett Press.

Pynsent’s most ambitious work was his editing of an encyclopedia of East European literature published in 1993.¹ He contributed over half of the Slovak and Czech entries, including those on contemporary writers like Johanides, Rudolf Sloboda, and Pavel Vilikovský, while the other Slovak entries were written by Karel Brušák. Even in this usually neutral format, Pynsent did not withhold his personal opinions, dismissing Dominik Tatarka’s “dissident’ works” as “egocentric sensualism and nostalgic folksy didacticism,” while again praising Ján Johanides, whose “gift for representing the bizarre, and his concern for essential values and transcendental truths” made him “the most complex and versatile writer Slovakia has produced” (1993, 165, 393). The volume includes concise literary histories, in which Pynsent rejects the modern tendency of tracing Slovak literature back to the Great Moravian Empire:

In 20th-century Slovakia it has become a convention to state that the beginnings of Slovak literature lie in the Church Slavonic literature composed by Greeks on the territory of what is now Slovakia and in Old Czech literature. Furthermore, it has become normal to treat anything written in Czech, Latin or even Hungarian on Slovak territory, and anything written by Czech writers of ‘Slovak’ provenance, as part of Slovak literature. That is academically untenable. (545)

In Pynsent’s view, “The main turning-point in Slovak literature, the time when it achieves a degree of self-assuredness, and [...] a simple, specifically Slovak manner of expression, is in the fresh intimate verse of Krasko and Jesenský” in the early 20th century. He points out that the Slovaks “broke away from Socialist Realism sooner than the Czechs [...] and from the 1960s onwards developed a lively, sometimes eccentric, tradition” in both poetry and fiction (546). Whether intended as

self-referential or not, this same description of “lively and eccentric” might be applied to his own critical approach.

In the following year Pynsent published *Questions of Identity* (1994), containing four chapters loosely connected by the theme of Czech and Slovak nationality, of which only the second, “The Myth of Slavness: Pavel Josef Šafařík and Jan Kollár”, is focused on Slovak writers. Although both Šafařík and Kollár are “borderline” figures claimed by both Slovak and Czech literary history, he notes that they “together created a complex new myth of Slav nationalist deliverance. Like any myth it looked to the future as well as the past, and like any nationalist myth it had a utopia as its goal” (43). While his fourth and concluding chapter in this volume is primarily devoted to the “Czech martyr complex”, it also presents his observations comparing the contemporary Czech and Slovak national character, including the difference between their émigré communities, noting that “Slovaks are more vociferous in their nationality than the Czechs,” and that “nostalgia [for] praise of the war-time puppet Slovak State would not have been permitted to appear in print in socialist Czechoslovakia [as it did] in émigré periodicals in Germany and Canada” (150). Echoing his earlier critical remarks toward Slovak literary historiography, he notes that in current scholarly editions of 19th-century Slovak authors, their texts originally written in Czech are usually translated into modern Slovak: “In an area where the linguo-centricity of its nationalism was emphasized because of the closeness of Czech and Slovak, such editions amounted to a falsification of history” (152). At the same time, he observes that the “normalization” period fostered a growing national self-confidence among the Slovaks, who “appear to have a self-confidence about what a Slovak is which one might compare with that the English, Scottish or Welsh” (152). He also points out that the “difference between the Czech and Slovak languages is probably smaller than that between standard English and Lallans” (i.e. Lowland Scots; 156), perhaps subtly alluding to his own birthplace of Renfrewshire in the west-central Scottish Lowlands.

Pynsent further discussed Slovak identity in a broader Central European context in another edited volume, *The Literature of Nationalism* (1996). While his own chapter is focused on Czech women writers, Pynsent’s introduction does include several reflections on Slovakia. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Yugoslav civil war, and with several contributors covering South Slavic literatures, Pynsent compares the Slovak case most directly with the Croatian attempt to distance itself from Serbian, in reference to his preferred topic of historical mythmaking: “It is no doubt telling that the Croats and Slovaks, both formerly under Magyar rule, have a similar central myth: the Croats’ Thousand-Year Dream, the Slovaks’ Thousand-Year Yoke/Groaning. Within the mythic structure of each nation or *ethnie* is a belief in a shared history” (6). His greatest concern, however, remains the contemporary “falsification of history”, for which the early years of Slovak independence provided an alarming example:

Well in time for the beginning of the 1994–5 academic year a school textbook of Slovak history was published under the sponsorship of the National Bank of Slovakia, *Starý národ – mladý štát* (An old nation, a young state). The first of the four authors listed

on the title page is an historical novelist, Milan Ferko (born 1929).² [...] St Cyril's Prologue to the Gospels is called 'the first Slovak poem' and Prince Slavomír's rebellion against the Franks (871), 'the First Slovak Uprising'. One might assert that such a history book is simply a necessary academic evil when a new state is establishing itself, but, in fact, it does matter what children are taught at school and falsification of this sort does contribute to what Gellner summarises as 'the repudiation of all order, consistency and objectivity'.
(7)

By alluding to the Czech-British Ernest Gellner's work on nationalism, Pynsent's sharp critique places Slovakia at the center of one of the most pressing issues of post-socialist Europe.

The following year, Pynsent and Igor Navrátil co-edited the collection *Appropriations and Impositions* (1997) based on an international conference held in Slovakia in 1994. Unlike the previous volume on East European literatures, it is largely focused on British writing, including Scottish, Irish, and Welsh, but the introduction (co-authored with Navrátil but largely bearing Pynsent's inimitable style) prominently features Slovak literary history. In examining "the nationalist manipulation of memory", it contrasts the historicist approach by writers "whose language had been a vehicle for high culture" and in which "history is used to create a present," with "active atavism", in which writers "whose present language has never been a vehicle for high culture will tend to create its history on the basis of the present" (xv–xvi). Pynsent's own chapter, while nominally focused on the themes of violence, humor, and mysticism, provides a wide-ranging survey of recent fiction (1989–1994) that could be seen as a continuation of his lengthy introduction in *Modern Slovak Prose* (1990). Although his articles often indulge in sweeping critical judgments on Slovak (and even more frequently, Czech) writing drawn from his extensive reading, Pynsent rarely comments as directly on Slovak society itself as he does in the following passage (albeit inspired by a passage in Johanides):

What does appear to me to exist in Slovak culture, that of the streets and the villages, is a certain Mediterranean aggressiveness, something that does not concur with the educational values of the high culture on which Slovaks are nourished. Thus the intelligentsia is likely to feel somewhat alienated from their so-called roots. (1997, 198)

While it discusses not only Johanides and Vilikovský but other well-established figures like Sloboda and Ladislav Ballek, the chapter characteristically mentions lesser-known works of the period such as the dramatist Miloš Janoušek's prose collection *Nevoskové panoptikum* (Nonwaxen panopticon, 1993), which Pynsent compares with both Jaroslav Hašek and Gejza Vámoš (219).

In 1999, another Slovak studies conference was held at SSEES that focused more on socio-political than cultural developments, but the resulting collection *Slovakia after Communism and Mečiarism* (2000) includes two separate contributions by Pynsent.³ In his first article, he focuses on the work of Peter Pišťanek, whose work is "self-consciously aesthetic," although "[his] dominant mode is satire, and his devices belong to that mode, the grotesque, parody, the burlesque, and vulgar language" (89). He disputes the claim that Pišťanek is misogynist: "Since male brutality to women has been a major theme of Slovak literature since the 1960s, the lit-

erary critic may well come to the conclusion that Pišťanek is satirically commenting on Slovak men's behavior towards women" (95). He highlights Pišťanek's reaffirmation of "the existence of the comic tradition in Slovak literature, which has been evident since the National Awakening" despite being overshadowed by the legendary (and Pynsent implies, overrated) "greatness of Czech humour" and "self-irony" (107).⁴

The second and longer of Pynsent's chapters introduces his own term, the "Genitalists", for writers who use phallic imagery as a metaphor for post-socialist existence, in contrast to another group he terms the "Barbarians".⁵ Although the focus of this essay is on contemporary literature, he begins with the 19th century, contrasting the "Romantic nationalist" Ľudovít Štúr with his lesser-known contemporary Štěpán Launer: "Where Štúr saw Slovak salvation in Russia, Launer saw it in Germany [...] [One] may see in them the foundations of the two currents of thought that have afflicted Slovak thinking, created Slovak political camps" (117). He sees their viewpoints represented in two trends of contemporary writing: "the Barbarians, a group who tried to re-invent the Western 1960s in 1990s Slovakia [...] are the Štúrites, and the second camp, the Genitalists, are the Launerites. The Barbarians are tired young modernists, the Genitalists 'Postmodernists,' [or] 'neo-Decadents'" (120).

Although he again mentions Vilikovský and Johanides, as well as feminist writers such as Dana Podracká and Jana Juráňová who "have so far had little impact on Slovak literary or social development" (118), Pynsent's focus here is on the so-called Genitalists, characterized through their "ironisation of male genitalia and an explicit concern in their fiction with modern Theory, especially French varieties" (119), who include Tomáš Horváth, Marek Vadas, Michal Hvorecký, and Balla. Although Balla's debut had appeared only three years earlier, Pynsent sees him as "play[ing] more constructively with the deconstruction of his narrators than the rest of the Genitalists I have mentioned" (123–124). This was a prescient judgement for that time, since although all of these authors (apart from Horváth, who later moved in the direction of literary theory) have continued to publish successful fiction, Balla can be seen in retrospect as the most consistently productive and acclaimed writer of that generation.

The other literary chapter in the volume, by Tim Beasley-Murray, describes Slovakia as a deeply polarized society of "Urbanists" and "Ruralists", and associates the Genitalists with the former group, attributing their enthusiasm for Western literary theory for its "the relativist and pluralist bias [...] as a model of cultural plurality. Thus, embracing literary heteroglossia through intertextual play with other languages is the embracing of a notion of Slovakia, tinged with Czechoslovakian-nostalgia, tolerant towards its Hungarians and other minorities" (2000, 80). For Beasley-Murray, however, these writers "seem unaware" that critical theory "serves as the philosophical justification and literary expression of the ideology of liberal, free-market democracy" (83). He critiques their "fundamentally flawed" understanding of theory, in which "a rigid and dogmatic theoretical model of textuality is being applied to the process of literary creation," although he also describes Balla as "the most in-

teresting of the Genitalists,” in whose work “Slovak literature has begun to go beyond the dichotomy of theory and of life” (86).

According to Rajendra Chitnis’s monograph (based on his dissertation supervised by Pynsent), *Literature in Post-communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, the 1990s was distinctive in bringing together “formerly sanctioned writers” from the older generation with newly emerging younger ones: “The Slovak emphasis on the continuity between the writers of different generations reflects the emergence of a more urgent confrontation in Slovak literature between those writers who had a liberal, pluralist understanding of culture, and those who propagated a conservative nationalist view” (2004, 18). Chitnis also discusses the Genitalists, whose “ironizing of the phallus, as a symbol of the Slovak stereotype of male potency [...] may be seen as a unifying motif in the Slovak fiction of the Changes” (18). He follows Pynsent’s argument that 1980s Slovak literature developed more freely than Czech, and suggests that “by tracing postmodernism in Russian or Slovak literature back to the 1960s, when it supposedly appeared in Western literature, critics implicitly sought to demonstrate that Russian or Slovak literature had not, as suspected, fallen behind the dominant currents in Western literary culture” (20).

While Pynsent’s scholarship brought much-needed attention in English to modern and contemporary Slovak writing, his prolific engagement with this topic during the decade of 1990–2000 ran against the gradual decline of literary studies as an academic field. As Chitnis said in a Czech obituary which echoed his affectionate eulogy at Pynsent’s memorial service, “Pynsent loathed the direction British universities had taken in the last decades of his career, which in his opinion reflected a wider change in society’s attitudes to knowledge, teaching, the meaning of life, and the way we perceive and treat each other” (2023, 120). Nonetheless, Pynsent’s work laid the foundation for the continuing study of Slovak literature in the UK, which waned upon his retirement but has revived with the appointment of Chitnis (previously at the University of Bristol) as professor of Czech and Slovak at the University of Oxford.

Another of Pynsent’s legacies for Slovak studies in English is his influence on Julia Sherwood, a former student and later close friend who has emerged as the leading promoter of Slovak fiction in English, which she translates jointly with her husband Peter Sherwood (who was Pynsent’s colleague and taught him Hungarian). At Pynsent’s suggestion, as the first volume in Karolinum Press’s new “Slovak Classics” series, the Sherwoods translated Ján Johanides’s 1995 *Trestajúci zločin* (he also provided the English title *But Crime Does Punish*). Pynsent’s afterword, which discusses not only the novel but Johanides’s general literary career, was the last work he published in his lifetime. Characteristically, it takes him less than two pages to propose a “Genitalist” interpretation of the narrator’s name: “Ondrej Ostarok’s initials OO could indicate the two testicles Ostarok lost in Valdice, perhaps at the hands or feet of the frustrated homosexual warder who just cannot get his penis into Ostarok’s anus” (2022, 87–88). This allusion to the practice of torturing political prisoners is not “anti-homosexual”, but it establishes Ostarok as “a witness to the horrors the Stalinists imposed on Czechoslovaks, and to the fact that the 1960s was actually largely eyewash” (88–89). This dismissive reference to the heavily idealized period

of the Prague Spring reforms as “eyewash” (i.e. nonsense) is a quintessential example of Pynsent’s mythoclastic approach. This unsentimental perspective extends even to Johanides, whose *Slony v Mauthausene* (Elephants in Mauthausen, 1985) he dismisses as “an entirely political or politicized novel and that does not suit the author’s creative mentality” (94). As Julia Sherwood has recalled, Pynsent could be equally dismissive of his own erudition: on one occasion when preparing a podcast interview with him (which was unfortunately never completed), “Robert managed to scold me for the fact that I planned to introduce him as ‘the greatest expert of Czech and Slovak literature in the Anglophone world’. When asked how I should introduce him, he answered: ‘Say that I’m just a normal old sod’” (2023).

Pynsent had warm friendships with several Slovak writers, but his direct impact on Slovak academic circles seemed relatively limited, although the Slovak contributions to a collection on Central European literary history (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2004) by Dagmar Garay Kročanová [Roberts], who was a visiting researcher at SSEES, reflect a similar skepticism toward the use of nationalistic narratives in literary analysis. In his appreciation published in Slovakia soon after Pynsent’s death, Peter Darovec notes that he “did not remain only in the role of a ‘foreign observer’, but also actively entered into the current Slovak critical reflection of contemporary art,” and besides “significantly contribut[ing] to the visibility of Slovak literature in English-speaking countries, [he] also had the ambition to actively shape the form of Slovak literary discourse” (2023, 7). Recounting Vilikovský’s visit to London, when Pynsent introduced him as a “Genitalist” to the displeasure of the diplomatic delegation, Darovec observes that Pynsent’s “elegantly provocative” behavior is reflected in his writing: “It would certainly be beneficial if these relaxed and relaxing manners served at least as a partial inspiration for today’s literary academics, who are often sealed up in their inaccessible languages and concepts” (7).

For an aspiring scholar of Central European literature in the mid-1990s such as myself, when almost no contemporary Slovak fiction was available in translation, Pynsent’s descriptions of it came as a revelation. It was thanks to his summary in *Modern Slovak Prose* that I chose to read and later translate Vilikovský’s *Večne je zelený...* (1989; *Ever Green is...*, 2002), the English title of which I took from him (as well as acknowledging this influence by inserting a semi-hidden allusion to him in the margin notes). Two decades later, in the afterword to *But Crime Does Punish*, I found a footnote referring the reader to my translation of Vilikovský as an example of “works which could not be published before 1988” (Johanides 2023, 96), and felt generously complimented by this implicit stamp of approval in Pynsent’s final work.

Although I did not know Pynsent as a professor or colleague, my encounters with him at SSEES were brief yet memorable. On the first occasion, at a postgraduate conference in 2001, I introduced myself to him just before my panel as a doctoral student of comparative literature with a still vaguely-defined dissertation topic related to national identity and translation studies. “That sounds very... modern,” he told me with a distinctly dubious expression. However, he was more favorably impressed by my paper (the last of the evening) on Pier Paolo Pasolini’s final play *Bestia da stile*, set in Czechoslovakia and featuring the real-life Slovak poet Laco Novomeský, yet

so obscure that even Pynsent apparently had not read it. His comments during our stroll toward dinner were so enthusiastic that I could not resist quipping cheekily, “I do hope it wasn’t too modern then”. As I had expected from his writing, he seemed amused rather than annoyed by this mild audacity. While I only saw him in person one other time, I would like to think that my own work (while different in style and content) bears a trace of my earliest encounters with Pynsent’s “lively and eccentric” explorations of Slovak literature.⁶

NOTES

- ¹ The same volume appeared simultaneously in both US and British editions; the latter under the title *The Everyman Companion to East European Literature* (London: Dent, 1993).
- ² Pynsent’s separate article two years later on Milan Ferko’s brother Vladimír and his son Andrej, also novelists, concludes that the latter’s novel about an emigrant tinker reveals that “the typical plebeian, the pure Slovak, is base, selfish, intolerant, narrow-minded and intensely uneducated” (1998, 282). The piece caused a minor incident when the younger Ferko contacted SSEES to complain about it.
- ³ This event was attended by two future prime ministers from strikingly different political orientations, Robert Fico and Iveta Radičová.
- ⁴ Pynsent even finds an intertextual allusion to the title of Vilkovský’s *Večne je zelený...* (1989; *Ever Green is...*, 2002): “Instead of Goethe’s golden tree of life, Pišťanek has the pompous American-trained Czech Vice-Admiral Sosna declare, ‘Ever green is the tree of practice’” (2000, 94).
- ⁵ In an editorial note, Pynsent observes wryly that the version of the essay published a year earlier (1999) had “censored those parts of the account of the Barbarians and the Genitalists which they considered ‘un-Slovak’”; thus the SSEES volume was printing the full version with the deleted sections marked in bold (2000, 115). These include a quote from Balla’s *Leptokaria* (1996): “For the sake of perfect ecstasy, I’ll live off orgasms. I’m attached to a pot full of water, which trickles down a tube into my throat, into my penis; [...] finally my balls, which fill my mouth, retract in a spasm and my sexual organs spurt out their contents straight into my stomach in quite astonishing ecstasy. Then everything is repeated, constantly – forever” (Pynsent 2000, 125).
- ⁶ My thanks to Rajendra Chitnis and Julia Sherwood for providing me with otherwise unobtainable sources.

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Robert B. Pynsent. Slovak literature. Nationalism. Ján Johanides. Genitalists.

This article provides an overview of the most important works on Slovak literature by the leading British scholar in the field, the late Robert B. Pynsent, from his edited collection *Modern Slovak Prose* (1990) to his afterword for the translation of Ján Johanides's *But Crime Does Punish* (2022). His themes range from nationalism in 19th-century writers to the ironization of sexuality in the post-1989 generation, for whom he coined his own term, the "Genitalists".

Prof. Charles Sabatos, Ph.D.
 English Language and Literature Department
 Faculty of Arts and Sciences
 Yeditepe University
 26 Ağustos Yerleşimi
 34755 Kayışdağı
 Istanbul
 Republic of Türkiye [Turkey]
 charles.sabatos@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4166-9320>