

Croatian Culture as Meeting Point of Four Superstrata

Each culture, including the Croatian, is a net of indivisible internal relations within the spiritual, social, political and material areas of life. These areas are subject to separate fields of knowledge, among which, in regard to the culture of the people or the land, stand out the science of religion, philology, and especially, in these electronic times, the science of communication. However, all these types of knowledge base their insights and their rules, sometimes their laws as well, on writing, as a form of language materialization, thus making language, in written cultures, the first apparent system of expressing public life, i.e. culture. Cultural achievements may indeed be expressed in non-lingual signs, as in musical or theatrical folklore, in civilisational habits, in the forms of a cult and so on. But language, almost exclusively language, written in documents that can be reproduced and permanently maintained, is the base of every culture. The base, i.e. the secure storage of upheld values.

Therefore language and its – communicational, functional, cognitive, aesthetic – realizations constitute the essential base of each culture. Still, language contains its indigenous and its acquired features. The indigenous ones are the stronger the closer they are to the phonological level; and the acquired ones the closer they are to the widest, universal paradigm of human relations. Therefore, all is language, and it interprets the life of the community (the group, the people) in the best way.

Since the beginning of time, there have been, in the life of a people, numerous determinants that have made it a substrate, i.e. such a sign system that remains constant in the changeability of its own immanences. There is, however, a multitude of determinants that make it a creative recipient of other sign systems, which are then determined as language's superstrata. A superstratum is such a language in contact with the native language, that "loans" its features for a

shorter or longer time to the substrate, until the substrate adopts them as its own values, and they gradually "melt" with the native substrate. And the superstratum, before it "melts" with the substrate, brings with it the spiritual features of other, neighbouring groups and peoples, and their civilisations. Such is the "interplay" of cultures! Languages in contact are intermediaries between cultures in contact.

Each culture is a historic "team-play" of the native substrate and the historically active superstrata. Each culture in its own way. A rule may be formulated. Where a substrate acts alone, the culture is chthonic, closed into itself, and in these modern times might possibly survive only as a reservation protected by the state. And where there is only exposure to superstrata, culture is internationalised, gradually losing its indigenous features. Ideal are those cultures that have maintained their native course, that have always nurtured and fed its substrate, but have also been open towards lingual, i.e. communicational values of other cultures. This is why European cultures have survived: they have nurtured a balanced relationship between their own substrates and welcome superstrata. Hence the multitude of European languages, cultures, states. In Europe, the passion for the Tower of Babel has always been stronger than any passion towards an autistic cave or a silent, wordless desert.

Still, each culture maintains the play between substrates and accepted superstrata in its own way. So the Croatian culture as well. This is how it differs from other Slavic cultures, how it differs from other neighbouring cultures, such as the Italian, Austrian, Slovenian, Hungarian, Serbian. Simply put, the Croatian culture is its own special weave of relations between the native language and the languages with which it was in close contact, under circumstances of political or informational subordination. However, history itself decides which form of subordination will later turn out to be fruitful and which one will not. The latter is quickly forgotten, the former remains a constant archive of national culture.

Croatian culture has had its own substrate during thirteen centuries: its own languages that today are apparent as an amalgam of at least six differing languages of times long past. But it also had its superstrata which lapped at its borders from four neighbouring directions: the Mediterranean, Central Europe, Pannonia and Western Balkans. As regards the substrate, there has been a succession of the following written languages: Old Slavonic, Latin, Čakavian, Kajkavian, Old Štokavian and Modern Štokavian. And each one of them has recorded, in papers and books, today on discs (and in ancient times in stone), the truths (and lies) of life in the Croatian lands. Yet these truths have been recorded also in a series of languages that have left their traces in the Croatian language, i.e. culture. The aforementioned Latin is beyond discussion, but there also were and are presumably today, more or less apparent, the following: German, Italian, Hungarian, Turkish, Albanian, Serbian. Their values were brought by "newcomers", conquerors, adventurers, immigrants, foreign political strategists, and last but not least, native xenophiles. All these intermediary groups had their own special goals, often subjugation, but also well-intentioned ones.

In any case, the substrate of the Croatian language and culture has at different times been equally influenced by cultural values brought by four superstrata: the Mediterranean, the Central European, the Pannonian and the Western Balkan ones. The duration of their dominances might vary, but the mechanisms are the same. Today we can classify them according to their participation in contemporary Croatian culture. They are arranged in the very order they have been enumerated here. Thus, Croatian culture is, apart from its substantial determination, its substrate, also Mediterranean, Central European, Pannonian and Western Balkan. Most of all Mediterranean, least of all Western Balkan.

The Mediterranean Superstratum

Croatia is in its largest part a Mediterranean country, so the values of its language are literally soaked in mediterraneanism. Still, the languages with which Croatia was in close contact, the constant Latin, Italian, and Greek in the past, were also adding to the soak. From this constant practice of lingual contact three major cultural acquisitions sprang forth: Catholicism, Latinity and the concept of harmony. Of all Christian types of religiousness, Catholicism has taken the strongest root in Croatia, as is well known. Croats are mostly Catholics. And they, whether it be true or not, strive toward the comprehensiveness of the term Man, towards the comprehensiveness of Christianity, as indeed expressed by the Greek loan word *katholikós*. And since the Mediterranean is the cradle of Christianity, it is a natural fact that the Croats, after moving there in the 7th century quickly accepted Christianity as the base for its religious expression. As Catholics, mainly Catholics, Croats have a good understanding of the other Mediterranean Catholic peoples: the Italians, the French, the Catalan and the Spanish. Unfortunately, not also of the Arabs from the southern Mediterranean, but, interestingly, of the Israelis. The other superstratum fact is *latinitas*. Not only because Latin used to be, until several decades ago, the ceremonial language of the Catholic church (since the Croats were among the few peoples who had the privilege to serve in one of its old national languages), but also because a large number of educated Croats during the humanist, renaissance and classicist periods expressed themselves in Latin, wrote their scientific and literary works in it, communicated in it during scholarly discussions. Latin, the *lingua franca* of educated Europe, was the language of Croatian literature, as it was also the official language of the Croatian Parliament up to the year 1847! In modern Croatian there is a significant number of linguistic data which is the direct result of adopted Latinity as a cultural paradigm.

To be born in the Mediterranean means always to measure data of finality and the vastness of infinity. It means to perceive the "spirit of shape". Balance and

measure, the ancient inheritance of the Greek and Latin spirits, found in Croatian mediaeval and renaissance cultures many prolific creators: Luciano Laurana (Lucijan Vranjanin), Giorgio Giulio Clovio (Juraj Julije Klović), Giorgio da Sebenico (Juraj Dalmatinac), all the way to Meštrović and contemporary sculptors. Also, Dalmatian towns are a model realization of the Mediterranean spirit, as are works by the best Croatian writers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, of the Baroque and modern times. Marin Držić, Marko Marulić, Ivan Gundulić, Ivan Bunić Vučić, these are but a few of the most famous keepers of Mediterranean universalism.

Central European Substratum

Ideas from higher spiritual planes descended from Central Europe into Croatia through the German, but also through the Czech and Slovak languages. These were scholarly and philosophical ideas. The intermediary was, of course, the Austrian territory. This fact is easily explained on the basis of the political system of the Croatian state. Croatia, Dalmatia, Slavonia and Istria were all, at different times in different ways, constituent parts of the Habsburg Monarchy. Vienna was its capital. Therefore, many legal norms, customs, everyday ideas, but also the highest forms of science and art, became part of the lingual sediment of Croatian culture. From Albert the Great, from, if you will, the most learned man of the ninth century, Gottschalk of Orbais, all the way to Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Croatian culture, with its good knowledge of German, knew how to adopt the ideas of these heroes of thought, and internalize them. It is well known to what extent Croatians were in close contact with the German language in the 18th and 19th centuries. To that extent even, that at times they had to express anti-German sentiments. The German language, German philosophy, especially the values of the Reformation and Kant's teachings, found fertile ground in Croatia. And some of these pinnacles of thought found

their creative echoes in the works of Croatian thinkers. And *vice versa*! For example; in the sixteenth century, in Germany itself, two prominent Croatians served as tools in religious discussions. The Protestants extensively cited one of Luther's and Melanchthon's supporters, Matija Vlačić (Matthias Flacius Illyricus), who was born in Labin; and the Catholics cited the most learned Croat and the founding father of Croatian literature, from the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, Marko Marulić from Split. According to recent findings, his *De institutione bene vivendi* was published in Cologne in German in four different editions within a few years. Nothing can be a better symbol of the integration of Croatian culture, then and now, into Central-European cultural trends.

The Pannonian superstratum

It has to be said in advance that we are not speaking only of Pannonia, part of which is also Northern Croatia. Thus, we are not speaking of only the area of modern Hungary, with which Croatia was politically joined in a state for all of eight centuries, but also of an area which is significantly beyond Pannonia. This is the area from which the Croats originally came to the Adriatic in the 7th century. In modern Croatian culture this is primarily apparent in the fact that the Croatian language belongs to the joint Slavic linguistic tree, from which it even today picks many a fruit. Croats are especially close to the linguistic corpus of the Balto-Slavic peoples. It is interesting to note that the first lecture at the renewed University in Zagreb in 1847 was by the slavist Lavoslav Geitler, and on the Lithuanian language to boot. A valuable fact regarding the "inherent" Croatian "nationalism"! There is even today a certain number of writers, and a significant number of folk customs and folklore forms, that are rooted in the Croats' ancient homeland. And the original ancient Slavic inspiration was also the path for the greatest Croatian female writer, Ivana Brlić Mažuranić, the "Croatian Andersen". Also, ancient Slavic roots are hinted at in the melody of

many modern songs, as noted in ethno-musicological research. The Pannonian superstratum is apparent as a constant flow and influx, as a constant transfer of ideas and values within the wide area from the Ukraine, through the Carpathian Mountains and Southern Poland, through Slovakia and Hungary, finding its estuary in Northern Croatia, from Zagreb to Vukovar and Syrmia.

Western Balkan Superstratum

Regardless of the fact that in modern Bosnia and Herzegovina there lives a number of Croats who share all the cultural heritage of the Croatian nation, both Bosnia and Herzegovina were sources which influenced Croatia with significant spiritual currents. For a long time Islam touched even today's "Croatian horseshoe", bringing with it a series of specific features that slowly seeped into public and private lives. In literature, writers of the same language created a special literary genre in the 17th century: the sermon. These writers were Bosnian Franciscans. And the oral tradition, especially love poetry, found its significant place in Croatian literature. Famous are the "Sevdalinka" poems, but the most renowned is the oral Croatian poem, the *Hasanaginica*, which was, through Mérimé, translated by Goethe himself! In spiritual matters, there was a strong wave of a special form of Manichaeism, Bogomilism. The belief that Evil is equal to Good exists in several writers today, even the greatest ones, for example in Krleža, Laušić, the southern poets, its unconscious advocates. Be it as it may, in Bosnia and Herzegovina two very disparate, yet monotheistic religions, Islam and Catholicism, expressed their religious truths in the same language. Therefore the learned Muslim poet and polyhistor, Safvet beg Bašagić, was able to say:

For the Croatian language's ring
can easily coin, can easily join
East and West, whether they think or sing.

The four superstrata of Croatian culture have saved it from entropy. They have opened up windows into the world, not only for Croatian culture, but for the country in general. Nevertheless, it has not lost its irrefutable autochthonousness. Its substrate has always been strong enough to amalgamate such numerous spiritual and lingual layers.