

# **IDENTITY AND EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

The question of identity preoccupies both literature and literary theory. Personal identity is built in relation to the feeling of belonging. The process of education is a complex procedure which, through many ways and identification processes builds the identity of an individual. It includes given linguistic systems and literary works. Today's modified ways of learning still take part in forming gender and national identities, common as well as individual, and certain instruments offered by contemporary literary theory help us analyze the process.

## **Identity**

The issues of subject formation and subjectivity formation have been one of the principal questions of contemporary theory for some time now. Although the interpretations of the issues differ, they share the same basic idea. A stable, permanent, autonomous subject does not exist. The subject is being constantly reformed in the continuous process of existence thus repositioning itself in its context. In a casual conversation one can easily perceive oneself as the measure of all things, but even then we are dealing with comparing oneself with the Other or with the others. Identity is being formed through a continuous social play of relations to the others, thus being often modified and destabilized. This process of continuous formation simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the existing, so that the subject assumes several different identities which have been formed and which are yet to be formed, in relation to itself and to its context. Whether we are dealing with the individual or the collective identity is not relevant.

Both the individual and the collective identity are shaped in the process of representation, mostly through various forms of narration which are fictional and language mediated, and yet materially and politically utterly effective. Identities are therefore formed in the symbolic space of language through complex processes which include different forms of inclusion and exclusion within various relations of power. Despite all the theoretical knowledge and achievements, this process remains very much complex and unpredictable. On the individual level the process begins in Lacan's pre-lingual, pre-mirror phase stage of the Real, in early childhood, only to be later formed through questioning and reasoning in relation to the Other and the opposite. This process is a perpetual reinterpretation, both on the individual and the collective level, so the constant modification of the subject keeps reshaping and reinterpreting that to which it, or the society as a whole, is related to.

Language is the space of the symbolic. The rules within it are very clearly structured. That is precisely where Julia Kristeva finds reasons to project such existence onto meanings thus trying to control other subjects by actually projecting the idea of stability within the language onto our relations to others.

The symbolic space of language does indeed have similarities to various forms of sociopolitical reality, and performativity of the text can nowadays be proved in a much more subtle manner than Austin did more than half a century ago. The widely understood issue of purposiveness of literature considers all that has been written. More interesting parts of literary theory do not problematize authenticity and verisimilitude, but political and ethical effects the texts has. Contemporary literary theory, humanities in general, deals with the question of identity formation and identification of the subject, which is perceived as dynamic. Subjectivity is a process, identity can be influenced. According to Judith Butler identity is formed within multiply interlaced and partly corresponding and yet party completely differing cultural identifications such as class, racial, religious or gender ones which add up.

If the language used is relevant to identity formation, one must not disregard the importance of the text which is being understood as in one of the complex narratological interpretations where everything around us is a kind of story, a narrative or as a pragmatic effect resulting from popular, much read texts of some novels, literary historical reviews or designated textbooks. Our perception of reality undoubtedly remains narrative, although there has been a widespread claim lately that we have been living in a virtual world of images. Our cognition, and as thus our personality, are being formed through a story, a narrative, that is, through a text.

Nowadays, the common belief is that the mind can not exist outside of culture. Human development is associated with the development of a lifestyle where members share certain symbols, and the symbolic modus is being preserved, upgraded and transferred onto new generations that maintain the identity of a culture. Jerome Bruner, in his preface to *The Culture of Education* states that nowadays we have come to understand that the way we devise education is in the function of our perception of a certain culture (Bruner, 2000:9).

This way the problem of shaping and education through texts, that is literature, has simply been put within the contemporary frame. It has a history and it has been relying on a long tradition of humanistic education of a free human being. Just to remember Socrates, the Academy, the Roman *studia humanitatis*, the renaissance *seven liberal arts*, Rousseau's work on education, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Enlightenment idea of pedagogy which was understood as encouraging the individual to achieve his maximum on every level also involved the collective, a national collectiveness. That was the key to work through education. National literature was used to educate the collective identity. Books can influence identity formation. Books are an efficient means of national education, as well as a potential means of indoctrination. The first law concerning public schools and public education in the Kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia, printed in Zagreb in 1874 (issued October 14, 1874, Law on Public Schools and Public Education in the Kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia, National Printing Shop Ljudevit Gaj 1874) states:

*....One more thing: while designing and comprising future designated textbooks, the Government was lead by the principle which is to be most strictly followed, that the purpose of education in public schools is primarily to teach the attending youth **their** language, their culture, their country. After that come the neighbouring and alliance countries and nations, and finally the rest of the world, the great history of which is to be taught to older higher level attendants...*

When we talk about identity today, we refer to it as being very unstable and subject to perpetual change, subjects exist merely as dynamic categories. During our identity formation

we pass through different phases, we have the ability to simultaneously access and identify with several different identity patterns. Such concept, such comprehension of identity opens up the possibility that identities can be formed through a series of conscious and unconscious identifications. That leads to the conclusion that, up to a point, it is possible to willingly influence our inborn characteristics, even when it comes to nationality or gender, although identity very much determines our existence and makes us what we are now and the next moment might not be.

Books were, very early in history, recognized as a rather efficient means of individual or collective identity formation. Just to think of all the lists of banned books, appearing over time trying to influence distribution and reception of certain titles, mostly without success though. Violence done to books as well as individual authors marking certain historical periods which is not so unthinkable even today, also confirms the present, existing consciousness of their influence. Books have been accused of corrupting the readers by affecting their identification. Literature does not deal with the identity merely on the level of contemporary theoretical research, but also in various ways by transferring the narrative content in literary works. Literary texts often thematize characters' identity formation, and as such they influence the reader as potential identification models which can in some cases be fatal, as in the case Goethe's *Werther*. No matter how pathetic it may sound, the statement that books can influence readers can be true.

By problematizing the unstable, fluctuant identity, contemporary theory has raised the question of the Others and has tried to introduce into literature texts which are not canonical, thus bringing into question the process of canonization itself. The idea of contemporary education is still based on that very process. This created space not only for postcolonial literature, but also for all that which nowadays is called postcolonial criticism, including the treatment of women, and even various gay and lesbian identifications as objects.

### **The Role of Education and the Boundaries of the Individual and the Collective Identity**

The complexity of the individual identity formation is fully applicable to the collective identity formation. Within a somewhat complex structure exist and function the same continuous processes of questioning one's own boundaries and relations to others. Although the processes shaping these collective memories are more easily demonstrated in turbulent periods, in the case of Croatian culture that would be the second half of the nineteenth century, these periods do not end therefore leaving the images of collective identities open and unfinished. Every historical period and every culture keep reinventing themselves by shaping its alterity. This process is very certain, and yet most national histories of literature clearly mark the ownership over certain texts, especially if the texts in question are the pillars of that history.

In a text as short as this it is only possible to briefly refer to the process of identity formation, to make it clear that the role of education is mandatory. Education also functions as a bond between the individual and the collective.

A process which, with different appearance, exists in all cultures and societies may be easily explained through the examples of forming of modern European states. In that process of formation, education and texts were used with great caution and skill. For the leaders of the Illyrian movement in nineteenth century Croatia, the process of modernization of education was one of their primary goals. Reforms were made in order to the population, the people, literate. Ljudevit Vukotinovi dealt with the issue in 1844 in his booklet *A Little About Public Schools*. He pointed out to the large number of illiterate people slowing down the process of modernization of Croatia. He was very much aware that new ideas can be spread through texts, and that textual communication, communication through books and magazines is an efficient way to transfer new values.

In all modern states education is also a means of creating and shaping loyal, obedient citizens. Education was meant to reduce the existing social and regional differences, and in a way create conditions for the indoctrination of the entire new state or states. Soon after introducing national language to schools, the parliament reached a decision in 1847 to open a chain of schools on the entire area of the Kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia. This network of schools was to be improved and law-controlled. A big difference in education and therefore society as well was made in 1874, when Mažurani's law made schooling mandatory for boys and girls. Legislation determined rules and principles of work of the educational system. Croatian language was introduced to schools, teachers had to pass a course to be instructed and prepared to teach, and were also under the constant supervision of county officials. Pupils were informed of previously selected contents. Uniform designated textbooks were used, and they mediated this new national identity. Textbooks helped determine and shape the national literary canon. Positive characteristics about the Croatian people, like loyalty and responsibility, willingness to serve one's sovereign who in turn is caring and involved when it comes to his or her citizens; all that could be read in literary texts or their interpretations.. The Croatian people are proud to be a part of the great Habsburg Empire. They are not very fond of the Ottoman Empire because of the tax system. (Jelavich, 1992) Extracts from work by Gunduli, Vitezovi, and Karnauti were used in those interpretations. A popular recurring theme was the battle of Siget, which was a favourite in the older days of Croatian literature. Although the story of the battle actually deals with defeat because Nikola Zrinski got killed during the siege of the fortress, interpretation has the power to turn defeat into victory – the Turks outnumbered the Croats, so the brave Nikola Zrinski heroically lead his army to their last attack and got killed in the process, but the Turks withdrew from the fight and the Habsburg Empire was saved.

Textbooks or readers very efficiently mediated ideas about history of national literature, and national identity was formed through interpretations and attitudes. The importance of the Croatian people was portrayed in works which have been interpreted as exceptional, ancient, and important. Literary texts served to present and promote one's own tradition, language, literature, history.

After a brief insight into history it is clear that nowadays we use other “great truths”, so in textbooks, when it comes to the Habsburg Empire we do not find the sense of admiration but the idealization of European unification. It is visible that not much has actually changed. Education mediated scientific facts of that time differ significantly from those of today, so that the identity of an average European individual might be different then than it is now, though the process of its formation remains more or less unchanged.

A series of assumed beliefs, or what we call ideology, is mediated within a society through text, where text is perceived in its broadest sense. That influences identity formation to a great extent. Calling those beliefs and ideology is not meant negative, but as a kind of discourse, a way we talk about it. Teun van Dijk points out their social function, which is for many members of the group rather stable, and can be interpreted as an abstract system of knowledge which enables communication in different contexts. He also points to the fact of negative determination of ideology that makes us not use the terminology when it comes to our own beliefs but the beliefs of others. On the other hand, every consideration of ideology is itself an ideology, what make it almost impossible to avoid because it actually represents a materialization of the existing omnipresent values

At this point we can think of Jan Assman who views individual memory only through various communication processes. The role of individual memory is to connect the individual to various social groups. The collective and the individual memory are the basis of identity, so their interrelation has to be taken into account. Individual identities determine collective identities, but collective identities are not merely the sum of the individual ones. Individual memories are determined through actions within groups, we recall what we have been told by others as well as our own memories. Our memory is determined by our own cognition, our relation to the others, our consciousness about values of our social and cultural context, that is, by the collective identity in which we recognize ourselves. Contemporary theoretical research emphasises the obvious connection between literature, culture and memory through the undisputable effect various literary-historical reviews have in certain cultures and within the widely connected network of meanings which makes a particular culture, as defined by Greetz (1973). Literary history does not just mean the immanent reading of literary texts, but rather places them into contexts.

The most frequently mentioned and fairly complex identity is definitely the national one. It is a term referred to as paradoxical by Anderson. In the very title of his book he talks about an imaginary community which makes it easy for the individual to identify with, although he or she will never meet all the members of that community. According to Anderson's interpretation, what serves as a means of connecting the members of that community is education. He points out that modern nations are being formed simultaneously with the rise of modern printing, what gave many books and magazines the feeling of unity. Books and magazines became numerous and began being more used due to the increasing number of literate individuals of certain nations, and that was possible due to education which is the most significant link between individual national communities. This collectiveness was confirmed through, at the time very popular various jubilees, what is one of the more effective ways of retaining national memory. Building statues was almost a matter of fashion. Jubilees that have been important in certain cultures are still being celebrated in public places such as schools or square, thus supporting national identification.

Education became mandatory not before the end of the nineteenth century, what very much increased the number of books and magazines consumers, creating at the time new and a very efficient means of influencing various forms of public opinion.. Through various instances of educational institutions literary canon was being defined and was becoming functional. Education forms and imposes systems of values, for chosen texts it offered single, unambiguous interpretations. The education authorities themselves were very highly educated. This enabled education to participate in relations between educational institutions and the state in complex processes of restoring the collective national culture.

Educational procedures unite all the elements significant to that kind of identification process, education includes national language, literature and history. At the very beginning of the forming of modern Croatian identity Dimitrije Demetar's text was published in the magazine *Danica*. In the text he makes it very clear that he fully understands how the identity is formed "*Dear people, we have a beautiful language, and written in that language we have beautiful texts which would make proud even the most educated people of Europe, and here we are, not knowing them and searching for something we already have.*" (Demetar, Thought About Illyrian Language, *Danica*, 1848). Education gives that retrospect needed for collective identification. The story on which it is based thus becomes functional.

As we near the end of this superficial presentation, it has to be pointed out that the term *identity*, just as *ideology* or *culture*, is a term that is very often used and even more often misused in contemporary theory. On one hand that forces us to admit that all ideas and discussions concerning identity are doomed to criticism and incompleteness. This openness of the term, on the other hand, opens up the possibility of continuous mobility what can sometimes lead to new meanings. Maybe it is best said in Hall's sentence that "identity is one of the terms that functions when it is "crossed", in the interval between abatement and appearance: an idea that can not be thought about the old way, and without which certain key issues can not even be considered" (Hall, 358).

The problem is being imposed in the simple relation between the individual and the collective, for it can seem that we are dealing with two groups where one includes the other, or others. It appears though that the true understanding of the problem of identity is to be identified with those ideas of the term *culture* which interpret it as a series of different ways. We can identify ourselves with a specific form of collective identity while at the same time feeling as the others

This explanation is important for a better understanding of contemporary global processes which are filling art and media, and consequently interpretations. If texts, or other contemporary artefacts offer a reading in the line of this popular interpretation, we are willing to look the other way when it comes to other levels of meaning or even flaws. This is how probably an average, pensive student of humanities will try to explain most of what is happening in the world today. Due to the omnipresent globalization mantra, in a world where supposedly everything is accessible and possible, we are not always capable of seeing that globalization is merely an illusion and that the world we are living in is very much divided. And while education is one of the main reasons that the idea of global connectedness is an integral part of our identity, its symbolic components keep being redefined on a much lower level. It is very popular in Europe nowadays to revive the heritage through various forms of festivalization and carnavalization, what contributes greatly to certain local communities which in this way keep questioning the symbolic components of their identities.

Education is not merely a link between the individual and the collective, it is the education that connects the space of the symbolic and the space of the concrete. In a way, education is a way of imposing identity, at least when we are talking about forms of primary education and schooling. Here we see the literary canon at work. The canon is formed as a coherent, meaningful concept that is being held together through argumentation which can be brought into question only by a more thorough scientific analysis. Today we could approach it as something that has no permanent or cumulative synthesis of national or even universal values, but is rather a consequence of relations within the society, division of social power

and ideology. As we have pointed out several times, the process of canonization, a kind of reinterpretation of heritage, can not be stopped.

Such insisting that certain literary canons or authors belong to a certain collective can be a matter of serious debate and even conflict, what can be supported by numerous examples on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Ivo Andrić, the only south Slavic Nobel winner, a canon whose literary work used to be an integral part of every textbook has since become a topic of discussions and symposiums, which only confirm a rather ambivalent attitude towards his body of work. What emerges is the association of a bridge in the title of one of his great once fashionable novels which was usually read as symbolically bringing together of different times, cultures, people. Paradoxically, soon after his death his sentences will be read in a completely different way, different explanations for new political situations will be read in them. Different interpretations will be offering contrastive readings which were obviously a consequence of the ideological and not the immanent reading.

Due to historical circumstance, the last decade of the nineteenth century once again reinterpreted the Croatian literary canon. The change did not affect literature prior to the national revival or the Illyrian movement, but mostly twentieth century texts. So textbooks replaced poetry of Juraj Kaštelan with sonnets of Nikola Bulić or Viktor Vida to illustrate metaphors. Almost all new literary historical reviews included Mile Budak while excluding August Cesarec. When it comes to Vladimir Nazor, the “obsolete” texts were replaced with poems about Croatian kings. It indisputably clear that there is no such thing as one, stable, defined, eternal literary canon, no matter how firm it may seem at the time. While forming a canon what is always active is the mechanism that simultaneously recognizes similarities and abstracts differences. No matter how simplified this may seem, it does come as the only valid theory Barbara Herrnstein Smith gives us. A work of literature has no preset value, its value depends on the dynamic process (Herrnstein Smith, 12) of evaluation and reinterpretation. Permanence of literary canons, their eternal universal value comes as a consequence of repeating the same interpretations through the system of education over years.

Even when simplified like this, the process of canonization is never uncomplicated. In most cases the processes of historization, aestheticization and nationalizations are all active at the same time. That which historical interpretations exclude is being made into a canon through complex procedures that take the text out of the normal time flux, “freezing” it in a way (Assman, 2002: 60).

The analogy of canon and ideology is rather complex, but effective.. (Eagleton) Literary texts which are canons hide the potential social conditioning of their position, while foregrounding aesthetical and perfectly autonomous criteria of choice. Artistic canons always deal with mechanisms which perform the identification of the individual or even the collective subject through art, literature and culture, in a certain defined context. Our perception can be brought in to correlation with the consumed artefacts, especially the ones that come with interpretations. A canon offers us imaginary models which help us become a part of a certain group. Literary texts chosen in such a manner do have an exceptional value, but only within those social groups where they function as exceptional. It should be noted that significant changes and reinterpretations of canons always happen in grim times.

If we caricature the whole issue a little bit, the influence of education can be reduced to a pragmatic level, as we have seen in historical textbooks various imposed interpretations of events can lead to an armed conflict. Academic discussions, no matter how well planned, can not enter the space of action, the space of politics, unless they use education. The

Enlightenment ideals about transferring great human values via education in reality often offer either compromising or particular or even obviously contradictory solutions. And yet, education is closely related to the formation of a personal identity of a human being, as well as the identity of the collective within he or she is formed.

Discussion lead by contemporary intellectuals about individual identity formation or culture identity formation, about the omnipresent and yet undefined power about the efficiency of language and texts can be exciting in that it combines semiotics, linguistics, psychoanalysis, narratology, political theory, literary theory, sociology and history. And yet it is happening in time and place with no universal collective values which hold constant compromising. The only conceivable strategy to enter an active political space is education. Education has made possible many positive activities of today's society to acknowledge minority rights, what has enabled a yet different approach to identity interpretation.

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## **Academic biography**

Patricia Maruši earned her Ph.D. at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb, with the thesis *Forming of Literary Canon in older Croatian Literature 1835- 1913*. For over 15 years she has been teaching classes related to literature and literary theory. She has participated in conferences and projects dealing with the relation of literature and education. In her academic work she has dealt with the question of canonization, relations between old and modern Croatian literature, function of magazines in culture and society, questions of forming national identities and literary histories.

