

THE SLOVENIAN AND THE EUROPEAN NOVEL: AN OUTLINE

Zamudništvo v razvoju slovenske proze je oviralo dialog s sočasnim evropskim romanom. Prav zaradi tega so se zgodovinske težnje evropskega romana pokazale precej drugače v slovenskem romanu 19. stoletja. Tudi dejstvo, da je bila slovenska družba v tem času dvojezična, je oviralo razvoj slovenske proze. Ivan Cankar je prvi začel dialog s sodobnim evropskim romanom, a njegovo delo sega od realizma do simbolizma, od pozne romantike do naturalizma. Vendar pa so prav njegova začetna prizadevanja omogočila slovenskim pisateljem 20. stoletja naslonitev na tujo novelistično izročilo, pa tudi na lastnega »močnega avtorja«.

slovenski roman, povest, literarna sociologija, evropskost, moderna, Ivan Cankar

The delay in the development of Slovenian prose hindered the dialogue with the contemporary European novel. For this reason the historical tendencies of the European novel took significantly different shapes than the 19th c. Slovenian novel. The fact that Slovenian society was bilingual at that time also posed an obstacle to the development of Slovenian prose. Ivan Cankar was the first writer to start a dialogue with the contemporary European novel, but his works range from realism to symbolism, and from late-romanticism to naturalism. However, his pioneering efforts made it possible for the Slovenian writers of the 20th c. to refer not only to the foreign novel-tradition, but also to a *strong author* of their own.

Slovene novel, short story, literary sociology, Europeanness, *Moderna*, Ivan Cankar

The fact that the first Slovenian novel that can be considered a prose work of truly substantial length from the point of view of the European novel's history was published in 1866 had a significant impact on Slovenian historical and theoretical thinking about the novel. However, the focus is not on phase displacement (*Phasenverschiebung*, *décalage chronologique*) of a dubious vantage point applied according to a comparativist consideration of deterministic nature, but, rather, on the fact that sociological and linguistic-theoretical issues are important in the treatment of the Slovenian novel, and on the question what kind of traditional events are questioned, created, and rejected by the Slovenian novel at the turn of the century, especially in the work of Ivan Cankar. With regard to the first point, it was partly the structure of Slovenian society and partly the insufficiency of the Slovenian literary world that made the demand for the Slovenian novel relatively

modest in the first half of the 19th century. The reason lay in the fact that most Slovenian readers were multilingual and had access to high (and not so high) quality literature written in German, thus there was no need for the works of world literature to be translated into Slovenian from, for instance, German. One consequence of this was that the Slovenian readers' multilingualism became an obstacle to the publishing and reading of Slovenian novels, and there was no natural way (due to the lack of a variety of translated works) for the language of novels to become established in Slovenian in original literary works. As is most likely the case with most of Ivan Cankar's works, another possible outcome of this was that a direct connection was established between Slovenian novelists and world literature rather than an indirect one through literary works translated into Slovenian. Instead, Ivan Cankar (and others) reacted to and polemicized with works interpreted independently but not read in Slovenian. An important literary sociological fact is that there was hardly an economically significant publisher in the whole Slovenian-language territory who could have supported himself by publishing and selling Slovenian novels. Due to the well-known structure of Slovenian society, the publishing and reading of original Slovenian novels was for a great while almost a patriotic act. Utilitarian and ethical approaches to literature also did not favor the development of the type of novel that by the second half of the 19th c. led to the complete revitalization of novelistic language in both French and Russian literatures. Through creating the crisis of the novel's presuppositions concerning language and the individual subject conscious, it also considerably changed prose epical formations created in the name of realism. The 19th c. Slovenian novel attempted to meet the expectations of its own environment of the small town and village and of the intellectual circles growing out of them. In the late realistic or romantic poetical fashions it attempted to explore the world in which European and Slovenian epical formations can enter into a dialogue. At the same time, the utilitarian and ethical considerations made the novelistic traditions of European realism and romanticism continue, although by the end of the 19th century they were mostly questioned, but could still be reacted to in the exploration of the Slovenian world. Among these is the issue of the position of the narrator, i.e., how the narrator, who is omnipotent in the world of the novel and who can transmit the society's moral norms and personality types, functions. But the issue of moral justice, which surfaces in the teleological interpretation of the series of events depicted in the novel, is such as well and connected to the issue of the narrator. This also means that the plot becomes the carrier of the novel's ideological content: a voice external to the possible world of the novel is heard in the course of the novel's events, sometimes administering justice and attempting to establish a direct connection with non-literary factors. At the same time, we should not forget, didactics and what is termed referentiality, were prerequisites of the readability of the Slovenian novels of the last four decades of the 19th century and of the extent to which they were read. And this helped the development of a readership which chose the future world

literature reading matter in such a way that it was ready and able to absorb and process Ivan Cankar's epic works, which "overwrote" the Slovenian novelist tradition and polemicized with it. This way, similarly to its European counterpart, the history of the Slovenian novel can be described as a result of interplay between continuity and interruption and a mutual presupposition of the two. More concretely, in the course of the 19th century such a novel formation is created that, from among the proposed influences of literature, strives to realize a didactic function. This didactic function, however, does not prevail in the works' ideological stratum, but, primarily, in introducing a genre into Slovenian literature that readers and critics had only known before from reading in foreign languages. And after a gradually widening circle of novel readers had been established, only then was a Slovenian novelist able to undertake the subversion of the traditional Slovenian novel and to begin a direct dialog with the already well-established novelist trends of Europe. Our example is Ivan Cankar's novel *Hiša Marije Pomočnice* (*Maria's Almshouse*, 1904). As far as the novel's "allegorical space" is concerned, a hospital in the outskirts of the big city, Vienna, the confined space of the hospital room, and the venue of the fourteen girl patients' daydreaming signals the layering on top of each other and assimilation to each other of worlds thought to exist in binary oppositions, such as the proximity of life and death (that is, a slow dying process). The time frame of the novel extends from one death to another; meanwhile, the passing of essentially uneventful days (filled with events symbolic only for them) becomes unnoticeable and incomprehensible, through which the narrator's objective time is rewritten by the sick girls' subjective time. Seemingly, the novelist-narrator provides a voice to the images of the Slovenian religious tradition, but in reality he alienates us from them: the religious enthusiasm voiced at the end of the novel evokes the introduction to the novel, and thus the beginning point of entering the hospital is essentially repeated, on the level of statements, in the closing phrases. This way, the reader is faced with a novel in which there is no series of events, and the small events that happen to the protagonists do not form a continuous, progressive event. At the same time, we learn the stories of almost all of the fourteen girls. This is important in two respects. One refers to the turn of the history of the Central European novel, since not only in Slovenian literature but, also, for instance, in Hungarian and Slovak literature as well, Turgenev constituted the most widely read and most greatly appreciated author. The personalities peopling his provincial manor houses, the "superfluous men", are depicted at defining moments of their lives, but their prehistories are related in the course of the text as well, thus widening the space and time of the narrow space of the plot and showing the world-like characteristics of the related series of events, which, in themselves seem insignificant and are blurred by the conversations of the salons. This structuring of Turgenev's novels is integrated into the history of the Central European novel, and Ivan Cankar also seems to be using the contrasting of story and prehistory in his above-mentioned novel. Another important aspect is that Cankar

“deforms” the Turgenevian tradition: he seemingly impoverishes the salon’s bilingual – French and Russian – language, conversations feigning interest in culture and sinks them into uneventful, everyday, and insignificant matters. In his prehistories he does not provide explanations for the disintegration of personalities, like his Russian predecessor, but includes in his novel the story of the suffering of unrealized personalities. This is not the subject concept of Viennese modernism, but illustrates how a deformed social structure is reflected in the narration of children’s fates. The concept of illness at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries goes through a shift of estheticism in the works of Viennese modernism, while it comes to signal the morbidity of the entire society.

Cankar’s 1907 *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* (*The Bailiff Yerney and his Rights*) offers no alternative to short European prose works. If we choose to define its place according to a history of themes, it can be classified as belonging to the afterlife of Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas*, especially in his manner of relating the main protagonists’s adventures and vicissitudes with the means of exaggeration and through a thematizing of misunderstandings and misjudging – all the more so since Cankar’s narrator does not put on the costume and mask of a judge, just the opposite: the outsider and reserved narrator lets the various protagonists’ speech come into full display, seemingly not admitting anyone’s truth more than the others’. Perhaps the subversive strength of Cankar’s short story lies exactly in encouraging the reader to place the related story into a context where it can gain an additional meaning. Such contextualizing presupposes activity on the part of the reader, as the intertextual references articulated on the level of the theme and its elaboration refer to a relationship between the world and the individual that, on the one hand, is characterized by a striving for co-definition, and, on the other, depicts the necessary failure of this striving. Even though in Cankar’s short story two explanations to the world and to the law clash, but behind this conflict we find a contradiction between the rational and the irrational that represents an impossibility of the designation of the borderlines of the two spheres. Yerney acts logically and rationally, as far as his own laws are concerned, and so does the world. The two types of rationality are, at the same time, two types of irrationality as well. Viewed from different aspects, the same statement or act seems rational or irrational. Various languages aim not at understanding the other person but can be conceived only in a closed system. At the same time, the “truth” mentioned in the title of the short story, that Yerney is appointed to be the owner of, can hardly be characterized as an author’s statement, even though it suggests that the author accepts (in the title of the work) Yerney’s declaration and action in asserting his real or imagined truth. But in the course of the plot another kind of truth is also expressed, namely that of society’s conventions and of the accepted and seemingly unshakeable world order. But in the course of the plot it also becomes certain that the representatives of this world order cannot qualify as depositories of truth, only as the protectors of a truth enacted in law. Unlike in his contemporary Franz Kafka’s case, Cankar’s Law and

House of Law are not allegorical venues for the drama played out in the world but only one station on Yerney's journey, which carries no special significance whatsoever. Vienna is a much more allegorical place, and in Yerney's mind it is identified with Babylon. Yerney's story is projected into cosmic space with this signal and becomes similar to that of the prophet who goes unheeded. Except that his prophecies are not heeded by the powers either of the world or of Heaven, which results in the fact that his story gains its sense only in Yerney's death – only then can he step out of his fate, and only then can the phrase set in the title be modified. Then it is not Yerney's truth that burns on the pyre, but the sufferer who took on himself walking the whole road to truth. If, at the end of the road, it is not truth that awaits him (neither his truth, nor Man's truth as such), that can be explained perhaps by the fact that Yerney does not know the truth but maybe only suspects it. The truth cannot be shaped in his deeds and words, since, as a fallible human being, Yerney does not possess the ability to understand and to make understand. His death, however, validates his striving, and thus, with his last sentence the narrator does not just close the story but, perhaps surprisingly, directly calls the reader to take a stand. This closing differs from the narrator's position that made possible the chronicler's role before. Calling to God casts doubt on the authenticity in language and content of Yerney's (similar) appeal, and, at the same time, calls into question the similarity in value of the character's direct speech versus the narrator's voice. The closing sentence smuggles back into the text the omnipotent narrator who had been absent until then and who seems to make a concession to the potential (Slovenian) readers' religious expectations by the way he finishes his short story.

Taking all of this into account, we can still state that in the history of Slovenian epic prose it is Cankar who carries out the European emancipation of the Slovenian novel and short story. He does so partly by layering the Central European shared text space through his stories and characters that can be understood as case studies of the Slovenian small town and provinces (that is, he provides a Slovenian reading to the text of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – viz. his depictions of Vienna). And partly he does so by employing the modernism of the turn of the 19th century (i.e., a symbolist and, to some extent, naturalist technique of narration) in order to enrich novels thematizing the crisis of language and the subject by his own contributions. Similarly to his European contemporaries, the relationship between individuality and identity in Cankar's work is also problematic, and self-definition does not at all or very rarely meets with the attempt to define the other, and thus the realization that the world and individuality is ambivalent does not happen. Thus, we can say that Cankar did not just carry out the modernist turn in Slovenian literature, but he prepared the foundation for the possibilities of Slovenian prose to retain the ability for dialog in the post-modern situation.