

## CANKAR'S *UNWRITTEN NOVELS* – A MODEL FOR SELF-CONSCIOUS NARRATION

V črtici *Nenapisani romani* (1914) Ivan Cankar s posredovanjem pripovednih glasov formulira svoje ideje o značilnostih ustvarjalnega postopka v literaturi. Cankar predvidi tehniko za razkrivanje misli in občutij, ki se pretakajo v junakovi zavesti, znano kot tok zavesti, in napoveduje moderni psihološki roman. Črtica *Nenapisani romani* je izvrsten primer zgodnje pripovedi samozavedanja v južnoslovanskih literaturah, predhodnik del, kot je npr. roman *Pomladi Ivana Galeba* (1957) Vladana Desnice, in je v južnoslovanski literarni zgodovini pomembna zaradi inovativnega pripovednega postopka.

Ivan Cankar, črtica, pripoved samozavedanja, metafikcija

In his sketch *Unwritten Novels* (1914), Ivan Cankar formulates through narrative voices his ideas on the nature of the creative process in literature. Cankar foresees the technique for revealing the thoughts and feelings flowing through the mind of the character, known as stream of consciousness, and thus heralds the modern psychological novel. *Unwritten Novels* is an exquisite example of early self-conscious narration in the South Slavic literatures, which precedes works such as Vladan Desnica's novel *Springs of Ivan Galeb* (1957) and is significant in the scope of South Slavic literary history for its innovative narrative strategy.

Ivan Cankar, sketch, self-conscious narration, metafiction

A writer of any literary genre of experimental fiction must count on a reader who is self-conscious and ready to receive innovations in order to decode his work successfully: "Significant literary changes, then, can only take place at times when audiences are so constituted as to render banal or unintelligible the messages and modes of contact of those preceding".<sup>1</sup> Ivan Cankar (1876–1918) was among the authors who indeed brought innovations (both formal and thematic) in Slovenian and South Slavonic literatures. In this paper I want to examine one of Cankar's short texts containing strategies for self-conscious narration.

Historians of Slovenian literature, while speaking of Cankar's work, mention, in a laconic manner, that "maybe it is justified to assume that the sketch *Unwritten*

<sup>1</sup> Hayden WHITE, The Problem of Change in Literary History, NLH 7 (1975), 108.

*Novels* (1914) Cankar explicitly predicts the modern psychological novel”.<sup>2</sup> It is almost natural that in the huge literary production of Cankar (thirty-five books published during his lifetime, and five more published after his death), a four-page-long text has not attracted that much attention.

Though some of the *connoisseurs* of Ivan Cankar’s opus say that his text *White Chrysanthemum* (1910) is the key for the understanding of his concept of art,<sup>3</sup> and his vision of the role of literature in general, I suggest the reading of *Unwritten Novels* for the same reasons, but also for its perfect form: it opens with one typical framing device – “the story within a story”. We read about a man who meets a friend in a bar who tells him a story. Immediately, this character tackles the topic so dear to Cankar – what is literature, how and where it is created:

I was never engaged in art, especially not in literature. I have my modest job, my little cow that gives me milk everyday. I don’t care for other things. But, one day, a man who strolls around the world and sells material took hold of me. Well, you know men of his kind. They look like those people who sell never-fail advice about how to make millions without pain. That man who sells material says he is not an artist; because he has no time, and anyway ... But, if he had time, he would write a novel that has never been seen before. And then he starts to speak ... God knows what about! You have your drink, you pay and you go your own way, grumbling ... I don’t know why he chose me. He knew me by sight, and I guess my face is not so sinful that one can think ... this or that! But, because of him, I have started to think about strange things that would not leave me in peace. What is a novel? Is a novel that nine times kneaded and mashed mixture of infatuation, adultery, murder and suicide? If it is so, then my life has passed without a novel. Scholars say something like that a novel is an authentic representation of the times, the times that can be found in the life and behavior of certain people. I am not a hero from a novel, in scholarly opinion, not even a supporting role. Because my life, for the present times, has less meaning than a single plant for the picture of one pasture. This idea was very unpleasant for me, though I am not an arrogant man. There wanders in an intrusive ruffian, selling tons of his material, and I ... I became engrossed in my life, in order to find in some hidden corner one detail worth remembering. And the miracle happened: I haven’t found just one detail, but I have found too many details ... What is sand to a sandbank? A multitude of big and small grains. A painter makes one wide stroke with his brush, and that is also a sandbank. But if a painter decides to portray just one grain of sand, wouldn’t it be a creation too?... What is life? Billions and billions of moments. If I manage to describe one single moment with all its sense and meaning, wouldn’t it be a novel? ... Before, I always had the impression that I live a very ordinary, irresolute, empty life, that I live just because I exist in the world, and that is why I should digest and sleep till the end. But I realized, amazed, that every sip of wine is different by its sense, taste and effect ... that an hour ago there was a completely different man walking these streets, than the one sitting here. In between two sips, in between two hours a novel was conceived, developed and achieved. And all those novels, that we,

---

<sup>2</sup> POGAČNIK, ZADRAVEC, 1973: 369.

<sup>3</sup> POGAČNIK, ZADRAVEC, 1973: 347–348. See also Marija MITROVIĆ, Višeznačnost i deklarativnost u Cankarevom delu, in: Ivan CANKAR, *Proza*, Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1981, 25.

potbellied and bold men, carry inside of us and have more of it than bacilli, will never be written ...<sup>4</sup>

As we can see from this quotation, in his sketch *Unwritten Novels*, Ivan Cankar formulates through narrative voices his ideas on the nature of the creative process in literature. Apparently ordinary life in this sketch is full of fiction, in spite of the fact that it is a 'realistic' representation of the everyday world. What this text also suggests is that a person recounting his life (telling his autobiography) is actually telling/writing fiction! The character examines fictionality and through self-exploration and self-questioning re-creates 'reality'. This is where we inevitably come to think about the term *metafiction* that is "given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text".<sup>5</sup>

Cankar also foresees the technique for revealing thoughts and feelings flowing through the mind of the character, known as "stream of consciousness" and announces the modern psychological novel. His concept of time is in harmony with the literary works of contemporary writers. Cankar's character, just like the character in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927), recreates the past and the reader is focused on his thoughts and ideas: the accent is on fragment, on detail, and there is a difference between the time of the story and the time of narration. The past and the present are interlaced instead of the strict linear narrative:

In between two sips, in between two hours a novel was conceived, developed and achieved. Who will discover it, who will write it down? The flash of light brightly enlightens everything around. You get to know the very last corner of the room, you get acquainted with people sitting and standing next to you, you even get to know yourself in the mirror. You don't see just your own and other people's faces, you can peer into their souls, up to the last locked door, and within you until the last temple. The light fades. And when an invisible hand, after a moment, an hour or a year turns on the light again – where is that room, where are those people, where are you yourself? Everything has disappeared without a trace! You sit among strangers of hostile attitude, you don't understand their language, you don't know what they are thinking. And the man who is staring from the mirror is not you; it is a boring, mean old man who wasn't ever young in his life ... When did it all happen, when and how has it miraculously changed? Because, there are no magic or magic tricks! ... So, from the appearance of the first and the second light, a novel was conceived, developed and achieved, a novel we haven't seen and we cannot write ...<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> CANKAR, 1981: 119–120. My translation in English.

<sup>5</sup> WAUGH, 2001, 2.

<sup>6</sup> CANKAR, 1981: 121–122.

Cankar's sketch has all elements of modern prose: self-reflection, introspection, contemplation, "the poetics of digression" (memories, thoughts, ideas and feelings), reconstruction of atmosphere, instead of time continuity we have continuity of images and descriptions, the notion of time and plot are neglected, the character skips over the time frames, and so on. *Unwritten Novels* prepared the literary audience of that time for a different kind of narrative: one can read about the content of character's mind, his "inner world", find his psychological portrait and his intellectual self-consciousness.

*Unwritten Novels* is an exquisite example of early self-conscious narration in the South Slavonic literatures, which precedes works such as Vladan Desnica's novel *Springs of Ivan Galeb* (1957), and European modernist (and later post-modernist) self-conscious novels that attract attention to the aesthetic construction of the text. These

metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinction between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'.<sup>7</sup>

Such texts "think" about their methodology (for example, André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1926), Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (1928), Walter Jens' *Herr Meister*, "a dialogue about a novel" (1963) and Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), just to mention some of them), and authors of those texts investigate a theory of fiction through their practice of writing fiction. Instead of conclusion, I propose reading of Cankar's fiction as "worlds as real as, but other than, the world that is. Or was".<sup>8</sup>

## Bibliography

- Ivan CANKAR, 1981: *Proza*. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. Translated from Slovenian by Marija Mitrović.
- Marija MITROVIĆ, 1995: *Pregled slovenačke književnosti*. Novi Sad – Sremski Karlovci: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića.
- Jože POGAČNIK, Franc ZADRAVEC, 1973: *Istorija slovenačke književnosti*. Beograd: Nolit. Translated from Slovenian by Marija Mitrović and Milorad Živančević.
- Tzvetan TODOROV, 1978: *Genres du discours*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Patricia WAUGH, 2001: *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London – New York: Routledge (first published in 1984 by Methuen & Co. Ltd).
- Franc ZADRAVEC, 1980: Impresionizem ter črtica in roman. *Elementi slovenske moderne književnosti*. Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba.
- Viktor ŽMEGAČ, 1982: *Istina fikcije*. Zagreb: Znanje.

<sup>7</sup> WAUGH, 2001: 6.

<sup>8</sup> FOWLES, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, London – St. Albans: Triad/Panther, 1977, 86.