

THE 'FLÂNEUR' AND THE 'CITIZEN' IN THE MODERN SLOVENIAN SHORT STORY

V prvem delu razprave vzpostavljamo dve ključni podobi, ki simbolizirata izkušnjo urbanega bivanja, dve namišljeni osebi, ki sta: 1. običajni prebivalec megalopolisa, katerega opis temelji na spoznanjih Georga Simmla (v besedilu *Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben* (Velemesto in duhovno življenje)) in 2. *flâneur* (sprehajalec), model urbanega umetnika, ki ga opisuje W. Benjamin v nedokončanem delu o Charlesu Baudelaireu. V drugem delu razprave opazujemo ti dve osebi v sodobni slovenski kratki pripovedni prozi, predvsem v kratkih zgodbah Andreja Moroviča, Marta Lenardiča in Dušana Čatra. Sledi poskus označitve razlike med urbano izkušnjo, ki jo posreduje besedila Simmla in Benjamina, in urbano izkušnjo, kakršno najdemo v sodobni slovenski kratki pripovedni prozi.

prebivalec velemesta, *flâneur*, ljubezenska tematika v književnosti

In the first part of the paper two crucial figures are established that symbolise the experience of urban existence. These are two hypothetical individuals: (1) an ordinary citizen of the megalopolis, whose description is based on the insights of Georg Simmel (*Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben*) and (2) the *flâneur*, the model of the urban artist that is described in Benjamin's unfinished book on Charles Baudelaire. The second part of the paper observes these figures in contemporary Slovene short narrative prose, especially in the short stories of Andrej Morovič, Mart Lenardič and Dušan Čater. We also strive to note the differences between the urban experience mediated by Simmel and Benjamin, and that found in contemporary Slovene short narrative prose.

citizen of the megalopolis, *flâneur*, love in literature

Simmel's text *Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben* and Benjamin's texts on Baudelaire as the paragon poet of the era of high capitalism (Benjamin 1983) sets the patterns of the study of modern urban existence. Simmel studies the typical citizen of megalopolis, while Benjamin uses the example of Baudelaire in his attempt to depict an alternative to Simmel's citizen, which is the figure of the *flâneur* – the urban outsider.

The most obvious difference between a citizen and a *flâneur* is their perception of the city. Writing about the citizen's specific perception, Simmel first establishes that the citizen of megalopolis is exposed to rapid and discontinuous changes around him that will irritate his nervous system to the maximum (Simmel 1903:

187). To defend himself from these changes, the citizen is forced to respond to them with the mind rather than the heart as, according to Simmel, the mind is the organ that is the most adaptable to external change. Simmel uses the term *blasé* to denote this domination of mind in encounters with changes brought about by the megalopolis. This attitude has a defensive role: the rapid changes surrounding the citizen are reduced to a range of objects none of which is more worthy than the other. The *blasé* attitude can also be perceived as reducing the objects, and people surrounding the citizen to their surface image, so that the citizen never reaches their interior. He or she thus does not interpret them.

In contrast to this, one of the major characteristics of the *flâneur* is the power of observation. By reading the facial features of people encountered in the street, the *flâneur* can find something out about them (James 2001: 6). It is this ability that singles the *flâneur* out from the mass of citizens and makes him the urban 'aristocrat', whose status does not depend on material wealth or origin. Given that Simmel relates the dominance of mind over heart and the *blasé* attitude to the domination of money economy in the city, it is clear that the *flâneur* is the urban outsider living *inside* the city, but *outside* the crowd. It is this characteristic that did not escape the attention of the observers of *flânerie*: being a *flâneur* means having the ability to observe others without actually being seen. It is a person who does not exist in the perception of the citizen of the megalopolis, as he does not enter in any way the complex mechanism of interpersonal relationships established by its citizens. The functioning of this organism is enabled by mutual time coordination of all the functions of the city: the image of people scurrying down the streets is the symbol of urban speed necessary for every citizen to reach his or her destination *punctually*. Unlike the citizen for whom a street is empty space to be passed from point A to point B in a given period of time T, the *flâneur* uses the street for strolling, i.e. for walking down the pavement unlimited by either destination or time.

Contemporary consideration of the relation between the *flâneur* and the citizen has been marked by their differences. There is, however, a similarity between them which should be emphasized: both tend to conceal their subjectivity. It is not by chance that Hugo Friedrich sees Baudelaire's oeuvre as the beginning of impersonal poetry, while Benjamin, regarding Baudelaire, emphasizes the analogy between the poet and the actor. In Simmel's interpretation of the citizen, we find insights with the same outcome, but different rhetorics. Namely, Simmel writes about *reserved behaviour* as the typical perception of the other person by the citizen of the megalopolis. Moreover, he mentions a certain dose of animosity that citizens feel to one another. What connects the *flâneur* and the citizen is the almost obsessive need to hide their self from the eyes of others.

In these post-modern times, it is worth considering how much Simmel's and Benjamin's texts are truly contemporary. Simmel's text, dating from 1903, does not thematise the perception of the shop-window in which money, contrary to Simmel's

claims, establishes difference rather than equalizing things. On the other hand, despite being widely thematised, today the *flâneur* represents a theoretical construct whose popularity in the realm of theory is reversely proportional to the concretisation of this type of urban existence. So, if the *flâneur* marked the image of Parisian outsiders in the 19th century, providing them with an aristocratic artistic aura, we can now ask what figure marks the urban outsider in postmodern times. Or, rather, whether there is at all a dominant figure to which various images of urban outsiders gravitate?

I would like to test these issues on several successful short stories by contemporary Slovenian writers. I encountered them in translation, compiled in a book entitled *The Key Witnesses*;¹ this is a good title, because in my opinion the stories I am about to analyse fit into the premise set here; they truly testify about the collapse of modern values – one of them being the *flâneur* – in post-modern times. They bear witness to it truly and genuinely, not hiding anything.

I would first point to the issue of speed in Andrej Morovič's *The Malicious Dead*. The hero arrives at the cinema just before the beginning of the show, and they leave the cinema even faster afterwards. The relationship between Barbara and the hero very quickly turns to sexual intercourse, although she is no more than a stranger for the hero. The motive of speed also appears in the descriptions of the sexual act between the hero and Barbara. How can one explain this pace?

Unlike a *flâneur*, who had plenty of time, the cinema (the beginning/end of the show) here turns the outsider into a viewer whose time is managed by the city: the cinema forces the viewer to adapt his time to the supra-individual time of the city. However, the need for speed, which points to the continuous lack of time, remains present after the show as well. This need is puzzling: Morovič's hero is an outsider – we don't know where he works or what he does, we don't know how much he earns, we know nothing that should be known if we read about this hero from the perspective of Simmel's citizen. The speed that rules this outsider shows us that the hero is not a *flâneur* – who is independent of speed – but something else.

Speed here is a tool used by the hero to attempt setting aside his own individuality, his own distinctiveness, as well as Barbara's individuality. Over time, this individuality could appear on the surface and thereby destroy, rather than sublimate, the contact between a man and a woman. The instruments that could be used to make this individuality visible are conversation and time. It is the drug consumption and wild sex practiced by Morovič's heroes that mark their rationalisation of their own bodies. Drugs and sex defend the hero and Barbara from their individuality, just as the *blasé* attitude protects the citizen from the rapid changes surrounding him or her. The heart, if there is one, remains intact in both cases.

¹ *Krunski svedoci: Mlada slovenačka proza devedesetih* (The Key Witnesses: Young Slovenian fiction writers of the nineties), selection and preface by Mitja Čander, translated by Ana Ristović Čar, Beograd: Rad, 2002.

Morovič's story *The Malicious Dead* can therefore be read as the counterpoint to Blatnik's Carverian *What We Talk About*: perhaps Barbara and the hero are dead, but they are by no means malicious, and this is where one sees the surplus meaning that does not allow us to establish unequivocally Morovič's attitude to the identification of love and de-individualisation. The possible negative attitude could only be expressed if Morovič's story were read from the perspective of Blatnik's, in which 'speech' mentioned in the title announces another concept of love – the one dependent on conversation.

What differentiates these two stories is their length. It is clear why Morovič's is a short story. This brevity contours the view of a citizen which never lasts long as the objects around him or her appear and disappear at a breathtaking pace. Barbara is therefore not much more than an object, as the hero of this story will not find out anything more about Barbara than what can be offered by her body. But if this is so, if Barbara is only a body rather than an event to leave a mark in the memory, what is then the symbolic potential of this story? Morovič's story seems to describe *Erlebnis* rather than *Erfahrung*.² The domination of event over truly experience questions the identification of the postmodern urban outsider and artist, which is what a *flâneur* is.

Regarding the above, it is interesting to note that the stories of most Slovenian authors born in the 1960s no longer feature "autoreferentiality" as the topic of the day: neither the act of writing nor the figure of the author are thematised. None of the three different outsiders found in Morovič's *The Malicious Dead*, Lenardič's *Program Plus* and Četar's *Promise* is a writer, or an author at all. In what way, then, do these outsiders achieve the necessary minimum link with the city? The answer to this question looms in *The Malicious Dead*, and becomes clearer in Mart Lenardič's *Program Plus*. Namely, if the outsider is a citizen who has lost his place in the city (he or she is no longer a *flâneur*), then 'love' is in fact a metaphor of the most tenuous link between the hero and the city.³ The outsider can no longer claim the status of *flâneur*, so that 'love' becomes a place where the hero and the city meet. Love deserves the quotation marks, as this is not the ideal, romantic love still appearing in pulp fiction romances. The scale of love touches the process of urban de-individualisation (as in Morovič) at one end, and reinterprets the experience of love of a stranger thematized by the famous Baudelaire's poem *A Une Passante* (To

²This difference is stressed by Jonathan Arac (1980: 79): "Benjamin builds his case through a sharp distinction between two related German terms, both of which are usually translated 'experience' *Erlebnis* (which characterizes city life) carries further meanings of 'event, occurrence, episode' that is of discontinuity and segmentation, while *Erfahrung*, (which city threatens to annihilate and the poet must capture, preserve, and re-create) further connotes 'practical knowledge' such as traveller or craftsman gain over a long period of time and can use in the future as a part of the deep continuity of his life."

³The significance of this theme is also stressed by Mitja Čander (2002: 11): "So love in its most varied forms and development stages, from passionate sex, a passing flirt, infatuation, half-hearted routine, to boredom, depression or estrangement, is one of the major if not the main topic of these story-telling microcosms."

a Passer-by) at the other. We find this other type of love in Mart Lenardič's *Program Plus*, where the hero meets a TV screen beauty purely incidentally. Puzzled by the untrue story that changes his identity, he will, not without being surprised himself, get a kiss and the beauty's telephone number. Rather than being a skillful rhetorician or a professional liar – which would define his place in the city as that of a con man – Lenardič's hero is surprised by the ease of identity change. It is this surprise that presents him as an actor, as his interest in the beauty is not clearly presented as the motive for the (false) story about a job at an institute and a trip abroad.

Still, this embryo of a story will never develop into a love story. The hero's drunken (female) friend is a symbolic mirror in which the hero identifies himself. Such reading is intensified by the fact that this friend indirectly prevents the development of a relationship between the hero and the beauty. A similar symbolic key may be used when reading the fact that the hero's drunken friend will be sleeping in the hero's flat, as the appearance of the flat after waking up will be a symbolic representation of the hero's outsider identity, an identity separating him from the beauty.

The beauty in *Program Plus* is not shown as a mistress. What separates the hero from the beauty is not money, but the hero's own body, which, opposed to the beauty's ideal body, represents some kind of objective hindrance which cannot be denied by a *deus ex machina* that would endow the hero with a winning lottery ticket, or the beauty with a noble heart. On the contrary, this barrier seems to be objective and nobody's fault.

Lenardič's story is thus reminiscent of Baudelaire's poem *To a Passer-by*, in which a beautiful passer-by disappears from the *flâneur's* sight at the moment when, if it were not an encounter in the street, the story would only begin. The encounter of the lyric subject of Baudelaire's poem and the beauty in the street is as equally accidental as the encounter of the hero and the beauty in the café. Both encounters are characterised by discontinuity: encounters cannot continue into a story.

A careful reader will surely notice that Lenardič's story still differs from Baudelaire's famous poem in one significant characteristic: the disappearance of the street. The symptom of this disappearance is not the fact that the hero meets the beauty in a café, but the attribute of being a TV personality that constantly accompanies the beauty. This attribute is reinforced by the story's television title, *Program Plus*. If it is so, then television is here a motive that requires a separate interpretation. Reading Lenardič's story in the context of the topic of *flânerie* shows that, in postmodern times, the street is replaced by television – where the TV is similar to a *flâneur*: he is the one who watches without being seen. However, unlike a *flâneur*, who could view himself or herself as a poet, the postmodern outsider does not have such an option. Looking away from the TV screen, the outsider sees him- or herself as nothing. By destroying the TV set at the end of the

story, the hero of *Program Plus* symbolically shows that, once he has seen himself, he will never again see anyone else. The face of the TV screen beauty will always remind the hero of himself.

If the modern street is transformed into the postmodern TV programme, the question to be asked is what happens with the street. One of the possible answers to the question is offered by Dušan Čater's story *The Promise*. Čater's hero steps out into the street in search of an event, but all he encounters is summer heat. A little later, the hero wants to buy a drink, and this is when he will realise that he has not brought any money with him. Read within a *flâneur* narrative, Čater's story acquires the contours of a parody. If stepping out into the street used to be an act confirming a *flâneur*'s independence of the city, for Čater this stepping out only confirms the hero's dependence; if for a *flâneur* wandering through streets used to be filled with events occurring owing to his or her ability to observe, for Čater the street equals emptiness. Finding nothing else in the street but open space ranging between points A and B (to be crossed in time T), the postmodern outsider is separated from the *flâneur*. However, the postmodern outsider's maladjustment – concealed by the metaphor of love as the smallest link with the surrounding world – separates him from Simmel's interpretation of the citizen. This outsider has not been named yet. However, several Slovenian authors have testified to his or her existence and offered us his or her facial features. And this is not an inconsiderable achievement.

Literature

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