

THE SUBJECT AND NATIONAL IDEOLOGICAL PARADIGMS WITHIN THE POST-COMMUNIST CONTEXT (IN MÖDERNDORFER'S NOVEL *PREDMESTJE*)

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Prispevek se ukvarja z vprašanjem subjekta in ideoloških form v kontekstu postkomunistične slovenske realnosti na primeru Möderndorferjevega romana *Predmestje*. Metodološki in konceptualni (teoretični) aparat bo Freudova psihoanaliza, Lacanova psihoanalitična teorija in Althusserova teorija ideologije. Največji del prispevka bo temeljil na podlagi psihoanalitičnih pojmov iz Žižkove knjige *Sublimni objekt ideologije*.

subjekt, ideologija, identiteta, sidrišče (*le point de capiton*)

This paper deals with the issues of the subject and ideological forms in the context of the post-communist Slovene reality in Moderndorfer's novel *Predmestje*. The theoretical-methodological apparatus used will be Freud's psychoanalysis, Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and Althusser's theory of ideology. The paper leans heavily on elaborations of fundamental psychoanalytic concepts from Žižek's book *Sublimni objekt ideologije*.

subject, ideology, identity, anchor point, subtext

Introduction

In this paper we attempt to analyse the relation between the subject and ideological forms in Moderndorfer's novel *Predmestje*. In the first chapter, we consider the concept of subject from the perspective of Althusser's teachings, and of Lacan's and Žižek's conceptual apparatus. The basic assumption for all further consideration is Freud's discovery of the unconsciousness, with which an individual is no longer the ruler in his or her own house. Social contradictions and the question of identity in relation to the Other come from and are explained by an internal gap in one's personality.

Althusser's interpretation of ideology is important here, considering that it marks a faulty insight into reality, through the influence of the ideological state apparatuses, to which the subject has been submitted from birth. Such a false perspective, which de-

forms reality, conceals the subject's fundamental incapacity for true acknowledgment. The analysis of the relation between reality and the subject gives way to Lacan's thesis on the subject as an empty place; a subject that takes its symbolic place through the signifier's practices. The section ends with the introduction of the rigid signifier of »nationalism« as an anchor point (*point de capiton*), which fills in the empty spaces in the symbolic chain of the subject.

In the second section we analyse the question of ideology. We report Žižek's thesis that ideology is false consciousness, and we confront the question of nationalism as a need for identification, in accordance with extracts from Biti's book *Upletanje nerečenog*. Here, we analyse the work's paradigmatic layers, through the writing of history from the bottom up by choosing marginal types as protagonists of the narrative text. The analysis of

nationalist practices unfolds according to the binary opposition Europe-Balkan, and takes a stance on the anchor point as the identification dividing line.

In the conclusion we address the subtext of the work, referring to selected statements by Čander from the article *Zemljovid za suvremenu slovensku prozu* about the dominant features of contemporary Slovenian literature and its relation towards the historical context of transition. Finally, we present a thesis on the ideological influence of multicultural global post-capitalism as the unconscious of the work (subtext), which stands in opposition to the need for identification of small nations from Central Europe with a national home.

1 The subject or about replacing emptiness

Psychoanalysis has shown that the subject is not a sort of filling nor is it a consistent homogeneous entirety. With the discovery of the unconscious, it became clear that we have within us an entity, an unapproachable enclave, radically opposed to the consciousness; a sort of traumatic core that pulsates like an alien in the basement of the psyche. We are already internally divided and separated, and here there squats the Other, bleak and unknown. A subjectification process is achieved, passing through the register of the imaginary and stepping into the symbolic order by accepting the signification practices of a certain culture or ideology. This roughly means that the subject has learned to say »mummy«, »daddy«, to use a knife and fork, to believe in God or in sexual revolution, to listen to the Beatles or Seka Aleksić, to cheer for *Olimpija* or *Primorska*, and so on. Mainly, through the subjectification process, floating proto-ideological signifiers completely disseminate a hard substance as an assumption of the core identity.

It is thus no wonder that Lacan, in a sense disposed of the subject, declaring it as an empty space, marking it with the sign \$ (a big crossed »S«), an »empty space in the struc-

ture of the signifiers« (indeed, Lacan also disposed of the world, language, the Other, etc., (Žižek 2002: 105)). Consequently, we are in some way similar to an empty sheet, on which the text of the world is written. What is written on such paper represents the inventory of our personality, our subjective capital. Here arises the question as to who is the writer who adds in writing to us a certain line of signification (our aim is to avoid the theological answer: God). One of the possible answers could be given to us by Althusser. We must keep in mind that Althusser was a structural Marxist, which means that he believed that beyond the visible appearance there is a certain network of elements that administrate the logics of historical events. For instance, the breakdown of Yugoslavia took place therefore its structural elements, which in a certain historical period were kept together like a molecule inside a stable organism, separated from one another, thus destroying the entity's entirety. The main structural elements of »Brotherhood and Unity« captured places where they turned into »Unbrotherhood and Ununity«. However, as here we do not intend to analyse the structural pathology of Yugoslavia, we will return to our first question. According to Althusser, we could conclude that what shapes the texts of our lives is the stretched out hand of ideology. If we shift our perspective from verbal metaphorical to optical images, we could say that ideology is like a pair of glasses of which we are not conscious and which deforms and bends the objects in front of us, turns them into in a second-class reality. The only thing we can do (and here hides the possibility of some sort of heroism) is to admit to ourselves that our ideological glasses blur the real truth; well, we live in a state of untruth or at least distorted truth. The true falsification agents are represented by the institution of the ideological state apparatuses – Church, family, political parties, charity projects, ecological fundamentalists, ballet schools, etc.

A theoretical introduction was necessary in order to draw attention to the concept of

emptiness as a semantic place that summarises the atmosphere of the novel's world and the psychological content of its protagonists. My standpoint is that the emptiness of the main character (Marjan) represents the impossibility of him identifying with the signification practices of Lacan's symbolic order. Marjan, in fact, is a failure as a husband (if he were better, his wife would probably not slit her throat (Möderndorfer 2002: 94)); as a father, hated by his daughter for his adultery; his career as a policeman ended when he gets fired; he is keen on alcohol; he participates in the killing of stray dogs, and so on. The leitmotiv of emptiness is owven through the novel's structure like some sort of echo of the narrative voice, and so are the two final words of the novel: »empty, empty« (Möderndorfer 2002: 189).

Returning to Lacan's theory will help us understand the paradox by which emptiness actually represents an excess. According to Lacan, that excess is the remnant of the Real which eludes symbolization. »The Real is absolutely nothing, only emptiness, a cavity in the symbolic structure that marks core impossibility« (Žižek 2002: 233). If we return to the comparison of an empty sheet of paper and a written text, we could say that the Real appears where a certain word is erased. That place is taken by emptiness, which, due to grammatical and syntactic needs, demands a replacement, considering that a text (a chain of signification) cannot function without it. Thus a new signifier has to take the place of the emptiness in order to repair the metonymic line. My view is that Marjan's failures in core social relations – marriage, family, father-daughter, etc. – are gaps left by erased signifiers, grammatical emptiness in the syntax of society.

Möderndorfer's main character represents an alienated subject (like other characters from the novel) that aspires to symbolic integration, in other words, to filling in the empty spaces on his paper. Here we get to Lacan's concept of an anchor point (*point de capiton*),

a sort of meaningful patch sewn over the symbolic structure of the text anew, i.e. in the gaps left by the social signifiers which were the active content of Marjan's subject – husband, father, policeman – is written the new, alternative signifier of »local nationalist«, through which its syntactic functionality is ensured in the metonymic line.

2 Ideology – the anchor point of difference

When mentioning Althusser, we spoke about ideology as a structure which distorts reality from the moment of our birth. The point is that the subject, regardless of how and who it is, cannot fight off the influence of ideology. The subject sees the world through the ideology, which therefore semantically defines it. Similarly, Žižek concludes that: »the ideology is not simply false consciousness... we should rather consider this reality as ideological – an ideological social reality is such whose mere existence implies its participant's ignorance with regard to its being – that is, a social reality whose mere reproduction implies that each individual 'does not know what they are doing'« (Žižek 2002: 39).

Earlier we mentioned that nationalism is an ideological paradigm which, like an anchor point, fills in the emptiness inside the symbolic chain linked to the main character's situation. We are keen to accept the interpretation according to which the primary function of nationalism is manifested in a need for identification (Biti 2000: 126). In the novel *Predmestje* the primary function of nationalism is shown as »socio-psychic imaginary home seeking.« The protagonists of Möderndorfer's novel are all socially marginalised, unfulfilled, unhappy individuals who suffer from signifier emptiness and crave social integration. With such a paradigmatic choice, the author's strategy depends on a perspective of recording history/context from the bottom up. The passive nihilism of the main characters on the margins of nationalism (a negative nationalism that mutates into chauvinism and xenophobia) transforms them into active

subjects. They represent »everyman«, »simple people« who leave their place in the discourse and take the place of the producer of the narration, that is, the narrator.

The nationalist practices represented in the novel are active inside a known xenophobic frame »non-Balkan-Balkans«, or »European-Balkans«, which may be interpreted in codes of binary oppositions such as civilised-wild (it is significant how the main character describes the sexual games of the young immigrant couple Nebojša and Jasmina: »Lovita se. Kot dve mladi živali. Kot živali.« (Möderndorfer 2002: 46)), developed-undeveloped, advanced-regressive, etc. According to this viewpoint, the reception of the Balkans means unconsciously Europe, its non-symbolised space and for this reason Nebojša and Jasmina represent the disturbing Other. Their first names are signifiers of ethnic belonging, which is confirmed by Fredi's statement (among the four main characters, Fredi acquires the typological role of »brain of the group«). After hearing their names he concludes: »Vse je jasno! Ime pove vse! Ime nikar tako! Ime je važno!« (Möderndorfer 2002: 20), and again: »... Marjanova nova soseda ... imata svoja imena in njuni imeni ne pomenita nič dobrega« (Möderndorfer 2002: 22). The antagonism towards the Other is also described in the narrative instance when Marjan, overhearing the young couple's love game taking place in the neighbouring flat, finds himself: »V neobvladljivem občutku jeze (gneva) in sovraštva (mržnje).« (Möderndorfer 2002: 37.) And when, on the occasion of meeting in the corridor, Nebojša touched Marjan: »Marjanu se naježi koža. Preplavi ga nekakšen gnus (gađenje) ... gnus da ga je dotaknil človek ... črn ko tujec ... zoprn je ... zoprn mi je ... zoprn. Zoprn. Zoprn. (odvraten)« (Möderndorfer 2002: 71–72).

Wrath, hatred, disgust and repulsion represent the obverse of a negative identification, based on nationalist premises. The psychoanalytic theory interprets such viewpoint as self recognition; what we recognise

as negative in the Other is actually the reflection of our weaknesses. The self is always a projection of the Other, that is, the results of a primary and repressed identification with it. However, the need for identification demands the establishment of certain limits between the ideological register of the Other and ourselves. It seems that the function of the dividing line, a synchronic axis that divides the self from the Other, is set by Lacan's anchor point.

[...] the fundamental paradox of the anchor point: a »rigid signifier«, which totalises the ideology by stopping the metonymic sliding of its signified, is not the peak of Meaning's maximum density, some sort of Warrant which would, let off from the distinctive interaction of elements, serves as constant and firm point of reference. On the contrary, it is the element that represents the signifier's instance on the field of the signified. It is nothing but 'pure difference': its role is purely structural, its nature purely performative – its highlighting is in contrast with its own act of exposure; briefly, it is a 'signifier without signified'... an element that only occupies the place of a certain deficiency... pure **difference** is perceived as Identity (Žižek 2002: 140–141).

In accordance with this quotation we could conclude that nationalism directed towards fetishism of national purity is a »rigid signifier« through which Möderndorfer's heroes grant themselves a symbolic place in the field of the signified. But, what they »do not know«, and what was mentioned earlier when defining ideology, is that it is a matter of false ideological consciousness according to which, it seems, a fundamental misunderstanding, a blackout, takes place on a level of substance-structure opposition. The protagonists of *Predmestje*, in fact, are substantial fundamentalists who see in national history a diachronic, free-flowing substance (Fredi says: »Končno smo na svojem. Tu smo že stoletja ...« (Möderndorfer 2002: 165)).

The »boys from the bowling hall« (let we call Möderndorfer's heroes after the place they used to meet and spend their free time)

are simply structural cleaners who try to keep the national substance of their native place pure from the structural blurring. Finally, we get to a performance reversal, in which process the concepts »animal«, »wild«, »uncivilised«, used to define the Other (Balkan), become signifier practices of themselves. They are the ones who run over Nebojša and take him to an abandoned quarry, where they entertain themselves killing stray dogs, they are the ones who tie Nebojša up in chains and point a rifle towards him – whether the rifle is fired or not is unknown, but what we know is that the young immigrant couple is forever banished from »predmestje«.

3 Conclusion or peering into the work's subtext

A summary of what has been uncovered would go like this: the local »boys from the bowling hall« could in no other way symbolically integrate but through rigid practices of xenophobic nationalism. In it they found the anchor point that offers them an identification of »home«. However, the intent of this presentation is to peer into the subtext of the work, because: »what the work is silent about and the way it keeps silent hides the key to its meaning« (Eagleton 1987: 192). But, before we peer into »what the work is silent about«, we will revise in a few words what the work is about. Above all, the novel *Predmestja* was written in the genre convention of the realistic novel, the raw material (paradigmatic pattern) of its narrating text, in some way, reflects the post-Communist reality of the contemporary Slovenian society. Its tendency to show a neuralgic transitional reality, full of contradictions and social gaps, exactly in accordance to what Mitja Čander writes:

The world in which Slovenian literature found itself after independence is a deceived world. Dreams passed by, overnight. Transition did not lead to the creation of some sort of all-state brotherhood. On the contrary: in the name of the market and individualism, society even more radically disintegrated into

rich and poor... The visible narrative field is narrower, but maximally enlightened. Everything that comes through from the surrounding darkness penetrates through a belt of light with unexpected impetus. (Čander 2004: 116–117.)

Möderndorfer's narrative world thus »maximally enlightens« the life of the Slovenian suburbs and of their protagonists. Considering the perspective of the omniscient narrator, we learn quite enough elements from their lives and »living cultures« as to clearly imagine and evoke such a world and its spiritual atmosphere. However, in Čander, there is a statement that we will use as an introduction in the final analysis of »what the work is silent about«. Describing contemporary narrative practices, he says: »The more the transition heroes keep their feet on the ground, the more easily the world escapes their visual field« (Čander 2004: 117). It is precisely the world that escapes from their visual field that can be interpreted as a »mute« paradigmatic pattern, which was kept silent and which represents latent content of an absent ideological paradigm – the work's unconsciousness. My view is that the work's unconsciousness decodes in the ideological influence on narrating mechanisms, those practices that gave shape to the final syntagmatic links in the novel, and relate to trans-cultural universalism as part of the signifier chain of globalist post-capitalism. For this reason, *Predmestje* must also be read as a symptom of neuralgic transitional reality, which leads the post-Communist subject into an ideological gap and disruption between the demands of a capitalist imperialism disguised behind the mask of multiculturalism and an identification need (particularly of the small postcolonial nations of Central Europe) for the national home. It is too easy to read *Predmestje* only as message against xenophobic nationalism, it would be appropriate to understand it as a symptom of contradictions between multiethnic and nationalist ideological tendencies.

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