

# Towards an adequate storyworld and expression: description in Slovak realist fiction\*

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Ivana Taranenková

## **Point of departure: European realism and Slovak romanticism of the National Revival**

Despite the ambiguity of the term literary realism (understood as a mode or technique of depicting reality as well as a specific type of literary and historical discourse) and its ontological questionability, one may not question description being its central figure. Through the varying extent of engagement in the text structure it represents the fictional world of texts, which claim to be part of realist discourse. Description, however, can go well beyond its objectivizing function and relate to deeper structures working in the text. Similarly, it can relate to various modifications and transcendences of literary discourses, within which the literary text is being realized. In our case it may help present a specific modification of realism in Slovak literature.

Slovak literary realism, which, based on literary and historiographic research, is set in the period from 1880 to the first decades of the 20th century, is a heterogeneous, divergent phenomenon regardless of the self-identifying manifestos and proclamations of the single players in the literary field of that period. It is possible to observe in it a concurrence and configuration of various aspects and the presence of different sediments and deposits (the presence of elements, as well as structures other than those characteristic of realist discourse in literary history, of lines going beyond the period of

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one literary movement or epoch and determination of literary texts using meta-aesthetic criteria, etc.). This is caused by the specific situation in the Slovak literature of those times, as well as various period realizations of the aesthetic programme of realism in the context of European (and world) literature, also characterized by some divergence (various realizations in the British, French, German and especially in the Russian context).

Relevant aesthetic results have been achieved in poetry following the codification of the Slovak literary language (1843) – an act which in fact established Slovak national culture, which represented a specific variant of European romanticism.<sup>1</sup> Fiction writers, establishing themselves since the 1880s were confronted not only with numerous variations of the romanticist literary tradition without any aesthetic contribution, but also with a half-finished tradition in fiction, its genres, and language. The Slovak literary language itself was a relatively young language in that period, as it was only reformed in 1851 by Michal Miloslav Hodža and Martin Hattala, who greatly stabilized it to achieve a unified version. The social stratification of the Slovak language was still teething, and its cultural base and literary functions (Miko 1972: 143) were developing slowly and gradually as well. Literary works written by the representatives of romanticist fiction failed to establish a genre and language tradition despite their qualities, and have merely outlined the tendencies and possibilities that had been developing gradually since the 1860s. Another root cause of this situation was the aesthetic opinions of the central figure in Slovak Romanticism, Ľudovít Štúr, who considered prose fiction a “lower form of art” (Štúr 1875: 190) and recommended authors focused their attention on poetry. This attitude was revised in the context of the National Revival and the resulting course of events (establishment of Matica Slovenská and Slovak secondary grammar schools). What was being highlighted at that time was the pragmatic function of fiction as a medium of interest to the reader and thus a medium that was efficient in

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1 If in the case of Slovak romanticism its specificity within Slovak literary historiography in the 20th century was accepted in the long run, the idea that Slovak realism does not correspond with its realizations in western European context, was not formulated specifically in this period. Slovak literary realism was brought into connection with the positivistic aesthetic concept by Auguste Comte and any differences from this model found in the texts of single authors were explained as temporary contamination with the aesthetics of the previous literary period of romanticism.

spreading nationalistic thoughts, as was its participating role in the formation of Slovak national life.

Not even this revival brought about significant works of art and after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, Slovak emancipation efforts were dampened, Slovak literature stagnated, holding on to the themes of national agitation and the theses of patriotic Romanticism. It was this crisis situation that provoked a reaction in authors establishing themselves in Slovak fiction from the beginning of the 1880s. They tackled it by applying the principles of realist aesthetics, the realization of which, however, was influenced by various factors. Their presentations are either explicit and proclamatory in their nature, as in the case of Svetozár Hurban Vajanský, or discrete, but with even graver consequences, as was consequently realized by Martin Kukučín. These authors are the founders of two paradigmatic lines in Slovak fiction, which go beyond the 20th century. Vajanský adheres to literary realism in his programme texts, in which he presents his literary aesthetic conception. His reflections are influenced by past and contemporary discussions in Russian, Czech, and French literature. In parallel with these texts, which are actually aesthetic manifestos, his prose works were also being written. Kukučín has become thoroughly acquainted with the aesthetic programme of literary realism and the debates about it as a well established author in the student association *Detvan* in which he was active from the latter half of the 1880s during his medical studies in Prague. His debut in Slovak fiction was more preconditioned by a spontaneous author's gesture than by his fulfilment of any programme proclamations.

Regardless of the differences in starting points and the artistic solutions implemented, both the most outstanding fiction authors of that period had to face the same elementary problems. They both had to decide on the framework around which they would construct a credible "world" for their prose writings and about the expression they should have, or the language in which they should be articulated, whereby their choices or acts were in many aspects of an initiatory and standardizing nature. When meeting the challenge represented by the creation of a fiction model to fulfil their ideas about literary realism, both prose writers were free to take advantage of the tendencies in artistic fiction outlined in romanticism and developed in the course of the 1860s and 1870s. In this period Oskár Čepan identified two central development trends in fiction (Čepan 1984: 32–36). On the one hand

there was the romanticizing and sentimentalizing novella, which focused on fabrication, characterized by the presence of a significant authorial subject and an inclination to construct a “subjectively stylized image of individually evaluated reality” (ibid.: 33). Svetozár Hurban Vajanský followed this tendency. Martin Kukučín, on the other hand, inclined towards the development in Slovak prose writing tradition which readers considered to be on the periphery at that time. It was represented by short genre forms in political writing (ibid.: 32), which in a small area of composition focused on the reproduction of “the banal details of ordinary life” and the use of “non-literary” colloquial language. However, what was an even more powerful inspiration for both authors than the national sources was Russian literature which was obviously modified by realist discourse. The specific features of Russian realism were summarized by the literary scholar Naum Yakovlevich Berkovsky as follows: “Russian realism lacking stability, with its effort to thoroughly penetrate all phenomena of the present, but without dwelling on them, without floundering, contained something romantic in its very nature. Russian authors concentrated on life that was yet to come, depicting it always and on every occasion, engendering the feeling that real life was capable of overcoming any obstacles – which was a romanticist way of depicting it, indeed” (Berkovskij 1983: 133).

Fiction was being written by the two key personalities in literary historiography in canonized Slovak realism – Svetozár Hurban Vajanský and Martin Kukučín – in interaction with the ideal, and retrieved and confronted by various means – and not only due to the strong influence of Russian literature. The tension between the ideal and its presence in empirical reality was thus the central moment in Slovak fiction in the last third of the 19th century.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reality and projection, the “own” and the “foreign”: Svetozár Hurban Vajanský**

The ambition of Vajanský the fiction writer was to present the forms and possibilities of renewal and realization in national life. Those who have initiated and revitalized the national organism should be the representatives of the

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2 For more detailed information see the study by Marcela Mikulová “Povinnosť k ideálu alebo romantizmus v slovenskom realizme” (Mikulová 2011: 105–113).

elite – intellectuals or members of the nationally oriented gentry. In close relation with his artistic efforts was his targeted effort to canonize the novel in the context of the literature of that period. He saw in this a suitable means to represent Slovak national society as a whole. At the same time he strived – not only as a fiction writer, but also as an extraordinarily active cultural publicist (articles presenting his aesthetic concept were published continuously for almost forty years) – to moderate contemporary literature so as to make it fulfil his ideas of “high” art (which were determined predominantly by the classic aesthetic ideal, which preferred the categories of what was integral, inevitable, and ideal to what was fragmented, coincidental, and commonplace). However, Vajanský’s intent was complicated by the real situation in Slovak society, as well as the existing tools, inclinations, and phraseology of the national literature. Contemporary Slovak national reality could provide him neither with adequate topics nor heroes. This is why Vajanský changed the text-to-reality ratio and produced – to his own benefit – such circumstances and characters that should influence reality through the suggestion of a work of art: “[...] a good novella, a good novel (may God grant us one!), bursts with real life, and is capable of founding a new spiritual colony in the desert of our impoverished life” (Vajanský 1882: 2). The lacking ordinariness of the world of his fiction, which were actually becoming some kind of national utopias, led him to strengthen the ideologically based (to be specific, we speak of the ideology of nationalism) semanticizing principle therein. It puts the phenomena of the fictional world of Vajanský’s fiction in fundamental opposition between the “own” and the “foreign”, where the code used in this classification is the nationality of characters. It affects all text components, starting with the plot and composition, through the description of the characters to the stylistic and lexical level. What contributes to this is the presence of an extraordinarily strong authorial subject: “The suggestiveness of the demiurgic act, the desire and the will to create, which we did not have before, do not allow the authorial subject in Vajanský’s fiction to blend into the unobtrusive background. Vajanský’s authorial narration is not only a medium of the epic world. In this narration one can feel the touch of the demiurgic hand of the authorial subject, his directing, reflections, explanations, notes, comments, his ideological rhetorical pathos” (Miko 1972: 144). What makes a utopian impression is the decision to create a language of high literature: “when we say that Vajanský created the language of modern Slovak

prose – modern in a broad sense of the word, we mean it almost literally. While creating, he would use the cultural forces of his personality, and only then the cultural forces and resources of Slovak reality” (ibid.).

The omnipresent ideologically determined significant principle and an authorial subject which asserts it stubbornly have a significant influence also on Vajanský’s description. It does not meet the idea of realistic description at all. “The presenting and representing function of description” (Fedrová – Jedličková 2011: 34), serving the need to concretize the fictional world and create a credible “realistic effect” (Nieragden 2008: 615) becomes part of the ideological persuasiveness of the authorial gesture.

“Ownness” is also a determining axiological principle of Vajanský’s world – adherence thereto or rejection thereof determines the moral qualities of his characters and their environment and also affects the choice of stylistic methods present in the text. When depicting the “foreign” elements, Vajanský uses hyperbole, irony, and the methods of “low”, colloquial vocabulary and, vice versa, the characters and phenomena typical of the sphere of “ownness” are presented with pathos and monumentality. Adherence to “ownness” does not only determine the features of the characters, but also influences the description of their physical appearance. The positive characters possess physical beauty and their counterparts are caricatured through descriptions of unappealing if not repulsive physical detail.

An example of an explicit connection between physical appearance and mental qualities and of the relationship towards “ownness” is the description of the character Laco Vrábel in the novel *Koreň a výhonky* (Root and Shoots, 1895–1896). His impressive appearance, which demonstrates his Slovak origins, is slowly decaying as a consequence of his growing away from his “roots”. The details highlighted by the authorial narrator, such as the long nail or a monocle, which demonstrate Vrábel’s theatrical attempts to appear Hungarian, his “magyaron” behaviour, seem unnatural and indicate the deformed elements of the “foreign”, to which this character has succumbed:

He surely knew how to put on the monocle to fit his right eye like the most indebted demi-magnate, throw a Gypsy a coin with great skill, demonstrate on the streets against Hentzi’s Monument or against the minister, and even hold speeches at the cemetery of Korepes above the tomb of the “martyr” Jesenák, who at the time of the uprising imprisoned his family and

even had one of the Vrábel family members hung. He dressed well, according to latest fashion, and grew a long nail on the little finger of his right hand, which he had to clean ten times a day, and scratch and cut quite often. Otherwise he was a strong, beautifully grown young lad; not even the atmosphere, – natural or moral – of Budapest could wipe the dewy healthy glow off his open ancestral face. (Vajanský 2008: 52)

**Vrábel's lifestyle based around his alienation towards national life and "naturalness" leads to disease and ultimately to his complete physical decay:**

He was dressed daintily, with good taste. The more his body languished, the more elaborately he would dress. Free, in the recess of an abandoned mill he would pay even more attention to his physical appearance than in the town. His long nail was elaborately cut and cleaned. His collar was as white as snow, made stiff with starch it was rubbing against his skinny cheeks. A colourful and artfully tied scarf ornamented his skinny neck with its immaculate silky freshness. (ibid.: 152)

The ideological semanticizing principle also governs the description of the environment in which the characters representing the opposite categories exist. It is only characteristic that for example the household of the characters representing "ownness" is clean and furnished with good albeit simple taste and that in the close presence of significantly moral characters such as the teacher Holan in the novella *Letiace tiene* (Flying Shadows, 1883) and the priest Rybka in *Koreň a výhonky* (Root and Shoots, 1895–1896) there is a linden tree which is one of the Slovak (Slavonic) national emblems. In order for the exposed importance of the linden tree to be highlighted, in Vajanský's work it appears not only as an ordinary tree in the background, but becomes a temple in which the character prays:

A quiet wind was blowing past the linden trees under the starlit sky. An old man stepped towards an old trunk of a linden tree, hollow on the inside. The core had rotten long ago, now a big hole loomed black. In its hollow hung a simple wooden cross nailed to its back wall. The old man entered the hollow – it was roomy enough – he raised his hands towards the cross and his mouth started whispering a devout prayer. The murmur

of his words was accompanied by the rustling of the leaves excited by the midnight wind. Wide deep sky vaulted above the linden tree in extensive majesty, covered in twinkling stars. (Vajanský 1883: 96)

And vice versa, the environment inhabited by the characters who come under the “foreign” category is depicted by Vajanský as showing cheap taste, “theatricality”, or having a repugnant appearance. What is characteristic is the description of a Jewish household of the Zweigenthal family in *Flying Shadows* (in the work of Vajanský, Jews are significant representatives of foreign, anti-national elements; the anti-Semitism of that period has also marked other areas of Vajanský’s activities – namely his poetry and political writing). Despite the showiness observed on the outside, the narrative voice accentuates the lack of good taste of the owners, their questionable hygiene and last but not least, their speculative purchasing of the items in the household:

Róza entered the room. Quickly she removed her jewellery, and pulled her dress off over her head. She covered her white and not particularly clean petticoat with a housecoat she found lying on the bed. On the rack next to the closet hung a pair of trousers, a vest turned the other way round, and torn braces. A bonnet was hung on top, crowning the entire composition. A proud green sofa didn’t really match the deep red armchair. Three chairs made of crooked wood of different colours were a proof of the fact that the furniture was bought in at various auctions. (ibid.: 69)

In this unity of nature and environment one would search in vain for any traces of “atmospheric realism” identified by Erich Auerbach in the texts by Honoré de Balzac.<sup>3</sup> Vajanský cannot create a credible milieu, or suggestively fill this milieu with convincing perceptible details, indeed. The details cannot function on their own, as they are way too abstract and conventional – they are “banal details” verifying the authenticity of the fictional world in

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3 “[...] jeder Lebensraum wird ihm zu einer sittlich-sinnlichen Atmosphäre, welche Landschaft, Wohnung, Möbel, Gerät, Kleidung, Körper, Charakter, Umgang, Gesinnung, Tätigkeit und Geschick der Menschen durchtränkt, wobei die allgemeine zeitgeschichtliche Lage wiederum als alle ihre einzelnen Lebensräume umfassende Gesamtatmosphäre erscheint” (Auerbach 1964: 440–441).



realistic fiction. They are symbols constantly referring to the text, to the ideological principle duly organizing all levels of Vajanský's prose writings, to a higher "metaphorical and allegorical plan" of the text, which is present as an ideal in his fictional world (specifically, it is the ideal of the regeneration of national life). Specific elements of depicted reality function as "metonymic substitutes of the metaphorical and allegorical narration level" (Čepan 1984: 79). Vajanský's inclination towards allegory pointed out in the analysis of his poetry by Valér Mikula<sup>4</sup> is also indicated in his descriptions of natural phenomena that never function on their own. They work as anticipation motifs foretelling the destiny of characters or become a background on which the ideological image of the work can be developed.

When for example the members of the Jablonský family in *Flying Shadows* on the porch on a warm early evening contemplate the fate of their relative, the libertine yeoman Kazimír Podolský, who is on the verge of a financial and personal downfall, this scene also includes the image of infatuated moths flying towards the light of the lamp, which does not relate to any specific character, but foretells the fate of the whole family, the members of which had turned their backs on "ownness" and then, threatened by financial speculations of "foreign" forces, come to a social and economic breakdown, which in the end is also obvious from the description contextualization in the following dialogue:

"Poor brother! He has wasted his life!" noted Anna and looked first at Herman, and then at her sister. "Did he fall deep in debt with you, then?" "Pah, real deep," answered Imro absent-mindedly, and looked at the moths hurling themselves in swarms towards the glass of the lamp and falling on the white tablecloth quivering their wings, burned. "I am in with him. We

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4 "[Vajanský; completed by IT] to the facts and the reality itself he does not add allegorical significances gradually, but sometimes begins his poem straight away with an already finished allegorical character [...] a natural phenomenon, for example a sunrise or dawn, does not at the beginning 'trigger' a series of images or relations, just as is the case in romanticism or symbolism, but enters the scene at the very end as natural (and thus native, organic, sovereign) acknowledgment of the ideological thread. [...] The seriously 'conceptual' allegories of Vajanský meant to change reality, however, paradoxically they are the ones to respect the reality the least. [...] Allegory 'says one and means the other', however, in Vajanský it not only 'means' 'the other', but 'says' it rather openly, and his allegories thus offer the reader no enigmas, but only answers" (Mikula 2010: 82).

hold half of our property in promissory notes. But I hear say they are unknown debts. Your old nest is falling apart.” (Vajanský 1883: 51)

The allegorical impression of a description of natural scenery in such prose writings is not only explained in the narrative sequence, the potent authorial narrator also intervenes when the characters speak, which connects the reality of the natural world of Vajanský’s fiction with the ideological level in an explicit way:

The moon was setting behind the hills. The whole valley was basking in its magic light. On the hillsides the umbrages loomed black – not standing still, but crawling up the rocky slopes. A few thin wispy clouds appeared on the horizon. Their shadows were flying above the landscape, casting shades on the silvery river stream, and then sat on Jablonovo. [...] “You see – flying shadows are the image of our life, of our current period! All those beings, harmful or at least unnecessary in our opinion, with ‘their hearts and virtuous will’ are just like these flying shadows, perhaps shadowing the silver lining of heaven a bit, but only for a transient moment. And they have so much beauty in them! My brother, they are no pathological phenomena, but phenomena of great truth. Whilst being created, a big thing always seems to have so many odds. You only see the shadows, complain about them stealing our clear weather! We do not have real dark sides – our weaknesses, our vices, our mistakes are just flying shadows, above them rules the quiet eternal light of the ideal. General weaknesses that you may find everywhere, in all nations, in all ages, must be subtracted, for not even Slavs are free of such misdemeanours shared by all humanity. But we – the oppressed, the dependent, are really not the ones to strictly reprimand the vices of all mankind. But we do have our special shadows. Even if they cast shade on our slopes for a few moments, then a wind blows and the shadows are gone, dissolved, vanished! Look, how they are crawling on top of the majestic shoulders of the colossal Tatras always higher and higher! They have already reached the top; as if somebody cut their sharp tips – they have rolled over the mountain – the summit is basking in the dusk! That glowing light above the landscape! Oh, do believe in the ideal, believe in its light!” The moon sank behind the hills. The valleys are oppressed by darkness. (ibid.: 93–94)

### **Alternatives of realist description: objectivization and allegorization**

Description in Vajanský's fiction is not only a functional element within the complex structure of the text, but it becomes a marker referring to the fact that his texts differ from the realist fiction model. If we accept that in the context of European literature the concepts of that period were based on the belief that realist art should concentrate on objective representation of reality, namely the reality of the 19th century, a world of objectively given empirical phenomena, "a world of actions and reactions, of causes and consequences, a world without miracles, a world without the transcendental" (Wellek 2005: 119), we see that Vajanský's descriptions constantly attack us with the hidden inherent qualities of reality, or references to the ideological level of the text.

For the purpose of comparison, I will provide a landscape description in the novella *Lipovianska maša* (1872) by Gustáv Zechenter Laskomerský, whose short prose writings published in a literary journal in the course of the sixties and seventies of the 19th century were based on the empirical experience and focused on capturing the details of everyday life (Slovak literary historiography classified him as an author with significant realist tendencies):

In Zvolen, right down below where the waters of Čierny Hronec and Hron meet, a long valley opens up on the left. A narrow rocky route leads through the valley along the bubbling stream of Bystrá and the high pine and moss covered slopes, along the whirring saw-mills and drossy, harsh scarcely grown fields – to the iron-mill settlement of Lipová. When a man walks along the gurgling stream for three hours or so, he sees nothing but the sky above and steep limestone hills covered with red-branched pines, sad birches, and whole carpets of yellow blooming gold moss stoncrop (*Sedum acre*) and woolly thistle (*Cirsium eriophorum*).

(Zechenter-Laskomerský 1969: 2)

What we can observe here is due effort to make an objective if not scientific classification of single natural phenomena and retrieved reality, to situate and name them exactly. On the contrary, in Vajanský's fiction nature is constantly allegorized, personified and full of hidden significances. The first person narrator and protagonist of the sketch story "Noc na skalách" (A Night on the Rocks, 1883), tired with "people and problems of everyday life" (Vajanský 1883: 7), seeks refuge in the woods for the night:

Having crossed the beech wood, I entered a grove of pine and firs. Here the rule of the conifer trees began, only here and there grew an oak, as if lost on a foreign ground. The beauty of the fir tree is deeply engraved in the soul of every Slovak living in the hills. Along the linden tree, the songs of our people also celebrate the fir tree. On their rocky bosom, the monumental Tatras nurture firs and pines. A fir tree is the true image of a satisfied Slovak. It is beautiful, soft, and filled with sap, even though it is rooted in rocky soil. [...] A sickle moon peeped out from behind the mountains. The sky is densely covered with stars. Bemused, moved by impressions, I sit on the rock under an old crooked pine. I feel so free I want to open my wings and fly. Slowly the falling asleep of nature has lulled my spirit to peace. But does nature fall asleep at all? Not completely, a bat flew swiftly above my head; in the moss the lightning bugs are flashing their bluish lanterns. [...] Nature never fully falls asleep. Eternal movement gusts out of it, but maybe it is just her dreams. No, even that is life, the secret mythical life of the night. (ibid.: 9–10)

Vajanský's description is constantly dynamized – and that not only by the (explicit) connection established by the authorial narrator between the description and the metaphorical and allegorical level of narration – in front of our very eyes an ordinary fir becomes part of the national mythology. What accentuates the dynamization of the description is the interconnectedness of the mental state of the protagonist and the natural phenomena (peaceful nature – peaceful soul), with the focus on the invisible but constantly present “eternal” movement giving nature her soul. Apart from representing the usage of tools typical of romantic poetics, with nature being the room for “authentic (natural) existence” (Hrbata – Procházka 2005: 28), a place of contemplation, it represents the development of Vajanský's problem of how to adequately and credibly represent reality in its complexity in his fiction: “Vajanský does not focus on the epic complexity and causality between the elements of the narration, but presents a situation in its illusive and dynamic tension” (Čepan 1984: 68). From static description, he is heading towards the “principle of epic representation”, where the “mediating stage is the objectification of the metaphorical and allegorical significances through the motifs of objective reality” (ibid.: 68). Vajanský's conception of the adequate representation of reality, influenced by Hegel's aesthetics, was fulfilled

by acute situations, oppositions, confrontations of agonistic forces, the hypertrophic expression, which is not only present in the narrative structure, but also affects the description itself.

Vajanský's voluntarist authorial gesture, touching upon not only the thematic, but also the expressive elements, causes the reader to be constantly confronted with a certain excessiveness in his texts: "With him everything is lifted from its original place and placed somewhere different" (ibid.: 89). This impression points to the fact that representation in Vajanský's fiction is of a different type than realistic representation. These means preferred by Vajanský refer to the melodramatic mode of representation, in the sense in which it is analysed by Peter Brooks in his work *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976). Brooks believes this type of imagination to be characteristic of literature in the "post-sacred era". Its beginnings are identified in romanticist literature; however, he also finds them in authors like Honoré de Balzac, Henry James, Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The presentation of strong and tense emotions, Manichaean moral polarization and schematization that we can identify in the texts written by these authors, are the result of a situation where "melodrama is a form for the post-sacred era, in which polarization and hyper-dramatization of forces in conflict represent a need to locate and make evident, legible, and operative those large choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance even though we cannot derive them from any transcendental system of belief" (Brooks 1995: viii.). A melodramatic gesture is an expression of urgency by a subject freed from ties, which should be given a priori. The author, creating in a melodramatic mode, constantly retrieves and with hyperbolized means amplifies the battle between good and evil, whereby both come from an autonomously determined moral world. The meaning of this world is determined by the subject, and is therefore also highlighted, unveiled and demonstrated for the price that the world he represents will not bear all of these meanings. It is a situation evoking the effects of Vajanský's fiction in many respects, which in fact represented a world without "ontological coverage" (Miko 1972: 147) and this deficit was replaced by the urgency of melodramatic expression.

## **“Effect of reality” as product of the search for a lost world:**

### **Martin Kukučín**

Martin Kukučín also reacted to the need to create a tradition in fiction, to create a world and find an appropriate expression for it in a more discrete manner, but with more convincing solutions than Vajanský. He resorted to the seemingly ordinary world of a Slovak village in its daily life and used its colloquial language as a literary language. Epic situations just like other elements of his fiction were not organized according to an a priori ideological principle, but a “formula of epic harmony” based on a self-regulated process governing relations between man, his environment, and tradition (Čepan 1984: 143f). However, the seemingly objective determinism of the fiction which lead Slovak literary historiography to pronounce Kukučín an exemplary realist, hide subliminal subjective motivations and processes. They were the source of his objectivity and determinism, as well as his harmonizing authorial gesture. In his work, Kukučín actually retrieved the natural world of his childhood, which seemed constantly present in his texts, even though it was actually situated more in his memories. His writing on the one hand reacted to the processes of cultural modernization developing into enlightenment, where “the earlier holistic society was replaced by a society that was individualistic, inconsistent, and fragmented” (Müller 2008: 523), and on the other hand, to his personal trauma caused by the fact that he had to leave home at an early age and go study (and spend most of his life living abroad). The feelings of being unattached, uprooted and out of traditional and archaic values, which characterize modern life in general, are thematized subliminally as well as explicitly in Kukučín’s texts. Their central motifs thus become, with varying intensity, the present motifs of melancholy and nostalgia connected with the unfulfilled archetypal desire to return to the “golden age of human kind”. In human life it is represented by childhood (the only period in the life of a human being connected with the uncomplicated and direct simplicity of all things in life as they are given), and in history it is represented by the pre-historic period characterized by archetypal natural time (in art such situations are thematized by the topos of Arcadia). Kukučín’s fiction, just like his realistic artistic method (to which he openly admitted to having an affinity), are thus compared with the ideal, however, in a different sense than in the case of Vajanský. His ideal is situated in the past – in the individual framework of childhood, and in the more general

framework of the traditional life of the Slovak ethnic group, which was becoming irreversibly obsolete. Is also present in various ways in the fiction located in an urban environment or in his travel books from France or South America. While Vajanský's ideal was determined by the ideology of nationalism, in Kukučín it shows a broader anthropologic dimension.

If Kukučín's fiction is characterized from the very beginning by a cultivated sense for detail, it will not only be part of his effort to achieve an exact and fitting expression (Čepan 1984: 127) in the re-presentation of reality. It may also be perceived as the manic desire of a nostalgic individual manifesting itself as an "incredible capacity to perceive images, tastes, sounds, scents, details, and banalities of the paradise lost which those who stayed at home have never experienced" (Boym 2001: 4). So when Adam Krt in the well known novella *Rysavá jalovica* (The Mottled Heifer, 1885) is getting ready to attend a fair, the narrative voice pays great attention to his outfit and explains them in the greatest detail, using the linguistic means of the colloquial language:

On his back there is a scrip; in it lie folded boots, shoes, and slippers that he had made and was now going to sell. He had put them into the scrip so that they fit right, sawing each pair together with a thick waxed thread. Krt is a peasant, but in winter he makes footwear from Walach wool for the villagers. It is quite an easy job indeed. No need to pay much attention to measure, as the bigger the boot is, the better; and no need to have a selection of lasts, as Krt himself only owns three. A small one for maidens with tiny little feet; another one for the guys who need shoes as big as troughs, so that they can jump into them straight from the Russian oven. The third one is neither big nor small, middle sized it is. (Kukučín 1961a: 7)

However, Kukučín's description goes beyond the ephemeral details working somewhat statically and meant to verify his fictional world; it is functionally becoming part of the narrator's interpretation, which introduces the disinterested reader to the norms, rules, and customs of the reality depicted. The authorial narrator in Kukučín's fiction is sometimes a "guide", and sometimes the voice of the traditional community depicted. When for example the protagonists of his childhood fictions *Z teplého hniezda* (From a Warm Nest, 1885), and *Velkou lyžicou* (With a Big Spoon, 1886) leave home

“for the world” and change their “village” clothes for a suit, the description of their appearance is neither objective nor value neutral. He can relate to the opinion and evaluation of a village community, as well as with the feelings experienced by the protagonist. In both aspects the details of his new clothes are observed and perceived as something inappropriate and foreign. They are “signs” which do not belong to this environment and alienate the person wearing them:

Maťko Rafikovie seems troubled, as it is the very first time in his life that he got a pair of boots. Well, this alone could be bearable, could somehow be endured: but – what is worse – they took his former peasant clothes and dressed him in new apparel. Behold, Matej Rafikovie is no longer a peasant’s son: let’s see, let’s have a look – the white trousers ornamented with a green cord lie over there under the oven, a black slop neatly embroidered and lined with red satin is hung on a rack, a broad-brimmed hat with a double ribbon and twelve new pins that he had bought on Trinity Sunday, hangs there on a nail in the corner next to the lantern. Instead of his former admirable clothes he has now received a pair of black pantaloons and a jacket made of thin cheap fabric. And how it is made! At least the jacket looks like a museum piece; it is short but so wide that another Matej could fit in; there is a big hump left on the back, and the jacket is so narrow it rubs against his armpits. On the boy’s head sits a tiny little hat as light as a feather, he can hardly feel its weight. But all that he could endure in the end, if they had only left him his shirts. But no, they have taken them as well, his shirts with white wide laces and long wide sleeves, and given him muslin shirts instead, with no wide laces; just plain buttons, the sleeves do not hang loose, but are stitched above the wrists and narrowly seamed. Well, this is what happened to poor Matej Rafikovie; out of a handsome slender lad who only yesterday looked as tall as a tree, they made a scarecrow in just an hour. His fair soft hair that a day ago he would comb neatly behind his ears is gone. The miller cut it off, the only barber in the whole valley, leaving just a shock of hair above his forehead. Behold the latest fashion!

(Kukučín 1961b: 73)

In those fiction narratives where Kukučín resorts to first person narration, the alienation of his heroes is expressed by means of an idealized description.



The prose work *Na obecnom salaši* (At the Community Sheepfold, 1887) thematizes the archetypal motif of the “return to Paradise Lost”, “Arcadia”, which, in the end is a topos that in art represents an expression of melancholic sentimentality (Chamonikola 2000: 78) compensating for the melancholic feeling of being uprooted.<sup>5</sup> The hero of this story does not only return to the realm of childhood but also tries to go back in time. The first person narrator, a student on summer holidays decides to return to places where he used to spend his summers. A landscape he described is not a real but a fairy-tale land soaked in an atmosphere of cosiness and kindness – everything here seems to have been created for a quiet human life:

I entered a small village that today is still called Topoľany. [...] As I say, I entered the village: it really was necessary to enter it. Like a garden enclosed from all sides by fences and buildings, our village was encircled by mountains dressed in the dark greenery of woods; only their peaks were bald as an old man’s head. If the hills did not leave a narrow valley in between, through which a stream could make its way like a snake, with a white-dust-covered route along, it would not be possible to enter the village at all. Only in one place the valley widens so that the hollow basin can accommodate Topoľany; the slopes of the hills are less steep closer to the village, surely to allow the villagers to usurp some land and cultivate it. The village looks, well, like any other village. There is a long street with white houses and tiny little gardens on both sides; a stream flows through – surely so that the miller can mill, well, everything! But let me mention the poplars that grow beautifully along the stream – perhaps it was from them the village got its name. (Kukučín 1958: 51)

Later the protagonist goes to a sheepfold and is fascinated by the manifestations of traditional life there:

After a two hour walk through a dense conifer forest one ends up on a meadow. The dark greenery of the woods forms a perfect framework

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5 “Another aspect of melancholy probably comes from the feeling of being uprooted, expelled from Paradise, in memories of the state of happiness, although there are various projections of this happiness” (Chamonikola 2000: 77).

for the sunlit meadow covered in tiny juicy grass. A really beautiful image! Around lie the woods like a velvet frame and with the meadow they form a green background for the yard and a shepherd's hut. As if the hut didn't feel free amid the meadow, it retreated to the forest edge in the shadow of old firs. What a peculiar house! Beavers must build such homes above the water. I try to look out for a beaver. No beaver in sight, instead, I see a giant standing in front of the hut. A real giant, a tall hunk that you don't often see even in our country. (ibid.: 62)

He sees him – because he already lives in a different modern time – as a reminder of the pre-modern archaic times and wishes to become part of this “natural” environment that he perceives as a tool to fulfil his desire to lead an authentic life. What makes an archetypal and mythical impression is the character of the shepherd (“the giant”), who is an unquestionable authority for the protagonist. In the context of Kukučín's fiction it is an extreme pole of the idyllic and mythical approach towards everyday reality in the village, in a broader context however, it may be perceived as a romantic desire to return to natural conditions, to re-establish the natural oneness of man and his environment.

Kukučín's ideal – the ideal of home (long lost forever) goes beyond the dimensions given by individual biography and becomes a generally valid anthropological constant factor in his writings. It is also present in fiction setting the story a “foreign” environment (in texts thematizing life in the “big city”, i.e. in Prague, where he studied medicine, as well as in his travel books). Using this approach the “foreign world” is described by means that accentuate its resemblance to home. The narrator constantly expresses his distance, wishing to appear as a “peasant” looking at the restlessness of the big city from the position of common sense also despite the fact that Kukučín can present the urban environment (Prague, Punta Arenas, Paris) to his reader in a civil manner, as, without doubt, he knows it well and is well adapted to it. Oskár Čepan states in this connection that for Kukučín, the “silhouette of home” represents “a solid background” (Čepan 1972: 177).

In the texts by both Vajanský and Kukučín it is obvious that description does not work as a neutral and objectivizing mediator of the properties of the fictional world, but is rather a functional part of its significant principle, retrieving the unity between man, environment, and tradition, where

conflicts are solved by self-regulating processes. He uses it to compensate for his melancholic desire to live in a world that no longer exists and allows him to dwell in memories of the past. In the prose writings by both authors we observe the effects of description being an indicator of a specific realization of a realist artistic model in the context of Slovak literature.

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