

LOUIS ADAMIC, A SLOVENE, AN AMERICAN, AN OBSERVER, A FIGHTER, A 'POET'¹

Janja Žitnik

A comparison of the prevailing value system in the native country with that in the new homeland is something which constantly forces itself into the consciousness of almost every first generation immigrant, the person with two homelands. Louis Adamic, one of the most conspicuous Americans among Slovenes and at the same time unmistakably a Slovene among Americans, weaves elements of such a comparison into a considerable number of his works. Most of the time he does not compare the two countries and their values directly; on the basis of his contrasting portrayals of people, their living conditions, habits and mental patterns, comparisons tend to offer themselves.

The writer tackled this topic as a systematic researcher of society and the individual and as a sensitive observer of human predicaments and expectations. He reacts to them in two different ways. On the one hand he identifies himself with his freely chosen role of public figure, a fighter for equality in various spheres and an advocate of humane social changes, while on the other he remains a »poet«, a refined, genuine, direct and therefore still convincing portrayer of the deepest human feelings. His gift of observation, his empathy, the way he interweaves poetic passages even into non-literary texts, and his constant search for the sense and meaning of human and social phenomena are probably the legacy of his Slovene origin. His vitality, enterprise and decisiveness, without which he would not have been able to appear in the first of the roles mentioned above, I believe,

¹ This paper was presented at the international conference *The 100th Birth Anniversary of Louis Adamic – Intellectuals in Diaspora*, Portorož, 1–5 September 1998, organized by the Institute for Slovenian Emigration Studies, Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

are elements which the writer to a large extent adopted from the American mentality.

The contrast between the Slovene and American value systems is particularly apparent in Adamic's works *Laughing in the Jungle*, *The Native's Return*, *Grandsons*, *My Native Land*, and *The Eagle and the Roots*, and also appears indirectly in other works. Adamic felt an explicit need for a redemptive connection and a flow of values between the two countries, something he attempted to establish convincingly during his two visits to his native land (1932–33 and 1949). At the time of his first visit Slovenia was in the middle of a political and economic crisis, while the USA was still reeling from the effects of the worst economic crisis in its history. Nevertheless even then Adamic found more differences between the two countries than common characteristics. During his second visit to Slovenia the contrast was in many ways even greater. The East had at that time suspended economic and military cooperation with the writer's native country which meant that in 1949 it was practically fighting for survival. Almost simultaneously his new homeland, despite its economic boom, which at that time still had no comparison anywhere in the world, was plunging into an almost medieval political inquisition and the horrors of the Korean War, which saw people rushing in fear to the department stores and feverishly buying substitutes for peace, for political freedom and the loss of mutual trust.

»Things, things, things. They were made for us, us, us; and we bought, bought, bought them if we had the money, money, money; and we worshipped them at the same time that having them meant very little to us if we had the money to replace them. Things, things, things were our cult, our culture, our needs and entertainment, our religion; /.../ The radio and television priests and minstrels and temple girls sang hymns, ballads and chants about them... A hundred years before, another minstrel, Walt Whitman, had sung another kind of song – about what things might do to American men and women, to American democracy.«² This never published cry for different values was written by Adamic in the last year of his life.

As a counter to commercialised American values the writer set the traditional human values of his old homeland, particularly those which in the turbulent times of the Second World War and the postwar political changes had not changed significantly and which had not yet been touched by western mentality.

² Louis Adamic, *The Eagle and the Roots*, manuscript, second version, Library of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana. Book Two, Chapter Four, p. 294.

Even in the first of his books which deal with his old country, *The Native's Return*, he emphasizes certain still elemental cultural and ethical values which he finds mainly among the simple people of Slovenia but also in progressive literary and political circles. He discovers in the Slovenes the indestructible moral strength which has helped this nation, threatened in every moment of its history, to survive in its fierce and never-ending struggle for existence. With great love he describes the natures of the Slovene and other Yugoslav nations under the yoke of the Greater Serbian regime. Contemplating their characteristics he suddenly becomes proud to be Slovene. This feeling leads him in a relentless exposure of the truth of the violence of King Alexander's dictatorship, and, ten years later, to the organization of political and material support for his countrymen during the period of the national liberation movement. Following liberation it leads him to support their struggle for fairer borders. In such moments Adamic the fighter steps to the forefront. Standing loyally by his side, with his frequently idealized images of his bravely suffering countrymen, is Adamic the 'poet'.

In Adamic's eyes the Slovene nation is traditionally oriented towards art. Accounts of how songs and improvised theatre in the most difficult moments of the national liberation struggle meant as much to the Slovene fighters as a life-saving mouthful of bread made a powerful impression on the writer. In his efforts to show the western world the important place held by cultural and ethical values in the everyday life of the Slovene people, he was in places prone to such exaggeration that he was even reproached by some prominent Slovenes who realized somewhat to their embarrassment that Adamic's writing offered a less than objective picture of the cultural and ethical consciousness of the Slovene people. Even during his first visit to Slovenia the writer gained the impression that in this country even in extreme poverty there was no moral degeneration to be found. Instead he saw in people an innate natural dignity, which filled him with pride and admiration. Through his picturesque portraits of his countrymen he tried to transfer fragments of their value system to the new continent. Perhaps it is understandable that he sometimes got carried away, as also happened on the occasions when he proudly painted for his old homeland a modern image of America. Naturally the responses to Adamic's work also include more favourable opinions of his objectivity. The literary historian Mirko Jurak considers that Adamic's work shows the mature patriotic feeling of a writer who despite his emotional attachment views the problems of his two homelands with a sober and critical eye. He deliberately counterbalances his idyllic and emotional portraits

with an ironic tone and a sharp commentary, which are the fruit of later reflection and the expansion of the horizons of the mature writer brought about by long years of experience.³

That Adamic, despite his rare use of his mother tongue and his only occasional contacts with other American Slovenes (which however always had such far-reaching consequences) was one of the more nationally conscious Slovenes is demonstrated by his three books dedicated to his native land and his public work on behalf of his former home. Although he claims precisely the opposite in the introductory chapter of *The Native's Return*, he always preserved lively and direct contacts with the country of his birth from his arrival in the USA right up to his death. Slovene and Slovene emigration topics account for roughly half the subject matter of Adamic's books and articles, something which reflects the writer's close attachment to his first homeland. That in addition to his national consciousness he bore other unmistakable elements of Sloveneness was observed by Oton Župančič on his first meeting with Adamic.

Župančič's approach to dealing with Adamic's Sloveneness was fairly provocative to the Slovene mentality of the time. In a famous article in 1932 he expressed his belief that going out into the world had spiritually enriched Adamic rather than impoverished him. America had given him what it could but had taken nothing away.⁴ It is interesting that Župančič's essay has clearly survived all the hot-tempered reactions to it from his colleagues at *Ljubljanski zvon*, who in response listed the arguments with which they wanted to undermine the poet's views – particularly the view that Adamic was more explicitly a Slovene than the majority of the 'guardians of Sloveneness' living in Slovenia.⁵ In the decades following the publication of the controversial essay, writers of articles and papers on Adamic have constantly summarised, quoted and further developed Župančič's thoughts on the writer's Sloveneness, though not the responses of his outraged contemporaries.

Some literary historians believe that it is precisely because Adamic had more or less withdrawn from the Slovene cultural arena for eighteen years that it

³ Mirko Jurak, *The Relationship Between Fictional and Non-fictional Elements in Adamic's Autobiographical Novels*, *Louis Adamič: Simpozij*, ed. Janez Stanonik, Ljubljana: Univerza Edvarda Kardelja, 1981, pp. 125–36.

⁴ Oton Župančič, *Adamič in slovenstvo*, *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1932, no. 9, pp. 513–20.

⁵ Their responses to Župančič's essay were collected in a booklet, *Kriza Ljubljanskega zvona*, Ljubljana: Tiskarna Slovenija, 1932.

was so much easier for him on his return in 1932 to discover the cultural and literary dimension of Sloveneness which he writes about in *The Native's Return*. He recognised that in those periods of history when the Slovene nation was enduring the worst social, economic and political conditions, Sloveneness was grounded above all in culture and literature. A thorough study of this was published in 1981 by Denis Poniž, who found, among other things, that Adamic wholly identified with his national roots. He creatively combined the identity of his national origin with his new, acquired identity as an immigrant but nevertheless completely inculturated American. The result is his effort for a two-way flow of cultural, literary and other values. Awareness of one's roots for Adamic also meant assertion of those roots. His was not merely a passive search for his origins in order to gain a sense of belonging, but the active principle of winning international recognition of the national elements of his people.⁶

Among Adamic's friends and acquaintances we also find other views on the importance of his dual national identity. In conversation with me in 1986, the psychologist Vera Candon, who claimed to have been in correspondence with the writer almost until his death, attributed part of the blame for his emotional distress in the last years of his life to the fact that in both his old homeland and his new one Adamic was to a certain extent a foreigner and could not feel 'completely at home' anywhere. He missed the feeling of total, unconditional acceptance which would in any case have been incompatible with his almost legendary inflexibility, his irrepressible criticalness and his individualism. A similar opinion was expressed by Marija Vilfan, an acquaintance of Adamic's who had preserved all her extensive correspondence with the writer. Adamic enjoyed moving in the circles of the progressive, socially-committed New York literati, whose central figure was the famous American writer Lillian Hellman and who sympathized with the political programme of Henry Wallace. Adamic felt comfortable in the company of these writers. He esteemed them and in many ways felt himself to be a part of their circle. Vilfan however believed that they never really accepted him.⁷ During Adamic's second visit to Yugoslavia his hosts addressed him as 'Mr Adamic' while they themselves were 'comrades'. Adamic mentions this in his last book. On the one hand it pleased him that in Yugoslavia

⁶ Denis Poniž, Nacionalno v literaturi Louisa Adamiča o Slovencih in Jugoslaviji, *Louis Adamič: Simpozij*, pp. 113–18.

⁷ Janja Žitnik, *Pogovori o Louisu Adamiču*, Ljubljana: Prešernova družba, 1995, p. 135 and pp. 141–42, 147–48.

he was seen as a real American, but on the other such formalities only intensified the unnecessary distance between his hosts and a guest who had after all been their 'comrade' in the national liberation struggle. He was touched when his Belgrade housekeeper Marija one day spontaneously addressed him as 'Comrade Adamic'.

Over the course of the thirty-five years which Adamic spent in America before his second visit to Yugoslavia, in many ways he really did become a true American. However all his life, consciously or unconsciously, he clung to the main ethical values impressed on him by his Slovene origin and his early youth in his old homeland. These values the boy who had scarcely begun growing into a young man unwittingly carried with him when in 1913 he landed on Ellis Island. Despite the mighty current of American life, which tends to destroy everything which resists its inexorable power, and despite the fact that both as a young man and later as a mature writer he himself did his utmost to become a real American, the old values never left him. He remained a Slovene (if we once again borrow Župančič's words) 'in the elements of his spirit, the instinctive drive, the secret essence which gives his work its special colour and tone.' He became successful both in the eyes of Slovenes and Americans, although his success was greater in the eyes of his old countrymen than in the eyes of his new ones. His success did not accord entirely with the prevailing American conception of success. The writer accepted the 'American dream' only to a certain extent. But that which represents the driving force of his writing and work has less to do with the concept of the 'American dream' than with the values of his former homeland. In moments of decision, at crossroads where it was necessary again and again to seek a way forward, he always chose to seek truth, and the political, cultural and ethical enlightenment of the public. He always put these goals ahead of his personal material success.

Some interesting conclusions on the influence of Adamic's two homelands on his value system were made by Boris Paternu in his paper for the 'Louis Adamic Symposium' in Ljubljana in 1981,⁸ and this question was also indirectly dealt with by several other papers from the symposium. The question remains an interesting one. Fresh light is cast on it by the unpublished chapter 'Game of Chess in an Earthquake' from the manuscript of *The Eagle and the Roots*. In his

⁸ Boris Paternu, Nastajanje Adamičevega sestava vrednot ob Ameriki in Jugoslaviji, *Louis Adamič: Simpozij*, pp. 85–100.

last work Adamic once again attempted an extensive comparison of the values of his old homeland and his new one, something which is not evident from the published version since the editors left out the whole of an extremely critical chapter on America, without which of course there could be no comparison.

Adamic believed that in economically less developed countries the majority of people aim for a certain satisfactory standard of living which is neither markedly higher nor markedly lower than the material conditions in their immediate environment. When a family or individual reaches this level what they want is stability and tranquillity. Since there are too few conditions for further material progress this no longer takes first priority. Interests expand from the most basic, such as ensuring at least minimal material conditions, personal freedom, sexual equality, ethnic and social equality, to a second series of interests such as self-education in parallel with formal education, the possibility of taking part in decision-making in the working environment and the overall system, collective consciousness, enjoyment of cultural benefits, cultivation of creative activities, and so on, which has an automatic influence on the value system of the society and the individual.

In a country such as Slovenia was during the time of Adamic's second visit, concern for moral, cultural and social values were, he believed, an important part of everyday life and enjoyed strong support in the mass media. One of the consequences of such conditions is a broader understanding of the notion of success. The criteria for estimating success in private and public life, and also the success of the social system as a whole, are in a such a country different from the criteria which generally applied in American society at the beginning of the 1950s (and indeed later).

In economically developed countries such as the United States, most people are constantly aiming for progress, i.e. at every moment for the next rung on the ladder of success. Final success is as an unknown concept, and every success is merely a transition level, one rung lower than the next. Social success, influence in the work place and success in private life are closely connected with material success. Adamic believed that as early as the immediate postwar period the average American, in his relentless battle for ever better material conditions, rarely had time and energy left for other pursuits. The entire American system supported this life style via the public media, the operation of which had to guarantee the sponsors the maximum profit, while moral, cultural and social values remained in the background in the most widely disseminated American media.

We know from our own experience that even in a country like Slovenia the value system changes rapidly when there is a change in social conditions, and thus in the standard of living of the majority. In the 1970s Slovenia too saw the competition for the highest possible standard of living move into the foreground. This was a time when the standard of living increased perceptibly, in a distorted reflection of the actual economic state of the country. This was the first time in the country's history that relatively favourable material conditions could cause the mentality and interests of the average Slovene to draw somewhat nearer to the mentality and interests of the average American. The gap between the generations was more appreciable than usual in this period; the young people disapproved in particular of their parents' confused and narrow-minded competition to accumulate material goods. This feature of generational conflict found its greatest expression in the USA at the end of the 1960s, although its origins in America reach right back to the postwar period, when the standard of living in Slovenia was very low and when collective consciousness (volunteer work and solidarity in postwar Yugoslavia made a powerful impression on Adamic) was considered one of the most important values of society at that time.

If we are aware of the different background of prevailing values in Adamic's two homelands and know that these depended to a large extent on the social system, material conditions and traditions of the individual countries, we can understand Adamic's efforts to combine the best from the two countries and in this way contribute to a better future for both Slovenes and Americans. The Slovene whom he paints as contentedly pushing his wooden wheelbarrow while the sweat drips from his brow onto the great heap of stones he is transporting, and the young American woman whom he depicts sitting at her machine in a great textile factory and dreaming of becoming a Hollywood star — these are the people he wants to help. He wants to open their eyes to new values, new possibilities. In the former he wants to awaken the consciousness that as a working member of society he is entitled to more dignified living conditions; to the latter he wishes to show that only internal wealth can make sense of human life and bring to the greyness of everyday existence nobility, beauty and genuine contentment.

The idea that his native land lacked much of what the new continent had in abundance, and that on the other hand the American system lacked a great deal that in the old country was everyday and natural, can be found in many of Adamic's writings. The thing that had made the greatest impression on him in America was

the 'wonderful bustle' which is hopelessly muddled and terrifyingly chaotic as soon as you find yourself inside it but which is nevertheless so carefully organized and managed that it seemingly functions as an efficient whole, of course according to its own standards. Within this system everyone who is capable can reach goals which at first glance are unattainable, provided however he understands the rules of the game, matches the pulse of the country, understands the rhythm of its chaotic but nevertheless controlled bustle and is able to follow this rhythm. The prosperity of the new country gleamed from afar and affected the young immigrant from distant Slovenia just as it affected many others. He was overwhelmed by new dimensions, high technology, the great variety of races and nations which despite everything was so carefully led that it had built the most successful country in the world. The young Adamic was entranced by America as an economic, technological, commercial and scientific superpower, entranced by it as an entity, and his first wish was to become a 'real American'. The need to constantly prove that he was a real American and his admiration for American vitality and efficiency stayed with the writer almost until his death.

Adamic's hard experiences while trying to make his way in American society, during his own struggle with want and anonymity, also gave him the recognition that the rules of the game in this country were not always fair. With a remarkable ear for the fates of the people he met along his way, he experienced with them their highs and lows. Then he began to recognize the rotten core of the gleaming whole, the ruthlessness of the system towards the weak and the 'too different', the poverty, primitiveness and the wild contradictions which seethed beneath the apparently harmonious surface. Problems such as racial and ethnic discrimination, corruption in the labour movement, the growing number of homeless people, the reasons behind the ever-increasing crime, attracted his attention to such an extent that he devoted himself to them intensively. Too many individuals sink and are simply lost in the American masses because their hopeless struggle for survival and the pitiless system have destroyed the last remnants of their moral balance. He recognised that the American system was not fair to all, that it did not give equal opportunities to all, and that it gave rise to distorted values which were reflected in the moral fragility and spiritual limitation of the poor and the rich, in various forms of escape, and in general human alienation.

By the time of his first visit to his homeland, the thirty-four-year-old Adamic knew more about the United States than many Americans born there. As well as numerous other articles he had by then already published two of his most

important books, *Dynamite* and *Laughing in the Jungle*. He devoted himself to the problems of America in his books, articles and lectures. However when he arrived in his old homeland he tried to present his countrymen with the brighter side of his new country, although he did also mention its problems. He liked to emphasize the advantages of the United States just as he liked telling Americans about the natural mildness, dignity and moral strength of the Slovene nation. Here again he showed his emotional attachment to both countries.

When during his second visit seventeen years later he happily took every opportunity to serve up bewildering statistics on American industry and agricultural production, on the outstanding technology, modern infrastructure, incomparable circulation of magazines and newspapers, the standard of living of the 'average' American, it was of course not his aim to try and make his countrymen feel small. One of his goals was to encourage greater economic cooperation between Yugoslavia and the USA. At home he had long been preparing the ground for the acceptance of the idea of American help in the war-ravaged countries of Europe, and he was convinced that too little initiative for this was coming from Yugoslavia. Despite the ideological obstacles which paralyzed Yugoslav-American relations, the new economic difficulties which followed the resolution of the Cominform persuaded Adamic that the only future for the new Yugoslavia lay in economic reliance on the USA. This is the reason that he quoted statistics on the successes of this economic superpower. To him it seemed vitally necessary that the Yugoslav leadership should become aware of the hopelessness of their country's position and decide to take the most promising way out possible.

During his three-hour speech at his farewell dinner in Ljubljana in 1949, just before his departure from his homeland, he addressed the gathering of the most prominent Slovenes with the following words:

»I hope I'm wrong but I feel it necessary to express my pessimism because all of you seem so gay and confident – not just because at long last you're going to be rid of me but because some of you are suddenly hopeful of America and you have said that your hopes are partly based on my remarks last winter. What really helps you to see America in a better light, I believe, is that Washington has granted you a small loan and the State Department will let you buy an American steel mill. I think that is an illusion. How could a steel mill be an illusion? I won't answer my own question. I can't without running into some of your most insistently held beliefs; /.../

I suppose nothing I told you last winter was untrue. America is a great place from many angles whether you're in the right mood, or if you're hostile to her; even from the communist angle – we have bigger and better communistic institutions than you have: the post office, the public school library, and water systems, to name the most obvious. But I didn't, I couldn't begin to tell you the whole truth about America; and I can't tell it to you tonight. I don't know it, nor does anybody else.»⁹

Adamic by no means wanted to conceal the shady side of America. He was however convinced that the country had many advantages which could serve Yugoslavia as a model. He felt that what the new Yugoslav leadership lacked most was boldness, practicality and flexibility in economic policy. Although he had a premonition of the possible undesirable consequences of a decision by Yugoslavia to open itself more to American cooperation, such a decision seemed to him necessary. He was convinced that without it Yugoslavia's prospects for the future were very bleak.

These thoughts occupied Adamic as he travelled round his native land in 1949 and collected impressions. A year later he set off on a journey across the whole American continent. This gave rise to different thoughts: America too needed a humane policy towards industrial workers like the one, he was fond of saying, he had witnessed in Slovenia.¹⁰ It also needed many other of those elements of the mentality of his old countrymen by which he was constantly being surprised. Suddenly all he could see in the America he observed on his journey were the deficiencies, which were now so glaringly apparent that they cast in the shade his former conception of the 'land of limitless opportunity', where 'the sky's the limit'. America was dangerous to itself and to others. America waited impotently and hoped for the birth of a 'new freedom', for a solution to the hysteria of the suspicion which from month to month was intensified by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his team. In the first pages of his unpublished chapter on America Adamic wrote:

⁹ Louis Adamic, *The Eagle and the Roots*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1952, pp. 411–12.

¹⁰ In an interview on April 7, 1986 Štefan Urbanc, director of several Slovene factories, told this author about Adamic's comparison between working conditions in Slovene and American industry (Žitnik, *Pogovori o Louisu Adamiču*, pp. 87–102). More about this in: Janja Žitnik, *Leto 1949: Louis Adamič v Tržiču*, *Obzornik*, 1987, no. 10, pp. 726–35.

»In their own industrially up-and-coming countries the financiers and industrialists subverted and took over governments. They plotted against one another, polluted streams and the air and made new culture patterns. Individuals who did not follow those patterns were considered eccentrics (as David Thoreau was) or outcasts, ne'er-do-wells, village atheists, bolsheviks or radicals who didn't know what was 'good' for them, and since lately, 'communists', 'fellow-travelers' or 'un-Americans'.«¹¹

The fear of a hearing before the Committee on Un-American Activities and indignation at America's intervention in the Korean crisis, combined with certain personal factors, brought Adamic to at least partial resignation. He was increasingly disenchanted with both of his homelands and began to doubt the success of any existing political efforts for a way out of the current crisis of international relations. A year before his death he began to feel that writing *The Eagle and the Roots*, such demanding and perhaps fruitless work, was like a game of chess during a long and destructive earthquake. He used this metaphor as the title for the unpublished chapter on America mentioned above, which was to be his last piece of writing. Alongside numerous other extremely pessimistic passages in this chapter, which are in no sense typical either of his previous works or of the published chapters of *The Eagle and the Roots* written a few months previously, we find the following:

»The world was full of misnomers. All at once the Land of the Morning Calm – Korea – exploded. And, instead of taking the few weeks' rest my doctor had advised, I took a few months'. But 'rest' was a misnomer too. The tremors in the summer and early fall of 1950 were severe. I spent hours every day reading the prints and listening to radio commentators and making notes to keep my seismographic data up to date. When I stopped to think though, nothing made sense – only the green grass outside my window, and the groundhogs and the poison ivy I was trying to extirpate, and sunshine and rain.«¹²

The old values which Adamic had believed in all his life, which he had substantiated and advocated, were now, in the chaotic reality of the beginning of the 1950s, becoming increasingly fragile. Finally they faded so much that they could hardly be seen any more.

¹¹ Louis Adamic, *The Eagle and the Roots*, manuscript, second version, Book Two, Chapter Four, p. 18.

¹² Adamic, op. cit., pp. 186–87.

But Adamic only felt this level of resignation in the last year of his life. He had impressed himself on the Slovene consciousness, and in part on the American consciousness as an unbending fighter for a juster and more contented society. We shall probably remember him most for the frequently quoted passages on his experience of his native land and its people, passages which testify to his Sloveneness. And we shall also remember him for his touching reflections on his Americanness as represented by the following extract from a speech he wrote in 1947:

»I am for being an American in the best tradition, which is to say being a man or woman openly opposed to what he or she regards wrong or unsound; being openly for what is sound and true. There is no thrill in being a worm, in allowing oneself to be stepped on, to be intimidated by propaganda.

*We need to help each other. A few nights ago I was leafing through Nehru's latest book, *The Discovery of India*, and came on this: 'There is only one thing that remains to us, that cannot be taken away: to act with courage and dignity, and to stick to the ideals that have given meaning to life.'*¹³

Adamic, however, will be remembered not only as a Slovene, an American and a fighter for a better society, but also as a sensitive observer and conveyor of human feelings in the most varied moments and situations. He managed to capture hunger, war and death on paper and from all angles: the tragic, the wretched and the courageous. Comradeship is again and again in his stories a value which can illuminate the most difficult moments with a ray of hope. Loyalty, treachery, disappointment, frailty and strength of character are all reflected in his tales as a component part of the human soul and human history. And here too is love. When we leaf through the rare love scenes in Adamic's stories we are surprised by the subtlety with which this solid, realistic man describes the feeling of love, a phenomenon which for him was of all human feelings, experiences and values the most elemental, eternal and unique:

»Stella and I sat on a stone under a low-hanging bough of a great hemlock at the clearing's edge and watched the lake below slip into shadow. Then we heard the sound of hurrying hob-nailed boots on the steep, gravelly Triglav trail... and a moment later a boy and a girl bounded into the refulgent shimmer and stopped short at the convergence of trails, where the knoll was highest and the view best. /.../

¹³ Louis Adamic, *The Contest*, *T & T*, 3 (1947), January-March, p. 4.

Facing the lake and the sun, which put a rutilant sheen on their skin, they stood on that spot for possibly ten seconds without moving or saying a word. Then they abruptly faced each other and smiled strangely as though with a private understanding. And thus they remained for another few seconds. /.../

They were watching the setting sun's trembling light on each other's faces. Then the instant before shadow engulfed the knoll with the rest of the mountainside, the girl rose quickly, eagerly on her toes and the boy bent down a little and pressed his cheek briefly against hers.

I have never witnessed a more appealing scene or one more filled with drama. For a moment, rising on the tiniest ripple in the time-stream, the boy and the girl were the core of all meaning, the sudden and significant center of everything that lived and mattered.»¹⁴

These lines are not an isolated example. There are countless similar gentle impressions dotted through almost all of Adamic's books. And if in some unforeseen historical earthquakes of future Slovene generations, Adamic the fighter one day sinks into oblivion, these timeless poetic bits, no matter how unconsciously he may have written them, will probably survive him.

POVZETEK

LOUIS ADAMIČ, SLOVENEK, AMERIČAN, OPAZOVALEC, BOREC, 'POET'

Janja Žitnik

Primerjava prevladujočega vrednostnega sestava v rojstni deželi s tistim v novi domovini je nekaj, kar se nenehno vsiljuje v zavest skoraj vsakega izseljenca prve generacije, človeka z dvema domovinama. Louis Adamič, eden najizrazitejših Američanov med Slovenci in obenem nezgrešljiv Slovenec med Američani, vpleta prvine takšne primerjave v precejšnje število svojih del. Obeh dežel in njunih

¹⁴ Louis Adamic, *My Native Land*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1943, pp. 3–4.

vrednot največkrat ne primerja neposredno; na osnovi njegovih kontrastnih prikazov ljudi, njihovih življenjskih razmer, navad in miselnih vzorcev se primerjave ponujajo kar same.

Pisatelj se loteva te tematike kot sistematičen raziskovalec družbe in posameznika in kot tenkočuten opazovalec človeških stisk in pričakanj. Na slednje reagira v dveh smereh. Na eni strani se domala istoveti s svojo prostovoljno izbrano vlogo javnega akterja, borca za vsakršno enakopravnost in zagovornika humanih družbenih sprememb, na drugi strani pa ostaja »poet«, pretanjen, pristen, neposreden in zato še vedno prepričljiv izpovedovalec najglobljih človeških občutkov. Dar opazovanja, empatija, vpletanje poetičnih pasusov celo v neliterarne tekste ter nenehno iskanje smisla in pomena vsakovrstnih človeških in družbenih pojavov so pri Adamiču nemara dediščina njegovega slovenskega porekla. Vitalizem, podjetnost in odločnost, brez katerih ne bi mogel uspešno nastopati v prvi od omenjenih vlog, pa so prvine, ki jih je pisatelj tem lažje razvil v svoji novi domovini, saj predstavljajo pomemben sestavni del ameriške mentalitete.

Kontrast med slovenskim in ameriškim vrednostnim sestavom izstopi predvsem v Adamičevih delih *Smeh v džungli*, *Vrnitev v rodni kraj*, *Vnuki*, *Moja rojstna dežela in Orel in korenine*, posredno pa tudi v drugih. Eksplicitno potrebo po odrešilni povezavi in pretoku vrednot med obema deželama je Adamič začutil in jo poskušal prepričljivo utemeljiti dvakrat, in sicer v času obeh svojih obiskov rojstne dežele (1932–33 in 1949). V času prvega obiska je bila Slovenija v politični in gospodarski krizi, ZDA pa so tudi še vedno pestile posledice najhujše ekonomske krize v zgodovini te dežele. In vendar je Adamič že tedaj našel več razlik med deželama kot pa skupnih značilnosti. Med drugim obiskom Slovenije je bil kontrast v mnogih pogledih še večji. Vzhod je prekinil gospodarsko in vojaško sodelovanje s pisateljevo rojstno deželo, zaradi česar se je leta 1949 tako rekoč borila za preživetje, njegova nova domovina pa se je skoraj istočasno – ob vsem svojem gospodarskem razcvetu, ki je bil tedaj še vedno brez primere v svetu – pogreznila v skoraj srednjeveško politično inkvizicijo in v strahote korejske vojne, ko so ljudje prestrašeni hiteli v veleblagovnice mrzlično nakupovat nadomestke za mir, za politično svobodo in izgubljeno medsebojno zaupanje.

Skomercializiranim ameriškim vrednotam postavlja pisatelj za protiutež tradicionalne človeške vrednote stare domovine, zlasti tiste, ki se v burnem obdobju druge svetovne vojne in povojnih političnih sprememb niso bistveno spremenile in ki se jih zahodna mentaliteta še ni dotaknila. Že v svoji prvi knjigi, posvečeni stari domovini (*Vrnitev v rodni kraj*, 1934), poudarja nekatere še vedno prvinske

kulturne in etične vrednote, ki jih najde zlasti med preprostim slovenskim ljudstvom pa tudi v naprednih pisateljskih in političnih krogih. V Slovencih odkrije neuničljivo moralno moč, ki je temu v vsakem trenutku svoje zgodovine ogroženemu narodu pomagala preživeti v trdem in nenehnem boju za obstanek. Z veliko ljubeznijo opisuje nravi slovenskega in drugih jugoslovanskih narodov pod jarmom velikosrbskega režima. Strmeč nad nekaterimi njihovimi potezami nenadoma postane ponosen, da je Slovenec. To čustvo ga vodi v neprizanesljivo razkrinkavanje resnice o nasilju Aleksandrove diktature, deset let pozneje pa v organiziranje politične in gmotne podpore rojakom v času njihovega narodnoosvobodilnega gibanja in po osvoboditvi v podporo njihovem boju za pravičnejše meje. V takih trenutkih stopi v ospredje Adamič - borec, ki mu s svojimi pogosto idealiziranimi podobami pogumno trpečih rojakov zvesto stoji ob strani Adamič - »poet«. S slikovitimi prikazi rojakov je pisatelj poskušal prenesti fragmente njihovega vrednostnega sestava na novo celino. Morda je razumljivo, da ga je pri tem včasih nekoliko zaneslo, kakor se mu je rado zgodilo tudi tedaj, ko je v starem kraju ponosno slikal moderno podobo Amerike.

V slovensko in deloma v ameriško zavest se je vtisnil kot neupogljiv borec za pravičnejšo in zadovoljnejšo družbo. Spominjali se ga bomo najbrž predvsem po najpogostejše citiranih odlomkih o njegovem doživljanju rojstne dežele in njenih ljudi, odlomkih, ki pričajo o njegovem slovenstvu. In spominjali se ga bomo po njegovih ganljivih razmišljanjih o svojem amerištvu. Spominjali pa se ga bomo ne le kot Slovenca, Američana in borca za boljšo družbo, temveč tudi kot razhločutnega opazovalca in izpovedovalca človeških občutij v najrazličnejših življenjskih trenutkih in situacijah. Revščino, lakoto, vojno in smrt je znal ujeti na papir z vseh plati: s tragične, bedne in pogumne. Tovarištvo je v njegovih zgodbah vedno znova tista vrednota, ki lahko najtežje trenutke osvetli z žarkom upanja. Zvestoba, izdaja, razočaranje, šibkost, pokončnost se zrcalijo v njegovih pripovedih kot sestavni del človeške duše in človeške zgodovine. In tu je še ljubezen. Ko listamo po redkih ljubezenskih prizorih v Adamičevih zgodbah, nas preseneča, s kakšno subtilnostjo ta trdni, stvarni mož opisuje ljubezensko čustvo, fenomen, ki je zanj med vsemi človeškimi občutki, izkušnjami in vrednotami najbolj prvinski, večen in enkratni. V Adamičevih knjigah najdemo kar nekaj vznesenih ljubezenskih impresij, kakršna je tista v uvodnem poglavju Moje rojstne dežele. In če bo v nepredvidenih zgodovinskih pretresih prihodnjih slovenskih rodov Adamič - borec nekega dne morda utonil v pozabo, ga bodo ti brezčasni poetični utrinki, pa naj so se mu še tako nehote zapisali, verjetno preživeli.