

The Historical Novel between National Identity, Ideologies, and “Historical Genres”

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*Author's comparative analysis deals with two literary images of the 20th-century Slovenian history (two historical novels of the resistance: Alojz Rebula's novel *Nokturno za Primorsko*, and Boris Pahor's novel *Zatemnitev*). Both novels treat some key subjects of the relationship between literature and historiography: universal contexts of the European and World history, national historical context, position of the resistance, autobiographical features, ideological interpretations of the Slovenian history, as well as the contemporary political perspectives. Both novels reveal how myths, speculations, and apparently illogical connections, which have »no right to exist« inside the frames of scientific historiography, may serve perfectly well as an aesthetic means of thematising the complexity of history.*

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Introduction

For a comparative analysis of the literarization of contemporary Slovenian history, I have chosen two historical novels that address the topic of resistance from the perspective of Slovenians from the Littoral region (Sl. *Primorska*) during the period when almost one third of the entire Slovenian population lived under the Italian regime. These novels are *Nokturno za Primorsko* (Nocturne for the Littoral, Mohorjeva družba, Celje 2004) by Alojz Rebula and *Zatemnitev* (Fade to Black, Slovenska Matica, first publication: 1975, second publication: Ljubljana 1987) by Boris Pahor.

Both works of art are characterized by employing a series of common contentual contexts taken from the same or shared historical subject matter, which is shaped by the authors into identical motifs (i.e., rebel, priest,

revolutionary, female activist, executor, etc.), but with conceptually mirror interpretations of the themes. These refer to key issues of 20th-century Slovenian history, which serve both authors as a means of gradual descent into the story in the form of concentric circles and at various levels of a multilayered historical spiral. This moves from broad, entirely universal issues to themes at the political level and, ultimately, the level of personal experience, which recurrently (and all the way back to the highest level) once more legitimize and justify the subjective judgements and reflections of the literary characters' actions – again in the name of the highest universal conceptual premise. These spirals, upon which both authors move the protagonists of their stories, constitute a conceptual skeleton that enables the multiple layering of both stories. Such an approach is entirely in line with the method of traditional historiography from Romanticism to (at least) the French concept of “total history” vs. the “pluralism” of discourses (Veyne 24).

Similar to traditional historiography, both historical novels also circumscribe a full hermeneutic circle and, in both cases, in a single place offer a comprehensive selection of contents conditioning the relation between historiography vs. the historical novel:

1. Universal contexts of European history (the universalism of the European Enlightenment vs. the universalism of Catholicism);

2. National historical context (i.e., the status of the Slovenian minority in Venezia Giulia under the Fascist regime between the two world wars vs. the unrealized idea of a united Slovenia within the United Slovenia political programme);

3. By their conscious choice of this historical subject matter, both authors are willingly or unwillingly transposed (to a certain extent) into the ideological context of interpreting 20th-century Slovenian history;

4. For this very reason, both authors cannot but see themselves (again, willingly or unwillingly) as also addressing the historical subject matter from the political perspective to a certain extent. In the 20th century, this is only seldom entirely separable from interpretations of historical developments;

5. Both authors present the resistance in Venezia Giulia following World War I (in so doing, they present different conceptual orientations assumed by the resistance: from Catholic, through Liberal and Nationalist, to Communist tendencies);

6. Finally, the authors combine the dilemmas and differences of ideas with the issues of resistance and collaboration during World War II (and the attitude of Slovenians towards all three forms of European totalitarianism that they were confronted with during World War II and the immediate period thereafter);

7. A special context that is common to both authors is also the “historical context of the Slovenian minority” (i.e., a view of the history of the common Slovenian ethnic environment from the perspective of historical developments in its westernmost parts: the Littoral under Italian rule);

8. A further characteristic of both authors is the “current context of the Slovenian minority” (i.e., the present view vs. collective national memory, generated at the “outskirts” of the ethnic environment);

9. Both authors are also comparable in terms of the literary forms and methods they employ. Boris Pahor presents a biographical novel in which developments intertwine to a certain extent with the actual biography of the author. Alojz Rebula, on the other hand, creates a clerical historical novel whose developments take place in the period experienced by the author himself.

10. In addition to all the characteristics noted thus far, which render the authors comparable to each other, both authors most frequently use fictitious dialogues as their basic means for arguing conceptual premises.

The selection of these levels and the issues addressed by both novels is reminiscent of a curriculum for historical studies at any Central European university. One encounters the entire “weekly schedule of subjects” in a single place (each individual novel): from general European history (i.e., the Enlightenment, social revolutions, totalitarian ideologies, resistance, collaboration, Communism, political Catholicism, the Holocaust, etc.), through European national ideologies and the “Birth of Nations”, chronologies of political history, and the history of European national minorities, to the history of everyday life and individual memory sources – and one could enumerate many more.

The authors deal with these major themes through personal experience and the destinies of rebels from the Littoral (Catholics, Liberals, and Communists, or individuals that are politically and ideologically entirely passive), and they invest great effort in their mental endeavours in order to substantiate the decisions, actions, and (consequently) personal fates of the protagonists by means of well-considered and planned individual dialogues that the protagonists engage in.

Through these argumentative or interpretative “excesses”, which contemporary historical studies more or less disallow (as speculation, supposition, suspicion, intuition, assumption, etc.), the authors (who ground their work in historical subject matter) thus leave the domain of historiography behind and transpose their creation into the literary domain – the realm of historiographical fiction.

Basic premises

Universal Contexts of European and World History

In their literary confrontation with these multilayered historical themes, both authors refer to the broadest possible historical context of European ideas, which serves them as a starting point for their writing. Specifically, they refer to the origins of the secularization of European thought during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and on the other hand to the tradition of ideas of European Catholicism.

Alojz Rebula's novel puts a positive accent on the idea-based viewpoints of its characters, who are actual historical figures. These include the Bavarian newsman Fritz Gerlich, editor of the Catholic newspaper *Der gerade Weg*. In addition, the novel summarizes ideas or short quotations from figures such as Nikolai Berdyaev and papal authorities from Leo XIII to Pius XI (Rebula 116, 123–125). These figures, which form an integral part of the tradition of European Catholicism, obviously represent the authorities for the ideas in the novel.¹

Boris Pahor, on the other hand, frequently focuses on individuals from historical tradition, beginning with figures such as Francis Bacon, and then moving on to, for instance, Giuseppe Mazzini or the liberal ideas of Alessandro Manzoni, Giacomo Leopardi (Pahor 55, 66, 274), and other figures representing the main theme of the (more or less) secularized paradigm of the ideas of the European Enlightenment.

The National Historical Context

The authors relate key turning points in 20th-century Slovenian history to the initial outline of the bipolarity of the ideas indicated above. From these turning points, which they develop within every context – within universal, national, ideological, and political contexts, as well as their subjective experience of the history of the Littoral – they derive the viewpoints of their characters.

The national historical context (which was, almost as a rule, nationally defensive for the Slovenians) is consistently nationally defensive for minority authors. As regards both authors, this context is so strongly present that they both (willingly or unwillingly) continuously shape even the most radical ideological viewpoints of their protagonists into a nationally defensive posture (e.g., the Slovenian people and culture must survive, the goal that must be attained is the United Slovenia Programme, etc.).

When providing arguments for or defending one or another ideological or political position, their literary characters often assume the role of interpreters of viewpoints and developments that can hardly be fully illuminated and substantiated from the historical point of view. The protagonists identify with them, defend them, or merely sympathize with them. For instance, Pahor explains the primacy of the Communist Party in World War II (181), whereas Alojz Rebula provides arguments in favour of “functional collaboration” (110). The representations of ideological viewpoints constitute two extreme points at which the authors create historical novels from the context of historiography.

The Ideological Context of Interpretation of Slovenian Wartime History

Within the ideological dilemmas of the nationally defensive context, there is also a necessary confrontation with the attitude assumed towards the paradigm of the Catholic idea. The basic division of ideas in Slovenia – that is, from the establishment of the pluralism of ideas and political pluralism onwards (as in both novels under consideration) – extends from the conflict between liberal and Catholic ideas, through the conflict of socialist and Catholic ideas, to the conflict between Communist and Catholic ideas. This primarily unfolds (in complete consistency with the well-known theses of, for instance, Dušan Pirjevec, Dimitrij Rupel, etc.) in literature, then moves on to the political arena to evolve into a radical political (and, during World War II, military) conflict, only to reappear today – paradoxically – “again” in the literature of both of these authors (Hladnik 211). In this case, historical literature (i.e., the novel) conducts itself equally (it is “nationally functional”) as literary historiography.²

It seems as though the rhythm of the division of ideas, ideologies, and politics within the nation gradually intensified into an uncontrolled dynamics because the political events condensed too rapidly and succeeded one another in too intense a sequence. Such divisions by ideas then obviously led to a national catastrophe similar the one that took the form of the civil war in Slovenia considered in all its complexity by both novels. The fact that both authors are active outside Slovenian national territory by no means changes this fact – on the contrary, it confirms it (Kos 193, 194, 218, 219) because the clash of ideas returns once more to the field of literature.³

In his definition of the Slovenian literary tradition, Boris Pahor expressly exposes the double-tracked nature of ideas. This occurs when one of the protagonists from the Catholic ideological circle refers to Finžgar

and Pregelj in his attempts to define his worldview, or when others from the liberal circle refer to Župančič and Ferdo Kozak (Pahor, 20), or to Kosovel, Bevk, and Cankar (Pahor 77, 274).⁴

At the theoretical level, the “clash of ideas” culminates in a retrograde eschatological thematization of the question of the primacy of religion or nationality addressed by both authors (Rebula 33, 34; Pahor 79). In their attempts at this, they are confronted with the question of the ideological “order of values” (as the question of the primacy of “religion or – nationality” was termed by Aleš Ušeničnik, the leading wartime ideologist of Slovenian political Catholicism; Grdina 60).

The Political Character of Historical Subject Matter

Whether the authors desire it or not (this question may remain open to debate), in the light of the facts given thus far their novels are also necessarily subject to interpretations within the current political context, which extends deep into present political dilemmas (reconciliation, redress of wrongs and choice of national holidays, national celebrations and commemorations, etc.). Synchronous reading of both novels involuntarily provides a hushed answer to the question as to why the Catholic battle, waged in the 1930s and during World War II, was lost beforehand; doomed, for instance, like the battle of the German Catholics against National Socialism. “The sacrament of the Lamb” (to paraphrase Heinrich Böll) stood no chance in its clash with Communism in Slovenia, and the concept of “beyond good and evil” was just a phrase to the Catholic rebels, who never quite got to understand it.

By establishing a specific literary dialogue with the past, the authors thus help us understand what Hannah Arendt (30–43) terms a “perpetual confrontation with totalitarianism”.

Resistance in Venezia Giulia during the Two World Wars

From the broad response that both novels met with among Slovenians, it is evident that Slovenian historical literature confronts us with a similar lack of knowledge of the history of Slovenians in the Littoral (as regards the Slovenian national context as a whole), just as in historiography. In this respect, it is a question of a well-known issue: namely, whether the history of the Slovenian people can actually be written “with a common denominator” given such diverse development of regions (not least of all,

during the 19th and 20th centuries) (cf. also Rožac Darovec). In the period thematized by both novels (the period between the two world wars), the Littoral under Italian occupation faced entirely different issues and problems compared to central Slovenia, where Slovenians faced other political problems (e.g., centralism, rapid economic development, and ideological bipolarity strained to the extreme; Vodopivec 7).

The resistance against Fascism in Venezia Giulia (following the establishment of the Rapallo border, Venezia Giulia comprised almost one third of Slovenian ethnic territory) thus constitutes the point at which the authors “agree” to the greatest extent possible in terms of interpretation and literarization of historical developments. In the thematization of this period and environment, the ideological bipolar characteristic of the Slovenian perspective on the 20th century no longer plays an essential role. A common enemy and obvious injustices caused by an attempt at systematic ethnocide in Venezia Giulia not only obliterated the clash of ideas, ideologies, and politics, but all of a sudden allowed all other forms of resistance to coexist as entirely acceptable, regardless of ideological differences – the national resistance of liberal youth in the antifascist organization TIGR, the Communist resistance of Pino Tomažič (even though he harboured thoughts of a Slovenian Soviet Republic), and the organized irredentist resistance to the “policy of the two Romes” posed by the Catholic circle (Rebula 39; Pahor 43).

Issues of Resistance and Collaboration during World War II

In their interpretations of these issues, the authors disagree radically. They address the key and ever-present questions of 20th-century Slovenian history, as considered within the framework of traditional ideological and political currents following World War II. Resistance and revolution, on the one hand, and anticommunism and collaboration, on the other, intertwine as motifs and themes throughout both literary works. However, in addressing these issues (which their protagonists contemplate), the authors find themselves on opposing sides of an unbridgeable gulf. Once again, both authors present the situation from the different perspectives of the Littoral partisan movement vs. the Littoral clergy. The situation in the Littoral therefore once again transcends the Slovenian context; yet, at the same time, both authors also problematize the historical developments taking place in the Slovenian environment.

Within the ideological context described here, Pahor’s protagonists are more inclined to defend participation in the resistance, albeit under the

leadership of the Communists, and to advocate resistance “even if all that was said about the Communists is true”, all from the “never-side-with-the-occupier” point of view (Pahor 79, 80). Rebula’s protagonists, on the other hand, within their proper ideological context, elaborate on the situation in the counterrevolution and, consequently, collaboration. They also address the tragedy that befell the Slovenian Catholic movement after it found itself on the side of collaborationists (Rebula 109, 110). As a final consequence, the protagonists also have different views of nationally defensive action; for example, as waiting for the right moment (Rebula 109–111) or as immediate armed resistance (Pahor 290).

The Historical Context of the “Slovenian Minority”

By now, the Slovenian minority has (undoubtedly and understandably) condensed the issues related to the historical context of the Littoral, which appear in both literary and historiographical considerations regarding the status of Trieste at the end of World War II. The “loss of Trieste” constitutes a unique and special Slovenian national myth. In relation to this, one of Alojz Rebula’s protagonists insinuates that the loss of Trieste resulted from the occupation policy in Trieste and the autocracy of the Yugoslav authorities during the “40 days” (Rebula 171). Pahor’s protagonist, on the other hand, experiences the loss of Trieste as the clash of great powers (Pahor 317), which actually unfolded in this very place when the political fate of the city was addressed.

The Current Context of the Slovenian Minority

In their historical and cognitive dimensions, the dialogues and individual fates of the protagonists in both novels ultimately and involuntarily lead the reader to the conclusion that neither the Catholic idea of resistance in the 1920s and 1930s, nor the revolutionary idea during World War II, are absolutely victorious. This is the case both in fact (for which reason both authors remain members of the Slovenian minority to date, as the United Slovenia Programme mentioned above was never realized) and in content (because liberation did not result in the victory of democracy and did not constitute a veritable social liberation within the Slovenian national context).

Common to both authors at this point is once again the view of Slovenian territory from the western outskirts, “from beyond the national border”. This does not seem make their views substantially clearer – they

are probably far too determined by context, which (being national) is also ideological and thereby again and instantly “classically Slovenian”—that is, marked by the experience of the clash of two ideologies with rather clearly drawn limits separating the two (cf. Zalta).

Literary Forms and Methods for Confronting Ideas

Most frequently, the argumentations in both novels take the form of fictitious dialogues between individual protagonists or their self-reflection. Both authors create dialogues in which one or another interlocutor (in line with his or her designated ideological option) is generally victorious or, at least, in which one or another interlocutor confronts the other with a situation in which no rational counterargument is possible, a dilemma without an answer (Rebula 111, Pahor 182). Dialogues unfolding in this manner are modelled on the “Socratic dialogue”, serving as a classic literary technique. The ideological coordinates of both texts are expressed in the dialogues of “neutral observers”. These, however, are frequently subtly lenient towards the decisions and, even more so, towards the fundamental ideological premises of one or another ideological circle.

In this specific narrative procedure, characteristic of such a dialogue, the difference between scholarly historiography and the historical novel becomes apparent on numerous occasions. Contemporary historiography presents and explains a problem on the basis of sources, historical doctrines, methodological approaches, and, not least of all, the choice of a multitude of historical sources. Literature, on the other hand, produces a story, sums the story up, and concludes it. It thereby frequently and inevitably simplifies the answers that surround such a story and constitute its historical context in the name of the nation, minority, ideology, or politics. As long as such actions take place within literature, whose primary goal is aesthetic, no harm is done. In this respect, from the point of view of contemporary historiography, both authors proceed similar to any traditional historian or historical novel relying on traditional historiography.⁵ Contemporary historiography (as opposed to traditional historiography) evades the story, and is generally not predetermined by the idea of totality.⁶

Conclusion: Between Historiography and Literature

For the literarization of historical subject matter (i.e., similar to the argumentation of the views assumed by their literary characters), both authors use the production of historiography as their starting-point. In the

“chicken-and the-egg” story of literature and historiography, it is rather clear, at least in this case, that historiography precedes literature. Without historical texts, neither of the two novels could be conceived.

Myths, speculations, guesses, and seemingly illogical connections, which “have no right to exist” in historiography, enable the literarization of history. On the one hand, this produces great surpluses in the understanding of complex historical developments (e.g., addressing moral and political dilemmas that literary characters can resolve, while historical facts can neither confirm nor deny them). On the other hand, this allows literature to suffer great shortcomings.

Literature can afford quick conclusions, moral resolutions, and judgments regarding historical developments because they are literary and therefore fictitious. However, historiography may only present historical developments, articulate them, and accompany them with reflections. Regarding historical texts, historical sources may exercise the “right to veto”. Even if there existed an infinite number of possible interpretations of or discourses on the wartime collaboration of the Slovenian forces (the *Domobranci*, or Home Guards) and their tragic postwar fate or the Communist liquidations, we are ultimately still left with something that can be neither reduced nor reinterpreted: that something that can only be termed the “historical truth”. To use the definition by Jerzy Topolski, a historian is in a permanent dialogue with the past through historical sources, with himself through rational argumentation, and with the public (i.e., a select group of specialists), where he is a prisoner of sources applied with a positivistic attitude (Hanisch 221). The inevitable subjectivity of interpretation associates a historian with the author of a historical novel only at this level.⁷

Literary authors, on the other hand, are allowed to choose from the “historiographic shop-window”, selecting those arguments that “render their story logical”, each with respect to one’s own conviction and even one’s own adherence to a particular idea (cf. Matajč).

Only thus is it possible for both of these authors to coexist within the nationally defensive context (i.e., the minority context), even though they frequently find themselves on opposing ideological sides, each creating for himself a separate convincing literature. As such, this literature establishes “its proper sense of right” but, being literature, it does not provide ultimate confirmation of the “facts” that it presents, nor is it obliged to do so. The authors disagree with respect to key questions; however, they both recognize that these (identical) questions are essential. These are the points at which both novels are completely compatible in terms of motifs. At the same time, however, these are also the points at which both

novels diverge most in terms of argumentation, which is paradoxical, yet understandable. It appears that Alojz Rebula’s novel was (willingly or unwillingly) actually written in response to the novel by Boris Pahor, which was produced 30 years ago. For this reason, it would be best to read both novels in direct succession because, in addition to aesthetic pleasure, such reading also provides the possibility of comparing the argumentative efforts of both authors.

Considering all that has been said thus far, both authors create state-of-the-art literature. This is also shown by their national and international reputation, which ranks them among the most prominent names in Slovenian literature.

Literature cannot, therefore, prove historical facts. However, because it is a question of literature, of fiction, it need not prove these facts, and readers of historical literature should be aware of this. At this point, historiography can traverse literature into (national) mythology, which is a constitutive factor for a nation.

Myths, which can be prejudicial to historiography, may serve a purpose in literature. Not necessarily all of them at all times, but the majority of them are generally produced within the relationship between history and literature – with the aesthetization of the former.

Translated by Dejan Brate

NOTES

¹ According to the literary historian Janko Kos, Alojz Rebula “gradually evolved from an author whose initial narratives – the novel *Senčni ples* (Shadow Dance) in particular – were designed in a relatively liberal fashion to a distinctively Catholic literary witness, essayist, and polemicist” (Kos 208).

² “It is therefore understandable that with its very origin – that is, with Herder – historicism was ideologically fed from yet another base, which was constructive for the emergence and development of (literary) historiography: namely, from the tendency to establish an imaginary community: the nation. As regards the ‘cultural’ nations – that is, nations that were deprived of a single and national individuality if compared to the ‘historical’ nations – it was literary historiography itself that emerged as a redemptive ally” (Juvan 21–22).

³ “The public dilemma within which historiography operates is illustrated by the experience of transition, when revived interest in the public past serves to redefine collective identities /.../, national identity in particular. On the one hand, politics forces historians to adjudicate on all matters that have proved controversial in the recent past and, on the other hand, historians are reproached that ‘official’ history – although it addresses ancient ethnogenesis – constitutes a means of indoctrination” (Juvan 27).

⁴ Compare the analysis of worldviews in, for instance: Janko Kos, *Dubovna zgodovina Slovencev*.

⁵ “[Literary] historian, who had been faithful to the metaphysical, philological, and national-political inclinations of 19th-century historicism, became the all-knowing and all-seeing narrator, who reveals the ‘idea of totality’ to the audience. He beheld the idea in the image of a depth momentum, which links once dispersed ‘coincidental’ information into a uniform and reasonable story, provides it with meaning, and illuminates it from within by interpretation; the ‘idea of totality’ shaped the method of commenting on facts, linked the text in terms of themes, and assumed the role of a transpersonal protagonist, such as, ‘beauty’, ‘progress’, ‘zeitgeist’, or ‘nation’, which is the hidden cause or objective of individual historical developments and achievements” (Juvan 19, 20).

⁶ “Bloch exposed a new idol that must be banished from historical reflections; namely, infatuation with a single cause. Judgement is without appeal: monism of cause, prejudice of common sense, postulate of logic, obsession of the investigating magistrate /.../ In history, causes are not postulated. They are sought” (Bloch 34).

⁷ “History should therefore /.../ refrain from establishing false principles because perpetual invasions of coincidences render them impossible. History is valid only when it is imbued with rationality and intelligibility: its scholarly property is therefore reflected not in its nature, nor in its subject, but in the proceedings and methods of the historian” (Bloch 17).

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