

LITERARY CRITICISM CONTAINED IN THE DIARY OF A WRITER A DOCUMENT OR FICTION?

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What happens to literary criticism if it appears in an unusual place – in the diary of a man of letters? With this question in mind, this article analyses sections of three diaries from the interwar period written by Vladimir Bartol, Slavko Grum, and Srečko Kosovel. The conclusion is that the diary has its own narrative logic that is stronger than the objectivist principles of literary criticism. The diary writer, sensitive to the pressure of the diary genre, becomes a fictional hero and his critical remarks tend to become a story.

Keywords: literary criticism, diary, fictionality, story, document, Vladimir Bartol, Slavko Grum, Srečko Kosovel

This paper discusses three specific problem areas: 1) Slovene writers in the period between World War I and World War II, 2) the diary as a problem of narratology, and 3) literary criticism located in an unusual place; in this case, in the diary of a man of letters. To be more precise, three diaries are examined, all of them published posthumously: by Srečko Kosovel (written 1924–1926), Vladimir Bartol (written 1930–1933), and Slavko Grum (written 1932–1940).

1. The Interwar Period

In the period between the two world wars there developed a specific relation to literature and among writers that is hard to imagine today. Writers associated very much with one another in pubs, coffee houses, or their homes, where they read their new manuscripts aloud, thus presenting them to their colleagues. Their homes often functioned as literary salons, and the best known among them were held by reviewers; for instance, by Josip Vidmar

or Fran Albreht. When a writer produced a new work, he often wrote it at a table in a coffee house, as a public act. Passionate discussions were held concerning the dilemma of whether literature should be spiritual and elevated or, instead, materialistic or even socially engaged. These polemics were so feverish that often one writer would attack another one physically in public, even striking him in the face. This was, of course, the turbulence accompanying the change of the ruling *Weltanschauung*: Symbolism and Expressionism were retreating, and New Realism was taking their place. This split in ideological convictions resulted in a formal division into two camps, with “Catholic” writers on one side and “Freethinkers” on the other, and increasing intolerance towards one another, even though they may have cooperated as friends in the early 1920s, as was the case of the young Catholic writers gathered around the journal *Križ na gori* (Mountain Cross) and the Freethinkers, gathered around Kosovel’s journal *Mladina* (Youth). In the 1930s there were increasingly fewer such friendly bonds, and they were replaced by acts of intolerance, such as that which broke out in the scandal on the opening night of Zuckmayer’s neoneaturalistic play *Der fröhliche Weinberg* (The Merry Vineyard; cf. Kralj, “Teatrski škandal”). The overheated atmosphere of dividing the spiritual from the material could also be observed in the increased interest in occult séances that took place at several locations in Ljubljana. To top things off, an economic crisis hit in the 1930s, creating a struggle for survival that every day became more tiring and even repulsive; the fear of future appeared.

2. The Diary as a Problem of Narratology

The idea that a diary can be a problem is of newer origin; in fact, it first appeared in the 1970s. Before this, the phenomenon of the diary was self-evident in literary theory. Traditionally, literary theory has treated the diary as material or as a document. The use of the diary was to explain the writer’s biography; specifically, the inner and outer stimuli affecting the genesis of the writer’s work. Once this was achieved, the researcher was supposed to be able to form a general opinion of this work. Later on, new approaches were developed (e.g., by Manfred Jurgensen and H. Porter Abbott) that no longer treat the diary as a mere document. There is no more restriction of the diary to the subordinate function of an auxiliary means because the line between the documentary and the literary has become fluid. At the moment that the diary is no longer a mere document it loses some of its objectiveness; it belongs not only to reality, but to an increasing degree to fiction as well. The diary, which had long been treated as a simple source of biographical or historical data, now often becomes the actual subject under discussion; it is established as a text comparable to literature – in fact, it is some kind of literature. At the very moment literary theory established such a condition, the diary became both more and less than a document: it crossed the line that divides reality from fiction. Writing diaries turns into a kind of exercise in writing literature, and sometimes we perceive it as

something very fictional already. Nowadays the statements in diaries are no longer treated as completely factual, irrespective of how hard the person writing them actually tries. The act of writing a diary creates irresistible fictional consequences and it forces the writer to invent and change the facts. This is exactly what is happening to Kosovel's, Grum's, and Bartol's diaries: they are becoming fictionalized. That is, the descriptions of reality, matter-of-fact and genuine though they were intended, begin to "change inventively" when they appear in a diary, as inventively as any fictional story. The diary follows its own need for story-telling, which is stronger than its wish to be objective.

In the 1920s and 1930s, readers in Slovenia were very interested in reading the diaries of famous writers – for example, Strindberg, Rousseau, Tolstoy, or Nietzsche – like readers anywhere in the world. It seemed to them that these diary volumes radiated the glory of authenticity, and they perceived them as the ultimately credible way of reporting. In its very form the diary assured the reader that it was not a product of literary art, but a piece of true life, no forgery used. In this strong wish of the readers for genuine reality, for texts that are not made up, but report real events, one must of course observe the effects of the collapse of the Symbolist and Expressionist doctrines and, consequently, the arrival of New Realism. The next step in this development in the interwar period can be seen in the appearance of simulated diaries; Hocke calls them "fictive diaries" and Abbott "diary fiction" (Hocke 109; Abbott 9 ff.). These are short stories, totally literary products, yet they bear titles such as *Listi iz dnevnika* (Pages from a Diary, by Milena Mohorič) or *Iz dnevnika vsemirskega skitalca* (From the Diary of a Space Vagabond, by Miran Jarc). Often the reference to the diary comes in the subtitle: *Iz študentskega dnevnika* (From the Diary of a Student) is the subtitle of the short story *Vas* (The Village) by Bratko Kreft, and *Zadnji listi iz samomorilčevega dnevnika* (The Last Pages from the Diary of a Suicide) is the subtitle of the first two editions of the short story *Podgane* (The Rats) by Slavko Grum. The simulated diary is a literary genre that endeavors, using special strategies, to seem not literary, not made up – in short, to be a real document of real life. Thus it happens that the strong demand for materiality, the documentary, the non-fictional in the interwar period created a paradox: prose writers, including Slovene ones, begin to produce simulated diaries. Such a simulation mostly takes the form of a very short narration, called a "sketch" at that time (Slov. "črtica," Germ. "die Skizze"). Because the authentic diaries – for example, Strindberg's, Rousseau's, and so on – are much more extensive, usually the size of an entire book, the simulated diary often refers to itself as "pages from a diary." This is to say that the writers and readers of the simulated diary pretended that this genre was merely a bunch of pages, accidentally and fragmentarily torn from a larger, genuine diary (for more on the relation between diary and reality, see Kralj, "Dnevnik in pismo").

3. Literary Criticism Located in the Diary of a Writer

It is far from unusual for a man of letters to write critical reviews along with producing literature. In the interwar period two writers especially excelled in such double talents: France Vodnik and Fran Albreht. It is unusual, however, if pieces of criticism appear within a diary. First, because of the phenomenon just mentioned above: the act of writing a diary forces the writer into fictionalization; that is, into such an arrangement of facts as to help create a story. Further, there are other reasons that originate in the special genre status of the diary. For instance, the diary writer never really knows whether he is performing a public or a private act. Will he change his mind somewhere in the future and publish his diary, although at present he is so very sure that he would never do such a thing? Or, is it possible that the diary will be published posthumously – as actually happened to Bartol's, Grum's, and Kosovel's diaries discussed here? Moreover, biographical studies of the lives of famous diary writers (Rousseau, Strindberg, etc.), as conducted, among others, by Hocke, show that the act of writing a diary is often based on feelings of loneliness and isolation, which might further develop into subjectivism, egocentrism, and sentimental solipsism – or even into megalomania, sometimes combined with a persecution complex. All of these feelings are hard to combine with the objectivity and distance expected of literary criticism – at least from the traditional point of view.

Let us examine a sample of the literary program of Vladimir Bartol contained in his diary. In it, he strongly defies the sort of literature that is sentimental and/or performs a mission – in short, the literature that believes in idealistic metaphysics and therefore requires an especially elevated attitude from the author and from the reader as well. What Bartol has in mind is the doctrine of Symbolism and Expressionism brought into Slovene literature by its canonical author Ivan Cankar, although the ground for this was prepared even before Cankar's arrival. This is the idealistic and sentimental tradition of Slovene literature, and Bartol calls it, not very aptly, “noble-minded literature”:

Two days ago I decided something extremely important, together with Žagar and Lenček: we must unmask all the noble-mindedness in our history (above all in cultural and literary affairs). And we must demonstrate who the fighters are that have defied it. Currently it is Lenček that will tackle this task. This already began with Slomšek, about whom Prešeren wrote his notorious epigram. Father Bleiweis – the noble-minded man. The real litter of noble-mindedness, however, was begotten by the sentimental Stritar. The great fighter against it: Fran Levstik. But personally even Levstik was taken in. Innumerable noble-minded figures were influenced by Stritar. After them another crowd: Govekar . . . Meško, Sardenko. – Cankar began realizing this filth half-heartedly and, only partly conscious of it, he began fighting these noble-minded people, who are nothing but a facet of classical Pharisaic hypocrisy. Oton Župančič belongs to noble-mindedness as well, especially in his later poems and totally in his *Veronika Deseniška*. In his case it is all the influence of his wife. She has been troubling the waters since

the very beginning. Josip Vidmar raised his stick against the noble-minded; they were stripped naked in the “Vidmar affair“ this year. Famous contemporary noble-minded people: Mrzel, Tone Vodnik, Magajna, Ciril Debevec (Kresal, in part), and many others. (Bartol 625)

Bartol stated correctly that the prevalent tradition of Slovene literature was idealistic or, as he calls it himself, “noble-minded.” He was at a loss, however, how to call the literature that he himself was promoting and writing; his adversaries called it “magazine literature,” implying that it was trivial. When Bartol published his book of short prose *Al Araf* in 1935, he still did not know how to label his stories with regard to genre, and so he decided on a not very imaginative subtitle: *Zbirka literarnih sestavkov* (A Collection of Literary Compositions). Today we might define them as “essay prose.” Bartol resisted any metaphysical use of literature, including the one that endeavors to preserve the Slovene nation or to attain social equality among people (socially engaged literature). This was exactly the metaphysical use of literature that was supported by the Slovene literary canon of that time; Bartol opposed it strongly, feeling something old-fashioned and even fake or mendacious in this principle. He confronted the myth of sentimentality and suffering with his attitude of arrogance, spiritualism with rationalism, eternal values with the sensation of earthly pleasures, and harmonic form with unpolished verbal dispute as used in the coffee houses.

How is this position of Bartol’s reflected in his diary? In the form of a story, which begins to appear inventively, construed from everyday events. It was perfectly clear to Bartol that he was being rejected by the Slovene literary environment for the most part, with the exception of Janez Žagar, the director of the publishing house *Modra ptica* and editor of the journal of the same name, and the critic Josip Vidmar, who sometimes approved of him, but on other occasions treated him rather harshly. What Bartol did was to make a virtue of necessity, declaring that his negative reception was exactly what a writer of his dimensions needed:

Now I know: because of these people I am entitled to act with the utmost severity. There should be only one moral, saying: this pack should not be spared. It would only mean abetting them. – Such has been my opinion from the very beginning. They’ll all be strangled! Those are the stimuli that supply me with subject-matter and drive me forward. Such things incite my blood and provoke my fantasy. My paragon: a handful of constant friends, the entire rest of the world being a multitude of enemies, and I have to thrust my lance into their flank. I need fighting as the fish needs water. I did not provoke this fight and this is the reason why I was not active enough – I was pulled into it by force. But now we go to the very end. They’ll all be strangled! (Bartol 630)

In other places of this diary, too, we can find a similarly formulated will for power, a similar confidence in the high value of his own literary work while rejecting that of his surroundings. Among the writers of that time Bartol acknowledged primarily Slavko Grum and hardly anybody else. Such a system of values, in which he put himself at the very top,

would have gained no support if Bartol had published it; just the opposite, it would have been considered eccentric and conceited, especially because it would not have suited the effective literature canon. Today, however, the situation is very different because we value his literature nearly as highly as he did himself. From the 1980s onwards a group of Bartol's fans systematically worked on revaluing his position in Slovene literature, and by the time of the Bartol conference in 1991 this actually happened. This is to say that Bartol's unlimited self-esteem proved today to be justified. To the readers of the 1930s, his diary would have seemed strongly fictionalized, nearly completely made up. When reading it today, however, we perceive it as fairly near to reality, if we put his exaggerated usage of metaphors into brackets.

Vladimir Bartol and Slavko Grum exchanged a kind of a solitary dialogue in their diaries – they thought of each other, considering each other worthy of discussion, they were each other's reference point. From October 1932 onwards, the criticism of recently published books in his diary *Knjige, ki sem jih čital* (Books I Have Been Reading), was about the only thing remaining that Slavko Grum was producing in the field of literature. His time of inspiration was over and he was no longer able to write literature. He was reviewing or, as he put it, “censoring” (Grum 259) the books recently issued by Slovene and fairly often by German publishing houses as well. With the following words he evaluated Bartol's *curriculum vitae* when reviewing his novel *Alamut*, published in 1938:

I have been waiting for this novel with immense curiosity. There was a time – ten years ago – when we, the young writers, were attending one of Vidmar's lectures on Slovene literature. By that time Bartol seemed to me a very ambitious, very learned and witty young man wanting to become a writer at any cost – lacking the talent, however. Later on his short stories began appearing, at first very learned, witty, maybe more essays than stories. And still later a writer was increasingly developing, and finally stories of such a technique appeared that one cannot but admire them. Now there is *Alamut* lying before my eyes. I would never believe that a young Slovene writer was able to treat historical subject matter with such a firm writing technique, with such skill ... An interesting memory: in those past days Bartol and I were sitting in the coffee house and I was telling him that nowadays a surgeon had only one chance: to act as a wizard. I offered a theory of wizardry in the field of medicine, and it was the same theory that he made come true in this novel in the field of an entire life: curing by means of wizardry is always founded on faith, on suggestion. ... This way we both and at the same time touched something that today probably hangs in the air. Bartol grasped it, made it come true, whereas I – – –. (Grum 279)

Grum's review of Bartol's *Alamut* concludes just like that, with the above sentence, amputated at the word *I*, followed by three dashes. Herbert Grün, the first editor of Grum's selected works, speaks in this connection of “three horribly painful dashes trumpeting silently” (Grün 20–21). Painful, because at the time of this diary Grum was no longer able to write literature; he lived in the small mining town of Zagorje as a general physician,

slowly surrendering to alcohol and morphine. His only substitutes for writing literature were the diary reviews of newly published books. One can see that the diary in this way, too, can turn from a document into literature; that is, to fiction. Living in such a state of mind, Grum is a very stern critic of the Slovene literature, especially the contemporary one. He acknowledges Bartol, but he rejects many other writers:

We Slovene writers love so much to behave wickedly against each other; we think we must criticize everything. Still I would wish it, I would be extremely pleased to find something that would make me thoroughly happy. Not again an unpleasant surprise, a disappointment that would leave me in cold despair at its end. Cankar is so very beautiful; still, who did not feel the cold despair created by his books at their ends? Why did Mrzel disappoint me with his book? And now – Pregelj! (Grum 251)

Harsher still, Grum rejected the autobiographical novel *Novo mesto*, published in 1933 and written by Miran Jarc, who spent his youth in the same city as Grum (i.e., Novo mesto):

Jarc is not a wizard, he is not an artist. He has been reading a lot and gained much from it, he has good taste and above all: he wants to become a writer at any cost. A typical citizen in the sense of Professor Prijatelj's concept *The Poets and the Citizens*. (Grum 255)

The diary of Srečko Kosovel is to some degree differently structured than Bartol's or Grum's because as a rule it does not contain narrative blocks, but a multitude of small fragmentary units: material for the meetings and from the meetings of the Ivan Cankar Literary and Dramatic Club, parts of literary production in the making, material for future creative work, copies of interesting statements from the newspapers and magazines, concepts of letters etc.; which is to say that only a minor part of the text is reporting of daily events. Still, Kosovel's diary can be compared to Bartol's and Grum's, because it relatively often contains Kosovel's literary criticism, although seldom in a longer piece. Like Bartol and Grum, Kosovel holds Josip Vidmar to be the most influential Slovene literary critic. This time, however, Vidmar is introduced in Kosovel's avant-garde context, demanding very clearly that Vidmar's type of criticism, as published in his periodical under the name *Kritika*, should be eliminated and replaced by a far more radical one:

Criticism should not put the reader to sleep, it should awake him. Bravničar is lying, Hribar plays a superficial viola, you discuss things paternalistically, and Vidmar deserves to be killed for his writing. Dobida talks too much, he is also afraid to say that the exhibition is not worth anything; as he sees it, all artists have "considerable talent," while actually they hardly have any. He seems to me like a tourist that has chosen a lousy summer resort and now he is praising it constantly to persuade himself of the opposite. What *Kritika* is lacking is fire and a whip. It should contain such an internal fire that it can hardly restrain from burning everything down; its whip should expel all the merchants from the temple. (Kosovel 698)

This diary section is a criticism of criticism; that is to say, a criticism of issue no. 8 of Vidmar's journal *Kritika* in 1925. Kosovel lists nearly all the reviewers in this issue; they discussed musical events, the book by the philosopher France Veber, theatre events, literature, and painting.¹ He rejects one after the other, both because of their falsehood and superficiality, or for their paternalism and verbosity, topping it all with his opinion of the influential critic Josip Vidmar: he simply "deserves to be killed." Ten days later Kosovel's diary contains a summing up of the last half year's issues of the journal *Kritika*:

The arts have bad luck in Slovenia: either they have to deal with dogmatists or with drunken intemperate poets or with men of pure reason. Although the latter stand at least one degree higher than the others, they should not be spared my criticism. Oh poor Slovene arts, who is leading you, who is trying to lead you! After being raped in the newspapers and pubs, you are being led to the operating table of pure reason! As if our time were not deadly enough to the arts, now we need other means, deadlier still: pure reason ... This criticism is the pale flower of reason, blooming painfully and without inspiration. This criticism is our most suitable *forum*; it does not have fire enough to clyster our leaders. It has no semen, no inspiration. It seems to me that the critics do not believe what they write ... that their abstract words contain a very real fear of the police. (Kosovel 711)

What is the purpose of criticism in the public mechanism of literature? Let us propose a heuristic answer: it is evaluation, in distinction from literary history, which is engaged above all in registering the system's characteristics. By means of evaluation, criticism socializes the literary work, puts it into circulation – in short, works as the intermediary between the writer and the readers. Drawing the readers' attention to the imperfections of the literary work on the one hand and to its merits on the other, criticism stimulates them to adopt an objective standpoint in their relation towards the text under discussion. Therefore the critic is supposed to be a very balanced person; this is what our horizon of expectation is telling us. And how balanced is the critical reviewer in Bartol's, Grum's, or Kosovel's diaries? He is not balanced at all. These are supposed to be actual diaries and not simulated ones, and the narrator (identical with the diary writer) is the author himself, because the diary, according to the traditional definition, is a document of the author's life. Yet before our own eyes the diary writer becomes fictionalized very quickly; he constructs a fictional story around himself, he undergoes a change into an emotionally strained and bizarre person. This process shows two typologies: Bartol's and Kosovel's diary writers are inclined toward delusions of a Nietzschean superman, whereas Grum's one, in contrast, toward a morbid decadent loser. Both typologies, however, develop and intensify a strong contempt for contemporary Slovene literature; this critical position gradually turns into complete negation. Bartol's narrator is indulging in fantasies of the world as an immense crowd of enemies that should all be strangled, Kosovel's is imagining fire and the whip he will use when expelling the merchants from the temple,

and Grum's is envisioning himself as a wizard, who has, alas, lost his magical power and is now dying away in cold despair. It is important to realize that the statements of these three diary writers are of such a kind as Bartol, Kosovel, and Grum would never dare to publish in a review, essay, or a similar objective genre; they can only appear in the diary, where the pressure of language and the process of writing immediately begin to change the initially objective position into something that is increasingly fictional.

NOTE

¹ Matija Bravničar, who is "lying," reviewed the concerts; Mirko Hribar Veber's book is *Problemi sodobne filozofije* (Problems of Contemporary Philosophy); the pronoun *you* refers to Kosovel's brother Stano, who was reviewing theatre; Josip Vidmar was of course reviewing literature, and Karel Dobida the art exhibitions.

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