

Metapoetics in Norbert Gstrein's Novel *The Years to Come* (*Die kommenden Jahre*)

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This article comments on the metapoetic dynamics of the narrative in the novel of the contemporary Austrian writer Norbert Gstrein, The Years to Come (Die kommenden Jahre, 2018) aiming at a more profound understanding of Gstrein's poetics. We first try to define the term metapoetics drawing on the relatively scarce body of scholarship on the topic and relying primarily on Matthias Freise's definition. This is followed by a review of the work of Norbert Gstrein, with a special emphasis on the questions of his poetics raised previously both in his novels and essays. The central part of the paper devoted to the interpretation of the novel analyzes the most prominent instances of metapoetics in the novel: the motto at the beginning, the symbolism of glaciers, the relationship between irony and pathos suitable to reveal the truth, the central character of the authoress, her literary evening, the insertion of two different versions of chapter 13, as well as other books mentioned in the novel. In conclusion, we summarize the possible answers given by the novel to the questions of poetics the narrative implicitly raises and show how the metapoetic level of the text influences the creation of the meaning of the text.

Keywords: Austrian literature / Gstrein, Norbert: *The Years to Come* / narrative structure / metapoetics

This article aims to highlight the metapoetic aspects of the novel *The Years to Come* by the contemporary Austrian writer Norbert Gstrein published by the German publishing house Hanser in February, 2018, with a view to understand Gstrein's poetics more thoroughly. Bearing in mind the previous literary tradition, in his earlier novels, Gstrein touches upon the issue of literary art, both explicitly and implicitly, first of all the (im)possibility of objective narration, while in his latest novel he focuses on the role of literature and the position of a writer in contemporary society. We will use literary interpretation to describe Gstrein's implicit poetic expression identified in the text of the novel, and show how it participates in the formation of multilayered semantic

structures which transcend the unilateral meanings of the individual layers of a literary work. First of all, we will try to define the term metapoetics in relation to the existing body of theory which is not large, despite the tendency of authors to comment on art and literature implicitly in their works, i.e., in an artistic form that has been present in literary and art history since the times of ancient Greek literature at the latest since Aristophanes.¹

Metapoetics

In this article, the term metapoetics is used to designate the specificity of a literary text to refer to both its contemporary cultural context, and back to itself as a poetic text. In the broadest sense, the term is often identified with Jakobson's "poetic function" (1960), while in German literary and theoretical tradition it is related to Schlegel's definition of modern poetry as transcendental (Schlegel fr. 238). The prefix "meta" indicates that this is a reflexive, that is, a self-reflexive phenomenon. A more widespread term, often used in a related sense, is metafiction. It denotes a set of self-referential literary procedures by which the author or narrator draws the reader's attention to the fictionality of a text, thus problematizing the relationship between reality and fiction.² In this text, however, we will opt for the concept of metapoetics, since the subject of our study are primarily the narrator's and the characters' statements expressing the author's attitude in relation to the key issues of poetics in general, which is why his literary text becomes a poetic commentary, offering answers to the questions about the origin and nature of poetry, its effect and power, its social role and individual knowledge, the position of an artist in society and the world in general. The text becomes a manifesto, analysis or critique, which further enhances its importance for study.

The most common is the distinction between implicit and explicit metapoetics, and Matthias Freise distinguishes also between thematic and structural metapoetics depending on whether a work of art, its production and reception, form and literary practices become the subject of a text—either directly or symbolically or metaphorically—or a

¹ In addition to Freise, on whose definitions we rely in this article, other authors also tried to systematically define the concept of metapoetics: see Steiner; Müller-Zettelmann; and Pott.

² For a systematic overview of the concept of metafiction, see Waugh, and on metafiction in the twentieth-century American novel, see Radonjić.

text by its form refers back to itself as a poetic creation, disclosing its own construction (4–5). Depending on the questions the text aims to answer, Freise further distinguishes between historical, technical, aesthetical-philosophical, and cultural metapoetics. In historical metapoetics, an artist situates himself/herself or a text within a social, economic, political or psychological situation; technical metapoetics focuses on the adherence to or violation of stylistic tendencies, the use of standard or innovative literary procedures, and the ways of the formation of a text; aesthetical-philosophical metapoetics deals with the questions of philosophical aesthetics, perceiving art as a human activity, the purposefulness or superfluity of art, the ludic character of art, inspiration understood in a metaphysical way, etc. In cultural metapoetics, the question of the belonging to a certain epoch becomes central pointing out the relationship between different procedures and different images of the world in a text and its axiology, the creation of meaning and the perception of art as a search for meaning viewed in a diachronic context under changed cultural conditions (3).

These individual metapoetic aspects of a literary text are not mutually exclusive; only some of them can be identified as characteristic for the texts of certain cultural epochs, while others are completely absent. Thus, thematic metapoetics can be identified in realistic movements that emphasize the referentiality of the sign, while structural metapoetics is more pronounced in avant-garde movements that emphasize the difference between text and the world, that is, the self-referentiality of the sign. In epochs and movements that insist on either the compatibility of the sign and the reference world or on their incompatibility, the metapoetic expression is twofold and is revealed both on the thematic and structural levels. Freise illustrates such metapoetics by Lermontov's poetry (7–8) and in this article, we will discuss it within a postmodernist narrative—a novel of the contemporary German author Norbert Gstrein.

Gstrein's works

With his new novel, Norbert Gstrein confirms his reputation as a master of “profound narrative art” (Neubert 12) multi-layered, obscured levels of meaning, flawless and impeccable style, and complex and indirect linguistic expression.³ Gstrein earned this reputation after pub-

³ Unless otherwise stated, the titles of Gstrein's works, and quotations from his texts originally published in German are translated into Serbian by the author and from Serbian into English by Vesna Bratić.

lishing his first novel *Anyone* (*Einer*, 1988), which soon became the subject of a large number of interpretations due to the author's bold wordplay and language skepticism, as well as the audacious poetic questioning of the scope of narration.⁴ In this novel, Gstrein discusses life in his native Tyrol, which he will continue to do in the subsequent works from the earliest period of his writing: the short story *The Next Day* (*Anderntags*, 1989), the novel *The Registry* (*Das Register*, 1992), the novella *O₂* (*O₂*, 1993) and *Kommerzialrat*, 1995, which are often labelled as "Antiheimatroman" (anti-homeland or anti-regionalist novels) in the style of Thomas Bernhard. Gstrein writes about the "Austrian soul and soullessness" (Gstrein, *Das Register* 90) intertwining frame and embedded stories, hastily changing perspectives and narrators, juxtaposing scenes of nature and "civilization," and demonstrating the ultimate inability of the terms and concepts of the codified language to directly express the truth about the individual and the world (cf. Knežević, "Knjiga").

The novel *The English Years* (*Die englischen Jahre*, 1999) marks a new stage in Gstrein's work characterized by two constants: their plots unfold in conflict-ridden places in different parts of the world at different times: starting from World War II, through the wars in the former Yugoslavia to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the narration itself is characterized by narrative skepticism, a radical suspicion that any story can be told entirely and objectively, as a rounded whole. Thus, in *The English Years*, several narrators tell their different accounts to the novel's curious heroine of a deceased Jewish writer, an internee on the Isle of Man in the aftermath of the Second World War. At that point, the novel acquires a pronounced metapoetic dimension. A story of a writer becomes a story of the construction of a novel, but also a story of exile and (de)construction of the identity of an exile.

Two Gstrein's novels are set against the backdrop of the 1990s conflict in Croatia and Kosovo, *The Art of Killing* (*Das Handwerk des Tötens*, 2003) and *The Winter in the South* (*Die Winter im Süden*, 2008). In *The Art of Killing*, he makes even greater use of the documentary method in the construction of the novel, in the fashion of Danilo Kiš, of whom he often speaks and writes as his writing role model (cf. Car). The novel discusses what the writer actually does in practice—the (im)possibility to construct a new, fictional, reality from shreds of truth, half-truths,

⁴ Here are just a few: an extensive analysis of the novel in the critical edition is given by Heribert Kuhn (111–143), and the collection of papers dedicated to Gstrein's work in the 2011 edition of the Drosch Literaturverlag (Bartsch and Fuchs 89–114), where Christina Weiss, Ulrich Weinzierl and Gerhard Melzer wrote about the author's debut novel.

and figments of imagination. Paul, the protagonist, is a freelance journalist and mediocre writer trying to write a novel about Christian Allmayer, a war correspondent reporting on the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, who was killed in Kosovo. In addition, the novel is based on the true events surrounding the tragic death of Gabriel Grüner, a reporter for the German magazine *Stern*, to whose memory the novel is dedicated. The alleged misuse of delicate details from the journalist's biography, brought public condemnation on Gstrein in Germany.

To defend himself against these allegations, Gstrein wrote an essay titled "Who Owns a Story?" ("Wem gehört eine Geschichte?," 2004), in which he not only strove to shed light on his narrative procedure, but also to point to a "middle ground" between realistic, even naturalistic attempts to write about warfare, when fiction starts to resemble reality too closely and ends up on the borderline with kitsch, and a kind of art that refuses to commit to reality, and gives itself the right to transcend reality to the point that it almost ignores it.⁵

The same principles of narration, which must, in fact, be a continuous "critique of narration," can be found in another Gstrein's novel set against the backdrop of the wars in the Balkans – *The Winter in the South*, but also in the subsequent, extremely successful, novels such, as *The Whole Truth* (*Die ganze Wahrheit*, 2010) set in the publishing industry, *An Idea of the Beginning* (*Eine Ahnung vom Anfang*, 2013) which links the eternal topic of the danger of books with terrorism, and the 2016 novel, *In the Free World* (*In der freien Welt*, 2016), which discusses the problem of narration—about a Jewish painter and a writer killed in America—set against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These novels have earned Gstrein not only the reputation as one of the most important contemporary writers in the German language, but also a skeptic as regards the possibility of literature to "mirror" reality. He is also skeptical about the ability of the medium of language, in itself treacherous and inadequate, to convey any narrative.

The Years to Come

The latest Gstrein's novel lacks the usual backdrop of a major conflict, a world war, or a low-intensity conflict in a politically prominent area. There is a globally present conflict, though; a world war has already

⁵ The essay communicates with Imre Kertész's text "Who does Auschwitz belong to?" (1998).

silently begun and warfare has been taking place in all spheres of life. Gstrein discusses a number of current socio-political topics: Trump's election for president, a refugee and economic crisis, migration, climate change and lack of ecological awareness, the melting of glaciers in the poles, the relationships between industry and science and media and contemporary art, and the general feeling of insecurity in the contemporary world. Through these topics, however, in the manner of the best German and world story tellers, Gstrein explores the universal issues of fragile human existence, the relationship between freedom and necessity, interpersonal, spousal and parental relations, while the examination of the topic of transience leads him to the exploration of the nature and purpose of art. The novel does not give unequivocal and clear answers to most of the above questions, but it, nevertheless, discusses and challenges patterns of living in the contemporary world thus raising both current and all-time poetic issues: the position of an artist in contemporary society, the engagement of contemporary art, intellectual responsibility, the relation between art and society, the principles of postmodernist poetics, the nature of art and its functions understood differently in different cultural epochs. Hence, the novel is decidedly metapoetic; it is characterized by the presence of thematic—both explicit and symbolic, and structural metapoetics. The novel is set in 2016, the year of the great refugee crisis. The I-narrator, Richard, is a scientist—glaciologist, a rationalist and skeptic, married to Natasha, a successful writer, an enthusiast and engaged empath. It is through Natasha's empathetic actions—she takes care of a family of Syrian refugees—that Gstrein sets a scene for the discussion of one of the novel's core questions: whether an honest conversation about the ongoing refugee crisis is possible without aligning ourselves to either the right-wing or the left-wing politics, and whether one can be just in such a conversation (Gstrein, Interview). At Natasha's initiative, the couple lent their summer house by a lake near Hamburg to the Farhi family, thus generating much media hype. The situation in the small town in which the summer residence is located becomes fraught with tension as a group of teenagers starts visiting the estate to “keep an eye” on the refugee family. At one point, the tension threatens to brim over into violence, as one night two Syrian boys are abducted. The boys are soon found in the nearby woods, unharmed, but scared stiff. Richard grows increasingly skeptical about Natasha's intense involvement with the Farhi family and her interfering with their lives, which was supposedly meant to facilitate their adaptation and especially about Natasha's writing project with Mr Farhi, which is why she spends the summer at the

lake, alienating herself from both the husband and daughter. Richard, too, becomes alienated from his previous life, which is why we can read the novel as a story about a middle-aged man who entertains a thought to simply walk away of his life. With his longing for retreat in nature, he embodies not only skepticism towards social engagement, but also escapism as one of the statements of the intellectual elites of our time. The novel sets out to explore, *inter alia*, what Gstrein calls the “American coquetry” that could be recognized among American intellectuals who, in the lead-up to Trump’s victory claimed “that if the worst happens, [they] will all flee to Canada.” (Gstrein, Interview) In this context, it may be interesting to note that Richard is an Austrian and does not feel completely at home in Germany and it is, thus, all the more possible to link the author to his character Bassam Farhi and establish the character as the author’s double through the motive of emigration and exile, bearing also in mind an allusion to Natasha and Bassam getting intimate during their cooperation on the literary project. The novel opens with Richard’s staying in America and his encounters with his colleague and friend, a Canadian-born Serb, Tim Markovich, who offers to Richard a real exit, i.e., to actually move with his family to Canada, more precisely to St. John’s, Newfoundland, supposedly the oldest settlement in North America. Richard is offered yet another exit by his colleague Idea, a Jewish-Mexican, who is, at the same time, sentimental and brutally candid with him and to whom he feels greatly attracted – she invites him to climb Popocatepetl with her, although there is no more ice there. Gstrein further underscores the complexity of the emotional entanglements of modern man by introducing the character of Katja, Natasha’s prematurely died twin sister, whom Richard often fondly remembers, as well as that of Fanny, Richard and Natasha’s daughter, the embodiment of the innocent existence in the world, with whom Richard spends three weeks in the countryside between the glaciers and meadows of his native Tyrol, reading her *The Last of the Mohicans*. Natasha and Richard’s estrangement culminates after the literary evening in the town by the lake, and Richard leaves for America once again with the intention to spend some time with Tim in Canada. Two versions of Richard’s stay end in the same way, because the gun that is introduced at a relatively late point in the story has to fire, eventually.

The novel consists of four parts, the first being titled “Canada” and encompassing Richard’s stay in America, his conversations with Tim and Idea, a bicycle accident in the place called Canaan, and a retrospective of the Farhi family’s moving into the summer house by the lake accompanied by a TV footage. The second part, titled “Canaan,” takes

place during the summer Richard spends in Germany and Austria and unfolds the events surrounding the dramatic episode with the disappearance of the Farhi boys, the weeks in Tirol, and, finally, Natasha's literary evening. The title of the second part refers both to the place where Richard has had the bicycle accident, and, despite the altered spelling, to the biblical land of Canaan, a land of freedom and prosperity, promised to the Jewish nation, as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8, 3:17, 13:15, 33:3). Geographically, Canaan is a fertile area of the Middle East's Mediterranean coast, the site of the encounter and conflict between the Eastern and Western Empires and home to the most sacred sites of both Christendom and Islam. Here, we can recognize a crystal-clear symbolism of the promise of a better life in a distant country which is reached through a series of temptations and tribulations, especially when taking into consideration that the Second Book of Moses, also called Exodus, is dedicated to the exodus of the Jewish people who left the life of slavery in Egypt and set out on a harrowing journey towards the Promised Land. However, Gstrein twists and loosens the symbolism, which undoubtedly relates to the immigrant fate of the Farhis, in a postmodernist fashion, by choosing North American toponyms invoking biblical geography for the titles of his chapters. This is emphasized in the scene of Richard's waking up after the Canaan accident, when both Canada and Canaan appear in rapid alternations before his blurry sight as he regains consciousness.

Canada becomes a naïve metaphor for a new Promised Land—Canaan, which is also the name of the place where Richard, paradoxically, barely manages to get help after being hurt.⁶ This relativization frees the symbolic reading from tacky sentimentalism and ideological one-sidedness: the once promised land is now a land that people hastily abandon, and bearing in mind the multitude of global threats, America and Europe also need a new Canaan of their own. By using biblical toponyms, Gstrein also establishes an intertextual connection with the Bible as a literary text, which, much before our time, recorded an account of migration of a large number of people across continents in search of a better, more secure and more dignified life – a refugee story. This intertextual communication with the Bible is at the same time a metapoetic place in the novel through which the author draws attention to the history of the topic of refugees, most likely alluding

⁶ The idea, which Gstrein introduces ironically, was originally developed in a serious key by Daniel Vannorman Lucas, *Canaan and Canada* (1904), who claims, among other things, that the country is probably the only ethical battleground in the universe and that good must prevail.

to the plethora of contemporary literary texts that touch upon the subject. The religious context in connection to the Second Book of Moses is also introduced via the character of Pastor Aldrich, who provides spiritual guidance to the Farhis through the process of conversion to Christianity. When Richard speaks of his injury and the place where the accident occurred, the pastor immediately refers to the “Promised Land, which everyone can find in themselves only” (130). In the continuation of the conversation, the pastor rejects the possibility that, despite God’s will for them to leave for Canaan, the Farhis actually reached the desired destination when they came to Germany. The hypocrisy of the priest’s statement is disclosed by Natasha, who opposes the abstract humanism of religion to which her concrete material support stands in stark contrast. In this way, Gstrein avoids the black-and-white modeling of characters and their actions, and we may draw attention here to Gstrein’s mastery in the art of introducing some of the eternal philosophical themes in passing, seemingly nonchalantly. Here, it is the everlasting question of the origin of evil in the world—since Natasha understands Aldrich’s statement as a justification for the war in Syria for reasons that mortals cannot fathom—which is, already in the following sentence, relativized and devoid of pathos, silenced and suffocated by a mimetic excess related to the described events.

The third part of the novel encompasses two versions of chapter 13 telling two different versions of Richard’s return to the United States on the way to Montreal. What is at play here is a process of marking a work of literature as an artistic creation, whose development and ending do not rely on reality but on the author’s intent and the laws established within the world of a work of art, which is, precisely, what structural metapoetics is about. The novel, however, concludes with the chapter entitled “What really happened” (“Was wirklich geschehen ist,” 273), which again refers to reality and which, in a metapoetic sense, reflects the writer’s earlier statement that a work of literature must not deviate too much from reality, and, thus, in both structural and thematic sense, completes the realistic motivation.

Gstrein formulates some of his poetic attitudes in an essay entitled “All humanity loves aggressive morality. That’s the immoral thing about it” published in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 22 March, 2018, which can be read as an accompanying text to the novel. The essay begins with the topic the author has been preoccupied with: the mimetic quality of literature, that is, the problem of transposing reality into a literary form, which is discussed in the novel through Natasha’s project and the public promotion of the project in front of an audience in a small town

by the lake. The second subject of the essay is “the aggressive moralizing in public appearances,” which in the novel gains its literary expression in Natasha’s need for public engagement reflected as much in her taking care of the Syrian refugees as in her uncompromising attitudes.

It is Natasha who discredits all other attitudes taking a stance of an unquestionable moral authority. In an interview to Ö1, speaking about literature and politics, Gstrein points out that moralizing is not always the most appropriate answer: “Whenever we discuss politics, whenever we discuss literature, in the beginning and in the end of our talk we always talk about morality, and it is in the in-between that we have to let other voices, other options, arguments and counter-arguments be heard.”

Only in this way can literature “keep the space for discussion open about every position that can be argued,” that is, no position should be declared unjustifiable too early (Gstrein, Interview). In that way, literature becomes the meeting point of different, opposing views, both rational and emotional, in which the dual nature of man as both a rational and an emotional being is reflected.

Metapoetics in the novel

In this section, we will interpret the passages and procedures in the novel that we have labeled as metapoetic in order to identify Gstrein’s implicit poetic statement, that is, the answers to the questions about the nature and function of literature in the modern world, presented in a literary form, bearing in mind the author’s explicit statements expressed in interviews and essays.

The novel opens with a motto to be read first and foremost in a moral key, as in the above-mentioned author’s statement that in politics and in literature, morality must be discussed in the beginning and in the end: “Not forever here on earth / for a short time only” (7).

The motto primarily draws attention to transience as an absolute determinant of human life, directly and inextricably linked to the codification of ethics governing human action in every religion, ideology, philosophical doctrine, whether rightful actions are to be rewarded by immortality, new life, redemption or paradise in the afterlife or they serve as a confirmation of the dignity of human beings as free, saved, and able to rise above their selfishness, their instinctive nature, etc. The motto, therefore, becomes an invitation to the reader to reconsider his/her own position in the world and his or her acting or failure to act in

relation to other beings and nature. In the novel, this is realized when Idea emails the same quotation to Richard in Spanish, as a prompt reply to his report on the turbulent day when the Syrian boys were found in the forest.⁷ In addition to the “natural melancholy” (168) contained in them, the lyrics spur Richards to urgent action. Under the motto at the beginning of the book, it is written—and this is what Idea communicates to Richard—that the verses originate from the Song of the Aztec King Nezahualcōyotl, one of the most powerful people of his time, poet and philosopher, who is credited for the flourishing of the Aztec world, and, by the same token, responsible for numerous human casualties. Any literary reference, whether fictional or real, is a possible metapoetic commentary. Here, the commentary is about the ability of literature to encapsulate human experience within a form in which it can survive as a testimony of a life that existed or could have existed long ago, that is, in a form which opens the possibilities for both the contemporaries and future generations to benefit from the account and find it actual and relevant to their own life and work.

The message expressed in the verses can also be related to the issue of the lack of ecological awareness, referred to by Richard's profession—glaciology, that is, in his conversations with Tim. The question of human (in)action is the question of what kind of world we will leave behind. Human transience is contrasted with the eternity of nature itself, the eternity of glaciers, but as a consequence of human neglect, they, too, as Tim notices, are “by no means eternal” any more (12). Unlike Richard, for whom the study of glaciers primarily serves to facilitate a withdrawal from the world, as in the aforementioned elitist escapism, Tim insists that the main task of a scientist is to reveal to the people the dire consequences of their actions, the indications of the imminent ecological disaster, that is, the annihilation of life, and, alongside it, all the testimonies that life ever existed. In this way, the novel touches upon the issue of moral responsibility of science and conscience of scientists, alongside the question of moral responsibility of literature—through Natasha's work. That is why Natasha and Tim could be literary doubles, because he not only admires the fact that she is a writer, but his actions in his own domain (that of science) are similar to hers in literature—they both act bravely, unconditionally and unwaveringly.

⁷ “No para siempre en la tierra, sólo un poco aquí” (167). By citing these and some other Idea's pithy sentences in Spanish, the author marks them and thus additionally highlights them in the otherwise densely woven text.

The introduction of a double is one of Gstrein's favorite literary procedures used as a means of characterization, interiorizing of the action and shifting of the narrative events from the outside towards the inside. It also serves for reflecting upon the events, reconsidering the relationships between characters, and the hero's questioning of his own identity. In addition to the connection the narrative establishes between the characters of Richard and Bassam, and Natasha and Tim, Natasha and her sister Katja killed in a car crash could also be read as doubles. In his memories of Katja, Richard reassesses his relationship with Natasha, searching for what he seems to have never found in Natasha, just as he, observing the relation between Natasha and Bassam, casts an inward look upon himself, torn apart by the new circumstances that challenge his habitual skepticism and rationalism. Bearing in mind Renate Lachmann's theoretical postulates on the motif of a double as one of the very common motifs in literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism, Gstrein's introduction of doubles at several levels can also be considered to represent technical metapoetics, that is, commenting on a procedure by way of actually using it:

Literature, however, which is both doubleness and split, both shapes and interprets, and is, in a way, itself not immune to a dualism of its own processes and representational structures: there is a duplication of the author and the implicit author, the narrator and the protagonist, the reader and the implicit reader, the author and the reader. (Lachmann 262)

All these categories of dualism can be found in Gstrein's novel.

The symbolism of glaciers is what could be identified as the central metapoetic motif in the novel. It belongs to thematic and aesthetical-philosophical metapoetics. When an industrialist asks Richard's colleague and friend, Idea Selig, what prompted her interest in glaciers, she answers:

There is hardly any matter more transient than snow, but it is preserved in the ice of glaciers. Just think of all the snow that has fallen for all these years. Imagine the snow of the days when Cortes conquered Mexico, or the snow from the times of Christ's birth, or the snow from when the first humans lived. (59)

Idea's response symbolically expresses the central position of romantic and idealistic aesthetics, predominant in the eighteenth and nineteenth century understanding of art, as well as in the neo-romantic conceptions of modernity. The perishability of human existence in its physical form can be overcome only through art. A glacier is, therefore, per-

ceived here as a symbol of art, where the beauty of life, in itself transient and perishable, is preserved and elevated to eternity.

The connection with idealistic aesthetics is the verb “aufheben” (*to sublimate*), which functions here in its two meanings: “to keep, to preserve” (*aufbewahren, erhalten*), or “to cause it to cease, to put an end to” (*aufhören lassen, ein Ende machen*), which are at the heart of the central concept of Hegel’s dialectics: dialektische Aufhebung.⁸ Just as the snow in a glacier ceases to exist in its primary form—that of fragile, extremely transient matter, but it, nevertheless, does not cease to exist, so is reality abolished in art through a dialectical relationship with fiction, creating a “more complex truth” about life (Gstrein, “Die aggressiv”), while remaining preserved for thousands of years, all with the intention of preserving life from decay, on the one hand, and on the other, providing an understanding of “complex cognitive processes in literature” (Gstrein, “Die aggressiv”).

Hence the author’s multiple references to books and legends that deal with large and important collective experiences from a long time ago, such as the Second Book of Genesis or Aztec legends, or direct mentions of the titles of the books that influenced the characters’ worldviews and their lives, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Moby Dick*. At the same time, Gstrein diminishes the seriousness of his meta-poetic commentary about the influence and importance of books by taking an ironic stance on it. For instance, when Natasha wants to keep the upper hand in one of their marital arguments, Richard becomes aware that her point is actually a quote from one of the books on her bedside table and retorts citing a character from that same book, that is, he answers to one literal quote with another. The irony here rests on a reversal similar to the one from Cervantes’ parody of the chivalric romance when literature claims to become life. Gstrein’s focus, too, is not on the seductiveness of literature—since he does not even mention the title of the book from which the spouses take their “lines”—but on the dangers of a dogmatic understanding of literature and the tendency

⁸ Hegel explains the double meaning of the word in the first book of *Science of Logic* (*Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, 1816): “To sublimate and being sublated (the idealized) constitute one of the most important concepts of philosophy. It is a fundamental determination that repeatedly occurs everywhere in it, the meaning of which must be grasped with precision and especially distinguished from nothing.—What is sublated does not thereby turn into nothing. Nothing is the immediate; something sublated is on the contrary something mediated; it is something nonexistent but as a result that has proceeded from a being; it still has in itself, therefore, the determinateness from which it derives.” (Hegel 81)

of modern man, man of every time, to take ideas and concepts from literature uncritically, which, at the same time, reflects his inability to achieve authentic communication with other human beings, even those closest to him.

This passage, however, is not only a self-reflexive metapoetic commentary on the lack of communication in the modern world, but also contributes to the characterization of Natasha, the central heroine of the novel, a type of contemporary socially engaged writer and the embodiment of what Gstrein terms as “aggressive morality.” As in Gstrein’s earlier novels, writers are either protagonists or central characters which makes their actions emblematic in a poetic sense. For Natasha, her social engagement is not only understandable in itself, but also inseparable from her role as writer, since this is how a writer draws public attention to his/her actions, with the intention of being a positive example in the world. She is a representative of contemporary writers who believe in the possibility of literature’s direct engagement in order to raise the level of public awareness on certain topics and in that sense her actions are rightful and exemplary—hers is the idea for a TV footage on providing the accommodation for the Syrian family, she authors a blog for a Berlin newspaper on the topic of accepting immigrants and works on a literary project with a public reading to further draw attention to the immigrants’ plight. Her writing activity rests on the belief that literature and morality are inseparable, and the view that communication between the writer and the audience must necessarily take place in the contemporary social environment that is a scene of political, class and moral conflicts, all of which necessarily leads to the conclusion that a work of literature and the opus of a writer not only have to be situated within this context, but must also firmly uphold indisputable moral principles. Nevertheless, Gstrein finds a series of flaws to this seemingly perfect manifesto and exposes them in the episodes in which Richard, in his merciless skepticism, reveals the exhibitionism and egoism of contemporary art as the main driving forces behind this kind of model morality, whether it be conversations in writers’ circles or an argument arising because some artists obstructed a distribution of food and necessities in a refugee camp while looking for participants for their performance. Richard’s ironic take on possible theater performance for German pensioners, who would, from the safety of the decks of their cruisers, witness a spectacle of people drowning somewhere off the Libyan coast, questions—in all its parodic exaggeration—the need of contemporary art to replace life itself, that is, the repeatedly asked question of the meaning and role of art: “why there should still be art”

(199). It is interesting to note that Natasha does not respond directly to this question, but ignores it with disdain as self-evident, thus renouncing Richard's credibility as an interlocutor on topics of art, since he is a scientist whose greatest achievement is "ridiculous measuring of the world" (199). Such an attitude reintroduces the idea of dogmatic thinking, which is detrimental even when the thinking is right—in this novel, as it will turn out, both for the reality to which Natasha's art refers, i.e., the fate of the Farhi family, and for art itself—Natasha's writing project. Accusing Richard of being deprived of emotions, she implies that art must be warm and emotional—which is an anachronistic idea abandoned completely as early as in the avant-garde—and reduces humanity exclusively to empathy and sensitivity, neglecting its intellectual and discursive components, both in life and art. We should not forget here the allusion to Kehlmann's novel *Measuring the World* (*Die Vermessung der Welt*, 2005) as a "chosen signal" (Juvan 30), which invokes in the reader's mind the relation between the principles of action and contemplation, the key principles of human nature deeply embedded in Western culture, and embodied in Kehlmann's characters Gauß and Alexander von Humboldt. Richard and Natasha can be perceived as their parodied, weakened replicas through which Gstrein comments negatively on the activism and escapism of contemporary intellectuals revealing the futility, and even destructiveness of the actions of the elites.

Natasha's literary evening's fiasco is also an important metapoetic place in the novel, inserted, like a play within a play, primarily as an ironic commentary on contemporary literary events. After preparing the show for the whole summer, Natasha and Bassam Farhi perform together in a bookstore in the center of the town by the lake, in front of the local audience, the same small-town folks with whom we got previously acquainted, as both curious and suspicious, even homophobic in relation to the Farhis. The attitude of such an audience towards literature was announced earlier when one of the neighbors, a certain Dr. von Gunten, commented that "the life of the Farhis must be a true gift for a writer" (138). Instead of Natasha, Bassam Farhi provides an answer to this comment citing an alleged Russian saying that there are only two real professions, that of a writer and that of a frontiers guard, because only they cannot be performed for too long without passion (139). Both statements reintroduce Gstrein's favorite poetic theme of shifting/safeguarding the boundaries between reality and literature, mixing truth and fiction, and judging literature against non-literary criteria, which becomes the main reason for the failure of Natasha's

evening. Von Gunten's statement reflects a misconception about the necessity of the truthfulness of literature, which, with the consolidation of realistic poetics, established itself as a value criterion: an authentic life story is a prerequisite of a good work of literature, or even more pronouncedly, the other way round—only literature based on a true story is good.⁹ This is why a lady from the audience protests after she realizes that Natasha, in her story, mentions the route that the Farhis did not take, even if thousands of other immigrant families have travelled that route: "What about the other stories? Are they also made up?" (205). The disappointment of the audience stems from a naïve, Platonic belief that literature must reflect reality as they came to hear what really happened. Indicative, in this sense, is the presence of an inspector investigating the kidnapping of the Farhi boys—it is highly unlikely that he attends the event out of his great love for literature; he clearly wants to uncover at least some shreds of the blurred truth (29). The evening almost turns into a court hearing, when a lady from the audience stubbornly insists that she be answered for each and every episode whether it was "experienced" or "fictitious," revealing both herself and the audience as a truly petty bourgeois auditorium interested only in the piquant and shocking details of the lives of others, with pre-prepared typified reactions of wonder, pity, condemnation, etc.¹⁰

That is why neither Natasha's "pleading for the power of fiction did not make any difference, because with each sentence it only became clearer that the problem lay exactly in the fictionalization and that there could not be a question of power" (207). Everything gets further complicated when someone from the audience asks Mr. Farhi to say something in Arabic, which he does, provoking an additional suspicion in the inspector that he did not speak about an ordinary morning of his family in Damascus, but complained about his position in a language that no one could understand, instead.

Two things, here, are the subject of Gstrein's metapoetic reflection. One relates to the problem of the reception of art, the fact that, after centuries of writing and reception of literature and different eras with diverse concepts, most people still understand art in a Platonic way as

⁹ For easier understanding of the problem, it is sufficient to mention the sentences that we often hear in the everyday experience in relation to the evaluation of a work of literature or a film: it is based on true event, it must be good.

¹⁰ A critique of the petty-bourgeoisie is present in the earliest Gstrein's novels, and from *The Art of Killing*, it is accompanied by an open criticism of the media, since it is precisely media reporting that contributes to such a mentality. These two levels of criticism are joined in the novel at the point of Natasha's flirting with the media.

simply a replica of life, spiced with exoticism and incomprehensibility. The other refers to literary dilettantism. Although she understands the Aristotelian concept which states that literature speaks of what is possible and probable, and not about what really happened, allowing even for deviations from what is possible and thus confirming the aesthetic autonomy of literature, Natasha writes on deeply personal experiences in a typified, schematized way, relying on black-and-white moral concepts and mediated emotion and ignoring both the irrational and negative in human nature and the paradox of human existence. In his essays, Gstrein calls such writing “kitsch of proximity,” believing that instead of genuine human empathy, it can only generate an automated, cold reception, preventing a critical encounter either with the present or the past (Gstrein and Semprun 32).

This concept is contested by Gstrein's novel, based on a constant destabilization and relativization of both the narrated and the narrative instance—through auto-irony and doubles, and continuous meta-narrative reflection. These narrative devices in the novel allow for the formation of a complex, multi-layered image of the world, in the way in which Idea's statement, somewhere between pathetic and ironic, allows us to acquire knowledge of life without having to resort to excessive didacticism.

When Richard answers lukewarmly to her enthusiastic invitation to climb Popocatépetl together, excusing himself by obligations, Idea first warns him that she should not be treated like an idiot, and then retorts passionately in Spanish: “Por que no aprecias la vida? ... No se puede vivir sin amar” (100).¹¹ Her trick was, continues the narrator, “in forcing irony and pathos so close together, that, as hard as you tried, there was no way of avoiding it: you could try throwing yourself on one side or the other for a time, but in the end, there was no way to escape truth” (100).

This highly metapoetic expression is also illustrated in other Idea's passionate statements, in Spanish, usually accompanied by irony or auto-irony, revealing the inevitability of balancing the emotional and intellectual in an attempt to understand the paradoxical human position in the world, which is the essential task of literature.

The indication that Idea is the conveyer of the metapoetic level of the text is given in the remark that she bears the name of an Uruguayan poet. In Idea's claims and statements, which we read as an aesthetical-philosophical metapoetic commentary, an important theme of the role,

¹¹ “Why do you not appreciate life? ... You can not live without loving.”

purpose and expressive means of literature is realized at the diachronic level via the symbolism of the glacier, while at the synchronic level, it is realized through her “passion for paradoxes” (60) which reflects the necessity of the collaboration between the pathetic and the ironic in the expression of contemporary art, i.e., the emotional and intellectual in its relation to reality.

Therefore, in the novel, Natasha embodies a type of contemporary artist who craves for constant media attention, striving to bring current political topics closer to art in a pamphleteering way. Richard’s reflection on her art, after the literary evening, is a critique of the scope of such art that wants to communicate great truths and to become a truth itself, while using primitive and one-dimensional means that leave the audience unresponsive (cf. Knežević, “O stvarnosti”). This is the opposite of the concept of art based on Idea’s “trick” which, by constantly shifting between the ironic and pathetic relations to reality—and between the ironic and pathetic stances of the writer towards himself/herself—brings the reader inevitably, as in a game, to the paradoxical truth about the absurdity of human existence.

The whole novel is imbued with the paradox and the absurd, both at the level of the sentence and at the level of the plot, and especially so in the two versions of the thirteenth chapter, the first metapoetically marked by the title “The End for Literature Lovers” (“Ende für Literaturliebhaber,” 241), and the second by the fact that Richard introduces himself to an unknown woman as an Austrian writer to whom he, according to Natasha’s words, “looks creepily alike” (260), which establishes an auto-ironic relationship between the narrator and the writer as each other’s double.¹² It is also remarkable that neither of the two versions of the story of Richard’s return to Canaan and Canada is functional in terms of motivating the end of the central plotline describing the events around the house on the lake. By inserting two possible continuations of the storyline, a realistic narrative frame breaks apart, the relationship with the reality to be mimetically represented is relativized, and the need is emphasized for its reflection through playing with the fictional. This is why we recognize this procedure as technical metapoetics. The first version suspends Richard’s dream of moving to Canada. Gstrein’s skepticism is directed here against the lachrymose sentimentality, this time absurdly placed within the world of science,

¹² Richard’s contemplation of living with Natasha in a few more instances in the novel makes space for additional poetic comments on the relationship between reality and literature, Richard’s fear of becoming one of the characters in Natasha’s prose, perhaps, the most obvious among them.

which, at the level of the novel as a whole, is inevitably viewed in relation to art through the previously established constellations of the relations among the quartet: Natasha – Tim – Richard – Idea. The critical edge of the second version is directed at certain clichés in literature and film related through a seemingly absurd story of an acquaintance with an, to say the least, unusual female figure, overly pathetic and prone to excessive immersion in literature, as well as the cliché of the mystification of the figure of a writer.

The absurd is intensified here to the point of unbearability. The blending of life with fiction gets its pathetic, simultaneously comic and grotesque, version. At the end, however, through a legend with which Richard intends to commence his lecture in Montreal, the text returns us back towards the glacier metaphor. The affirmative statement that “there was hardly any greater pathos than the pathos of truth” (269), is followed by a legend, allegedly present wherever there are glaciers in the world, about a son who found his long missing father in the ice, the father’s face as young as his own. The awareness-raising recognition of the similarity of our personal experience to what was experienced by the people in the past is identical to that realized in art. The pathetic picture of life caught in ice, similar to that of Laookon’s dying, saved from inevitable bodily decay and preserved for eternity in the art of sculpture, is ironically shattered by the facts from Richard’s own lecture warning of an ecological catastrophe, the melting of glaciers and the destruction of the world, which mock mercilessly the idea of the eternity of art (cf. Knežević, “O stvarnosti”).

The novel ends with the realization of the paradox at the level of plot: Bassam Farhi not only acquired but actually used the gun mentioned in Natasha’s text during the literary evening, severely wounding boys and girls wandering around the house, although they did not do any harm to his family. What Natasha wrote as fiction, she afterwards accomplished in reality: not only did she give Richard’s hidden gun to Farhi, but also encouraged him to use it. Paradoxically, a humane advocate of unquestionable ethical principles becomes an instigator of violence, a victim becomes a perpetrator, and a story of an immigrants’ plight in a globalized world—a story about the fate of us all—becomes a story of the detrimental confusing of literature with reality.

Conclusion

The above analysis has shown how the metapoetic expression identified in the text of the novel of the modern Austrian writer Norbert Gstrein *The Years to Come* (*Die kommenden Jahre*) participates in the formation of complex semantic structures of a text. The attitudes about literature, its expressive means, its function both in the social and individual sense, as well as its relation to reality, which the author otherwise presents in essays and texts in newspapers, are realized in the novel in a sensual-concrete form through characters and their actions, dialogue and reflection, within a predominantly realistic, constructive principles of plot development, which simultaneously problematize and relativize.

The thematic metapoetic aspect is reflected in the problematization of individual attitudes about contemporary art, especially through the fact that the central heroine is a writer herself, while structural metapoetics is present through the author's using of the same procedures that he examines: pathetization, irony, doubling, reversal, and paradox. Gstrein's placing Natasha's creative engagement in the year of the global refugee crisis and introducing the episodes that recreate events from the contemporary literary environment has been identified as a cultural and historic metapoetic commentary, while the most striking instances of metapoetics provide, both diachronically and synchronically, an aesthetical-philosophical answer to the question of the role of literature (the glacier metaphor) and the means through which it achieves its highest peaks (pathos and irony). Technical metapoetics is combined with aesthetical-philosophical metapoetics in the narrator's masterful irony which questions both the concepts of engaged art ("authors' usefulness"; Interview 91), that are too close to reality and the fictionalized, clichéd representations of life. Gstrein's (auto)ironic edge is directed not only to writers and intellectuals, but also to philologists "who always have to get to the bottom of everything and cannot accept that there is perhaps no reason behind things" (70), which also made the author of this text question her own conclusions at multiple levels.

In addition, in the interpretation section we have shown that the metapoetic passages serve other purposes, too. They are used for characterization and for thematizing the current political, social, and environmental issues in the world, which adds even more complexity to the semantic level of the text mirroring the complexity of human relations in the contemporary environment. Interspersed manneristically with episodes and storytellers' memories of encounters and conversations from different times, the novel as a whole is an affirmative answer to the

poetic skepticism, which the artists inevitably face. Despite the relativity of every truth and its absolutely certain unachievability, and despite the paradox of our efforts to find sense, the literature that forces us to face the antinomies of our existence and the world we live in, is not only possible—in the way that Gstrein writes it—but, also, necessary.

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Metapoetika v romanu *Die kommenden Jahre* Norberta Gstreina

Ključne besede: avstrijska književnost / Gstrein, Norbert: *Die kommenden Jahre* / pripovedna struktura / metapoetika

Razprava poskuša prek komentiranja metapoetične dinamike pripovedi v romanu sodobnega avstrijskega pisatelja Norberta Gstreina *Die kommenden Jahre* (2018) poglobiti razumevanje Gstreinove poetike. Na začetku poskusi opredeliti izraz metapoetika s pomočjo sicer dokaj skromnega nabora znanstvenih obravnav te teme, pri tem pa se nasloni predvsem na definicijo Matthiasa Freiseja. Temu sledi pregled dela Norberta Gstreina s posebnim poudarkom na vprašanih njegove poetike, ki so se v preteklosti porajala tako v njegovih romanih kot esejih. Osrednji del prispevka, posvečen interpretaciji romana, analizira najbolj izstopajoče primere metapoetike v romanu: začetni moto, simbolizem ledenikov, odnos med ironijo in patetiko, primeren za razkrivanje resnice, osrednji lik avtorice, njen literarni večer, vključitev dveh različic 13. poglavja in drugih knjig, ki so omenjene v romanu. V zaključnem delu povzemamo možne odgovore, ki jih podaja roman na vprašanja o poetiki, implicitno zastavljenih skozi pripoved, in pokažemo, kako metapoetična raven besedilnih vplivov soustvarja pomen besedila.

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