

## STUBBLE FIELDS IN PURPLE: IMPRESSIONISM IN PREŽIHOV VORANC'S STORIES

Irma M. Ožbalt

Although Prežihov Voranc had been publishing stories under his real name, Lovro Kuhar, for over twenty years, he was already in his forties by the time he appeared on the Slovene literary scene as a writer of importance. The reasons for his late acceptance were his geographical and social isolation as well as the themes and style of his writing.

The Slovene literary avant-garde between the two wars was an elite group of academically educated intellectuals, who gathered in the private salons and coffee houses of Ljubljana to discuss the newest literary, cultural and socio-political developments at home and abroad. Voranc, on the other hand, was a poorly educated peasant, living far away in the Carinthian mountains. There was no one in his milieu with whom he could discuss anything concerning literature, art or philosophy: his only contact with the Slovene literary world was his correspondence with more or less benevolent and more or less competent editors of minor magazines published in Celovec and Prague.

The second reason why Voranc remained practically unknown until the mid-thirties was the prevalent orientation of Slovene literature between the two wars. The impact of Ivan Cankar had been so strong that the echoes of his ideas, themes, and especially his style, reverberated throughout the production of his countless imitators for two decades after his death in 1918. The physical and mental suffering and the dehumanization of existence caused by World War I had pushed another group of artists either into a frantic quest for the meaning of existence, which produced works in the expressionistic style, or into escapism, which demonstrated itself in bizarre literary experiments. Throughout these years Voranc kept writing his simple stories about simple folk; his heroes were not intellectuals torn by self-doubt, they were his countrymen eking a meagre existence from their sloping fields, or jobless tramps and petty thieves; the most sophisticated among them were soldiers drowning in the muck of battlefields, all of them people whose fate Voranc had experienced firsthand. Such stories were doomed to remain unnoticed by the Slovene literary élite, and it is clear why his first book, the collection of short stories, *Povesti*, in 1925 provoked no discussion and merited practically no critical assessment.

By the mid-thirties, however, Slovene literature had begun exploring new directions. New literary magazines were founded. The prestigious liberal *Ljubljanski Zvon* and its Catholic counterpart *Dom in Svet* lost their supremacy; their contributors now had their own publications based on different, or at least more radical, views. The most visible among these magazines was *Sodobnost*, founded by leftist-oriented dissidents from *Ljubljanski Zvon*. The philosophy on which it was based was Marxism or at least an interpretation of life close to dialectic materialism. In *Sodobnost* a new literary current, or school, was formed. Slovene literary history has named it 'social' realism, rejecting the Russian term 'socialist' realism with the argument that the Russian variant, especially given the strict guidelines of Ždanov's cultural policy, had become a political weapon, while Slovene writers created independently, even if their search for social changes stemmed from the same philosophy. In *Sodobnost* new names appeared, new authors of talent and social responsibility, and also new themes. The quest for the meaning of existence was replaced with realistic stories about everyday existence of peasants and working-class people in

different parts of Slovenia. The writers lived in different areas of the country and were able to introduce new dimensions, new people as well as new attitudes and a new style into Slovene literature. The readers and the critics were ready for Voranc's heroes and his style of writing.

From 1925, when his *Povesti* aroused no interest, Voranc published nothing and wrote very little. How and why he decided to send, in 1935, the story "Boj na požiralniku" to the editor of *Sodobnost*, who had never heard of Prežihov Voranc before, has not been established. Hidden behind his new pen-name, Voranc was proclaimed the discovery of the year. His style was immediately labelled by critics as socialist realism par excellence. After his first success, Voranc, who at that time lived in Paris as a political exile, continued sending stories to *Sodobnost* until his return to Slovenia five years later. All of them were discussed with and edited by the editor, Ferdo Kozak. In 1940 they were reprinted, with a couple of additions, in the book *Samorastniki*. Even though a great majority of Voranc's books, novels, collections of stories, sketches and memoirs were published after World War II, critics seem to agree that the peak of Voranc's artistic achievement is the collection *Samorastniki*. His literary profile was determined with this book and has remained practically unchanged since then. Voranc is considered the greatest Slovene epic talent, the most convincing representative of the school of social realism in Slovene literature. This assessment is based mostly on the analyses of Voranc's characters, themes and ideas. The portraits of his simple heroes make a profound impression not only because of the sharpness of naturalistic detail in their physical features, but also and foremost because of the depth of their ethical profiles and their enormous potential for suffering. But what unmistakably labels Voranc as a social or critical realist is not so much the choice of his characters, but the message he is trying to convey. Depending on the critic's own socio-political orientation, Voranc is perceived as a rebel, a fighter, a prophet of social revolution, or an heir to the Carinthian folk artists, the *bukovniki*.

Yet Voranc's writing comprises other elements, which do not fit the narrowly determined label of social or socialist realism. There is a yearning, a need for artistic expression in Voranc's nature which could never be totally tamed by the discipline of his service to revolutionary political ideas. This element of his artistic nature appears most strongly in the stories located in his native mountains and dealing with Carinthian peasants and laborers. These stories represent Voranc's best work and they greatly surpass those dealing with industrial workers or political upheavals. In these stories Voranc develops plots and characters against a background depicted with impressionistic devices and technique. His descriptions of landscape have been noticed and mentioned by different critics, but they have never been considered as a manifestation of a different writing style, a style that was present in all his writing and which prevailed in his swan song, *Solzice*. Thus, Sonja Vudler,<sup>1</sup> discussing Voranc's earliest stories in the *Prežihov Zbornik* (1957), repeatedly mentions his "romantic" descriptions of nature; she also notices some characteristic features of landscape painting: the play of light and shadow, sunsets and starry nights, music accompanying the visual imagery. She attributes these elements of Voranc's style to the heritage of romanticism. In the same volume, another critic, Erika Rajh,<sup>2</sup> discusses *Solzice*, Voranc's final book. She mentions the lyrical quality (*milina*) of his descriptions of nature, but she, too, seems to find it difficult to reconcile this aspect of his style with the unpretentious realistic stories about the author's own youth and about other prematurely grown children. The critic finds, e.g., the passage describing sunrise in the story "Dobro jutro!" unconvincing, unnecessary rhetoric. She tries to fit an impressionistic image with symbolist overtones, found in the story "Levi devžej," into some kind of realistic mold by

calling it a simple and explicit description of the way some children walk, of their clothes and behavior. Even the clearly impressionistic/symbolistic canvas of "Ajdovo strnišče" merits only the assessment that it is a vivid and precise description of a colorful scenery. Similarly, in his essay accompanying the 1968 reprinting of *Solzice*, the critic Jože Koruza<sup>3</sup> mentions Voranc's landscapes only as a sporadic feature of his writing, not as the essence, the core of practically plotless sketches. The magnificent painting of the sunrise in the story "Prvi maj," for example, is dealt with in the following sentence: "His description of the dawn deliberately symbolizes the rise of the new belief in the proletariat." Anton Slodnjak,<sup>4</sup> in 1968, was the first to cautiously deviate from this established perception of Voranc's style. He still characterizes his writing as socio-realistic in conception and idea and naturalistic in the execution and detail, but he also notices his use of symbols and allegory and his "heart-wrenching lyrical descriptions of his native landscape." However, Slodnjak, too, fails to perceive *Solzice* as the manifestation of Voranc's final artistic statement: the visual and emotional effects have become much more important than any idea or socio-political message, social realism has been overshadowed and practically displaced by another style, the impressionism. Lino Legiša,<sup>5</sup> in *Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva* (1969), repeatedly uses the terms "impressionism" and "impressionistic," but he considers Voranc's landscapes only a framework for his narratives, not their core.

In spite of these assessments and perceptions, none of the critics has tried to challenge or modify or extend the label of Prežihov Voranc as social realist. Yet, elements of impressionism and even symbolism can be traced to Voranc's first literary attempts and followed up to his final, most impressionistic writings in *Solzice*. From the earliest stories, Voranc has always developed plots and characters against a clearly delineated background, usually a landscape. These descriptions are not an inherited literary affectation or an acquired pattern. They do not play the role of a soothing counterpoint to his starkly realistic, often naturalistic portraits of characters, or to the cruel drudgery of their existence, their beliefs and prejudices. They are another aspect of his perception of the world around him, another feature, an inextricable part of his style. This aspect, just as his unmistakable talent for the realistic drawing of characters, grew and developed throughout the years of his artistic career. But while the realistic element reached its peak in *Samorastniki* in the tumultuous years of his political activities, his impressionistic landscapes were perfected in his very last years, the years when all the outside pressures had stopped, when he could allow his sensitive nature to indulge in the beauty that surrounded him in the splendid isolation of his native mountains. *Solzice* are not only heart-rending memoirs of Voranc's bitter-sweet childhood; in them he created exquisite, vibrant impressionistic canvases painted not only with a rich palette of colors but also with a clearly symbolic choice of hues, light and shadow.

Impressionism in Voranc's stories could be compared with the works produced by the school of Slovene impressionist painters, Rihard Jakopič, Ivan Grohar and Matija Jama, who ruled supreme in the first decade of the century. Voranc most likely did not know their work at that time; he was just a child, a shepherd in the Carinthian mountains. It is possible that he later heard about and even saw some of their paintings, either in Ljubljana or elsewhere. Marija Kuhar<sup>6</sup> maintains that, to her knowledge, her husband never exhibited any talent for painting or any special curiosity about art; he never bought or collected pictures. In spite of that, his descriptions of landscapes display the same eye, the same angle of observation as the one found in the paintings of the Slovene impressionists, especially Grohar. In the most accomplished landscapes, created by both the author and the painter, the play of colors and light is intensified to such a degree that the impression-

istic transposition of nature acquires symbolistic overtones. For both the source of inspiration is people working the land, their observation filtered through the tradition of folklore. They both paint with intensive colors and contrasts. Their colors are the pure colors of the prism, but split up into component tones, the changing rhythm of appearances conveyed through the vibration of light. Their paintings exceed their descriptive dimensions; they portray farmland and farm laborers larger than life, and they often reflect the artists' personal attitudes, feelings and dispositions, shifting their art into the realm of existentialism. Every picture or description of landscape is conceived as a tense, personal declaration of the artist's existence and of his perception of the world. The best examples of this style are Grohar's paintings "Sejavec," "Pomlad" and "Macesen," and such Voranc stories as "Levi devžej," "Prvi maj," and "Ajdovo strnišče," all found in *Solžice*.

In "Levi devžej" (The Left Pocket), the author reminisces about a poor family who lived next door to his childhood home. Five hungry children, five orphans, often came visiting in order to be fed by Voranc's mother. The story tells of one such visit, during which mother stuffed the children's pockets full of bread, nuts and dried fruit, but overlooked one of the pockets in an oversize garment worn by the smallest child. The little boy shyly pointed out his empty left pocket. The tragedy of these children's existence is not conveyed so much through the description of their ragged clothes, their bare feet and their shyness, but by positioning them like insignificant black dots against the background of a stark white winter landscape. The image is conveyed as follows:

"In the wintertime, when heavy snows covered everything, a deep track meandered from our neighbors' house to ours. To the right and to the left of this track lay smooth white fields, with hungry crows darting over them in search of food. From time to time, five black dots would appear in the depth of the snowy tunnel, slowly making their way from the neighbors' place towards our home. First in line marched the biggest dot, bobbing up and down; it was followed by the smaller dots, down to the smallest. The last dot was so tiny you could hardly spot it in the snowy ditch. These dots were our neighbors' children, and they were on their way to our house."<sup>7</sup>

The word "dot" (*pika*) is then repeated with a regular beat throughout the story, forcing the reader to retain the stark black and white image of the pitiful little procession. The symbolism of color is most pronounced: the cold indifference of the white, the black misery and sorrow of the innocent little victims of poverty. The image of the "dot" is intensified by such qualifiers as "black dot," "a procession of black dots," "the little black dot," "the lingering, tired, last little black dot." The story ends with a chilly description of the winter landscape, which conveys a feeling of utter hopelessness and immense sadness:

". . . it was. . . already getting dark. Deep snows, spreading out without a beginning or an end, covered the land like a stony blanket. Soon the neighbors' children sank into the tunnel cutting across the fields. They did not utter a single sound. On their way home, the dots looked even blacker than they had been before, on their way towards us."<sup>8</sup>

With its economy of colors and with its sharp black and white contrasts, "The Left Pocket" creates an impression of a charcoal drawing.

In the second story, "Prvi maj" (May Day), the color scheme is not limited to the meager choice of three sober tones, however. The colors here are dramatic, joyful, an explosion of intensive light, the predominant components of the spectrum being vibrant reds, a

flaming array of orange tones, and blinding golds. Voranc's description of the sunrise over Carinthia is like a canvas thickly overlaid with blobs of oil paints, creating a vision of mountains on fire. Here, too, the colors and light have a symbolic meaning: they symbolize hope, life, determination, strength, and perhaps even the impending social revolution, bathed in fire and blood, but leading into a happy tomorrow. As in the other sketches in *Solzice*, the story-line in "Prvi maj" is insignificant: the author, a shy seven-year-old shepherd from a lonely farm, has risen at dawn to take the family flock of sheep out to pasture on a hill behind the homestead. Some factory workers, celebrating May Day by climbing to the top of the mountain, come by laughing merrily. They all wear red carnations in their lapels, and a little girl from the group gives her carnation to the confused boy. This is all. Perhaps Voranc did set out to write about May Day and its clandestine celebrations and significance in pre-war Slovenia, but the days of his political involvement were over, and under his fingers the story outgrew the confines of its message and developed into a magnificent impressionistic landscape painting. The focus of the sketch is not the shepherd's encounter with the factory workers, but the description of a majestic sunrise, the birth of a spring morning. After describing the pre-dawn chill and gloomy countryside covered by a thick layer of fog, the author paints the sunrise like this:

"First, the two highest mountain peaks caught fire and burst into a scarlet flame. Immediately everything was aflame, rocks and crags and precipices. The sight overpowered me completely, and I stood there as if in a trance. I completely forgot how tired and sleepy I was as I stared into the flaming mountains, which seemed to be coming closer and closer. . . . But soon the ruddy peaks of the two giants began to pale. At the same time, the woods at the bottom of the mountain became brighter. Now, the daylight began changing the scenery at a great speed. The Pohorje ranges separated from the eastern sky, and the peaks of the Golica and its foothills outlined themselves against the somewhat dull northern horizon. The fog, which a few minutes earlier was still licking the broad mountain slopes, suddenly collapsed into itself; through the haze appeared shimmering patches of tilled fields. Our mountains were not bathing in the red light of the rising sun any more. Now they were illuminated by the real sun-rays emanating from the huge red sunball, which had suddenly arisen from behind the slopes of the Pohorje.

"A new day was born.

"The vast expanse between heaven and earth, everything that my eyes could encompass, was filled with a pearly, transparent light. This festive illumination was swallowing the fog in the valley, pushing it closer and closer towards the earth, forcing it down into the swamps and meadows. Giant trees of supernatural dimensions rose from the foggy bottom, jagged edges of undulating valley dismembered the fog into countless narrow tongues; scattered homesteads began appearing on all sides, and finally, a little village with a tall Gothic steeple became visible at the bottom of the valley.

"At the same time the sun was changing too. When it had risen from behind the Pohorje, it was like a huge, red-hot ball; but then it became paler and paler, smaller and smaller. Finally, it surrounded itself with a brilliant halo, which was brighter than the center of the ball. From this halo longer and shorter rays began shooting in all directions, like fiery bolts of lightning. Soon, you could no longer look at the sunball.<sup>9</sup>

To this joyous play of color and light the writer then adds the accompaniment of sound, a technique he had used in his descriptions of nature since his earliest stories. The sunrise is perceived as a total awakening of nature, visual and accoustic. The music of singing birds, buzzing insects and the wind playing in larches and birches, provide the observer with an experience of total merging with nature. Voranc writes:

“This mighty music overwhelmed me completely, and I stood there staring numbly at the wonder of this mountain drowned in the morning dew. I, of course, was not conscious of this beauty that surrounded me, and of all this music reverberating through my young body; I was not like someone who observes and listens fully conscious of his surroundings; I was simply an integral part of everything around me, and everything was part of my own being. For a while I had a feeling that I was looking at myself.<sup>10</sup>

This projection and identification of self with nature exceeds not only any romantic or realistic description of landscape, it reaches beyond impressionism and symbolism into existentialism. The idea of Labor Day is drowned not only in the riot of color and sound, but also in the affirmation of life, in the pure joy of existence.

If “Levi devžej” could be entitled “A Ballad in Black and White,” and the substance of “Prvi maj” given as “Flaming Mountains,” then the essence of “Ajdovo strnišče” would be conveyed by the title “Stubble Fields in Purple.” Among all of the sketches in *Solzice*, this one is the most lyrical, most artistic and resembles most an impressionistic painting. The story-line, as elsewhere, is practically non-existent: on his way home, the author, now a grown man, passes by a buckwheat field. He sees his old, frail grandmother harvesting buckwheat. She is all alone, bent deeply over her work, shivering in the chilly autumn afternoon. He implores her to stop working and go home. The old lady refuses, saying: “Oh, let me be. Voranc, this might be the last time that I harvest buckwheat.” The she looks down towards the village cemetery and smiles.

“Ajdovo strnišče” is Voranc’s most exquisite impressionistic masterpiece. Through skilful manipulation of autumn colors and subdued light, he creates an atmosphere of soft, melancholy beauty, of quiet resignation, of acceptance of death as a logical, restful final phase of human existence, and at the same time a feeling of pain, of guilt, of lost opportunities, of immense sadness. Although the landscape is resplendent in autumn colors, lightly veiled in a late afternoon mist, the predominant hues in this landscape painting are purples and violets, the colors of contrition and mourning, and the earthen tones, symbolically erasing the distinction between the earth and the human body close to becoming part of it. The autumn landscape in “Ajdovo strnišče” is described as follows:

“At the time of the buckwheat harvest, if the weather is nice and sunny, the fields are awash with the most beautiful colors of autumn splendor. Although the countryside seems somehow melancholy with all the lush summer vegetation withering away, this wistful sadness shrouding the fields, woods, hills and gullies is so lovely that your heart involuntarily harkens to some strange, distant musings. At this time countless vivid colors hover and flow in the air, the colors of yellowing trees, rusty plowed fields, green spruce forests, reddish larch- and birch-covered slopes of nearby mountains, the colors of somber forest glades and deep valleys, all of them flowing and merging into that mysterious, peaceful autumn display which defies description. And wherever autumn buckwheat is grown, another color joins this autumn palette, the color of ripening buckwheat fields, or an even stronger one, that of the stubble left after the buckwheat

harvest. This purple, nearly violet reflection of the countryside in the fall conveys that deeply-felt, awesome feeling of leave-taking and dying. . . The autumn landscape evokes special emotions. Colorful nature, the vibration of colors in the air and the tiny sparks of light shimmering through the mists touch people gently, and they are suddenly reminded of their own mortality. This is not a bitter feeling, however; it is a feeling of peaceful resignation and beauty.”<sup>11</sup>

This description of landscape contains all the elements of an impressionistic painting: there is a rich display of colors, observed through dispersed sunlight and interpreted through the artist’s perception and feelings. The overpowering tone of this canvas is purple-violet, which symbolizes contrition, resignation and death. The message about the transience of life, the mortality of man and nature, is reinforced also by the brown, earthen tones used in the description of the old woman. The coloring of her face, hands and clothing is that of the earth she is laboring upon and of which she will soon become a part:

“The color of her dress was the color of the earth on which she stood. . . all alone [she was like] a little brown patch in the yellowish autumn sunlight in the middle of the buckwheat field. . . The color of her hands and face reminded me that it was much too cold for her anemic body to be in this open field at this time of year.”<sup>12</sup>

Another symbolic color, a small flash of it, is white. It shines brightly for a brief moment on the cemetery wall and reflects on the grandmother’s face. Here, white is a symbol of joy, peace and hope.

The sketches discussed above are three outstanding examples of Voranc’s impressionistic descriptions of landscape, but they are by no means the only stories in which the author manipulated the elements of color and light in the impressionistic style. Even the motifs of sunrise and of the accoustic accompaniment of the visual images appear in his other stories, including his earliest. Impressionism is not a style that Voranc turned to or invented in his final years. “Ajdovo strnišče,” for example, was written already in 1941. Rather, it is a style he used in combination with the realistic and naturalistic portrayals of his heroes. But while in the earlier stories the impressionistic landscapes were created only as a background for the sharp-featured sculptures of his characters, in his final years they grew into independent masterpieces. They not only prevailed over messages and socio-political ideas, they even overshadowed the tragedy of the pathetic children from his past, with whom he tried to re-people the earth after he had been bitterly disappointed and disgusted with the corruption of the world beyond his childhood and beyond his beloved Carinthian mountains.

PSC Language Training, Montréal.

## REFERENCES

1. Sonja Vudler, “Prežihova mladostna ustvarjalnost,” in Marja Boršnik, ed., *Prežihov zbornik* (Maribor: Obzorja, 1957) 237-60.
2. Erika Rajh, “Solzice,” 324-36 in *Prežihova zbornik* (see note 1).

3. Jože Koruza, "O Prežihovem Vorancu in njegovih Solzicah," in Prežihov Voranc, *Solzice* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1968) 123-7.
4. Anton Slodnjak, *Slovensko slovstvo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1968) 329-30, 422-8.
5. Lino Legiša, "V ekspresionizmu in novi realizem," in L. Legiša, ed., *Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva* VI, (Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica, 1969) 57-68, 288, 393-8.
6. In a conversation with the author at Prežihov vrh, June 23, 1986.
7. Prežihov Voranc, *Solzice* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1968) 95 [all translations by the author].
8. Voranc, *Solzice*, 102.
9. Voranc, *Solzice*, 47-9.
10. Voranc, *Solzice*, 49.
11. Voranc, *Solzice*, 115.
12. Voranc, *Solzice*, 116-7.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barac, Antun. 1954. *Jugoslavenska književnost* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska) 310-13.
- Brejč, Tomaž. 1983. "Od impresije k simbolu: tokovi v slovenskem slikarstvu 1902-1918," *Obdobje simbolizma v slovenskem jeziku, književnosti in kulturi. Drugi del* (Ljubljana: Univerza Edvarda Kardelja) 339-406.
- "Impressionism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1966, XII: 9.
- Koruza, Jože, Fran Zadavec, Hermina Jug, Marko Kranjec. 1967. *Slovenska književnost 1945-1965* (Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica) 9.
- Kosmač, Ciril. 1985. *Pomladni dan* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga) 32-37.
- "Landscape Painting," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1966, XIII: 674.
- Mahnič, Joža. 1964. "Obdobje Moderne," in L. Legiša, ed., *Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva*, V (Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica) 391-2.
- Pirjevec, Dušan. 1961. "Ivan Cankar in naturalizem," *Slavistična revija* 13: 23.
- , 1963. "Ivan Cankar in simbolizem," *Sodobnost* 11: 707-19.
- Torkar, Igor. 1984. *Umiranje na obroke* (Zagreb: Globus) 122.

## POVZETEK

### STRNIŠČA V VIJOLIČNEM: IMPRESIONIZEM V ZGODBAH PREŽIHOVEGA VORANCA

Oznaka "socialistični" ali "socialni" realist ne krije vseh razsežnosti Prežihovega sloga. Realistični, celo naturalistični so portreti ljudi in dogodki, ki jih avtor opisuje; socialistična, ali bolje, po socialni pravičnosti težeča je njegova namera. Njegova proza pa ima še tretjo dimenzijo, ki se prepleta z realističnimi elementi in socialistično tendenco: impresionistično slikanje pokrajine, v izbiri barvnih tonov prilagojeno temi in ideji posamezne zgodbe do take mere, da postajajo barve na paleti simboli. Impresionistični elementi, ki so navzoči že v Prežihovih mladostnih zgodbah, se razrastejo v njegovih zadnjih črticah, v zbirki *Solzice*, v neodvisna impresionistična platna. Izbira motivov in barv, opazovanih skozi različne svetlobne nijanse in meglice, in še posebej avtorjevo zlitje lastnega jaza z naravo, ki jo upodablja, približujeta Prežiha, besednega umetnika, slovenskim impresionističnim slikarjem, posebno Ivanu Groharju. Razprava podrobno raziskuje impresionistične elemente v treh zgodbah iz *Solzice*: *Levi devčej*, *Prvi maj* in *Ajdovo strnišče*.