

Vitomil Zupan's Dramatic Works: An Attempt at Synthesis

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Introduction

Vitomil Zupan is one of the most charismatic, vital, and complex artistic personalities in Slovene literary history. As an eternal rebel, pursuer of the self, outsider, and odd-man-out who was never associated with any of the great historical literary currents, he often aroused interest in literary studies and among the general public. The public devoted most attention to Zupan's dynamic life destiny—specifically, to his adventurous exploits before WW II, when he traveled the world and made a living by doing odd jobs, then to his prison experience, and to his continually dynamic and hedonistic erotic life. Zupan was a versatile writer who created an extensive body of work: he wrote poems, novels, short prose, plays for theater and radio, television and film scripts, children's literary works, and translations; he composed essays on film and theater, and theoretical papers on philosophy and psychology. All of this, together with other, yet unpublished works constitutes a legacy held in sixteen boxes at Ljubljana's National and University Library. Literary studies have displayed the greatest amount of interest in Zupan's prose works, whereas his plays have attracted less attention in literary and theater studies, and by theaters themselves.

Zupan's dramatic works are characterized by a special type of paradox: on the one hand, the author received the highest awards; on the other, his texts were often staged in theaters after a delay of several decades, and some have not been published or staged even to this day. In his book *Pomenske spremembe v sodobni slovenski dramatik* (Semantic changes in modern Slovene playwriting, 1975), Taras Kermauner wrote that, alongside Ivan Mrak, Zupan can be considered the most unfortunate Slovene playwright. The word "unfortunate" here refers to the fact that it was precisely Zupan who had in many aspects introduced great innovations to Slovene playwriting, but his plays were nonetheless shunted aside and not afforded proper recognition.

However, whereas Bor, followed by Potrč and later on by Smole, Kozak, and Strniša, each experienced great success with reviewers, the public, and the avant-garde (some of them with all three, and others only with two or one), Zupan—whom, unfortunately, only literary history is able to fairly evaluate and ascribe what he really deserves (i.e., the status of an innovator, avant-gardist, and one of the most important Slovene playwrights)—remained empty-handed throughout

and is barely known as a literary figure among today's young audience. (Kermauner 1975: 7)

In 2014, one hundred years had passed since Zupan's birth, and so this anniversary rekindled interest in reading and studying his literary oeuvre, and it encouraged the author of this article to examine Kermauner's words and reread, rethink, and evaluate Zupan's role in the development of Slovene playwriting and theater.

This study is based on studies by the literary scholars Jože Koruza, Denis Poniz, Marjan Dolgan, Silvija Borovnik, and Malina Schmidt Snoj, whose analyses highlight the fact that Vitomil Zupan's dramatic works are thematically, stylistically, and formally diverse. According to Silvija Borovnik (2005: 41), every time readers read his plays, they receive the impression that they were written by completely different people because the texts are so different. In every play, Zupan dealt with a different problem, which was also followed by a completely different stylistic and expressive technique. Borovnik goes on to say that his plays "range from ideologically propagandistic Partisan one-act and longer plays to socially humanist plays to modern and modernistic plays with expressionist and avant-garde elements" (2005: 43). Zupan "is a distinctive, unique, and unconventional playwright. With his special conceptual features, and in part also formal characteristics, he never joined the predominant literary currents" (Koruza 1967: 133).

The second premise is the fact that Zupan lived in the WW II era and, from a literary perspective, in a period characterized by a transition from the predominant social realism, which started in the 1930s and lasted through WW II, and into the mid-1950s, when stronger influences of modern currents from the West, especially existentialism and theater of the absurd, began to influence Slovene plays. Kermauner (1975), who studied and interpreted Zupan's dramatic works most thoroughly, sees Zupan as the best representative of the transition from one macrostructure to another—that is, from social humanism to personalism and intimism. Zupan's plays were published with delays of several years, and some still have not been published or staged today; therefore, they had a lesser impact on the development of Slovene playwriting than they might have had if they had been published in a more timely manner. Jože Koruza reports that Zupan

was, at least during a certain phase, an important and defining phenomenon in the development of Slovene playwriting, which, however, did not result in any successors and imitators partly because of circumstances beyond his control and partly because new tendencies appeared during and after his time. (1967: 126)

Even though his dramatic works can be studied in the same chronological order as they were introduced to the public and influenced the development of Slovene literature, thus giving priority to reception, this study examines his plays based on the year they were created. This makes it possible to observe the development of the author's poetics more accurately, which is one of the main aims of this study: to present the path of development of Zupan's dramatic works and to point to areas that share conceptual and formal starting points, despite the diversity of his dramatic works that other researchers have highlighted.¹

The path of development of Vitomil Zupan's dramatic works

Zupan started writing plays in 1940, when he composed his first play, *Stvar Jurija Trajbasa* (Jurij Trajbas' thing),² which is a direct successor of Ivan Cankar's play *Kralj na Betajnovi* (The king of Betajnova). In terms of its conflict, motifs, themes, and structure, the play follows a realistic poetics with individual romantic and fantastic elements. Only a year after this, he wrote the play *Tretji zaplodek* (The third embryo), which is based on a completely different tradition, returns to expressionist features, and heralds the emergence of modernism. However, the text has remained in manuscript form and has not yet been staged. Zupan thus began creating his dramatic works from two completely different points of departure and with two completely different plays, neither of which corresponded to the predominant literary current at the time (i.e., social realism). Kermauner also classifies Zupan's first play as social humanism, whereas the second one can already be regarded as a personalist-intimist play:

In searching for the "original" text or the text that was the first to mark, delineate, and begin the new macrostructure of

¹ The study includes published and/or staged plays by Vitomil Zupan, but not dramatizations or adaptations of his prose, such as *Andante patetico: povest o panterju Dingu* (Andante patetico: The tale of Dingo, the panther, staged in 1944), *Črvi* (Worms, staged in 1970), *Levitán* (Leviathan, staged in 1985), *Noč brez oči* (A night without eyes, staged in 1958), nor material from Zupan's estate held by the Ljubljana National and University Library: a report by Boris Rozman (1993: 185–212) indicates that this material also includes several texts listed as "radio play," "TV play," "screenplay," or "play," but these labels are not entirely reliable and therefore this material should be checked and studied in the future. However, the study does include the unpublished play *Tretji zaplodek* (The third embryo), which premiered as a dramatic reading at the symposium *Razmaknite se, zidovi, človeškim sanjam* (Part, walls, and let human dreams enter) on 18 October 2014 as part of the forty-ninth Borštnik Theater Festival in Maribor.

² The play was published in 1947 and 1972, and it was staged in 1982.

intimism-naturalism-personalism in Slovene playwriting, we have finally reached the farthest “back” we could, closest to the “source”: among all of the Slovene plays known to date, Vitomil Zupan’s *Tretji zaplodek* is the oldest work of this type. (Kermauner 1975: 153)

This sheds completely new light on the course of development of his plays: Zupan did not wait until after WW II to begin writing intimist and personalist plays because both dramatic structures were already present at the very beginning of his creative career. Kermauner already highlighted this in the second part of *Pomenske spremembe v sodobni slovenski dramatik*. The play *Tretji zaplodek* was not mentioned by any of the researchers listed in the introduction and is not included in any of the overviews of Slovene plays, which definitely calls for an extensive study to properly contextualize this text within the literary system.

Considering that during this time Zupan also wrote the novel *Potovanje na konec pomladi* (A journey to the end of spring)—he wrote it as early as 1940, but it was not published until 1972—which already displays all of the features of modernism (i.e., a loose plot, non-linear narration, metaphysical nihilism, and an increased share of dialogue and descriptions), it can justifiably be concluded that, at the beginning of WW II, these three works ranked Zupan among the most modern Slovene writers, and the findings concerning his novel *Potovanje na konec pomladi* certainly also apply to the dramatic works created during that time; specifically,

Literary historians (e.g., A[leš] Berger, H[elga] Glušič, and A[lojzija] Zupan Sosič) have already expressed their regret several times over the fact that this novel was not published earlier (i.e., immediately when it was written) because it would have come into contact with contemporary European currents and more visibly contributed to the modernization of Slovene prose. (Zupan Sosič 2014: 174)

The play *Stvar Jurija Trajbasa* deviates from the basic principles of social realism; at first glance, social conflict is readily evident in this play (the exploitative caretaker of the castle on the one hand and the oppressed peasants on the other), but to Zupan the character Trajbas is not important as a social class representative, but as an individual who wants to climb the social ladder at any cost:

Life follows a course of lies and deception. If you want to live, you have to be strong and skillful... I will step on others... To me morality is my morality!... Now I’m the lord of Ostroge Castle. I have the authority and power; because the law is on my side, so is justice. (Zupan 1972: 20)

The sense of justice and social welfare is represented by the rebellious peasant Andrej Deževnik, the artist Simon Jalen, Trajbas's adult children Peter and Marcela, and Count Vilibald, who stand up to the exploitative Trajbas. Even in terms of form, the dynamic action with a prelude deviate from the principles of social realism, especially through the addition of romantic and fantastic elements represented by the castle, mysterious voices, and apparitions, such as a stranger in a black coat with a wooden leg.

The play *Tretji zaplodek*, subtitled *Številka osem in osemdeset* (Number eight and eighty), represents a deviation from realism. It originates from the expressionist tradition, which places the individual and his ethical renewal at the center, and already heralds the arrival of modernism; a restless seeking consciousness tries to provide answers to fundamental questions concerning birth, love, guilt, and death. The story then moves inside the individual, where opposing lines of forces are at work, manifested on the outside in the split or multiplied main character. This is Eight, who at the same time is also Jacob, Scorned, Look, Thought, and Voice, and it is only the combination of all of them that makes up a person as a whole, displaying his multilayered relationship to the world. "Only now has it become clear that Jacob is completely the same as Eight. That is Eight to begin with. Are there two Eights?" (Zupan 1941: 30). Eight represents the dark side and is characterized by lust and envy, but also by courage and ingenuity, whereas Jacob is his light side, committed to truth, beauty, and pure love.³

The play *Tretji zaplodek* has no resolution or clear plot; the plot merely represents some sort of a framework: Eight is chasing Jacob, using pretty Ogana as bait. Ogana becomes his victim, which is why Eight ends up in prison, where, with the images and stories from his life running through his head, he wonders which way is the right one. The reader learns that he was so named because he was born on 8 January as the third embryo and the result of sin; in the end, he dies in his prison cell as prisoner *eight and eighty*. Suggestive, visually effective metaphors (the circus, Kala the lioness, gushing blood, the laws of the character Reka, numerous intertwined voices, and so on) are prominent. The use of light, colors, music, extensive didascalia, and epicization elements indicate the legacy of German expressionist, experimental one-act plays or avant-gardism in general. The work contains a number of autobiographical elements and,

³ Zupan also used the theme of a split personality several times in his novels, such as in *Potovanje na konec pomladi*, *Menuet za kitaro* (*Minuet for Guitar*), and *Igra s hudičevim repom* (*Playing with the devil's tail*), in order to depict the multilayered relationship to the world, which is an important and original element in his poetics as a writer.

with the following words spoken in the prison, Eight prophetically predicts Zupan's fate:

How strange are the paths: the paths that last an entire life and the paths measuring five steps from the window to the door with its little window. *Pacing up and down*. A day is a horizontal scratched line on the wall, a month a vertical one, and life is a scratched wall. There are two types of solitude: one is when you run away from people, and another is when people leave you. Only the second one is true solitude. (Zupan 1941: 42)

WW II most likely cut into the natural creative development of Zupan's dramatic works because, through his Partisan agitprops, such as the one-act plays *Jelenov žleb*, *Tri zaostale ure* (Three clocks running slow), *Punt* (The Uprising), and *Aki*, and the three-act play *Rojstvo v nevihti* (Birth in the storm),⁴ the author prioritized propaganda writing (in order to spread the ideas of the Partisan war effort) over aesthetics. However, according to Marjan Dolgan, even though Zupan was aware that he was writing propaganda plays, it was precisely these plays that strengthened his reputation as a talented and even meritorious Partisan author; they were relatively well received and even in them one cannot overlook tiny traces of his later, unique postwar literary world (Dolgan 1993: 62). The dramatic three-part reportage *Rojstvo v nevihti* is the apex of Zupan's Partisan plays; Kermauner described it as the best Partisan play ever—even though, as he noted, Matej Bor's play *Raztrganci* (False flaggers) received greater acclaim (Kermauner 1975: 7).

Even though Zupan received the Prešeren Award (i.e., Slovenia's highest recognition) in 1947, the following year the authorities sentenced him to eighteen years imprisonment (he then spent six and a half in prison) for immorality, attempted rape, and disclosure of state secrets. The prosecutor also cited Zupan's prewar play *Svar Jurija Trajbasa*, claiming that it demonstrated the defendant's depravity and political hostility.⁵ While in jail, Zupan wrote the play *Ladja brez imena* (A ship with no name), followed by the plays *Aleksander praznih rok* (Alexander empty-handed)

⁴ All four one-act plays were created in 1944, during WW II, and were also staged at that time by the Slovene National Theater in liberated territory in Črnomelj. The three-act play *Rojstvo v nevihti* was created at that same time and was staged in 1945, after the war had ended. Zupan received the Prešeren Award for it in 1947 (the highest recognition for cultural achievement, which was established that same year).

⁵ With his bohemian lifestyle and unique views of the world, Zupan was not favored by the new authorities at all, which is why they had him arrested in August 1948. The developments of that time are described in detail by Aleš Gabrič (2014) in his article "Greh in kazen" (Sin and punishment).

and *Angeli, ljudje, živali* (Angels, people, animals; originally entitled *Barbara Nives*). All three reflect on fundamental existential issues—on how to live and what is good and bad in a man, on the individual's moral responsibility, and on metaphysical categories, such as happiness, love, freedom, truth, beauty, hope, loyalty, and guilt, as well as on the meaning of dreams and memories. Because of their similar philosophical premises, Kermauner combined these three plays into a philosophical triptych (1975: 74). This was created towards the end of the predominant socialist realism current and continued the ideas presented in *Tretji zaplodek*.

Ladja brez imena is Zupan's most complex play. It was created as early as 1953, but it was published only much later on, in 1972, and still has not been staged to this day, even though both Kermauner (1975: 45) and later on Tomaž Toporišič (1993: 70) highlighted its qualities in their studies. The play deviates entirely from the characteristics of early 1950s Slovene plays and represents a complete shift from realism and the ideology of Partisan agitprops. Allegory and metaphor, poetic language, the tendency to discover a holistic truth about the world, and the reference to Biblical tradition are foregrounded. The play is set on a ship, which is a microcosm that mirrors the features of the macrocosm. Based on all of these features, it can be characterized as a predecessor of poetic plays. This three-act play is divided into many tableaux and scenes, the dramatic action is complemented by sung interludes (most frequently recitatives accompanied by guitar), and it features more than thirty characters, with characters named Rajnik, Tanata, Hudič, Babilonka, Java, Angel, and Atlant at the forefront, representing various life principles. At the beginning of the play, Angel utters the following declaration: "Let's try and live *well*" (Zupan 1972: 15), and the events that follow make the characters face tests in which they must choose between good and bad, whereby Zupan affirms life throughout.

The next text from this triptych is the play *Aleksander praznih rok*,⁶ written in 1954, in which the author poses similar moral questions, but this time from the viewpoint of a historical figure; however, he is not interested in this figure's biography and historical role, but he portrays him as someone at the peak of his glory and power, strong and almighty, yet who despite his divinity is still only human, wondering about happiness, truth, justice, and love, and imbued with the realization that violence and evil do not bring peace to a person and that success and victory do not go hand in hand with satisfaction and kindness, nor do the ruler's duties go hand in hand with freedom. A diametrically opposite principle is represented by the philosopher Diogenes, who renounced everything and is living in a barrel; however, for Zupan this too is not the right solution because in this way Diogenes also gave up his dreams and life. In contrast

⁶ This play was published in a magazine in four parts between 1960 and 1962, and was staged in 1961 and 1971.

to the highly poetic and metaphorical language used in *Ladja brez imena*, Zupan discusses the serious topic of Alexander the Great with humor; he creates an ironic distance between high and low, official and common, sophisticated and folk, and projects it onto the linguistic level because the text is a combination of standard language and dialect.

Angeli, ljudje, živali was created in 1955⁷ and continues Zupan's reflections on happiness, and the good and evil in a person (here he uses the metaphor of an angel and animal, in which man is a combination of both). The protagonist is the actress Barbara Nives, who is married to the painter Damjan Misija and afterwards to the physician Gregor Rot. She ends up in a hospital due to a car accident (a suicide attempt), and there the events and people, phantoms, and hallucinations from her life run through her mind. Accordingly, this play has a distinctively open structure, with numerous leaps in time and space. Barbara believes that someday people will lead a better, more just, and freer life, and that people will be kinder to one another. Her vision is personified by Boris, an artist and a pianist, and in general art plays a positive role in the text, representing the path of discovering the good. *Ladja brez imena* poses questions about fundamental philosophical and metaphysical categories allegorically and *Aleksander praznih rok* poses these questions through the perspective of a historical figure, whereas *Angeli, ljudje, živali* places an intimate story of individuals and their interpersonal relationships and actions at the forefront.

Zupan's playwriting was thus constantly developing until 1955; in the following decades he largely wrote prose fiction. He rarely wrote plays, which was at least partly due to both the reservations of contemporary criticism and the fact that his plays were neither published nor staged. In 1962, he wrote the comedy *Če denar pade na skalo* (If money falls on a rock),⁸ which he dubbed a humorous play without emotions. The protagonist, the fortuneteller Babaruha, is a female version of Mephistopheles, who performs a special experiment: after she inherits an enormous sum of money, she throws handfuls of banknotes through the window as a sign of charity and kindness and enjoys watching the fights and brawls caused by human greed. This triggers an increasing need in people for shopping and spending money, with new desires constantly springing up, and a seemingly endless consumerist mechanism is established. With her gifts and loans, Babaruha enslaves people and indirectly forces them into crime, through which she seeks her revenge. However, her project falls through: "I thought the world hated and persecuted theft. But—it gets used to it" (Zupan 1962: 62). In the end, a positive value system is established again because it turns out that Babaruha

⁷ This play was published in 1974 and staged in 1962.

⁸ This text has remained in its manuscript form, but the comedy was staged in 1963.

cannot buy their souls; her closest assistants find no sense in what she is doing and want to return to their daily lives. Babaruha throws a big pile of money into the fire and the money as well as Babaruha herself disappear in the smoke. As in a typical comedy, the world regains its balance, and love and an honest life win. Thus, Jože Koruza also describes this text as a moralistic parable (1967: 133), but the ending remains ambiguous: "But the smell of money remained..." (Zupan 1962: 75).

In 1971, Zupan wrote the play *Bele rakete lete na Amsterdam* (White rockets fly towards Amsterdam),⁹ which won an anonymous Yugoslav theater competition of 126 texts. This is why the play was staged an unprecedented four times in 1972, which had an exceptional impact in Yugoslav theater circles (Kreft 2014: 308). As can be seen from the analysis above, Zupan was fond of extensive and variegated stories involving many characters, whereas here he shaped the dramatic action with great minimalism; the entire play is composed of a single emotionally and psychologically intense event with distinctively psychologically motivated characters. The unity of place, time, and action, the "chamber ensemble" of only three people and their intimate conflicts, without a historical framework, are definitely a novelty in Zupan's playwriting. In addition, traces of the "modern weary man" appear here for the first time within Zupan's body of dramatic works: this man is Brumen, a journalist and pop song writer (after whom the play is also named) accustomed to the comfort of a middle-class life, who wants to spice up his life and escape loneliness by inviting the intellectually and socially inferior night watchman Tonič for a drink. They are joined by Brumen's girlfriend Lela, who erotically overwhelms Tonič and sexually provokes him, while she and Brumen verbally insult and humiliate one another. Fueled by the alcohol, the tension between the three increases and it reaches a climax when Tonič rapes Lela, who in turn grabs Tonič's service pistol and points it first at him and then at Brumen: when she senses that Brumen is scared to death, she stops, sees her life in a completely new light, and decides to leave Brumen. Then they all go their separate ways. To Brumen's question of whether she really meant to shoot, Lela replies:

I don't know. Maybe I did. You tell yourself something—and then you suddenly see the opportunities you wouldn't see before. It's definitely good that it ended the way it did. Let's move on—and then we part forever. *Puts on her dress and gets up.* You were right when you said that one knows very little about what's actually inside him, at the bottom ...

⁹ The play was published in 1973 and it was staged in 1972 in four different theaters across Yugoslavia (Nova Gorica, Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš), as well as in Kranj in 1986.

Everyone has some kind of beast inside, and some tame it, others don't... (Zupan 1973a: 42–43)

Zupan is interested throughout in the essence of a person, what lies at the bottom, in discovering various layers or fault lines within a person, in the ambivalence hiding in a person; this is also what Lela establishes in the end—in an extreme, unforeseen situation, she comes to see her life from a new perspective. In terms of its message, despite the minimalism and the radical nature of the situation, this text is a purified version of the play *Angeli, ljudje, živali*, and Lela is an updated version of Barbara Nives; only her erotic-sexual dimension is even more pronounced. However, in terms of eroticism, in general Zupan is significantly more reserved in his plays than in his prose.

The different fault lines within a person also appear in a new manner in the play *Preobrazbe brez poti nazaj* (Transformations with no return) published in 1973, which is manifested at both the conceptual level and the level of dramatic form. This text no longer has a clear dramatic structure and its protagonist is the SELF and its fleeting feelings, ideas, emotions, and thoughts; the dramatic action is thus created by the internal impulses within the SELF, which run between dreams and wakefulness, life and death, physics and metaphysics, and numerous reflections on the essence and meaning of life, the existence, transition, and transience of everything, and the meaning of pain, fear, death, nothing, and love. Even though the text has a dramatic form, which is indicated by being broken down into roles, and the main and side texts, and individual acts and scenes are replaced by a division into the first, second, third, and fourth levels, Zupan writes the following at the end: “The end. First copy. Not for staging” (Zupan 1973b: 202). Perhaps this was why this text has not been included in any of the literary-historical overviews of Slovene dramatic works and has also remained unnoticed in theater studies. In any case, this text definitely shows that the author was not interested in its staging potential, but used the dramatic form as the medium within which he was able to most easily express the voices, memories, associations, and reflections running through a person’s consciousness. In many aspects, this text is similar to *Treji zaplodek* because it includes many autobiographic facts and, similarly, calls for more thorough study.

A break or radicalization in the development of Zupan’s dramatic works is indicated by the play *Zapiski o sistemu* (Notes on the system), written in 1974,¹⁰ in which one can witness the breakup of the fable, dramatic characters, and language. *Zapiski o sistemu* is characterized by a completely altered relationship to language: de-semantized and emptied language; *logos* is no longer at the forefront, but instead the sound and

¹⁰ This play was published in a magazine in 1975 and staged in 1979.

rhythm of the words, jocular playfulness, and the juxtaposition of various types of speech and language varieties of everyday as well as sociopolitical life, which transition into one another without any real cause and effect, forming a playful and elusive hybrid. Or, as the director of this play, Janez Pipan, argues in the article “Zapiski o svobodi” (Notes on freedom), *Zapiski o sistemu* represents material

...that is rough and unrefined—consisting of many fictions, and sociohistorical realities on top of that—which in the play do not cross their paths and are not juxtaposed following a clear ordering principle, but accumulate and are deposited one on top of another like sediments washed down by a flash flood, clogging into a solid mass in some places, whereas in others they part and flee across the edges of fiction into external, non-literary, and non-theatrical realities. (Pipan 2014: 317)

The play's framework is formed by conversations between four scientists working at an institute—the institute represents a system or an institution with its entire bureaucratic apparatus and is being supervised by a great, invisible boss—that study the sexual life of lamias and are becoming increasingly like them. *Zapiski o sistemu* is Zupan's most modern text: unconventional, free, resembling a screenplay, humorous, sarcastic, and ironic, but with the awareness of the power every system, including the democratic one, has over an individual. When the play was written, Kermauner (1976: 222) wrote of “a new tone in Slovene playwriting. Carnism with self-parody. Spiritual sexism. Humorization of marginal human existence.” However, the author that had been characterized throughout by his faith in language and words, and a desire to understand and talk about things, the author who was a master of language variety, concluded his path as a playwright with protagonists that remain expressionless and wordless:

Era: It feels so good, becoming a lamia...

Absyr: I'm going to become one, too...

Era: Yes, you, too... Then our mouths will shut forever... and everything will remain expressionless, wordless... just like it is, like it's supposed to be... (Zupan 1975: 144)

An attempt at synthesis

To sum up all of the above in a somewhat schematic manner, the path of development of Zupan's dramatic works can be observed in three stages. The first stage begins in 1940 with his play *Stvar Jurija Trajbasa* and continues with his Partisan agitprops, reaching its peak in the play *Rojstvo v nevihti*, which is characterized by commitment to realism, a clear

plot, and the traditional dramatic form. The second stage begins in 1941 with the play *Tretji zaplodek*, continues after the war with his philosophical triptych, and concludes with the sharper and in many aspects new play *Bele rakete lete na Amsterdam* and the formally innovative play *Preobrazbe brez poti nazaj*. This group is composed of extremely diverse texts in terms of genre, but what they all have in common is that they loosen the traditional dramatic form with leaps in time and space, and a dynamic story that is fragmentary in places. At the conceptual level, these texts are linked by the author's persistence with his own moral philosophy and efforts to preserve the sense of the world and man, his portrayal of exacerbated existential situations, in which the protagonist must decide between good and evil, and his desire to understand and talk about things, and hence his faith in language. Delving into a person and the different, even opposing views and actions inside a person are most pronounced at both the level of content and form in the plays *Tretji zaplodek* and *Preobrazbe brez poti nazaj*, two exceptionally modern texts that still await a more detailed analysis. In terms of conceptual and thematic elements, and the use of language, *Preobrazbe brez poti nazaj* still belongs to the second stage, whereas in terms of its dramatic form it already heralds the next developmental stage. The third stage is represented by the play *Zapiski o sistemu*, in which one witnesses the breakup of the fable and the dramatic characters, and especially an altered relationship to language; the faith in language is replaced by free play with language and a juxtaposition of various types of speech and language varieties, and forms of everyday and sociopolitical life.

Zupan sees playwriting as a place where he can reflect on things and juxtapose various life principles through dramatic characters. His protagonists are always individualists or individuals; collectivism is alien to him. He constantly explores the essence of a person, in what lies at the bottom, the ambivalence inside the person, his dark and light sides, and the angel and the animal, and so he portrays existentially extremely aggravated situations in which the protagonist must decide between good and evil, between desire and power. Or, as Angel says in the play *Ladja brez imena*:

Inside him, a man has the power of desire, which is bad, and the power of will, which is good. When he opts for destruction, he defeats the good power. When he follows his desire against his will, he falls into trouble, and when he follows his will against his desire, he rises above himself. He is happy when his desire and will are the same and achieve fulfillment together. (Zupan 1972: 100)

In this sense, Zupan is an existentialist; a person decides on his own how to act: "Specifically, the morality of Zupan's heroes does not originate from the institution of the Church, God, the afterlife, and any other

attributes of Christian dogma. It originates from the person himself, from his consciousness" (Toporišič 1993: 72).

In conclusion, similarities in motifs in the plays also deserve attention. Specifically, detailed reading shows that Zupan's dramatic works are also linked by various motif fragments that are repeated and passed from one text to another or vary between them. Pistols and clouds occupy the central place among them. Zupan surprisingly often uses firearms or other types of weapons in his plays, which he introduces in a variety of ways: Trajbas commits two murders using a dagger and a pistol, Ogana shoots herself with a pistol, rifles are common in his Partisan plays, Alexander the Great and his soldiers use spears and swords in their conquests, the painter Misija's still life is composed of bombs, pistols, swords, and bayonets alongside stuffed pigeons, Babaruha watches over her money and protects it from burglars using a hunting rifle, and the night watchman Tonič uses a service pistol. The question that arises here is what function the weapons play in Zupan's dramatic works: are they a symbol of power and dominance, an expression of a desire to test exciting life situations, or an echo of Zupan's biography, considering that he owned a gun himself and was affected his whole life by an incident in which he played Russian roulette with a friend and ended up killing him. Even though one can agree with all of these reasons, the use of weapons is also closely connected with the structure of the plays themselves. As described above, in his plays Zupan explores the essence of a person, which is disclosed only in extremely aggravated existential situations, or as Rot says in the play *Angeli, ljudje, živali*:

Many people don't know their essence—unless they find themselves in completely unexpected situations, where they have to think about their characteristics and are forced to discover their essence... People are seeking their true selves their entire life, and the majority achieve only little success doing it. (Zupan 1972: 25–26)

A pointed gun is one of these extreme existential situations, an unexpected entanglement, in which the protagonists come to see their essence and their faces from new perspectives; such a situation usually leads to a changed life position and even to redemption.

Clouds play an altogether different role. Specifically, in Zupan's dramatic works one rarely encounters feelings of anxiety, resignation, entrapment, and nihilism because the author constantly seeks to preserve the meaning of the world and man. The motif of clouds appears several times; the protagonists stare into the clouds, connecting them with joy, longing, faith, and dreams. The clouds appear most intensely, as many as seven times, in the play *Ladja brez imena*, where they also frame the beginning and end of the play. The character Rajnik says:

This is how I once lay in jail along the Bay of God's Name, staring at the clouds, day after day, year after year, until they invisibly sucked me in. My weightless dreams turned into clouds. I swam high in the blue sky above the whitish-gray limestone rocks sharp as knives, falling down into the warm foaming waves. I became creation and disintegration, course and exchange, passion and ease, escape and fatality. (Zupan 1972: 142)

Through his oeuvre, the clouds are displayed as a symbol of something essential in a person's life; they represent transience, change, and transition, but not finality. The clouds (and dreams and memories play a similar role) maintain one's faith in life, the meaning of life, and drive a person forward to tear down walls and follow dreams.¹¹ Hence, the clouds and pistols are not only a type of a spectacular addition, but are very closely connected with Zupan's conception of the world and humans' place in it, as traced here through his dramatic oeuvre.

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¹¹ Clouds and pistols also appear in Zupan's prose, but there these two motifs are sporadic and do not have a structural function.

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POVZETEK**DRAMATIKA VITOMILA ZUPANA: POSKUS SINTEZE**

Slovenska literarna veda opredeljuje Vitomila Zupana kot samosvojega avtorja, ki ni sledil prevladujočim literarnim tokovom, njegov dramski opus pa je označen kot raznovrsten po vsebinski in oblikovni plati. Pričujoča razprava prikaže dramski opus Vitomila Zupana v razvojnem loku v treh fazah in opozori na tista mesta, ki kažejo na skupna idejna in formalna izhodišča, to so avtorjevo vztrajanje pri lastni moralni filozofiji in prizadevanje po ohranitvi smisla sveta in človeka, prikazovanje skrajno zaostrenih bivanjskih situacij, v katerih se dramska oseba odloča med dobrim in zlim, rahljanje tradicionalne dramske forme s časovnimi in prostorskimi preskoki ter razgibano, mestoma fragmentarno zgodbo, vera v jezik in umetnost ter s tem povezana želja po razumevanju, oblaki in pištole pa so tisti motivni drobc, ki dobivajo simbolne razsežnosti odločilnega in usodnega.