

LITERATURE AGAINST THE POLITICS OF OBLIVION

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It is typical of the post-modern epoch that we are facing a disjunction of the principles of economics, culture and politics, as Daniel Bell states.¹ The problem with socialism, however, is that this stage has not yet been achieved. The decisive moment in socialism is not the domination of the development of economics, as is the case in corporate capitalism, which is also a part of the modern era, but the domination of the development of politics. Within the framework of politics as a dominant model of social and cultural life, literature must struggle for an autonomous status in which aesthetic norms will depend not on the political, but on the artistic value-sphere. To establish its own rules, literature should represent those forces that threaten the establishment of autonomous rules; when analyzing the peace treaty between the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians, Thucydides based his explanation of autonomy on the same principle. These forces are in the possession of the party in power which, by abolishing the distinction between civil society and political state, makes an attempt to abolish all conflict. Yet, due to fact that the duality between *citoyen* (public citizen) and *bourgeois* (private egotist) is abolished, many conflicts have been adjusted according to a political criterion. In socialist regimes, pluralism of criteria has vanished, and likewise the freedom of choice: the modern *either-or* is thus the only *modus vivendi*, since there are still no social conditions which would be suitable for the post-modern *and-and* principle.

There is no such thing as what de Tocqueville called "the independent social eye,"² which would be able to control the activity of the authorities from below. At the same time, socialism in its post-totalitarian form diverges from its former techniques—mass bloodshed, the Gulag archipelago, the mobilization of workers, police oppression. It relies on the institutionalization of the "lie as the social order" (Kafka), and on political immobilization, i.e., the passivity of citizens who are not disturbed if they do not interfere with the activities of the authorities and if they give free rein to the authorities and to their unchecked disposition of people's lives.

Literature has not agreed upon the parameters within which formal techniques, styles and methods may be examined with the proviso that the ruling ideology is not to be artistically described and analyzed; literature has not yet accepted this taboo. What represents a taboo for literature which confines itself to the experimentalist "ivory tower," is the analysis of social conditions and of the political terrorism of power: the relative freedom of literature of this kind is the 'real' freedom which, according to party dictates, must inevitably have a different outlook from the 'formal' freedom of western democracies. Yet such a freedom is a freedom *an sich*, not a freedom *für sich*; in other words it is—as Hegel states—freedom without the form of freedom. The essence of freedom is that the content itself chooses its own specific form, regardless of whether such a decision is politically acceptable.

The 'ideological contract' has been, so to speak, subconsciously signed by the authors of formalistic experimental texts. Power has always been most efficiently defied by the literature of documentation, the literature about the drastic experiences of prisoners and convicts. This is sometimes referred to as 'the literature of Goli otok,' an island that has become a metaphor for all political prisons in Yugoslavia.³

Documentary novels of this kind in Slovenia were initiated by Branko Hofman, Igor Torkar, and Vitomil Zupan.⁴ Undoubtedly, Zupan's *Levitán* is artistically the most haunt-

ing and moving of the three. Zupan has always been an *enfant terrible* in Slovene culture—a prewar radical, a partisan, an adventurer, a polyglot, an writer of eruptive erotic power. An analysis of *Levitan* should prove that fiction is able to impart as much as any number of theoretical essays in cases where the tyranny and ruthlessness of ‘barbarism with a human face’ ought to be revealed.

Zupan’s *Levitan*, a ‘novel which may as well not be a novel,’ is part of a trilogy, following *Menuet za kitaro* and *Komedija človeškega tkiva*⁵: the whole cycle introduces a unique stance of anarchistic liberalism that has nothing to do with the ideology of moralistic humanism.

Zupan deserves praise for establishing previously-rejected individualism in the field of culture, and pitting it against the mass tradition. In the post-totalitarian period, which is still in need of a scapegoat, this is only an additional winning card in the hands of Zupan’s individualistic heroes. It is due, in particular, to their enforced marginal status that they have so much to say. The function of the marginal discourse is not to provide an appropriate explanation of the spiritual essence of Power, but rather to concentrate on its internal mechanisms in order to disclose its insufficiency and—even worse—its obscenity. The brutal directness that serves to reveal the lies of the authoritative Arcadia compels Zupan to disregard the use of tactful politeness; he confronts the authoritative *doxa* with individualistic skepticism, and dissects the ruling hypocrisy with the noble skill of witticism. The haughtiness of an individual against the boundless perversity of Power—this is the leitmotif of Zupan’s trilogy. His epistemology inclines toward a fascination with reality, with life, with “the real that always comes back to the same position” (Lacan), for it can not be symbolized or incorporated into the course of the narrative. The most important condition to be fulfilled in writing is, for Zupan, the dreadful extent of reality. This is, at the same time, also a way of preserving one’s faithfulness to writing: to write incessantly, quickly, and well.

What makes *Levitan* so surprising is its style of brutal journalism, in which the most important element is the impact rather than the stylistic figure. Zupan’s style is astonishingly smooth, flowing, and flexible; although it flirts with the effects of everyday speech, it remains unaffected by mannerism. His style is not the accomplishment of a sophisticated élitist literature, but it never surrenders to the banal pattern: it does not blabber like a carefree Babel, nor does it neglect narrative structures. Zupan is not interested in making an explicit political point, though the political absurdities are artistically described. He ignores the sociology of taste since he is relying on the sense of extremes; and in this respect Zupan has become, as an *auteur*, synonymous with the use of excesses in literature. It is in his use of the minimal stylistic instruments that the subversive potential can be found, and this is what makes the book unique in its own way: there is the passion of cataloguing, classifying, documenting, and so forth. From this perspective *Levitan* is perhaps the first truly convincing presentation of a political anatomy of the spirit, within which the criterion of authoritative wilfulness is expressed by the number of years one must spend in jail for just minor offences. *Levitan* reveals a wide spectrum of ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ political delinquency which belongs to a different level from the politically-indifferent ‘ordinary crime:’ unlike nowadays, when ‘the richness of the concrete’ distinction between the radicals and the étatists, between the conservatives and the extreme leftists, is lost inside an undefined Enemy . . . when, in fact, everyone is in the same boat.

If therefore criminals are essentially different from political delinquents, they may enrol in some kind of ‘school of prison skills;’ *Levitan*, the hero of the book, of his own free will and belief, enrolls in this school too. There is however a diametrical difference between

this penal university and the university of prewar Mitrovica, the generator of communists.⁶ Mitrovica cherished painful theoretical work, and the study of literature; Levitan's jail provides a practical knowledge of petty crimes. Mitrovica witnessed the struggle of communist factions for the ruling positions; in Levitan's jail, the superficial conflicts and clashes between the thieves remind us of Jean Genet. We are thus faced with a decisive watershed: the theoretical character of the Communist 'university' in Mitrovica exposes the mass extent of politics, while the practical scope of Zupan's criminals' skills discloses an everyday pragmatism contained in the treasure-house of the deceivers' guerilla warfare. As a matter of fact, Jakob Levitan is instructed by experts in ordinary crimes: burglary, robbery, and so on. This is the socializing component of crime as such.

The penal university of applied sciences is of an existentialistic character. Prisoners, as 'new mutants' (Leslie Fiedler), learn, for instance, how to light a cigarette despite having their hands tied. Jail-inspired imagination and activity are added to the Promethean allegory!

Levitan does however also tell us facts about the hero's abilities within the scope of the prison skills: that is, how to write under circumstances in which writing becomes not just an asocial activity, but even madness. Jakob Levitan's perspective is that of a writer whose extraordinary status provides him with a special kind of privilege: the fact that he writes in jail, the enclave of outcasts, makes him an intellectual shaman, who evokes ambivalent attitudes in other prisoners. This is another proof of the asocial character of writing, confirming at the same time that the inferno of a prison guarantees a wonderful, radical prose (Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Wilde, Villon, Genet . . .)

The textual strategy of *Levitan* comprises the fascination achieved through extremes, through unusual experiences, through pleonasm: the writer does not actually employ direct criticism of revolutionary terror, but shrewdly reveals its mechanisms, the integral form of which is clearly displayed only through the montage of heterogeneous elements, events, and interrelated destinies. The 'ecological' ambition of a revolution, which tries to free itself of all alien elements, becomes obvious and is demystified in this collection of human tragedies and farces. In this light, a prison becomes (let us paraphrase Foucault) "a condensed symbol of that 'police' that considers itself the civilian equivalent of religion." This is why it so perseveringly maintains discipline and indoctrination. Jail is our history, a part of our present, and a shadow over our future.

If, in *Levitan*, we are to look for some general metaphor in common demand, the following can be suggested: sexuality is here the unbearable mixture of threat, obsession by taboo, and of pleasure as well, bearing a condensed symptom of the symbolic tyranny by Power. Taking sexuality as the incarnation of a subservient world truth, we may understand the real policy of Power (*vulgaria eloquentia*) to be contained in the statement: "Screw them, or they'll screw you!"

It is not accidental that, despite the homosexuality of the prisoners, Levitan is never the passive partner in an act, and by some mysterious relapse the norms of antique homosexuality reappear: the real shame is to be a passive sexual partner, whereas the act itself brings no shame. The implications of sexuality are quite strong, as the hero was imprisoned in the first place because of his suspected 'immorality', i.e., sexual extravagances. Here the policy of subjectivity makes a decisive stand against Power, in the arena where its policy is actually being devised. Power's dialectics of love and hate may be unmasked if we point to the sexual myth, the sexual fantasy which constitutes the metaphysical background of Power. Its libidinous economy is constituted through the keepers of security: the wardens, the interrogators and others, who are in fact the incarnation of a kind of contradictory unity,

within which Power emerges from its "simultaneous inability and lack of sex. There is a father, but a castrated one."⁸ On this level, therefore, the degree of sexual permissiveness represents a democratic social structure, which quickly becomes obvious if we compare western democracies and the régimes of real socialism with respect to their treatment of sexuality, pornography, homosexuality, and so on.

The question: "Should Zupan's work be burned?" is asked in the voice of oppressive political despotism: in a society where books are burned and writers prosecuted, there is no trace of democracy.

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NOTES

- * Revised version of paper presented at the 19th AAASS Annual Convention, Boston MA, November 1987.
- 1. See Bell's classic *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York NY: Basic Books, 1976).
- 2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, transl. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Doubleday, 1969).
- 3. For an extensive explanation of "Goli otok" in literature, see Oskar Gruenwald, "Yugoslav camp literature: Rediscovering the ghost of a nation's past-present-future," *Slavic Review* 46. 3-4 (1987) 513-528. In this good overview of the subject, some of the socio-historical background for the proper understanding of Zupan's novels is also presented, although Zupan is systematically mis-spelled as Župan.
- 4. Branko Hofman, *Noč do jutra* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1981); Igor Torkar, *Umiranje na obroke* (Ljubljana/Zagreb/Murska Sobota: Cankarjeva založba/Globus/Pomurska založba, 1984); Vitomil Zupan, *Levitan* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1982).
- 5. *Menuet za kitaro* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1975) and *Komedija človeškega tkiva* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1980).
- 6. The largest pre-war prison in Yugoslavia was located in Sremska Mitrovica, a small town in Serbia. For the most part, communists with lengthy sentences were sent there. The Communist party succeeded in establishing a "Red University", surprisingly well-furnished with books, translations, and so on, a system of courses of political economy, the history of the workers' movement, the basic concepts of dialectal materialism, and other relevant subjects that would be useful for future activist work outside the prison. These courses were taught by eminent party leaders such as Moša Pijade and Ognjen Prica. See "Intervju z Milanom Apihom," *Nova revija* 3/4 (1980): 374.
- 7. Michel Foucault. *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), transl. R. Howard, *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York NY: Pantheon Books, 1965.
- 8. Pierre Legendre, *L'amour du censor* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

POVZETEK

LITERATURA PROTI POLITIKI POZABLJENJA

Spis osvetluje fenomen zapora v romanu Levitan (1982) Vitomila Zupana. Umesti ga v tradicijo zaporniške literature (Dostojevski, Villon, Genet, itd.), vendar opozarja na drugačen politični kontekst. Levitan sicer je izpoved individualnega zapornika, hkrati pa razkriva tudi brutalnost in brezobzirnost represivnega stalinističnega sistema v povojni Jugoslaviji. Kot paradigmatično delo "književnosti Golega otoka" roman razpira usodo oporečnikov in nasprotnikov režima, vendar brez direktne politične kritike. Mnogo učinkovitejšo kritiko roman doseže s pomočjo posebnih mehanizmov literarne reprezentacije, v katerih igra pomembno vlogo erotika. Le-ta omogoča junaku ohranitev človeške identitete, istočasno pa deluje subverzivno glede na ustaljeni ideološko-moralni kodeks. Erotični ekstremizem je namreč ravno tako kot politični ekstremizem problematičen za oblast, v ozadju katere leži mit o kastriranem očetu.