

JANKO LAVRIN: SLOVENE INTELLECTUAL AMBASSADOR

Janja Žitnik

*Jaz hočem življenja, jaz hočem življenja,
izpiti njegovo čem čašo do dna.*

Janko Lavrin wrote these lines when he was nineteen. During the following eight decades of his life, he fully accomplished this youthful, ambitious intention. He was an intellectual adventurer, a curious wanderer roaming from one exciting country to the next, from one charmingly and yet somehow painfully attractive literary world to another. He wanted to experience turbulent historical events in which human passions reach their climax, and this he did. He likewise sought and managed to experience the passions raging across the scenery of the greatest literary masterpieces of Europe. Lavrin shared the tears and laughter of their literary heroes and went further, to explore the most hidden chambers of the troubled souls of their famous authors. His whole life was a thrilling adventure—emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—and so, too, his work.

Eleven years ago, just before Lavrin's hundredth birthday, instead of jubilee articles and letters of congratulation, Slovene magazines and newspapers carried notices of his death. In 1996 the tenth anniversary of his death passed almost unnoticed. Janko Lavrin, literary historian and critic, editor and essayist, and to some extent also a poet and writer, nonetheless remains in our minds as one of those prewar Slovene emigrant intellectuals who achieved world renown in their chosen field in a new homeland.

This article briefly reviews Lavrin's life and work in the field of literary criticism as background to his own creative writing, on which little has been published. The last part of the paper examines the question of Lavrin's intriguing personality, which is at least partly revealed in his creative writing and critical method.

Janko Lavrin was born on 10 February 1887 on a wealthy farm in the village of Krupa near Semič in Bela Krajina. By the age of six he was an orphan. His guardians found tenants for the farm he inherited but the young heir received no share of the income. His relatives exploited him; his was a difficult childhood.¹

¹ Letter from Janko Lavrin to Rado L. Lenček, 27 January 1985; Rado L. Lenček. "From Correspondence with Janko Lavrin," *Slovene Studies*

From 1899 to 1907, he attended grammar schools, first in Novo Mesto, and then, from 1905, in Sušak.² Even at school he suffered financial hardship and had to support himself by giving lessons. Since he had nursed for some time a dislike of Austrian political hegemony, he decided that after finishing school he would leave the country and continue his education abroad. In 1908 he set off for St. Petersburg, where he had some friends. There he completed a course in Slavonic studies. He resolved to expand his knowledge by further study at universities in Scandinavia and Paris. During this time he travelled over almost all of Europe (partly as a war correspondent for the largest Russian daily newspaper *Novoe vremia*) and part of Asia. In this way Lavrin succeeded in broadening his literary horizons, getting to know diverse cultural environments and becoming familiar with various systems of higher education, all of which had an important influence on his later pedagogical and academic work.³

Shortly after arriving in St. Petersburg, he took the post of co-editor of the monthly publication *Slavianskii mir* (*Slavic World*), which appeared somewhat irregularly between December 1908 and May 1911. His own articles he signed with the pseudonym Lev Savin, or with the initials L.S. or I.G.L. The magazine carried articles on Slavic culture and translations of works by other Slavic writers, including figures from the Slovene *moderna* movement (most notably Ivan Cankar).⁴ In 1912–13 Lavrin and the poet Sergei Gorodetskii published the literary anthology *Veles*, which, in addition to literary contributions from leading Russian symbolists such as Andrei Belyi, Viacheslav Ivanov, and Alexei Remizov,⁵ included translations of works by authors from other Slavic countries.

He spent the years 1915 to 1917 in the Balkans, where the editors of *Novoe vremia* had sent him as their permanent war correspondent.⁶ This assignment allowed him to witness events in

8.2 (1996): 95.

² Joža Glonar. "Lavrin, Janko," *Slovenski biografski leksikon* 4 (Ljubljana: Zadružna gospodarska banka, 1932) 624.

³ Lenček 95; Vera Brnčič, "Janko Lavrin (Ob devetdesetletnici)," *Jezik in slovstvo* 22.6 (1976): 176.

⁴ As early as 1908 this magazine carried Lavrin's translation of Cankar's "Hiša Marije Pomočnice," which was reprinted two years later, again in *Slavianskii mir* (Lenček 99, note 3).

⁵ Lenček 99, notes 4 and 5.

⁶ Lavrin himself was one of the magazine's editors.

Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania, and twice visit the Serbian front. During this period he interviewed the Serbian prime minister Nicola Pašić, King Nikola of Montenegro, and the Albanian dictator Esad Pasha.⁷

After the collapse of Serbia, he travelled with the Serbian army on its retreat to Salonica and Corfu. Lavrin went to Paris, from where he intended to return to Petrograd via London and Stockholm. The start of the October Revolution in 1917 saw the end of *Novoe Vremia*, and Lavrin found himself without a job. He recounts that he became a regular contributor to *The New Age*, a weekly publication covering politics, art, and literature, by invitation of its editor, Alfred R. Orage. In London he made the acquaintance of Sir Bernard Pares, founder of London University's School of Slavonic and East European Studies, whom Lavrin credited with advising him to apply for a vacant lecturership at Nottingham University.⁸ From January 1918 onwards, he published a series of well-received articles and essays, mainly about Russian literature, for the weekly.⁹

In 1918 Lavrin assumed the Nottingham lecturership, which had been instituted in 1915. In 1921 he was named "professor of Slavonic languages" and encouraged the study of Slavic languages other than Russian at the same time he was giving lectures on Russian literature.¹⁰ In 1928 he married the English painter Nora Fry, who until her death almost six decades later remained his loyal companion (she died in August 1985, exactly a year before her husband).¹¹ Despite the fresh demands placed on him by the role of university professor in a field which at that time was still in its infancy in Britain, he quickly began writing studies on the most prominent figures of Russian literature, later publishing

⁷ Dušan Moravec, "Janko Lavrin: 1887–1986," *Sodobnost* 34.10 (1986): 858.

⁸ Janko Lavrin, "Difficult Beginnings," "Slavonica: To Mark the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Department of Slavonic Studies" [Department of Slavonic Studies, University of Nottingham] 6.1 (December 1977): 12–14. I am indebted to Professor Peter Herrity of the University of Nottingham for providing me with this source.

⁹ Letter from Janko Lavrin to Rado L. Lencek, Lencek 96

¹⁰ Details of Lavrin's hiring and work at Nottingham are found in Mark Knight, "A Short History of the Department," "Slavonica: To Mark the Sixtieth Anniversary": 2–9. Also see Lencek 98.

¹¹ Letter from Janko Lavrin to Rado L. Lencek, 18 September 1985, Lencek 98.

studies on Scandinavian, French, Italian, English, and other literatures.¹² In addition to several extremely well-received monographs on individual authors, he wrote a number of synthetic reviews. His comparative studies are also widely known. Through all the years of his teaching work (until his retirement in 1953), his initiative and organizational ability made a significant contribution to the expansion of the Nottingham Russian language and literature program, from which a general Slavonic studies department was eventually to develop.

For his services to literary scholarship in Britain, Nottingham University bestowed on him the title *Magister Artium*. His importance in academic and cultural circles in Britain is clearly demonstrated by his membership in numerous British and international organizations. He was one of the first members of the London International PEN club, a member of the British Universities Association of Slavists,¹³ and from 1963 honorary vice president of the London Institute of Linguists.¹⁴

Following his retirement he and his wife divided their time between Slovenia and England for a number of years: They usually spent spring and summer in Piran, where Lavrin had a flat, and autumn and winter at his house in London. Throughout this period they also travelled a great deal around Europe, Asia, and Africa. He was a member of the Slovene PEN club from the time of its founding, at his instigation, in 1926.¹⁵ Like the British, the Slovenes honored him with several prestigious awards for his scholarly achievements. On 2 October 1956, he was elected an external corresponding member of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1971 he received a Prešeren Award.¹⁶ He was particularly proud of the title of honorary member of the Society for Slovene Studies, which he was awarded in the last year of his life (November 1985), despite being unable to attend the presentation ceremony in person.¹⁷ When old age would no longer allow him to

¹² See "Bibliografija Lavrinovih spisov," *Letopis SAZU* 8 (1956), Ljubljana: SAZU (1957): 40-2.

¹³ Aleksander Skaza, "Janko Lavrin," *Jezik in slovstvo* 32.4 (1986-87): 108.

¹⁴ S.J. "Umrli je Janko Lavrin," *Obzornik* 10 (1986): 676.

¹⁵ Dušan Moravec 857; S. J. 676.

¹⁶ Vladimir Gajšek. "Janko Lavrin med osem in osemdeset," *Dialogi* 24.10/11 (1988): 137.

¹⁷ The text of the honorary award, with citation, appears in full in *Slovene Studies* 7.1-2 (1985): 115.

travel, he remained at home but continued writing until the end of his life. He died in London on 13 August 1986, just six months short of his hundredth birthday.

Lavrin began publishing essays in literary criticism under a variety of pseudonyms in the Petrograd monthly *Slavianskii mir* (1908–11), of which he was also editor. Four years later, he worked as co-editor and co-author of the anthology *Veles* (1912–13), and then for the daily newspaper *Novoe Vremia* (1915–17), although in the first instance his involvement was as a translator of literature and in the second as a reporter. The next year, when he settled permanently in Britain, he published his first English critical essay, entitled “Dostoevsky and Certain of His Problems,” in *The New Age* (17 January 1918).¹⁸ He continued his work in literary history and criticism a few months later when he began lecturing on modern Russian literature at the newly-founded Russian Studies department at Nottingham University.

Since knowledge of contemporary Russian literature was at an extremely low level in Britain at the time, and because there was a lack of the necessary material, Lavrin’s Nottingham post presented him with a challenging task. With astonishing zeal and the requisite knowledge, acquired during his “Russian period,” he began systematically acquainting his British students and readers with Russian literature, first with the basics and later in more depth. To begin with he wrote a review of Russian literature intended for students,¹⁹ and then began writing his characteristic “psychocritical studies” on some of the leading Russian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the Romantic period (in particular Aleksandr Pushkin) to the present, approximately to the deaths of Sergei Esenin (1925) and Vladimir Maiakovskii (1930). His articles, monographs, and collected essays deal with the life and work of Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol’, Ivan Goncharov, Mikhail Lermontov, Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, Aleksandr Ostrovskii, Lev Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Maksim Gorkii, Aleksandr Blok, Boris Pasternak, and others. He also studied the methods of literary theory and criticism of such Russian writers as Vissarion Belinskii, Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Semen Vengerov, and Dmitrii Ovsianiko-Kulikovskii.

¹⁸ Rado L. Lenček 99, note 8.

¹⁹ Vera Brnčič, “Janko Lavrin (On the Occasion of his Ninetieth Birthday),” *Jezik in slovstvo* 22.6 (1976): 176–77.

As regards other European literatures, Lavrin wrote about a series of the most important writers, such as Honore Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, Henrik Ibsen, Anatole France, Friedrich Nietzsche, Joris-Karl Huysmans, August Strindberg, Guy De Maupassant, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, Knut Hamsun, Rainer Maria Rilke, Marcel Proust, and Jean Paul Sartre. Particularly interesting are Lavrin's comparative studies, sometimes rather bold and unconventional, which draw together the works of related and clearly contrasting writers: Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and Dostoevskii; Chekhov, Maupassant, and Dostoevsky; Proust, Ibsen, and Shaw; or Huysmans and Strindberg. Dušan Moravec has observed that

the choice of writers whom Janko Lavrin brings face to face in the same essay is frequently unusual and occasionally rather challenging. No wonder, then, that those who followed his work—from the French comparatist Baldensperger, to our own Leben and Ocvirk—should have suggested that such comparison might be dangerous and reproached him for sometimes distorting the true character of the writer, warning that such parallels, while interesting and witty, were not always based in scholarship or literary history. This, however, was not actually the first and primary intention of our essayist, whose writing is always deliberately personally colored.²⁰

Lavrin never lost contact with Slovenia for long; this applied to his scholarly publications as well. Between 1926 and 1930 he published a series of studies in *Ljubljanski zvon*, and between 1932 and 1941 in *Modra ptica*. These works, like the Slovene translations of his monographs, evoked a significant response in Slovene literary history circles. During the Second World War, when direct contact with his native country was impossible, he managed to keep in touch by working at the BBC, delivering weekly lectures for Slovenes.

It is particularly important to emphasize Lavrin's role as an intermediary in acquainting the Russian and even more so the British public with Slovene literature. Lavrin prepared Russian and English translations of key Slovene writers, literary studies of their work, and translations of poetry collections and prose anthologies. He himself wrote including companion studies to these.²¹ This was

²⁰ Moravec, "Janko Lavrin (1887–1986)," *Sodobnost* 34.10 (1986): 860.

²¹ Exact bibliographical details about Lavrin's publications on Slovene literature—both literary studies and translations—are contained in Rado

an attempt to build cultural bridges between the three countries where Lavrin had made his home: Slovenia, Russia, and Britain. He was undoubtedly successful in building the first bridge, between Russian and British culture, and he certainly played an important role in the building of the other two—that is, between Slovene culture and Russian culture, and Slovene culture and British culture.

Eloquent testimony to Lavrin's international recognition is the fact that his book on Tolstoy sold 43,000 copies, including its various reprints, and even more so the fact that this noted literary study was translated into an enviable number of foreign languages.

CREATIVE WRITING

Lavrin's attempts at poetry are, if we are honest, a relatively unsuccessful, youthful episode. He started publishing his first poems in 1906, when he was nineteen, in *Domači prijatelj*, a Prague monthly with a fairly small circulation. By 1909 he had published ten poems. In 1917 he had a further two sonnets published in the Chicago publication *Čas*. All of these poems are, from the esthetic point of view, fairly ordinary; nonetheless, they serve as a telling, personal record of what the poet wanted to express at the time.

The metrical construction of Lavrin's poems illustrates in many cases his somewhat nonchalant attitude towards smooth-flowing, polished versification. It falters most in the poems "Ah, kje si, kje, moj mladi raj?" ("Ah, Where Art Thou, Paradise of my Youth?"),²² "V temi" ("In the Darkness"),²³ "Spomladi" ("In Springtime"),²⁴ "Dovolj!" ("Enough!")²⁵ "Pogreb" ("Funeral")²⁶ "Vzdih" ("Sigh");²⁷ even within a single sonnet we find a mass of metrical inconsistencies,²⁸ although from the metrical point of view he had more success with sonnets than with other poetic forms.

L. Lenček. "Janko Lavrin," *Slovene Studies* 7.1-2 (1985): 113–15.

²² *Domači prijatelj* (hereafter *DP*) 3.8 (August 1906): 209.

²³ *DP* 3.4 (April 1906): 87.

²⁴ *DP* 4.4 (April 1907): 101.

²⁵ *DP* 4.12 (December 1907): 327.

²⁶ *DP* 6.2 (February 1909): 31.

²⁷ *DP* 5.9 (September 1908): 230.

²⁸ *DP* 3.10 (October 1906): 259.

Somber themes are typical of the majority of Lavrin's poems: war ("Balkan Sonnets" I and II, "Čas" [1917]), the cruel reality of life ("Sonnet,"²⁹ "Vihar divja" ["The Storm Rages"]³⁰) loneliness ("Spomladi"), and death ("Pogreb"). All the poems are moody, full of unhappy lamentations and a more or less undefined suffering. Nature responds to the poet's mood and intensifies it through its own image.

Lavrin's poems remind one in many ways of the early poetry of Vojeslav Molè, which appeared at roughly the same time.³¹ Both poets' work features an emotional and sometimes even elevated style, parallels between the poet's mood and natural spectacles, and a lack of originality in terms of content and style. The clearest difference between Molè's early lyric poetry and Lavrin's lies in the faultless formal polish of Molè's verses, while Lavrin, as we have already said, frequently does not adhere to the metrical norms that his poems require.

When talking about his slight poetic oeuvre, and when evaluating it either on the basis of impartial literary and esthetic criteria or taking into account his youth and lack of literary experience, we can single out, from the point of view of artistic value, at least the first part of the poem "Jaz hočem življenja" ("I Want Life").³² Here the poet, despite the troubling metrical lapses of the third verse, in all probability achieves his modest poetic peak. Lavrin was evidently aware of the limits of his poetic gift since after 1912 he published no more poems.

PROSE

Lavrin's early short prose works can be found in *Domači prijatelj*. He began publishing prose in 1905, when he was eighteen. That year saw the publication of "Usoda in človek" ("Destiny and Man"), probably his first published creative writing.³³ The story describes a man's encounter with Destiny, personified as "a woman with a serious face and an icy gaze." When the woman reveals her identity the man accuses her of abandoning mankind to misfortune and damnation. Destiny replies,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ DP 3.11 (November 1906): 277.

³¹ Vojeslav Molè, *Ko so cvele rože* (Ljubljana: Kleinmayr & Bamberg, 1910).

³² DP 4.1 (1907): 5.

³³ DP 2.2 (November 1905): 265.

But when all could live like brothers, why do you live like wolves? The stronger oppresses the weaker more and more and would rather let him feel his authority and power than his protection... For one to raise himself up, thousands of others must be crushed and the blood flow in rivers to satisfy the thirst for glory of a single tyrant, at whose nod millions go to the slaughter without ever knowing why ...

The man contradicts her but when Destiny proves to him that he himself has never really sacrificed for the sake of his fellow men, he hangs his head and silently goes on his way.

Lavrin's second allegorical fable, "Luč, ki je kazala pravo pot" ("The Light which Showed the Right Path") is of similar content and was published in *Domači prijatelj* just two months later.³⁴ The story, written in the first person, tells of how Life appears before the narrator in all its cruelty and shows him a gloomy swamp where a mass of people live without any goal in their lives. The narrator wants to lead them, with the help of his lamp, to the mountain "where the sun shines, the air is filled with the pleasant scent of flowers, and wonderful fruit ripens on the trees." Some follow him to the steep mountain, along a way blocked by almost insurmountable obstacles, but halfway there they are exhausted and do not want to go on. Worse, they even try to prevent their guide from continuing on his way. The narrator, however, does not give up: "I turned to them in scorn and shouted: 'Stay here and perish where you are! You're not worth anything else...!'" No sooner does he utter these words than his lamp goes out. Life tells him in a cruel voice that he will be the first to die since he had renounced love and trust in his fellow men.

Lavrin's third parable, "Sreča in bogastvo" ("Happiness and Wealth")³⁵ is written in the style of a folk fairy tale with a distinctly moralistic message, which connects it to the preceding two stories. The hero this time is borrowed from Roman mythology. Jupiter, king of the gods, goes to earth in order to see how people live. When he arrives in a poor village he is surprised to find that despite the terrible poverty and the struggle to earn their daily bread the inhabitants are always cheerful of visage and hospitable, livening up the working day with joyful singing. Because he is enthusiastic about their hearty kindness and optimism he rewards them with wealth. A year later he returns to the village and sees,

³⁴ DP 3.1 (January 1906): 6.

³⁵ DP 3.7 (July 1906): 169.

instead of tumble-down cottages, gleaming palaces. The people, dressed in gold and silk, now face the world with a troubled, weary look. Jupiter, disguised as a beggar, is uncharitably chased from the doors of these once hospitable villagers. The god leaves the village disappointed and in a nearby meadow spies a poor shepherd who had been overlooked the year before when the wealth was shared out. The shepherd invites Jupiter into his humble shack and offers him his last piece of bread. In gratitude, Jupiter reveals his identity and asks how he can repay his hospitality. The shepherd answers that he is satisfied with what he has and does not need anything else. Jupiter realizes that this humble man is more blessed than all the rich men, and happier even than the gods.

The last story, "Adjunkt Grivar" ("Grivar the Clerk") appeared in the same magazine a year and a half later.³⁶ It is a fanciful love story with an unhappy denouement. Grivar is an unsociable man who is seen as a bit of an eccentric. He always dresses the same way, has no friends, and gives the impression of a man who has had no dealings with women. One fine day, however, Grivar falls fatally in love. The writer describes his romantic feelings with outstanding sensitivity but at the same time predicts with hidden irony the gloomy end of the story: the hero makes a fool of himself in front of others while his beloved, a girl to him forever unattainable, is not even aware of his existence.

The main weakness of Lavrin's early prose works is their lack of originality in terms of style and content. While these early narratives are fluid and plastic, their themes, motifs and even plots, with the exception of the last one, are extremely common. The last story, however, already shows in its subject matter and certain literary devices (though not in its narrative style) the main characteristics and features of his later stories, which he would write from time to time throughout his life and which he finally developed into an exceptional example of extravagant Brechtian short prose. They reveal a fully mature author who writes with virtuosic lightness, wit, psychological perception, and a challengingly unusual narrative style that conceals provocative hints behind a facade of apparent triviality and the false simplicity of mostly undemanding (at least at first glance), comparatively simple plots.

I am thinking here, of course, of Lavrin's collection of autobiographical sketches entitled *Med osem in osemdeset* (*Between*

³⁶ DP 4.8 (August 1907): 313.

Eight and Eighty).³⁷ The book was supposed to coincide with the author's hundredth birthday but its publication, like Lavrin's hundredth birthday, was overtaken by the writer's death.

These twenty sketches, featuring the quiet drama of the "extraordinary ordinary," a realistic style incorporating certain naturalistic elements, a contrived emotional distance and an indulgently gentle ironic tone that only rarely, and then just for a moment, turns into sarcasm, really are quite reminiscent of Brecht's prose collection *Ein gemeiner Kerl*. Nevertheless, although there is an overlap in the time that these two collections were written, any direct influence of Brecht on Lavrin is unlikely.

Lavrin's stories illustrate, from an ethical viewpoint, interesting episodes from the lives of people the writer met in the course of almost a whole life spent travelling the world: from his native Austria-Hungary, through sophisticated, mysteriously removed or politically and economically chaotic regions of Europe, to exotic parts of the Balkans and tropical Africa. It is interesting to note that the author only appears in the stories as a secondary character, although he is by no means detached from the events depicted.

The first story, "Pasje življenje" ("A Dog's Life"), describes the unusual fate of a morose, neglected dog, Hektor, who is taken home by the taciturn Tone, a new employee at a mill in the Karst village where the young Lavrin had spent his childhood holidays. Around the story of the dog's fate the writer weaves a subtle picture of the surprisingly complex characters and complicated relationships of the other four inhabitants of the mill: the bluff, vulgar but basically fair miller, his gentle wife, the aged miller's assistant Luka, and the mysterious Tone. Similarly full of contradictions and vividly presented are the characters of the *dramatis personae* of the other stories in the collection. The common thread of the majority of the stories is the contradiction between the hidden and usually unexploited wealth of moral values of the hero and their unfortunate external manifestation. It is precisely in this contradiction that the writer sees the greatest literary challenge; nevertheless, he treats it with a characteristically sublimated, nuanced irony, and even self-irony, which reaches its peak in the story "Pomembnost molčanja" ("The Importance of Being Silent"). The story has a provocatively aggressive and at the same time disingenuously innocent tone, an

³⁷ Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1987.

original' and contradictory mixture of youthful distress and "mature," resigned elevation above the banal. The narrator's relationship to the problem of moral values, which represents the thematic basis of the story, is the dichotomy between the condemnation of moral decadence and the sense of his own complicity, and man's readiness for a comfortable social compromise which dictates forgiveness and indulgence in one's relationship to one's own weaknesses of character and the weakness of others.

When the book was published, an exhaustive though in places somewhat unclear assessment of it was offered by Vladimir Gajšek. He wrote, among other things:

One can tell from Janko Lavrin's short anecdotal stories that he was once a journalist. The lively narrative flows in old world images, and through them, when cosmopolitanism was still naive and without malice. In short, they are ingeniously witty throughout. In his writing and in his life Janko Lavrin found good things, such as friends, not that he needed to lower himself to them, but he also met 'former' friends—self-interested or foolishly vain people. In *Med osem in osemdeset*, therefore, we encounter a whole range of moods and actions: an institution run by women, thus a marriage with all the features of family life; divine wealth and the human misery of poverty, the all-embracing evil of avarice and the already funny insignificance of the humiliated and the offended; justice and injustice; the sweetness of power and the dependent weakness; merciless disdain and sorrowful compassion for one's fellow man; the issue of money among like-minded people and the greed of plundering egoists; the mistakes and sins of the wise and the fixed ideas of the foolish; simple fun and mockery taken to the point of nervousness; reproachable and irreproachable public figures; flattering self-love and impartial altruism; accidental frivolity and sober prudent judgement; slyness and stupidity; general human kindness and kindness to one's friends or neighbours... All the stories are barbed with one of these characteristics or modes of behaviour. *Med osem in osemdeset*, which Janko Lavrin wanted to call *Srečanja in leta* (*Meetings and Years*), mixes an Ehrenburgian tone with English detachment. It should also be acknowledged that the translator of these stories,

critical writer Rapa Šuklje, has succeeded in capturing the archaic tone of these modern 'cautionary tales'...³⁸

Reading his stories, one regrets that Lavrin did not choose to devote more time to prose writing. I believe that from the point of view of its literary value Lavrin's collection occupies a more important place within Slovene short prose than one might conclude from the modest critical response to its publication.

CONCLUSION

Janko Lavrin's greatest success was undoubtedly the introduction of Russian literature and Russian trends in literary theory and literary criticism to the British cultural consciousness. His comparative studies on European literature also enjoy a special place within this field. Particularly important is his literary critical method, a method he devised at the beginning of the 1920s and then successfully developed in numerous studies right up until he reached an advanced age. The method works by including varied biographical, psychological, and sociological factors into a most complex analysis of the literary works of a particular writer, all of this leading toward a psychological interpretation of the writer. The most notable features of Lavrin's "psychocritical" studies are their clear construction, the surprising originality of the theories themselves, the lucid formulation of their arguments, and their attractive, direct, and witty style.

To Slovenes he is most important for his translations of Slovene literature into Russian and English, the publication of anthologies of Slovene (and Yugoslav) poetry in English translation, and his introductory studies and other articles published in English that relate to Slovene literature. The Slovene translations of his monographs and his published studies on European literature also represent an important contribution to the development of Slovene literary science. The main translators of his works into Slovene are Griša Koritinik, Branko Gradišnik, Peter Donat, and Rapa Šuklje.

Of all his work his own literary efforts remain least known. This is of course understandable given the incomparably greater importance of his achievements in other fields. Nonetheless, it does not seem to me superfluous to repeat that we are still a long way from

³⁸ Gajšek 138.

conceding to Lavrin the story-teller his proper place in Slovene short prose writing.

The fate which Janko Lavrin experienced with his critical writings in terms of the response of Slovene academic circles could perhaps in a certain sense be compared with the fate of the unconventional and always somewhat "problematic" literary historian, critic and philosopher, academician Taras Kermauner (despite their different scientific methods and certain fundamental differences of style). Kermauner also had to wait several decades before more influential colleagues acknowledged the worth and credibility of his specific scholarly approach.

As with Kermauner, Slovene evaluations of Lavrin's books on Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky were at first cautiously tentative, reserved, offered from a safe distance. It was particularly difficult to decide at the beginning into which branch of literary science these studies actually fell. Soon, though, reactions clarified themselves into two opposing camps. Henceforth Lavrin had both his opponents and his adherents (there were of course those in the middle who could not decide). Very few, however, were able simply to disregard his work.

Janko Lavrin is an unsurpassable internal esthete, at every moment and even in the most destructive circumstances a devoted worshipper of the inner beauty that is reflected in an elite combination of human values. At the same time his writings reveal a researcher of wide learning, clear thinking and exceptional creative self-confidence—a relatively rare combination. He never offers, in his studies and essays, simplified or tedious fact-oriented conclusions. Quite the opposite, his markedly intuitive assertions are most often boldly provocative, but at the same time fully thought out. When he finds it necessary he argues them from several different aspects. At other times, he leaves the reader enough room for an exploratory "dialog" with the theories he has put forward.

It may appear to contradict the above statement if we recognize that here and there Lavrin liked to vary his work with ingenious suggestions which he would slip in more because they sounded tried and tested good than because they were demonstrable or even that he believed them entirely himself. This, of course, is a rhetorical device which never fails to increase the attention of the reader or listener and should provoke from him a positive or negative reaction. It is similarly unnecessary to charge Lavrin with affectation. He was a born rhetorician. Reading his studies one senses that not only did he write them with a good deal of love, he

also took genuine pleasure in them. This is why reading them is such a unique pleasure as well. Lavrin's devotion to the subject of his research, and the unbelievable energy with which he approached it, also succeed in absorbing the reader.

Because of some of his "manipulative" tactics, however—whether they were really manipulative or just appeared to be—certain critics found Lavrin's work academically questionable. I do not see anything dangerous in Lavrin's attempt to develop a fairly "dry" subject in new directions, or in the final phase to raise it to the level of an exquisite intellectual delight. His detractors, of course, question whether this can still be called scholarship. In their eyes Lavrin's studies are more superficial than those written according to the old model: theory - incontestable proofs - example (or the other way round). This is because Lavrin's theories are sometimes not reasoned explicitly enough. Lavrin and his adherents, on the other hand, would accuse these advocates of the "scientific" method themselves of superficiality, since by excluding the role of intuition they are already restricting the development of creative thought and its breakthrough into new dimensions, while at the same time closing the door to the central sphere of the mind. It is precisely the intuition and unfettered imagination of the boldest scholars that have opened the way for the natural sciences, the humanities, and other fields of knowledge to progress to today's understanding and methods. Naturally, they have also frequently lead them up a blind alley. But without dreams, rebellion, courage and imagination, the world would not be able to progress at all.

Methodological and stylistic originality, daring and courage (which are most frequently conditioned by creative self-confidence and a noticeable devotion to work), provided of course that they are not an end in themselves and do not diminish the objective scientific credibility of the study, can only complement the results of research work. After all, Lavrin was very well aware of the fact that logical thought and logical conclusions (even if markedly unconventional or even thoroughly subversive), and clarity of essential expression, were—along with the credibility of the basic information—undoubtedly still the most important elements of successful scholarship.

Inštitut za slovensko izseljenstvo, ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana

POVZETEK**JANKO LAVRIN: SLOVENSKI INTELEKTUALNI AMBASADOR**

Prispevek podaja oris življenjske poti, znanstvenega, pedagoškega in strokovnega dela ter manj znanega leposlovnega ustvarjanja Janka Lavrina (1887–1986), mednarodno priznanega komparativista, literarnega zgodovinarja in kritika, pesnika in pisatelja, ki je med 1908–15 deloval v St. Petersburgu, od leta 1917 dalje pa v Londonu. Posebna pozornost je v eseju posvečena Lavrinovi vsestransko zanimivi osebnosti. V zaključku avtorica ocenjuje pomen Lavrinovega prispevka v okviru slovenske književnosti, zlasti kratke proze, predvsem pa seveda na področju literarnih znanosti.