

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Rudolf Sloboda

Reason

Rozum

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After the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, normalisation meant the restoration of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's control over society and was critically perceived in dissident circles as a period of stagnation and regression. The political stability, which relied on a kind of "social contract" with the regime, gradually turned into dissatisfaction in the 1980s. The Slovak novel Reason (Slovakian: Rozum) by Rudolf Sloboda from 1982 is a great example of social criticism in prose, in which self-alienation and a "universal nihilism" implicitly refer to society in the last decade of fading state socialism. Motifs such as non-integration into the collective, the failure to adapt to the surroundings and the lack of non-toxic relationships point to a distortion of society and are directly linked to outsiderhood as the central theme of the novel, confirming the work's subversive approach to literary tradition and social conventions.

This first-person narrative is in fact limited to the inner life of the respective protagonist, a middle-aged writer and screenwriter who constantly doubts himself and searches for his place in life. The plot is reduced to his attempts to overcome professional and creative challenges as well as his strained family relationships. Inner reflections alternate with memories, struggles with creative difficulties and the unfolding narrative of the screenplay he is working on. The protagonist's emotionality and subjectivity cannot be abstracted from their social context, and a stable absence of any hope for an alternative future throughout the narrative as well as open existential dilemmas foster deeper reflections on the dull and monotonous environment of Slovak normalisation, which seems to be synonymous with doom. Moreover, the intense reflectiveness and focus on the expression of individual identity or the protagonist's inner life deviate from the ideological framework of socialist literature. In autobiographical reflections a few years after the novel's publication, the author explained his pessimistic works and the earlier portrayal of a gloomy picture as an inner commitment to advocate for better social conditions (Sloboda: 7–11).

The social space in the novel remains identifiable, and the focus on analytical thinking thus serves as a metaphorical expression of the coldness and desensitisation of both the era and the individual within it. The screenwriter's attempt to solve his problems through "reason" and rational organisation emphasizes the "reasonable compromise" as the foundation for a late socialist life. The deformation of society manifests itself through a distorted notion of what "rational behavior" is – narrowed down to mere compliance with collective regulations, it is no longer a driving force for cultivation and progress but rather a survival strategy or an existential necessity. On the other hand, initiative, innovation and non-standardised actions are restricted, the expression of individuality is seen as risky, while the cultivation of one's own ordinariness, passivity, conformity and mediocrity as central principles of life ensure survival. Individuals have to adapt to shifting values and adhere to a "rational agreement", which ultimately makes them truly asocial beings who do not contribute to the

development of society but merely keep their heads above water.

The emotional emptiness is intertwined with the falseness of the depicted society, which manifests itself not only in the inability to establish interpersonal relationships, but also in the double standards as well as in the decay of morality, which is illustrated by the amoral aspects of life such as psychological and physical violence, infidelity, lies, indifference or the display of empty moralising (so-called “superficial morality”). The screenwriter recognises the futility of his efforts in life and tends towards resignation, declaring himself a dead soul, a destroyed man. He strives to write a good screenplay, but constantly acknowledges his failure or the pointlessness of his activities and believes that he will remain misunderstood or rejected in the end. Writing the screenplay is also his only outward-directed activity, the only means of making contact with others and seeking understanding in society. The inability to create a work that aligns with his idealistic vision, coupled with his negative experiences in the film industry, leads him to a profound sense of uselessness.

The narrator's mood is black and white, callous, even sarcastic, and the failure to realise his intentions together with the lack of recognition causes his emotions to escalate. As the memories and melancholy serve to amplify the contrast between reality and what is desirable, the frequent reflections on the protagonist's deceased father and nostalgia for the past life can also be interpreted as an escape from social reality. The open ending leaves a feeling of unease, confusion and pity for the protagonist, who wishes to end his life to avoid an existence he sees as an attempt to cut short an unbearable state of emptiness. Despite the ending, which fosters deeper reflection and a stable absence of any hope for an alternative future throughout the narrative, Sloboda tends to relativise inner tensions generated, leaving open whether the protagonist's existential dilemma.

Social criticism, which is expressed in this prose through the motif of the absurdity or meaninglessness of human existence, manifests itself as resignation within society or as the protagonist's withdrawal into himself. Beneath the cynicism and anger of a “failed” artist lies not only, as it might seem at first glance, a superficial justification of personal weaknesses and life complications by blaming circumstances and others. Instead, a closer look reveals the pain and suffering not only of this individual, but also of thousands of others wounded by the oppressive totalitarian environment. Through introspection, some of them attempt to find meaning within the “mechanical cycle of monotony” and others try to act “reasonable”. In order to lose themselves in their own rationality, they replicate the image of what they are supposed to be and deliberately erase any trace of their true selves.

Latent nihilism and hopelessness, as an implicit critique of late socialist society, provoked a polemical backlash from ideologically driven critics, who condemned the work as a destructive challenge to the established artistic vision of an 'ideal' socialist society. Though its second edition appeared only in the post-communist era, where it became a defining testimony of its time, it had already influenced a younger generation in the 1980s, who increasingly exposed the moral decay and dysfunction of the state.

References:

Sloboda, Rudolf. *Pokus o autoportrét*. Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1982.

Further reading:

Prušková, Zora. Rudolf Sloboda. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2001.

LANGUAGE: Slovak/Slovenčina

PUBLISHER: Slovenský spisovateľ

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