

The Tutors

Tutori

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Over the past twenty years or so, the political dimension of the European political novel has been exhausted in an increasingly bloated production of novels about families and family history. The problem with contemporary family histories is, paradoxically, their escape from history itself, a history that simply happens to the protagonists while they attempt to take shelter from it in their peaceful and insignificant lives. The literary protagonist thus ceases to be a hero and becomes an amorphous mass shaped by history, without even being fully aware of what is happening to him, only to conclude in the end that the present, the time of the narrator recounting history is nevertheless the best in comparison with all the bad things that have happened. It should be noted that such novels are also formally rather unambitious and are based on the narration of the individual character's own experience.

As early as 1978, Bora Ćosić published a completely original family history under the title *Tutori* (*The Tutors*), which still stands as an exception within this overexploited genre. The novel is divided into five parts, each presenting the story of one family member, told in his or her own time, spanning the period from 1828 to 1977. A departure from a patriarchal, biologically grounded genealogy is evident in the introduction of two female characters: Katarina, the daughter-in-law who married into the family of the forefather Teodor, and later Katarina's own daughter-in-law, Laura. In this way, Ćosić constructs a family history that escapes a linear narrative based on commentary on past events, instead producing stories that are simultaneously focused on what they narrate and on the act of narration itself. The author achieves this through the formal diversity of each of the novel's five parts.

The first part, Teodor's, set in 1828, is written as a non-alphabetical dictionary with more than 1,600 entries, in which the narrator explains concepts such as "leg," "to have," "century," "is," and so on. At the outset, it functions as a moment of shaping language, of examining the material from which the family history will later be formed, material that needed to be established within the framework of Enlightenment activities in Slavonia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The second part is largely written as a chronicle, in which the concepts established in the first part begin to be used to describe everyday phenomena and events in the countryside; they serve to systematise a world in which it is necessary to record how much the land has yielded, who the emperor was, where he travelled, and similar matters.

This is followed by sections written in rhyme or in the manner of an expressionist drama, in which words and events begin to acquire faces that articulate them, thereby assuming responsibility and authorship for them. Finally, in the last part, dated 1977, the text is signed by the Writer, who in the concluding section offers a reminiscence of the entire family and all the previously read parts. Predrag Brebanović, in his reading of Bora Ćosić's novel *Podrumi marcipana* (*Cellars of Marzipan*), says of this figure that "in a Barthesian sense one could

conclude that, like the author himself, he is absent from the text, or rather present in it only hypothetically as a 'hand' (separated from any kind of voice)" (133). The family history thus ends in parody, with a writer who gives birth to himself as a textual and linguistic instance.

Tutori by Bora Ćosić, in addition to being read as a family novel, can also be read as a political novel in which the family serves as the site of the genesis of the political. It is a political family shaped in time and language. The novel itself establishes the means by which this shaping will occur and presents the process of their emergence. These are, namely, words that carry and create meaning, that govern discourse. At the same time, the novel is aware of their development, from their origin, through their association into more complex systems, to the creation of the author, thereby exposing the author as nothing more than an instance within the process of writing, rather than the one who determines the meaning of the text.

The text is thus freed from univocal interpretations, and the family history can be read as a loosely connected series of texts, statements, poems, dialogues, and words through which everything that marked the family is linguistically mediated. Language, in this case, reveals itself as a political instrument which, through its pluralism, dissolves the univocality and linearity of historiographical accounts of family history. It is able to do so precisely within the novel as a genre that is willing to incorporate linguistic multiplicity into itself.

References:

Brebanović, Predrag. *Podrumi marcipana: Čitanje Bore Ćosića*. Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2006.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

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