

Irena Avsenik Nabergoj, *Reality and Truth in Literature – From Ancient to Modern European Literary and Critical Discourse*, trans. Jason Blake. Goettingen: V & R unipress GmbH, 2013, pp. 229.

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According to Johann Wolfgang Goethe necessity originates art, and if matter is brought to life by a real artist, then it would inherently carry eternal value. In *Kunst und Handwerk (Art and Handwork)* he states that the enjoyment of art should be enriched by deepening one's knowledge, the refinement of taste and more sensitivity while creating the long, intergenerational process of the multiplication of meaning and the nivellation of values. Works of art are not only meaning-bearing, but also value-transmitting structures, and the constitution of aesthetic qualities is a proliferation of moves and requirements bound to the given age and society.

Irena Avsenik Nabergoj is interested in the canonic components of different epochs and stylistic trends which were not always able to get free from each other's influence. In her recent book she scrutinizes the historic identity of value orientations and the chances of their survival while she also surveys the modification of their scope and the realignment of their dimensions. The excellence of her approach is that she looks at the spheres of culture and the art of words as a system of hierarchies of the combination of signs, the modification of meanings and literacy trends. We can define literature as an autochthon form of spirituality if we see it through the lens of dialogues and relationships between the national and the universal. She unfolds the consequences of expressing and experiencing aesthetic and artistic truth from a more language-centered point of view (she stresses the mechanisms of metaphorization, allegorization, the usage of symbols and the bounds of forms). Feeling at home in the fields of philosophy, theology, the philosophy of history, comparatistics, psychology and the history of criticism, she presents that the notions (in a broadened semantic sense) of reality, truth, beauty and love do not at all stay so distant from each other.

Her chronology-based reasoning gives way to a communication-system-type of literary typologization, in which she sets artistic practice, the artistic sort of articulation against the ideas of the possible mapping of reality. Armed with thorough classical philological knowledge she traverses the Greek-Latin philosophical tradition, poetical wits and rhetoric expectations. We face the same erudition as in her previous book, *Longing, Weakness and Temptation: From Myth to Artistic Creations* (2009). Her subtle intellectual by-passes reach into the eras of the middle ages, the renaissance, enlightenment, romanticism, modernity and postmodernity while spotlighting international literary tendencies reflected in Slovenian literature.

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The Platonic concept of logical and ontological truth, its counterpart, the Aristotelian interpretation of reality, the universal truth of Aurelius Augustinus, finding home in the spiritual world, the views of Thomas Aquinas that the intertwined existence of beings and of the soul is a basic truth while believing in the polysemy of symbols and words and segments of reality settled in myths, fictional and historic descriptions are all exhaustively covered. In the wake of a 1797 dialogue of Johann Wolfgang Goethe titled *Über Wahrheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke* (*On Truth and Probability in Works of Art*) Nabergoj also tackles the problems of the true and the real or things seeming to be true and real, or rather the problems of substituting the real or pretending something to be real. She also invokes the theories of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich von Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger and others, and the oeuvre of Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy or Ivan Cankar who she wrote a synthetic work about (*Mirror of Reality and Dreams*, 2008).

The historic order of movements of things ever happened in the world, epoch forming sequences of events, existing in the current and the chaining of events – they all strongly correlate with time and space, so everything which can be apprehended chronologically has a story, and their story is basically identical with its existence. The answer to the question of the relation between the studying of literature and history is the following: „In principle, history is the search for facts and events that really happened. The primary concerns of history are events based on knowledge concerning the human mind in reaction to the challenge of the natural and social environment of groups of individuals that "create" history and manifest their character and decisions, or defend their thoughts and views of the universe as a whole and affect groups of individuals. History is therefore open to typology. In any case, the expectation remains that the historian's work is bound to eternal facts and events. On the other hand, the writer of fiction is always concerned with the individual as such, with his innermost soul, no matter what the influence on other people. This is also true for the genre of historical fiction. The goal of literary historical fiction is not to divulge the historical setting of an historical time period. Authors of literary history are concerned with characters who managed to transcend time, speak to us from their own perspective and help us to better understand the commonalities and differences between their time and ours.“ It is also useful to take into consideration whether it is not too easy to curtail the arsenal of terms, the basic categories of their historic concreteness while analysing phenomena in their determined historic context which leads to the interpretation of these terms and categories as eternal notions, psychological, theoretical or metaphysical constants. That is why the temporal traits of the historic dimension should never be lost sight of in the historic process (and, of course, the different aspects of existence weltering within it). Literary texts remain constant elements of the historic stage representing another section of the shaping process on a real or an imaginary (if they had been destroyed) level, thus they remain the actors not only of the past, but also of the present. They not only represent the older and the former as precedents of the now, but they also exist together with works created later.

In the middle section of her book Irena Avsenik Nabergoj reviews the real and fictional components of biographies and autobiographies. According to her, both have a significant common feature – they have an intimate relationship with the past. The

echoing, resonating and long-range fading of events which were experienced and recollected by a creative intellect. Besides biblical details, works of antique authors and others like Saint Theresa of Avila, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Georges Sand, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi she also cites the texts of famous Slovenian authors, namely Ivan Cankar, Ciril Zlobec, Marjan Rožanc, Lojze Kovačič and Marjan Tomšič.

The well-selected examples let one come to the conclusion that collecting and organising data, perspectives dissolving into each other, the past seeping through the present are all peculiarities of a point of view which can not only be connected to the note-taker or the narrator, but also to a chosen literary modality, to patterns and schemes of different genres. So, as a spin-off of the Hayden Whitean tropology, it is clear that historians need to encode and present their results as unbiased observations and, consequently, creditable opinions before a reader could decide or state whether any encoded professional certainty is objective or not. In that sense narrative identity is not an illusion, a biography or an autobiography is not a special novel, nor the negation of this statement is true, rather we can cite here Philippe Lejeune who said that 'both are special cases of incorporating something into a narrative'.

After reviewing the value presentations of the religious and literary tradition and the challenges and methodological implications of intercultural and -religious dialogue she looks into the artistic and philosophical reflections of beauty and love. Frames of representation and sources of inspiration are both spotlighted from an aesthetic and an ethic point of view. References to the works of Philon of Alexandria and Maimonides and other correspondences (William Shakespeare, John Keats, François-René de Chateaubriand and Paul Valéry, just to name a few) all serve to show what happens if 'centralism' is not axiomatical any more neither in the classicist, nor in the modernist sense. Refining the object, which evolves in the logic of beauty-related value production, is a deeply rooted prerequisite of idealisation. Which means that both nature and humans have the inmost feature of thriving for perfection, so it is unnecessary for nature to prove its existence, because nature incorporates all reflections of beauty. As the cult of purity and orderliness is fading away, and anticlassical tendencies and methods of derogation are gaining more and more ground, artistic space does not leave much space to serving, search for autonomy means getting unaffectedly distant from previously set borders and rules while turning away from the ideals of beauty and mimesis. Anything dressed in an overdecorated gown, anything which deliberately appears to be lacking problems can only be observed from a critical point of view, while any previous artistic canons and forced literary suprematism can only be taken into account as doubtful or rejectable.

In the last chapter of her work Nabergoj concentrates on *Baptism on the Savica* (Krst pri Savici), the highly influential, romantic work of France Prešeren, which mixes personal life situations with questions regarding national existence. While studying the historical influence of Prešeren's oeuvre which enriched Slovenian lyrical tradition with a lot of new genres, verse forms while showing unique richness in means and style, Nabergoj adds a new colour to its afterlife by bringing the paraphrase of Dominik Smole (which was published as a drama in 1969 under the same title as the original) into the picture. It is interesting that the emblematic music group of Neue Slowenische Kunst, Laibach is not included in the ancestry line with its third album, *Krst pod Triglavom*

(Baptism under Triglav, 1986) which reaches, with its heroic-totalitarian industrial music, hymnic heights when representing seditious ideas. The same is the case with the debut novel of Mojca Kumerdej, *Krst nad Triglavom* (Baptism over Triglav, 2001), which plays with allusions to the world of France Prešeren and the musical originality of the groundbreaking group of artists (founded in Trbovlje) while ironically dethroning the quasi-national anthem of Slovenia and turning it into a private mythology.

After reading the book of Irena Avsenik Nabergoj, we can ask, what is at stake? It is not about making it clear what we can consider reality or truth (and mendacity) but rather about asking the question, how we can make sure what is and what is not true. On the basis of the epistemological concept and theory of logic of David Lewis she creatively points out that the process of the recognition of truth always generates a certain degree of doubt. Historic topicalisation, different literary forms (biography, autobiography, novel and other text types) are basically bound to the same modification models, sets of phenomena and to living or dead individuals' context-generating techniques and meaning-condensing processes. The evoked artists' attitudes and oeuvres, however, show that a philosophical approach is not in every sense useful. Literature enriched by deductive methods and purely rational points of views is based on life experiences and is connected to exact circumstances. History generates interest as a deep well, as a vast territory of knowledge due to a growing amount of responsibility inevitably accumulating and culminating in the quest for truth of historians.

Any kind of literary genre is based on life stories, either personal, national, or universal ones. However, it is worth ranking the sequences of poetic use of language and communicative utterances. Self-declaration, self-affirmation, creating an identity, linguistic-rhetoric condensation are all different formulations of totality and while truth requires universal consent (at least within a community), beauty does not (certainly it does not mean that it is then less important). The unique scientific approach of the author shows the nature of literary creativity through the harmonising, reconciling processes of idealism, realism, materialism, existentialism, etc. That is why the comparative, differentiating method seems to be outdated: it is winning or losing on the basis of a belief which does not cease to require a positive answer to the following question: does the unity and sanctity of a high literature exist which originates from the subtlest elements of a multicultural European tradition? And by doing so it somehow meets the expectations of postmodernism, because its objective is a close reading which considers any kind of literary text a creation of a unique genius in a special time and space. It is clear from the illuminating, inspirational conclusion of Irena Avsenik Nabergoj's book that this "combined method is, furthermore, not exposed to great competition, because historical experience with research in art and literature shows that the main problem with most literary analyses is consistency and constancy in balancing opposites and combining constituent parts into an organic whole".