

Exploring „pictures from recent times“ (Ján Kalinčiak: *Reštavrácia*/The Restoration)

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Reštavrácia/The Restoration, which first appeared in the almanac *Lipa I*. 1860:1–130, is the best-known prose work by Ján Kalinčiak. The fact that it is this, rather than his other works, that has become part of the school version of the literary canon is doubtless due to what was seen as its realism. In his monograph, *Ján Kalinčiak* (1936), Andrej Mráz wrote: “The dominant feature of *Reštavrácia* is its realistic relation to the processed verbal material” (p. 191) and that “thanks to the nature of his work, of which *Reštavrácia* is the prime example, Kalinčiak is the founder of Slovak realism in prose” (p. 194). By way of evidence, Mráz cites “new themes” or at least “new thematic material” in this work. Mráz’s claim regarding realistic elements in *Reštavrácia* and in fact in all of Kalinčiak’s prose was cautiously challenged by Július Noge. What Mráz regards as realistic, Noge deems to be romantic in nature. Rejecting the claim that Kalinčiak’s work anticipates realism, Noge believes that what Mráz took for signs of realism was in fact “internal contradictions of Slovak literary Romanticism in which a seemingly realistic matter-of-factness, imagination rooted in reality and plausible characters fuse with Romanticism, poeticization, and mysterious and exceptional plotlines” (Noge, 1969, p. 420).

In Slovak literary historiography the concept of Realism has a number of fundamental features. In the first place, it is the temporal placement of the topic of a literary work in the author’s “contemporaneity”, hand in hand with the “fidelity and veracity” of the textual world to the facts of the “real” world (i.e. the world beyond or behind the text), the image of the “life of the folk” underpinned especially by the utilization of “folk language”. In this connection it is usually said that “the author truthfully depicts the life of (village) folk/society, etc.” Thus, as a criterion, at the centre of attention is the easy and straightforward access of the reader to the world of text, as it is based on the similarity with the real world of the author and reader. It is in this uncomplicated similarity that the idea of the veracity of such texts is rooted, because their referentiality is based on the principle of external concurrence between the textual and extra-textual worlds. In thematizations differing from this idea, our domestic tradition is wont to mention an increased degree of literariness or, seen negatively, a “writerly” manner of thematizing the world. Mráz’s evaluation of *Reštavrácia* is based on the idea of realism and realistic character outlined above.

Noge’s terminology, employing terms such as “matter-of-factness” and “life-like veracity”, also implies this concept of realism, although his analyses of Kalinčiak’s plots were more sophisticated than those of Mráz and he is more reserved. While not denying the “realistic effect” he attributes it to the “internal controversies and conflicts” of Slovak Romanticism. It seems, then, that this can be attributed to problems with the concept itself. The reference to controversies and conflicts functions here as an “escape hatch”, in

the absence of a more precise characterisation of the suspected “distinctiveness” of Kalinčiak’s fiction based, inter alia, on his period-specific notion that the “official definition deriving from Štúr is incorrect, and that the suppression of the individual does not serve general goals” (ibid., p. 401). After all, Noge was well aware that this was the result of the very distinctive “assertion of authorial individuality (...), the individuality of a romantic poet”, which “out of the entire body of Štúr’s prose can actually be attributed only to Kalinčiak, and it is more important to the understanding of his prose and its basic principles than the elements of realistic description” (ibid., p. 398). What Noge describes as the “assertion of individuality” or “factuality” and “veracity” can be viewed from a wholly different angle. To adopt this different viewpoint it is, however, necessary to briefly look at those works of Kalinčiak which were written in the historical genre.

The ways in which their stories are constructed is almost identical. They are based on the contrast between characters which, in terms of their functions within the plot, can be defined as the hero and the villain. The hero, at the centre of action, is characterised by his ability to fulfil the period role, as the essential expression of the interaction between the personal and historical within the historical genre (it is the fulfilment of this role that gives the character his position as hero); this ability is tested in the form of two simultaneously functioning versions of the “pledge of loyalty”: *loyalty to the motherland* and *loyalty in love*. The role of the villain involves the intent to frustrate the hero’s ability to accomplish his task and question his fulfilment of the pledge on both levels. Therefore, the villain is often also a rival in love. The plotlines critically examine the essential conditions of the way man functions in terms of being part of the social “we” as well as in terms of his individuality. The essential feature of the world of Kalinčiak’s historical fiction is the fact that the test or trial mentioned above takes the form of a *competition between the individual and the collective*, this competitive structure being one means of intensifying the destructive force of the image: in Kalinčiak’s words the “internal messiness of the kingdom of Hungary” In *Bozkovci*, Kalinčiak’s first (1842) historical novel, Jaroslav’s alleged romantic involvement with the wife of another man provides the first indication of things to come. Eventually, after a series of tragic individual fates of characters in his work between 1842 and 1870, there comes in the legend *Orava* an ahistorically-constructed form of the tragedy that affects human life at the family level – ahistorical because of the relationship to God as the essence of humanity, in the form of the thematization of the seemingly eternal dispute between Catholics and Protestants. The meaning of these works of fiction derives from the semantics of their plot endings. The tragic conclusions of *Bozkovci*, *Milkov hrob* (Grave of Milko), *Púte lásky* (The Pilgrimages of Love), *Mládenec slovenský* (The Slovak Swain), *Orava* and other works of fiction are the expression of Kalinčiak’s scepticism regarding the possibility of objectifying the ethos of high national symbolism in everyday (and on the collective level, national) life. Štúr and Hurban derived the above-mentioned ethos from the example of the stability (eternal presence, undaunted persistence) provided by the dominant features of Slovakia’s landscape (the Tatra mountains, the rivers Danube, Váh/Hron), while these “exemplarily positive” properties were mechanically attributed to the acts and life of the people: “*The spirit of the Slovaks is the spirit of the Tatras, a spirit that is original, powerful, massive,*

made of iron, like the Tatras themselves, massive, powerful, made of iron, vast and that is something of great proportionality and harmony" (Hurban, 1975, p. 138; see further Bílik, 2008). Consequently, Kalinčiak's fiction, as the result of the author's specific approach to reality, is a radical form of the message concerning the *essential weakness* of the social structure to which they are tied. Kalinčiak's scepticism, in the form of the expression of his distrust of the absolute validity of the ideological construction of the linear bond between the ethos of the natural features and the ethos of action – the life and survival of the Slovak folk, as presented by Štúr and Hurban in their concept of harmony of the country/natural body and man – has philosophical foundations.

The emphasis on harmony between the natural and the human, which was perceived by the key representatives of the pragmatic wing of Slovak Romanticism as the materialised spirit, points to possible connections with Schelling's philosophy of identity. Kalinčiak's cautious approach to the aforementioned mechanical harmonisation of nature and human action, presented (as opposed to Štúr, see Kalinčiak, 1949, p. 49) as a prosaically expressed need to test "*a constructed principle*", and thereby deal with the "*consequences ensuing therefrom and from it derive the possible*", highlights the moment of **reflection** and **reflexivity**. This is what forms the essence of what I have defined above as Kalinčiak's specific approach to reality. In his attitude to Štúr, this approach is reflected in Kalinčiak's reluctance to confer the status of art on Slovak folklore as a "folksy" form of literature. He contrasts immediacy and naiveté with a more mediated creative approach, in which the author's role is clearly visible. In terms of literary texts – this being a response to Hurban - this reflexive approach tends to take the form of a polemic with partisanship in art, of which Hurban was a proponent. The emphasis on reflexivity-- and this must be underlined especially in relation to those evaluations of Kalinčiak's work which place it in the vanguard of Slovak Realism -- is a supremely romantic gesture. It shows a scepticism towards a nature artificially constructed, to a systematic philosophy of history presented as linear progress, towards the monumental ideological construct of a harmonious ethos of natural monuments and human action as well as towards the postulation of the artistic and ethical immediacy or naturalness of Slovak folklore. For Kalinčiak reflexivity is what stands in opposition to all the above, as a process based on the notion that "*The closer a man is to himself, the closer he is to what is general*" (Kalinčiak, 1965, p. 273). That is to say, reflexion is the analysis of the self that is, at the same time, the analysis of the world and its various spiritual concepts. Linearity is juxtaposed to the "throbbing, rhythmical alternation of the stirrings of the spirit, described by Schlegel as two opposing movements, both the stepping of the Self out of itself and the recurrent return of the Self to itself" (Horyna, 2005, p. 174). It is this centrifugal – centripetal throbbing of the subject which is both creative – because "the Self leaving itself is creative" (ibid., p. 175) – and, at the same time, critically reflecting, self-aware (centripetal motion towards the Self is reflective-critical, ibid.) that is the basis of the concept defined as romantic irony, and represents a fundamental feature of Kalinčiak's fiction. For Kalinčiak adopted the symbolism (the Tatras, the Danube, the Váh, historical figures and periods) of both ideologues of the pragmatic wing of the Slovak Romanticism, but did not adopt their version of historical optimism (logical progress) as the essential principle driving human

history. Therefore the “testing” of the relationship between the ethos of symbol and its human objectification in his fiction should be considered polemical and at the same time as his own contribution to resolving the tension between “the spirit and objectivity”. Kalinčiak contrasts his questioning scepticism with the linearity (simple sequentiality or immediacy) of this relationship in Štúr and Hurban. This, along with the aforementioned concept of romantic irony is the starting point of his fiction. His scepticism is different from the one “known from Antiquity, and [it is also] fundamentally different from contemporary ideas of the ironic, carefree and destructive downplaying of things”. It is the home-grown irony of early German Romanticism, that “merges with the process of transcendental thinking [and] defines it as its eternally moving principle, capable of turning the flow of thought against its own course, expose it to itself, turn it into thinking of thinking [...] romantic irony opens up a world of new, total subjectivity” (Horyna, pp. 175–176). In accordance with the notion that “*The closer a man is to himself, the closer he is to what is general*”, i.e., in harmony with the principle of the centripetal – centrifugal course of reflection, Kalinčiak probes his own “way of thinking” as the thinking of self, as well as the thinking of his generation. On the one hand, this pulsating motion seemingly nudges him outside the circle of his contemporaries, confirming that “the ironist [...] is not someone who fits in with a group or collective, he must always rely on his own resources” (Horyna, p. 176). On the other hand it parametrically arranges his individual works of fiction into a meaningful whole, bringing it back into the context of Slovak romantic literature as a rational, sceptical-ironical corrective to its idealising and mythicising intentions. An essential part of all this is his *Reštavrácia*, even though the events it describes have a different time scale and the story has a happy ending.

A valuable starting point for a contemporary reading of this book is provided by its previous readings, especially those aspects of them that attempt to characterise its genre. It is interesting that Andrej Mráz and Július Noge paid so little attention to the genealogical message of the subtitle *Pictures from Recent Times*, or rather that they concentrated on its second part, i.e. on the definition of the time parameter of the theme (recent time). Ján Števček, on the other hand, adopted a different approach. He defined *Reštavrácia* as a “comic novel, because the characters appearing therein, are *unaware* that they provoke laughter, that they are laughable; their actions and utterances are perfectly natural” (Števček, 1989, p. 64; J. Š.’s emphasis). In addition to being guided by the book’s subject-matter Števček derives *Reštavrácia*’s genre from its epigraph, a quotation from Horace: *Dulce est desipere in loco* which the scholar renders as *Je príjemné zabaviť sa v pravú chvíľu*/It is pleasant to enjoy oneself once in a while.

I find attractive this gap or incompleteness on the one hand (in Mráz and Noge) and the seemingly radical and indisputable straightforwardness on the other (in fact, Števček first considers the genre of *Reštavrácia* at the end of the work, suggesting that “The meaning of this comic novel is contained in the epigraph from Horace”). Indefiniteness and uncertainty (“by using the term ‘pictures’ the author *probably* wants to hint at the loose composition of this work [of fiction]”, Noge, p. 442; my emphasis – R. B.), on the one hand and the authoritative definition on the other are extremes between which I can identify some room for reflection.

In her monograph *Božena Němcová: Příběhy – situace – obrazy*/Božena Němcová: Stories – Situations – Images, Jaroslava Janáčková also analyses the genre of Němcová's *Babička* (The Grandmother). It is the subtitle, *Obrazy z venkovského života* (Pictures from Rural Life) that was the starting point of her analysis. For our reading of *Reštavrácia* Janáčková's approach is an inspiration, because it convincingly places "pictures" within the context of literary genre in the period under examination. At the same time, Janáčková provides a convincing list of key genre characteristics of a "picture". While her findings are based primarily on Czech texts, given the close links that existed between the Czech and Slovak literary circles at the time, as well as the universality of key features of romantic poetics (including the genre characteristics of texts), her findings are also relevant to the Slovak literary material. In particular, Jaroslava Janáčková points out that the "choice of the 'picture(s)' as a genre seemed quite safe as far as the Czech audience was concerned" (p. 153), because the term 'picture' was familiar and comprehensible. "It had been widely used for over fifty years, from 1786 to 1850, in magazine production" (ibid.). It can thus be assumed that the Slovak reading public, too, had a similar awareness of the genre. Its ubiquity in this period is reinforced by texts and their subtitles of another key author of Slovak Romanticism, Jozef Miloslav Hurban: *Svadba krále velkomoravského: obrazy ze století devátého*/The Wedding of a Great Moravian King: Pictures from the Ninth Century, *Přítomnost' a obrazy zo života tatranského*/Presence and Pictures from Tatra Life, *Slovenskí žiaci, obrázky zo života*/Slovak Pupils: Pictures from Life. Thanks to their experience of reading magazines, the readers' awareness of the genealogical meaning of the term 'picture(s)' was multilayered, signifying both a role model, an example (i.e. through characters acting in a positive or negative way) and an image or parable (Janáčková, p. 153 et seq.) "In the following decade 'picture(s)' could introduce even a longer text [this is how Kalinčiak defines his *Knieža liptovské*/Prince of Liptov – R. B.] that promoted a clear patriotic or Slavonic ideology and contained a lively evocation of the setting. From the mid-1840s, the subheading 'picture(s)' designated a feature" (Janáčková, p. 154). It was focused, above all, on the thematization of the rural environment from the "position of folk Romanticism" (Kusáková, cited by Janáčková, p. 154). Thus the subheading 'picture(s)' cannot be ignored because it carries fixed genealogical meanings, and in the reader's consciousness it signified a specific convention between author and reader. It is a perception signal which, in the case of *Reštavrácia*, announces the fragmentariness of epic construction that aimed to fulfill a *pragmatic exemplificatory function* by privileging situation over continuous action. At the same time, through the "simulation of orality" (Janáčková, p. 153), this choice of genre facilitates the presence and involvement of the narrative subject: "*But you will tell me that even if you criss-cross the entire land of Hungary and wear your legs down to the knees, you shall not find province of Záhorie, although the land boasts as many provinces as there are weeks in the year (...) So, this happened in the province of Záhorie in the village of Radošovce*" (*Reštavrácia*). Here the presence of the narrator is manifested quite clearly, in fact in two ways. The first is represented by the narrator's explicit self-designation ("you will tell me"), the second by the construction of the "fictitious" *province of Záhorie* as a model place standing as an "example for all". This layer of expressed subjectivity reveals the

strategy of the text as a *pars pro toto*, signalling the presence of the author and his partial attitude to the story. While Kalinčiak's previous work was topographically characterised by a progression from the south to the north (Pest/Buda – Orava, or “from the Danube to the Tatras”), in this work the added westward – eastward direction (Radošovce – Bešeňová) topographically completes his epic picture of the Hungarian land.

As in the case of his “tales”, in Kalinčiak's “pictures from recent times” both the storylines and their conclusions must be taken into consideration. Whereas love in the stories with a tragic ending took the form of an unconsummated relationship, in *Reštvárčia* this principle is reversed. Love is consummated, but under conditions and in circumstances absent from his earlier fiction. The means of achieving and consummating a romantic relationship consist of deceit, fraud, corruption and lies, all this with the full awareness and participation of both lovers. This is a significant shift from the heroic model of the world to its mundane nature. While in the first model the problem of a soul “torn asunder” is resolved by renouncing the personal, in the other model the personal, i.e. love, serves as the means of realizing high social (and political) ambitions. The thrice-reiterated vow of Adam Bešeňovský, that “*if Štefan becomes Vice-Governor, I will give him my daughter as wife*”, becomes the driving engine for the duplicitous undertaking on the part of old Ondrej Levický. This culminates in Potocký's victory, Štefan's Vice-Governorship and the marriage of the young couple. The romantic dispute between emotion and will was resolved by *using emotion in order to assert the will*, thereby crowning the endeavour to achieve harmony between the two principles. In Kalinčiak's rational-sceptical interpretation, however, this cannot happen as a result of a heroic victory, but rather as a result of mundane, pragmatic action. However, its sheer pragmatism not only deprives such action of dramatic weight and grandeur, but also of its ethical dimension, since it tends to be amoral. The fatal rending apart persists, but this time it is hidden behind the rational, ironic curtain of authorial choice and points to the subjective anxiety of the author himself.

The basis Kalinčiak uses to embed this value in in the “national body and soul” is particularly interesting: he makes use of one of the hallmarks and symbols of continuity in the ideological system of national cultural memory: i.e. “folk wisdom”. The text is saturated with idiomatic expressions (proverbs, sayings), particularly the more pragmatic ones, such as “*a penny saved is a penny gained*”, “*charity begins at home*”... As demonstrated by František Miko, idioms play a dual role: that of naming, and that of value judgements. Their ability to “act as value judgements” stems from the layer of social memory generally referred to as tradition. Situating idioms at the level of naming brings to the fore the question of rigidity (constancy) of their content, while situating them in the realm of tradition, which is part of cultural memory, raises the question of their role as “folk utterance” which, together with their function as value judgements, justifies the use of the phrase “folk wisdom” mentioned above. Another significant characteristic that locates idioms in a particular place is their national and sometimes even regional peculiarities. An idiom is, therefore, a cultural text with a naming function and the intention of a value judgement often peculiar to a specific region or nation. At the same time, it is closely linked to real-life situations expressing them as a “metaphorical

alternative" (Miko, 1989), which can be said to be "typically used in the presence of reality itself" (idem., p. 103). This emphasis on the situational character of a linguistic utterance is congruent with the genre invariant of the "picture from life": idioms, as cultural designations are linked to the exemplifying intent of the 'picture' genre.

Learning the lesson of time-honoured generalizations of folk experience, Adam found a formerly rich widow and "*he made as much money as the devil made iron, for it grew for him as the liver grows in a wolf*" (p. 24). Similar principles are accepted by the Levický and Potocký families. In using these three families as *pars pro toto* for the "province of Záhorie" and "Hungarian land" the author underlines, above all, the absence of noble ardour, which stems from the confrontation of human suffering and the prospect of liberation, as well as moral deficit arising from this dramatic clash. This produces a sense of destruction that does not assume the form of death but of its ironic alternative: laughter as the result of self-destruction, self-mockery of the characters, linked to their specific life situations and actions. In this context it is worth noting that this is the case particularly in situations in which speech acts dominate. For epic progression in Kalinčiak arises from the power of linguistic meanings and from the conventions linked to the speech act. Narrative development both in *Reštavrácia* and in Kalinčiak's folk legends is triggered primarily by performative utterances, such as *promise, oath, commitment*, resulting in the subsequent test of the ability to keep or fulfil them in various difficult situations. This exploration of "life in language" through works of fiction is an explicit authorial gesture and signals a moral uncertainty. This, together with the time-tested transferability of the narrative pattern from one text to another demonstrates that the essence of Kalinčiak's model of epic fiction consists in reflection, judgement, and expression of opinion rather than in dynamic action. This is corroborated by the idioms used in *Reštavrácia*. They demonstrate the retentive capability of the language, as well as its potential to deposit under an economical designatory surface a value judgement extracted from the depth and vastness of the collective life experience. Speech acts, especially of the kind that involve keeping or not keeping one's word, highlight Kalinčiak's interest in the ethical aspect of individual and national existence. Hence the ontology of the text faces two directions: towards the life of the author himself and the people of "his time" and, at the same time, towards the text itself as an aesthetic phenomenon. On the latter level it is clear that this reinforces the literary quality of the way the world of the text is constructed and thus, contrary to the aforementioned claims concerning *Reštavrácia*'s realism, it is a solution that is "writerly".

Therefore this work does not exemplify Kalinčiak's realism but takes a romantic stance par excellence. The death (in the historical legends) and laughter (as another facet of the end in *Reštavrácia*) represent, above all, reflection – (re)cognition. He thematizes the ideal as "the desire that knows that it cannot be fulfilled" (Petříček, 1997). At this point, which is once again reminiscent of the pragmatic motivation of Kalinčiak's characters in *Reštavrácia*, it is time to return to the work's Horatian epigraph. I have already mentioned Števček's interpretation, which was intended to support the genealogical characteristic of *Reštavrácia* as a "comic novel". In searching for a translation of this quotation in different languages, however, I came across the following English

rendering: *It is pleasant to play the fool at times*. This can also be interpreted as meaning: Sometimes it is pleasant to make a fool of oneself. In this sense, what comes to the fore is the above-mentioned pragmatic dimension of human behaviour: calculation and cunning. For Ján Števček Horace's *desipere* meant, above all, *fooling around* or *letting one's hair down*. That is why he refers to it as a comic novel, and that is why Števček characterises Kalinčiak's characters as laughable and naïve. However, the language that the author puts into his characters' mouths is not indicative of any naivety. On the contrary. The characters do not usually speak in freely constructed sentences; they speak in proverbs, phrases closely tied to situations they describe. These are *culturally stabilized constructions, situations, pictures* of calculated, purposeful action driven by profit-seeking. This action strategy seamlessly accommodates the ability "to make a fool of oneself, if it pays off". The pleasure of this foolishness consists in the ultimate result, which brings profit.

Reštavrácia is not a comic novel. Its genre is defined by its subheading. It is a "picture" which demonstrates by means of the common folk's perception of life, fixed and stabilized in the language, how in *Reštavrácia* (and, in view of the exemplifying function of its *picture*, also in the world outside the novel) "the Slovak language, and Slovakness not in words but in the matter itself, is lodged" (Kalinčiak in a letter to J. K. Viktorin, *Lipa I.*, 1860, p. 130; cited by Noge, p. 354). At the same time it has to be said that *Reštavrácia* is not a parody aimed by the author at his own earlier texts (such a parodic intent was suggested by, e.g., Stanislav Šmatlák, 1988, p. 357). The fact that it represents an inverted version of stories with a tragic ending, while retaining the key plotlines of these stories, does not mean that it parodies them. *Vis à vis Reštavrácia* the "legends" function as a paradigm of authorial and reader processes and expectations linked to them. This is the key to understanding *Reštavrácia*. It is, as Frank Kermode put it, a reinforced "sceptical modification of paradigmatic fiction" (Kermode, 2007, p. 24). It eliminates the linearity of direction towards death as the inevitable end and is connected with the birth of a modern "concept of *crisis*" which perceives the present "as time in-between" (*ibid.* p. 25) It is continuously imbued with the awareness of "the End as happening at every moment (...) No longer imminent, the end is immanent" (*ibid.*). In the case of *Reštavrácia* the immanency of the end takes the form of ethical inadequacy and the destruction of what is regarded as the highest value. It is a radical deconstruction of a major systematic concept and the instrument is reflection, or "scholarly scepticism", as the basis for Romantic irony. Kalinčiak's work is most commonly compared with that of Jozef Miloslav Hurban. And rightly so, because the two authors provide basic and, for Slovak fiction, thematizing and even foundational concepts of the Slovak past. Kalinčiak's dominant method is the problematization and examination of the exemplifying power of the key symbolic elements (natural scenery, language and folklore) that formed the ideological system of a newly constructed cultural memory. Hurban's method is their unproblematic *canonisation*. Both are legitimate. The former attempts to communicate "what we must not forget" using the model of rational problematization of examples in an ideologically postulated glorious past, whereas the latter uses a model in which the past is established in its unequivocal glory and exemplarity. The former relates to the author's experienced world as a *recurrent problem* (it is a polemic against the linearity of the

ideological postulation), the latter as a *myth*, which forms an ideal backdrop to the then still-imperfect world. Hurban's is an ideologically pragmatic approach. By contrast, Ján Kalinčiak's approach, which this paper focuses on and which is also corroborated by the "pictures from recent times" entitled *Reštavrácia* is an aesthetic method and with it the ironist Kalinčiak opens a new chapter in modern Slovak literature: that of aesthetically constructed fiction – and not just historical fiction.

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