

The Perlmann crisis of the academic world

PAULÍNA ŠEDÍKOVÁ ČUHOVÁ – MARTINA KUBEALAKOVÁ

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Pascal Mercier. *Perlmann's Silence*. Academic novel. Genre and subgenre.
Burnout syndrome. Crisis of the academic world.

The article discusses the crisis of academia depicted in the novel *Perlmann's Schweigen* by Pascal Mercier (1995; Eng. trans. *Perlmann's Silence*, 2012). It also examines the question of the novel's genre classification. Perlmann's burnout is represented by a web of motifs – such as losing one's sense of purpose in regard to teaching and research work, competitive struggles such as popularity contests and number of publications, the inaccessible nature of the humanities, the commercialization of research, the contradiction between the philosophy of science and the practice of research work. We consider these to be distinctive because in the 1990s the repeating motifs unmasked the *internal* decay of the academic tradition along with the identity of the academic teacher or professor. It showed how the academic environment reacts to new trends in university education by distorting academic values and scientific research. In effect, this problem emerged because quality was exchanged for quantity, scientific respectability for social prestige and popularity. Thus the motifs are specifically concerned with the decline caused by the capitalization of academia, research work, and the subsequent thinking of teachers within the profession.

Paulína Šedíková Čuhová
Department of German Studies
Faculty of Arts
Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica
Slovak republic
paulina.cuhova@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-4158-3532

Martina Kubealaková
Department of Slovak Literature and
Literature Studies
Faculty of Arts
Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica
Slovak republic
martina.kubealakova@umb.sk
ORCID: 0000-0002-1620-6412

This article is focused on the image of the academic world as constructed by the character of Philipp Perlmann in Pascal Mercier's prose debut, *Perlmann's Silence* (*Perlmanns Schweigen*, 1995; Eng. trans. *Perlmann's Silence*, 2012).¹ We are interested in the picture of the crisis within academia as well as with the academic as an individual, which Mercier had depicted by means of a university model even before the Bologna declaration was adopted. Furthermore, our interest lies in answering the question of the novel's genre classification, since Mercier's prosaic debut is a part of the tradition of the German university novel and, at the same time, a part of the discourse on the crisis of the humanities and, above all, on the crisis of academia and with academic teachers. The crisis of the humanities was not a new topic at the time of the novel's publication; it was debated both socially and academically and its roots go deep into the past. Although the emphasis of the crisis has shifted, the common denominator has remained the conceptual metaphor of usefulness and pertinence, especially in the context of social change. The authors consider the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and the emergence of a modern type of university – the so-called Humboldtian model – to be one of the turning points in the crisis of the humanities, which also led to its renaissance.² The Humboldtian model of the university has also created a different historical background and a different university discourse in Germany than in the Anglo-American context. One of the fundamental differences is that in the Anglo-Saxon systems, the university is far more connected to everyday life. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, pressure for a more utilitarian view of education and research began to increase with an emphasis on their pragmatic application; we also discuss education in the era of neoliberalism. From the period up to 1995, many academics have decisively entered this debate, for example, C. P. Snow in his essay *Two Cultures* (1959, printed 1961). Criticism of the modern educational system (closing the mind) as opposed to classical education (opening the mind) was also raised by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Pierre Bourdieu in *Homo Academicus* (1988), for example, criticizes elitism and reflects on academic autonomy in relation to the commercialization of education. John Law writes about how modern societies organize and structure the social order (1994). In the German-speaking territories, the importance of the humanities in relation to social critique is considered, for example, by Jürgen Habermas in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981; Eng. trans. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1984).³

Elaine Showalter in her book *Faculty Towers* claims that “academic novels are rarely in sync with their decade of publication; most reflect the preceding decade's issues, crises, and changes” (2005, 12–13). Pascal Mercier's *Perlmann's Silence* has proven the exact opposite, as the relevance of its themes has only grown over time. The type of academic represented by Philipp Perlmann and the ways in which he sees academia and its future remain relevant across Europe, including Slovakia.⁴

PETER BIERI'S CRITICISM OF THE POST-BOLOGNA ACADEMIC WORLD

Pascal Mercier was the pseudonym of Peter Bieri, who worked as a professor of philosophy at the German universities of Marburg, Bielefeld, and Berlin. As a writer, he became famous for his five extensive novels. *Perlmann's Silence*, which he published while still an academic, was his debut novel. It was only with his next novel, *Der Klavierstimmer* (The piano tuner, 1998), when he revealed his real identity behind the pseudonym Pascal Mercier. His breakthrough work was the novel *Der Nachtzug nach Lissabon* (2004; Eng. trans. *Night Train to Lisbon*, 2008), which was translated into almost 20 languages and made into a film.

After the release of *Perlmann's Silence*, Peter Bieri managed to last another twelve years in the academic world. Disgusted, he gave up his professorship at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2007 and retired from academia altogether. Seven years later the journalist Jürgen Kaube stated that Bieri “left the department in protest against the university’s policy, to which science is alien” (2014, n.p.). According to the German philosopher Holm Tetens (2023), Bieri began distancing himself from the academic world of the university and from academic philosophy even before the publication of his literary debut *Perlmann's Silence* in 1995. Thus this novel may be viewed as the outcome of a long contemplation on academic work and dissatisfaction with the way the system functioned:

The most important motif of Bieri’s departure from the academic philosophy is already present in his first novel: a reproach that conceptual and argumentative clarity can become autotelic and, as a result, it mainly goes past the existential dimension of philosophical formulation of questions. Although people speak, they say nothing – that is an important motif of Bieri. (Tetens 2023, n.p.)⁵

The departure from the academic world and academic philosophy, according to Tetens, did not happen quietly and without conflicts. Even in an obituary made public by the Freie Universität Berlin, Tetens points out that Bieri “often felt misunderstood and not respected enough by his colleagues. But he did not make it easy for his colleagues either” (2023, n.p.).

In one of his few interviews on this topic, Bieri explains his decision in this way: “The situation at the university makes me upset. It’s not only about money and company identity. I am devastated by the mentality of the university” (Anonymous 2007, n.p.). Bieri’s reaction to the state of the university has much to do with the Bologna reform of higher education, which was unpopular in academic circles even then, and often blamed for the decline of the Humboldtian ideal of education. He was extremely disappointed by the changes that followed the reform and by the pressure the academic environment exerted on researchers: “A professor is nothing but a prison guard of modules now. I spend hours solving bureaucratic problems of the students...” (n.p.). The Bologna Process was not criticized only by Bieri but also by several other notable academics. In his critique of the functioning of the university, Bieri highlights another serious fact – the expectation that professors should acquire money for research, which he considers an outright disgrace in the humanities. The criticism mostly dealt with the commercialization and the economization of education, its standardization,

uniformity, schematism, enormous rates of bureaucracy, heightened pressure created by competition and third-party financing, and restriction of academic freedom.

PERLMANN'S SILENCE AND VIVAT ACADEMIA

German literary criticism in that period devoted little attention to Mercier's debut, and not even the mystery surrounding the authorship of the pseudonymous novel could pull the critics in. The readers were left with only the brief information that Pascal Mercier is a Swiss author and an associate professor in linguistics living in Genoa, Italy. This information, combined with the theories about the novel's main character, prompted the creation of even more theories.⁶

When it comes to Mercier's debut, the work is characterized by the discussion of its genre classification. It can be viewed as a philosophical novel because the main character is enquiring into ethics and morality, the issue of experience, free will and oppression, and the nature and motivation of human behavior. Time and the experience of the present⁷ also play a crucial role, as well as the question of identity,⁸ memories, or the meaning of the process of remembering in relation to language.⁹ The novel also bears the attributes of a psychological novel; after all, the novel is dominated by the auctorial-personal narrator of Philipp Perlmann and his personal perspective. Friedman Apel assesses the novel as "a self-reflective, philosophical-analytical, criminal, and adventure novel in line with the highest artistic tradition" (1995, n.p.). In connection to *Perlmann's Silence*, the term "university novel" is also mentioned.

It is important to note that relatively few studies on the term "university novel" have been written in the German-speaking environment. The borders, the definitions, and even the term itself are thus not precisely defined. Among the most known and extensive publications devoted to the problem are the works of Victoria Stachowicz (2002) and Alexander Košenina (2003). Until 2009, the genre "university novel" had not even been incorporated into the *Handbuch der literarischen Gattungen* (Handbook of literary genres, Lamping 2009) as a single entry. Nowadays it is only briefly described as a variant of satire.¹⁰ The change was brought about via Vojtěch Trombik's doctoral thesis (2017), which became the most cited secondary literature on the subject for the whole of the German-speaking territories. The author successfully provides a more nuanced perspective and contributes to the university novel being perceived as a valid genre.

The choice of the university/academy as the main setting of the novel is, without a doubt, a common denominator of the various attempts at defining the given genre. However, such a narrow view excludes novels that do not take place in such an environment, even though they depict its effects on the lives of the characters. Defining the genre in this way – that a university novel is a novel that takes place at a university – is, for example, defended by John E. Kramer (2000);¹¹ however, we consider this definition too limiting. On the contrary, Wolfgang Weiss and Vojtěch Trombik state that the borders of the definition should be broadened – the term "university novel" should thus denote a whole university microcosm that is quite inaccessible to the rest of the world but with all the attributes of academic life quite intimately depicted. This characterization also includes the literary debut of Pascal

Mercier. In this case, the space of the university cannot be a defining generic characteristic. The texts do not always have to be situated at a university; they can depict individual aspects of the life of a researcher/professor/academic that transfers the university experience to other parts of life. The texts can also address a coming to terms with the academic environment/institution of the university, wherever they take place (see Moseley 2007). Thus, it means that the influence of the academic environment on the plot of the novel is more important than the environment itself.¹²

In general, one might say that the university novel tells a story that is situated in an academic environment and depicts the university in some way. Its characters are professors, associate professors, academics, and students. Sabrina Deigert, too, considers all novels that are predominantly about everyday academic life to be university novels (2019, 64). It seems that defining the genre is quite difficult, as noted by literary scholar Wieland Schwanebeck: "In the course of a historical survey, it should become clear that an all-encompassing definition [...] under which all textual examples could be summarised must remain a utopian goal, not least because even the most inventive representatives have hardly set thematic boundaries" (2012, 53).

Since, according to Wolfgang Weiss, the university novel always refers explicitly to the university in social reality, "its most important constitutive trait is that the essential features of the institution are incorporated into the overall fictional outline of the world in the novel, whether in a realistic mimesis that may move towards an exact description of the real university or in a stylized, model representation, including caricature exaggeration or satirical distortion" (1994, 20). He also claims that "university as a subject of a novel has never taken root in German literature" (1995, 447) and is aware of the issue of defining the genre. He sees a possible solution, nevertheless, in defining the protagonists of these novels: "this category of novels does not have a typical hero like the *picaro* but alternately focuses on students, associate professors in precarious positions, grey professors, or guests of the faculty" (1994, 20; emphasis in the original). Barbara Himmelsbach, too, points out that in a university novel, not only "students, teachers (professors or associate professors, temporary or full-time staff), visiting professors, lecturers, *writers-in-residence*, or even non-scholarly employees of the university may be at the center of the action, so that the themes dealt with in the novel may differ very strongly due to the different perspectives" (1992, 5; emphasis in the original).

The definition of the genre is made more difficult by the various thematic foci of the novels and the overlap with several other literary genres. The themes and plotlines that the authors implement have many varieties, and they almost always surpass the borders of the genre.¹³ They also fulfil many functions. The most popular themes include intrigues and relationships, criticism of institutions, refusal of the system and its methods, depiction of research, social structures of the university, disappointment caused by the academic world, or sexual harassment.¹⁴ Philosophical topics, the issues of identity and integrity, or the isolation from the outside world are also among the most frequent themes.

Vojtěch Trombik comments on the genre classification of *Perlmann's Silence* when regarding Mercier's debut along with *How are you, Mister Angst?* (2008) by Joachim Zelter as one of the best new *psychological* (emphasis added) university novels. Additionally, Trombik considers both works as “works on the border with the *experimental* university novel” (2017, 17; emphasis in the original). The definition is further developed by Markus Fischer, who describes Mercier's novel as a “research novel” (2020, 53). At the same time, he also emphasizes that among university novels, research itself is only rarely portrayed as the main theme. He legitimizes his description by explaining that the theme of academic research is at the foreground in this particular novel. For us, Mercier does not hierarchize the motifs of academia but rather creates a web out of them, each motif playing an important role because it contributes to a change in the characters – their thoughts, experiences, opinions, and actions – that are unique both to male and female academics. The complementary research part of the university professor's work is portrayed in the novel as burnout. Research, presumably as meant by Fischer, turns into a fascination with the language, the content of a thought, particularly in regard to the translation of Leskov's text. In this case, however, it is not the essence of the research work that is at stake, but the discovery of a new, interesting, and as yet unexplored activity by Perlmann, in which the translation replaces academic research. In terms of this way of thinking, the label “research novel” is debatable.

Several reviewers of the novel emphasize Mercier's mastery of believable depictions of the academic world. For example, Gerhard Beckmann argues that it is “the most important university novel in contemporary German-language literature” (1998, n.p.), and he views it as an “example of the present deterioration of academic communication”. Even Olaf Kramer (2008) draws attention to the portrayal of the position of science in the academic world. In her review, Petra Frerichs (2021) emphasizes the excellent handling of character psychologization and the construction of the novel's ensemble.

Because Mercier's novel depicts the academic world and its inaccessibility, the protagonist and most of the characters in the novel are academics or researchers, and they allude to the inaccessible academic world. The work, however, can be further characterized as an academic novel with psychological, philosophical, and criminal novel components.¹⁵ The motif of the intended murder stems directly from the academic environment and its functioning; it consists of immense remorse, feelings of shame, fear of being exposed as a plagiarist, and of the loss of reputation within the tight linguistic circles depicted. All of these elements almost lead the main character to the murder of his colleague Leskov and his own subsequent suicide. The psychologization of professional burnout and of sheer exhaustion, therefore, takes on an absolute existential dimension. It is from this perspective that Graham Reid reflects on the novel, describing *Perlmann's Silence* as a psychological thriller (2012). He even identifies a near-Hitchcockian tension within it. Peter Bieri himself has stated that he “was both shocked and amused to discover the extent of criminal energy present in Philipp Perlmann” (2011a, n.p.).

THE PERLMANN CRISIS

The novel starts with a description of the moment of psychological crisis of the narrator, linguistics professor Philipp Perlmann: he has nothing to say, there is an unbearable silence, there is a sudden blindness to signs and meanings, the appearance of anxiety and the feeling of being unconvincing and boring, the inability to concentrate, the feeling of irreversibility, the loss of faith in the meaning of academic activity, the loss of a sense of excellence, the disinterest in methodical investigation, forgetfulness, the feeling of exclusion, wasted time, even dead time. Against all of this stands a generous budget, a meeting of the top experts in a pleasant location without concern for the expense, public interest, a product or even a committed professor. The causes of Perlmann's crises are three-fold, of which the latter two are professionally related: 1. the death of a partner, 2. the feeling of academic stagnation, as if "he had nothing to say" (Mercier 2011, 3), and 3. the increasing contempt for academia and the loss of faith in the importance of academic work. In this state of mind, Perlmann recklessly accepts an offer from the Olivetti company to organize and lead a multi-week linguistic symposium at a luxurious hotel in Liguria, where he is expected to give a lecture on his current research. The sponsoring company is "especially charmed by the possibility of being able to promote a project that had something to do with the company's products, while it also went far beyond it, by taking in questions of general interest, of significance to the whole of society, so to speak" (Mercier 2011, 5). By moving the setting from the university to a luxury resort, Mercier again thematizes the affect of commercialization on the humanities.

The text is interspersed with reflections on translation and its nature. It is Perlmann's translation of a text by his Russian colleague Leskov, entitled "On the Role of Language in the Formation of Memories", that becomes central to the novel, through which we are confronted with several philosophical problems (the philosophy of time, the philosophy of remembering) as well as with the philosophy of language itself. Paralyzed by the expectations of the academic world, Perlmann hides in a hotel room and seeks refuge in the translation of the Russian text, as a result of which he becomes more and more entangled in a vortex of lies. The lack of time to write the brilliant introductory lecture expected by everyone and doubts about his own abilities lead him to plagiarism when he decides to appropriate the text of the Russian colleague, translate it into German, and present it in front of his colleagues. Plagiarism is considered one of the greatest sins in the academic and scientific world and often means academic suicide, since it utterly undermines the identity and reputation of the researcher/professor. Therefore, Perlmann also addresses a current and frequently cited practice that concerns researcher/professors and increasingly students, which has apparently been around for a long time but to an unknown extent.

However, it is not Perlmann's intention to proceed in this way; he never intended to present a plagiarized text to his colleagues; the problem lies in his doubts about his own abilities. He feels that everyone expects him to give a brilliant and ground-breaking preliminary lecture in which he will report on his current research. Clearly, Perlmann's motivation for translating Leskov's text is not to commit

an academic crime; the translation is merely an escape and a flight from his inability to write his own paper. If he later decides to use the translation and pass the text off as his own, this act must be understood as a way out of immense pressure and a product of desperation (which, of course, in no way excuses the possible violation of academic ethics).

Autobiographical details, rooted mainly in the experience of the philosopher Peter Bieri, are a characteristic feature of Mercier's writing. He built his academic career on specific philosophical (epistemological) and psychological questions. Later, he decided to prematurely terminate this career. Mercier's dive into the academic world is interesting because it casts doubts on the mechanisms of its functioning. It was these very mechanisms that brought the sensitive main character, Philipp Perlmann, to a point where anxiety and panic took over, not allowing him to evaluate situations accurately. The suffering Perlmann experiences stem mainly from his hyperbolical constructions of expected social situations, in which he fears not only other people but also his own failure and incompetency. He thinks:

They would look at him expectantly as he sat at the front, and then, after a prolonged, unbearable silence and a breathless halting of time, they would know: he had nothing to say. Ideally, he would have left again immediately, without giving a destination, without an explanation, without an apology. For a moment the impulse to flee was as violent as a physical pain. [...] He couldn't come up with a convincing excuse. To give the true reason would be impossible. Even if he could summon the courage, it would sound like a bad joke. (3)

Perlmann, who knows from the very beginning that he has nothing to say, realizes that his whole reputation depends on how well he corresponds with the image of the prominent and respected scholar he is believed to be. When the emphasis on the quality and originality of academic works shifts to quantity, he also feels pressure to constantly produce new works. As his years holding an academic position pass, Perlmann becomes more and more the image of what other people want him to be. In effect, he loses himself, growing further and further away from his research work. He does not feel "present" within it, and he doubts that he ever did:

If only he could feel that in his academic work as well. It seemed strange to him, but he no longer knew if it had ever been so. If it had, it was a long time ago, in a time when he had not yet known the paralysis that had tormented him for so long. By now he had the feeling that he didn't really know what it was like: doing academic work. [...] [H]e had lost his faith in the importance of academic work – that belief that impelled him in the past, which had made daily discipline possible... (10)

In contrast to the natural sciences, the humanities do not have a corrective that would determine which theory is correct and which is not. It is often just a matter of which theory gets accepted. In this way Perlmann points out a certain inaccessibility of the humanities and of the academic world itself. While reading the novel, one becomes aware of the academic world as something of a self-contained circular movement, a world that rarely has impulses from the outside. Perlmann is exhausted and more:

Making an academic discovery: he simply had no need for it now. Methodical investigation, analysis and the development of theories, hitherto a constant, a given, self-evident

element in his life and in a sense its center of gravity – he had utterly lost interest in it, and so completely that he was no longer sure he understood how it could once have been otherwise. If someone spoke of a new idea, the beginnings of a notion, he could sometimes still listen; but only for a short time, and its elaboration interested him not at all. It felt like wasted time. (11)

In contrast to such an “inaccessible science”, Mercier puts forward the character of Giorgio Silvestri, who works directly in a psychiatric clinic, where he studies speech disorders as expressions of mental disorders in schizophrenics. Through Silvestri, Mercier also brings into the text the real-life figure of the Italian psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and psychotherapist Geatan Beneditti, who is considered a pioneer in the psychoanalytic treatment of psychoses.

The mental state mentioned at the beginning can be described as a burnout syndrome. Along with frustration, the burnout syndrome is common in the real lives of both academics and the non-academics. Perlmann himself realizes that the joy and energy he felt at the beginning of his academic career have completely vanished. The reference to the stagnation of research in the humanities among some of his colleagues is also alluded to in the novel. There is a mention of colleagues who do not publish anything anymore or of those who keep revitalizing older research. Philipp Perlmann is aware that a number of professors who have not written or contributed anything new for a long time are nevertheless able to continue to exist in universities, and with due flair too. In this case, Mercier lends a critical voice to the Spanish linguist Evelyn Mistral.

The competitive struggle in academia is also strongly thematized. It is manifested in Perlmann’s efforts to win awards or invitations to guest lectures at renowned universities. However, the competitive struggle also takes place elsewhere – at the level of popularity with students. Thus, for example, Perlmann’s colleague Berghoff envies Perlmann not only because he spends most of the semester in an expensive hotel in Liguria, but also because Perlmann’s lecture halls are full of students, which is proof of his popularity. In his lectures, Perlmann, however, is aware of his failure and the difference compared to when he started his academic career; he is conscious of his sense of distance from his chosen field; he performs rhetorical exercises instead of a deeper immersion in the subject matter. It is not only in the field of research that Perlmann realizes that he has nothing to say; he feels that even the students – the driving force behind his work – have ceased to interest him.

Mortimer Robinson Proctor’s comments on the British university novel also applies to Mercier’s novel:

Thus the university novels have always had to a large extent the quality of the documentary about them. [...] They have recorded, with surprising accuracy, the issues of reform, the temper of the reformers, and the astonishing changes they wrought; perhaps as accurately and certainly more vividly than could any memoir of official account of the most important era of university reform that England know. (1977, 187)

In hindsight, the crisis of the academic world as viewed by Perlmann was affirmed by André Bosse, a critic and journalist whose article “Uni ohne Sex-Appeal” (2012) begins with the clear statement that the Bologna declaration killed the university

novel; the credit system, employability, and directives of effectiveness destroyed academia and changed it into a “boring stress” (in langweiligen Stress).

The way in which the crisis of the professor and academia is thematized in the novel is related to structure. Both the causes and the manifestations of the crisis are revealed right at the beginning, so we do not follow either their gradual unveiling or their escalation. When Perlmann returns to the causes, it leads him to repeat his thoughts, and when he delves into the manifestations of the crisis – that is, into himself – we observe a sort of “feeling schematicism” that slows the plot down, even stalls it. The crisis of academia and the individual, as Mercier calls and describes it, may form the basic blueprint of the novel, but it is the repetitiveness that undermines the persuasiveness of its depiction and makes Perlmann an unsympathetic, self-absorbed egocentric, who compares himself to others and criticizes them. However, we believe that the novel’s aesthetic focus lies in another motif – the intellectual rescue of Philipp Perlmann from the catastrophe to which Perlmann’s situation could lead. It is the aforementioned passion for translation, which turns into fascination and thus allows the author not only to fictionalize his philosophical views and thinking, but also to develop a variety of motifs related to the philosophy of language or identity, as well as the pitfalls, challenges, and specifics of translation work. The latter is submitted to a reflexive and critical inspection. Throughout the process of translation, the poorly functioning academic system is also revealed. Had Mercier not chosen the motif of translation, he would not have been able to show the difference between the academic (no longer creative) activity and the joy the translation brings.

The “space” of translation – the text within the text – makes discourse about academia and the self-destructive aspect of such working structures possible. This aesthetic-discursive strategy serves to represent the hero’s thought-world. In dialogue, such a detailed depiction would be impossible or at least extremely problematic. Mercier has succeeded in a specific visualization through words – a paradox, given that the title mentions silence while the narrative itself represents a constant process of working with words – and thanks to it he has created a specific dimension of suggestive reality.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the web of motifs associated with Perlmann’s burnout, which form the essence of genre classification, another web of motifs in Mercier’s novel is both parallel and prospective. These motifs are related to a newfound fascination with translation, a “difficult” task (as it often appears in the novel’s text) that, however, fails to motivate Perlmann to work intellectually after such a long time.¹⁶ Although we could find many faults with the novel, such as the unconvincing escalation of the causes of the professional crisis, the repetition of the protagonist’s thoughts and emotional states, the emotional schematicism, Perlmann’s alter ego in the form of Leskov’s handwriting as a means of expressing a variety of philosophical reflections (Mercier uses the same compositional element in both *Night Train to Lisbon* and *Gewicht der Worte* – The weight of words, 2020), it, nevertheless, fascinates us

with the realism of its fictional world. Certainly, the planning of the murder and subsequent suicide may appear to be merely a fictional gradation, but Perlmann's feelings and experience of professional crisis are authentic.

Peter Bieri was not a visionary; he was just sensitive to the changes in German higher education, which anticipated the intense discussions on higher education reforms in Germany in the 1990s.¹⁷ If Perlmann might have appeared to the Slovak readership in the 1990s as a solitary eccentric¹⁸ – after all, even Graham Reid (2012) wrote of him as “an unsympathetic figure who talks too much about an increasingly fragile ego” –, 30 years later we would find in our academic space not only many Perlmanns but a whole panopticon of Mercier's characters.

Ulrike Dubber's (1991) description of the university novel as a “fictionalized sociology” particularly stands out in relation to *Perlmann's Silence*. The novel was written at a time of heated debates about the future of higher education in Europe (even though the campus novel is above all an Anglo-American affair). There were also debates about the social significance of the humanities. The university novel is heavily conditioned by how universities function (and the authors know how they function from their own experience) and thus reflects the real crisis of the people working in this sphere. Perlmann's crisis of academia might be specific in that in the 1990s it unmasks the very internal disintegration of the academic tradition and the identity of the professor. The academia has responded to new trends in university education by distortion of academic values and deformation of academic research because it has exchanged quality for quantity and academic respectability for social prestige and popularity.

According to Bieri, education shapes the cultural identity of the individual and the cultural identity of the community through the acquisition of the mother tongue and foreign languages (2011b). The distortion of the traditional Humboldtian university in favor of corporate education necessarily leads not only to a crisis of academic tradition but also to a crisis of cultural identity of both the individual and the community, a fact that Pascal Mercier warned us about three decades ago.

NOTES

¹ Even though *Perlmann's Silence* was published 30 years ago, it appeared only two years ago in a Slovak translation by one of the co-authors of the present article, Paulína Šedíková Čuhová (*Perlmannovo mlčanie*, 2023).

² In Germany, for example, it is the work of Schelsky (1957), in which the author contemplates the significance of the humanities in the education of postwar Germany.

³ After the novel's release, the other works are Readings 1999; Nussbaum 2010; Collini 2012; Newfield 2016, and others; in Germany, we would particularly like to mention Münch 2007 or Liessmann 2014, 2017.

⁴ The penetration of neoliberal politics into the Slovak education system has begun to be described only recently. Ondrej Kaščák and Branislav Pupala's *Škola zlatých golierov* (School of the golden collars, 2012) is a compelling critique of the one-sided neoliberal redirection of European education. See also Kaščák and Pupala 2011; Višňovský 2014; Kaščák 2016; Golema 2017; Passia 2018, and Jančovič 2019.

- ⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German are by the present authors.
- ⁶ Pascal Mercier, in one of the interviews that took place after his identity as Peter Bieri was revealed, expressed that he is not Perlmann although both have an academic background (more detail in Saltzwedel 1998).
- ⁷ Bieri published his dissertation on the philosophy of time in 1972.
- ⁸ As a philosopher, he also addressed the question of identity – personal, mental, intellectual, cultural, affective, linguistic, spiritual, etc. – in *Wie wollen wir leben?* (2011a), for example.
- ⁹ Both Peter Bieri and Pascal Mercier are fascinated by language. Yet again in *Wie wollen wir leben?* (2011) he argues that language is the key to the emergence of personal identity; he reflects on language blindness and language vigilance, on the role of the mother tongue and the acquisition of foreign languages.
- ¹⁰ By comparison, the campus novel appeared as a term in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* in 1985.
- ¹¹ Definitions in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1991, 30) and *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (2013, n.p.) correspond to the tradition of the campus novel in the Anglo-American setting but are not applicable in the European context; its application would disqualify many works as campus novels.
- ¹² Oksana Blashkiv writes: “The end of the twentieth century produced images of academics who were anxiously unable to adapt to the new requirements the welfare university imposed on their lives and identities. Talking about the ‘university man’ today presupposes awareness of not only the historical and literary background, but also social and cultural diversity of the globalized world, which has a direct bearing on his/her academic identity” (2018, 152).
- ¹³ Very often it is a cross-genre shift towards the crime university novel, for example novels by Nora Dorn.
- ¹⁴ For example, *Die Brandung* (1985) by Martin Walser, *Auditorium panopticum* (1991) by Kerstin Hensel, *Der Campus* (1995) by Dietrich Schwantze, *Magistra* (1997) by Monika Bohn, *Die Intrige* (2001) by Dorothee Nolte, *Die Schatten der Ideen* (2008) by Klaus Modick.
- ¹⁵ A similar case in Slovak literature is that of the literary scholar and writer Stanislav Rakús (Součková, 2022).
- ¹⁶ For importance of the text in terms of the motif of translation see Čuhová and Kubealaková 2023.
- ¹⁷ On the evaluation processes that started around 1994 in Germany, see Rehburg 2006.
- ¹⁸ Considering the history of the Anglo-American university novel, Weiss depicts the manifestations of frustration and inferiority among humanities scholars, even leading to suicide (1994, 119–127).

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