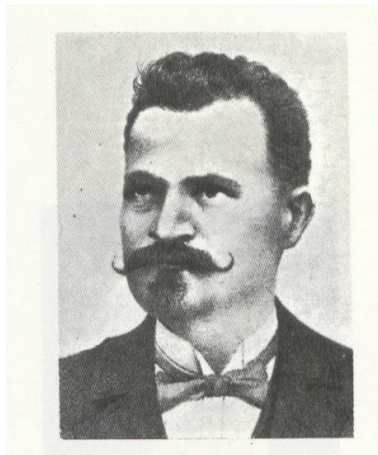


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Analysis of a Catalysis (Or: Analysis of 15 "Unimportant" Pages from an Important Novel)

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Introduction

The following text is an attempt to clear up the usage of the notorious formula from the literary theory "unity of subject matter and form". We'll try to do that by analyzing the behavior of catalysis. (The term catalysis is taken from the renowned article by Roland Barthes: "Introduction in the structural analysis of narrating").

In order to avoid the oddly enough resistant human characteristic —extensive explaining, we'll confine our interest to a short excerpt of 15 pages of a novel by the Croatian writer Janko Leskovar (1861-1944). The short novel that we are to deal with has 105 pages, and is titled "Fallen Castles" (first published 1896), and our task are the 15 pages, from 47 to 62.

We've chosen 15 pages that in the whole of the novel seem completely unimportant, even redundant: it is exactly that part of the book that an average reader skips; we can illustrate that visually by absent gaze at the margins of the book. The reader's attention at these 15 pages weakens, after the reader notices that nothing important happens there.

The hero, Pavle, meets several people unimportant from the aspect of the story and he starts conversations that don't lead to anything important for the plot; he finds himself in series of unnecessary situations; the reader comes across a line of images from his neighborhood.

According to Jacobson, this denseness of narration is the first sign that we're reading a work from the realistic genre. (This is a novel from the "psychological realism").

Our question is if each of these meetings (predications) that the hero has according to their order and format, i.e. formally, are meaningful in respect to the subject matter of the novel. Does it make any difference that Pavle meets the locksmith first and then his uncle or are these events just accidentally one next to another? Our elaboration will show that every single event in the novel according to their order and intensity have their own concrete function in the book. In other words, this text will prove that event order (even the most superfluous at first sight) produces certain features with the hero by means of elements of the discursive texture – signifiers, and the hero who is bearer of a certain idea – signified. The question is: how does the text produce certain characteristics with the hero?

What's going on?

This is a novel about a man between two women, and our 15 pages present only the man and none of the women. It is not surprising then, that the impatient reader is interested in seeing which woman Pavle chooses, keeping in mind that "each life has its boring paths and each book its poring parts" (Roussell) in a Sergei Bubka manner, the reader jumps over the part, not reading it at all. But the jump proves to be wrong move, since these pages hold the key to understanding Pavle's choice (or unwillingness to choose) and his women. For the unfamiliar reader we are obliged to present this man, seriously affected by problems and his encounter first with the first and then the other woman. The beginning of the novel reveals 27 year old Pavle already having experienced the turbulent encounters with women. Those scenes are described retrospectively and therefore stand apart from the narrative present, but represent the subject of our analysis.

Our broken Pavle is a stout, tall and attractive young man with pointed beard and tanned face. The cultural codex of that time defines him a modern man (because of the shape of his beard) with a non-aristocratic (rural) background (because of his sun-tanned face). Pavle possesses spiritual qualities as well. He is musically gifted and among his other talents, he is very good at economic issues. As a grown up he shares the later interest with his aristocrat neighbor – Žiga Borgovič. This happens in wrong time since Ljudmila, his neighbor's daughter turns him on and Pavle falls for her. The girl returns her love and they become friends and socialize for several years concealing the feelings they share. One sunny day, on the estate of the neighbor-aristocrat, remote relatives arrive. (Probably in the same way described in an identical scene later in the book, where ladies with necklaces and fat-necked gentlemen jump out of their sport cars) The complexes are annoying like flies, so one day, Pavle, irritated by the flies, will drag Ljudmila, who was busy attending her relatives, in the nearby woods. He falls on his knees beneath the puzzled girl and hastily declares his love for her. Blinded by love, Pavle won't see the relatives' grinning faces behind his suspenders. What he doesn't see is what she does.

Delighted because of the love statement, but intimidated by the apocalyptic threat of her attacking relatives, put into an awkward position of humiliating herself, in the nick of time that demands a response, she leans towards her lover only to throw it in his face: "Aren't you sorry for your new trousers?" The insulted lover flees from the village and is gone for 3 years.

It is this point in the novel that Croatian critic Ivo Frangeš's lesson alludes to "All things have their time". Pavle is the right man, on the right place, in the wrong time. The existentialist would say that a human's life is nothing but fear of wrong choices. Pavle uses the same mechanism – in order not to make a wrong choice he won't choose at all. But that's exactly the trick since not-acting at all is the worst possible choice. This is a well-known mechanism — choosing the worst in order not to be surprised by disappointing experiences. In other words, this is a scene that initiates Pavle's development as a passive figure, a man thinking but not acting. Ivo Frangeš calls him "the Croatian Hamlet", ("Leskovars are ... Hamlets who tear life apart by thinking, they suffer but don't fight, they drown but don't try to escape"). The critic intuitively recognizes a character of this kind, but he is not yet created by the text of the novel. It is our duty to show how and when that happens.

And then the other woman shows up. It is a scene given retrospectively as well. In the big city Pavle encounters a genuine Nemesis. Maria is a widow, meaning —a woman with experience, a woman with past. About her temperament others will speak, saying that her husband has died of a stroke. Maria gets rid of the undesirable help, but the invited Pavle doesn't call on. When some fortress long under siege would be conquered, the ancient Latins used to say: "vae victis", meaning "woe to the vanquished". Pavle may have said "woe to Maria" because her fortress is easily conquered. But he doesn't visit her because he says "woe" to himself. The first time he runs away from a woman because he doesn't succeed, the second – because he does. So, escaping becomes a mechanism: he runs away both when things work out and when they don't. But the woman whose husband dies from a stroke develops a lavish and expert tactics. She gets Pavle, and now he returns home after many years as Maria's fiancé.

Proust says: "NO is the greatest stimulus for the wooer", therefore the rejected doesn't forget about their failure. It has been said that the human psyche doesn't function on the basis of emotional reciprocity, but on the basis of a hero-epic psychology. The interest increases with the rejection. The rejecter tickles the rejected by the mystery of the untouchable. Proust's elegant definition conceals the phantom that conquered in order to (only) possess things. Pavle is influenced by this phantom who tells him that Ljudmila, apart from showing a stoic worry for the condition of his trousers, has also said the famous NO to him. So Pavle unexpectedly becomes a man in schism between two women.

Pavle's Idleness

The novel commences with all these episodes in the past. What is to be seen are the consequences from the life past. One of the most authoritative narratologists of the contemporary literary theory, Roland Barthes, introduces two kinds of narrative scenes which are immanent in the respect of the narration– clusters of the stories, called nests, which are opposed to scenes used to slow down the action until the next important joint in the story takes place, i.e. catalysts. The 15 pages that we have chosen are exactly the catalysts between two nests. The nest that precedes is the first scene in the novel – a meeting between two former lovers in a church. The following nest is a point when the present Pavle's fiancé arrives (Before this nest a joker-scene takes place. It is a visit of some relatives to the Dobrovac castle, that resembles the visit from

many years ago when Pavle was turned down by Ljudmila. This is a replay of the situation evoking of his wrong choice maybe a new attempt under the same circumstances. This scene is a reduplication of the nucleus which was retrospectively given; this is a scene that relativizes the narrative perfect and the narrative present). Between the two meetings in two whole days, as catalysis, Pavle "is killing time" with the following predications:

Day 1st:

1. At his house he finds the old locksmith, who has come to invite him at his neighbor's estate. (The stocky locksmith Mihalj Hrestak is almost a psychological caricature: if disease in the village appears he hides, if he gets sick he cries, panicking that he might die. His fear is not a normal human emotion, but almost a demon).

2. Pavle visits the Dobrovac estate. This estate, now decaying, has started the old famous history 150 years ago with the marriage of the ancestor with a Hungarian woman. The history is as follows: Ljudmila's great grandfather, Carlo the materialist, grins contently from the family portrait, smoothly combed back, with neatly shaped beard. The next generation shows decadent signs: the grandfather has the floor of the castle tiled with art tiles, he has gothic bells built on the roof. The grandmother, on the other hand, feels endangered in her world. The supervision of the estate is limited by the size of the window where she sits all day, and it is this frame that defines her perspective. She has hired a building constructor that mustn't build anything, because some woman has warned her that the moment a building is finished she would die. The oppositions of the couple are found in their son. He is a vegetarian who is a passionate hunter, and so on. The family sinks into decadence and the estate decays. The title of the novel is "Fallen Castles".

3. Pavle visits his uncle and aunt. The old couple lives comfortably, in harmony, but their children are little mediocrities, unpleasant, fashionable and quarrelsome.

4. A man who ecstatically defends social democrat-ic ideas visits them.

5. On his way home that night Pavle meets the locksmith again, now intoxicated, crying, afraid that he would die.

Day 2nd:

6. The next morning Pavle sees the watercolor of Dobrovac estate, well taken care of, in gilded frames.

7. His mother brings him coffee. His father takes him to the vineyard. (He is in contact with both parents who are involved in the latest family conflict that repeats every time when his generous mother gives something to somebody which irritates her stingy husband deeply).

8. On his way home he sees the social democrat arrested, escorted by three policemen.

Circles

These episodes are not meaningless. The omniscient narrator says: "the events past and present touched him... he raised his thoughts above the local situation towards the general view of the society. He suddenly saw all the main periods of human civilization with their features", and the final sentence: "It's even more clear that none of the human works is perfect." The scene ends with a raven flying over – the mythology of the area defines it a bird of ill omen.

A thorough examination of the preceding scenes will show that this meditation over human history has happened after a double-circled movement.

First circle: 1. meeting the locksmith 2. the Dobrovac estate 3. meeting his uncle and aunt 4. the social democrat.

Second circle: 1. meeting the locksmith 2. the Dobrovac estate painting 3. his mother and father (acting as equivalents of the uncle and the aunt) 4. the social democrat.

It is evident that the circles repeat with the same features of the elements, (Possibly even with such elements that act as equivalents, which is the case with the third element) given in same order, rhythm and function. These circles are closed, there's no expansion, and it is a typical standstill.

Still, there is a sign that distinguishes the two circles, and that is the intensity. The second circle intensifies the elements in respect to the first circle; it gradates them.

First element: In the first circle the locksmith fears death, in the second, he intoxicated — cries.

Second element: In the first circle Pavle meets the owner and the estate and in the second circle the subject (the owner) is annihilated but the object (the estate) remains. The estate will fall apart as well, eventually (the title is "Fallen Castles") because it is degraded to a painting.

Third element: In the first circle Pavle sees that his uncle and aunt live in harmony, but the disharmony exists between generations (the old couple with their children). In the second circle there's no harmony in both directions; horizontally—between his parents, and vertically— his parents and himself. Fourth element: In the first circle the social democrat ecstatically defends an idea, in the second circle the defender of an idea is arrested.

The omniscient narrator says that after these events Pavle was preoccupied with thoughts about human history, but what exactly that is, the narrator doesn't say. Pavle is a fictional character, he lives as a result of the events that preceded and will live according to the events that follow. We can intuitively guess his thoughts, but we can only define them in reference to what has happened to him. In other words, Pavle can not share the thoughts that the criticism would have instead of him, i.e. the literary criticism can not think instead of him. If these two circles with increased intensity happened to him, Pavle must have registered the following events: 1. fear of death changes from emotion to madness, i.e. man is doomed to restlessness, unhappiness and fear 2. the subject and the object (the owner and the painting) are annihilated to a painting, i.e. neither the man nor his works last forever, and only art endures. 3. family relationships, that is, alliance between humans is impossible, man is doomed to loneliness 4. a defender of an idea is arrested, that is, the idea of a man is destroyed by the society.

Pavle learned for sure— life is sorrow with double intensity. The omniscient narrator says that the problem was raised from a problem on a local, to a problem on a general level, meaning that Pavle comprehended the essence of things, he acquired knowledge, and he was enlightened. The episode concludes with a raven flying over. That means that the knowledge that he gained will have a fatal effect in the future. Why?

The nature of knowledge

Croatian critic Ivo Frangeš calls Pavle "the Croatian Hamlet". Who is the English Hamlet? It is a character broken by his inner struggle. The English Hamlet is troubled by his dilemma in seven long monologues: to be or not to be, and he remains passive. There are various theses for Hamlet's psychoanalytical file: he is a neurotic intellectual, unable for acting. Nietzsche offered deeper reading of Hamlet. He shows that Hamlet hasn't lost the ability to act; he has lost the will to act. He lost will because of more profound reasons. Nietzsche says: "The similarity between the Dionysian man and Hamlet is that both of them have dipped into the very essence of things and therefore they are sick of acting for they know that the essence of things is unchangeable". Knowledge kills action. To act means that the things are covered in mystery.

Pavle, the Croatian Hamlet, in the two previously described days throws light on the essence of things because he finds out: Life is reduplicated, redundant sorrow, and so he refuses to act. It is a character that takes off his rose-colored glasses, and without them, he can not move in any direction.

Afterwards...

We can predict what happens afterwards since the text has already formed Pavle with Hamletian characteristics. He won't be able to decide between the two women and eventually he loses them both. He leaves both of them to their wrong ways and eventually destroys all three lives. At the end we find Pavle in an expected position of a politician, trying to compensate for his lost anthropological values with a struggle for other, ideological, but this Pavle isn't the subject of this paper. Our job was to present the textual formation of Pavle and to explain why he backs off in the first crucial moment in the book, at the first serious decision that he has to make. The question whether the author ordered the scenes intuitively or he was theoretically aware of his work – remains on the margins of our interest. Firstly, because in our human psyche, complex and complicated as it is, some other people intertwine; Secondly, because the author is long time deceased, and therefore any psychological expedition through his thoughts is risky: he only left his works to us and as far as other issues go, he remains simply – silent!

Literature:

1. Roland Barthes (1966): "Introduction a l'analyse structurale des récits", Communication 8.
2. Janko Leskovar (1963): "Fallen Castles", "Matica Hrvatska" Zora-Zagreb, 1963, edition – "Five Centuries of Croatian Literature" (book no. 59). Afterward by: Ivo Frangeš.