

**"THE OLD TIMES" AND THE GENRE FORMS:  
AN INTERPRETATIVE TRIANGLE**

**Ivo Pospíšil**

Writing about the problems of the chronicle in several studies and monographs,<sup>1</sup> I came across the antinomy **old - new**. It occurred, as a rule, together with several similar antinomies, e. g. **home - world, nature - culture** etc. From the very beginning it was quite clear that the tendency towards the past, to the old times of the heroes' childhood, to the sweet idyll of past years is closely associated with the impact of romantic imagery, with the elegiac vision of the world. Moreover, I began to think that the adoration of the past was a constant feature of human characters dissatisfied with the contemporary state of things, convinced that *something was rotten in...* Most probably it might also be a reflection of man's past world, of his possible birthplace not identical with the Earth...but in that case we could find ourselves on the swampy grounds of fantasy, illusion, imagination, mysticism, although, *perhaps*, we could touch the truth...Therefore let us take the three authors belonging to three Slavonic literatures (Russian, Slovak and Czech) to compare their conceptions of *the old times* that will never come back.

It is obvious that the theme of *old days* or *times* is not part of all national literatures in the same degree of intensity. Among Slavonic literatures it is the Russian literature both of the present and of the past which is full of reminiscences, returns, the longing for the past. Action evokes re-action. Peter's economic and political reforms in the first quarter of the 18th century caused many revolts, chiefly in the intellectual sphere. Against Peter's supporter Mikhail Lomonosov, a poet, a theorist of literature, a physicist, a master of dozen crafts reminding us of great figures, say, of Italian Renaissance, there stood a poet and a dramatist Alexander Sumarokov who thought about eternal questions of mankind, against a supporter of Utilitarianism influenced partly by J. Locke, against the author of the poem *On the Use of Glass* there was a sceptic fallen in love with the biblical Ecclesiastes: "*Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity (...)* What profit hath a man of all his labour which he takes under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose(...) And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness, and folly: I perceived

*that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.*"<sup>2</sup>

The problem of "old times" in Russian literature grows out of the dualism of Russian culture in general forming one of its many antinomies starting with pagans - Christians, Western - Eastern and ending with Slavophiles - Westerners. The category of "old times" was closely connected with the defence of original Russian natural and cultural roots, with the atmosphere of quietness and peace, with the so-called static genres, e. g. the descriptions, sketches and chronicles the action of which realises in one particular place usually opposed to the "great world".<sup>3</sup> The theme of "old times" is not typical of Russian literature only, it is a key-phenomenon of Slavonic literatures in general, especially of the 19th and of the beginning of the 20th century. It could be found in Polish, Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian literatures as well as in the works of some Sorbian authors. It can also be met in Slovak and Czech prose writings of the last and this century.<sup>4</sup> The sociological and national reasons of this thematic cluster are based on the political and social situation of Slavonic nations in the past: the lack of national independence, non-existent national states at present on one hand and the glorious or at least better past. There are many Russian authors who cultivated the genre of the novel-chronicle (S. T. Aksakov, M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, N. S. Leskov), not so many can be found in other Slavonic literatures. Having studied this interesting phenomenon, we came to the conclusion that the most autonomous and the most contrastive conceptions of "old times" had been worked out by the three authors belonging to three national literatures: Nikolay Semenovich Leskov (1831-1895), Svetozár Hurban Vajanský (1847-1916) and Vladislav Vančura (1891-1942). The three authors represent not only the three national literatures - Russian, Slovak and Czech -, but also the three generations who found themselves at the crossroads of their national and individual, creative careers. The attractive theme of "old times" must be, in our view, connected with their artistic, literary, genre conceptions. The interest to the embodiment of "the old times" in the works of the three authors belonging to the three literatures is, therefore, linked with the artistic evolution of their national literatures in general and their own creative potentials in particular. The theme of "old times" appears in Leskov's prose writings quite early, because his dominant feature is the first-person narrative (in Russian tradition *skaz*) dealing with recollections: Leskov's "old times" are associated with the reign of Tsar Nicholas I., when Russia still remained an old-fashioned, idyllic country not so much touched by Peter's destructive reforms. The political struggles concerned only the Russian nobility (the Decembrists), while peasants still lived their monotonous lives full of grief, but also of old folk customs and traditions.

From the short-stories and novelettes published chiefly in 60's Leskov came over to dramatic novels, but he was not successful. Only later he tried to write an epic panorama formed as a chronicle and based upon a chain of episodes, characters and artistic details and found his real range as a prose writer. Even the titles of his chronicles tells us about his dominant thematic cluster: *The Old Times in the Village Plodomasovo* (Starýe gody v sele Plodomasove, 1869), *The Cathedral Folk* (Soboryane, 1872), the scenery of the chronicle is situated in *Stargorod*, *The Impoverished Gentry* (Zachudalyi rod, 1874) and others standing on the border between a novel and a short-story.<sup>5</sup> The model of old times in Leskov is based on the scenes from the Russian country life in which he finds much more virtues than in St. Petersburg and Moscow. He is afraid of the increasing power of the Russian bourgeoisie which brings utilitarianism, the cult of money, prevalently pure economic thinking which lacked the touches of beauty typical of the life of old Russia. Leskov loved the enclave character of his Russia's country, he even loved the enclave character of national minorities living in Russia which preserved their own way of living, their own aesthetics, e. g. the Jews, the Germans in St. Petersburg, various Russian and foreign religious sects (Quakers, for example). Leskov tended to plurality of living, thinking and creating, and "old times", "old Russia", "ancient skazka" were the patterns which defended the world of old virtues and values against the impact of the cruel civilization.<sup>6</sup> For Leskov the theme of "old times" represents the original synthesis of beauty and morality, of aesthetics and ethics which was gradually disappearing under the pressure of modern, hectic life. Leskov's model of "old times" is opposed to his vision of changing Russia - "the old times" in his view are the criterion of moral and aesthetic values: the author analyzes the penetration of "the old times", i. e. the organic synthesis of beauty and good, into modern, utilitarian life. He finds its traces in the lives of good people (*Soboryane*), in human imagination, in recollections, nostalgia, emotions and, last but not least, in the art of narration.

S. Hurban Vajanský lived in a different society which fought for its emancipation, he was a representative of a nation which had lost its national freedom. The problem of Vajanský's prose works is, in my view, the problem of social, economic, national, moral, aesthetic and cultural continuity which had been violently interrupted. In his key prose works *The Undergrowth* (Podrost, 1881), *The Dry Twig* (Suchá ratolest', 1884) and *The Root and the Shoots* (Koreň a výhonky, 1895-96) he depicts the problem of spiritual growth of the Slovak intelligentsia and its search for spiritual roots. While in the first novelette he tries to describe the situation of the young generation, in *The Dry Twig* he wrote about the Slovak gentry which looks for a new connection with its country roots, with country people and with the Slovak nation in general.<sup>7</sup> The

return of the Slovak lower nobility to its people is a specific return of "the old times" into the new epoch characterized by the oppression of the Slovak nation and by its struggle for its national and state independence. It is impossible to build a new national society in an empty place, the problem of continuity, i. e. the integration of "the old times" as a moral and social basis of a new state of things, is extremely important. In his prose work *The Root and the Shoots* Vajanský analyzes a similar problem: the relation of higher social classes to the national patriarchal traditions ("the roots"). The influence of Russian realists upon Vajanský was and still is obvious: Tolstoy and especially Turgenev were mentioned many times. In my view even more important is the impact of a specific genre layer of the Russian 19th-century literature - moral descriptions, ethnographical prose and chronicles. It would be very difficult to name the concrete authors, but I would prefer the whole spirit, the atmosphere of autochthonous static genres as a whole which inspired Vajanský. And one more factor: the situation of social and moral crisis, the transient period of history, the crossroads of national and individual life and, not to forget about it, the inner artistic situation of the author himself. Leskov in Russia chose a chronicle genre, because he felt he was standing at the crossroads, the total, existential crossroads - the chronicle is always a clear signal of this hesitation, of returns, of recollections, of "the old times". Speaking about the structure of Vajanský's prose works which are mentioned above it becomes evident that they have a descriptive, chronicle character: it is a panorama of scenes taken out of the Slovak country life connected only by a chain of characters and their problems. While in Russian literature at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin (*Gospoda Golovlevy*, *Poshekhon-skaya starina*) and M. Gorky (*Gorodok Okurov*, *Žizn Marveya Kozhemyakina*) tried to create an inverted model of "the old times", "the old times" as the past which must be defeated and destroyed to open a new age, Vajanský - in a different spiritual climate - tends to a synthesis. Leskov wants to preserve "the old times" in a new era as a cruel mirror for contemporary immoralities, as a sort of provoking existence, Vajanský is convinced that the development of any society is gradual: nothing disappears, it may reappear in a new form, set in a new context. Vajanský's "organic" conception of "the old times" may remind us of Apollon Grigoryev, a Russian 19th-century writer and a literary critic, who even invented "the organic literary criticism". It is not by chance: Grigoryev's "botanical" metaphors, such as "rastitelnaya poeziya", "gorod-rasteniye" etc., are very similar to Vajanský's thinking and imagery (*Pustokvet*, *Koreň a výhonky*, *L'alia*, *Suchá ratolest'*, *Podrost*). The fascination by the comparison of social and mental life and the life of a natural plant is striking. "The old times" are gradually becoming part of an organic evolution of man, nation,

mankind. By the way: A. Grigoryev may be understood as a predecessor of the Russian psychological school of A. Potebnya and even of some of the features of modern hermeneutics.<sup>8</sup> Vajanský's conception of "the old times" tells us something more about his "organic" concept of social and national life. Nevertheless, the "Russian theme" is still present in it.

While Leskov has the conception of "the old times" as a model of the original integration of ethics and aesthetics as a protest against the unification of man's character in the era of technology, and Vajanský tends to make use of "the old times" as natural roots of the organic development of the national community, the Czech prose writer Vladislav Vančura - a leading figure of the Czech "poetism" of the 20's of this century - understands the process of history as a farce or a grotesque. In the novel *The End of the Old Times* (Konec starých časů, 1934) his narrator Bernard Spera, reminding of a *pícaro* from a Spanish or a French Renaissance or Baroque novel, makes fun of all the great figures including Duke Megalrogov, a Russian White Guardist, dreaming all the time of the restoration of old Russia under a new Tsar. Megalrogov (Greek "megas" = big, Russian "rog" = horn) represents the old times full of hopes, the idyll of the "gentry nests". It is evident that the novel grew out of the film script written by Vančura under the title "Baron Prášil" based on the story of Baron Münchhausen.<sup>9</sup> Both Jan Mukařovský and Zdeněk Pešat, the authors of the afterwords to Vančura's novel, think that the key-role is played by the narrator's ironic hints and remarks transforming the genre of the novel into a grotesque vision of history.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless the chronicle character of Vančura's prose work did not change: the poetics of the titles of each chapter forming a chain of loosely connected episodes remind us of the same morphology which can be found both in Leskov and in Vajanský (not speaking about a number of other representatives of the chronicle genre), e. g. *Kratochvíle and Its Glory* (the name of a Czech chateau in which the novel takes place), *A Chicken on the Spit*, *Incidents in the Night*, *The Story of a Russian Christmas in the Field* etc.<sup>11</sup> The title as well as the inner structure of the novel show that Vančura found himself at the crossroads tending to write an epic work but still preserving the lyrical pattern typical of his prose writings of the 20's (the period of the Czech "poetism"). The genre of the chronicle, a chain of freely associated episodes, has again become a useful artist's tool, similarly as in Leskov and Vajanský. In the panorama of the Czech prose of the 30's Vančura's novel-chronicle must be regarded as a very strange, uprooted structure.<sup>12</sup> Chronicles which appear in modern literature are always understood as eccentric, strange phenomena. The theme of "the old times" in Vančura differs from the proceeding novels a great deal: the old times are not regarded as idyllic, the idyll is accompanied by irony and sarcasm reminding of the same technique

in N. V. Gogol's novelette *The Old-Fashioned Landowners* (*Starosvetskie pomeshchiki*, 1835) - some of the critics spoke about "the ironic idyll". I would prefer this contradictory term even for Vančura's original novel-chronicle.<sup>13</sup> The "old times" in Vančura's interpretation do not represent the ideal as in Leskov, or an organic, integrated link of the historical process as in Vajanský, but, on the contrary, just part of the passing character of human existence in history, the existence which is always uncertain, transient, false and tragical. Therefore the old times are laughed at and satirized, although in their foundations there are grief, tragedy and eternal sadness. The Russian theme is a constant link between the three authors: both Vajanský and Vančura are influenced by the "atmosphere" of Russian static genres, by the characters who are found in the Russian prose or by the characters of Russians themselves (*Megalrogov*). The transient nature of all the mentioned prose works, their key-role in the development of the three national literatures and in the artistic career of the three authors is indubitable. The consideration of the theme of "the old times" and its genre varieties may, therefore, lead to a more profound understanding of literature in general and of the "philosophy" of the artifact in particular.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I. POSPÍŠIL: Ruská románová kronika. Brno 1983. I. P.: Labyrint kroniky. Brno 1986. I. P.: Rozpětí žánru. Brno 1992. I. P.: Od Bachtina k Solženicynovi (Srovnávací studie). Brno 1992.
- <sup>2</sup> The Holy Bible. Oxford 1902, p. 585.
- <sup>3</sup> See my studies Etické transcendence ruské literatury. Etika, interdisciplinární časopis pro teoretickou a aplikovanou etiku, 1992, 1, pp. 33-45. Dualita a etický přesah v ruské literatuře. Etika 1991, 2, pp. 34-39.
- <sup>4</sup> See my article Man's Fate in Space and in Time (The Modifications of the Chronicle in N. S. Leskov and K. V. Rais). Opera Slavica 1, Brno 1991, pp. 44-49.
- <sup>5</sup> See my monograph Proti proudu (Studie o N. S. Leskovovi). Brno 1992.
- <sup>6</sup> F. WIZGZELL: The "staraya skazka" of Leskov's Soboryane. Archpriest Tuberozov and Avvakum. The Slavonic and East European Review, vol. 63, 3, June 1985, pp. 321-336.
- <sup>7</sup> I. KUSÝ: Vajanského román Koreň a výhonky, in: Svezozár Hurban Vajanský: Koreň a výhonky, Bratislava 1962, pp. 7-19. I. KUSÝ: Mladý Vajanský, Bratislava 1982.
- <sup>8</sup> See my article Synetická metodologie Apollona Grigorjeva. Sborník prací filosofické fakulty brněnské university, D 36-37, 1989-1990, pp. 57-66.
- <sup>9</sup> See O. MALEVIČ: Od scénáře k románu. Sovětská literatura 1981, 6, pp. 138-145. The hidden, symbolic and emblematic meaning of the names of Vančura's characters is interpreted in: J. HOLÝ: Funkce jmen postav v dílech Karla Čapka a Vladislava Vančury. Česká literatura 1984, 5, pp. 459-476. J. POLÁČEK: Portréty a osudy (Postavy v próze Vladislava Vančury). Brno, in print.
- <sup>10</sup> See: J. MUKAŘOVSKÝ: Vančurův Konec starých časů, in: V. V.: Konec starých časů. Praha 1958, pp. 357-370. Z. Pešar: Dostov, in: V. V.: Konec starých časů. Praha 1987, pp. 251-262. R. KUZNÉCOVÁ: Charakter Vančurovy grotesky (Konec starých časů). Česká literatura 1973, 1, pp. 25-39.
- <sup>11</sup> See the English translation (Edith Pargeter) The End of the Old Times. Artia, Prague 1965.
- <sup>12</sup> See A. HAJKOVÁ: Přijetí Vančurova Konce starých časů soudobou kritikou. In: Tři studie o Vladislavu Vančurovi. Olomouc 1970.
- <sup>13</sup> See my study Gogolovi Starosvětské statkáři jako polyvalentní text. In: Gogol a naše doba, Olomouc 1984. R. POGGIOLI: Gogol's Old-Fashioned Landowners. An Inverted Eclogue. Indiana Slavic Studies III, Bloomington 1963, pp. 54-72. R. A. PEACE: Gogol's Old World Landowners. The Slavonic and East European Review, October 1975, pp. 504-520.