

MAN'S FATE IN SPACE AND IN TIME

(The Modification of the Chronicle Model  
in N. S. Leskov and K.V. Rais)

Ivo Pospíšil

In the stream of the 20th-century modern literature the genre of the chronicle novel seems to represent an archaic artistic structure, an old-fashioned world of virtues and idyllic sceneries. We may agree, but it is not the whole truth. The chronicle is part of the complex of the oldest methods of artistic creation, of the most archaic forms presented in ancient texts. It has been, however, frequently used also in the system of modern literature. The chronicle changes but, at the same time, preserves its basic principles. It has been revived with the help of different literary genres, sciences and philosophy; its plot has undergone important modifications under the impact of the changing reality but, in spite of all these changes the chronicle has preserved its original principles.

The 19th-century Russian literature was very rich in chronicle structures which belonged to the most important literary works at that time, e. g. S. T. Aksakov's *Chronicles of a Russian Family* (1856), N. S. Leskov's *Cathedral Folk* (1872) and *The Impoverished Family* (1874), Melnikov-Pechersky's novels *In the Forests* (1871-1874) and *In the Mountains* (1875-1881), Saltykov-Shchedrin's *Old Times of Poshekhona* (1887-1889) up to the "inverted chronicles" of M. Gorky (*The Town Okurov*, 1909, for example) and the chronicle parodies written by K. Fedin and L. Leonov. The analysis of the chronicle's typology discovered at least the two different models of the genre: one stresses the space (locality), the other accentuates the group of protagonists (or just one protagonist). Therefore the elements forming the genre of the chronicle could be divided into the static (the description of the locality) and the dynamic (the depiction of man's course of life) ones. Some of the chronicles lie between the description of the local scenery and the fragments of a biographical or an autobiographical novel. A few years ago we analysed the spatial and the temporal qualities of the chronicle in Russian and other European literatures.<sup>1</sup> We came to the conclusion that the space of the chronicle was prevalently linear, filled with the series of artistic details and based on the "chronicle pulsation" which is closely connected with the formation of

the stream of time. We used the term "chronicle pulsation" experimentally; the word "pulsation" is not understood as a natural rhythmic movement of a regular character but as an irregular change of spatial amplitude. The basic feature of the chronicle time is characterized as an attempt to stop or to retard the time. This trend is manifested in the conception of death, in the great number of first-person narratives and in the formation of a specific understanding of the past, the present and the future. The dominant feature in the evolution of the chronicle is the struggle between the linear time and the closed space, i. e. between the dynamic depiction of the course of life and the static description of the chronicle locality. The disagreement between the two morphological dominants can be found in any chronicle. Besides this the chronicle is a fruit of its national literature and mentality which can be easily discovered in the structure of the plot in general and in the genre dominant in particular.

N.S.Leskov's chronicle *The Cathedral Folk* (Soborjane, 1872) could demonstrate a good example of the development of the chronicle structure as a compromise between the linear and the closed dominants. The work itself opens up as a typical chronicle with the description of the Stargorod scenery and its protagonists: the three Orthodox priests (Tuberozov, Benefaktov, Desnicyn), the modern intellectual Termosesov, the two Lilliputs and several minor characters representing the Stargorod community, the local and the Church authorities. The chronicle structure is not compact; it also contains a layer of the fairy-tale with its colourful terminology (žar-ptica, car-devica, Seryj volk, volšebnyj kover, sapogi-skorochody, šapka-nevidimka).<sup>2</sup> The two Lilliputs, especially Nikolaj Afanasjevič, are, as it seems, part of this fairy-tale world. They represent strange creatures from a different world, from a different space and time: there are striking colours in their dresses and everything in their speech comes back to the past (staraja skazka). The invasion of the fairy-tale space into the space of the chronicle ends at the moment of the Lilliput's disappearance: "Nikolaj Afanasjevič uletajet, i s nim uletajet i staraja skazka".<sup>3</sup> The genesis of the chronicle has been investigated several times.<sup>4</sup> We know that it is associated with the motifs of Leskov's short-story *Ovcebyk* (1863) and with the two previous versions *Čajuščije dviženija vody* and *Božedomy* (published 1868). The genesis of the chronicle from *Čajuščije dviženija vody* up to *Soborjane* may be characterized as a condensation of the text tending towards philosophical contemplation and reflection with the dominant figure of the archpriest Tuberozov whose course of life has gradually become the central part of the plot. Tuberozov fights against the sceptic local intelligentsia rejecting traditional morals and, at the same time, against the Orthodox hierarchy characterized by conservatism and arrogance. The Orthodox Church - according to Leskov - ceased to look for a better and more harmonized man and society and lost all the contacts with the Russian people. Inside the chronicle there are several

large digressions, among them the most important - Tuberozov's diary ("demikotonovaja kniga"), the skaz (first-person narrative) inside the third-person narrative. The traditional chronicle moves to the stage of the confessional novel. The diary reflects the period 1831 - 1861 (1831 is the year of Leskov's birth) with the gap 1850 - 1857 in which Tuberozov formulates his vision of the world of wisdom and love in the conflict with the cruel world. At the end of the diary and in the scenes which follow he became an old, tired man seeking only harmony and calmness. His life represents a specific symbol of the vanity of all man's actions as it is expressed in Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.". It is not by chance that in the layer of the reminiscences the author mentions the lives and works of the writers expressing similar ideas: Avvakum Petrov and John Bunyan. Leskov's chronicle depicts the passivity of the Russian social life in the 19th century; it is closely connected with the topical phenomena of that time (the movement of the Russian nihilists), but especially in the parts in which the depiction of man's life prevails it becomes the parable of general validity stressing the tragic fate of man in history. The pressure of the historical process, the tendency to objectify the narration make the chronicle integrate the "objective", "historical" points of view even in the narration of the protagonist with a limited sum of knowledge (the formation of the mixed structure of the first-person and the third-person narrative, the tension between the depiction of the events and the chronicle scenery in the stream of time).

While the conflict between the depiction of the locality and the description of the course of man's life is present in the whole structure of Leskov's Cathedral Folk, the two chronicles written by the Czech 19th-century author Karel Václav Rais show the gradual evolution of the chronicle structure from the classical chronicle based on the antinomy local - total towards the confessional type of the novel analyzing "the pilgrim's progress" of modern times. The chronicle The Forgotten Patriots (Zapadní vlastenci) was published in 1893. Unlike the 19th-century Russian literature the Czech literature in the climax of the national revival cultivated the genre of the chronicle rather in the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century (Josef Holeček, Naši, 1899-1930; Alois Jirásek, U nás, 1903; A. and V. Mrátík, Rok na vsi, 1903). It may be explained by the fact that the chronicle always appears in the critical moments in the development of the national community (in Russia-approximately since 50' s). The scenery of the village Pozdětín with its protagonists opens up in the same way as in Leskov's chronicle: "Žhavé, médéné slunce chýlic se na tmavomodré, mlžnaté obloze od poledne k západu, ne-jiskřilo a nesršelo šipovím paprskův, ale mrazivé zíralo na pahrbkovitou krajinu, po níž se krčily chalupy horských dědin,

a polávalo snéhovou púdu rúžovým nádechem." <sup>5</sup> Also Rais' portraits and details based on comparison remind us of Leskov's literary technique: "Starý byl malý, ramenatý sedláček široké hlavy, na níž měl naraženou mrazovku s opelichaným beránkem a s mašlemi zle již zvedenými, tvaří vráskami rozsekaných, obrostlých šedavým strniskem (...). Mladík byl štíhlý holobrádek ruměných tvaří, velikých modrých očí, hustých vlasů kaštanových, do půl hlavy ukrytých černým lesklým kastorem, a pod ním se mu počínaly vlniti jemné knírky (...)" <sup>6</sup> The central character of the chronicle is a young teacher Čermák, his superior Čížek and the village priest Stehlik. The role of Tuberozov's diary from Leskov's chronicle is played by Čížek's personal chronicle (Život pomocníka Venceslava Čížka v Pozdětíně) which is situated inside the chronicle as a large digression read by Čermák. Rais' chronicle has symbolic features, too: the bird names of the three protagonists which stress the importance of music and folklore in Czech national revival (čížek - siskin; at the same time it is the Moravian nickname for a Bohemian; čermák - robin, stehlik - goldfinch), the name of the village (Pozdětín) and the title (Zapadli vlastenci) accentuating the old-time and provincial character of the locality. All this reminds of the symbolic names of Leskov's heroes in The Cathedral Folk ("Tuberozov" is derived from the Latin word for a plant - tuberosa; the name was given to some seminarists for modesty and good behaviour; "Benefaktov" - in Latin "bene facere" "Desnicyn" is derived from Old Church Slavonic "desnica" - a right hand). While Leskov in The Cathedral Folk speaks more about the topical political events of his time, about the Russian political scenery, Rais depicts the process of the Czech national revival in some remote parts of the country. His main interest is the description of the struggle between German and Czech (or Slavonic) elements: "Jaká pomoc, když jsi Němec! Takovi páni nevidí, kde je pravda, třebaže na to mají brejle. Tak, to je moje evangelium". The spatial "chronicle pulsation" is represented by the tension between the province and Prague - the symbol of the Czech national renaissance and of the Slavonic community. The narrative strategy (the diary inside the chronicle), the symbolic character of the text and the "spatial pulsation" (the province - the great world) are very similar to the general model of the chronicle. Unlike Leskov's chronicle the model of the dramatic novel in Rais' text prevails in the construction of the plot (the specific "ménage à trois", the dramatic peripeteia, the love incident and the optimistic conclusion associating intimate and national ideals). While Leskov's novel integrates the chronicle and the confessional novel, Rais' work has more or less a dramatic structure. The course of life is depicted only fragmentarily; the life of the young teacher Čermák seems to reach its climax in the marriage with his beloved girl. The philosophy of the chronicle is not very profound, the whole novel has didactic, political functions, although the author's epilogue accentuates the chronicle roots of the artifact: "Krkonošský můj přítel zvědév, že se připravuji napsati

historii ze staré školy české, zapůjčil mi zápisky horského pismáka Václava Metelky, nyní již dávno zesnulého, jenž za mladých let býval školním pomocníkem na horské lokalitě, později rolníkem a houslařem v Pasekách u Vysokého nad Jizerou. Mezi rodinnými, mravokárnými, hospodářskými i kantorskými poznámkami denními našel jsem tam též hojně vlastenecké výlevy a stesky, črty z tehdejšího života vůbec a z kantorského zvláště, jež se mi vroucností i pravdivostí svou a bohatými detaily dobovými výborně hodily. Připomínám to pro památku onoho zvěcnělého horského vlastence."

In *Sunset* (Západ, 1896) Rais tends to the biographical, confessional novel which has a stronger chronicle character depicting the course of the life of the village priest Antonín Kalous. His life was full of affection for the Czech national revival and for poor village people. The novel contains more social criticism and scepticism. While in *The Forgotten Patriots* the prevalent optimistic understatement is kept by the village community, by its union, by the fact that the people there live together having common joys and sorrows, in *Sunset* the thematic and morphological dominant is the lonesomeness, the solitude felt by those who find themselves in the end of their lives. The life itself is so cruel and the single man so helpless that he is not able to live in this world and wants to leave it. The anthropomorphization of the unbearable world is a mere human illusion - man's fate is part of the indifferent world and the cosmos in which nobody is interested in the solemn mission of mankind. The scepticism of Rais' *Sunset* is expressed by title (Západ - *Sunset*, West, the symbol of the end) which represents the semantic transformation of the title of the preceding novel (*Zapadlí vlastenci*; both "zapadli" and "Západ" have the same root; in the first novel the whole connotation is optimistic and admiring, in the second resigning). The sceptic vision of the world is similar to some of Chekhov's short-stories belonging to the same time (Gusev, 1890; *Ubijstvo*, 1895).

The development of the genre, the modifications of its relatively stable model are influenced by the spirit of the age, by the concrete philosophical and literary streams and ideas. *Fin de siècle* brings more or less sceptic visions of the Decadence, the Naturalism and the Symbolism. Their doubts and uncertainties anticipated the tragic cataclysms of our century the end of which is drawing near.

In the development of literature the chronicle usually appears in the periods of crises either social or personal, psychological. The half of the 19th century in Russia, the turn of the 19th century in Czech lands confirm this presupposition. It is not by chance: the chronicle, one of the oldest genres in literary history connected with the novel and the myth reflects and activates the deepest and the most hidden layers of human consciousness.

## NOTES:

- 1 See POSPIŠIL, I.: Ruská románová kronika. Brno 1983; Labyrint kroniky. Brno 1986.
- 2 See also: WIGZELL, F.: The "staraja skazka" of Leskov's Soboryane: Archpriest Tuberozov and Avvakum. The Slavonic and East European Review, vol. 63, No. 3, July 1985, p. 321-336.
- 3 Собрание сочинений Лескова, Москва 1956-1958, 3, p. 273. In the quotations from Russian we prefer the transliteration common in Central Europe.
- 4 GOLLERT, I.: Romanchronik "Die Klerisei". Berlin 1969; Th. EEKMAN, The Genesis of Leskov's Soborjane. Californian Slavic Studies 2, 1963, p. 121-140; ZELINSKY, B.: Roman und Romanchronik. Strukturuntersuchungen zur Erzählkunst Nikolaj Leskovs. Köln-Wien 1970.
- 5 RAIS, K. V.: Zapadli vlastenci. Vyšehrad, Praha 1950, p. 9-10.
- 6 Ibid., p. 9.
- 7 Ibid., p. 59.
- 8 Ibid., p. 403.
- 9 КЕДРОВ, К.: Фольклорно-мифологические мотивы в творчестве Н. С. Лескова. В кн.: В мире Лескова, Москва 1983.