

Queer Emotions? The Narrative Shape of Feelings in *Noben glas* by Suzana Tratnik and *Eskorta* by Michal Hvorecký

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Abstract: This contribution aims to explore the narrative potential of emotions in two texts, the short story *The Big Burden* by Slovenian writer Suzana Tratnik and the first part of the novel *Escort* by Slovak writer Michal Hvorecký. Regarding the connection of emotions with human actions as manifested in narratives, it is informed by Patrick Colm Hogan's claim in *Affective Narratology* "that story structures are fundamentally shaped and oriented by our emotion systems". Moreover, it focuses particularly on queer emotions involving the questioning or subversion of heteronormativity and gender binarism, and dealing with the fluidity of sexual identity in its social dimension and in the existing mechanisms of power. As it turns out, the queer emotions of the protagonist in Tratnik's story are capable of producing a turning point in the text and a new kind of action for the plot, which is not the case in Hvorecký's novel that does not lead to such a narrative pattern, perhaps questioning its practicability in the time of late capitalism.

Keywords: theory of emotions, queer theory, narratology, Suzana Tratnik, Michal Hvorecký

This contribution consists of four parts, all of which may need further elaboration and more detailed argumentation: firstly, an outline of the theoretical framework; secondly a reading of the last short story from the collection *None of the Voices* (*Noben glas*, 2016) by Suzana Tratnik (*1963) entitled *The Big Burden* (*Veliko breme*) as the first case study; thirdly a reference to the first part of the novel by Michal Hvorecký (*1976) *Escort* (*Eskorta*, 2007) as the second case study, and a comparative conclusion as the final part of our text.

The two texts were chosen for several reasons, but above all we wanted to reflect on East-Central European authors and texts with a different regional background. So we

thought of a Slovene-Slovak comparison – and we found it intriguing to compare a writer like Tratnik, who clearly positions herself and is positioned by others in the context of queer literature, with a writer like Hvorecký, who partly deals with non-heteronormative literature but neither presents himself nor is considered as an author of queer literature.¹ The authors will, anyway, play no further role in our analysis, which is much based on the readings of the texts. It is important to highlight that both works focus on children's emotions – and this has been a second reason for us to choose them since we wanted to observe queer emotions in the first period of life, when individuals begin not only to sense themselves but also to give themselves a sense.

I

The study of emotions covers today a whole range of research fields and relationships in theory and it has a long tradition also in philosophical and aesthetic thought since ancient times. For the use here, the connection of emotions with actions based on the work of Nico Frijda (*The Emotions*) should suffice. This connection with human actions, of course, also binds emotions with narratives. The source of emotions is, if we return to Frijda, in the perception and evaluation by the self of certain changed situations in an environment that evoke, for example, threat, desirability, danger, etc.; emotions are therefore manifested as a form of action response of the self to the situation, and they are a form of awareness of the importance of a changed situation (cf. Andringa 139). Emotional processes, experiences and the shaping of action tendencies are linked up by various factors, for example reactions such as flight, fight, laughter or a sense of powerlessness, frustration, and repressed anger; emotions can also vary in terms of strength and duration (sadness, despair, loneliness, rebellion). It is very important for our further analysis to point out that emotional life has several dimensions: it can be collective or individual, bodily or spiritually shaped, based on a (however given) disposition or rather culturally coded, unconscious or reflected – and of course something in between. This variety of emotional experiences does have a significant impact also on narratives: in fact, the shaping of their plot can vary according to their way of representing emotions. Every narrative follows a certain logics of emotions: for example, some narratives present them as short body-led outbursts, which are incapable of influencing the story development in a consistent way, while some other narratives treat the very same outbursts as turning points of the plot – eventually as something that has the power to shake off a long lasting state of the mind, a crystallized emotion that has taken control of the subject and their actions. This manifold narrative potential of emotions has been highlighted by Patrick Colm Hogan in his

1 See Hvorecký's profile in the English language by the Slovak Literary Information Centre (<http://www.litcentrum.sk/en/slovenski-spisovatelia/michal-hvorecky>) (07.05.2019). *Escort* has been translated into German (*Escort*, 2009) but not into English.

study *Affective Narratology* (2011), a book that also informed our theoretical framework: the book is largely grounded on the results of cognitive research and parts from Hogan's contention "that story structures are fundamentally shaped and oriented by our emotion systems" (1). An incomplete list of emotion systems would include, as he claims, fear, anger, attachment, disgust, hunger, and lust, one of the main issues of his book being "the relation of emotion systems to recurring story patterns" (11, cf. also 18). He also argues that narrative time that has its spatial dimension is fundamentally organised by emotion. Therefore incidents (the smallest units of the story) and hierarchized larger units, "events, episodes, general story structures, works, and genres are a function of emotional processes" (237), connected by reader's causal attributions that are always inferred.

And what about the queer emotions and the narrative logics they produce? What could they be? Above all they seem to be emotions which are being reflected in queer theory because they involve in one way or another the questioning or subversion of heteronormativity and gender binarism, dealing with the fluidity and discontinuity of sexual identity in its social dimension and in the existing mechanisms of power – as we shall show analysing Tratnik's *Big Burden* and Hvorecký's *Escort*.

II

Leaving home and normalcy involves emotion in Hogan's view, and conversely, being at home involves an avoidance of risk. The protagonist, the first-person narrator of Tratnik's last story in *None of the Voices*, a twelve-year-old girl, is also met in the incipit of *The Big Burden* accompanied by her mother and aunt on the way from home to Serbia. The journey out of home develops for the girl into a complex emotional journey out of normality. In Pirot, where her other aunt owns an inn, she is having fun working in the kitchen (she is ashamed to serve the guests), learning to swim in the nearby river and exploring the room of the absent male, her cousin Rale, with whom she identifies and whose big black sunglasses and leather jacket she borrows for her boyish image. She also begins recording in Rale's notebook what is going on during her stay. The only person who somehow seems to sense the importance of this identification play for the protagonist is a local drunkard, who speaks with her as if she were a boy. She befriends him despite the initial disgust, hate and fear of the unknown she feels at their first meeting. However, the girl turns down her aunt's offer to stay in Serbia and go to school there, claiming that she and her mother have a big burden back home in Slovenia. This big burden, the one of the tale's title, refers to the fact that the girl and her mother have a difficult family situation: the grandparents have recently died and the girl's father has left his family for another woman. The reader perceives as paradoxical that the girl wants to leave Pirot, a place where she feels well, to go back to Slovenia, where burdens are waiting for her. Yet the whole story is exactly about the difficulty to abandon bad

emotions for good ones since the ties between people and their burdens can sometimes be very strong. But *The Big Burden* is a tale with an emotional turning point, in which the protagonist refuses to be part of the emotional world of her mother and chooses her own path breaking off the chain of burdens imprisoning her. This decision, or action, originates in a strong emotional outburst with a strong involvement of the body. During their way back home, in a park near the Belgrade railway station they meet an old man who wants to give the girl a puppy, because as he says, it has become a big burden for him. The girl would, of course, like to have the puppy, but her mother, sad as always, does not allow it. Yet, the child's reaction to her mother's words this time overcomes any sense of guilt or solidarity: she puts on Rale's black eyeglasses, and loudly yells that they could have taken this little dog since they do not have anything at home and that this is a big burden to stand. Although her mother asks her to calm down and not become a burden to her, the girl runs away, jumps into the pond and starts swimming. And then suddenly, which is a very symbolic conclusion of a story with a postmodern time loop – such as one can find, for example, in another story from Tratnik's collection entitled *Ida's cube* – there appears to be the very same friendly drunkard from Pirot running around the pond, and he is loudly encouraging her to swim. The black notebook remains on the bench and the wind slowly turns its already densely written pages.

The role of emotions in this story is clearly remarkable. The represented kinship in this short story is not a patriarchal family with Oedipal relations. It seems that the girl, having an absent father, attempts to imitate a boy to protect her mother, but her actions are determined by emotional impulses that are much stronger. The conclusion of the story could be interpreted as a girl's open acceptance of emotional impulses that are more suited to her queer identity in becoming. The formal role of the story's title and at the same time its recurring pattern, the refrain "big burden", is also interesting, as it intertwines artistic narrative cohesion and the girl's understanding of this concept, which is actually part of the adult world, but she apparently interprets it in her own way, and perhaps in the end rejects it in favour of freedom.

III

We shall now analyse the first part of Hvorecký's *Escort*, whose protagonist, Michal, tells in the first person the story of his childhood and adolescence in Prague, Bratislava and Western Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s. The characteristic of the novel which is most relevant to the purposes of our analysis is that the world of the protagonist seems to be one in which emotional turning points like the one concluding *The Big Burden* are impossible and, more than that, in which emotional outbursts capable to shake off body and mind do not really exist. Indeed, Michal's world is a world of drives but these drives do not belong to the protagonist, who seems to be immersed in an emotionless spleen that never leaves him.

Hvorecký plays in his novel with the subversion of a very common situation we know from queer literature on childhood: the life environment of his protagonist is not heteronormative but, on the contrary, quite homonormative. In fact, both Michal's parents are homosexuals who have married and had a child together in order to disguise from the homophobic Czechoslovak socialist regime. They actually never try to force their son to homosexuality but their (male) friends do repetitively attempt to seduce him when he is a teenager. Michal is not completely exposed to sexual harassment because his parents protect him sometimes yet they also have, in general, a kind of an absent-minded relation to their child who grows up in Prague amidst their sexual parties, drinking alcohol and smoking joints from the age of five. The parents even do not seem to bother that their child has to stand many interrogations by the secret police, constantly lying to protect his family. The situation changes when the family moves to Bratislava as a result of the severe repression politics of the late 1970s: The parents try to behave straight so that Michal can go to high school although his mother is nevertheless put in prison because of her past and the neglect of her maternal duties. The family moves to Western Berlin when Michal's mother comes back from jail and stays in Germany until her death, a consequence of her difficult life. At the same time, the Berlin Wall falls and Michal and his father return to Bratislava where Michal, who feels attracted by women, begins his activity as a sexual worker for extremely rich ladies (for this first part of the novel – from Michal's childhood until his return to Bratislava – see Hvorecký (5-67)).²

Michal's childhood and adolescence are quite tragic, yet he recounts them in a way very different from the protagonist of Tratník's *The Big Burden*: he describes everything in a cold and detached mood, including his emotions. He rarely characterizes them through the sensations of his body: on the contrary, he stresses several times that his body is suspended in a kind of a lethargic state. The readers find only a few short hints to emotions described from the inside of a feeling character: for example the mother and son crying together when she returns from jail (33) and his incredulity when she dies (45). Moreover, Michal experiences his emotions not only in a detached but also in a very passive way: he feels bad about going back to Bratislava in 1989 but he nevertheless follows his father there (45-46). In his childhood and youth he never comes to an emotional turning point leading to new actions in his life like for example the one lived by the girl of *The Big Burden*.

We will not deal here with the subsequent parts of the novel, yet it is worth looking at the end of the story since it represents, at least apparently, a radical turning point. Michal transitions and becomes Michaela – neither as a result of a real decision nor through an operation, but in form of a metamorphosis due to an overdose of hormones that transform him – rather magically – into a woman of heterosexual orientation: the transition pleases her, yet she describes it in the same detached and clinical way she had

2 Page numbers always refer to the novel's original edition in the Slovak language.

to speak about emotions when she was a man. The readers may be quite puzzled by this ending since it seems that Michal/Michaela does not find an intimate way to feel any sexuality: he tries first to kill his feminine side by becoming a professional women's lover, and he manages later on to kill his masculine side by becoming a woman (see the fourth part of the novel (214-235)).

IV

The comparison of *The Big Burden* and *Escort* shows from a narratological point of view that different approaches to emotions can lead to different narratives. Children's emotions are represented in Tratnik's tale – by means of her first-person narrator – as energies from the inside that are capable of turning the narrative: in fact, they produce a new kind of actions for the plot. On the contrary, Hvorecky's first-person narrator seems to alienate himself from his child's emotions, describing them from the outside without much participation: emotions in the first part of *Escort* do not lead to a new kind of actions. Nevertheless, both the powerful and the powerless emotions of the two texts can be considered as queer emotions insofar as they refer to typical emotional patterns of queer life (in general and of queer children in particular). We would like, as a last consideration, to point out these patterns relating to two interrelated studies by the queer theoretician Sara Ahmed: *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014).

Ahmed is in a way speaking for Tratnik's protagonist when she considers that being "happily queer" often means to stand the unhappiness of beloved people, like for example mothers, who are not able to accept the queerness of their children (*The Promise* 115-120). Being happily queer means thus to resist the reproach of being a willful child, that is a child wanting the wrong thing – a thing that according to the mother (or the father or society) is ultimately going to make the child unhappy, too, since a common assumption on queerness is that it cannot make people happy (*The Promise* 88-114 and *Willful* 1-21). Ahmed would therefore recognize and praise the willfulness of the girl from *The Big Burden* when she challenges her mother to be unhappy. Indeed, this emotion and the subsequent action in the tale are not explicitly directed to a queer self-affirmation by the child in relation to her orientation, gender or sexual identity (which the reader can assume will occur later in her life). Yet Ahmed tends, as many other queer theoreticians, to understand queerness as a metaphor for every phenomenon which is based on twerk, turn, twist, thwart, transverse, perverse and cross, opening with such transgressions to the possibility of something new and inspiring (*Willful* 11).³ In this sense, the main character of *The Big Burden* feels and acts queerly when she brings her relation with the mother to a twist, willfully deciding to swim in the pond.

3 Ahmed explicitly refers to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (xii).

The situation of the young Michal in *Escort* can also be considered through Ahmed's theory. This character does not seem to be willful at all in his passivity – and one has the impression that this passivity is also a way to cope with the system he is growing in: in fact, Michal learns how to be passive in the interrogations with the Secret Police. Yet there is surely more behind Michal's passivity: for example, his reluctance to go into sexual desire when he is a teenager can be read as a reaction to the overwhelming sexuality of his parents' world (which is an interesting hypothesis since reluctance can be for Ahmed a form of indirect willfulness: *Willful* 140-141) – but it might be also connected with his incapability to find a way into the complexity of sexuality. The end of *Escort* is interesting as a counterpart of the *The Big Burden*: in fact, it shows that not every turning point of a story leads to a new quality of actions. That is to say – if we now leave the language of narratology for the language of politics – that not every turning point is emancipative. Michal's life becomes apparently “queerer”, in a strict sense of the word, when he becomes a woman, but she appears to feel also in her new condition as passive and uninspired as before. A partial exception to this state is her motherhood, for Michal's magical transformation gives her the possibility to have a child (see the fourth part and the epilogue of the novel: Hvorecký (236-238)). Yet the analysis of Michaela's love for her daughter would require another long article dealing with a fundamental question that *Escort* raises up through its plot – from Michal's work as a professional lover to Michaela's experience as a woman with child: Are emancipative emotions still possible in the time of late capitalism?

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