

“ARE LOUIS ADAMIC’S NOVELS SLOVENE NOVELS?”

“... A fresh but not innocent
‘Adamic’ naming of place provides
the writer with the inexhaustible
material and the potential of a new,
but not naïve, vision.”
Derek Walcott¹

Literarni opus slovensko-ameriškega pisatelja Louisa Adamiča vključuje nekaj del, ki bi jih lahko imeli za romane. Čeprav so bili napisani v angleščini, se zastavlja vprašanje, ali bi jih na osnovi njihove vsebine ali kakšnih drugih lastnosti lahko obravnavali kot »slovenske romane«. Vprašanje pisatelja, ki ustvarja v tujem literarnem okolju, je zapleteno in žgoče ne le v slovenski ali slovanskih literaturah.

slovenska izseljenska književnost, ameriški Slovenci, slovenstvo, književnost v angleščini, avtobiografski roman, hibridna proza, L. Adamič

The Slovene-American author Louis Adamic has in his corpus a few works that we might readily consider to be novels. Although they were written in English, might we also consider them to be ‘Slovene novels’ on the basis of their content or other features? Not just for Slovene or even Slavic literatures is the question of the native son operating in an alien literary environment a challenging and even burning one.

Slovene immigrant literature, American Slovenes, Sloveneness, literature in English, auto-biographical novel, hybrid prose, L. Adamic

In urging his fellow Caribbean writers to stop their ceaseless recriminations about colonial injustices and outrages, and to start seeing their present situations in new ways, the Trinidadian poet from the island of St. Lucia, Derek Walcott, never intended to make a pun on the name of the Slovene-American writer Louis Adamic. In fact it is probable that he has never heard of Adamic, whose current reputation in American literature is modest at best. But for those of us who are interested in the life and work of Adamic, it is a pun indeed, one with which Adamic himself was familiar (Christian 1971: xix). For the vision that the biblical Adam enjoyed of

¹ As cited in ASHCROFT 1989: 34–35.

paradise, a vision unobstructed by history, prejudice, or boundaries, a vision rather that was informed by divine insight, love, creativity, and joy, was very much the vision that Louis Adamic deployed, or at least attempted to deploy, in his best literary works. Never naïve and hardly innocent, but at the same time not cynical or sarcastic, Adamic too viewed his surroundings in fresh ways that appealed strongly to his contemporaries (he was, after all, a “Book-of-the-Month-Club” author for *The Native’s Return*). It is regrettable in a way that he has fallen out of the American canon.² Happily, however, he remains topical in Slovene literary criticism, and for good reason.

Exactly seventy years have passed since Oton Župančič stirred the ire of Slovene intellectual society with his essay “Adamič in slovenstvo.”³ And, as Janja Žitnik notes in the most recent issue of *Dve domovini/Two Homelands*, the dust that was raised in the process has still not settled completely (Žitnik 2002: 165). Adamic, who, like his mentor H. L. Mencken, was trenchant in his critique of American society, showed himself remarkably naïve in the culture wars of his homeland. Perhaps partly in response to the intense criticism he had caused to be generated, he beat a hasty retreat from Yugoslavia.⁴ And he did not return again to the country until January 1949, or for almost as long as his initial absence – nineteen years – had been.⁵ Despite the infrequency of his visits, however, Adamic was not forgotten. On the contrary, as Jerneja Petrič puts it in yet another very recent article on Adamic, he continues to be “not fondly remembered by all in his ethnic group” (Petrič 1997: 121). The reasons for his ambiguous position in Slovene cultural history to the present day are complex, involving politics and nationalism at least as much as, if not more than, anything to do with Adamic’s literary production.⁶ And to some degree the reasons transcend Adamic the person. Fifty-one years after his death he has ceased to be an individual and become a type, a twentieth-century Črtomir. Like Prešeren’s reluctant hero, Adamic sacrificed what he treasured – family, fatherland, mother-tongue – in order ultimately to help his people. But a sense of abandonment and, even worse, betrayal, inheres to his sacrifice. He abandoned “pure” Slo-

² At least as reflected in standard reference works, like *The Penguin Companion to American Literature* (New York etc.: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), where he is nowhere to be found. As Jerneja Petrič notes, Adamic’s work has not aged well (PETRIČ 1990: 271).

³ ŽUPANČIČ 1932, reprinted in ŽUPANČIČ 1984.

⁴ ADAMIC 1934: 355–365. He and his wife Stella left in March 1933 although Adamic’s Guggenheim Fellowship would have lasted until May. He ascribes his premature departure to fears of impending war in Europe: “My head whirled with what I knew was going on all over Yugoslavia, in Germany and elsewhere. Barbarism, barbarism ...” (356.)

⁵ Adamic emigrated – fled might actually be a more accurate term – from Austrian Slovenia to the United States in December 1913. He made his first trip back in May 1932. His only other trip, in 1949, lasted six months.

⁶ Especially in post-Titoist, post-Communist independent Slovenia, where memories may remain of Adamic’s admiration for Communist Russia’s “epic” experiment in the 1930s (ADAMIC 1932: 335; in subsequent editions this postscript was removed); his support of Tito, who could not possibly be a dictator because his “personal glow” reminded Adamic of Wendell Willkie (ADAMIC 1952: 88); or his enthusiasm for the Sovietization of Slovenia (ADAMIC 1943: 449).

veneness for another “god.” To a small nation, often perceiving its language and culture to be embattled, even the semblance of such betrayal can hurt. But Adamic, like Črtomir, could do nothing else if he was going to make a genuine contribution to his native land.⁷

And what might that contribution of Adamic’s be? Both Župančič and Adamic himself suggest that *slovenstvo* gave more to Adamic than he gave back to *slovenstvo*. As Župančič put it in his essay: “Adamič je ostal Slovenec v prvinah svojega duha, v instinktivnem pogonu, v tajnem bistvu, ki daje njegovemu delu posebno barvo in ton.”⁸ Furthermore: “Amerika širino, Slovenija mu je dala globino. In zdravo telo in dušo s krepkimi prvotnimi instinkti. In dragoceno dediščino po materi – smeh!”⁹ In his own analysis of Župančič’s essay, published in 1938 in his second autobiography, *My America: 1928–1938*, Adamic conceded that *slovenstvo* was, if not the dominant factor in his life, at least an important one, that in the United States “... I could develop, grow, find for the essential *slovenstvo* in me wider, fuller expression than I could probably ever have found had I remained at home” (Adamic 1938: 128). And:

Clearly I was an American from Slovenia, or a Slovenian who came to America and became an American. By coming to the United States and becoming an American writer, I had jumped the boundaries and restrictions, the profound and elaborate pettiness, of the Old World. I was of two worlds, which met in that blizzard on the Iron Range in Minnesota, in Cleveland and elsewhere – not perfectly, but still, they met: America and Slovenia. (Adamic 1938: 137–138.)

But the reciprocity here is absent: Slovenia gives, America in Adamic receives, but what does Slovenia get in return? Adamic did of course become something of a spokesman for Slovene and wider Yugoslav concerns in the U.S., although the direct benefit to either Slovenia or Yugoslavia in retrospect was probably minimal.¹⁰ Župančič hints at a more mystical return on Adamic’s *slovenstvo*, when he notes that Slovenia has given America not only miners and builders, but also in Adamic a writer, “ki odkriva nji in nam njene in naše skrivnosti.”¹¹ Unfortunately the silence Župančič imposed upon himself after the eruption of criticism over his essay prevented him from elaborating on what those “secrets” might have been.

However else Adamic may have contributed to Slovenia and Yugoslavia, in his tireless disquisitions on South Slavic matters, his propagandizing Slovene and

⁷I attempted to argue this point in my paper (COOPER 1981: 215–226). I detect a similar line of argumentation in ŽITNIK 2002: 176: nations do not develop their cultures by closing but by opening their cultural borders, by being inclusive, not exclusive.

⁸ŽUPANČIČ 1932: 57. “Adamic remained a Slovene in the primary elements of his spirit, in the drive of his instincts, his secret essence, which gives his work a particular color and tone.”

⁹ŽUPANČIČ 1932: 59. “America gave him breadth, Slovenia depth. And a healthy body and soul with strong primal instincts. And a precious inheritance from his mother – laughter!”

¹⁰He himself said at the conclusion of *The Native’s Return* (ADAMIC 1934: 365): “I guess my job in the next few years, perhaps for the rest of my life will be ... to interpret my old country to America.”

¹¹ŽUPANČIČ 1932: 59. “Who reveals to it [i.e., America] and us its and our secrets.”

Yugoslav causes, and his lobbying at the very highest governmental levels in the U.S., clearly as a writer he sought also to contribute through his literary efforts. In the remainder of this brief paper I would like to focus on the best of these, namely those five lengthy prose pieces he published in the 1930s – *Laughing in the Jungle* (1932), *The Native's Return* (1934), *Grandsons* (1935), *Cradle of Life* (1936), and *My America: 1928–1938* (1938).¹² Two of these, *Grandsons* and *Cradle*, Adamic considered explicitly to be novels. In *My America 1928–1938* he refers to the former as “my first novel,” and the latter as “my novel” (Adamic 1938: 187, 244). In a letter to I. F. Lupis-Vukić of 10 October 1936 he wrote that *Cradle* was the first of three, four or even five novels he intended to write about all the South Slavic nationalities in the twentieth century (Christian 1981: 282–823). And Adamic’s modern critics have noted novelistic elements in his three autobiographical volumes as well. Many of the papers presented at the 1981 Adamic symposium in Ljubljana focused on Adamic as a fiction writer. Boris Paternu, for example, suggested that both *Laughing in the Jungle* and *The Native's Return* tend “v smer literarne fikcije.”¹³ And elsewhere he writes that Adamic ‘transforms experiential reality into the realm of free literary fiction,’ in that he rearranges his material into rounded tales with beginnings, middles and ends, he selects characteristics in order to portray personalities in particular ways, he composes large narrative complexes in which there are many ‘novelistic’ touches, and he deploys a ‘minipoetics’ in his choice of words, use of comparison, metaphor and symbol, and in his construction of sentences with a syntactic rhythm bordering on poetry. He concludes: “Skratka, v Adamičevem pisanju nenehoma deluje proces literarizacije, pa naj bo to pisanje še tako stvarno in na prvi pogled dokumentarno.”¹⁴

Mirko Jurak made similar claims, explicitly labeling *Laughing in the Jungle*, *The Native's Return* and *Cradle of Life* “novels.” They are fictional and autobiographical at the same time because they are less histories than acts of perception and narration, employing a language that has clearly esthetic and symbolic functions. Adamic’s subject matter was, he claimed, selective, and was conveyed in terms of

¹²I omit from consideration two other lengthy works he wrote in the 1930s, *Dynamite* (1931), and *From Many Lands* (1939, the first in his “Nation of Nations” series), plus all the works he wrote in the 1940s, including the “sequel” to *The Native's Return*, *My Native Land* (1943) and the other three volumes of “Nation of Nations,” as well as the posthumous *The Eagle and the Roots* (1952). In part I do so because of space constraints but more so because I consider these works to be publicistic, occasionally bordering on propagandistic, without significant literary merit other than that they are all written in Adamic’s clear, compelling English prose style. It is, perhaps of some interest to note that Adamic himself reported (ADAMIC 1938: 48) that Upton Sinclair had recommended that he make *Dynamite* into a novel to make it more attractive, but Adamic refused. On the other hand, in the last of these works (ADAMIC 1952: 330, n. 1), Adamic does refer to himself as a novelist as he describes how he modified a scene for inclusion in his book: “Taking the liberties of a novelist, almost [believing that novelists often approach truth more closely than historians], I try to give the altercation in self-interpretative equivalents.” Nonetheless the novelistic components, such as they are, seem overwhelmed to me by the intense didacticism of the work.

¹³PATERNU 1981: 86. “In the direction of literary fiction.”

¹⁴PATERNU 1981–1982: 42–43. “In a word, a process of literaturization works ceaselessly in Adamic’s writing, even if the writing is realistic and at first glance documentary.”

“hyperbole, repetition, accumulation, and antithesis” (Jurak 1981: 126–135). Finally from the same symposium Ivo Vidan called *Laughing in the Jungle* an accurate account of Adamic’s life but one in which facts and persons had been ‘altered, modified and invented:’ “It is quite cunningly and significantly designed; it reveals a literary awareness and ambition on the part of its author that goes much beyond the true-to-life recording that it professes to do.” (Vidan 1981: 146.) Both he and another symposium participant, Rose Mary Prosen, found Adamic’s novels somewhat lacking, however, in artistic achievement: “The concept of *Grandsons* obviously surpasses the rendering of it by literary means” (Prosen 1981: 140), and “Adamic simply does not seem [in this novel] to be adequate to his assumed task” (Prosen 1981: 142).¹⁵ Prosen calls *Grandsons* “didactic” and “propagandistic” and *Cradle of Life* “melodramatic”: Adamic “perhaps exceeded his artistic limitations in these novels.”¹⁶ As a result, we are left with the impression that Adamic’s autobiographical works are in some ways more successful as novels (in the broadest sense of that term)¹⁷ than the two books he wrote explicitly as novelistic fiction.

Certainly it is a challenge for a modern (let alone post-modern) American reader to appreciate either *Grandsons* or *Cradle of Life*. Although their design is clear, their stories are interesting, their texts readable and their dialogue vivid and authentic, as Ivo Vidan notes (Vidan 1981: 151–152), *Grandsons* lacks coherence and *Cradle of Life* lacks plausibility. Neither measures up to Adamic’s best American models, Upton Sinclair or Sinclair Lewis, although in their shortcomings perhaps the two explicit novels are close to the lesser works of Adamic’s other influences, H. L. Mencken and Mark Twain, to whose *Prince and the Pauper* I believe *Cradle of Life* owes a distinct, if unacknowledged, perhaps even unconscious, debt. As Adamic’s friend, the poet Carey McWilliams said in an interview in 1977, Adamic may have had artistic instincts, but he was no artist, and his work has not aged well (Petrič 1990: 271).

That harsh evaluation should be tempered, however, for the three autobiographical works. Where Adamic could speak freely for himself, as he seemed constrained by his material in *Grandsons* not to do, and where he could handle material he knew first-hand, unlike the almost fairy-tale treatments we find in *Cradle of Life*, then he could narrate compellingly. One need only contrast the depiction of Rudo, the Maxo Vanka-inspired main character in *Cradle of Life*, with

¹⁵ PATERNU 1981–1982: 150, 151.

¹⁶ I disagree with Prosen’s contrasting of *Grandsons* and *Cradle of Life*, where she sees the latter as having a more positive ending than the former. It is difficult to overlook Adamic’s insistence in *Cradle* that Rudo and Zorka’s idyl was taking place on 27 June 1914, i.e., literally on the eve of World War I, which would completely destroy the system in which they enjoyed their privileged position. On the other hand it was Adamic’s intention to make the ending of *Grandsons* positive, for, as he wrote at the end of *My America 1928–1938* (ADAMIC 1938: 476): the great-grandson Anthony was meant to be “symbolical of the good, the positive forces stirring in the world amid chaos ...”

¹⁷ See KOS 1983 for a thorough analysis of the genre. Unlike non-specialized dictionaries, which include fictiveness as one of the criteria for calling a work a novel, Kos omits it.

the real Maxo Vanka as portrayed in *My America: 1928–1938*, in the chapter entitled “My Friend Maxo Vanka” (Adamic 1938: 156–183), to understand where Adamic’s talent lay. And *My America* is the weakest of the three, for it is a string of lovely pearls with very little thread to make a fine necklace. It is a bit too self-conscious as a commentary and critique, whereas both *Laughing in the Jungle* and *The Native’s Return* appear to be fresh, direct, unpremeditated (although not uninformed) observations of their respective subjects. Quite remarkably, or at least so it seems to me, Adamic managed to bring the perspective of the ‘outsider who is on the inside’ to each work. Or, to put it in terms now used to describe post-colonial writers of the period after World War II, a group I believe Adamic in many ways anticipated, the Slovene-American was one of those “cosmopolitan commentators” who “offer an *inside view* of formerly submerged peoples for target reading publics in Europe and North America in novels that comply with metropolitan literary tastes” (Brennan 1995: 174). Included among these are Gabriel García-Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie, and Nadine Gordimer, in other words not bad company for Adamic to find himself in.

The more I have inquired into post-colonial literature and in particular to one subdivision of it, the literature of exile, I have been struck by how often Louis Adamic fits the profile that has been elaborated recently for Indians, Jamaicans or Canadians writing in English, or Algerians, Senegalese or Québécois writing in French. Keeping Adamic in mind, consider what Edward Said, the dean of exile writers, has written in his 1983 essay, “Reflections on Exile”:

Much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals. [...] The exile’s new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction. Georg Lukács, in *Theory of the Novel*, argued with compelling force that the novel, a literary form created out of the unreality of ambition and fantasy, is *the* form of ‘transcendental homelessness.’ Classic epics, Lukács wrote, emanate from settled cultures in which values are clear, identities stable, life unchanging. The European novel is grounded in precisely the opposite experience, that of a changing society in which an itinerant and disinherited middle-class hero or heroine seeks to construct a new world that somehow resembles an old one left behind forever. [...] The novel ... exists because other worlds *may* exist, alternatives for bourgeois speculators, wanderers, exiles. (Said 2000: 181–182.)

In Adamic’s case, the ‘itinerant and disinherited middle-class hero’ finds not just *a* new world but *the* New World, as the stuff of *Laughing in the Jungle*, and he evokes it masterfully from his own particular point of view. And then, when he does return to his “old world” – for at least formally he was not an exile but an emigrant – he discovers in fact that the “old world” of his Austro-Slovene childhood has indeed disappeared, to be replaced with the “new world” of the Yugoslav-Slovene present, and that is the stuff of *The Native’s Return*, which is equally well evoked. “Seeing

‘the entire world as a foreign land,’” continues Said, “makes possible originality of vision [...] This plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (Said 2000: 186).

Said returns to these thoughts in a later essay. The exile, he writes, sees things in a “double perspective that never sees things in isolation.” He tends to see things not just as they are, but as they have come to be that way: “Look at situations as contingent, not as inevitable, look at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings, and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible.” (Said 1993: 378.) Such an exile, he notes, can become unhappy if he is tortured by memories of his former home and envious of those who have not lost theirs. Or, once again I see Adamic here very clearly:

On the other hand, as Rilke once said, you can become a beginner in your circumstances, and this allows you an unconventional style of life, and above all, a different, often very eccentric career. [...] If you can experience that fate [as an exile] not as a deprivation and as something to be bewailed, but as a sort of freedom, a process of discovery in which you do things according to your own pattern, as various interests seize your attention, as the particular goal you set yourself dictates: that is a unique pleasure. [...] An eccentric, unsettled course, so unlike anything we would today call a solid professional career, and yet what exuberance and unending self-discovery it contains. (Said 1993: 379–380.)

What I find new and intriguing about Adamic is that he applied these insights to each of the countries from which he was ‘exiled,’ so to speak, that is to the U.S. during his immigration there, although he claims he felt no longing for his Slovene homeland, at least until he returned to it; and to Slovenia and Yugoslavia, during his visit, when he admitted that he longed to return to the U.S.

And what resulted from Adamic’s application of this ‘plurality of vision’? In post-colonial theory’s terms, he created in his works the literature of hybridity, “the characteristic feature and contribution of the post-colonial, [...] developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth” (Brennan 1995: 183). Slovene literary critics have detected this in Adamic before: Paternu wrote of the ‘duality, even hybridity of [Adamic’s] literary prose’ (Paternu 1981–82: 42). As some American post-colonial critics have put it: “Hybridity in the present is constantly struggling to free itself from a past which stressed ancestry, and which valued the ‘pure’ over its threatening opposite, the ‘composite’” (Ashcroft 1989: 35–36). It is in this context that they adduce Derek Walcott, whom I used for the epigraph to this paper, who said hybrid writers possess a ‘fresh but not innocent’ sense of place, and a ‘new but not naïve’ vision, which provides them with inexhaustible material. Hybrid writers accept “differences on equal terms,” and that is their strength.

Louis Adamic’s contribution to *Slovene* literature (for that is ultimately what I wish to make clear) is precisely his hybridity, his ‘fresh but not innocent,’ ‘new but

not naïve' American sensibility, that eschewed ancestry and purity in favor of what he himself had become, a composite, an amalgam, neither one nor the other fully but a good deal of both. Although his writings were not in the Slovene language, they did not have to be, as Žitnik correctly asserts, in order to contribute to the literature about Slovenia, the literature of Slovenia and Slovenes. In America he was ahead of his time, anticipating by several decades the rise in interest in "hyphenated" Americans who sought to avoid or undo some of the harsher aspects of the "melting pot." And in Slovenia, too, he was ahead of his time, the first of an ever larger group of writers who live beyond Slovenia's borders and write in languages other than Slovene, but who cannot be (any longer) ignored by Slovene audiences or critics.

In 1938 Josip Vidmar wrote a piece he entitled "Veliki tekst" ("The Great Text"), a comparative study of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Arrowsmith*, which he labeled "American," and Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg*, which he considered to be consummately "European" (Vidmar 1938):

Toda ko sem zdaj v mislih pregledoval Lewisovo delo, so se mi mahoma odprle oči. Spoštovanje, ki ga imam do Manna, me ni oviralo. Razmišljajoč o 'Arrowsmithu' sem ugledal podobo slovenskega velikega teksta, o kakršnem je sanjal Cankar, kakršen nam je usodno potreben in kakršnega nam je naša književnost še dolžna.

However, when I ponder now Lewis's work, my eyes were opened. The respect I have for Mann did not stop me. Thinking about *Arrowsmith* I caught sight of the model of the Slovene great text about which Cankar had dreamed, which is fatefully necessary for us, and of which our literature is still in need.

And then he goes on to cite Cankar, and then conclude with his own thoughts on the matter, which I believe are worth citing in full:

Videl sem ga samo v obrisih: pot neke osebnosti skozi džunglo slovenskega duhovnega in družbenega življenja in njen boj za svojo podobo. Roman o slovenskem intelektualcu s podobo te džungle, kakor jo je skiciral Cankar, in torej s kritiko te džungle, te naše zaostale in omejene duhovnosti. V takem romanu bi se ta narod videl kakor v zrcalu, bi to življenje spoznalo in se zavedelo samo sebe. Takšen bi bil lahko sodoben slovenski veliki tekst ...

I saw it in outline: the path of some person through the jungle of Slovene spiritual and social life and his struggle for his own image. A novel about a Slovene intellectual with an image of that jungle as Cankar had limned it in, and thus with a critique of that jungle, of our backward and limited spirituality. In such a novel the people would see themselves as in a mirror, would recognize their life and become self-aware. Such would be the modern Slovene great text ...

Forgive me if I draw what might seem a too facile comparison here in conclusion: if one seeks such a 'jungle' in Slovene literature, one could do worse than to look to Louis Adamic's novels for it.

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