

The palimpsest of ruins: cultural memory, European literary intertext, and post-romanticism in Simon Jenko’s “Picture VII”

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Abstract In 1865 short poem “Obraz VII” (Picture VII) published by the Slovenian post-romantic poet Simon Jenko (1835–1869), paradigmatic figures of speech (exclamation, apostrophe, and rhetorical question) subvert the presence of the speaking persona and the subjectively modalized landscape (*Stimmungslandschaft*) that were characteristic of the *obraz* genre. Rhetoricity of the lyrical voice may be seen as the trace of the underlying traditional intertext of ruins stemming from the early modern topos, in which the image of demolished buildings is linked to the notion of *vanitas vanitatum*, i.e., to the idea of the elusiveness of being, society, and culture. Jenko’s short poem is a variation within the vast and intermedial imaginary of ruins that has been central to the fashioning of European cultural identity (viewed as the presence of the past under permanent de- and reconstruction), especially since the eighteenth century. Compared to other variations of the ruin motif in romanticism (e.g., Byron, Uhland, Lenau, Mickiewicz, Petőfi), Jenko’s ascetic, fragmented poem re-writes the topos differently, through semantic undecidability that comes close to the post-modern existential condition.

Keywords Ruin poetry · Intertextuality · Cultural memory · Post-romanticism · Jenko, Simon (1835–1869)

Introduction

A palimpsest of codes is inscribed in a brief poem from the lyric cycle *Obrazi* (Pictures) by Simon Jenko (1835–1869): the intertext of cultural memory, woven together from the traditions of European literatures, arts, and semiotics of living spaces shines through the layer of the “Zeitgeist” that produced the text in 1857/1858. In the poem’s melancholic mood, the contours of an actual experience of a solitary scene dissolve into a dreamlike erasure of all foundation of existence. In his fragmentary depiction of ruins as fragments of the elusive past, Jenko evokes the fragility of individual being and the universal *agon*

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between nature and culture, time and history. The textual meaning, however, oscillates in an irreducible “aporia” brought into being by the play between the lyrical voice’s dramatic and rhetorical disquiet and the quiet “answer” of an echo:

Zêlen mah obraščã zrušene zidove, veter skoznje diha žalostne glasove.	Moss has crept on walls Fallen in decay, Sadly breezes moan As they breathe through them.
Pôvej, razvalina, v soncu zatemnêla! Kaj je moč človeška, kaj so njena dela?	Speak, o fallen ruin, Darkened in the sun! What is human might And all it has done?
In življenje naše, ki tak hitro teče, al’ so same sanje? – <i>Sanje</i> – jek mi reče.	And this life of ours, Swiftly fleeing past, Is it but a dream? – <i>Dream</i> – the echo comes.
(Jenko 1964, p. 51)	(Transl. N. Grošelj)

Is Jenko’s ruin motif mimetic or semiotic (cf. Riffaterre 1978)? The fallen walls do seem mimetic and there can be no doubt that the author saw many ruins in his lifetime. In contradistinction to the *gelernte Dichtung* of his great precursor, the romantic-Biedermeier poet France Prešeren (1800–1849), Jenko abandoned the erudite allusive apparatus and wrote instead about experiential, familiar motifs and themes, imitating in his apparently “unpretentious” style the folkloric poetics and oral tone. Drawing on the folklore, writers from the pre-romanticism onward tried to introduce a different concept of lyrical poetry: it was the capital of orality, borrowed from the folklore that created an impression of culturally unmediated spontaneity in the written texts, which were trying to escape from classicist pressures of rhetoric. The oral tone of folklorism opened up the conventional lyrical ego (cf. Andreotti 1990, pp. 144–147; Horn 1995, pp. 302–304).

However, more than a half of Jenko’s lyrical piece is occupied by a *rhetoric* gesture. The lyrical speech, supposedly authentic, is actually caught in age-old patterns of apostrophe and rhetorical question. This discloses Jenko’s poetic utterance as non-mimetic: it is actually a semiotic echo of cultural memory, dependent on archives of writing.

The ruins imaginary

An extensive intertextual imaginary developed in the Western culture around the representations of ruins; this imaginary crosses the borders of particular semiospheres, ethnic languages, dialects, and sociolects, as well as transgresses the historical succession of cultural codes (cf. Augustyn 2000; Aziza et al. 1978; Daemmrich 1972; Daemmrich and Daemmrich 1995; Jahn 1989; Janowitz 1990; Kostkiewiczowa 1988; Królikiewicz 1993; Mortier 1974; Skyrme 1982). Remnants of ancient and medieval architecture served as raw material for new buildings until the Renaissance, when they—under the influence of historical and archeological interest in the Antiquity—became an aesthetic fact, empowered by the classicist imitative drive. The ruins were included in the designs of gardens and

were largely taken into iconography of painting and graphic art. They provoked metaphysical, moral, or religious reflection on the boundaries of human endeavors. Due to their aesthetic features—the diversity of contours, light, and counterpoints with natural environment—they became popular in landscape painting of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The aesthetic of the picturesque even produced special genres of ruin painting and “caprice” (Pannini, Piranesi, Robert). European artists, stage designers, and others arranged fictional ruins in arbitrary compositions, whereas the park architects built artificially ruined “antique” or “medieval” edifices to boost the aesthetic and sublime impression of gardens (the so-called English garden survived well into the nineteenth century).

Artistic and garden iconography could certainly have influenced Jenko’s imagination through intermedial channels, making it absorb some traditional artistic contrasts in a litotic poetic form (e.g., the soft green of moss versus dark walls, *chiaroscuro*, full versus empty volumes). Essential for Jenko’s ruin poem, though, are the intertextual bonds: in the European literature from the Antiquity to Romanticism, ruins became an important topos of cultural memory which was articulated by characteristic words, perspectives, standard allegorization and *sententiae* (e.g., correlating the motif of destroyed edifices with the *vanitas vanitatum* theme).

As early as in the Antiquity, observation of the fallen buildings of past dynasties and defeated civilizations often led to metaphysical contemplations on the fortune’s whims or the time’s predominance over state power and glory; it also allegorized the transitoriness of the individual being. This pattern of representation was easily taken over by and accommodated to the medieval Christianity. The ruin poetry as a special genre, however, was constituted only by Janus Vitalis in his *Qui Romam in media quaeris novus advena Roma* (1552–1553), which presents us with a series of oxymorons: the ancient Rome is, in the form of ruins, hidden within the modern town; Rome once conquered other cities, but now it defeated itself; everything changes, while the flowing Tiber is the only constant. From these paradoxes, Vitalis derives a thought about the almightiness of the Fortune and transitoriness of mighty empires. This text inspired a mass of imitations, translations, and adaptations throughout Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (cf. Skyrme 1982).

Right until the baroque period, the ruin motif was employed mainly as a moral example (*exemplum*) for the futility and transitoriness of worldly deeds and it was represented rather schematically. However, ruins attracted attention in their own right in the eighteenth century, calling for aesthetic feelings by their irregular, fragmentary outlook as well as by dramatic contrasts with their environments (travelogue literature, the aesthetic of the picturesque, descriptive poetry of nature); in addition, they were put in the perspective of melancholy. The latter, originally a British intellectual product, spread throughout the pre-romantic and romantic Europe where it sometimes melted with the traditional and Christian idea of *vanitas vanitatum*.

The composition of a solitary observer, melancholy, *Stimmung*, and the ruin motif was a hallmark of European Romanticism (cf. McFarland 1981). Innumerable works by Blake, Lamartine, Hugo, Wordsworth, Coleridge, von Chamisso, Mickiewicz, Norwid, Petőfi, and many others belong to the context of the romantic ruin poetry. Moreover, ruins figured as a notorious subject of the time and that made them closely associated to the very notion of “Romanticism” (Schultz and Lüthi 1975, p. 579). The imaginary of ruins played the role of a fictional mnemotope, that is, of an imaginatively produced monument and fragment of the past, which paradoxically bore witness to the continuity of a certain cultural space (e.g., English, French, European) only by tracing its discontinuities: the presence of ruins evokes the absence of the past architectural wholes, their functions, social contents, mental

totalities, political and cultural contexts. The imaginary of ruins—of antique cities, medieval castles, defending walls, etc.—evoked the historical layers that were needed for antiquary invention of collective identities: first national, later European ones (cf. Janowitz 1990). In Jenko's case, another function of the imaginary is crucial: as in Hegel, it epitomized the crisis of modern subjectivity in the condition of "transcendental homelessness" and the destruction of traditional metaphysical, social, and political order, connected to the post-Enlightenment and post-revolutionary processes of secularization and modernization. On the other hand, the representations of ruins served as a *mise en abyme* of the romantic fragmentariness (the latter affected not only music, theory and belletristic texts but the artists' "unfinished" lives, too), which was inseparable from the Kantian sublime, a frightful and aesthetic intimation of a transcendent, unreachable totality (cf. McFarland 1981).

Jenko versus romantic ruin poetry

The ruin poetry by Byron, Uhland, Lenau, and the Slovene Ignatius Holzapfel cannot be considered exclusive and direct sources of Jenko's *Picture VII*, notwithstanding great probability of the *rappports de fait*. Their poetic texts are nothing but variants of the same thematic structure, rooted in the European cultural memory and still popular in the poetic codes of pre-romanticism and Romanticism (i.e., a fragment metonymically evoking to the observer the absent whole and producing melancholy or fancy). Because of variation within the common representational repertoire, those texts often display similarities on their linguistic surface as well.

Byron's treatment of the ruin motif in the travelogue epic *Childe Harold* has little in common with Jenko's miniature, although Jenko's poetry evolved along the historical chain leading from Byron through Lermontov to Heine. The sublime ruins of Rhine castles are metaphors for the vanished spirit of aristocracy. They are just one of the picturesque tourist sensations that are able to inflame Harold's imagination of the past and make him forget his present condition. The only parallel between Byron and Jenko consists in the motif's blueprint and clichéd figures of speech (apostrophe, question). Jenko's text shares numerous other elements with the paradigmatic ruin poetry written by Uhland, who was quite popular in Slovenia. The image of a dreamlike, imaginative experiencing of ruins and recalling of their idyllic feudal past is developed in his poems *Das Schloß im Walde* and *Die drei Schlösser*. A solitary observer is charmed by the picturesque quality of ruined and abandoned castles in the exuberant nature: grass overgrows the inner court, vines creep over the walls (the detail is similar to Jenko's moss), birds shoot through empty windows (similar to Jenko's wind). The scene evokes memories of old heroes, noblemen, and their legends. Certain details from Uhland's extensive historical ballad *Marius auf Karthagos Trümmern*, which foregrounds the difference of Carthaginian past power and its empty, haunted remains, stands very close to Jenko's brief lyric text (e.g., the motif of an echo coming from the ruins). Lenau, to whose influence some Slovene critics ascribed Jenko's supposedly unhealthy, non-Slovene pessimism, wrote another typical item of ruin poetry, the elegy *Die Heidelberger Ruine*. Jenko's *Picture VII* chose quite a similar approach as regards the text's melodic quality, the topical motif structure (ruin versus nature, scene versus observer's reflection), the metaphysical contemplation of transitoriness and vanity of being, deeply melancholic mood, and, last but not least, the inclination to outworn rhetorical devices (apostrophe, sentences, questions).

However, the ruin poetry had entered the Slovene literature at least two decades before Jenko in the form of a lyric poem *At the Ruins of the Evil Castle* (1824/1830) by Ignatius

Holzapfel. Although the latter is most probable Jenko's source, it cannot be considered as its sole pre-text. Both Slovene texts are merely variants of the ruin intertext: referring to the scene of a ruined edifice, they both bring into play the topos of *vanitas*, they both use some identical words, pathetic anaphors and rhetorical questions to the ruins. Yet there is also considerable difference between the two: Jenko's reflection on the elusiveness of the human powers in history offers no religious, transcendental salvation (as Holzapfel does, after his Volneyean attack on feudal atrocities). It leads to a melancholic dead end and a radical abandoning of any existential grounding, which is articulated by the mannerist-baroque topos of "life is a dream", known from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

The above cursory comparisons show that Jenko's *Picture VII* is best understood as a variant in the vast intertext of ruins. The deepest layers of cultural memory provide the poem with the motif blueprint (i.e., the constellation of ruins and nature, past and present, the whole and the fragment, the scene and contemplation), topical allegorizing (*vanitas vanitatum*), and "abstract", general depiction of ruins. More recent, that is, at least pre-romantic, are the sources of Jenko's lyrical *Stimmung*, melancholy, and sense for the picturesque. But what makes this small poem intriguing is Jenko's unique inscription onto the palimpsest of ruins, evident in the text's fragmentary brevity, semantic undecidability, and radicalism of its poetic ontology.

Post-romantic deconstruction

Jenko's authorization of the traditional motif consists in transforming the representation of ruins into a symbol for the general dissolution of all historical tradition and metaphysical certainty, whereas reinterpreting the *vanitas* topos leads to a radical loss of whichever ontological foundation. These traits were interpreted in Slovene literary criticism as depending on the post-romanticist gap between the subjective inwardness and outer reality, as well as on Schopenhauerian philosophy of transitoriness (cf. Bernik 1979; Kos 1966, 1987, pp. 87–100; Paternu 1974, 1979; Skaza 1979). Schopenhauer in a way prophesies the modernist notion of the fluid subject, when he asserts that "our existence has no ground to step on, with the exception of our fleeting present" and that our being is but an "*existentia fluxa* existing only in permanent change" (qtd. in Paternu 1974, pp. 462–463). Jenko seems to have absorbed in his text certain aspects of Schopenhauerism which was the last metaphysics among the ruins of European metaphysical traditions and concurrently a precursor to Nietzsche, Freud, and modernism. Jenko not only evokes transitoriness following this philosophic line, but expresses it with the image of the world as something illusionary, dreamlike, of no substance, what, in turn can be compared to Schopenhauer's notion of *maya* (borrowed from Hinduism or Buddhism). In the Slovene literary history of the 1970s and 1980s, late Romanticism or post-romanticism was in no way considered as a transition from romantic to the realist representation, but as a literary current in its own right. It partially follows the romantic dichotomy of the ideal and reality, while questioning and limiting the absolute romantic subjectivity, revealing its dependence on social, political, bodily, natural, or material contexts. Post-romanticism is a crossroads from where different currents start, such as psychological realism, symbolism, and modernism.

Several features of Jenko's *Picture VII* could be considered as post-romantic and pre-modernist. The poem confronts human existence and work with the "material" forces of nature, thus disclosing the subject's fleeting nature and the dissolution of its existential grounds. Also post-romantic is the modulation of the poem's genre (*paysage intime*, *Stimmungslandschaft*, *Bildgedicht*), in which the presence of the contemplating and

experiencing consciousness is called into question, while the once organic form gives way to the model of an open artwork whose meaning is undecidable.

“Deconstruction” enacted in Jenko’s *Picture VII* questions the presence of the lyrical ego’s consciousness and voice by hybridizing oral register of a “real-time” authenticity with time-honored rhetoric and formulae from the written archives of the European cultural memory. On the one hand, the echo “*Sanje*” (*Dreams*) is represented within the framework of the text’s grammatical and rhetorical structures, as the answer to the question posed by the observer of the ruins. Namely, it might be considered as a *prosopopoeia*, that is, the figure that allows non-living objects to speak and, in this particular case, answer a living human voice, performed through two other rhetorical figures (apostrophe, question). The reverberation thus plays the role of the answer, but an empty, superfluous one, since it merely reinstates what the rhetorical question has already assumed. *Picture VII* plays figures of speech one against the other. The sound coming back from the ruins cannot be an answer within the possible world of this text, because it is merely a physical reverberation, resonance that reproduces solely the materiality of the poet’s voice. What the lyrical ego gets is not what he longed for, but only a signifier devoid of meaning, consciousness or emotion. There is no other subject, no intention, no signified behind the echo’s signifier. We are confronted with the undecidability of the echo motif (is it an answer or merely a meaningless reverberation of sound?). At this crucial point the irresolvable crisis of being among the ruins of metaphysics irrupts. The final point of the poem displaces differences between the subject (its consciousness and voice) and the objectivity of natural powers. The foundation of the individual existence has vanished: neither historical tradition (epitomized in ruins), nor consciousness, not even nature can still play this role. Jenko is looking over the ruins of metaphysics and rhetoric, over post-romantic horizon, and is sensing the dawn of our modern and postmodern condition.

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