

Oliver Fuggeri

Avalanche — the novel as an
exploration

"Macedonian Review" (Skopje),
XII, 3, 1982, pp. 265-271

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
LIBRARY

Progressive No. of Work 150230

No. of Volumes One
PS9698.3.F76A98

Class Mark P.B.200

Remarks _____

REFERENCE COPY

No. of Volumes One
PS9698.3.F76A98

P.B. 200

REFERENCE

300477

Avalanche – the Novel as an Exploration

by Oliver Friggieri
(University of Malta)

Literature can be fully appreciated both as an expression of a particular experience gone through in a definite time-space condition and as an expression of man the eternal animal in continuous search of himself and of his environment. The particular and the universal dimensions are interdependent, and if the writer manages to get hold simultaneously of the two apparently distinct levels, his work acquires the merit of being a historical or temporal account as well as a permanent reflection of man's unchangeable condition on earth.*

Boris Vishinski seems to succeed in accomplishing both tasks in a manner which is typical of the more mature writers. He is a voice coming to the outer world from his beloved Macedonia, but he is also the spirit of inward truth speaking to man about man. To the outsider *Lavina (Avalanche)* is easily understandable on this second level as a "disturbing" meditation on the earthly condition of man as a mind, a faculty which is at once man's best vehicle and worst enemy. Stripped off of its immediate social and political connotations, the novel comes forth as a thorough exposition of the private, intimate journey which the troubled soul "undergoes" in space and in time which are not contingent or clearly identified, but which are best understood if considered as humanity's inevitable eternal dimensions. Vishinski transforms known and knowable data into an intriguing account; such data are revisited by the creative techniques of a narrator of a very modern brand. On the other hand, he unequivocally departs from the easily detectable situations known to all in order to arrive at a point where man, solitary and helpless, is bereft of his national, social and personal character and is brought to appear totally nude in front of himself as an insignificant agent of his innermost agitations.

Vishinski, one of the more important Yugoslav authors who appeared for the first time in the middle fifties, can be simply looked at

* This study was written as a preface to the Maltese edition of *Avalanche*, translated by Dr Oliver Friggieri, poet, translator and literary critic (Ed. Klabb Kotba Maltin, Valletta, Malta, 1982).

as a faithful and sensitive interpreter of his country's post-war condition. That would be a justifiable approach up to a certain extent, but it would definitely deprive him of the international, or better extra-national dimension according to which his work, multivalent and complex, is oriented. Alongside the perspective of a keen observer of known historical facts, persons and situations, there is the much wider panorama of a particular sort of humanity as recreated, interpreted and then sublimated by his own sensibility as a human, and not exclusively as a Macedonian, writer. After all, true art transcends the confines of one's own territory, seeks to understand and give meaning to knowable truth in terms of what is unknowably absolute, and transforms a particular narrative into an epic of mankind.

Martin is a person who can be put against a set background and be identified in terms of immediate circumstances. Up to this extent Vishinski would be the sensible literary historian whose psychological insight produces a veritable account of an individual. Over and above this elementary stratum, one can detect throughout the novel the impatient search for what is much more profound. Experience becomes transparent and reduces itself to motivation, the study of effects in the light of their hidden causes. The question put by Vishinski in the most persistent manner is *why*, not *what*. Martin is analysed not in terms of what he does on the empirical level but in respect of what his "actions" stand for and what his existence signifies in a universal context. He is both singular and collective, Macedonian and human, historical and eternal. There is an implied sense of chorality in his overt individualism. His cultural roots are deeply embedded in the soil of a particular country, but his essence belongs to the condition of existence as such. This is the exact point where history is sublimated into art. When literature acquires such credentials, it immediately gets the right to travel widely abroad, to reach for distant countries where men, ethnically and culturally different but essentially identical, inhabit just one whole planet.

The use of the pronoun "I" is ambivalent, and it contributes enormously to the development of the multilateral nature of the novel. Its meaning is almost changeable according to the particular semantic environment in which it obtains significance as a mere first person pronoun. Its implications within the structure of the whole narrative largely vary in accordance with the extent to which the uninterrupted parallelism between empirical reality and symbolical truth is drawn. The same "I" is present when the author recalls the disasters of the Second World War as well as when living in a more direct manner (obviously on the literary level) the Skopje floods of 1962. The two tragedies are undergone by an invading personality which really identifies itself with the world it describes and which ultimately becomes an integral part of it.

The war is a sort of betrayal of the self, a voyage beyond the limits of what the "I" considers normal, decent and logical. Alienation of the self, a theme which relates *Avalanche* to the more modern trends of European narrative prose, is basically caused by a clash between

sense and irrationality, and it makes the "I" seek refuge within the infinite realms of the inside world, offended and fragmented. There is a deep feeling of unbelonging which Vishinski succeeds in depicting through excerpts of pure narration occasionally intermingled with symbolical innuendos. Perhaps this fusion of direct story telling and metaphorical rendering of the story itself is the most typical aspect of the author's complex technique. On the other hand, the flood is described both as a physical tragedy and as an interior condition of utter destruction. Martin is desperate about the hardships and the fatal perils faced by the group of wounded friends, and decides to commit suicide. The death instinct of a self-destructive humanity is transformed into a personal experience. But this is just a partial rendering of the text's hidden meanings; the deeper layers suggest other interpretations which attain full justification if put against the background of the whole narrative.

Vishinski's method of construction amply shows that he is fully aware of the recent modes of novel writing. He belongs to the important (perhaps the most innovative) group of European novelists who have shown that the most intricate forms of narration should be sought within, and not outside, the spirit. But since, as E. M. Forster affirms, a novel must necessarily tell a story, he retains the basic skeleton of a "tale" with all its necessary cause-effect points of contact, and builds upon it a very different world of associations. This is aptly summed up by Todor Chalovski as follows:

"Martin is a young member of the underground, an active participant in the Movement, a revolutionary who is entrusted with responsible tasks, one of which is most vital as regards his future destiny; he has to look after a group of partisans, whose treatment in the city demands that they should be hidden and well protected. Arrested in a clash with the police, he is thrown into jail where he is mercilessly tortured. Under torture at the hands of the Investigator he loses consciousness, uttering the name 'Nestor'... This is enough for the Investigator to surround the house where Nestor is hiding and to organise a siege and set fire to it, believing that the wounded are being hidden there. But this means a reprieve for the wounded who are, in fact, in another house, and it also gives Martin a chance to escape. He is stratched on a rack, his nails pulled out and locked in a water-filled room, and is tortured thus until he utters Nestor's name and is then of no further use to the Investigator. The wounded are saved, Nestor dies after a heroic resistance and Martin will always be filled with unease, doubts and nightmares for being a traitor; he will always remember the past via the various characters that live inside him."

Within the general framework of this basic narrative body, Vishinski draws a whole series of partly autonomous narrative units, full of varied interpretations, which widen the scope of the novel, enriching it further with references directly and indirectly dependent on the main channel of narration. For example, Nestor is not only the childhood friend of Martin or the one who participates in a battle for liberty. He becomes an overwhelming, all-embracing image personifying what is true and ultimate. On the direct plain of the narration of sensible experience, he is characterized by what he thinks and does; on the indirect level of symbolical significance, he becomes a strong moral force, an urge which is both outside and inside the spirit of

Martin, a figure which towers over anyone and anything else and which actually "gives birth" to all the other positive forces. The Investigator, the Artist and the Doctor have their own strange relationship with him.

Vishinski seems to evoke relevant mythological data in the choice of the name "Nestor". Nestor, a name derived from the Greek verb *neomai*, suggests the capacity to reach ultimate happiness and stability. It implies the idea of an ideal arrival. The Homeric hero is also famous for his experience and wisdom, as well as for his participation in the Trojan war. As a young man he took part in numerous adventures; he was one of the few Greek leaders to arrive home safely after the fall of Troy. His name immediately recalls the experience of a blockade. All this extra-textual cultural background widens the significance of the role, parallel in so many aspects, played by the particular character created by the author. This is another indication of how much Vishinski strives to develop the associative dimension of his work and to give it relevance which immediately transcends the outlines of a purely historical account.

Avalanche derives much of its force as a psychological novel from the numerous contrasts which underlie an otherwise "innocent", smooth narrative. Martin assumes the role of a protagonist in virtue of whom all other characters acquire their relevance. He is actually the anti-hero, the victim of a complex plan fabricated for his utter destruction. He is a man in the real sense, as much as he typifies the all-searching spirit, the paramount strength of conscience which is felt and not sensibly perceived. The environment of the novel is tense, full of doubt and suspicion, and gives room to the creation of a strange world of double values. It soon becomes a region of uncertainty and eternal flux where clearly defined points of reference, especially ethical ones, lose their meaning. Within this wide context crops up the private and intimate world of Martin's troubled soul, a source of authenticity and sincerity. The search for what is ultimate and indestructible takes place silently within the conscience of an individual whose primary "enemy" is his own sense of justice, on the one hand, and of guilt, on the other. Idealism (as exemplified in Nestor) and caprice (as illustrated by the Investigator), sincerity and diplomatic technique, doubt (as a positive step towards knowledge) and certitude (as a misleading force) are forcefully put in contrast, in direct opposition to one another to depict the incessant struggle between good and evil. As a normal storyteller Vishinski develops it through a set of objective facts; as an attentive psychological novelist he transfers it to the plane of Martin's internal strife. The objective and the subjective levels are apparently put apart, but they constitute one single milieu.

Evil is translated into a dramatic image through the presentation of the enormous, fatalistic birds which occupy so much physical space and add new aspects to the colour-dimension of the novel. Again, these dantesque-like vultures also reside in the spirit as mortal forces and harbingers of annihilation. They seem to be the most visual and solid component employed by Vishinski in objectivizing an inward voyage.

The rest of the novel invites the reader to an intriguing meditation, a monologue on the fundamentals of human existence. At this point, however, the author who has behaved so consistently and for so long as a poet, at times lyrical and at times epic, turns out to be a dramatist as well. At this stage the reader does not read or reflect any more, but is induced to behold with a sense of awe and bewilderment. What has been previously a spiritual, almost mystic exercise now becomes a totally sensible, almost vulgar experience. The birds are to be seen and felt. Their challenging and terrifying omnipresence evokes in sharp contrast the intimacy with which the author has led the reader to think in silence and recollection. The law of the opposites makes the reader recall the previous love scenes and particularly the delicate sensuousness of Ana.

All this mysterious world of sensations, both psychological and physical, is extrinsicated dramatically and gives ample room for minute description:

"Enormous birds with green wings had arrived above the city as if brought by some crazy, godless wind. They had huge heads and large, motionless, forbidding eyes. From their sharp, distorted, yellow beaks they emitted cries like those of a man falling into an abyss. The stench which emanated from them and from their excrement was heavy and unbearable and made people feel dizzy... The green spectres had the habit of transforming themselves into little human figures in green or grey uniforms, the colour closest to their own colour, into cruel agents with enormous moustaches to hide their beaks... The terrified people used to say that there the birds devoured just the brains from the shattered skulls, but no-one was able to confirm this." (From the English translation by Timothy Bowen).

What is most concretely described ultimately becomes a perpetual state of mind. It does not remain an external object, but translates itself into Martin's own self, tattered and fragmented into pieces neither time nor a different mental attitude can ever erase. The war "will go on", and he will be eternally guilty. The distinction between past and present is not objective and metaphysical any more; it all depends on the subjective condition of the patient who has been finally confined to life in the past and lost contact with temporal progression. *Avalanche* is an elegy on man's incapacity to attain victory in front of the two worlds: the outer and the inner, both of them predetermined and superimposed. Nostalgia for youth and love, the urge to discover distant seas (as opposed to the claustrophobic atmosphere of "the city", the self), the will to be oneself and to reach sincerity (that is, truthfulness to oneself) will always remain the dominant sources of torment to the soul, desolate and helpless. The parabolic character of *Avalanche* easily suggests that Vishinski is sustaining Martin to make him transcend the significance of what is purely historical and immediate, so as to build him up into an image of mankind.

Martin's (that is, in this context, man's) irreparable defeat is not against the external but the internal order of existence. The outer world will change (as the present becomes the future), but the inner one has reached a stage of permanence, a sort of immutability (as the past remains the past, or better the continuous, eternal present) which in actual fact ends up by removing all previous "artificial" demarca-

tions between what is real and imaginative, experiential and phantasmagoric, sensory and mental. It is as if Martin has been petrified and rendered an immobile monument of decay and destruction. Vishinski the lyrical poet survives even at this stage, because his treatment of the anti-hero suggests that he tries to free him from responsibility. The loss of dignity becomes an imposition, not the result of volition.

A literary novelist, as opposed to any other conventional storyteller, is necessarily obsessed with the possibility of finding new modes of narrating and of reorganizing the apparently simple reality which imposed itself on our sensibility and which we normally summarize in the elementary components of a sentence: the subject, the verb and the object. The modern novel has shown that such basic simplicity is the result of hidden complexities and it may be the challenge of the creative novelist to sort them out in an unfashionable manner and according to his own world vision. For instance, *Avalanche* may be looked at as a story which, as Aristotle said, has an introduction, a body and a conclusion. But the actual reorganization of this threefold structure is Vishinski's real contribution to literature.

In the context of European literature, *Avalanche* is another valid experiment in the direction of what is normally called "the psychological novel". The One (i.e. Martin) and the Many (i.e. the other important characters) constitute one complete entity which, since it becomes the subject of consciousness and unconsciousness rather than of normal sensible observation, demands a particular way of being narrated. What is communicated is actually incommunicable, and the content of the dialogue of the protagonist speaking in the first person is essentially the bitter confession of a monologist. Vishinski does not translate a monologue into a novel, but reduces a novel to a monologue. Description becomes the end-product of a long soliloque, and narration betrays the symptoms of a frightening nightmare. The "poetry" of experience transformed into interiority and the "prose" of crude, repulsive facts and conditions are fused into one whole, a combination which illustrates the nature of Vishinski's narrative genre. The two components alternate, at times with detectable precision and at times casually. What may appear as two literary genres coalesced into a novel may actually be two psychological tendencies of Martin himself, the layers of one sensibility: the delicacy of his inner self and the harshness of his reaction to the outer world. The "distance" between the two extremes gives the author the possibility of gradually conceiving and forming the angst of Martin and, in the long run, of humanity.

The novel enables Vishinski to be included among the European authors who, more than any other previous literary group, have seen psychology as the most authentic raw material for aesthetic investigation. Such tradition probably goes back to Mme. De La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) and to Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). The new tendencies were later further developed in Goethe's *Werther* (1774) and *Wilhelm Meister* (1795), two significant examples of the *Bildungsroman*, the German novel which seeks to analyse a character, and in Foscolo's *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802). The twentieth century, having

acquired a much deeper scientific knowledge of the psyche, went on developing the novel as an inward voyage. Italo Svevo read Freud and sought to enter into the minds of his characters and to find there their only true identity. Proust mixed the past with the present and put them on one level in order to explore different layers of sensibility. Pio Baroja assembled parts of experience to arrive at the ultimate truth. Hesse created a series of "der Suchende", explorers of the absolute who go beyond the surface of apparent reality. Joyce delved into the subconscious in search of a level of stability. Kafka created a world of isolation where spiritual obsession holds full sway. D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, among others, are also important in this modern tradition.

Vishinski started to participate in a really personal manner in this European experience with *Vinozhito* (*Rainbow*), first published in Italian in Rome in 1971, and then in Macedonia in 1972. *Avalanche* (1978) constitutes a further step in the same direction. The fundamental function played by memory, the inter-relationship between the past and the present, and the continuous transformation of reality into an image are practically the three main factors which characterize it as a psychological novel. The unity of the whole narrative texture is sought through well-organized fragmentation; various parts are made to develop up to a certain extent by themselves, till they are finally put together to reveal one of the basic concepts of the novel, namely that there is no real distinction between facts and fiction, since everything is interiorized and changed into a mental figure. The world of *Avalanche* becomes one complete mind where objects reappear as spectres and communication (with the self rather than with the others) becomes symbolization. It is really Martin's state of mind which completely determines the novel's progression on various levels.