Afterword

Lado Kralj

The physician Slavko Grum (1901–1949) wrote the play *An Event in the Town of Goga (Dogodek v mestu Gogi)* in 1928 and 1929 – or perhaps even two years earlier, according to recent research by the German Slovenist Peter Scherber. In any case, the play was published in 1930 and first performed in 1931. It appeared, in other words, during "the interwar period" (i. e. between the First and the Second World Wars), and it is this period that provides the context for an initial understanding of the play. We might note, parenthetically, some of the first associations that usually arise in connection with this period – the Roaring Twenties and the Charleston vogue, as expressed in music, dance, flapper dresses and bobbed hair on women; the Ouija board as the calling card of spiritualist, theosophical and occult sects, with the notorious Madame Blavatsky on top of them all; the new sexual freedom and women's emancipation; psychoanalysis or, more precisely, the consultancy of Sigmund Freud, in the conventionally middle-class, but still rather cramped flat on Bergstrasse 19, near Vienna's Danube canal; narcotic addiction as the obligatory consolation of artists and other sensitive types; a psychosis of suicides by gas asphyxiation, swallowing match tips, and jumping off bridges; Russia's October Revolution and the threat of Bolshevism, the rise of Fascism and Nazism, and Blackshirts, Brownshirts, and shirts of other colors; the question of identity, and the more general problem of the divide between the individual and the raging crowd on the streets.

But, apart from these first associations, what does this context mean more specifically, especially with regard to playwriting and the theater? On the one hand, it signifies a continuity – intensified, to be sure – of the theatrical and social products from the recent *fin de siècle* era (Henrik Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, August Strindberg, Arthur Schnitzler,

Frank Wedekind, Lev Tolstoy, and so on). On the other hand, however, there were also new dramatists, theater directors, and actors who contributed decisively to the typical Viennese atmosphere Slavko Grum so eagerly absorbed from 1919 to 1926, as a medical student in the Austrian capital. We cannot say for sure if Grum actually read or saw the works of all these dramatists, but they all contributed to the characteristic feeling of the theater of the period. There were the German expressionist playwrights, for instance, of whom the most frequently performed was Georg Kaiser, author of *Gas*, *Gas II*, and *From Morn to Midnight*, who with his geometric and avant-garde catastrophism portrayed the mass madness toward which industrialized society was careening. Or the Viennese writer Oskar Kokoschka, with his examination of the hysterical and relentless struggle between the sexes *(Murderer, the Hope of Women* and *The Sphinx and the Strawman)*. Another significant dramatist of the age was Luigi Pirandello *(Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Tonight We Improvise)*, who explored problems of the self and identity, and the interplay between truth and appearance. The British playwright J. B. Priestley, meanwhile, was exploring the experience of time, the sense of being caught in a time-loop, and also concerned himself with revealing the technologically advanced but nonetheless totalitarian society of his day *(Time and the Conways* and *I Have Been Here Before)*.

The main character in Grum's *An Event in the Town of Goga* is Hana, the daughter of a well-off merchant in a market town. In her early youth, she was raped by the shop assistant Otmar Prelih, which is why she moved abroad very soon afterward; the traumatic experience, however, has left her frigid. But not only that – when she returns to her home she finds herself slavishly dependent on her rapist, and must submit to his will despite the immense revulsion and humiliation she feels. But Prelih is not the play's dramatic antagonist; indeed, he is a fairly powerless, helpless, and pitiful figure. Hana is the only one who finds him demonic, and this is because she is blinded by her neurotic fixation. Prelih's dramatic function is, primarily, to be killed by Hana so that she can at last free herself from her trauma; he is not himself a vehicle of dramatic action or any sort of motivations. For this reason, he does not, by and large, have a greater function than any of the

other inhabitants of Goga, each of whom, in their own particular way, reveals the distortedness, pervertedness, and suffocating atmosphere of the place. The old sisters Tarbula and Afra personify envy and possessiveness; the deceased Chief Tax Collector, an unhealthy self-love; Julio Gapit, fetishism; the hunchback Teobald, a morbid desire for compensation; and the Quiet Woman, the desire to commit suicide, etc. In short, all the characters, with the exception of the protagonist Hana, are here primarily to illustrate Hana herself, in one way or another – we can understand them, moreover, as "projections" of Hana, as part of her consciousness. In her encounters with them we see a *station technique* – she encounters her own various existential possibilities as embodied in these characters, and with every encounter she is put to the test.

It is possible to identify four major contemporary figures who influenced Grum's approach to playwriting and the theater and whose influence can also be detected in his most important work, *An Event in the Town of Goga.* (Given the thematic connections between Grum's play and his prose writings, their influence can also be seen in the latter, as well). These four are the playwright August Strindberg, the theater director Aleksandr Tairov, the psychologist Sigmund Freud, and the actor Conrad Veidt.

With regard to Strindberg, a comparison with his diary, *Inferno*, and the play *The Ghost Sonata* proves particularly fruitful. "We are bound by crime and guilt," the Mummy says in Strindberg's play, one of his series of "chamber dramas." In both Strindberg's and Grum's plays, crime and guilt are linked to eroticism, and to erotic events in the past (whether real or imagined). In this light, one could argue that *An Event in the Town of Goga* is trying to persuade us that life possesses not only an objective dimension but also an oneiric one, and that there is, so to speak, no clear demarcation between reality and dreams; also, that the repressive aspect of the human character is expressed much more fully in dreams, while eroticism is itself a ready tool for repression. Framed in this way, what then, is the idea of the play? Life is a dream – a horrific, necrophilic dream in which people are condemned to torture each other.

Grum himself lends support to this oneiric, unreal location and interpretation of the town of Goga. In 1929, in a

letter to Fran Albreht, he writes: "The dusty townlet in which the play takes place is not in the least a Kranj or a Mokronog, but rather an imagined, intentionally little-real, half-dilapidated townlet more from the Middle Ages than from our own times."[1] Nor is Goga, then, Ljubljana or Novo Mesto, as some interpreters have surmised.[2] In other words, we are not dealing with any veristic milieu or even with a metaphorical allusion to one. The town of Goga is "imagined" – illusory, dreamlike, and purposely constructed so that there is very little in it that is real. Here we have a typical example of the Symbolist legacy – an unreal setting that wishes to have nothing in common with verism, striving instead for a general metaphysical or mythic validity. It was precisely for this reason that Maeterlinck, the Symbolist playwright par excellence, so frequently set his plays in the mythical Middle Ages.

Grum became acquainted with the theatrical approach of avant-garde director Aleksandr Tairov in 1925 in Vienna, where he saw the Russian's acclaimed staging of Oscar Wilde's play, *Salome*. At the time, Tairov was touring European capitals with his renowned Kamerny Theater, and Vienna was one of the cities the troupe visited. Tairov's method was to divide the stage vertically ("vertical construction"), thus gaining multiple settings in which various dramatic scenes could be presented simultaneously. Grum used this important scenographic innovation of simultaneous, or fragmentary, technique in *An Event in town of Goga*, and it has since become the play's trademark, while serving at the same time as a metaphorical enactment of the functioning of the unconscious. From Tairov, Grum also borrowed elements of pantomime, marionette movement and, to a lesser extent, clown comedy. Grum himself was well aware that the turning point in his dramatic technique was the result of Tairov's influence. In a 1929 interview for the newspaper *Slovenski narod (The Slovene Nation)*, he

[1] Slavko Grum, *Zbrano delo*, ed. Lado Kralj (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1976), 2: 145.

[2] Novo Mesto, the largest city in southeastern Slovenia, is where Grum attended secondary school (at the *gimnazija*); the tiny hamlet of Mokronog lies about nine miles north of here. Kranj is a sizable city about sixteen miles northwest of Ljubljana, the Slovene capital. *(Translators' note.)*

observed: "The Russian director Tairov was the first person in Vienna to stage old plays with a modern set design of this sort. Tairov's set is such that it would suit a modern play, but he does not have such a play – while I have a play but no director."[3]

Grum first encountered Freudian psychoanalysis in Vienna while studying medicine there between 1919 and 1926. By the mid-twenties, Freud had written nearly all his fundamental works, survived periods of opposition and battles over his ideas, gained followers, founded the international psychoanalytical movement, and endured the apostasy of Adler and Jung. Psychoanalysis had become an important element in the cultural and intellectual climate of Vienna, and Grum – not only as a writer but also as a medical student – was obliged to take a position on the subject. One can say with a fair degree of confidence that he was most familiar with Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1915), which, although not a key work, was, as Freud himself noted, a summary, aimed at a wider lay readership, of the most important concepts from more exhaustive studies. Grum began studying *The Introductory Lectures* in 1926, his last year in Vienna. This year, then, may be seen as marking the beginning of Slovene psychoanalysis.

In 1930, Grum delivered a lecture at the Matica Cinema in Ljubljana entitled "The Flight from Life," the first part of which he devoted to the issue of suicide, and then, in the second part, presented his own understanding of psychoanalysis – his psychoanalytic manifesto, as it were. One of his listeners on that occasion was the psychologist and neurologist Dr. Alfred Šerko, who had been, more than once, the dean of the Faculty of Medicine and the rector of the University of Ljubljana, as well as Grum's supervisor at the Hospital for Mental Illness (where Grum had been a resident doctor for several months). Šerko, a fierce opponent of psychoanalysis, sternly rebuffed Grum's ideas, as the playwright described in his diary:

> After the lecture, Dr. Šerko took the floor and with brutal words demolished my arguments. Part of the audience agreed with him, but part of it grew restless and began to

[3] Grum, *Zbrano delo*, 1: 427.

> protest. Towards the end, everyone was more or less laughing. When he had finished, Dr. Šerko came up to me and asked if I had any hard feelings against him. Later, he sought me out in a café and discussed with me what had been said.

Šerko nurtured such strong hostility toward psychoanalysis that in 1934 he published the book *On Psychoanalysis* as part of the prestigious publication series "Slovene Paths," which Juš Kozak edited. In the book, Šerko, often resorting to sarcasm, presented a total denunciation of psychoanalysis, branding it a form of common dilettantism, if not charlatanry. In his younger days, Šerko had been an assistant to the eminent Austrian psychiatrist and university professor Julius Wagner-Jauregg, who received the 1927 Nobel Prize for Medicine (not for his psychiatric work, but for his treatment of paralysis using malaria inoculation). As a psychiatrist, Wagner-Jauregg taught that mental disorders must be treated solely by physiological or chemical means. Šerko followed him in this doctrine; hence his contempt for psychoanalysis. But this did not mean that he was traditionalist or petit-bourgeois in his views. Not in the least – he achieved great success in his research into schizophrenia, and was the first psychiatrist to try to approximate the psychological condition of schizophrenics by studying the effects of mescaline on himself. His findings earned him an international reputation, and his work was cited even by Karl Jaspers.

Not long after the presentation at the Matica Cinema, Grum published a version of the lecture under the same title, "Flight from Life," in the monthly magazine *Življenje in svet (Life and the World).* But Šerko's polemical rejection of his views on psychoanalysis depressed him so much that in the published version of the lecture he excised the entire second part, i.e. the part devoted to psychoanalysis, leaving only the first part, his discussion of suicide. The text of the entire lecture, however, did survive intact among Grum's papers, and has been published as part of the notes to his *Collected Works.* From this text it is evident that Grum had created a syncretic mixture of symbolism and psychoanalysis, namely, a psychoanalytic superstructure built on a symbolist foundation. He speaks of a "magic circle of flights from consciousness." This

magic circle encompasses the substance of real life; within it, there is a smaller circle – "conscious reality" – which receives rays, or spiritual energy, from outside and far away on high, from the extreme edge of the world beyond, from the "radiation point of consciousness" (compare Maeterlinck's notion of the "universal soul"). When real life becomes unbearable (compare Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*), conscious reality (the ego, the soul) transects life's circle at one of five circumferential points: *dreams* (daydreaming, art, religion); *intoxication* (alcohol, drugs); *illness* (neurosis, crime); *death* (suicide); or *sleep*.

Conscious reality breaks through the circle and returns to its source – to the world beyond. Or as Grum put it: "I understand the Beyond as anything that is not normal conscious activity, i.e. the world of fantasy, the subconscious, intoxication, nothingness, and death."[4] In this schema, artistic activity is fully equated with other possibilities, among which suicide represents the "most radical escape into the unconscious, into nothingness," and the artist is "half-brother to the psychopath." These possibilities were, it seems, to a large extent drawn from Grum's own life experience. And this is probably how one should understand Grum's view of the psychoanalytical traits of the characters in *An Event in the Town of Goga*, as he himself explained in the 1929 interview:

> In my play, the redeeming principle is the substitution of divinity by psychoanalytic release. I have portrayed people as puppets of subconscious forces, from which they free themselves by living out these forces to the full, just as a neurotic is cured through his confession to the doctor.[5]

As for the art of acting, the person Grum most esteemed and admired was the German stage and film actor Conrad Veidt. Veidt possessed very distinct and unique acting abilities, which made him one of the most famous actors in silent film, especially in expressionist film – his characteristic evocative makeup, his stylized mime and gesturing, and his expressive acting with his hands; also, he had an "ascetic and crooked

[4] Ibid., 2: 432.
[5] Ibid., 1: 426.

body." Two roles in particular typified his acting career: that of the murderous automaton Cesare in director Robert Wiene's film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and that of the student who fights his own shadow in Henrik Galeen's *The Student of Prague* (1926). In his most productive period, Veidt dedicated his unusual personality and passionate but always controlled dramatic zeal to the portrayal of extraordinary and, in one way or the other, deviant characters, who are tormented by hallucinations, nightmares, or angst-ridden inner rage. And this was exactly how Grum imagined not only the positive male characters in *An Event in the Town of Goga* (the hunchback Teobald, the scrivener Klikot), but also the negative ones (Prelih and Julio Gapit).

Grum saw Veidt perform on stage when the actor came to Vienna on tour, and the event made a profound impression on him, as he reported in a letter to his lover, Joža Debelak. It appears that he saw in Veidt not merely his ideal dramatic artist, but also an exemplary, if tragic, model of the modern intellectual:

> I saw Veidt a couple of days ago. For five minutes I was so close I could have touched him with my hand. Joža, he is the most beautiful person I have ever seen. The photographs are nothing compared to the reality. And he is thin, the poor man, thin. Coke, coke, morphine.
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> I am going to see him again tomorrow. He will be reciting at the Konzerthaus. He started crying on stage during his speech in Budapest. For ten minutes he lay in the dressing room sobbing convulsively.

When it was first performed, *An Event in the Town of Goga* did not enjoy the high regard Slovene literary scholarship gives it today. While it was acknowledged that the play possessed a formal interest and novelty, critics expressed reservations about the author's ethical perspective and values, which, in their view, were not sufficiently explicit or clear. Essentially, the problem was that Grum's play failed to meet the moral standards of either the liberals and leftists, on the one hand, or the Catholics, on the other. It was not concerned with promoting either national liberation or Christian ethics. After World War II, however, attitudes to the play changed considerably and the

town of Goga – like Ivan Cankar's St. Florian's Valley[6] – became a standard negative metaphor in Slovene, a testimony to the self-destructive potential within the Slovene collective consciousness, and as such, an important part of the national mythology.

Translated by Nikolai Jeffs and Rawley Grau

[6] The setting of Cankar's 1908 play *Scandal in St. Florian's Valley*, a searing indictment of rural petty-mindedness. *(Translators' note.)*