

Beatin dnevnik (Beata's Diary) by Luiza Pesjak. – Distant Reading for European Literary History

by Justin Tonra : 9-12 minutes

The fifth article of the Distant Reading Recommends series is written by Katja Mihurko Poniž of the University of Nova Gorica in Slovenia. She describes Beatin dnevnik / Beata's Diary, the first novel written in Slovene by a woman writer, and one containing numerous interesting echoes of nineteenth century literature from elsewhere in Europe.

In Distant Reading Recommends, an Action member introduces a novel, published between 1850 and 1920, from one of the participating countries in our Action. These novels may be important or notable within the individual nation's literary tradition, but less well-known in the broader European context. By bringing these novels to light, we aim to further advance our objectives of creating a broader, more inclusive, and better-grounded account of European literary history and cultural identity.

I am an ardent reader of nineteenth century novels written by women. For a long time, I assumed that this is connected with my undergraduate study in the field of comparative literature where I had to read a great number of the novels written by male authors whereas the novels of women writers were underrepresented. However, since my Ph.D in women's literary studies I have also read a substantial number of women's novels. Therefore, I would say that my interest is not only driven by the ethical goal of achieving gender balance in the corpus of the novels I have read so far. I think that the reason for my affection towards women writers is explicable with the fact that their novels written in the long nineteenth century are different in their topics but often also in the narrative style from the writings of male authors. I like these differences and I see them as an enrichment. Let me explain this with an example from the Slovenian literature, taking under the scrutiny the novel *Beatin dnevnik (Beata's Diary)* by Luiza Pesjak (1828-1898). Pesjak wrote the sentimental family novel *Beatin dnevnik (Beata's Diary)* in 1877 but it was not until 1887 that she managed to publish it. *Beatas's diary* is the first novel written in Slovene by a woman writer and it was produced in the period of the early Slovene middle-class novel.



Portrait of Luiza Pesjak (c. 1855) by Mihael Stroj

The novel is written in the form of a diary and is presented throughout as a first-person narration by the eponymous character: the young orphan and governess Beata. In this sense *Beata's Diary* is very close to the characteristics of *Jane Eyre*. As Luiza Pesjak was familiar with English literature, she certainly knew Brontë's novel. Compared to other female protagonists of Slovenian literature from the period before 1877, Beata is self-assertive, active, and very well educated. The latter is showed when she translates Byron's *Manfred* after a collective reading. In this way Pesjak also introduces the motive of incest. It is presented in a reading scene in which Beata, Rihard, and a lady of the castle read Byron's *Manfred*. Rihard is a young and attractive man living near the castle who is still in love with Dora, unhappily married stepdaughter of the lady of the castle, and as he is reading Manfred's words, Byron's character appears to Beata in a completely different light.

In the novel we can find another intercultural citation which refers to French literature and in particular to George Sand. Alongside Beata in Luiza Pesjak's novel appears the Frenchwoman Zoé, whom the writer describes as a patriot who left her country after the downfall of Napoleon. She describes Zoé's grandfather as an officer who was awarded an aristocratic title at Waterloo and her mother as an educated and talented actress of the *Comédie Française*. It is interesting that a similar relationship – the father from aristocratic circles and the mother from the theatre world – also appears in the family tree of George Sand described in her own *Histoire de ma vie*, however Pesjak didn't refer to the French writer with any concrete remarks. She presents Zoé as a companion of an elderly princess who is equally comfortable at court as she is among simple people. The other unusual feature for a Slovene novel is that Zoé and Beata become friends and communicate in French.

Slovene literary history completely overlooked the theme of women's friendship in *Beata's Diary*. This theme is absent in the texts of other nineteenth century Slovene authors in which women are only presented as rivals in the fight for the desired man. In *Beata's Diary* women's friendship is not limited to only the relationship between the two abovementioned characters since Beata also considers Dora and the lady of the castle to be her friends. The community in which the story unfolds is a distinctively female community as there are only three male characters in the novel: the servant Mirko – who is a completely marginal figure, the kind-hearted doctor Kosec, and of course Rihard. This can be understood as a special narrative strategy of deviation from the traditional Slovene novel with a central male character underlining his national allegiance. All of the female characters, with the exception of the princess Pavlovna whose snobbism the narrator rebukes with witty irony, are represented in a very positive way. Their characteristics are not limited to nobility of heart and the ability to empathise with other people's feelings, but also include intellectual inquisitiveness and cultivation.

The critical attitude towards the traditional role of women is also hidden in the novel, although the narrator does not refer to this directly. However, the reader can reach this conclusion from events in the novel such as Dora's prearranged marriage and her death during childbirth, as well as Anica's naivety, abandonment, abuse at the hands of a young aristocrat and subsequent death. All these events testify to the fact that in the nineteenth century women could not decide about their own lives. Despite Beata's reversal of fortune at the novel's finale, Pesjak is able to narrate the story of women's captivity within four walls and their desire to overstep the threshold through the protagonist's experience of spaces.

NARODNA BIBLIOTEKA.

Beatin dnevnik.

Roman.

Spisala

Lujiza Pesjakova.



Title page of the first edition of *Beatin dnevnik*

In *Beata's Diary* the interiors often bear a negative connotation; they are described as dark and bringing anxiety, while the exteriors (especially the garden) are spaces of freedom and creativity. Another of the narrative strategies is revealed in the author's decision to make Beata hear the love story between Anica and the Count in a space which is the complete opposite of the scenes in which the rest of the novel is set. Beata hears the story when she dares to step over the marked line upon leaving the immediate environment of the castle. Her approaching the place where Anica experienced happiness in love as well as her death is described as the discovery of a new world, which actually leads to the revelation of the secret. Beata sees nature as a space of happiness, as an echo of her feelings: "That mute melancholy, which saddens creation, ruled over nature. It started to rain, tiny drops were falling, and it rained constantly as if it would never stop. It corresponded to me so well!" This quotation shows Beata's intensive attention for the events in her environment and her reaction to them. In the two years, she spent writing the diary, she matures emotionally and her encounters with different life stories shape her outlook on the world.

Another topic that is omitted in the novels by Slovenian male authors are the representations of motherhood. In Pesjak's early poems the female characters are idealised images of mothers of the nation, fulfilling the expectations of society by having babies and raising nationally conscious children. However, in *Beata's Diary* the topic is developed in more innovative way. It is not only the countess who has a tender relation to her daughters, also Beata often takes on the maternity role. And there is also a motive of a mother who lost her child presented in Anica's story which is communicated to Beata through Anica's mother.

What I like the most in this novel is Beata's personal development. From the girl whom Rihard initially did not even notice, she turns into a woman who proves she is independent and dedicated to her work, which she carries out successfully. Even though she also conquers Rihard's heart by looking after him in his illness, all of Beata's activities derive from her own motives. The fact that at the end she finds happiness with a man she loves and who loves her can be seen as the typical ending of a romance novel, but on the other hand it could also represent the author's desire for women's independence and ambitiousness to be compatible not only with renouncement and even death but also with

happiness in love. Since the female figures in the novels of the Slovenian male authors are either passive girls without their own will or dangerous *femmes fatales* who are punished in the end for their boldness in transgressing the gender boundaries, *Beata's Diary* is one of my favourite Slovenian novels.

Beatin dnevnik is included in the Slovenian corpus of ELTeC, and can be read [here](#). For further reading, see:

- Elaine Showalter: *A Literature of Their Own*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Lilian Faderman: *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. William Morrow & Company, 1981.
- Susan S. Lanser: *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and. Narrative Voice*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992.

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