

The Poetics of Ressentiment.

Case: Timo K. Mukka's Novel *Laulu Sipirjan Lapsista - The Song Of Sipirja's Children*

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Abstract

In my presentation I study the concept of resentment, which is adapted from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of novel by Michael André Bernstein. The concept is also used by several other philosophers and scholars, for example Nietzsche, Freud and Girard. However, Bernstein's interpretation for Bakhtin's studies of Dostoevsky gives useful and effective methodological tool for study certain characteristic features in modern literature. Bernstein brings to the focus Dostoevsky's analyze from *Underground Man* (a piski iz podpolj, 1864). Bernstein shows how resentment, which is possible to see as a feeling of powerless rage and dreaming of revenge, works in the mind and in the discourse of the Underground Man. He is the prisoner of his memories. He feels that he is badly offended by other people and at the same time he is very proud of his idea that he is above others because of what he knows and understands. He thinks that he has superior consciousness. This hypersensitiveness is presented with fine nuances of his discourse, mainly in his inner speech but also in his conversations with his friend Liza. Underground Man's situation and attitude has also a lot to do with modern parody, mock-heroic aspects and the concept of melancholy, which is also interesting and important concept in the study of (modern) literature. I show with few text examples, first from Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and then from the novel of modern Finnish writer Timo K. Mukka (1944-1973), how the state of resentment works in the story and in the discourse of the characters. I translate by my self in English the text examples from Mukka's ballad novel *Song of the Sipirja's Children* (1966). The novel is translated in Hebrew, Swedish, Lappish, Czech and Estonian. My attention is to show, that by studying the nuances of speech genres (which has a lot to do with the generic change in the literature) and the discourse of the characters in the novel, it is possible study how the literature is in the world. By studying these aspects we are dealing with study of the world view of literary work of art. This presentation is based on my doctoral dissertation *I am the Land Beckoning You: A Poetics of Timo K. Mukka's World View* (2008, doctoral thesis are in Finnish). With the presented methodological apparatus I will continue my studies in the field of the modern Finnish literature and the artistic representations for example of traumatic features in the relationship between man and woman.

In this article I open up the concept of the resentment. What it means? From whom it comes from as a philosophical concept? How strong concept it is? And I also discuss how to use it as a methodological tool in the interpretation of literature. My main interest with this concept concerns Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of novel, where the idea of resentment has very strongly connected to concepts like otherness, the nuances of the dialog (double voiced word, loophole word, two dimensional speech and so on), and also to the concept of genre change and modern parody, which means amongst other things that modern hero realizes his nature as an character of the story. In Bakhtinian context the concept is introduced and developed forward by Michael André Bernstein in the important article «The Poetics of Resentment» in the book *Rethinking Bakhtin. Extensions and Challenges* (1989) and in his study *Bitter Carnival. Resentment and the Abject Hero* (1992), and I have quite largely researched the concept of the resentment in my dissertation. In this article I concentrate to introduce the historical background and the extensions of the concept.

What the word *ressentiment* or resentment, as it is in modern English language, means? Taken directly from the dictionary word resentment means trouble, annoying feeling, displeasure, discomfort, grief, distress and grudge (long standing hate). But the meaning of the concept is more complicated: it also means powerless feeling of revenge, feeling to be captured by painful memories and constant feeling to be under the spiteful or malevolent look and judgment of the other. And these more complicated meanings are important when it is a question about the story and discourse forming nature of the resentment. According to Bernstein, hate, envy and proud, which are medieval sins of the death, belongs to the nature of the resentment.

These deeper meanings of the resentment come from several scholars and writers, and in this article I mention the most important scholars who have developed and deepened up the concept. I will show with two novels how the resentment works: another is Dostoevsky's underground man (from *Zapiski iz podpolj, Notes from the Underground*) which I expect everyone to know, and the other is Finnish writer's Timo K. Mukka's novel *Laulu Sipirjan lapsista – The Song of Sipirja's Children* (1966), from which I will give some text examples. The plot of the Mukka's novel in nutshell is following: It tells about a man who returns to his home village in Lapland and starts to write a novel from the history of the village (there is «the novel in the novel» structure). By writing he clears up his painful and traumatic childhood and his relationship with the fellow villagers. Sipirja's writer, whose family name is also Sipirja, is typical antihero or mock heroic character like underground man. Their most important characteristic feature is misery, which is nearly impossible to overcome; they are bitter persons whose idea is to show the marginality of the human mind.^[1] The following text example tells about the nature of the villagers:

It was told that when God long ago created Sipirja he settled it by the river and trampled the path nearby the houses: go wanderer, stay a while but not longer! In the houses of Sipirja people speak their own language so that no stranger can understand what they

[1] It is interesting that there is in the becoming story also a double character for writer Sipirja from the past. This double character is like his possessing devil.

say; it remains unexplained. They are like mute, armless, eyeless and there is not heart in any one's chest, only the possessed and lashed flesh. When a stranger comes to the village of Sipirja, they despise him like an animal and they laugh at his speech, and all the old painful things and injustices which everyone has suffered sometimes are exposed. Children and old hags stare after him when he has left, they imitate his speech and the way how he walked and moved his arm, and they say: a creature like that! so ugly! They ask the stranger inside and they fill his cup with delicious coffee and urge to drink, but when he is gone they speak about him with despise: a creature like that! (Mukka 1974: 29, translation mine)

The text example shows at least two things: how the villagers treat people who do not belong amongst them and how the writer Sipirja interprets the attitude and the discourse of the villagers. Because the narrator is the slightly paranoid writer of the story, the reader can't be sure if the attitude of the villagers is really that malevolent.

1. THE NIETZSCHEAN POINT OF VIEW: THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN MASTER AND SLAVE MORALS

For the very first time the concept of the resentment was used by **Friedrich Nietzsche** in his study *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886 (*Beyond Good and Evil*). Bernstein emphasizes that for Nietzsche Dostoevsky's underground man is the character of critical period who struggles with the problems of the consciousness — so the problems of the modern man. Nietzsche said that *Notes from the Underground* contains «the most valuable psychological material known to» him and he called its author «the only psychologist... from whom [he] had anything to learn» (Bernstein 1989: 102). It is possible to say, that for Nietzsche Dostoevsky learnt through his characters what is the nature of the resentment and how it works in the art of literature, and in the lives of the modern man. For Nietzsche the understanding of the historical and psychological power of the resentment was one of the most important tasks of the contemporary thinking. It is easy to understand that the idea of «living in memories as a suffering, or painful living in memories» culminates in Nietzsche's philosophy when [he defines resentment as the chief characteristic of «natures that are denied the true reactions, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.»] (Ibid) The idea of how things should have been and done frustration and feeling that you can't do anything anymore, this paralyzed feeling is present also in many stories in modern and postmodern literature in generally. Modern antihero, often in the literary work of modern parody, compensates this powerless feeling, inefficiency and impotence with the «imaginary revenge».

It is very Nietzschean thought that the weak persons feel this resentment for the strong ones. So in Nietzsche the idea of the resentment is connected to the master and slave morals. According to Nietzsche both master and slave morals can appear in the same person (2001: 153-154). These sublime and low feelings are present in every person. Nietzsche describes the characteristic features of slave moral which are important concerning the concept of the resentment as follow:

What if people who were violated, oppressed, suffering, unfree, exhausted, and unsure of themselves were to be moralized: what type of moral valuations would they have? A pessimistic suspicion of the whole condition of humanity would probably find expression, perhaps a condemnation of humanity along with its condition. (Nietzsche 2001: 155)

It is possible to make an interpretation: According to Nietzsche the person who is resentful is occupied by slave moral, because he/she condemns himself to the pitiful, prevented and impotent, and also so passive that he can't commit a revenge for his enemies. At the same time from his soul rises the master moral, because he starts to act anyway. This happens in Mukka's novel, he is really like an underground man: At first he is totally inside in the resentment, paralyzed and horrified, but through his writing (the artistic work) he starts to act and make difference; he starts to open up the secrets of his home village and punishing with words the community which did not care about his childhood destiny. He is straight forward and honest; he hates but also respects fellow people in the end of the story. So, the master moral takes over from slave one. It is interesting that the act of writing is in an important role in this opening process. Writing is actual, real work which needs concentration, and by doing the act of writing the story, the writer turns his bad and destroying moral into the honesty and proudness of himself (look also Nietzsche 2001: 154-155, also Foucault 1977: 152-157, especially 155):

As a child I was helpless and filled with trust, but now I am fortunately sick with fear and filled with distrust. Now I am sharp-sighted, but then I was stupid and blind, and I had to experience it over and over again. (Mukka 1974:166, translation mine).

It would be madness to imagine that I or anybody else has private thoughts, private and independent: the self is the sum of the understanding the self, only when I can understand that there is also you, I can perceive my deeds and to be. (Mukka 1974: 166, translation mine).

If we think about this wholeness in the light of Nietzsche's philosophy and people in nowadays world (the world of depression, competition, division to the successful people and losers), the idea of the resentment is still a very powerful philosophical and psychological tool when we try to understand the state of mind of the nowadays man and the nowadays society. It is equally important to understand the psychological power of the concept and also its form-giving nature in the novel and in the novel theory.

2. THE FREUDIAN POINT OF VIEW: NARCISSISM, ABJECTION AND MELANCHOLY

In **Sigmund Freud's** psychoanalytical theory the concept *Das Ressentiment* is related to the memories and remembering / reminiscence. In Freud's theory the concept of resentment is linked to the melancholy and abjection, and narcissism (for example Freud 2003: 123-159) In Freud's theory this «being painfully captured by memories» means traumatic compulsive

repetition, which includes hatred, bitterness, envy and extreme proud. As it is possible to see, to be captured painfully by memories is very dialogical state of mind and state of the narrative.

For example in Mukka's novel the main character is suffering from motherlessness. He has been orphan since his early childhood. His mother was sexually disturbed woman who tried to get attention and affection by offering herself to all men in to the village and also to German soldiers who were in the Lapland in the end of the World War II, and one of them also killed his mother. The writer grew up without love and affection, which caused his mental impotence, powerlessness and feelings to be paralyzed especially with women. He hasn't ever really felt the important feeling: «I look to my parents/other people and I have seen as a person, so I exist». This idea is important for the birth of healthy and normal narcissism, and for the writer this mirror of otherness is broken, the reflection is incomplete. (Barthes 2000: 17; Barthes 1994: 82) This is ironical because nearly every man in the village could be his Father. He doesn't enjoy life, he is afraid of other people in the village, and especially the childhood lover and the goal of present lust Ulla is too much for him. He can't confront people, he feels that he doesn't belong amongst them; he is outsider, nasty object for other people, abject for himself. His suffocated sexual passion to Ulla causes resentment and also makes the tone of his life melancholic. Melancholy and artistic creation are also closely together.

This wholeness is represented in the text very interesting way: The narration is unsteady, fragmentary and broken. There are sections where writer Sipirja starts to think something but suddenly stops the idea in the middle of the sentence. He obviously thinks what somebody, «the other», might be thinking about him. The bad look of the other is hanging above him. He use loophole words and prevented speech because he wants to escape to the condemnation of the other. (Bakhtin 1990: 15) But it is important that during the writing process he slowly and painfully opens up and somehow reaches resignation:

I am on fire! With every nerve in my body I can feel the freeze burning outside, which creeps like a beast looking for a small cracks from the wall to brake in and attack over the innocent ones. Or maybe it is a friend which is seeking comfort from warm hands, tiny mouths and embraces... Someone has moved out of me and someone has entered, stepped in, but she is not the one I'll be waiting: Ulla.

As a sight I see the summer nights which are gone, and also the fall and the spring and the winter. There is no more space or time, only my crazy mind which acts a drama for its own eyes.

Summer night.

Summer night, when no leave is moving and people are asleep: there is silence — but the birds are singing and chirping in the forest. Then the river is warm and the water flows invitingly but no one comes. I am alone. (Mukka 1974: 183, translation mine)

Through writing he wins the depression caused by bad memories and childhood shame which is bigger than life. In the end when the writer finds some kind of peace, the surface of the text and the style of the narration calms down. In the end the crazy mind finds safety from reality and from presence of the other people. The feeling of loneliness slowly releases.

3. BARTHES: THE DISCOURSE OF THE REMEMBRANCE AND DEATH

Also **Roland Barthes** talks about resentment. In his book *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*) Barthes says that: «In the lover's Image-repertoire, nothing distinguishes the most trivial provocation from an authentically consequent phenomenon; time is jerked forward (catastrophic predictions flood to my mind) and back (I remember certain «precedents» with terror): starting from a negligible trifle, a whole discourse of memory and death rises up and sweeps me away: this is the kingdom of memory, weapon of reverberation — (Barthes 1986:200).

The resentment carries also the future dimension: the past shows that the future will bring new humiliations and sufferings: what is not happened yet requires already revenge. There is paranoia present. For example in the mind of Sipirja's writer the voice of the closing door starts this discourse of the memory and death; the seed of disappointment is already inside in the love and passion. The speech (also language) staggers in the stream of feelings and the broken pieces of broken feelings comes sharply out of the text. The subjectivity of the objectified and abjectified writer is dependent on other people's acceptance: he sees himself through the eyes of the others. Like Ann Jefferson says:

He cannot fight his way out of the tyranny of the *doxa* by adopting or asserting an alternative discourse of his own; he can do so only through a certain *practice* of language which Barthes calls writing and whose effectiveness depends on its being precisely that — a practise — rather than a particular characterisable style. (Jefferson 1989: 170)

In the story the writer is creating, he writes himself like he sees himself with his own eyes, not others. He uses this twisted image of himself created by the other people as an artistic mirroring. He writes because he wants to create own truth about himself. In Bakhtinian way we may say that he wants to say final word of himself by himself. It is also the only way to rise above the resentment. As Bakhtin said (2006: 16; 1999: 13-18): Through the character of the underground man Dostoevsky but into the trial his most important ideas; underground man is really the carrier of the ideology. In the same way writer Sipirja is the carrier of the ideology, because everything he is saying and emphasizing is connected to the state and the idea of resentment. As a character of the narrative and as a character of genre history of literature he is a prisoner of the humiliating inter- or subtextuality like the underground man. This is a matter of modern parody, and also a matter of genre change: the character of the novel, which is conscious of its genre history, recognizes his or hers nature as a literary loan or reproduction. For example in this particular Mukka's novel there are many genres like ballad, naturalistic style, grotesque realism, realism, confession and so on, as well as Dostoevsky's novel is full of literary genres. And as well as Dostoevsky's underground man, also writer Sipirja carries in his structure the recollections of the different genres. But when we consider writer Sipirja as a human being in the narrative world he finally finds some kind of a solution of his problems of identity.

4. GIRARD: RESENTMENT, JEALOUSLY AND THE SCAPEGOAT MECHANISMS

René Girard says in his studies *Deceit, Desire & the Novel* and in *Job. The Victim of his People* that the concepts which belong in the field of resentment, like jealousy, envy and hate implicates always the presence of the third part, which is really the target of these feelings. Girard emphasizes that jealous or envious person actually enjoys about the feeling of competition. This explains why the same persons are always jealous ones. (Girard 1980: 11-12) When a person is resentful he enjoys the passionate and vital feeling of competition. In jealousy he can also be in the ivory tower of solitude experience, he is proud of his sufferings in this twisted way. It is pure vanity. When Sipirja's writer is jealous to Ulla's lover he feels this resentful passion and powerless rage which raises him above ordinary people. He is listening love making through the wall and enjoying his own suffering (he is not just hearing, he is listening).

The writer and also his mother, they are the scapegoats of their community. They both carry the name of the Village as a burning mark. At the same time when he is writing about his own suffering, he is also writing the sufferings of the village people during the war and afterwards. He and his mother are like the collective sacrifices from the sins everyone has done in the village. And they both suffered also a collective shame punishment from these bad deeds. (Girard 1987: 104)

According to Girard the community which wants to get rid of the scapegoat acts very totalitarian way. One of the most powerful ways to destroy the scapegoat is the destroying also his or hers name from the collective memory. Girard says that the most ritualistic and traditionalistic deed is to reset the collective memory and destroy the scapegoat in some radical way. (Girard 1987: 118) In the case of writer Sipirja the resetting of collective memory is ironically impossible because he is carrying the name of the village. This situation emphasizes his position as a consciousness of the whole village.

5. SUMMARY

In this article I have opened up the concept of the resentment through the thoughts of Nietzsche, Freud, Barthes, Girard and Bakhtin. I have shown that the concept is very powerful and usable theoretical tool in the interpretation of literature, especially when it is used in the context of Bakhtin's theory of novel. The poetical strength of the concept is clear; it forms characters nature, creates the nuances of the story and effects strongly to the plot creation. It also affects to the generic variation of the work of literary art. And it is a strong sign in the semiotics of literature.

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