

## ONOMATOPOEIC REPRESENTATION TECHNIQUES IN TWO CULTURAL SALONS

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## ТЕХНИКИ ЗА ОНОМАТОПОЕТИЧНО ПРЕДСТАВЯНЕ В ДВА КУЛТУРНИ САЛОНА

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*Abstract:* This article focuses on the acoustic similarities between two cultural salons, which have become active participants and main characters in two novels, written far apart from one another in time – “War and Peace” by Leo Tolstoy and “The Man Without Qualities” by Robert Musil. The similarity between the two salons runs parallel in terms of their specific “sounding”, determined by onomatopoeic representation. The salon of Diotima in Musil’s novel is associated with a henhouse where all conversations about war and peace are just cackling and clucking. As Tolstoy never completely accepted the progress of bourgeois civilization, the salon transparently and explicitly gets allegorical sense of “spinning workshop” whose “products” are vanity, intrigue and bustle. The onomatopoeic representation of the two salons is loaded with deep irony, as well as parodic motivation, leading to the sceptic conclusion that peace cannot be achieved by the spiritual endeavors of cultural communication.

*Keywords:* cultural salon, onomatopoeic representation, Tolstoy, Musil

*Резюме:* В тази статия се представят акустичните сходства между два културни салона, превърнали се в персонажи на два романа, писани по различно време – „Война и мир“ на Лев Толстой и „Човекът без качества“ на Роберт Музил. Сходството между двата салона тече по линия на тяхното специфично „звучене“, определено от звукоподражателно (ономатопеично) представяне. При Музил салонът се асоциира с курник, в който всички разговори за войната и мира са само кудкудякане и каканижене. При Толстой, който никога не приема напълно прогреса на буржоазната цивилизация, салонът прозрачно и експлицитно получава алегоричния смисъл на „предачна работилница“, чиито „продукти“ са празнословието, интригантството и суетата. Звукоподражателното изобразяване на двата салона е заредено както с дълбока ирония, така и с пародийна мотивация, свързана със скептичния извод, че мирът не може да бъде постигнат по пътя на културно общуване във високите сфери на духа.

*Ключови думи:* културен салон, звукоподражателно изобразяване, Толстой, Музил

Cultural history brands cultural salons as one of the most intriguing artistic phenomena, successfully intertwining both literal and figurative meaning of the untraditional huge intellectual potential and directly assigned places of political discussions, related to the actual background. When these elite circles of cultural and political discourse transform into literary characters, their functioning is dependent on new, role-play conventions and author's intentions. The salons not only generate a network of new meanings and auras, but they transform themselves into a driving force of processes and actions, directly or circumstantially engaged with peace or war. Such a “characterization” of salons (in the sense of fictional characters actively participating in the literary work) can be observed in two different in time and place of creation novels, *War and Peace* (1863 – 1869) by Tolstoy and *A Man Without Qualities* (1930 – 1942) by R. Musil. We can assume that Musil (not only chronologically substantiated, but also because of the author's keen interest in Russian literature, especially in Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's work) was greatly influenced by Tolstoy in relation to his metaphorical description of Diotima's salon. What brings the authors together is their almost identical description of the salons and their social gatherings. They deliberately belittle them by means of an original acoustic game. Both salons echo the sounds of (futile) pathetic talking: in Tolstoy's work this is rhythmical clatter of a weaving machine, in Musil's novel – the metaphor of the henhouse and the incessant chuckle.

During the XVII century, salons were created to entertain the hostess and her guests, which subsequently reflected on the discussions and their themes. In such salons women's chatting resembled birds' sounds and for that reason they were called coquettes (from the French word *caqueter*, which means chat, but also chuckle). Later, during the XVIII century, salons gained a more serious reputation. The political situation in the country and abroad, as well as the most significant issues of the Enlightenment became popular subjects of discussion. The hosts and guests showed quite an interest in the social-political situation in their country and the world and turned the salons into a “laboratory for political check-up” (Hitrova 2016). The two salons which are the focus of this paper date from the later, let's call it the more “serious period”. They both reflect significant political changes. In this line of thought, the motivation for initiating and supporting activity in the salons was based on the unwavering belief which the two hostesses Schérer and Diotima<sup>1</sup> shared and that was the idea that these places of elite

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<sup>1</sup> E. N. Palij focuses on the central position which the individual who created the salon takes: “Every salon was characterized by the personality of their host or hostess and its purpose depended on their interests. It's impossible to analyze the salon in general, without taking into consideration the personality of its creator. That leads to detailed exploration of the personal characteristics of their creators” (Palij 2008).

cultural and political discussions are the cradle of various messianic ideas for the saving of the Empire and the world in a situation of crisis, which then was the threat which Napoleon represented for the Russian Empire and WWI for the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The difference, which in essence does not concern the typological identity of the two salons, lies in the development stage. The readers find Schéerer's salon already formed and active (after the French cultural tradition), discussing the world political situation, threatened by Napoleon's imperial ambitions, the relations between the European countries (Great Britain, Austria, Prussia) and Russia, and its liberating role etc., whereas Diotima's salon originates in the course of narration, relating to the attempt of Austro-Hungarian Empire to oppose two coinciding significant events (Emperor Franz Josef's and German Kaiser Wilhelm II's anniversary). So, the salon in Musil's novel was established as an institution whose sole purpose was to organize and coordinate a large-scale cultural-political event. The plot revolves within the year 1913, exactly one year before WWI, and practically the salon was not directly involved in talks and discussions about the war. It turns out that neither the emperor's anniversary, nor some cultural eulogy motivates the existence and the activities of the salon. The major driving force in the arising and the pathetic recognition of Diotima's salon is the intention to institutionalize the emperor's image as a peace-maker and strengthen the spirit of pacifism. The similarities between the two salons do not confine to the pathetic "sounding" (the main homology in this research) but project to the conversations themselves, which purposefully discuss and comment on the pacific function of both emperors – Alexander I for Russia and Franz Josef for Austro-Hungary.

The visualizing of the "phonic" homology between the two salons is cleverly achieved by the qualifying epithet "pathetic". Provided we refer to the meaning and the emotional identity of the word "pathos" (as defined by Pseudo-Longin in his treatise "On the Sublime")<sup>2</sup> the aspect of inspiration and enthusiasm is of groundbreaking significance for this article. One of the most ostentatious aims of the pathetic speaking is to elevate the topic of conversation and pose it as a phenomenon in the value paradigm of the "sublime". We can conclude that Countess Scherer's salon and that of the noble (not by origin, but by appearances) Diotima live up to that pretence, as it was already mentioned that both ladies look upon the functioning of their homes

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<sup>2</sup> "Nothing can be more grand than the noble pathos, used properly. Then, as if in a trance and inspired by God, it breathes the words in ecstatic revelation." (Longin 1985, 38)

as centres of the messianic plan to save the Empire and to declare the supremacy of the Emperor.<sup>3</sup>

In the first pages of the novel, Anna Pávlovna Schérer is described as a popular salonniere, “40-year old spinster”, “maid of honor and favorite of the Empress Márya Fēdorovna”, “with a fake, reserved smile”, which does not become her “already faded features”, and which is an indication of that “sweet imperfection, which she does not want, cannot and will not mend”. Tolstoy ironically depicts her nature, filled with “impulsiveness” and enthusiasm: “To be an enthusiast had become her social vocation and, sometimes even when she did not feel like it, she became enthusiastic in order not to disappoint the expectations of those who knew her.” (Tolstoy 2009). The main purpose of the salon’s existence is to gather “the highest Petersburg society”, because a characteristic feature of the court salons was its private, elite nature, “communication among equals”, which followed clearly defined rules (Palij 2009, 152 – 158).

Like any other poly-functional structure, Schérer’s salon (respectively Diotima’s) stands out as a centre of personal and public interests. Besides the meaningless, profane conversations held in the salon, other poignant social-political themes were also the centre of discussion: the personality and actions of Napoleon Bonaparte, also referred to as the “hydra of the revolution” (Tolstoy 2009), his impetuous territorial invasion, the intention of leading European empires to put a hold of his march by means of forming allies, the course of the battles on Russian territories, the relations between Kutuzov and Alexander I, etc. Schérer flatters herself to be knowledgeable and competent in all matters and vigorously expresses her opinion upon the subjects under discussion.

Specialists assume that the family name Schérer was created after really existing ones, such as Schefer, for instance. However, N.N. Ardens quotes Tolstoy’s wife, who remembered how upon getting home after a visit to a high-ranking lady, Tolstoy laughingly commented that the lady was becoming “sherer and sherer” (Russian “шерее”), because she welcomed her guests with “courtesy and addressed everyone with the mandatory “mon cher and ma cher” (cited by Gorbanevskiy 1988). M. V. Gorbanevskiy assumes that the family name Schérer may have originated from this phrase, although he admits the possibility of *some inner personal motivation* (my italics – I.I.) which may have affected the author and his choice of name (Above). Another version could be found in the old meaning of the French word “cherer” which

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<sup>3</sup> Although in Russian history the term “peacemaker” refers to Tsar Alexander III, on the grounds of Schérer’s opinions expressed in the novel, we can attribute the same role to Alexander I.

means “exaggerate” (Dictionnaire). This can be closely linked to the pompous, overexposed and pathetic behavior and speaking pattern, which was considered a golden standard.

The introductory description of the salon in the novel “War and Peace”, opens with a brilliant metaphor, used by Tolstoy to characterize his background noise:

*As a foreman of a spinning mill, when he has set the hands to work, goes round and notices here a spindle that has stopped or there one that creaks or makes more noise than it should, and hastens to check the machine or set it in proper motion, so Anna Pávlovna moved about her drawing room, approaching now a silent, now a too-noisy group, and by a word or slight rearrangement kept the conversational machine in steady, proper, and regular motion. (Tolstoy 2009, Book I, Chapter III).*

And later: “Anna Pávlovna’s reception was in full swing. The spindles *hummed steadily* and ceaselessly on all sides.” (Tolstoy 2009, Book I, Chapter III).

We have marked the key words and expressions, which brilliantly and skillfully weave the story and build up the impact upon the reader and the associated image of the machine in general. Using this modern tool of the bourgeois society, the author illustrates the “artificial” lifestyle in the novel. The rhythmic, constantly repetitive movements of the “speaking machine” run throughout the novel.

By analogy, the salon in Musil’s novel is entirely influenced by the personal characteristics of its hostess Diotima<sup>4</sup>. The beautiful “worldly usheress” is more than a mere hostess at the consequential, “world-famous” gatherings at her home. She is the driving force behind all Great Patriotic Action<sup>5</sup> events, her fame as a “remarkable woman” attracts influential, high-powered people like a magnet and her home turns into a “salon”, a centre of “society and spirit”, and “Tuzzi’s home” receives world recognition (Musil 2017). Like Anna Pávlovna Schérer, whose major aim is to accentuate her organizational skills (assigning visitors to the relevant group), Diotima comments in a pathetic, exalted manner on the important decision which urgently must be made within the Parallel Action, run by her. Unlike Schérer, however, Diotima does not impose directly her personal contribution. She takes her role as a hostess and organizer of elite gatherings of “*the affluent and educated*” (my italics – E. D.) too seriously,

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<sup>4</sup> The real name of Diotima in Musil’s novel is Ermelinda Tuzi, but her cousin and main character Ulrich, names her in his thoughts (not without ironic motivation) after the ancient “teacher of love”- Plato’s Diotima.

<sup>5</sup> The Parallel Action or *Parallellaktion* (German) in the novel is actually the “The Great Patriotic Action”. It is the reason for the creation of the salon, and at the same time, the main story line. In the novel it is described as an important event of enormous significance, historically motivated by the desire to find an occasion for grander celebration than the announced jubilee of the Keiser in Germany. As a counterpoint to the German jubilee, Kakania starts to organize on the highest level the 70th anniversary of the coming to the throne of the Austrian Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef (this act enables Kakania to become a dualistic monarchy). This clarification is necessary, because through the blown up historical pretence (which neither the German Keiser, nor the Emperor live to celebrate), we can feel the irony which is the driving force throughout the whole novel. It is the technique by means of which the salon receives its onomatopoeic hen ”chuckling”.

in an almost messiah-like manner: “Diotima opened the conversation by declaring the Collateral Campaign to be an opportunity such as would positively never occur again for giving practical reality to the things one believed greatest and most important.” (Musil 2017) And later:

In general, these gatherings were organized in such a way that all these people were jumbled up together and allowed to blend harmoniously. It was only the younger intelligentsia that Diotima usually kept apart by means of separate invitations, and the rare or special guest was something she had an unobtrusive way of singling out and, as it were, framing. (Musil 2017) (for Anna Pávlovna see below)

In its turn, from the very beginning, Musil’s novel (ironically predisposed) takes to illustrate Kakania – an occasionalism, a fictional toponym, an artistic name for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The etymological motivation of this bizarre name is the abbreviation *K und K*, or *Kaiserlich und Königlich Empire*. It turns out that the topos and discourse “Kakania” in Musil’s novel is entirely close to Diotima’s salon. Kakania is actually, by its isomorphic structure, Diotima’s salon. The metonymic connection is skillfully built on and through “the sound”. The background, acoustic “noise” which is typical of Diotima’s salon, creates the name of the Empire – Kakania. The root morpheme, formed by the binomial “K und K” (kaiserlich und königlich Monarchie) points to a semantic correlation to the German verb *kakeln*, used in spoken language by lower class people, meaning ‘to chuckle’. The meaning is transitioned on a secondary level to the human society – ‘the one who has to share (something) by presenting it’. Metaphorically and by undercurrent connotation, *kakeln* means ‘chatting’ and is a synonym of the verb *schwätzen* (see Duden 2001).

The way the noise in the salon is linked to that ironic meaning encrypted in the name Kakania, is relevant to the intensity with which the “sophisticated usheress” Diotima is compared to a hen. After the very first “get-to-know meeting”, with “the great cousin”, Ulrich subjects her to a thorough anthropological and phrenological analysis and concludes that the parallel action has been entirely personified into Diotima and “despite his experience and age”, he sees himself as a “small harmful worm, scrutinized by a big hen” (Musil 2017). Later on, in his mind, Diotima evolves into a “giant hen” (Musil 2017). The metaphorical style of the entire novel is virtually subjected to the ironic reflection of the character, which recreates with persistence and by means of the bird-like sound representation the Parallel Action and Diotima herself, as well as the entire salon, its participants and their vocally expressed spiritual endeavors, which are likened to “inspired thoughts born in a purposefully designed poultry house, called ‘philosophy, theology or literature’ (...)” (Musil 2017). Even Ulrich’s mistresses are not spared this bird-like obsession of his mind (Bonadea is compared to a duck, Gerda to a pigeon). Arnheim’s meaningless chatter is also mercilessly ridiculed (Arnheim is the Prussian

whom Diotima has fallen in love with and has involved in the parallel action and who is surrounded by constant chuckle) and finally we do come to the great metaphor of “vanity and emptiness”.

The pathetic enthusiasm which dominates over the discussions and the assignments, allegedly servicing the idealistic side of the Parallel Action, starts to crumble. The Action has lost its etymological meaning. Subsequently, everything that goes on in the salon has been degraded into pretentious talking and inertness-futile (literally and metaphorically) words and whispers, but constant and exalted, resembling the happy chuckling of a hen, which has just laid eggs. The grotesque clash between the high-fly intentions and lack of “results”, is brilliantly depicted in chapter 71, volume II, where the “wordly usheress” Diotima organizes and carries out the first and most significant meeting of the Action:

The handling of these throngs, from the hostess’s point of view, made great demands on Diotima, and she would perhaps have taken exception to a number of things had her head not resembled a superb fruit-bowl, a superabundance with the words continually brimming over the edge – words with which the lady of the house welcomed each arriving guest, delighting him with her detailed knowledge of his latest work. (...) The extra ordinary eloquence that passed away over Diotima’s head like a celestial event, as it were, so long as she was alone in conversation with one of the mighty, gave way to a painful inability to keep to the point as soon as a second or third of the mighty joined them and several speeches went on at cross-purposes with each other. (Anyone who does not shrink from such similes may think of a swan descending after its proud flight and moving along the ground.) (Musil 2017).

In the typical style of the author, the narrator ironically presents the meeting using culinary terms in order to state once again that the irony has to be explicitly revealed through the ambivalent motivation of the attitude to “the high” by means of laying out different value registers. Respectively, we recognize the same approach in Schérer’s salon, while introducing the special guests (viscount Mortemar, the abbot etc.) displayed to the public as sophisticated dishes:

“Anna Pávlovna was obviously serving him up as a treat to her guests. As a clever maître d’hôtel serves up as a specially choice delicacy a piece of meat that no one who had seen it in the kitchen would have cared to eat, so Anna Pávlovna served up to her guests, first the vicomte and the abbé, as peculiarly choice morsels.” And later: “vicomte was served up to the company in the choicest and most advantageous style, like a well-garnished joint of roast beef on a hot dish.” (Tolstoy 2009, Book I, Chapter III)

The Parallel action originates as a (pseudo) utopian project, oozing as much paradox innuendo as both Kakania and Diotima’s salon. The high-fly (“wealthy and educated”) circles ambiguously impose an emperor’s anniversary under the sign of pacifism, but the pacifism itself is unthinkable without heavy arms, as it becomes clear from a conversation between the military men and the civilians, participating in the Parallel Action. Every idea, reflection,

reference and official discussions among the prominent activists of the Action is scarred by that same “Baroque of Void” (Musil 2017), which the secretary and main character in the novel Ulrich infallibly senses. “Baroque of the Void” can be seen as a poetic expression of the ubiquitous chuckling, ironically encrypted in the vocal name of Kakania.

In a full-scale homologous “dependence”, regardless of the changing historical events, the life in Schérer’s salon (as well as in the analogical Héléne’s salon), remains blissfully unscathed, clattering in vain, representing great form without content. Tolstoy:

Among the innumerable categories applicable to the phenomena of human life one may discriminate between those in which substance prevails and those in which form prevails. To the later – as distinguished from village, country, provincial, or even Moscow life – we may allot Petersburg life, and especially the life of its salons. That life of the salons is *unchanging*. Since the year 1805 we had made peace and had again quarreled with Bonaparte and had made constitutions and unmade them again, but the salons of Anna Pávlovna and Héléne *remained just as they had been* – the one seven and the other five years before. (Tolstoy 2009, Book 10, Chapter VI) (my italic – I. I.)

The prevailing superficial pretence, the noise of the illusionary mechanical activity of the salon, compared to its unaltered condition in time, brilliantly recreate a lasting feeling of life imitation, stagnation instead of action, which in the end is associated with lack of real life, because according to the author, real life exists beyond the limitations of the salon.

The analogies which characterize the functioning of both salons are innumerable and rather intriguing, but more important for this article is the choice which the two authors make to illustrate a pretentious and elite atmosphere through specific onomatopoeic sounds. Tolstoy compares the sounds of the conversations and the false exaltation to a weaving machine, which at the end resounds into “drowned as usual by the buzzing of the court drones” (Tolstoy 2009). Musil makes use of animal sounds, such as the dominating bird metaphor, which “grows” into a bunch of synonymous sounds – “chuckling”, “clucking”, “droning”. The acoustic homology, so obvious in the works of these great authors, is a result of their inner sense of irony and their attitude to the salons, as well as their deeply rooted skepsis that real-life crisis can be solved by means of pathetic idle talk, since language has long lost its most inspiring function of being elevating and an educational factor. The only thing left is the false pathos, which lacks sincerity and love. Man needs to leave that purpose-built and snobbish environment in order to experience real life, exactly like Pierre Bezuhov (War and Peace) and Ulrich (The Man Without Qualities) set off on the path of their happy new life only when they leave the salon for good.



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