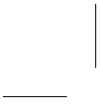


IV
Vrstne in formalne osvetlitve



SHORT NARRATIVE PROSE: PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY¹

Prispevek se ukvarja z osnovnim problemom kratke pripovedne proze s terminološkega in metodološkega vidika. Avtorja v prvi vrsti zanima nastanek kratke pripovedi v evropski literaturi oz. zgodovina poimenovanj posameznih vrst kratke proze, ki so se pojavljale v različnih nacionalnih književnostih. Poudarja podobnosti in razlike med termini (kratka zgodba, novela, roman itd.), pri čemer skuša razložiti bistvene težave, ki se pojavljajo pri razlikovanju, ter razložiti uganke kvantitete in kvalitete, krajše in daljše pripovedne proze – tudi glede romana, njegovega razvoja, zgradbe in omejitev v razmerju do krajše pripovedne proze. Bistvo problema je mogoče najti tako v diahronem kot sinhronem pristopu, v razmerju med metodologijo in terminologijo, med nacionalnim in internacionalnim. Avtorjev namen je primerjati različne jezike in nacionalne književnosti ter s tem prikazati, kako zapletena je obravnavana problematika. Prispevek zaključuje z ugotovitvijo, da bi bila pri delu zelo dobrodošla primerjalna literarnoterminološka enciklopedija, kakršno ustvarja raziskovalna skupina na Masarykovi univerzi v Brnu.

nastanek kratke pripovedne proze, krajša in daljša pripovedna proza, diahroni in sinhroni pristop, metodologija in terminologija, nacionalno in internacionalno, primerjalna literarnoterminološka enciklopedija

The paper deals with the general problem of short narrative prose from the terminological and methodological points of view. It starts from the formation of short narrative in European prose and with the history of various names given to the specific genres of short narrative in different national literatures. It accentuates the similarities as well as the differences between the terms (short story, novella, novel etc.) trying to interpret the problems of the crucial problem of differentiation, the enigma of quantity and quality, of short and long narrative prose as well as the problem of the novel, its evolution, structure and limits in relation to short narrative prose. The kernel of the subject is found in both diachronic and synchronic approaches, in the relationship of methodology and terminology and the national and the international. The author attempts to compare various languages and national literatures to demonstrate how complicated and complex the whole subject is. At the end of his contribution he demonstrates the need for the formation of a comparative encyclopaedia of literary terminology such as the research team from the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University in Brno has been working on.

formation of short narrative prose, short and long narrative prose, diachronic and synchronic approaches, methodology and terminology, the national and the international, the necessity of the formation of a comparative encyclopaedia of literary terminology

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This short treatise does not correspond to the genre or genre groupings we are supposed to deal, i.e. Slovene short narrative prose, as it is too general. The reason for this is not only that I am not an expert in Slovene literature, but also the necessity to demonstrate common points going far beyond the limits of short narrative prose or the short story.

I could start with two striking examples of short stories. Many years ago one of my Czech university professors working on a book about narrative prose asked me, as he often did, for some bibliographical data and to borrow some books for him. At that time I was preparing my doctoral thesis dealing with a similar subject, including the picaresque novel. The professor wanted to get hold of what is probably the first Spanish picaresque novel *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes*. “But be careful,” he joked, “it is a huge volume!” I said that the work, as far as I knew, had no more than 50 pages, but he did not believe me; later, however, he had to admit the sad fact that this first picaresque novel in the world is merely a short narrative.

When the Czech translation of the memoirs of a famous Russian Soviet writer Konstantin Paustovsky was being prepared – the original Russian title is *Повесть о жизни* – the translator faced a dilemma: from the terminological point of view “повесть” is usually regarded as a medium-length narrative with a specific plot pattern, but this book contained more than 2000 pages. Therefore, she used the term usually applied to a long narrative, novel, and in Czech *Román o životě*. She forgot, however, that the word “повесть” in Russian has two basic meanings and the first is simply a narrative, it is not a term in the strict sense of the word. Only in the 19th century, against the background of the development of the novel, novella and short story, did the term “повесть” start to be used for a medium-length, descriptive narrative: see Chekhov’s humorous short stories (in Russian: рассказы) and a little later long short stories or novellas such as *The Teacher of Literature*, *The Steppe*, *A Boring Story*, *Ward Six*, *The House with the Mezzanine*, *Man in a Case*, *The Lady with a Dog* and others. Therefore the correct translation should be *Narration or Narrative about My Life* or *History of My Life* – the term “повесть” was used in this very meaning as *Повесть временных лет* – which is not a term, the word is used promiscuously.

If we take into account that such problems arise nearly in any language and in any national literature, we will be more modest when dealing with general theory. Once upon a time a group of people focusing on various kinds of art tried to initiate a dictionary of artistic genres in general. They were extremely enthusiastic about the project, but later they found out that the project was hardly realisable because of the diverse understanding of each kind of art – the same or similar terms meant something different, as it was not acceptable to ignore the material and the traditional approaches connected with the subject. Although nowadays we may even speak of the text of a picture or the plot of a symphony, we might use musicological as well as literary terms or those borrowed from the sphere of visual

arts, the same language does not in fact appear as this usage does not overcome the boundaries of its metaphorical meanings.

If we have a look at the development of narrative prose in general, we might come to the conclusion that it was the very short narrative prose which stood at the beginning of the development of prose in general. The ancient Egyptian short stories were, as far as we know, from the contemporary point of view, mere descriptive narrative fragments dealing with very simple life situations, facts and sceneries. The crucial change concerned the depiction of the event and a chain of other events and situations which were dependent on it. The ancient Greek novel was based on the principle of a major event which evoked a chain of further events and then came back to its starting point: for example, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (*Metamorphoseon*) or *The Golden Ass*. As soon as narratives in general began to develop, they started to be named or labelled; the history of terminology demonstrates, at the same time, a complicated situation dependent on national, regional or local habits and traditions and on the character of each national literature in general.

The kernel function may be represented by the term story, from *historia* which may be applied to everything narrated concerning both social and individual development. Thus at the very beginning of the development of narrative genres in the early Middle Ages there arose a cluster of similar terms very often understood in a different way: roman, novella, historia (storia); the etymology of each of these might lead us to its original meaning, but does not contribute to a deeper understanding of its contemporary meaning and function. The history of the novel (roman) is significant here: the English term demonstrates an urgent need for further differentiation (romance x novel x novella), not to mention the incredibly complicated evolution of what is now called a 'roman', romance or novel; over time, terms changed their meanings (romance – history – novella) and each term evoked a cluster of other meanings and, most importantly, was closely connected with specific literary artefacts even more in cases where the authors themselves defined them in subtitles.

The secondary literature dealing with the subject of narrative prose in general and with short narratives in particular presents an array of notions and concepts. At least one thing is striking: even general and highly theoretical treatises are based or have to be based on a limited body of material covering just one or a few national literatures and the secondary literature connected with the same cluster of artefacts. If we take into account the most important bibliographical items from Erich Auerbach, Suzanne Fergusson, Peter Brang, Boris Mejlach, T. Cieřlikowska, Michal Petrovskij, Viktor Shklovsky, Miran Hladnik, Janko Kos and a recent outstanding study by Tomo Virk that attempts to delimit the short story and novella and that defends the German distinction (Virk 2004), all based their research on certain national literatures and certain theories that Virk argues with are nevertheless linked to a certain literary experience.

It may sound utopian, but the first presupposition for a future research project dealing with the delimitation and differentiation of narrative prose in general and short narrative prose in particular is a comparative study of terminology and methodology based on the expressive national experience with the development of these genre groups or clusters. Thus the starting point must be connected with genology or genre theory and comparative studies. I would stress the importance of the general communication and understanding in this field; otherwise we will speak different languages though using identical or similar terms. It is essential to have a deeper insight into various literatures, at the very least European or Euro-American.

One of the most important factors is genre communication, its level and quality. It is quite obvious, for example, that the formation of American short narrative prose on the one hand and Russian on the other was linked to the means of literary communication – American magazines and Russian “thick magazines” (толстые журналы) represented quite a different situation, quite different starting points and quite a different presupposition for the formation of a genre structure. Genre theory and comparison have to be, therefore, complemented by a general theory of literary communication.

The postmodernist era with its extremely liberal approach to categories is not a very prolific ground for discussing genre boundaries; however, it became evident that the rationalistic approach, fortunately, had not disappeared. It is, of course, hard to keep defining moveable genre boundaries, which means both morphological and thematic structure, but it cannot be avoided.

The problem of short narrative prose is clearly not an isolated research entity: it goes back to the original, very complicated formation of ancient, medieval and modern European development – not to mention other cultural entities and traditions. Nearly every national literature has its terms with specific meanings, at least with shifts of emphasis, connected with different artefacts, thus evoking quite different imaginative, poetic and structural patterns. From this point of view it is inevitable to apply all the clusters of methodological approaches borrowed from the sphere of cultural anthropology and hermeneutics not forgetting, at the same time, the traditions of immanent, autonomous, textual criticism associated with formalist and structuralist schools and doctrines. Many years ago when E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) provokingly spoke about the quantitative criterion in defining the novel it seemed ridiculous; but this criterion cannot be overlooked, as I tried to demonstrate at the beginning of this text. As far as I know from the experience of Czech literary theory and practice, sometimes the quantitative criteria prevail as they are more understandable. Therefore the short story (even the adjective demonstrates the importance of quantity), the novella and the novel are understood, above all, as quantities and there is no difference, in general opinion, between the novella and the short story; a cluster of terms has been used with nearly purely quantitative characteristics; only this is generally accepted. Therefore, there is less need for a sharp distinction than for mutual understanding. It is simply less

important to specify a model or concept with an impact on general adoption and acceptance than to have a deeper insight into the many subtleties of genre terminology.

Let us take look at our subject from the point of view of literary history, or, more precisely, historical poetics. The history of literature confirms that there are periods in which the longer genres prevail and periods with the prevalent presence of minor genres. Experience leads to the conclusion that there are periods of the novel in which poetry, drama and shorter narrative prose are suppressed, and periods where shorter narratives, drama, and poetry prevail. It shows that novels possess the qualities of all three Aristotelian kinds: on the one hand, the novel synthesizes literary development, on the other, in its experimental form it disintegrates traditional structures and leads to new genre entities – as if it committed suicide giving birth to minor genre forms. From quite a different point of view: minor or shorter narratives sometimes tend to form peculiar cycles or building sets (cyclisation or, for example, physiologies as foundation stones of longer narratives, most frequently of the novel – see Krejčí 1979).

The problem of both the poetic and the prosaic cycle in the evolution of literature (Pospíšil 2000) should be studied from divergent points of view. The most prevalent is that linked with literary morphology, i.e. with the analysis of the structural changes in the artefact and in literary development. The most usual and acceptable definitions of the function of the cycle in literature are based on this very presupposition. From this standpoint the ontology of the literary cycle consists in the tension between the unity and the autonomy which form its dual structure, its antinomical substance. On the basis of the closeness of the two phenomena it would be possible to differentiate several cyclical degrees in the artefact, e. g. a cyclical poetic creation or a cyclical narrative. Another point of view consists in the philosophical conception according to which the problem of the cycle in literature represents a mere reflection of the cyclical essence of existence in general (the cosmogonic, and the cosmological cycles, the geological cycles in the evolution of various cosmic objects including the Earth, the cycles of civilization, cultural cycles, cycles in the evolution of arts including literature etc.).

The understanding of the cycle in arts in general is dependent on the three sources of aesthetic thought usually connected with ancient Greece: cosmogony and cosmology based on the homology of forms (music of the spheres), technology (the theory of human activity, “*techné*”) and psychology (the theory of human soul, “*psyché*”). It is, without exaggeration, a feature of a certain naivety as well as the mechanical reflection of the fashionable trends in literary criticism if some authors dealing with the cycle in literature accentuate general evolution in cycles as a process having the character of a law. The conception of the cyclical development in literature has a hypothetical character: there is no direct evidence that literature moves in cycles; I would rather say that there are certain regular reappearances reminding us of Eliade’s concept of the eternal reappearance. Some of them might

be part of the general cyclical motion, but it is extremely difficult to prove because of the too short a span of time we have at our disposal. Though some literary genres reflecting myth and initiation have their roots in cyclical motions, they can hardly be generalised. Therefore I prefer a more sceptical view. The phenomenon of the literary cycle itself unfortunately often attracts flat, fashionable concepts and provokes easy solutions. This is one of the reasons for the refusal of these speculative – sometimes even exhibitionistic – hypotheses or at least for their “bracketing” (Einklammerung).

The second approach is technological: the tendency to the cyclical is the means of the formation of the artefact within the causality-anticipation chain (Pospíšil 1986). On the other hand, the literary cycle does not only mean a closure, but also the openness or semi-openness of the artefact, the autonomy of its parts and the looseness of its structure. The existence of the literary cycle also accentuates the incompleteness of literary genres and their provisional character. The poetic cycle is, more or less, the expression of an attempt to form more complicated literary entities, the prosaic cycle also means the tendency to openness, fragmentariness, looseness, and the preparedness of the artefact for flexible intrinsic change. The application of the cycle in prosaic creations may also express the author’s attempt at the formation of a larger literary entity; in this case, the cycle plays the role of a technological tool.

The third approach is associated with the psychological structure of the author’s personality and with the perception of the artefact itself; all the generally accepted definitions of a literary cycle are based on the intrinsic tension between the artistic unity and the autonomy of its parts. The cycle in general is usually defined as a period of time in which events happen in a certain order and sequence, and which constantly repeats itself. In the metaphoric meaning the artistic cycle may be defined as a group of artefacts with related subjects (a series of poems, romances etc.). Therefore the existence of the artistic cycle cannot be completely objectified: the feeling of the cycle often depends on the ability of the reader (researcher) to synthesize the shattered fragments reminding us of the cyclical motion though it is not (or cannot be) fully realised. From this point of view it would be better and more functional to speak of the cycle as a conventional term implying the cyclical tendency. Thus the important role in the concept of the artistic (literary) cycle has to be played by the reader’s (researcher’s) ability to complete the indicated cyclical character of the artefact which is, it seems, obviously a relatively subjective process depending on the individual approach of the perceiver. The concept of a literary cycle grows out of the complex combination of the traditional sources of aesthetic thought (Pospíšil 2000).

The beginnings of the novel in general are associated with its parasitism concerning other literary genres; the first stage of its development is connected with parody and travesty of traditional genres (epic poetry), later the novel tries to absorb and integrate them in its own structure (idylls, elegies, ballads etc.). From this point

of view the prosaic cycle seems to form the novel so as to achieve genre integrity. On the other hand, the prosaic cycle cannot be so tightly unified: the multi-dimensional structure of the prosaic artefact, more obviously than in the poetic cycle, resists the tendency towards the rise of the unified structure. For example, in Russia this ambivalent role of the literary cycle was strengthened by the paradoxical position of the novel in the genre system.

From the conservative point of view Russian 19th-century prose might be characterized as an antinomic, dual structure with a constant tendency towards static, descriptive and didactic genre models. While the first half of the 19th century was more pluralistic, consisting of both the dramatic and non-dramatic, static structures, the second half of the century prefers descriptive structures such as chronicles, memoirs, ethnographical stories and sketches. The permanent conflict between the dramatic and static artistic structures in Russian literature is also obvious in the 20th century: the prevalence of characterology in, say, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky was criticised by the young generation of radical writers of the 1920s who tried to restore the dramatic plot and, therefore, the genres of the picaresque and adventure novel (Kaverin, Ehrenburg and others).

From the very beginning the novel in Russia was regarded as a very strange, heterogeneous genre (Pospíšil 1998a, 1998b) because of the never ending process of secularization. The early novel with its general truths, omniscient narrators, with its eruptive and destructive forces breaking social and mental boundaries, which were destroying all hierarchies and were entering the taboo zones of human motivation and even the hidden layers of the subconscious, should be understood as the greatest opponent, the rival, the competitor of semi-secularized Russian literature. This strange attitude towards the genre in Russia, the feeling of its indecency and inadequacy were expressed by its deformation, markedness and strangeness. There is always something peculiar about any Russian novel – its theme, its plot, its characters, its philosophy, its provocative experimental or traditional character.

Overlooking the situation of the Golden Age of the Russian novel the reader will soon reveal the undercurrent of the cycle it contains: fragmentary cyclical movements in the form of unfinished linear plots and regular reappearances of characters and motifs. The cycle is not represented by Turgenev's *Sportman's Sketches* only; its hidden forms can be seen in the mirror composition of *Eugene Onegin* and in the autonomy of the digressions and novellas in *Dead Souls* (the portrayals or *physiologies* of the Russian *pomeshchiki* who might function as separate artefacts), in Leskov's inability to form a compact dramatic novel which is then substituted by the prosaic "folder" of autonomous stories which could form a cycle of narratives or could be disintegrated. *The Enchanted Traveller* (1875) might be understood as a cycle of stories; *the Cathedral Folk* (Soboryane, 1872) consists of the sketch *Plodomasovskie karliki* which was also part of the chronicle *Starye gody v sele Plodomasove* (1869). The genre structure of the Russian 19th-century novel was being formed by the cyclical undercurrent (the substantial part of which

was the shorter narrative) that sometimes breaks the surface or sometimes only represents the constructive potential realised in allusions (Pospíšil 1998a). Thus, the existence of the shorter narrative is an integral part of a literary development oscillating between processes of integration and disintegration.

The occurrence of shorter narratives in the poetological chain has its reasons which used to be associated with temporal categories. The speed of modern and postmodern life, the pressure of globalisation processes seemed to evoke the shorter narratives as more acceptable for readers than huge novels. But the reality of the reading public shows often quite a different picture: the novel remains a prestigious genre, and only novelists become Nobel Prize winners for literature; the novel still functions as a representative of the whole of national literature. The occurrence of the shorter narrative is, in my view, connected with certain literary currents: it is stronger in Romanticism and Modernism, weaker in realism and postmodernism; there are the cultural periods of great dynamism and disintegration of huge genre systems. Recently, the fashion of shorter narratives was evoked by minimalism, a specific literary tendency manifested both in poetry and prose (Goller, Witte 2001).

The literature of the 1990s in particular began to be associated with minimalism which, in the view of some scholars, goes back to 20th-century literature. Russian as well as Western critics discovered the work of Leonid Dobychin (1894 – disappeared 1939), a person of tragic fate who disappeared in the 1930s after sharp ideological criticism. The period after the fall of communism in Russia enabled the appearance of his complete writings. New Russian and West-European studies found out the context of his work both in Russia and in the world (Goller, Witte 2001). The problem consists rather in the fact that the phenomenon of minimalism can be more easily manifested than shorter prose or other literary structures.

Dobychin's novel *The City N* (*Город N*, most probably 1934–1935, published 1989) depicts the life of a family in the Baltic region of the former Russian Empire just before its fall. This novel is in fact one of the confirmations of the hypothesis or a hyperbolic vision that substantial part of the Russian 20th century literature is a sort of a palimpsest of Russian classical literature. The minimalist or detailed vision of reality means that the smaller novel disintegrated into short chapters or even paragraphs, forming the well-known domino-effect (34 minichapters).

The formation of the long or longer epic (epic poem, novel) out of shorter or smaller narratives and vice versa is the evidence of the heterogeneous character of literature as such (Pospíšil 1996). In this developmental strategy the shorter narrative has the following functions:

- a) It has a function in itself: it expresses smaller actions and depicts only several characters in action, it is a model focused on artistic detail.
- b) It functions as a building block of bigger narratives (novella, novel).
- c) It functions as a dynamizing factor of the genre system within processes of integration and disintegration.

To sum up:

1. The problem of narrative prose in general and short narrative prose in particular is connected with the general problems of literary criticism at the end of the postmodernist era closely connected with genre theory and comparative studies.

2. The problem does not consist so much in various more or less original concepts, but rather in mutual understanding of diverse literary traditions which led to different terminologies, methodologies and general understanding; therefore we have to study the whole complex of specific literary communication. The prevalence of mechanical quantitative criteria must be completed by a permanent re-defining of genre boundaries.

3. The problem of short narrative prose cannot be solved or dealt with without a generally accepted or acceptable comparative encyclopaedia of literary terms underlying methodological approaches and taking into account various, at least European or Euro-American literary traditions. The research team of Masaryk University in Brno started this project two years ago, but the problems of such a project may be a subject of another short narrative.

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