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Postmodernism in Slovak Prose

Abstract

In the genre of realistic novels, fiction is confined within the boundaries of the real world, yet the author or narrator presents it as reality, as if nothing were fabricated and the entire plot were simply transposed from reality into text. Contemporary authors disclose the processes of their creation, differentiating between what is fabrication, what is fiction, and what is directly incorporated from reality into the text. In postmodern prose, the methods of realism and modernism are interwoven, both integral to the artistic text. In Slovak literature, this phenomenon appears most notably in the works of Pavel Vilikovský and is even more pronounced in the works of Czech-French author Milan Kundera. Often, authors insert themselves into the narrative, particularly in the roles of commentator or by including mini-stories from their own lives into the plot. This is executed through various forms of metafiction. Metafictional techniques, while a hallmark of the postmodern text, are not new; similar elements have appeared in literature in previous centuries but never as extensively as they do now. By the end of the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, Slovak literature witnessed the rise of authors with distinct postmodern prose features, such as Peter Pišťanek, Pavel Vilikovský, Lajos

Grendel, Anton Baláž, Viliam Klimáček, Daniela Kapitáňová, Michal Hvorecký, Pavol Rankov, and others. Metafiction is undoubtedly a defining characteristic of the postmodern text, primarily due to the increased prevalence of these elements compared to the past.

Keywords

Postmodernism, metafiction, narrator, Slovak literature, existential prose, palimpsest prose.

Postmodern art (Postmoderna) reflects the contemporary human condition, characterized by both the fear of nuclear and ecological disasters and the real possibility of human civilization's extinction, and by the shift from nation-states to a new phase of societal evolution — the post-industrial or informational society era. While the factory symbolized the past era, the new one focuses on information (Grenz, 1997, p. 26). Fragmentation and episodicity in various human activities have become defining features of postmodern life (Bauman, 1995, p. 25). Postmodernism rejects messianism and salvation, abandons grandiose projects aimed at an uncertain future, such as Nazism, Marxism, and all forms of national socialism, and instead, gravitates towards stability. It acknowledges the traditional values of conservatism and liberalism, despite their intensifying contradictions.

Contemporary art no longer exclusively pursues originality and innovation but embodies a spirit of humor, new irrationality, hedonism, an escape from urban civilization to nature and rural solitude and is marked by opinion pluralism and tolerance. It consciously avoids the overcomplication of text construction, a hallmark of modernity and modernism. This culture is evolutionarily linked to the counterculture and subculture of the 1950s and 1960s, based on communicational pluralism and a departure from modernity, though not in clear opposition to it. In terms of postmodern art and thought, meaningful discussion is possible only with a keen sense of and appreciation for opinion differences, as well as for anti-elitism,

favoring pluralism over strict adherence to rules (Gablíková, 1995, pp. 76–77). W. Welsch refers to this as "its radical reliance on plurality" (Welsch, 1994, p. 34).

While modernist culture created an aura of uniqueness and irreplaceability, distancing itself from everyday life, postmodern culture bridges the gap between high and mass culture, abandoning the emphasis on the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the work or creator.

In this new orientation, postmodern literature often parodies authorities, employing radical irony, as well as pastiche, persiflage, travesty, parody, and paradox. However, postmodernism is not a rejection of modernism but rather its evolution and continuation, albeit with certain modifications. The beginnings and development of postmodernism/postmoderna in society and art are associated with these years and events:

- 1945: Joseph Hudnut publishes a text titled "Postmodern House."
- 1952: John Cage performs his performance art at Black Mountain College.
- 1960: Modern art becomes academic (Jameson, 1983).
- 1960: According to theorists (Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan), pop becomes a challenge to modern elitism.
- 1963: The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy marks the end of optimism and naivety (L. Mc Caffery).
- 1965: New characteristics of postmodern prose emerge, especially in the works of Pynchon, Barthelme, and Barth.
- 1968: Student movements fail – leading to the emergence of post-avant-garde art.
- 1968: Apollo 8 orbits the Moon at Christmas and returns to Earth; six months later, on July 21, 1969, Neil Armstrong becomes the first person to walk on the Moon.
- 1968: The invasion of allied forces into Czechoslovakia signifies a sobering realization of totalitarian aims and the ideas of socialism based on dictatorship.
- 1968: Works by Rauschenberg emerge; pop art king Andy Warhol is critically injured in an assassination attempt by feminist Valerie Solanas in his "image factory" – a day after the

assassination of Robert Kennedy on June 6; the assassination of Martin Luther King.

- 1977: Charles Jencks in the first edition of his book "The Language of Postmodern Architecture" labels architecture starting from 1970 as "postmodern" (Vay, 1991, pp. 85–87).

Postmodernism is closely linked with the evolution of electronics and the continuous growth of computers. Hence, the term "information society" is used to describe the phase following the industrial society. Particularly after 1968, there has been a fusion of electronics and computing technology with literature and art. Artistic texts are increasingly crafted based on intermediality, utilizing multiple communication channels to provoke an aesthetic response. The television screen enables the simultaneous use of acoustic, visual, and verbal elements in the construction of an artistic piece. The advent and proliferation of video is a hallmark of postmodernity (Pethő, 1992, p. 83), illustrating that visual and verbal elements can be intertwined within a prose text.

In the *postmodern era*, the emphasis in the relationship between the various participants in communication (author, text, reader) shifts to reception, to the act of receiving (Žilka, 2011, pp. 295–296; Fokkema, 1994, pp. 57–58). The author as the creator of the literary work recedes into the background, and only rarely does the relationship (bond) *author -- text* take priority, but when it does, a specific work such as an autobiography or memoirs emerges, as an independent communication product, or as a distinctive piece (Hornung, 1997, pp. 221–233). This priority of the text's relationship to the recipient can be illustrated as follows (Žilka, 2015, p. 163):

AUTHOR ·········· TEXT ——— RECIPIENT

MEANING
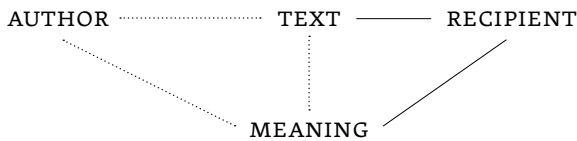
This is also related to the use of metafictional techniques. *Metafiction* (from Greek *metá*: among, between; [behind] after; and Greek *fictio*:

creation, forming) or "fiction over fiction" or "fiction about fiction". The increasing degree of metafiction problematizes the ontological origin and status of fictional facts and essentially suppresses the story in favor of narration about narration (narrative). The most famous forms of metanovels are:

1. A novel about a person writing a novel (André Gide: *Falšovatelia peňazí* [The Counterfeiters])

2. A novel about a person reading a novel (Italo Calvino: *Když jedné zimní noci cestující* [If on a winter's night a traveler])

3. The work comments on specific conventions of literary creation (John Fowles: *Mantisa* [The French Lieutenant's Woman])

4. The author is a character in their own work (Javier Cercas: *Vojaci od Salamíny* [Soldiers of Salamis])

5. Characters realize they are in a literary work (Miguel Unamuno: *Hmla* [Mist])

6. The reader is hinted that they themselves might be a character in another literary work (Pavel Vilikovský: *Krásna strojvodkyňa, krutá vojvodkyňa* [The Beautiful Train Driver, The Cruel Duchess]).

In contemporary prose, there are passages that are proof that instead of the narrator, the (fictitious) author themselves seems to be asserting in the plot, i.e., the narrator's passage is interrupted by the passage of the fictitious author of the story. This is realized through the use of metafictional techniques. Metafiction is characterized as a technique where a novel (work) refers to its own literary nature, then the fictitious author themselves enters the plot and becomes either a character or directly replaces the narrator. The narrator's speech is replaced by the author's speech, when the author inserts their own expression, their own speech into the text (Pavera – Všetička, 2022, p. 37). M. Kundera in his novel "*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* [The Book of Laughter and Forgetting] writes about the death of his father, as if putting it in context with the demise of his character Tamina; even the 6th chapter is titled *Taminina smrt* [Tamina's Death] (Kundera, 2017, pp. 171–172). First, the author informs the reader about the health condition of his father, who gradually lost his speech, until he reaches a stage where he can't say a single word. The author-son as a narrator incorporates this into the text as follows:

> There was a doctor with us at the time. He leaned over my father, who
> could no longer say a single word. Then he turned to me and said aloud,
> "He doesn't perceive anything anymore. His brain is decaying." I saw
> my father's large blue eyes widen even more (Kundera, 2017, p. 185).

A novel in which metafiction is prominently featured and abundantly
represented is the distinguished literary work of Alexandra Salmela,
an author who rose to fame for writing her debut in Finnish, despite
her Slovak roots. This is the novel *27 alebo Smrť vás preslávi* (2012), or
in Czech, *27 aneb Smrt vás proslaví* (which will be the focus of our
considerations, as this translation is closer to the original than the
Slovak translation). Alexandra Salmela is not the only Slovak author
to have made a mark in a foreign language; preceding her was Irena
Brežná, an author who has lived in Switzerland since 1968, writing
in German, although she still regards Slovak as her "Muttersprache"
(mother tongue). For her, German is the "Vatersprache" (father
tongue). Indeed, she emigrated for political reasons (Žilka, 1995,
pp. 104–106), but Alexandra Salmela chose Finland as her second
home by preference. She also set the thematic backdrop of her work
in Finland, although it begins in Central Europe – the Czechoslovak
region.

Previous evaluations of her work have primarily focused on the
text's composition and structure. The novel features four narrators
who alternate, creating a richly varied narration of the story. As she
has stated, the novel contains two narrative threads, and within
the second, several diametrically different narrators take turns
'speaking':

- the cat – Kassandra,
- a toy pig – Mr. Piggy,
- an old car, Opel Astra.

While Kassandra embodies a rather negative perspective in assessing
events within the text, Piggy is portrayed as a friend to the children of
the Finnish family, which is most vividly represented by the mother,
Piia. The family comprises the daughter, Bean, twins Ziggy and Merlin,
and the father, Marko. The story unfolds in the Finnish countryside
and is depicted from a Central European viewpoint on family life in

Finland. This perspective is particularly underscored by a comedic lens on Finnish family life and the mentality of its people.

However, the main plot centers around Angie as a foreigner in Finland, even though the narrative begins in the Czechoslovak region, from where the protagonist departs for Finland to gather material for her thesis on Kalevala symbols. What was intended to be a research trip becomes extended as Angie diverges from her thesis to engage in creative writing—composing poems, prose, scripts, and even a humorous textbook for beginners. Naturally, this is a Finnish language textbook aimed at Slovaks (and Czechs). Given the author's extensive exploration of text creation in various forms, these sections are quintessential examples of metafiction, thereby accentuating the postmodern nature of her prose and novel. Pavel Vilikovský is among the most frequent Slovak authors to explore this phenomenon.

Some works defy definitive classification within the literary movement known as postmodernism, as was the case with modernism or earlier with realism and romanticism. It is more about analyzing new elements and techniques even in the works of Slovak authors. Postmodernism as a trend, movement, or current is infused with humor, brimming with new irrationality and hedonism, an escape from urban civilization to nature and rural solitude, marked by opinion pluralism and tolerance, and it purposefully opposes the excessive complexity of text construction — a notable characteristic of modernism and the avant-garde. It is evident that certain trends in contemporary Slovak prose, as well as poetry and drama, directly or indirectly resonate with global events and movements.

A fundamental trait of postmodern literature is the introduction of "unreal reality" into the text from life; it may be more apt to speak of an absurd reality transformed into artistic expression. The postmodern writer does not adhere to established norms but is in a position akin to a philosopher, crafting a new artistic form as if ad hoc (Lyotard, 1993, p. 28). As if haphazardly, even absurd reality is assimilated into Slovak prose through quotations and paraphrases (P. Vilikovský, D. Mitana, D. Dušek, A. Baláž, D. Kapitáňová). Foreign "voices" are either subtly ironized and parodied, or their absurdity is exposed through the author's commentary and additions (an

instance being P. Vilikovský's mocking of excerpts from newspapers and scholarly works). In Baláž's case, it is an endeavor to re-educate prostitutes in camps near Nováky, as satirized in the novel *Tábor padlých žien* [The Camp of Fallen Women].

Not only are Agáty's quotations forcibly classified by parts of literary criticism into postmodernism, but also Jaroš's *Tisícročná včela* [The Thousand-Year Bee], which includes a chapter made up solely of newspaper excerpts, does not quite fit into the overall structure of the text. Conversely, Šikula's novel *Majstri* [The Masters] does exhibit postmodern features, such as segments that challenge the narrator's role. Furthermore, Šikula intentionally rejected lyrical prose, crafting his work in a seemingly contrary fashion, negating poetics. Postmodernism in Slovak prose can be delineated into two phases: the works of authors where postmodern elements are already present (D. Tatarka, J. Johanides, D. Mitana, D. Dušek, R. Sloboda, A. Baláž) and, on the other hand, authors and their works that are distinctly postmodern (P. Vilikovský, L. Grendel). Mitanov's novel *Hľadanie strateného autora* [Searching for the Lost Author] is also a definitive inclusion. P. Pišťanek holds a unique position with his novel (trilogy) *Rivers of Babylon*, as well as his short stories. His work prominently features the principle of parody (echoing Hečko's "Drevená dedina" [The Wooden Village]), but also reimagines the village, which served as an inspiration for lyrical prose. However, it should be clearly stated: being classified as postmodern does not inherently confer artistic superiority. Jaroš's novel and Ballek's prose are qualitatively on a higher level than texts that mechanically employ postmodern elements and techniques (like "Hľadanie strateného autora"). Nevertheless, Jaroš's novel contains elements of magical realism, which are further accentuated in the film adaptation directed by Juraj Jakubisko.

An artistic text of postmodernist lineage is deliberately built on parody and irony; its aim is to explore all spheres of life and mirror them in the text based on the principle of ridiculing certain stylistic strata – specific genres, functional styles – such as educational, administrative, and journalistic genres, political speeches, and the rigid, stereotyped forms and means of rhetoric, as well as literature itself. The statements and genres employed in creating a literary text

are no longer mere reflections of reality but also serve as parody, an ad hoc mockery, par excellence (demonstrating autoparodistic metatextuality and metanarration).

In the novel, fiction took place within the confines of the real world, but the author or narrator pretended as if it were reality, as if nothing was made up, as if the entire plot was just transferred from reality into the text. The contemporary author reveals the processes of their own creation, also revealing when it is an invention, a fiction, and when something is directly transferred into the text from reality. At least one quote from Klimáček's work *Horúce leto 68'* [Hot Summer of '68] (2011): "I am writing a documentary novel. I have changed the names of my heroes, but the name Darina is real. The fact that she appeared and what she did might look like the author's tug on the heartstrings. But it happened like that..." (Klimáček, 2011, p. 150).

We can summarize the techniques used by authors of literary texts in postmodern times:

1. The author explains that someone else passed the text to them (an anonymous author), who also relies on quotations from other works. Evidence is the Note at the end of P. Vilikovský's work "*Večne je zelený...*" [Forever Green...] (1989):

> Proof of the phenomenal abilities and encyclopedic education of the anonymous author (we maintain his incognito for understandable reasons) is also the fact that to support his views, he unobtrusively and perhaps even involuntarily interweaves quotations from leading works of academic literature... (Vilikovský, 1989, p. 87).

Since the authorial law is muddled in publishing practice – the author states – "in this note, we list those works whose quotations we managed to identify securely" (Vilikovský, 1989, p. 87). There are 16 in total. Naturally, this is a note by the author Pavel Vilikovský, with the anonymous author being the narrator, who allows himself the outrageous audacity of taking quotations from other works, mostly scientific. This is a case where the presence of the narrator (so-called anonymous author) of the text is emphasized, while the so-called authorial law on the originality of the text is disregarded.

2. The narrator (author) leaves it to the reader to form their own characterization or description of a character. The reader feels honored that the narrator-author does not impose their feelings or even taste. This technique is used by Viliam Klimáček in his novel *Horúce leto 68'* [Hot Summer of '68] (2011). He comments on the portrayal of his character: "What does a woman who feels genuine disgust at the word 'cabriolet' look like? I leave that to you. In the novel, I deliberately omit descriptions of characters and landscapes. I skip them for you. As a reader, I always quickly skimmed them, and imagining you a bit like myself, I hope you won't miss this fluff" (Klimáček, 2011, p. 8).

3. The narrator reports that one of the characters is collecting material to write a novel (André Gide: *Falšovatelia peňazí* [The Counterfeiters]). If the content of the text involves the creation of a novel (theming creation), we can talk about a metafictional novel, a distinct literary subgenre. Such a text is Stanislav Rakús's *Nenapísaný roman* [The Unwritten Novel] (2004). The main character gathers material for writing a novel, in some ways, it is also a university novel, as it happens in a university environment. It touches on the period of Husák's normalization when many university teachers were dismissed and had to find other employment. The point is the main character's resignation from writing the novel, even though there is more than enough material collected.

4. The narrator becomes a character themselves (Jorge Luis Borges: *Borges and I*). Michal Hvorecký, in the text *Prvé víťazstvo supermarketov* [The First Victory of Supermarkets] from the book *Lovci & zberači* [Hunters & Gatherers] (2001), made the narrator-hunter of customers into a gatherer. The very hunter of customers, who participated in preparing attractions for buyers, eventually becomes a buyer himself. The text is about how the manipulator becomes manipulated, the hunter becomes a gatherer, the arranger of the supermarket becomes a purchaser of goods.

5. Narrative footnotes are as if part of the story, even though they are presented as a commentary on the story. This metafictional technique is used by Pál Závada in his work *Jadvigin vankúšik* [Jadviga's Pillow], which is based on the diary of András Osztatný (1st level), notes of his wife Jadviga added to the text (2nd level), and

meanwhile, there are notes by their son Mišo Osztatný, who not only translates Slovak sentences from Slovak to Hungarian but also aptly comments on them. Slovak sentences, sometimes even longer passages, are part of the Hungarian text, i.e., the narrator's domain.

6. The work contains text by another author, even one's own text, incorporated into the novel. This technique is present in Dušan Mitana's *Hľadanie strateného autora* [Searching for the Lost Author], into which he inserted his short story *Ihla* [The Needle] from the short story book *Psie dni* [Dog Days] (1970) (Mitana, 1991, pp. 23–24). Rudolf Sloboda purposefully incorporated foreign texts into his works, which he admits: "Later, I never considered where the idea came from, and when needed, I copied entire sentences from some book, as for example in the conversation of the hero Urban with Hegel in the novel *Narcis* (Sloboda, 1988, p. 39). Hegel's sentences are taken by the author verbatim, without citing the source.

7. The narrator (author) admits that the character may think differently, allowing that their opinions may diverge:

> Could Imro be thinking about this? Hardly. Or maybe yes. He could think, but a bit differently, why should he think like the writer of this book. Why should he think like me? The writer is audacious enough to reveal to the kind reader that he somewhat sympathizes with Imro and whispers various things to him, simply imposing his own opinions on him... (Šikula, 1976, p. 41).

Imro is the main character of the novel *Majstri*, to whom the author-narrator (writer) "imposes" his thoughts, opinions, contemplations. One might ask: was V. Šikula a postmodern author? Definitely not, but metafictional elements in his novel are already a harbinger of postmodern narrative strategies, domesticated in the next period of development of Slovak literature.

8. The narrator reports that one of the characters is collecting material to write a novel (André Gide: *Falšovatelia peňazí*, this also includes Alexandra Salmela's novel, with the difference that in her work, other characters, such as a fictional editor of a literary magazine, also comment on the written texts). If the content of the text involves the creation of a novel (theming creation), we can

talk about a metafictional novel, a distinct literary subgenre. Such a text is Stanislav Rakús's *Nenapísaný roman*. In a sense, Rudolf Sloboda's *Rozum* [Reason] (1982) is also a metafictional novel, as the central theme of the text is writing the screenplay *Don Juan zo Žabokriek* as a post-text to the "Don Juan" theme. The entire plot is about how the screenplay is created, how entire passages are imagined and certain parts completed: "This much I wrote during my night storming. Jano is running for the morning bus, but what now with him? How will Hanka take her revenge? Will she report him? Who is the young man who came with Hanka to see Hrska? Is he a fiancé, a brother? – That still needs to be thought out. – If you want to know how I further imagined the plot for the film, read the next chapter…" (Sloboda, 1982, p.178).

Alexander Salmela also chose this approach in her novel *27 eli kuolema tekee taiteilijan* [27 or Death Makes an Artist] (2010), for which she received the prestigious Helsingin Sanomat newspaper award.

9. The narrator becomes a character themselves (*Borges and I*). Michal Hvorecký in the text *Prvé víťazstvo supermarketov* from the book *Lovci & zberači* made the narrator-hunter of a supermarket customer, respectively, an avid shopper. The text is about how the manipulator becomes manipulated, the hunter becomes a gatherer, the arranger of the supermarket becomes a purchaser of goods.

10. The work can comment on specific literary techniques, categories, can play with them and parody them. Lajos Grendel in the work *Ostrá streľba* [Sharp Shooting] humorously refers to the narrator, respectively, to this epic category:

> After a few weeks and months, he (meaning: the narrator) realized that inside him lived a self-serving narrator, a nefarious narrator, a trickster narrator, a bloodthirsty narrator, a lustful narrator, a cynical narrator, a self-important narrator, a cowardly narrator, a compromising narrator, a murderous narrator, and many other narrators about whom he knew almost nothing due to incomplete self-awareness.

In this spirit, the author (narrator) contemplates the types of narrators throughout the entire chapter, even analyzing and explaining

each of these types (Grendel, 1985, pp. 88–93). Daniela Hodrová points out that in postmodern prose, there is an emphasis on the moment of text creation, thus thematizing the creation of the text itself (Hodrová, 1989a, pp. 31–41). Within it, the author discusses their own poetics, focusing on the moment of generating, constituting the text. Through it, a game based on irony unfolds. This metafictional technique was also used by Rudolf Sloboda in the novel *Rozum* [Reason], as the content of the text is the creation of a screenplay titled *Don Juan zo Žabokriek*, which is in itself a source of humor. The funny part also includes the last name of the main character, Jano Hrsc, and the story unfolds in the Luhačovice spa at the Miramare hotel (which still exists). Indeed, the novel is about the creation of a text, the constant reworking of the story, which is also influenced by a committee and its chief, who demands that the author write about work in line with the principles of creation under socialism. The moment of text creation (the principle "I write about how I write the text you are reading") was first used by André Gide in 1925 in his novel *The Counterfeiters*.

Another characteristic of the postmodern novel is the visualization of the text. Visual elements are no longer just an addition, nor do they only serve as illustrations, but they often become part of the story itself. A typical example is Pavel Vilikovský's book *Silberputzen* (Leštenie starého striebra) – 2006. It is proof that the relationship between literature and other forms of art should be considered. And since we live in an era of pan-visualization, literature itself is becoming visualized.

However, postmodern literature increasingly focuses on phenomena based on intertextuality and carrying the comedic aspect of the text. Among these expressive characteristics of literary work, parody, travesty, pastiche, and irony can be specifically mentioned; in connection with irony, sometimes the term radical irony is used, meaning the ironic (mocking) character of the plot from the beginning to the end. This characteristic of the text is most pronounced in R. Sloboda's *Rozum* (1982), P. Pišťanek's trilogy *Rivers of Babylon* (1991, 1994, 1999), and its culmination is D. Kapitáňová's satire *Kniha o cintoríne* [Book about a Cemetery] (2005), published under the name of the narrator, a retarded character, Samko Tále. Samko Tále,

in many ways, reminds of Hašek's Švejk, but is set in the 1990s in Slovakia during the era of Vladimír Mečiar, a period characterized by Mečiarism. These characteristics are also present in the overall work of P. Vilikovský, but also in A. Baláž's works, especially the novel *Tábor padlých žien* [The Camp of Fallen Women] (1993) is a poignant satire of totalitarian practices of the 1950s. The satire focuses on the elimination of brothels in Bratislava and the transfer of prostitutes to labor camps, where they are attempted to be re-educated in the socialist spirit.

> Postmodern literature is proof that alongside verbal irony, there is also textual irony. It is primarily applied in parody, travesty, and satire. The essence of irony from a pragmatic point of view lies in the difference between lying and irony and can be explained as follows (Plett, 1982, p. 79).

The text (artistic artifact) in the era of postmodernism is not understood as a "closed" work, but its "openness" is emphasized. This does not mean the possibility of its arbitrary interpretation, but an interpretative program encoded in the work. This allows the reader to perceive (receive) the text at multiple levels. For example, Dieter Penning (1989) lists up to four possibilities of reading or reception of Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*:
1. A detective story,
2. A historical novel,
3. A novel of ideas (Ideeroman),
4. A metanovel (novel about a novel).

Czech literary scholar and writer Daniela Hodrová points out that in postmodern prose, the moment of text creation is emphasized, meaning the creation of the text itself is thematized. The author thus discusses their own poetics within it, focusing on the moment of generating, constituting the text. Through it, a game based on irony develops. The moment of text creation (the principle "I write about how I write the text you are reading") was first used by André Gide in 1925 in his novel *The Counterfeiters*. Characteristic symbols of postmodernity include the mirror, museum, mask, labyrinth, and

library. In our case, two symbols (mirror + labyrinth) are metaphorically combined, with the labyrinth playing a key role, allegorically corresponding to the loss of orientation of a person in postmodern hyperspace. Own stories (Dušan Mitana: *Hľadanie strateného autora*), newspaper articles (Pavel Vilikovský: *Kôň na poschodí, slepec vo Vrábľoch*) lose their original meaning and become either a source of self-parody or acquire a parodic character.

We can contrast the characteristics of modernism and postmodernism as distinctive trends of two different artistic directions:

Modernism	Postmodernism
1. Mega-structure (Joyce, Proust)	1. Pluralism = self-sufficiency of individual fragments
2. Urban civilization of crimes, murders, violence, Hiroshima, gulags	2. Ecological protection, escape to nature
3. Apollonian (ideal)	3. Dionysian (existential)
4. Rebellion, defiance, rejection	4. Searching for integration
5. Spiritual speculation, creative imagery	5. Simplification, clever improvisation, reduction and impoverishment of form, extravagance
6. Masculine in a semiotic sense as active (original, new, moment of creative input, ethical, committed)	6. Feminine in a semiotic sense as passive (unoriginal, old, moment of adoption, ostentation)
7. A certain alternative ideology of the epoch, contrary to violence; merging and combining of poetic, narrative, and rhetorical techniques	7. Alienation of language, branching and enriching of stylistic possibilities
8. Collage and montage of text	8. Palimpsest (originally a parchment manuscript rewritten multiple times after erasing older text)

Postmodernity is characterized by the same theme, the same movie being remade with different actors, crew, and in a different period. It usually involves reworking the theme, what filmmakers call a "remake." This approach is also known from literary practice – rewriting a text, or "re-writing" the same text in new historical conditions and a different environment, reminiscent of film "remakes" from previous periods.

"Re-writing" as a technique was introduced into literature by J. L. Borges in the short story *Author of the Quixote, Pierre Menard*, which can be a good example of intertextuality – the pre-text is Cervantes's novel, and the post-text is Borges's story. J. Derrida works with the concept of the trace, which can also be applied to the process of creating a relationship between the pre-text and post-text (Derrida, 1999, pp. 77–78). Intertextuality is indeed a prominent feature of postmodern art, which can manifest in the form of quotations or through adaptation, linking the new text to an already existing text in the spirit of contemporary poetics. Overall, in the postmodern era, the focus of creation shifts from the relationship REALITY – TEXT to TEXT (1) – TEXT (2), meaning the new text is linked to an older text, or possibly multiple texts. Older texts – as U. Eco points out – are revised, rewritten "with irony and without benevolence," hence postmodernity deliberately uses intertextual linking, i.e., quotability or intertextuality; this form dominates in the works of P. Vilikovský, L. Grendel, but also in the dramatic work of K. Horák (...let Your kingdom come...), where he subjects Ľ. Štúr, his life, and lifelong work to artistic critique and reevaluation. The work of V. Klimáček belongs more to the second group than the first, as the author parodies already existing texts. In this context, it is worth mentioning that P. Zajac, instead of palimpsestic creation, uses the term "simulacral form" of postmodernity.

Existential prose

The existential form of postmodernism mainly developed in Central and Eastern European regions, where societal absurdity reached such a degree that it almost invited themes for exploration. Instructive in this respect is the thinking of Czech (now French) writer

Milan Kundera, who draws from the Jewish proverb: "Man thinks, God laughs." As he himself states: the Renaissance author François Rabelais emerged in his imagination as having heard God's laughter one day, and probably from this idea the first significant European novel "Gargantua a Pantagruel" emerged. Within this concept, political reality is either negated or re-evaluated from the perspective of so-called radical irony. Man thinks and acts nonsensically, yet reality slips through his fingers. God must be laughing at this, as from a higher perspective, all ideas – especially the way they are deformed – must seem funny and absurd. The postmodern era rejects and ironically re-evaluates all so-called "great ideas" of salvation and messianism; the so-called "metanarrative stories" with universal validity should be eliminated (Lyotard, 1993, p. 29). These "stories" (monolithic ideological projects) should be replaced by a plurality of opinions, ideological projects of various origins.

Milan Kundera's most famous work from his domestic period is the novel *Žert* [The Joke], completed in 1965 and first published in Prague in 1967. The criticism at the time (Zdeněk Kožmín) labeled this work as "existential prose," a novel of "human existence." The critic stated: "The individual characters of the novel represent more than just contemporary types: they are also an expression of a certain existential position in life, they are a possibility of how to live in the face of the threat and reality of absurdity. The always successful ideologue Zemánek is only fully revealed and convicted in this existential layer of prose" (Kožmín, 1991, pp. 315–316).

Kundera's novel is based on the establishment and resolution of existential questions within totalitarianism, thus representing the existential form of prose.

A purer form of existential prose is represented by the short story "Eduard a Bůh" [Eduard and God], found in the collection *Směšné lásky* [Laughable Loves] (Brno 1991). A young teacher is accused of religiosity, but he solves his existential problem by having an affair with the principal under peculiar, grotesque, and absurd circumstances. Before the act of love, he forces the principal to kneel, clasp her hands, and pray. "Pray, so God may forgive us," hissed Eduard at the principal. The fledgling pedagogue existentially saves himself through a distasteful erotic adventure.

We know that Milan Kundera, similar to Umberto Eco, first devoted himself to the theory of the novel, and then became a novelist. His theoretical work is titled *Umění románu. Cesta Vl. Vančury za velkou epikou* [The Art of the Novel. Vladislav Vančura's Journey to the Great Epic] (1960). A more elaborate and complete version of this work was published under the title "L' art du roman" (1986).

It seems that of the Slovak classics, from modernism to postmodernism, Dominik Tatarka progressed the furthest. He too represents the existential form of creation, as evidenced by the trilogy written during his dissident period under the title "Písačky" [The Scribblers] (*Listy do večnosti* [Letters to Eternity], *Sám proti noci* [Alone Against the Night], *Písačky*). The entire book has an autobiographical character, including passages about friends and former friends (Milan Kundera, Vladimír Mináč). It's no longer pure literature of fictional provenance; the story isn't always invented but rather adapted to the individual intention of the author. Factography is equated with fiction, with "unlyrical" passages following lyrical ones. In his book, Tatarka addresses the existential problems of a person pushed to the periphery of life. This is particularly felt in parts describing the encounter with a well-known writer, his former friend – Vladimír Mináč. The author here highlights an asymmetric relationship: the author (narrator) is hierarchically "down" on the social ladder, and his partner is "higher up," belonging to Kafka's unattainable "castle," yet offers to mediate, to assist in settling disputes. Friends turned away from Tatarka, which is why his prose is interwoven with autobiographical traits. His financial situation was unsatisfactory, his books were published only in samizdat. Therefore, he inclined towards existential prose, continuing to create even in crisis situations, overcoming everyday challenges through his work.

In Slovak conditions, the inclination towards existential literature began in the 1960s in the prose of Ján Johanides and Rudolf Sloboda. Ján Johanides debuted with a collection of short stories titled *Súkromie* [Privacy], which can be considered the beginning of literature (prose) of this kind. Here, Privacy replaced the empty socialist pathos; where the focus on the life of the individual increases, the existential character of the creation inevitably comes to the forefront. The author has remained faithful to this principle

to this day; this is also evidenced by the preference for "balladicity" in his work. As many as two novels have "balada" [ballad] in their very title as a genre designation (*Balada o vkladnej knižke* [Ballad of the Deposit Book]; *Najsmutnejšia oravská balada* [The Saddest Orava Ballad]).

Rudolf Sloboda debuted with the novel *Narcis* [Narcissus] (1965), which is one of the best works of post-war Slovak prose. He created the type of anti-hero and in the work itself demonstrated the disintegration of human identity, as well as the continuous changes in perspective on reality. He achieved this aesthetic level only in the novel *Rozum* [Reason] (1982), and in his dramas written shortly before his fateful suicide in 1995 (*Armagedon na Grbe* [Armageddon on the Grbe]; *Macocha* [Stepmother]).

To existential prose, we can also assign the novel (text) *Pamäti* [Memories] (1996). Rudolf Sloboda here – in the spirit of Central European traditions – engages publicly and socially: judges, evaluates, equates dreams and reality. He assesses "fatherly thoughts": "... such a father must understand everything, starting from the creation of the world to the relationship with the monetary union or NATO. His opinions are always ahead, best 'capture' the era, but if you take the trouble to analyze his article, you will find only verbalism in it" (Sloboda, 1996, p. 120).

Elsewhere (further on):

> ...these ideologues, fathers, are completely corroded inside. Their soul is destroyed or dysfunctional, they have killed their conscience. It becomes evident in rare moments when these men of the nation sit next to you, slightly drunk, say, and you quietly ask them, so they don't have to 'proclaim', whether they really think Slovaks are more than Hungarians... Such a person roars: 'Yes, a Slovak is more than a Hungarian.' He must with this roar intimidate both me and his conscience, or rather his reason. (Sloboda, 1996, pp. 122–123).

Here, however, these are political, civic opinions, but this work is also special in that it presages the author's death, his suicide. The entire chapter (16.) is dedicated to the analysis, thorough (existential) analysis of the concepts of spirit, body, and soul.

Even more intriguing is the next chapter (17.), especially its conclusion, where the author speaks with God and then enters a bunker – this bunker resembles a grave. The section (and chapter) ends with the sentence: "Just to get away from there as quickly as possible…" (Sloboda, 1996, p. 114). Here, in the Heideggerian sense of the word, it's not just about anxiety as an abstract concept of death, but about the very concrete proximity of death – and fear of it. Yet, the author seems to want to test it, flirting with it. Sloboda also employs a frequently used trope of postmodernism – prosopopoeia (here revives J. Šimonovič, a poet, his/our schoolmate), but often interprets texts, deliberating his opinions.

At the very beginning of existential prose stand J.P. Sartre, but perhaps even more so A. Camus with his novels (*The Stranger; The Plague*). But mainly representatives of the "new novel" influenced Central European literature, including Slovak prose. Among the younger prose writers who chose this path is Dušan Mitana, especially with his novella *Patagónia*, but also some of his short stories belong here. Alienation, nothingness, inner emptiness is a characteristic feature of his short story *Dohady*, where he describes the funeral of the mother of the main character of the artistic work. Alienation is reflected in the fact that no one mourns his mother during the funeral.

A new type of prose represents, exemplifies the work of Peter Pišťanek *Rivers of Babylon*, which is thematically set in the new conditions – after 1989. If the previous examples in terms of using so-called radical irony do not reach the level of Milan Kundera's works, although undoubtedly in some texts this aesthetic category flashes as part of the literary norm (*Balada o vkladnej knižke* [Ballad of the Deposit Book] or the drama *Macocha* [Stepmother]), P. Pišťanek spices up his repugnance with his radical ironic attitude towards the then methods of privatization as well as the adaptation of former state security officers to new conditions. And finally, the career of the main character, based on audacity, uneducation, coarseness, and rusticity, is instructive. Existentially, the type of person with substandard lexicon and non-salon manners continues to be at an advantage, which in itself is a source of irony, even cynicism.

In this category, we also need to include the work of Václav Pankovčín, author of two novels (texts): *Marakéš* (1994) and *Tri ženy pod*

orechom [Three Women Under the Walnut Tree] (1996). It should be said that the first of these is more significant and can be considered an attempt at a literary depiction of a postmodern Kocúrkovo. Although the story takes place in some Eastern Slovak village, it could happen anywhere. With *Marakéš*, we are, as Faust with Kocúrkovo. It's worth quoting J. Záborský:

"Faust shook his head gravely at the mention of Kocúrkovo. Although he was very proficient in geography, he knew nothing about Kocúrkovo.

'Eh, well,' the oil merchant helped him, 'wherever you point on the map between the Tisza and Morava, you always hit Kocúrkovo, this funny side of Slovakia.'" (J. Záborský: Faustiáda (1984)

Postmodern elements here include: the application of radical irony and absurdity in the form of grotesque, fragmentation of the text, resignation on the story (second part). Connections should be sought with the work of M. Zimková *Pásla kone na betóne* [She Grazed Horses on Concrete], and finally, the use of dialect as a characteristic tool has its traditions in Slovak prose (Zuzka Zguriška). The most significant characters speak Zemplín dialect: Chosé, the greatest politician in Marakéš, Sandokan, the lion of Marakéš. Sandokan, the main character in part 3, heads to the Big City to support the prime minister, where he also demonstrates his belonging to the village with his Zemplín dialect, shouting: "We won't give up our Premier!" His banner is written in Zemplín dialect: "EVEN SANDOKAN FROM MARAKEŠ LOVES OUR PRIME MINISTER AND SUPPORTS HIM" and on the other side "WE WON'T GIVE UP OUR LEADER!" Marakéš becomes a symbol, is pars pro toto, and is geographically located somewhere in Eastern Slovakia. (The author is from Papín, district Humenné). Marakéš is not located in Morocco, but near Papín: "Marakéš is not Papín" – writes the author. – "Marakéš is an imaginary village, somewhere in Eastern Slovakia, but no one knows exactly where." Characters such as grandma Ovaňa, and all members of the so-called Rapid Rota (Vlaďo Ďugov, Ďoďo Cvanciger, Laci Karbuľa, Janko Falat, Cyril Hvizdoš, and Sandokan) speak in dialect.

In the prose *Tri ženy pod orechom*, the author makes even greater use of folkloric and mystical, or rather mystifying elements; it could be said that these are more folkloric motifs than elements. For

example, three women have been sitting under a walnut tree for 17 years, praying and waiting for the end of the world, reminiscent of the structure of ballads about a mother and daughter known in the Carpathian region. The mother (Marimka) does not want to allow her daughter Martuška to study in the city, fearing she will become (morally) corrupted. Maruška was the only girl in the village to whom an angel appeared. Marimka had such magical power that she could attract all the men from Marakéš. Explanation of the magical power: Marimka longs greatly for men. The book also contains curses and comparisons with the mythological element "perún" (the Slavic god of thunder). The coffee is described as strong as a hundred perúns. Pankovčín also ironizes Slovak politics, ideology, and even the rustic way of religious life, giving his texts nationwide significance. A special place in his texts is occupied by the PUB as a chronotope – many significant events take place on this sacred ground. Alongside the pub, the church (or listening to mass on the radio with a bottle of slivovice – p. 105) – dinner or supper – the toilet (thinking only happens in the toilet).

Palimpsest prose

Alongside existential prose, palimpsest prose has also developed in Central European contexts, although it started evolving later and is even today less represented than the former type. Generally, it can be said that every text exists only in relation to other texts, ontologically and epistemologically always tied to some existing pre-text or pretexts. While previously this relationship was obvious, today quotations and allusions become an integral part of the post-text; it is now difficult to precisely determine the sources of some references in the text. The literary (artistic) norm has fundamentally changed: the priority of production has been replaced by the priority of reproduction. The aura of uniqueness is no longer a requirement for an artistic work, as the focus shifts to seriality, to the mass occurrence of the same segment, medium, or phenomenon; originality lies more in how individual elements are embedded in a new context. Instead of writing, emphasis is shifted to re-writing. In this context, we can talk about the palimpsest form of new artistic

works, as their structure intersects many other segments, passages known from other works, only they need to be precisely identified. However, the new text can also become a commentary on a previously created text, it is linked to it, can reassess and meaningfully correct or supplement it. Eugène Ionesco, in the short story "The Grotesque and Tragic Life of Victor Hugo," subjects a significant representative of French literature and global Romanticism to humorous criticism. Something similar is attempted by K. Horák in his theatrical work: he has already experimented with the de-canonization of the established "image" of Janko Kráľ, Jonáš Záborský, and later Ľudovít Štúr in the play "Príď kráľovstvo tvoje alebo život, skutky a smrť proroka Ľudovíta (Štúra)" [Thy Kingdom Come or the Life, Deeds, and Death of the Prophet Ľudovít (Štúr)] (staged by the SNP Theater in Martin, directed by R. Polák). But de-canonized forms of "Jánošík" themes in the works of some Slovak dramatists are also known (M. Lasica and J. Satinský, Ľ. Feldek, S. Štepka). It can be said that there is a fusion of procedures for creating a fictional world from the Romantic era with the real world, characteristic of the literary direction from the Realism period (Hodrová, 1989b, pp. 5–13).

In conclusion, it should be stated that, as in Western culture, the contours of postmodernism cannot be precisely defined in connection with Slovak literature. Therefore, the entire issue needs to be addressed by grasping the oscillation between the "old" and the "new", i.e., between modernism and postmodernism as a literary direction[1].)

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