

SHORT PROSE AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM¹

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Abstract

An overview of Slovene short stories and novellas during the last two decades of the twentieth century shows that the 1980s were characterized more by short stories than novellas, whereas the reverse was true in the 1990s. A comparison of Andrej Blatnik and Drago Jančar's articulation of "big themes" allows one to conclude that two movements known as "new" and "young" Slovene prose differ according to the orientation of their ideas, even though both "generations" frequently thematize (superficial) interpersonal relations in the urban environment, and lyricization and intimism appear in both. Elements of the fantastic are traditional in older writers' prose and reinterpreted by younger writers. New Slovene prose utilizes folk motifs with fairytale elements, and especially among young writers there is a perceptible shift toward metafictional elements.

1. Production

A qualitative and quantitative examination² of the literary production of the last two decades of the twentieth century confirms the theoretical differences and similarities between the short story and the novella³—for example, as commented on by Tomo Virk⁴ and Aleksander

¹ Translated by Donald F. Reindl and Simona Lapanja.

² Alenka Žbogar, "Sodobna slovenska kratka zgodba in novela v literarni vedi in šolski praksi" (The modern Slovene short story and novella in literary theory and educational practice), diss., U of Ljubljana, 2002.

³ The short story ranges from 500 to 8,000 words, begins *in medias res*, ends abruptly, and normally foregrounds one central event or, better, a narrow excerpt of an event that undergoes an unexpected turnabout. There are few literary characters—up to three—and they are incompletely characterized, if at all. They are not developed psychologically or as characters. The place and time of the event are limited. First-person narration is typical. For the novella a "dramatic triangle" is characteristic, in which the fast-paced, unexpected, and active plot and resolution are reminiscent of a play. A subject that determines the event often has an important role in a novella.

Kustec⁵—and the hypothesis that, in comparison to the novella, the short story experienced a peak in production during the 1980s.⁶ Literary studies used short prose genre labels more precisely in the 1990s than in the 1980s, and the same is true when labeling authors.

Slovene literary criticism has followed primarily German theory and employed terms equivalent to the German *Novelle*, *Kurzgeschichte*, and *Erzählung*. German theory is more precise than Anglo-American, in which the concepts (‘i)story, tale, yarn, and sketch are in play, as well as what Kmecl observes has been dubbed “a somewhat briefer and ‘false’ short story, the short short story.”⁷ Anglo-American theory in principal does not define the novella; the term is rarely encountered. Slovene critics as a rule do not equate the concept of short tale⁸ with short story or novella. A short tale is “(generally) but a slice (fragment) of a whole (life)” featuring “a protagonist, most often two, and a singular event

The novella is thus an epic genre, but in its internal style it is a dramatic literary genre that in its motif and theme utilizes a matter-of-fact event (rather than fantastic or miraculous, as in a fairy tale).

⁴ Tomo Virk, *Čas kratke zgodbe: antologija slovenske kratke zgodbe* (Time of the short story: An anthology of Slovene short stories) (Ljubljana: Študentska založba [Beletrina], 1998); *Kratka pripoved od antike do romantike* (Short prose from Antiquity to the Romantic Era) (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije [Klasje], 2002); “Problem vrstnega razlikovanja v kratki prozi” (The problem of genre classification in short prose), *Slavistična revija* 52.3 (2004): 279–93.

⁵ Aleksander Kustec, “Kratka zgodba v literarni teoriji” (The short story in literary theory), *Slavistična revija* 47.1 (1999): 89–108.

⁶ The genres differ in their beginning and ending: both are open in the short story, but not in the novella. The novella is generally longer than 8,000 words, although this is not a strict requirement; as in the short story, there is a surprising turn of events; and more than one central event may be foregrounded. In comparison with the short story, such events are less narrow. The ending may be morally trenchant.

⁷ Matjaž Kmecl, *Mala literarna teorija* (Literary theory of the small) (Ljubljana: Univerzum, 1983) 298.

⁸ According to Gregor Kocijan, the short tale’s dual determinants are length and morphology: “a text’s length (breadth) is a significant trait feature that modulates the selection and use of narrative moves.” *Kratka pripovedna proza v obdobju moderne: literarnozgodovinska študija* (Short narrative prose in the Moderna: A literary-historical study) (Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete, 1996) 11.

(internal experience, psychological state) with far-reaching consequences for the protagonist.”

A quantitative examination shows that in the 1980s the greatest share was represented by collections in which texts of 1,000 to 1,999 words predominated. The most frequent genre label in the title or subtitle is “story” (17%), which was overtaken by “novella” (20%) in the 1990s. The label “short story” was not used, but in the 1990s the collective concept of short prose emerged. There is great variety among definitions in literary studies: a full thirteen genre labels are in use, including the short story, which critics and theorists used more often in the 1990s (18% in the 1990s compared to 9% in the 1980s). Among critics, the label “story” was popular in the 1980s (over 25%), whereas in the 1990s this fell to about nine percent—and at the same time the use of “short story” increased, and was more frequently used than “novella.” In the 1990s the term “short story” was used nine percentage points more than the term “novella,” while the use of the term “short prose” (used 16% in the 1980s) decreased to approximately 7% in the 1990s. In the 1990s critics began to use the concept of the novelette and no longer used the concepts of “prose poem” and “shorter prose.”

A qualitative analysis shows that in the 1990s only 57% of collections had an abrupt ending (in the 1980s this was a full 75%), and that in this decade the majority of collections had more than one central literary character (48% of collections had two or three, and more than 2% had more than three), whereas in the 1980s the same relation was characteristic for collections with one (and up to two) characters. Sparse characterization fell on average by seventeen percentage points from 77% in the 1980s compared to an increase in extensive (18%) and medium (15%) characterization in the 1990s. A limited frame of events was more representative in the 1980s (73%) than in the 1990s (55%), and events are now more often externally motivated (at 45% as compared to 27%). In the 1980s there was no prelude in 73% of the stories analyzed, whereas this was true of 62% in the 1990s.

This information demonstrates that in Slovenia the short story (in comparison to the novella) was truly more characteristic of the 1980s than the 1990s. It is possible to conclude that something important happened in Slovenia in the 1980s that influenced this development. The answer should be sought in the new “generation” of writers that appeared at that time. Somewhat surprisingly in comparison to the trend elsewhere

in the world, Slovene postmodernism was particularly expressed in poetry and in medium-length and short prose.⁹

2. Stories

In the 1980s and 1990s, two generations of writers—born before and after 1960—entered the Slovene literary scene. The older generation, referred to as “new Slovene prose,” was born around 1950 and began publishing at the end of the 1970s. They proceeded from modernist tradition and used antimimeticism and antirealism to give a sharp edge to their writing. Parodic elements, mixing of perspectives, realism, and the fantastic were common. The literary character was usually a victim of society. Genre and stylistic syncretism, destruction of narrative points of view, and autoreflexivity appeared.

The younger generation, or “young Slovene prose”—which was born around 1960—appeared in the 1980s. The precursors of this younger generation, which was initially also referred to as the generation without charismatic mentors, was recognized in 1983 when the collection *Mlada proza*¹⁰ (Young Prose) appeared. Explicit thematization of literariness and intertextuality, heterogeneous postmodernist experimentation (palimpsest, simulation, imitation, citation), a return to the past, and free reinterpretation of tradition have been ascribed to them.

The main character nostalgically yearns for metaphysical certainty, but is an isolated, lost soul in a world of uncertainties—a Borgesian labyrinth without an exit or center. In contrast to traditional (Romanesque) heroes, who realize just before their fall that the journey is ended but their path is just beginning, the main character in young Slovene short prose ascertains that there are innumerable paths,¹¹ which frightens him and he therefore never undertakes the journey. At the end

⁹ Janko Kos, “Vrste, zvrsti in tipi postmodernistične literature” (Genres, sorts, and types of postmodern literature) *Slavistična revija* 43.2 (1995): 139–55.

¹⁰ Containing works by Blatnik, Frančič, and Stavber. Tomo Virk was the first to refer to this generation of writers with the expression *mlada slovenska proza* (young Slovene prose) in 1988, which then came into general use.

¹¹ Thus in Blatnik’s short story “Pismo očetu” (A letter to father) we read: “Too many possibilities.... I want one, so that there is no choice. So that I won’t make the wrong choice.” *Zakon želje* (The law of desire) (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2000) 106.

of brief excerpts from this path—which itself is representative of short prose—the main character is unchanged and has not comprehended anything of deep metaphysical significance. Passivity is his basic characteristic: he does not seek to redeem the world because he is aware that this is not possible, for he is not even able to resolve his own everyday problems. Everything remains equally (un)important and (non)fateful in his life. Thus, for example, in Blatnik's stories the only possible action left is talking (e.g., “O čem govoriva” [What we talk about]),¹² whereas reaction to socially unacceptable acts—for example, a wife's adultery in the short story “Še dobro” (Still all right, *Zakon želje* [The law of desire], 2000; 500–1,000 words)—is simply not possible. The main character does not set off on a journey of self-discovery and remains passive—at the end he consoles himself by concluding: “it's still all right that she cheated on me with my best friend, otherwise I could have killed someone.” The big ideas that Romanesque heroes struggle for are reversed into small and mundane complications in life that the character either does not know or cannot resolve. The surprising turnabout contributes to an apparently unimportant complication receiving a fatal extension that the reader can only sense—the abrupt ending offers no resolution (or final moral lesson, more often in the novella): metaphysical nihilism in sharpened variations, the literature of exhausted existence. In the production of young Slovene prose we no longer follow “big” stories devoted to problems such as nationalism, ideology, religion, or politics or to resolving fundamental existential issues. Blatnik's stories “Dan, ko je umrl Tito” (The day that Tito died, *Menjave kož*, 1990) in “Dan osamosvojitve” (Independence Day, *Zakon želje*), for example, contain a distinctively individual fate accompanied by a big story—it turns out that the character that faithfully observes himself cannot be and is not engaged—a parody of naive and binding engagement in literature. It is thus completely different from Drago Jančar, a

¹² This is an allusion to Carver's *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981). The eponymous short story is the second from last in the collection, and Blatnik's first; Carver describes four friends—the narrator and his girlfriend Laura, and Mel and his wife Terri—who one afternoon talk about their amorous experiences. Blatnik's story does not address the problem of love so directly; a first-person narrator in a library, returning Carter's book late, sees an unknown woman and invites her for coffee. A love triangle falls apart with reconciliation between the old pair of lovers. The similarities between the stories are manifested in their portrayal of everyday, monotonous life that the heroes wish to enliven with love affairs.

representative of new Slovene prose—who, for example, in the title story from *Smrt pri Mariji Snežni* (Death at Mary-of-the Snows, 1985) traces the tragic fate of Aleksei Vasilevich Turbin. During the Russian civil war in 1918 he escapes death by a hair's breadth, deserts, and in 1931 appears for the first time in a remote village in Prekmurje, where he passes himself off as Vladimir Semyonov. Fate plays with him again just before the end of the Second World War, when he commits suicide in fear of the approach of the Russian army. Political engagement is also present in Jančar's collection *Augsburg in druge resnične pripovedi* (Augsburg and other authentic narratives, 1994), in which he reinterprets European history (cf. "Krila nad Panevropo" [Wings over Pan-Europe]). In Blatnik's work we receive an ambivalent response to the question of whether love can still be a big story. It is a big theme in the novel *Tao ljubezni* (The tao of love, 1996), here in the area of self-discovery, which makes possible the transcendence of subjective weariness. It is mysterious, "provides a purpose for a boring, exhausted existence, precisely through the fact that it remains the path (and not the goal) forever, that—similar to the conclusion in Fowles' *The Magus*—it remains an unuttered word (in the middle of a conversation), that it remains a mystery.... Namely, to love—as part of the paradigm of the path—does not mean to be in a place, but to go elsewhere, always elsewhere."¹³ Thus in *Zakon želje* love is no longer a bridge to metaphysical recognitions: in Carver's sense there is only an acting out of love in the foreground, a "small story."¹⁴

¹³ Tomo Virk, afterword, *Tao ljubezni* (The tao of love), by Andrej Blatnik (Ljubljana: LUD Literatura, 1996) 156.

¹⁴ On these cf. Tomo Virk in the foreword "Kako so velike zgodbe postale majhne" (How big stories became small) to Blatnik's *Biografije brezimenih* (Biographies of the Nameless, 1989), subtitled *Majhne zgodbe 1982–1988* (Small Stories 1982–1988). He says that we have to understand them "in the context of some kind of purely defined discourse—namely, a postmodern one—and specifically with regard to the declared postmodern destruction of *big stories*.... Namely, the theme of the small story is marginalia, an unimportant (in comparison with big stories) moment, fragment, movement, gesture that is not decisive in the truth about anything (e.g., "Bobnarjev zamah" [The drummer's flourish]), etc. Of course, this shift from the big story to the small story was not accidental, but expresses something characteristic of the spirit of the times: namely, a recognition of the equality and equivalent importance of the global and the marginal, the

2.1 Metafictional stories

Young Slovene prose,¹⁵ as well as Branko Gradišnik with his collection *Mistifikcije* (Mystification, 1987) among representatives of the older generation—make a noticeable shift toward postmodernism in its play with intertextuality and metafiction. The erasing of the border between truth and fiction creates an aura of authenticity (cf. Gradišnik's "Naj pevec drug vam srečo" [Let another poet describe happiness], in *Mistifikacija*, 1987). The subject is a fragile, lost soul in a world of lost innocence (Eco), a world that seems to be a labyrinthine library (Borges).

2.2 Lyrical stories

Distinctively poetic short prose with elements of metafiction, fantasy, and archaism is found in Lidija Gačnik Gombač's collections *Magdalena* (1987) and *Jajce* (Egg, 1994). The first is composed of sixteen rhythmical and metaphorical fragments, each 500 to 11,700 words in length, which could best be termed lyrical sketches (or prose poems): they are hardly fables, the character is submerged in finality, imperfection, and contradiction, and finds his identity in nothingness (e.g., in "Razpadanje" [Decay]). The second collection (250–1,400 words), which is identified as an amassing of novellas in its subtitle, although—as Miha Javornik also observes in the afterword—here we may speak of vignettes, short prose sketches, poetic images, and expressions. These are also not fables in a practical sense, not events; the narrative alternates between first- and third-person. Semantic poetics is defined as Acmeism (in the sketch "Jajce" [Egg] a literary figure—the narrator—is born from a sacred eggshell). Birth is the first and definitive traumatic experience for the character, and leaves a negative mark on him forever. The character (unsuccessfully) seeks his own identity, going astray in a

big and the small, the central and the peripheral, the total and the fragmentary" (126–27).

¹⁵ Especially Andrej Blatnik (*Šopki za Adama venijo* [The flowers for Adam are withering], 1983; *Biografije brezimenih: majhne zgodbe* [Biographies of the nameless: Small stories], 1989; *Menjave kož* [Changing skins], 1990; *Zakon želje* 2000); Igor Bratož (*Pozlata pozabe* [The gilding of oblivion], 1988); Lela B. Njatin (*Nestrpnost* [Intolerance], 1988); Maja Novak (*Zverjad* [Wild beasts], 1996); Aleksa Šušulić (*Kdo mori bajke in druge zgodbe* [Who is killing the tales and other stories], 1989; *Aleksija* [Alexia], 1997); and Igor Zabel (*Strategije. Taktike* [Strategies. Tactics], 1984).

phantasmagoric world of hallucinations, dreams, and ecstatic images through which he feels the horror of existence.

The first of sixteen compositions by Lela B. Njatin, entitled *Nestrpnost* (Intolerance, 1988; 170–1,700 words), is distinctively hermetic; as with Gombač, these are also not traditional stories: the narratives begin *in medias res*, the text's disregard of orthographic conventions (authority) and lack of address gives an impression of intolerance and hastiness. It tells us that we are lost in our individualism, pursued by the intolerance, jealousy, and fury that we feel in all-encompassing solitude.

In the poetic short prose of Tomaž Šalamun collected in *Hiša Markova* (Marko's House 1992; 4,000–5,000 words), which was composed in the 1960s, we encounter a technique of collage and fusing together elements of trivial literature, for example, detective, spy, crime, or love stories, as well as recipes, comic strips, and technical instructions (in "Jonas"). The central driving force is a game, the rules of which people make up as they go along, because otherwise they would become bored: the title story concludes with the recognition "Everything is the same" (12).

Tone Svetina's collection *Ljubezen—trojanski konj* (Love: A Trojan horse, 1988) ranges from 30 to 2,000 words and is a poetic narrative about a love affair: love is seen as the most sublime emotion, as an all-defining fact. There are frequent allusions to ancient symbols and motifs, and expressive metaphor leads to the conclusion that love is indeed the means to self-awareness and self-liberation, but it always evaporates and is thus only an illusion. The diary-like entries in *April* (1984; 16–550 words) by Brina Švigelj Mérat are characterized by elements of intimism: the first-person narrator describes an event connected with the birth of a child in April and the people that she makes friends with. Her most intense and most intimate relationship, which also causes her to suffer and wounds her the most, is with her friend Klara. The narrative comes to an end with the birth of her son and the narrator's postpartum depression.

2.3 Folk motifs and fairytale elements

The representatives of new Slovene prose in particular make use of folk motifs, although this is also frequently found in the younger

generation, especially with Lidija Gačnik Gombač and Vlado Žabot. This involves an interweaving of folk motifs with fairytale motifs and pure fantasy, which has an archaic effect. The narrative worlds of Lojze Kovačič (*Zgodbe s panjskih končnic* [Tales from beehive panels], 1993) and Marjan Tomšič—for the latter, taking into account the research of Alojzija Zupan Sosič¹⁶—are permeated by folk character and fairytale elements. Kovačič's collection is difficult to classify: because of elements from folk literature and strong moral accents (the collection teaches the reader that death is an endless repetition of life), it is more reminiscent of parables, legends, or fables. Kovačič and Tomšič employ popular mythology and superstition: in Kovačič the latter aids in revealing the story; for example, in "Zgodba o nesrečni Ljudmili" (The story of unhappy Ljudmila) the unhappily love-stricken Jurij exhumes his dead lover Ljudmila (she is deliberately thrown into a cauldron of boiling water by her mother because she opposes the union) and during sexual relations he says a spell that revives her. In *Prah vesolja* (Space dust, 1999)—a collection comprised of twenty stories from 500 to 1,000 words long—Tomšič plays with fairytale elements: archaic places of action are the scene for the characters, who are often the victims of unknown, uncontrollable forces (which originate in folk motifs). Anthropomorphized creatures (e.g., in the stories "Črna žrebica" [The black filly], "Volk spokornik" [The penitent wolf], "Pes in mačka" [Dog and cat], "Šipek" [Rose hip], "Ptičje strašilo" [The scarecrow]) and non-living natural elements (e.g., in the stories "Kamen vseh skrivnosti" [The stone of all mysteries] and "Čista voda" [Clean water]) appear, as well as ideas (e.g., in the story "Prah vesolja," in which Love and Hatred quarrel). The anthropomorphization of animals, plants, water, and ideas influences the actions of the character, and the fairytale animation of nature also has an esthetic effect.

Tomšič avails himself of one of the central postmodern elements: a labyrinth (especially in Borges, according to Virk,¹⁷ the most frequent material, thematic, structural, conceptual, and lexical element)—which the subtitle of the collection (*Zgodbe iz labirinta* [Stories

¹⁶ Alojzija Zupan Sosič. "Fantastika in sodobni slovenski roman ob koncu stoletja" (The fantastic and the contemporary Slovene novel at the end of the century). *Jezik in slovstvo* 46.4 (2000/01): 149–60.

¹⁷ Tomo Virk. *Bela dama v labirintu: idejni svet J. L. Borgesa* (The white woman in the labyrinth: The conceptual world of J. L. Borges). Ljubljana: Literarno-umetniško društvo Literatura (Novi pristopi), 1994.

from a labyrinth]) also accentuates—characteristic of which are moral trenchancy and didacticism. A young man of irascible temperament appears in the labyrinth and then tragically dies in a traffic accident. Here the labyrinth is a metaphor for the complexity of life, similar to that in Borges, only in a significantly simplified form. With Tomšič, the metaphor of being lost develops into a symbol of endless repetition of inexorable fate that afflicts the characters because they do not follow their intuition and nature's message. Tomšič continues his style in the novelistic collection *Kažuni* (Stone Houses, 1990; 800–9,200 words), drawing on folk mythology: for example, women made of ice, the black man (in “Jáčomica”), superstition (“Barba Dušan”), prophetic dreams (“Cerinova vrnitev” [Cerin's return]), and miraculous events (the gaping earth in the novella “Anita”). Tomšič's *Vruja* (Spring; 1,200–4,900 words) contains a variety of Biblical motifs—for example, visions of Joseph, Mary, Jesus, and Joshua, as well as fantastic elements (the arrival of the white ships in the novella “Košenice” [Meadows]). In addition to the introductory and concluding novellas (“Sedem ljubezni” [Seven loves] and “Aleluja” [Halleluia]), the collection contains two groups of texts: novellas that primarily take place in Istria and in which the supernatural power of fate is manifested, and the untamable power of the unconscious and instinctive (this fatally binds a man and woman in “Izvirni greh” [Original sin] and in the story “Kako se je ženil Lukič” [How Lukič got married]). These contain more fairytale elements, reality acquires symbolic extensions, and love, grace, happiness, and beauty are given as the fundamental principles of life—terminating in visionariness and prophecy (e.g., “Sv. Uršola” [St. Uršola] and “Freska”). The generic essence of these kinds of short narratives is similar to that of the traditional short story as seen in Boccaccio, Tolstoy, and Gogol, for example. The narrative does not proceed from man's encounter with the everyday world, but from encountering the holy or absurd—that is, in verbalizing mythical, spiritual essence.

2.4 Fantastic stories

Traditional elements of the fantastic are encountered in authors of both new and young Slovene prose—for example, in Samo Kuščer's collection *Sabi: splet domišljijских zgodb* (Sabi: A tangle of tales, 1983; 400–10,250 words), in which he thematizes the cosmic—that is, all-encompassing and eternal isolation (“Uekaminpis,” “Jaz sem drugačen” [I am different], “Plišasti medvedek” [Teddy bear]). Characters attempt

to give meaning to life and rid themselves of the fear of death, recognizing that everything moves in a circle and that artists are sentenced to investigate the interior and the exterior, and to try to create “themselves—to equate themselves with God.” In such sort prose, mundane verifiable reality tips into the fantastic without any kind of norms (we see a switch from realism to pure fantasy in Jani Virk). Thus in the novella “G. T.” there is a first-person narrator with miraculous abilities, the novella “Zelo bližnje srečanje” (Very close encounter) thematizes the arrival of extraterrestrials, “Padli angel” (Fallen angel) a mission to Jupiter, and “En passant” takes place on the planet Šiva, where the Earthling Greg takes up residence without saying farewell to those close to him. Kuščer’s *Žalostni virtuoz in druge domišljajske zgodbe* (The sad virtuoso and other tales, 1989) are either science fiction¹⁸ or parallels of the real and imagined world.¹⁹ The settings are real and include supernatural creatures, fantastic events, and unreal landscapes. Elements of science fiction are interwoven with elements of psychological realism in Gradišnik’s collection of novellas *Zemljazemljazemlja* (Earthearthearth, 1981), and purer fantasy is found in the collection *Numeri* (Numbers, 1996) by one of the most expressive representatives of new Slovene prose, Uroš Kalčič, for whom exceptional stylistic refinement (seen in the manipulation of declension patterns, sound structures, and puns) and suggestivity (of irrational flashes of wit) are characteristic. In this collection of five novellas (3,700–10,700 words), fantastic episodes appear in the title novella, in which Teofil Babnik wakes up one day with a strange sensation in his head—it turns out that the cause of this is the arrival of Martians, who have destroyed the number system. The narrative progresses like a detective story to the realization that humanity will eventually merge into a single person: “You see, everyone, the entire world, will be me...” (238).

Among the representatives of young Slovene prose, we can trace elements of the fantastic in Milan Kleč’s *Briljantina* (Brilliantine, 1985; 200–8,000 words); for example, in the story “Baba” (Old woman), in which, while posing for a photographer, a hair unexpectedly begins to rise from the character’s head and emit a strong light, and in the novellas “Sabota” and “Pterodaktil ali Ramforinh” [Pterodactyl or

¹⁸ “Žalostni virtuoz” (The sad virtuoso), “Dobrodošli” (Welcome), “Pisana kolonija” (Colorful colony), “Kajanon in Abanel” (Caianon and Abanel).

¹⁹ “Utripanje” (Pulsation), “Žar teme” (Glow of Darkness), “Mediterantska grozljivka” (Mediterranean thriller), “Častilec sonca” (Sun worshiper).

Rhamphorhynchus]. “It is different in [Mart] Lenardič, who attacks the very internal structure of the causal logic of the event” (T. Virk 1998: 306), which Virk names the “new fantastic” because the fable is no longer logical, but fantastic (e.g., in the collection *Moje ženske* [My women]).

2.5 Vacant interpersonal relations (in the urban environment)

In the 1980s and 1990s, in collections of both novellas and short stories, there was a frequent thematization of emptiness, the superficiality of interpersonal relations, thematized in the short stories of Franjo Frančič, Andrej Morovič, Brane Mozetič, P. Traven (Peter Mlakar), and Milan Kleč. This is shown from the male perspective in Lenardič’s collections *Moje ženske* (1989) and *Še večji Gatsby* (The even greater Gatsby, 1994), and Marijan Pušavec’s *Zbiralci nasmehov* (Smile collectors, 1992; 700–5,800 words), and from the female perspective in the collections stimulated by competitions from the Women’s Policy Office²⁰ and, for example, Milojka Žižmond Kofol’s collections *Polovica ženske* (Half a woman, 1990) and *Levitve* (Moltings, 1991). These analyze the relationships between the sexes, which range from distinctly traditional interpretations (e.g., in Kofol) to Lenardič’s attempt to reassign traditional roles. The highest values for Kofol—as she says—are love and tranquility of the soul, while writing serves her as a tool for self-discovery: “I write in order to get to know and come to love” (1990). In *Levitve* (Moltings) she seeks the truth about femininity, the relation to men, the essence of life, but this recognition evades her. The tension between women’s roles such as motherhood, housekeeping, and the home and the artistic mission that she feels shows her the path to self-realization.

The universal model of the contemporary woman is seen caught between professional and personal paths. Lenardič’s first-person narrator is an unsocialized person that remains isolated because of an inability to communicate with his environment. In archaically sarcastic and naively descriptive language, he reports on his unsuccessful attempts to establish creative contact with the opposite sex. The character’s name, *Hijena*

²⁰ Nataša Hrastnik, ed., *Zaznamovane: Ženske zgodbe* (Marked: Women’s stories; Ljubljana, Mihelač, 1994); Nataša Hrastnik, ed., *Ženski zalivi: Ženske zgodbe* (Women’s gulfs: Women’s stories; Ljubljana: Mihelač, 1996); Maja Novak et al., *Ne bomo več pridne: ženske zgodbe* (We’re not going to Be good anymore: Women’s stories; Ljubljana: Mihelač, 1997).

(Hyena), indicates that he is simultaneously a carrion-feeder and a nocturnal hunter, an unsuccessful Casanova, who seeks consolation in drunkenness, idleness, and self-pity. When a woman leaves him (they leave often and forever), he veils himself in a cloak of mysterious absence: he locks himself in his apartment, does not answer the telephone, and gives himself over to drinking ("Heda"). The character is rarely able to offer active resistance against an unhappy fate in life and, if so, his action is to his detriment ("Nesrečni Danilo" [Unhappy Danilo]). He often thinks about killing his beloved, for example in "Nesrečni Danilo," "Moja ženska" (My woman), "Iz mojega življenja" (From my life), and "Devica" (Virgin), or is passive-aggressive toward his former partner (e.g., "Ljubica" [Beloved], "Kmetavzar" [Hayseed], "Magdalena," "Gospodična" [Miss], and "Lora"). In an extreme case he even commits a crime, kills his former lover, and becomes a homosexual ("Balada o volu" [Ballad of an ox]). The character is endlessly attracted by women, but at the same time deeply afraid of them, and he transforms his disillusionment after unsuccessful attempts to turn them to aggression (against himself),²¹ but he never gathers sufficient courage to commit suicide. For example, in the title story he writes "Then it is clear to me [when a woman rejects him] that I ought to have killed myself long ago" (8). The final area of subjective freedom becomes the individual's body and experimentation with it.

Morovič's *Padalci* (Parachutists, 100–4,100 words) and *Potapljači* (Divers, 200–5,900 words), and Mozetič's *Pasijon* (Passion, 150–1,800 words) catalogue homo- and heterosexual relations, in the latter the passion of sadomasochistic variations, in which he articulates the connection between passion and suffering (i.e., a contemporary variation of the friction between *eros* and *thanatos*). The thematization is delineated even more sharply in Traven's *Skrivnostih srca* (Secrets of the heart, 1995; 250–3,000 words), which applies the philosophy of the art movement *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK)—as the foreword reveals, because the collection is dedicated to love, which provides the only force in which "everything that was evil ... becomes nothing and only that remains which had love within itself" (5).

Among writers of novellas, this is demonstrated more fully in, for example, Vinko Möderndorfer's collections *Ležala sva tam in se slinila ko*

²¹ As illustrated by the vulgarly stirring supplication from the short story *Pička* (Cunt): "Dear cunt, return, return to me. Cunt, I love you" (103).

hudič (We lay there and slobbered like mad, 1996; 700–7,200 words), *Total* (2000; 1,000–6,600 words), and *Nekatere ljubezni* (Some loves, 1997; 3,100–6,100 words). This last collection is composed of a novella section titled “Nekatere ljubezni” and the short-story–like “Vsakdanje ljubezni” (Everyday loves), where eroticism is most expressed (e.g., “Kondomi z okusom po jagodah” [Strawberry-flavored condoms], also reprinted in *Total*). Little people appear in this latter, continually defeated in their professions (“Total,” “Obletnica” [Anniversary]) and in their personal lives: in relations with partners (“Robček” [Handkerchief], “Je to vse, kar lahko rečeš” [Is that all that you can say], and “Smešna ljubezen” [Funny love]) and in their relation to themselves (“Si ti tisti, ki me boš danes imel rad” [Are You the One That Will Love Me Today]), which often thrusts them into the position of victim (“Veronikina pisma” [Veronika’s Letters]) or provoker of violence (“Škarje pa kar gledajo” [They just look at the scissors]). The central theme is the incompleteness of the relationship between the sexes, which the partners attempt to discharge through eroticism, but normally do not succeed in doing.²² The relationship can even become so sharp that pain becomes a feeling of comfort, for example in Mozetič’s *Pasijon*, and Frančič’s *Bele smrti* (White deaths, 1994; 2,700–13,700 words), *Male vojne* (Small wars, 1994; 800–6,800 words), and *Shizo* (Schizo 1998; 3,000–4,000 words). Kleč’s story “Januar” (January, from *Briljantina*, 1985) describes the love that develops while traveling through a winter landscape, “Ni se še polegel prah od škandala” (The dust from the scandal still hasn’t settled) speaks about the tragic fate of a prostitute that sells herself to factory workers and ends up beneath the knife of one of them—he kills her when he sees a flag spread under the sheet in the bed. Sexuality is also the central motive in the stories “Zaveznik” (Ally), “Baloni” [Balloons], “Ne obračaj se” (Don’t turn around), “Majda,” and “Ptič” (Bird). With Frančič, “each one runs from a *coup de grace*” (*Milostni strel: Orgija* [Coup de grace: Orgy], 1990, 18), which feature search for himself in others and others in himself, in which sexuality is an everyday compromise with life—an instantaneous flight from banal everyday existence to the void of oblivion. It is a momentary consolation in a world of depression and suicides in which not even the angels can help people anymore, because “there were no angels when genuine children implored heaven” (30).

²² Cf. Frančič’s 1998 collection of erotic stories *Dobro jutro, Charles Bukowski!* (Good morning, Charles Bukowski!; 100–600 words).

In addition to the thematization of the interpersonal relations that are especially attractive to the representatives of young Slovene prose, who are also referred to as subjective realists or individualists (Möderndorfer, Kleč, Morovič, Mozetič, Lenardič, etc.), they also problematize the urban environment:²³ a resistance to intellectualism is manifested, and the writing is matter-of-fact and direct, and gives the impression of having an autobiographic nature. Spontaneous language trickles out of intimate positions, giving an impression of a momentariness in which the inability of the character to communicate with the world and his fellow human beings is shown. The character compensates for this by writing (cf. the metafictionalists).²⁴

3. Conclusion

An examination of Slovene short stories and novellas of the last two decades of the twentieth century shows that the 1980s were characterized more by the short story than the novella, whereas the opposite was true in the 1990s. Especially in novellas, in both the 1980s and the 1990s, the urban issue comes to the fore, and the theme of (superficial) interpersonal relations is frequent. We find reasons for this in the various conceptual structures of the representatives of new and young Slovene prose—this is confirmed by a comparison of Blatnik and Jančar's articulation of "big themes" (themes with national, religious, ideological, or political dimensions). There is little distinctly poetically lyricized and hermetic literature, and this is primarily written by Lidija Gačnik and Lela B. Njatin, as well as Tomaž Šalamun, while we find elements of intimism in Brina Švigelj Merat. Lojze Kovačič and Marjan Tomšič draw on folk motifs, and in the latter the folk character is permeated by fairytale elements. We find traditional elements of the fantastic in Samo Kuščer, Uroš Kalčič, Jani Virk, Branko Gradišnik, and Milan Kleč, and the new fantastic in Mart Lenardič. The representatives

²³ E.g., in Igor Zabel (*Strategije. Taktike* [Strategies. Tactics], 1985), Jani Virk (*Preskok* [Leap], 1987 and *Vrata in druge zgodbe* [The gate and other stories], 1991), Silvija Borovnik (*Strašljivke* [Timid women], 1990), Aleksa Šušulić (*Kdo mori bajke in druge zgodbe* [Who is killing the tales and other stories], 1989), Vinko Möderndorfer (*Čas brez angelov: zgodba v treh različnih pripovedovanjih* [A time without angels: A story in three different tellings], 1994 and *Tarok pri Mariji* [Tarot at Marija's], 1994).

²⁴ Cf. Möderndorfer's "Veronikina pisma" from the collection *Total* (2000) or Kleč's *Dodatek Prijatelju* (Addition to a friend, 1998).

of young Slovene prose in particular have made a considerable shift toward a metafictional quality (cf. Andrej Blatnik, Maja Novak, and Igor Bratož).

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POVZETEK

KRATKA PROZA NA PRELOMU TISOČLETJA

Prispevek »Kratka proza na prelomu tisočletja« skuša dokazati, da na Slovenskem v osemdesetih in devetdesetih letih 20. stoletja prevladujeta dve kratki literarni vrsti, za kateri so se močne teoretične utemeljitve pojavile zlasti v devetdesetih letih. Literarna veda devetdesetih natančneje rabi kratkoprozne vrstne oznake kot v osemdesetih, podobno velja tudi za avtorska poimenovanja, a so slednja v primerjavi z literarnovednimi tudi v devetdesetih ohlapnejša. Kvantitativni in kvalitativni pretres literarne produkcije kaže, da osemdeseta leta bolj kot novele zaznamujejo kratke zgodbe, obratno je v devetdesetih. Razloge je najti v različnih idejnih strukturah predstavnikov nove in mlade slovenske proze—primerjalna analiza Blatnikovega in Jančarjevega upovedovanja t. i. velikih tem (tem z nacionalno, religiozno, ideološko ali politično razsežnostjo) to potrjuje, izkaže pa se, da tako predstavniki starejše kot mlajše generacije pogosto tematizirajo (površinske) medosebne odnose v urbanem okolju, slogovno se poleg izrazitega realizma pojavlja zlasti pri ženskih avtoricah lirizacija (npr. Lidija Gačnik Gombač, Lela B. Njatin) in intimizem (Brina Švigelj Mérat). Prisotno je spogledovanje z ljudsko motiviko s pravljničnimi elementi (npr. pri Marjanu Tomšiču in Lojzetu Kovačiču), tudi s tradicionalno fantastiko (npr. Samo Kuščer, Uroš Kalčič, Branko Gradišnik) in novo fantastiko (Mart Lenardič) ter (pri mladih) premik k metafikcijskosti (npr. Andrej Blatnik, Maja Novak, Igor Bratož).