

Artículo de investigación

The Works of Johannes Bobrowski: The Poetics of the Prose

Творчество Иоганнеса Бобровского: Поэтика Прозы
Las obras de Johannes Bobrowski: La poética de la prosa

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to identify the features of the pioneering novelistic style, developed by Johannes Bobrowski for the depiction of complex and controversial historical problems, as well as the system of expressive principles and means (poetics), combining the traditions of the German Enlightenment novel, folklore, and modern experiments in prose. The writer's original worldview and specifics of the artistic development of German history manifest themselves in the poetics of the analyzed novels "Levin's Mill" ("Levins Mühle") and "Lithuanian Pianos" ("Litauische Claviere"). It is unique and complex, rich with both traditional literary techniques and bold innovative elements. The author of the article concludes that through the pioneering novelistic style, characters' images, their speech, and rich poetic worldview, Bobrowski depicted German history, projecting the life of the people on modern human existence. This allowed the German writer to leave a unique mark in the history of the 20th-century novel.

Keywords: Bobrowski's prose, folk structure, poetics, character's speech.

Resumen

El propósito del estudio es identificar las características del estilo novelístico pionero, desarrollado por Johannes Bobrowski para la descripción de problemas históricos complejos y controvertidos, así como el sistema de principios expresivos y medios (poética), que combina las tradiciones de los alemanes. Novela ilustrativa, folklore, y modernos experimentos en prosa. La visión del mundo original del escritor y los detalles del desarrollo artístico de la historia alemana se manifiestan en la poética de las novelas analizadas "Levin's Mill" ("Levins Mühle") y "Lithuanian Pianos" ("Litauische Claviere"). Es único y complejo, rico en técnicas literarias tradicionales y en elementos innovadores audaces. El autor del artículo concluye que a través del pionero estilo novelístico, las imágenes de los personajes, su discurso y su rica cosmovisión poética, Bobrowski describió la historia de Alemania, proyectando la vida de las personas en la existencia humana moderna. Esto permitió al escritor alemán dejar una marca única en la historia de la novela del siglo XX.

Palabras claves: La prosa de Bobrowski, la estructura popular, la poética, el discurso del personaje.

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Аннотация

Целью исследования является выявление особенностей новаторской романной формы, выработанной Бобровским для воплощения сложной и противоречивой исторической проблематики, а также системы выразительных принципов и средств (поэтики), соединившей в себе традиции немецкого просветительского романа, фольклора, народного творчества и современные искания в области прозы. Оригинальное видение мира, специфика художественного освоения немецкой истории писателем проявляется в поэтике анализируемых романов “Мельница Левина: 34 пункта о моем дедушке”, “Литовские клавиры”: очень сложна, своеобразна, оригинальна, богата как чисто традиционными художественными приемами, так и новаторски смелыми элементами. В заключении мы приходим к выводу, что через новаторскую романную форму, образы героев, их речь, то есть через призму богатейшей системы поэтического мирозерцания И.Бобровский описывает историческое прошлое немцев, проецируя при этом народную жизнь на аспект современного человеческого бытия. Это позволило немецкому писателю оставить яркий, неповторимый след о судьбе романа XX века.

Ключевые слова: проза Бобровского, фольклорная структура, поэтика, речь персонажей.

Introduction

The works of the famous German writer Johannes Bobrowski (1917-1965), born in East Prussia, are relevant in connection with their multidimensionality. First, he found success as a poet (Egger, 2013), master of short stories (Fix, 2011), and, finally, he resolved to express himself in prose. The unique style of Bobrowski's works arouses great interest in European and world literary community (Degen, 2017).

Systematic analysis of the poetics of Bobrowski's novels, characterized by a special artistic organization of the depicted material, allows us to consider the expressive principles of the author, which make his novels unique, reflecting the national life, work, and creativity through a special narrative technique, images, and language.

The poetics of Bobrowski's prose, characterized by the genre specificity, reflects the ideological plane of the texts, the historical views of the author, his understanding of history as the life of the people, their spirit, creativity, and language. The writer was interested not in the life of the German state but in the life of the German people, which defines the German reality. Bobrowski's novels focus on the people, as well as those who express the national spirit – artists, poets, and musicians. Germany comes to life on the pages of the writer's novels; he gives a voice to the people of Germany, who are, in his opinion, its true representatives, its voice (Gilfanova, 2000).

Despite apparent fragmentation and free use of expressive means, there is principle structure to the artistic elements, which are used by the author of the novel “Levin's Mill” (“Levins Mühle”) (Haufe, 2012). Even though it seems that the novel is constructed spontaneously and lacks inner unity, in fact, it is well thought-out and has a core, which serves as the center of the text. Such a core in Bobrowski's novels, as well as his short stories, is the narrator, defined by the writer as the master of the story, who provides the inner unity of the text. The narrator assumes the role of entertainer in a traditional folk celebration, where people sing and dance, act and speak freely. He connects time, space, countries, people, and events. The narrator shares his own opinion about the history and the past, which does not agree with the outdated ideas of German officials. This characterizes Bobrowski's poetics, determining the narrative structure.

Methods

The research problems are mainly considered from the position of the specific-historical and historical-functional methods. The method of systematic analysis was utilized as well.

Results and discusión

An important expressive means of the depiction of history in Bobrowski's prose is the distance, arbitrary transition, time gap, not coinciding with its real logic. Such an artistic transition from one plane to another, adds a new perspective to the depiction of the historical theme in literature.

Bobrowski introduces the reader to the story, making them a participant in it. For example, the novel "Levin's Mill" is set in the 19th century: it begins in 1874. The use of metaphorical, fantastic elements – spirits, time travel – allows the author to depict the history and the reader – to delve into the story, investigate "Bobrowski's genealogy". Bobrowski used an interesting technique: a real story is presented through the unreal.

Even though the ideas of the novels seem simple, their composition is complex (Frickel, & Filla, 2016). Bobrowski's narrative freedom, as well as lack of plot and classic sequence of events, cause great difficulties in understanding. There is no fixed point of view in his novels. The connection between the author's subjective consciousness and the depicted objects is complex, obscure. To comprehend the full meaning of this connection, one has to read the texts repeatedly or even refer to the expert commentary (Degen, 2004).

The fact that there is no linear plot in the traditional sense in Bobrowski's "Levin's Mill" is evidenced by the event that could serve as the center of the plot but is only mentioned casually. Levin's mill is mentioned for the first time in the fourth "sentence", which describes "the little men" singing and mocking Grandfather. For the second time, the story about the mill is told by Habedank, who is suspected of causing the blaze and thrown in jail: "But the other mill that one's small, put up in a hurry last year. ... the mill lasted through the winter and into the spring, it's unbelievable really" (Bobrowski, 1996: 134). The reader learns about the disappearance of the mill only in the sixteenth "sentence": "One spring morning Levin's mill just disappeared ... high water came ... The old man damned up the river ... and the damn was broken. But not the water broke it..." (Bobrowski, 1971: 269-270). The theme arises before the event is mentioned. Events, which are not related storywise and are distant in narration, in time and in space, are connected in an unexpected way (for example, the story of Lea Goldkrone and Josepha's suicide). Jan Marcin tells the story of Lea (Chapter VIII), a beautiful woman, who "was wandering around the country barefoot ... until the old prince ... ordered to catch her ... she drowned herself years after" (Bobrowski, 1971: 262). Old Lea came to the lake, left her jewellery on the shore and went in to the water to never come back. A similar story of suicide committed by Josepha, the wife of the minister Feller, Bobrowski placed at the end of Chapter XI: "Josepha went on. In to the sluggish water. In to this stream that carries her away" (Bobrowski,

1996: 172). This unites the fates of the women. They both were suffocated by the lack of freedom; living in a foreign land was unbearable for them. For Lea and Josepha, death was the only way to escape "captivity".

Both "Levin's Mill" and "Lithuanian Pianos" ("Litauische Claviere") in their composition and imagery, musicality and characters' speech correlate with past and modern creations of the people, folk artists, poets, and musicians. For this purpose, Bobrowski widely used folklore structure in the composition of his novels: he chose the principle of free narration, liberating the prose and novel from traditional conventions and norms. His novels are reminiscent of the spontaneity of folk performance, in which every line, song, and dance is an improvisation, ruled by heart and not mind. Bobrowski used a variety of the elements of the German, Polish, and Lithuanian folklore (Barthes, 1989), the knowledge of which he demonstrated in his depiction of the conflicting relationships between the German, Polish, and Lithuanian peoples, as well as the gypsies and other nationalities: "Very strange happenings took place / When Moses tried to live by the water's face" (Bobrowski, 1996: 67). Folklore, the folk musical structure of "Levin's Mill" allows one to understand the writer's ideas. Folk art in the form of a song, written and sung by Habedank and Weismantel for everyone to hear after the performance of the Italian circus, pointed to the real culprit.

The novels are saturated with the national spirit and folk art. Their composition, style, language, and rhythm remind of either a song or a painting. In "Lithuanian Pianos", Voight's attention is caught by a 16th-century painting, depicting a Salzburg church, built by Austrian exiles when after a long plague, empty villages came to life again: "The epitaph is a wooden board in a rich carved gilded frame, now peeling off, devoted to someone named Barthel Skrinius, portrayed at the bottom, at the top are Tablets of Testimony, in the middle – offering of gifts to the temple. The space of the temple, barely noticeable at the edges, is wide open; in the background – a crowd of peasants with spears and pitchforks is walking down the white road, following the cross, carried by a red-haired man. The painting was singing, it seemed: you could almost hear "We pray to the Holy Spirit..." (Bobrowski, 1971: 396).

One of the most important features of the poetics of Bobrowski's novels is the language of the texts, the characters' speech. The language of the novels combines artistically subtle passages, perfect in their structure and imagery, and coarse,

rough in tone speech elements. The general tone of the novel "Levin's Mill", as well as his other works, resembles the intonation of colloquial speech: the narrative is constructed as a tale. It starts with an introduction: "Perhaps it's unfair of me to tell you the story of how my grandfather swept away the mill, and then again, perhaps it's not unfair" (Bobrowski, 1996: 5). In the next paragraph, the narration, reminding of a parable or tale in terms of vocabulary and syntax, takes a purposefully precise, laconic, and brief form: "Well then, the first sentence. ... All right, that's the first sentence. ... The second sentence as it were. ... Well, that's the second sentence" (Bobrowski, 1996: 5-10).

The writer expresses the element of common speech using irregular forms and dialectisms, which allow him to achieve vivid imagery, true to the historical context. Bobrowski managed to recreate the common speech of the people, which includes jargon and is a mixture of the urban and rural slang. For example, Grandfather in "Levin's Mill" thinks: "Go crawling to the court at Briesen, you skinny Jew. They'll piss all over you, we're Germans here, in case you hadn't realised" (Bobrowski, 1996: 26).

One can notice certain differences in the use of speech elements in the novels. Without a doubt, in "Lithuanian Pianos", Bobrowski relies on the element of common speech less than in "Levin's Mill". This is natural since the main characters of "Lithuanian Pianos" are two German intellectuals – a philologist, professor Voigt and a musician Gawehn. The main theme of this novel is art, music, poetry, and the history of neighboring nations. This leads to a careful and refined choice of words and expressions, both in the speech of the narrator and the monologues and dialogues of the main characters: "Master Voigt", says Gawehn with the exquisite voice of a scholar (needless to say, titles are of no importance here), "I'm at your service..."; "So, opera", says Gawehn, tilting his head to the side as if listening..." (Bobrowski, 1971: 354).

The extraordinary variety of folk songs, which organically become part of the novels' texts, whether they belong to Polish, German, or Lithuanian folklore, significantly enhances the language of the novels and highlights its national element. The inclusion of the songs' lyrics (Lotman, 1972) and the sounds of music enriches the text of the novels, which is sometimes laconic.

In "Levin's Mill", the Gypsy violinist Habedank plays both Polish and German melodies: "Old

Friends, Glinski calls. All right, Old Friends it is. Moorland Grave, calls grandfather when they have finished. All right, Moorland Grave it is. ... Frau Palm demands: Sabottka. Sabottka it is" (Bobrowski, 1996: 48). He improvises on the violin and sings along with Weismantel, who performs a song of *kosynierzy*, devoted to the January Uprising (1863). Geethe plays the flute at the summer festival of the Baptist community. Before coffee, Christina sings a beautiful song: "Heart, my heart, when will you be free", and after – an old joke: "Adam had seven sons". Finally Barkowski performs his favourite song: "When the lightning cracks and the thunder claps / And everything's wet from the rain" (Bobrowski, 1996: 192).

In Rosinke's inn, "Geethe was peeping away to a horrible ballad" about the Herr Wishowat and the Czar Basilowitsch "that Weismantel was performing with many Ta ta tas and La la las and interruptions because such songs sometimes get too gruesome" (Bobrowski, 1996: 194). After the ballad – a melancholy song "Roses bloom on the moorland grave" (Bobrowski, 1996: 195). Elisat sings Lithuanian folk songs. The songs in German are represented by "The Waves of the Baltic Sea", "Five Wild Swans", "Ännchen von Tharau" ("Lithuanian Pianos", Chapter I) (Bobrowski, 1971: 362). Young women sing "I Was Flapping Flax" ("Lithuanian Pianos", Chapter VIII) (Bobrowski, 1971: 434). The voices of the people and mentors of the writer can be heard in the novels, creating polyphony and becoming participants of the stories (Behre, Degen, & Fabritz, 2012).

The prose of the German writer is saturated with Herder's idea of the national. Bobrowski mastered the coarse East Prussian dialect of peasants, the language of the people, the knowledge of which came from his childhood and familiarity with folklore. The author relies on folk tradition. In "Levin's Mill" and "Lithuanian Pianos", the reader faces unique German national folk art, free from imitation.

This includes ancient texts, modern folklore, and every poem available to the people. An expert in the German language and literature, Bobrowski concluded that true poetry is rooted in folk art, which teaches one to deeply and truthfully convey the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of people.

Conclusion

Bobrowski's original worldview and specifics of the artistic development of German history

manifest in the poetics of his novels. It is unique and complex, rich with both traditional literary techniques and bold innovative elements, which expand the boundaries of the historical novel genre and present its new version at the modern stage of development. Artistic originality of the writer's narrative manner consists in the fact that he synthesized the traditions of folklore and the technique of modern novelists. Bobrowski asserted the author's right to a new vision of history and free narrative, shattering outdated stereotypes. The writer introduced this idea about the freedom of perception and understanding into the mind of the reader, liberating their imagination.

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