

Poetic or Ornamental Prose

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1 Definition

The term *poetic or ornamental prose* denotes the result of an over-determination of the narrative text with specifically poetic devices such as rhythmicizing and sound repetition.

2 Explication

Such overdetermination generally occurs with the creation of thematic and formal equivalence, i.e. with the strengthening of the paradigmatic order or even the dominance of non-temporal over temporal linking (Schmid → Non-Temporal Linking in Narration [1]). In ornamental prose it is as though the author, behind the narrator's back, so to speak, were to cast a net of formal and thematic linkages over the text, overruling the narrator and his point of view and conferring on the text a poetic fabric with the effect of neutralizing all individual linguistic points of view. Such poetization of narrative takes place during epochs in which the poetic pole dominates, i.e. when the equivalence principle, characteristic of poetry (Jakobson 1960), tends to extend its reach into the field of narrative prose.

3 History of the Phenomenon and of its Study

3.1 Manifestations in Various Literatures

In Russian literature between 1890 and 1930, ornamental prose took the lead among narrative genres. Originally used as a negative label for the plotless prose of Pil'njak's novel *The Naked Year* (1921), "ornamental prose" became a neutral term. So stated Šklovskij in [1924] 1991: "Contemporary Russian prose is to a large extent ornamental in character." Many of the later "socialist realists" also paid homage to ornamentalism in their earlier work, during the 1920s.

Whereas realism and its world view, shaped by the empirical sciences, found their expression in the hegemony of "narrative art," post-realist modernism tended to generalize the poetic principle, realized as "verbal art" (on this dichotomy, cf.

Hansen-Löve 1978; Schmid 2008). In contrast to realist prose, characterized by consequent perspectivization, psychological motivation, and stylistic diversification, verbal art unfolds the archaic, mythic-unconscious imagination. In texts of verbal art, the difference of points of view is abolished, the psychological motivation is, at best, weakened, and the style is homogenized in a poetic way.

Being a “hypertrophy of literariness” (Koževnikova 1971, 115–17), Russian ornamental prose in the 1920s paradoxically tended to combine with the opposite, or “hypertrophy of characterization,” i.e. *skaz* (Schmid → *Skaz* [2]), and this led to a highly complex structured hybrid texture.

In English literature, forms of ornamental prose can be found as an ingredient in D. H. Lawrence’s novels *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920). A high-water mark for the poetization of narrative prose is Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931). In these examples, however, perspectivization remains active.

In French literature the most comparable example is the “poème en prose” starting with Baudelaire. But whereas this hybrid genre ultimately remains poetry written in prose form, ornamental prose incorporating poetic devices remains prose narrative.

In German literature, the high point of this type of narrative, characterized in German philology as “lyrical,” “poetical,” or “rhythmical,” coincides with the epoch of symbolism, at a time when the genre system was dominated by the poetic pole. Ornamental traces are borne particularly by the narrative prose of lyricists such as Stefan George, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Rainer Maria Rilke. An example of German ornamentalism is Rilke’s *The Lay of Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke* (1906). This text, in “verse-infected prose,” as Rilke later called it, is an extreme case of poetic stylization of a narrative text, with its dense instrumentation of sounds in which rhythmicizing, alliteration, assonance and paronomasias play a large part. In the Rilke text, one can observe the aperspectivism of ornamental prose and weakening of the expressive function. The ascription of text segments to the narratorial or figural perspective is barely perceptible. This is because the opposition of narrator’s text and characters’ text is, when at all present, only weakly marked, since overdetermining ornamentalization largely abolishes the function of ideological and linguistic expression of narrating and speaking subjects. The narrative text directs the reader’s attention toward the authorial poetic principle, which organizes both of its two components in the same way. This principle is not the expression of realistic, objective thinking, but rather evokes a poetic, mythical mode of thought.

3.1 Ornamentalism and Mythical Thought

Ornamentalism is an artistic icon of myth whereby poetic experience and mythical thought are assumed to be in close harmony. What makes poetic and mythical thought analogous is their common tendency to abolish the non-motivation of signs adhered to in realism. The word, which in the realistic approach to language is only an arbitrary symbol determined by convention, tends to become, in ornamentalism as well as in mythical thought, an icon, an image of its own meaning. The iconicity that poetry imparts to prose partakes of magical speaking in myth. There is no mediative convention between name and thing, not even a relationship of reference or representation: the name does not *mean* the thing, it *is* the thing (Cassirer [1925] 1971: 38). The pre-semiotic approach of myth to language and the mythical identification of word and thing are displayed in ornamental prose as a result of the narrative text's tendency to favor iconicity and literalize tropes and images, as well as to take proverbs and sayings literally (Hansen-Löve 1982).

The iconicity of ornamental prose results from *co-occurrence* or isotopy between the orders of discourse and story. This means that every equivalence of the *signantia* suggests an analogous or contrasting equivalence of the *signata* (Jakobson 1960). Paronomasia becomes the basic form, a sound repetition that produces an occasional relationship of meaning between words that, in themselves, have neither a genetic, etymological nor semantic connection. It is in paronomasia that the law of mythical thought, as formulated by Cassirer ([1925] 1971: 67), takes effect, according to which "every perceptible similarity is an immediate expression of an identity of *essence*." The tendency toward iconicity, indeed toward the reification of all signs, ultimately results in a relaxation of the border, strictly drawn in realist narrative, between words and things, between discourse and story. Ornamental prose forms crossing points between the two levels: metamorphoses of pure sound patterns into characters and objects (the best examples of this are provided by the prose of Andrej Belyj, particularly his novel *Petersburg* [1916]; cf. Holthusen 1979), and the narrative transformation of verbal figures into sujet motifs (Puškin's *Tales of Belkin* [1830]; cf. Schmid 1991 [2013]).

3.2 Ornamentizing Prose or Ornamental Narrative

The ornamentalization of prose inevitably results in the weakening of narrativity. The restriction of narrativity can go so far that no eventful story is formed at all, so that the text merely denotes fragments of a story whose interrelations are no longer narrative-syntagmatic but only poetic-paradigmatic, produced in line with principles of association, similarity and contrast. In purely ornamental prose, a story is no longer being told, as is the case in Andrej Belyj's "Symphonies" (1902-04) which, according to Belyj himself ([1934] 1969: 228-34), were inspired by the

“decorative ornamentality” of Nikolaj Gogol’s prose and by the “musical prose” and “Asian style” of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. In purely ornamental prose, the techniques of iteration and equivalence remain the only factors of the text’s cohesion and thus serve as decisive guarantors of thematic coherence and crucial semantic operators.

Ornamental prose does not attain great semantic complexity in the total dissolution of its narrative substratum, but rather there where paradigmization encounters the successful resistance of an eventful narrative. This intermediate type can be called *ornamentizing prose* or *ornamental narrative* (Schmid 1992a). When poetic techniques constructively reshape the narrative, the possibilities of meaning in the two text types enrich each other by way of mutual determination and relativization. On the one hand, the poetic links which, as it were, draw a net over the narrative substratum disclose new aspects and relationships among the narrated situations, characters and actions, while on the other hand, the archaic, imaginative thought of verbal art, where it is integrated into a fictional-narrative context, is subordinated to perspectivization and psychological motivation. Before the heyday of hypertrophic ornamentalization (Belyj), we find this intermediate type in the postrealist prose of Anton Čexov, and after that in the prose of the 1920s (Evgenij Zamjatin, Isaak Babel’). Russian ornamental narrative uses the hybridization of verbal art and narrative art for the modeling of a complex, simultaneously archaic and modern image of man.

3.3 History of the Concept and its Study

Poetic or ornamental prose was studied intensely by the Russian formalists. Žirmunskij ([1921] 1962) called it “poetic prose” or “purely esthetic prose,” and Tynjanov ([1922] 1977) “poeticized prose.” Only in Šklovskij ([1924] 1991: 180) do we find the term “ornamental prose,” defined by him as an art where “the imagery prevails over the plot.” A term used in Western Slavic philology is “dynamic prose” (Struve 1951; Oulanoff 1966: 53). Nevertheless, in Russia, the problematic term “ornamental prosa” has become conventional and is now generally accepted. For the equivalent phenomenon in Western literatures, however, one should prefer the term “poetic prose.”

The most important contributions to the study of poetic or ornamental prose, by Koževnikova (1971, 1976), reopened examination of a phenomenon which, by then, had become politically unwelcome in the Soviet Union. Koževnikova explored the structures of ornamental prose, paying particular attention to the relationship between ornamental prose and *skaz*. Levin (1981) examined the position of this “non-classical” type of narration in the history of Russian literary language from the

viewpoint of linguistics and stylistics. Jensen (1984) studied the relationship between the archaic traits of ornamentalism and analogous trends in avant-garde culture. Szilárd (1986) stressed the importance of the symbolist tradition and investigated the typical themes and world views of ornamental prose. Schmid (1992b) outlined the homology between ornamental prose, mythical thought and subliminal structures, and he demonstrated (1992c) the connection between ornamental structure and archaic world view using the example of Zamjatin's story "The Flood" (1929).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

To date, the spread of ornamentalism in various cultures and literatures remains unexplored. Is the development of this type of prose peculiar to Russian literature, or has the lack of corresponding research outside Russian scholarship made it seem that other literatures are less affected by the poetization of story and discourse?

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5.4 Further Reading

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