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Metafiction in (Post)modern Slovak Prose

Abstract: In a realist novel, the fiction takes place within real-world frames but the author or the narrator pretends it was reality, as if he/she has not made up anything, as if the entire story was merely transferred into the text from reality. A contemporary author discloses how his/her writing proceeds; he/she also reveals fabrication, fiction, and when something is brought over into the text directly from reality. Metafiction has a distinct function and rich representation in the well-known *27 alebo Smrť vás preslávi* [27 – Death Makes the Artist] by the author Alexandra Salmela (2012), who became famous through the fact that, despite her Slovak origins, she wrote her debut novel in Finnish. In Slovak literature, this effect most often features in the writings of Pavel Vilikovský.

Metafictional processes are typical signs of a postmodern text, although similar elements are detectable in the literature of previous centuries, albeit not to the same extent as today. At the end of the 1990s and in the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there were a growing number of authors who displayed significant signs of postmodern prose in Slovak literature, such as Peter Pišťanek, Pavel Vilikovský, Viliam Klimáček, Daniela Kapitáňová, Michal Hvorecký, Pavol Rankov, and others. Metafiction indisputably belongs to the typical characteristics of the postmodern text, due mainly to greater presence of these elements than in the past.

Keywords: metafiction, narrator, postmodernism, reception, self-reference, world literature

In contemporary prose, there are passages which show that the narrator's role is interrupted by the role of the fictional author of the story.¹ This is accomplished by using metafictional processes. Metafiction is characterized as a process whereby a novel (a work of fiction) refers to its own literary nature, a process in which the fictional author enters the story and becomes a character or directly replaces the narrator.

One novel in which metafiction has a distinct function and is richly represented has been written by the author Alexandra Salmela, who became famous through the fact that, despite her Slovak origins, she wrote her debut work in Finnish. The well-known novel in question is *27 alebo Smrť vás preslávi* [27 –

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Death Makes the Artist] (2012), in Czech *27 aneb Smrt vás proslaví* (the latter will be the basis of our considerations, because this translation is more faithful to the original than the Slovak one). Alexandra Salmela is not the only Slovak author to promote herself in a foreign language; before her, another author, Irena Brežná, also took this path. She has been living in Switzerland since 1968, where she writes her texts in German, though she continues to consider the Slovak language her *Muttersprache* (mother tongue). German is her *Vatersprache* (paternal language). True, Brežná once emigrated for political reasons (Žilka 1995, 133–138), but Alexandra Salmela herself chose Finland as her second home. Her work is thematically set in a Finnish environment, although its origins are linked to Central Europe – the Czechoslovak region.

Previous reviews of her work have focused primarily on its textual composition, its structure. The novel has four alternating storytellers, creating a patchwork variation of narration in telling the story. As she herself has said, the novel has two plotlines, and in the second one there are more, diametrically opposed, narrators. Angie represents the first plotline; the second plotline consists of three different narrators: Cassandra the cat, a toy pig – Mr Piggy – and an old Opel Astra.

While Cassandra represents a rather negative attitude, Piggy is a friend of the children of the Finnish family, in which the mother Piia is the character described in most detail. Besides her, the daughter Fazolka, the twins Ziggy and Merlin, and Marko the father constitute the family. The story takes place in the Finnish countryside, and the family is portrayed from a Central European perspective on (family) life in Finland. Principally, I have in mind here the view supported by the comic vision of the Finnish family – the life, the mentality of the people.

The main plotline, however, is the story of Angie as a foreigner in a Finnish environment, although the story begins against a Czechoslovak background. From Czechoslovakia, the main heroine goes to Finland to collect the material for her diploma work on the symbols of the *Kalevala*. This is a study visit, and it is constantly prolonged because Angie does not concentrate exclusively on her diploma work but on writing texts of a literary nature – poems, prose, scripts – and writing a funny textbook for beginners. Naturally, it is a textbook on the Finnish language for Slovaks (Czechs).

In addition, since the author thematizes the origin of texts of various natures in her work in detail, the parts in which she does so are typical examples of metafiction, which highlights the postmodern character of her prose, her novel.

The term “metafiction” is derived from the Greek *metá* “in the middle, in between; beyond; after” and *fictio* “creation, formation,” thus meaning “fiction over fiction” or “fiction about fiction.” Metafiction as a genre is created by metafictionality, literary autoreference (self-reference) or self-reflectivity (Nünning, Trávníček, and Holý 2006, 501–502). Metafictional passages are those self-reflective

testimonies and narrative elements that do not focus on the content of an artwork as an apparent fact, but help the recipient to realize that the text (story) is imaginative, fictitious, unreal, and literary, and thus constructed (Nünning, Trávniček, and Holý 2006, 501). The prerequisite for identifying metafiction is the distinction between referring telling and scenic showing. On the one hand, metafiction is about the preference for the truth, the preference for the reality of the text; on the other hand, it is about the questioning of this truth, about the realization of facticity, textuality, and the fictionality of the story, of the events in its own or in a foreign text. Based on two spheres set out by Helmut Bonheim in the study *The Narrative Modes* (1982), metatextuality can also be deduced from (a) a physical sphere defined by spatial entities (description) and time (action, message, and speech), and (b) a metaphysical sphere defined in the text by reflection (comment). Metafiction belongs to the sphere of reflection, that is to say, commentary (Sládek 2008, 52–53).

This includes instructions for understanding the text and the story, thematization of the creation of the text itself, and explanations of the various functions of the narrator in texts by Lajos Grendel and Pavel Vilikovský, but also in Vincent Šíkula's *Majstri* [Craftsmen].² It is often claimed that metafiction is a typical feature of postmodernism, but we need to add that it has long existed in literature. It is mainly found in Western literature, in its purest form in the novels *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, *Tom Jones* by Fielding, *Tristram Shandy* by Sterne, and *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* by Diderot (Nünning, Trávniček, and Holý 2006, 502). Postmodernism, however, accredits greater importance to metafiction and makes heavier usage thereof than previous periods of literary evolution. It can be said that autobiography as metafiction is often present in contemporary literature (Hornung 1997, 224–225). Metafiction also occurs in the works of authors who cannot be categorized unambiguously as postmodern writers, which only employ some postmodern expressive properties.

Metafiction has a distinctive representation in the novel *27 aneb Smrt vás proslaví* by Alexandra Salmela. The centre of attention is the twenty-seventh year of artists' lives; this is the basic motif for developing the story about Angie. The novel is heuristic and original by virtue of the fact that the main heroine is ap-

2 Lajos Grendel (1948–2018) was a Hungarian prose writer living in Slovakia, a representative of postmodern prose. His works have been translated not only into Slovak but also into other languages. Pavel Vilikovský (b. 1941) is currently the best prose writer in Slovak literature. In his writings, there is a significant presence of postmodern elements; he is the author of several satirical works. Vincent Šíkula (1936–2001) was a Slovak prose writer, author of the trilogy *Majstri* (1976), which takes a new look at the events of World War II in Slovak territory.

proaching this age and realizes how many artists died in the twenty-seventh year of their lives (Kurt Cobain, Brian Jones, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix). Finally, in the chapter “Angie: Mystical Numbers,” she lists up to fifty names with exact details of their age and mode of death (suicide, drug overdose, car accident, excessive alcohol consumption, and so on). Mostly, they are the representatives of the popular culture for which Angie expresses her admiration, but she wants to promote herself with literary work – apart from her attempt at writing a funny textbook. The excerpts from this fictional textbook function exotically in the text itself: “Heikki: Hei, mina olen Heikki Heikkinen. Minä olen opiskelija” [Heikki: Hey, I’m Heikki Heikkinen. I am a student] (Salmela 2012, 148).³

However, poems, prose, and scripts of her creation are also embedded in the main narrative sequence. Although they are fictional texts, the entire story of Angie and her efforts to establish herself as a writer in many ways resembles the author’s biography (attempts at writing and gaining recognition in the Central European environment, transition to Finland, continued literary creativity, and so on). The very context of literary creation offers many comic situations, making the text attractive and the literary artwork captivating. What is important, however, is that the four narrators are not only involved in producing the extraordinary aesthetic and artistic value of the text, but are also a suitably applied element of postmodern literary artworks – metafiction. Thus, Alexandra Salmela is to be classified among the authors who tend towards postmodernism or whose *oeuvre* reminds us of the representatives of postmodernism in a foreign literary context.

From the point of view of metafiction, the novel in postmodern times has its own forms, some of which can be listed here with examples from international and domestic production, sometimes also from earlier periods:

- a novel about a person writing a novel or other text (André Gide: *The Counterfeiters*, Rudolf Sloboda: *Rozum* [Sense], Alexandra Salmela: *27 aneb Smrt vás proslaví*);
- a novel about a person reading a novel (Milorad Pavić: *Hazarski rečnik* [Dictionary of the Khazars];
- a work that reflects on specific conventions of literary creation (Lajos Gren del: *Ostrá strelba* [Live Fire], Pavel Vilikovský: “Štvrtá reč” [The Fourth Speech], Pavel Vilikovský: *Krásna strojvodkyňa, krutá vojvodkyňa* [The Beautiful Engine Driver, the Cruel Duchess]);

3 All translations in this article are my own.

- an author who is a character in his/her work (Vladimír Nabokov: *Lolita*, Denisa Fulmeková: *Konvália: Zakázaná láska Rudolfa Dilonga* [Konvália: The Forbidden Love of Rudolf Dilong]);⁴
- characters who are aware of the fact that they are in a literary work (Cervantes: *Don Quixote*);
- an author who peculiarly comments on the literary genre (Vincent Šikula: *Majstri*, Pavel Vilikovský: “Štvrtá reč,” Pavel Vilikovský: *Krásna strojvodkyňa, krutá vojvodkyňa*).

In Slovak literature, this effect most often features in the writings of Pavel Vilikovský. After all, the entire text of the novel *Posledný kôň Pompejí* [The Last Horse of Pompeii] (2001) is almost lacking a storyline; it is just a commentary and a collection of material for an academic work on the topic *Prvky slovanskej citovosti v diele Josepha Conrada* [Elements of Slavonic Sentiment in the Work of Joseph Conrad], and everything happens in London.

However, it is not our goal to select authors who are representatives of postmodernism in Slovak literature, but more importantly to show that certain components and processes characterize the writings of our authors. Let us note that some of the works mentioned so far cannot be categorically included in the literary stream described as “postmodernism” on the basis of how modernism is characterized. It is rather that new elements and processes can be analysed in the writings of Slovak authors.

Let us return to metafiction. In a realist novel, the fiction takes place within the frame of the real world but the author or the narrator pretends it was reality, as if he/she has not made up anything, as if the entire story was merely transferred into the text from reality. The contemporary author discloses how his/her writing proceeds; he/she also reveals fabrication and fiction, and when something is brought over into the text directly from reality. At least one quotation from Klimáček's work *Horúce leto 68* [Hot Summer 68] is necessary here:⁵ “I am writing a documentary novel. I have changed the names of my heroes, but Darina's name is real. The fact that she has appeared, what she has done, might seem like authorial pulling at emotional strings. But so it happened [...]” (Klimáček 2011, 150). In what follows, I present some other examples of metafictional phenomena.

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⁴ Denisa Fulmeková (b. 1967) is a Slovak prose writer, granddaughter of Rudolf Dilong, a poet and Catholic priest. In her novel *Konvália* (2016), she focuses on the love affair of Rudolf Dilong and her grandmother, who was of Jewish origin.

⁵ Viliam Klimáček (1958) is a playwright, poet, and prose writer. He is the head of the alternative theatre GUnaGU, where he is a stage director, scriptwriter, and actor.

(1) The author explains that someone else (an anonymous author), who also relies on quotations from other texts, has ceded the text to him/her. An example is the “Note” at the end of *Večne je zelený* [Ever Green Is] by Pavel Vilikovský:

The proof of the phenomenal abilities and encyclopedic education of the anonymous author (we preserve their incognito status for understandable reasons) is also the fact that, in support of their views, they modestly and perhaps unawares interweave the narrative with quotations from the leading works of scholarly literature. (Vilikovský 1989b, 87)

“In this note we mention those works whose quotes we were able to identify safely,” says the author (Vilikovský 1989b, 87). There are sixteen altogether. Naturally, this is a comment of the author Pavel Vilikovský; the anonymous author is the narrator who has the cheek to quote from other, mostly scientific works. This is the case when the presence of the narrator (the so-called anonymous author) of the text is emphasized.

(2) The work contains the text of another author; it may even be a text of the same author worked into the novel. This process is present in the novel *Hľadanie strateného autora* [In Search of a Lost Author] by Dušan Mitana, into which he inserted his short story “Ihla” [Stylus] from the 1970 collection of short stories *Psie dni* [Dog Days] (Mitana 1991, 23–24).⁶ Rudolf Sloboda deliberately put foreign texts into his works, to which he also admits:⁷

But later on, I never thought of where the idea came from, actually when needed, I copied whole sentences from a book, like for example during the conversation of Urban’s protagonist with Hegel in the novel *Narcis* [Narcissus]. I assumed I had excited the experts on Hegel by doing so, who would like this insertion of *direct speech*. (Sloboda 1988, 39; my emphasis)

(3) The narrator (author) leaves the completion of a protagonist’s characteristics or description to the reader. The reader may feel honoured to be allowed to do so, honoured that the narrator-author does not force his feelings or, God forbid, his style on them. Viliam Klimáček uses this procedure in his novel *Horúce leto* 68, for example when judging a character:

What does a woman look like who feels disgust in her heart upon hearing the word cabriolet? I will leave it to you. In the novel, I deliberately omit descriptions of characters or landscapes. I skip them for you. As a reader I have always skimmed through them and I imagine you a bit like myself, therefore I hope you will not miss that padding. (Klimáček 2011, 8)

⁶ Dušan Mitana (1946) is a Slovak prose writer. He is the author of the novella *Patagónia* (1972), which has been translated into several languages.

⁷ Rudolf Sloboda (1938–1995) was a Slovak prose writer, dramatist, and screenwriter. In his novels *Narcis* (1965) and *Rozum* (1982), he appears to be a critic of totalitarian society.

(4) The narrator (author) admits that the character may think otherwise, allowing for their views to diverge:

Would Imro be thinking about this? Hardly. Aye, maybe yes. He could be thinking, but a little bit differently, why he should think as the writer of this book. Why should he think like me? The writer is pretty cheeky to tell the dear reader that he is a bit sympathetic with Imro and whispers to him many a thing; he simply imposes his opinions of Imro. (Šíkula 1976, 41)

Imro is the main character of the novel *Majstri*; the author-narrator (scribe) imposes his thoughts, opinions, reflections on this protagonist. We may ask ourselves a question: was Vincent Šíkula a postmodern author? Definitely not, but metafictional elements in his novel are already a precursor of postmodern narrative strategies that were naturalized in the following period in the evolution of Slovak literature.

(5) The narrator reports that one of the characters collects material for writing a novel (André Gide: *The Counterfeiters*; the novel by Alexandra Salmela also belongs here, except that, in this novel, other characters, for example a fictional editor of a literary journal, also comment on the written texts). If the content of the text is writing a novel, that is, thematizing its creation, we can speak of a metafictional novel, an autonomous literary subgenre. *Nenapísaný román* [The Unwritten Novel] (2004) by Stanislav Rakús is such a text. *Rozum* (1982) by Sloboda is a metafictional novel in a certain sense, since the central topic of the text is writing the script *Don Juan zo Žabokriek* [Don Juan of Žabokreky] as a post-text on a “Don Juan” theme. The whole story is about how a scenario is made, how entire passages are fabricated, and how the finishing touches are put to some parts:

I wrote this much during my nocturnal last-minute pursuance of tasks. Jano runs to catch the morning bus; but what about him now? How does Hanka avenge him? Will she report against him? Who is that lad who came with Hanka after Hrsc? Is he a fiancé, a brother? – This has yet to be made up. – Those who want to know what I was still thinking about a motif for a film, should read the next chapter. (Sloboda 1982, 178)

In her novel *27 eli kuolema tekee taiteilijan* (2010), to give it its original title, Alexandra Salmela also chose this procedure, for which she received the prestigious award of the Finnish daily *Helsingin Sanomat*.

(6) The narrator becomes a character he himself or she herself has created (“Borges and I”). In his text “Prvé víťazstvo supermarketov” [First Victory of Supermarkets] in the volume *Lovci & zberači* [Hunters & Pickers] (2001), Michal Hvorecký made the narrator-hunter into a customer in a supermarket, specifically a passionate shopper. The story is about how manipulator becomes manipulated, hunter the hunted, supermarket designer the buyer of goods.

(7) Narrative footnotes as commentaries are parts of and references to the story. Pál Závada (1999) uses this metafictional practice in his *Jadvigin vankúšik* [Jadvi-ga's Pillow], which is built on the diary of Andás Osztatní (first level) and the writings of his wife Jadviga inscribed into the text (second level); in addition, there are notes by their son Mišo Osztatní, who not only translates Slovak sentences into Hungarian but also duly comments on them.

(8) The work can reflect on specific literary procedures, categories; it can play with them and parody them. In *Ostrá strelba*, Lajos Grendel wittily comments on the narrator:

After a few weeks and a few months he [the narrator] found that a utilitarian narrator resided in him, in addition to a rascal narrator, a deceitful narrator, a bloodthirsty narrator, an immoral narrator, a cynical narrator, an exuberant narrator, a cowardly narrator, a compromising narrator, an avaricious narrator, and many other narrators about whom he had yet barely known anything due to an incomplete self-knowledge. (Grendel 1985, 88)

In this spirit, the author (narrator) considers the narrator types in the chapter in question; he even analyses and explains each of these types (Grendel 1985, 88–93). Daniela Hodrová (1989) points out that postmodern prose emphasizes the moment of the making of the text, that is, that the creation of the text itself is thematized. Thus, within its frame the author can discuss his own poetics, focusing on the moment of generating, constituting the text. In this way, a game based on irony develops. In the novel *Rozum*, Rudolf Sloboda also used this metafictional process: the subject matter of the text is the origin of the script with the title *Don Juan zo Žabokriek*, which is itself a source of humour. The surname of the main character, who is called Jano Hrsc, also sounds funny, and the story develops in the spa town of Luhačovice at the hotel Miramare (the hotel still exists). The novel is about the making of the text, about the constant rewriting of the story-line, in which the committee and its boss intervene, requiring the author to write about work in the spirit of the principles of writing under Socialism.

(9) In “Štvrtá reč” by Pavel Vilikovský, Gabriel, the protagonist of the short story, collects material in the form of oral history about the crimes of Communism and Fascism, but relativizes his own character in doing so:

Gabriel could be a character as well as a narrator. In that case, the story would be in the first person, however, when the narrative is in the third person, we have freer hands, and we can speak about Gabriel behind his back. He could not do this behind his own back, it is impossible. We would never know what his buttocks or the hair on the crown of his head look like, because he does not see them, and maybe he would not even want to talk about such things. (Vilikovský 2013, 143)

In his novel *The Counterfeiters*, André Gide first used the motif of the origin of the text (the “I write about writing the text you read” principle) in 1925.

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Texts can include short stories by their authors (Dušan Mitana: *Hľadanie strate-ného autora*), news articles (Pavel Vilikovský: *Kôň na poschodí, slepec vo Vrábľoch* [A Horse Upstairs, a Blind Man in Vráble], 1989a), or even oral history (Pavol Rankov: *Matky* [Mothers], 2011). In the process, texts usually lose their original meaning and become a source of self-parody or acquire a parodic character. Naturally, this does not apply to the text by Pavel Rankov. His is rather a historiographical metafiction, or a metahistoriographical fiction, based on the fictitious adaptation of historical reality and thinking about this process on a metalevel (Nünning, Trávníček, and Holý 2006, 502–503). Accounts in oral history of a young woman being dragged into the Gulag deal with the fictional adaptation of historical reality, and thinking about this fiction on a metalevel constitutes the writing of a diploma thesis on the subject.

Metafictional processes are typical features of postmodern texts, although similar elements appeared in the literature of previous centuries, albeit not to the same extent as today. At the end of the 1990s, and during the first decade of the twenty-first century, various authors appeared who used significant features of postmodern prose: Peter Pišťanek, Pavel Vilikovský, Dušan Taragel, Lajos Grendel, Viliam Klimáček, Daniela Kapitáňová, Michal Hvorecký, Pavol Rankov, Vladimír Balla, and others. Undoubtedly, Alexandra Salmela, with her debut novel in Finnish, belongs among them.

However, the contours of postmodernism cannot be precisely defined in Slovak literature; therefore the whole problem needs to be solved by grasping the oscillation between *old* and *new*, that is, between modernism and postmodernism. It is possible to talk about certain tendencies characteristic of postmodern prose rather than precisely defining the boundaries of the postmodern. Metafiction, however, unquestionably belongs to the typical features of postmodern texts, mainly due to the greater occurrence of these elements than in the past.

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