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The Two Components of the Modern Novel

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*I dedicate this article to Wolf Schmidt, my most admirable academic teacher,
on the occasion of his 80th birthday.*

The novel became the most successful literary genre in the 18th and 19th centuries. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his works on this genre “Slovo v romane” [Discourse in the Novel] (transl. Bakhtin 1981: 259–422), “Iz predystorii romannogo slova” [From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse] (transl. Bakhtin 1981: 41–83), “Ėpos i roman” [Epic and Novel] (transl. Bakhtin 1981: 3–40), “Avtor i geroj v èsteticheskoj dejatel’nosti” [Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity] (transl. Bakhtin 1990: 4–256) as well as in his works devoted to individual authors such as Rabelais and Dostoevsky, repeatedly worked with dichotomies that are intended to clarify the specificity of the novel genre, on the one hand, and its inner structure on the other. In doing so, he again and again uses different dichotomies: in “Epic and Novel”, it is the contrast between the socially ‘closed’ ancient and medieval epic and the ‘open’ modern novel (esp. Bakhtin 1981: 11 and 31); in “Discourse in the Novel”, the contrast between the ‘monophonic’ verse poetry and the ‘polyphonic’ prose (Bakhtin 1981: 286–296); in chapter 5 of “Discourse in the Novel” (“The Two Stylistic Lines of Development in the European Novel”, Bakhtin 1981: 366–415), the contrast within the novel between the two-voiced novel, to which the examination novel, the educational novel, the Bildungsroman and the satirical novel belong, and the ‘sophistic novel’, in which

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the shepherd novel, the baroque novel and the novel of the Enlightenment are included; and finally in *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, the difference between the 'monologic' prose work of Tolstoy and the 'polyphonic' prose work of Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 1983: 56).

In my paper I would like to show that within the genre of the novel two quite different components have come together, originally from different literary genres, and that it is precisely this double origin of the novel genre that has contributed decisively to its great and lasting success. The peculiarities of the 'two-voicedness' of the novel observed by Bakhtin can be traced back essentially to one of the two components. In contrast, the alternative type of novel, which Bakhtin calls 'sophistic' or 'monologic', focuses on the other of these two components. The success of the novel since the 18th century, however, according to my thesis, stems essentially from the fact that the modern novel has succeeded in combining the two components as well as in integrating other components originally derived from verse poetry.

By 'components' of the novel I mean basic literary devices functional for the sense semantics of the text. By a 'basic device' I understand the semantization of one existential dimension of human beings. These dimensions are not objects but consist of relations. Since relations presuppose the mutual outsidership of two instances, all existential dimensions of humans consist of tension-laden relationships. Sense semantics refers to these relationships, it exists independently of the pragmatic semantics of the signified facts, that is, independently of the denotate of the linguistic sign. Its representation lies in the sign dimension not of the denotate but of the signified. While denotative semantics wants to be unambiguous and free of contradictions, so that it refers as accurately as possible to extra-linguistic facts, sense semantics lives thanks to the ambivalence of cultural meaning. Therefore, a literary device that generates sense semantics must be able to represent this ambivalence.

There are four existential relational dimensions that require semantization. Each literary device makes reference to one of these four dimensions. The dimension of association is served by all *e q u i v a l e n c e*-forming literary devices, that is, the devices of phonetic, positional, syntactic, and thematic equivalence as well as of metaphor, metonymy, symbol, and simile. It dominates poetry, but, especially as thematic equivalence, it is also of great importance in prose. Thus Viktor Vinogradov, criticized by Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel" (Bakhtin 1981: 268), is quite right in granting the novel poetic elements as well, i.e., literary devices such as equivalences, metaphors, or symbols.

The existential dimension of human communication is served by rhetorical devices. I summarize them in the concept of *p e r f o r m a n c e*. It dominates drama, but is found in prose and poetry as well, mainly in the form of parallelism, chiasm, hyperbaton or anastrophe and, of course, in direct speech. The thesis of Gustav Špet, also criticized by Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel" (Bakhtin 1981: 268), that the novel is a rhetorical genre, cannot therefore be called false outright. The performative aspect of the narrator's and character's speech in the novel undoubtedly has a part in the poetics of the novel.

Now we come to the two existential dimensions that are central to the modern novel. *I n t e r f e r e n c e*, that is, the two-voicedness or dialogicity of the text, is the narrative device mainly profiled by Bakhtin. It semanticizes the existential dimension of intersubjectivity or alterity. It is served by all devices of figural perspective, of representation and framing, of perspective, and generally in the interaction between the communicative levels of a narrative text (author – narrator – protagonist).

The fourth and final existential dimension is space-time. Space and time are semanticized in literature through the devices of setting, plot, and eventfulness. I group them under the term *sequence*. This fourth dimension, which is also bound to prose and thus to the novel, does not occur in Bakhtin's teachings. However, prose cannot do without plot. There is, of course, a tradition of 'plotless' novels. However, all examples of allegedly plotless novels – the frequently mentioned include *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, or *The Mezzanine* by Nicholson Baker, in which the hero at least goes up an escalator – are not plotless in every respect. They mostly lack external eventfulness which implies meaningful deeds and their consequences, but instead have external happening, which just implies any changes which make impressions on humans, or internal happening, which implies any circular or periodical movement, or internal events, which imply a new understanding or a change of mind. In this broader sense of eventfulness, any novel has a plot.

In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin criticizes the reduction of novels to their plot. The hero's action embodies only "the ideological position of the epic hero" (Bakhtin 1981: 334). Elsewhere, Bakhtin paraphrases the plot as "the information necessary to further the action" (Bakhtin 1981: 266). The phrase "information" suggests here that for Bakhtin, plot, and thus eventfulness, does not belong to aesthetics proper, but merely serves to 'inform', i.e., to depict reality.

However, there are very good reasons to understand plot, setting, and eventfulness as structural elements of the novel. The novel is notably an art of space and time and it shapes them in a double way: as space and time of narration and as space and time of event. If we generalize eventfulness and setting beyond literature, it reveals itself as giving space and time a meaning. One can define setting and plot as space-time charged with meaning. Physically, space and time are completely meaningless. They become human environment only through their semantization: only with a meaning, events occur. Whether these events are events which we passively face, or events in the narrower sense, in which human beings act in space and time, makes no difference at first. Mere happening is also, in its particular way, eventful. The same applies to the question whether the event manifests itself in the physical world or rather psychically. Both forms are fundamentally eventful. It is impossible for us humans to live without eventfulness, because without eventfulness there is no environment in which we could exist and act.

Here now several questions arise. First, one would like to know how it comes that the novel semanticizes two existential dimensions of human beings at once, while poetry and drama seem to have emerged from the semanticization of only one existential dimension of man. The most plausible answer to this is that the novel must have emerged from the synthesis of two different genres, that is, that originally the semantization of space-time through the production of eventfulness characterized one genre and the semantization of intersubjectivity through text interference characterized the other genre.

Bakhtin's efforts to delineate the novel against the ancient and medieval genre of the epic leads us on the trail of the former of these hypothetical genres. The epic, according to Bakhtin, lacks the dimension of dialogicity, of heteroglossia. It is "a world of founders of families, of 'firsts' and 'bests'" (Bakhtin 1981: 13), and it constitutes the "absolute past" (Bakhtin 1981: 17) of a community. Thus the epic, together with the chronicle and ancient historiography (e.g., Herodotus), is a genre that lifts historical time out of its anonymity,

semantizing it into history in the proper sense. In an analogous way, the medieval *vita* and in more recent times the biography and autobiography proceed. The constitutive moment of all these genres is eventfulness. When Bakhtin reduces the modern novel entirely to the aspect of text interference, he tries to eliminate its epic, i.e. eventful, historical part. But how then the novel of education and the *Erziehungsroman*, ascribed by Bakhtin to the modern, polyphonic novel, get along without biographical eventfulness?

Without a doubt, science, especially literary science, lives from absolutizing dimensions that were previously neglected. Bakhtin is therefore quite right to criticize the fact that text interference was largely ignored in theories of prose and the novel. His “Prehistory of the Novel discourse” (Bakhtin 1981: 41–83) not only seeks to make up for this deficit, but makes textual interference the defining characteristic of the modern novel. But to what original other basic genre, quite separate from historiography and biography, does textual interference owe its existence? What literary genre originally had the task of semanticizing the existential dimension of intersubjectivity and alterity?

Bakhtin traces the origin of the social speech variety of the novel to the parodic genres of antiquity, especially the *menippea*. According to Bakhtin, the *menippea*, when applied to modern literature, is a means of designating the essence of a genre and not [only, M.F.] a genre canon (Bakhtin 1984: 137). Thus, Bakhtin claims the *menippea* to be an elementary genre like verse poetry or drama. Within the list of 14 peculiarities of the *menippea* that Bakhtin enumerates in “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics” (Bakhtin 1984: 114–118), two features in particular appear to be genre-building: satire, which uses the device of irony and thus breaks down the unity of perception, and experimental fantasy, in which a realistic motivation of the plot is abandoned in favor of an idea to be tested. The other characteristics listed, such as scandal, social utopia, moral-psychological experiment, free fantasy, concentration on the ‘ultimate questions of humanity’, the creation of exceptional situations, and freedom from historical references, can be derived from these two basic characteristics.

Satire and the idea to be tested have one thing in common: they sharply contrast the reality of life with a concept. This leads to interference and fractures. A ‘double image’ emerges. However, in order to establish the ambivalence between the two images, which is necessary in terms of sense semantics, it is not enough to juxtapose two or more voices, two or more points of view. Where Bakhtin speaks of polyphony, one sometimes gets the impression that it is sufficient for the production of interference that there be a plurality of points of view contending with each other. There is, however, a fundamental difference between concept and life. They are not two embodied points of view, as Bakhtin occasionally argues. Their conflict is of a principled nature and only therefore semantically productive.

This insurmountable conflict exists between the perspective of life and the perspective of judgment. Life may be lived, the fulfillment of needs, longings, dreams may be striven for. In the U.S. Declaration of Independence, this perspective is formulated as the inalienable right of the ‘pursuit of happiness.’ Anna Karenina in Tolstoy’s novel has the right to love – she strives for the happiness of love. Hannibal Lecter also strives for his life’s happiness. Macbeth was allowed to strive for power, which meant for him to become king. There is nothing reprehensible about that. I am allowed to want something, and literary heroes even must want something, otherwise nothing happens. For literary heroes, the right to pursue

happiness is as inalienable as it is for citizens of America, as for Macbeth, even for Hannibal Lecter. But to concede it is not to make it absolute. For by striving for happiness we always at the same time put ourselves in the wrong.

It is the perspective of judgment which captures all these wrongdoings. Human action is subject to judgment, i.e. we do not operate in a lawless space. I'm sorry Hannibal, if you can only feel pleasure when you kill, but there are certain limits... I'm sorry Anna, but in your society, adultery is a grave sin and leads to social ostracism. Sorry, Macbeth, murder is not approved as a means for getting into power. In the literary text, the perspective of judgment is usually provided by the narrative instance. However where the narrative instance abstains from any judgment (the so-called *impassibilité* in Flaubert or the 'cruelly uninvolved' narrator in Chekhov), it can also delegate judgment to the readers. Yet, those who judge other people are both right and wrong. They are right because action is subject to judgement, and they are wrong because the aspirations of life have their justification in themselves. The boundary between people's right to acts of life and the judgment about them must be constantly renegotiated. Text interference demonstrates to us the incompatibility between living and judging. Both claim unlimited validity, but they never achieve it as long as the other perspective keeps them in check.

Bakhtin treats the tension between these two instances in his essay "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (Bakhtin 1990: 4–256). He rightly calls text interference constitutive of the modern novel. However, the component of eventfulness is no less so. Surprisingly, the semantic product of eventfulness does not yet have its own term in the typology of forms of semantization. We propose for it, in analogy to the word formation *e q u i v a l e n c e* for the first form of semantization, the term *s e q u e n c e*. At first sight, the prose genre seems to be responsible for the task of sequence – to establish time coherence in order to guarantee the consecutiveness of events – but originally the ordering of the timeline was not the task of the prose genre but of the genre of historiography, or, as far as the personal perception of time is concerned, in the genre of memoir or biography. With good reason, antiquity distinguished the task of Clio, the Muse of historiography, from that of Calliope, the Muse of narrative art. In the 19th century, with Jules Michelet and Leopold von Ranke, European culture seems to have denied that historiography is also a semantically active narrative and, instead, combined the tasks of the two muses in modern narrative prose. The semanticizing power of historiography was thereby denied. In the distinction between plot (*histoire*) and narrative (*récit*) there is still an echo of the genre distinction between historiography and prose. The modern theory of historiography (New Historicism) has attempted to rehabilitate the semantic activity in historiography. The modern novel, however, succeeded historiography insofar as it incorporated its basic device, that is, eventfulness.

Thus, if we ascribe to the novel two basic narrative devices of sense semantics – eventfulness and text interference – we place ourselves in opposition to some of Wolf Schmid's basic narratological assumptions. In *Narratology. An Introduction* (Schmid 2010), Schmid distinguishes four basic features of narration in fictional works: eventfulness, fictionality, perspectivization, and text interference. Have we here so far misappropriated two features? Not at all, as I will now try to explain.

First of all, fictionality. Is it sense-semantically productive? Logically, it is only a negative feature. Fictional texts are 'only' made up, so they lack the claim to truth that otherwise applies to statements. However, this does not make them 'untrue'. Rather, the truth claim to

be derived from the pragmatics of a statement is 'bracketed', as Edmund Husserl would say, i.e. put out of execution. This is the precondition for the sense semantics to come to the fore in a statement. However, even pragmatic statements for which the truth condition is valid have a sense-semantic side, but then it usually remains in the background. The abolition of pragmatics, thus fictionalization, is therefore not a necessary condition for sense semantics. This is clearly demonstrated by the genres of historiography and biography. Fictional texts can certainly contain elements that fulfill the criteria of truth. Napoleon I and Alexander III really met and embraced on a raft on the Njemen (the Memel) in June 1807, Tolstoy did not make that up in *War and Peace*. But the fulfillment of these criteria is quite irrelevant in his novel, because they are suspended. What matters in the literary text is only the sense semantics. Fictionalization frees the text from all obligation to truth and thus unleashes the sense semantics. However, it is not semantically productive itself; that must be done by the sense-semantic devices themselves. Therefore, fictionalization semanticizes nothing, it is not a literary device.

With perspectivization it is a bit more complicated. It is indeed semantically productive, but in quite different ways. That is why Schmid rightly emphasizes in his *Narratology. An Introduction*, in the chapter on the four tiers of narrative constitution in a narrative text (Schmid 2010: 190–215) that perspectivization is involved on all four levels of narrative constitution (Schmid 2010: 194). On the one hand, one can see perspectivization as a tool of textual interference. In this case, it is primarily a matter of the conflicting and mutually incompatible axiological perspectives of the narrator or implied author and the protagonist. On the other hand, perspectivization can also be understood as the spatial and temporal location of narrators or protagonists, which we call setting. But what is the role of setting in narrative? Is it another basic device, semantizing a fifth existential relational dimension? I would say no, because setting is not semantic in itself but only through devices implemented in it, like symbolization (of objects in time and space), equivalence (between times and spaces), metonymy (times or locations stand for specific semantic loads like 'Tiananmen Square' for the Chinese uprising or '1789' for the revolution which happened that year), and eventfulness (movement in time and space). Without such devices, setting is meaningless.

Therefore, perspectivization indeed is semantically productive, but only either as textual interference or in the framework of a whole bunch of devices which are bound to setting and which we can ascribe to equivalence, the semantic tension is not between experiencing and judging instance, but between incompatible space-times: Past and future, here and there. Between them stands the event in which this tension is discharged.

Consequently, then, in narratology the term 'perspective' is equivocal. Perspective is not an independent narratological category. There is no sense-semantic function specifically assigned to it. What we call perspective belongs to the sense-semantic function sometimes of textual interference, sometimes of eventfulness. Thus we are left with the two basic devices outlined here, whose interplay in the novel derives from the synthesis of two genres: historiography and biography, in which eventfulness was central, and menippea, with its satirical and gedankenexperiment aspects, out of which, as Bakhtin describes, the modern forms of text interference developed. From the fusion of these two genres, the cooperation of Clio, the muse of heroic poetry and historiography, with Calliope, the muse of narrative art, originates the success of the modern novel.

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