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Novels of S. Nadolny as Part of German Road Narrative Works at the End of 20th Century

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Abstract

The article considers the background of the genre definition issue of the novel in general, and the nontraditional novel genre “road narrative” in particular. The article also highlights the essential features of this non-canonical literary genre as well as manifestation peculiarities of this phenomenon in German national literature. The authors attempt to define to what extent the creativity of the contemporary German writer Sten Nadolny (namely his novels “Travelcard” (Netzkarte, 1981) and “He or me” (Eroderich, 1999)) has the capacity to reflect the specific character in terms of development of the given genre. Comprehensive analysis enabled the authors to arrive at the conclusion that the novels of Nadolny under consideration are the icon of road narrative genre in German literature. Using the culture-historical, comparative-typological and biographical methods it was inferred that the works of Nadolny illustrate the specific features of transformation of this literary genre during the 70s-90s of the 20th century.

Keywords: Novel genre, Road narrative, Conventions of the genre, S. Nadolny.

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Introduction

Novel genre as one of the leading in the literature of the 20th century still arouses the growing interest of researchers. In a number of literary works (L. Chernets, M. Shlyannikova etc.) it has been repeatedly noted that the definition and the description of the genre boundaries of different varieties of the novel are still largely problematic. Numerous attempts to create different levels of criteria in order to correlate the work of art with a particular kind of genre are evaluated as fairly ambiguous. The complexity of the definition of genre affiliation of the novel was emphasized by M.M. Bakhtin (1975) who defined the novel as “a developing and not ready genre” with no canon of the genre itself. This issue is of particular interest when it comes to the novels of the periods of modernism and postmodernism because the conception is characterized by the destruction of traditional artistic consciousness and an appeal to the mixture, the paradoxical blend and a combination of different forms and styles (Tamarchenko et al., 2004: 103).

The debut novel “Travelcard” (Netzkarte) by the German writer Sten Nadolny was published in 1981 and according to the majority of its researchers largely reflects the trends of modernism and postmodernism. Nadolny’s scholar B. Brix emphasizes in its implementation the individual, experimental forms and considers the genre of the novel “Travelcard” as a manifestation of the author’s innovation since this novel does not fit into the communion of the canonical novels which involve a trip as the plot core. According to the critic this work has little contact with the traditional material and cannot be reckoned among either poetically shaped travel notes, or the description of the rules in a foreign country like in an exciting travel novel, or the humorous and satirical utopia, or the adventure and picaresque novel which leave room for fantasy (Brix, 2008: 102).

On the other hand some researchers indicate a certain affinity of the work with the famous novel “Kurzer Brief zumlangem Abschied” (1972) (“A short letter to the Long Goodbye”) by another popular German author Peter Handke. Both works are united by the theme of the road and wandering. In addition it should be noted that the action of the novel by Handke takes place in America, the novel by Nadolny also has a trip to America in its final part, and this coincidence does not appear accidental. If we turn to the American way of life, that allows us to categorize it as a foundation for the road trip genre.

Materials and methods

The aim of this article is to analyze the probable causes of the emergence and development of the Road narrative genre in American national literature and specific features determining its authenticity and readers’ demand. The work provides examples from literary works

demonstrating the representation of this genre tendency in German national literature. Answering the question to what degree S. Nadolny's works represent the given genre peculiarities, it should be pointed out that this writer's works under analysis determine the vector of development of the genre from experimental during the modernism formative years up to its functioning as a kind of well-established conventional literature.

The material for the research is represented by his novels "Travelcard" ("Netzkarte", 1981) and "He or me" ("Eroderich" 1999). In the process of analysis of the current research the culture-historical, comparative-typological methods and the elements of the biographical method were also used.

Results and discussion

1. Peculiarities of the genre in the American literature

The phenomenon of road genre largely can be explained by a special, cult relation to nomadism which is characteristic of American country: "the image of the road, fast cars and everything that can happen on the road have always enthralled the Americans, because, perhaps, it is accompanied by a sense of risk and freedom from everyday life" (Byrd, n.d.). The researcher of American literature R. Primeau in his work "Romance of the road" (1996) notes that the road is a favorite subject of the Americans and is widely represented in many forms of art. Of special emphasis is its importance in relation to cinema because it was formed and established itself as an independent genre of "road movie" which gained its popularity in the 60s of the 20th century. The most striking examples of this genre can be rightly considered such films as "Easy Rider", "On the Road", "The Motorcycle Diaries" and others. Still R. Primeau considers road narrative as an independent genre having its obvious traits. However, in the author's opinion, the most significant realization of this topic is in prose, because of all the arts, glorifying the life on the road it is the prose which most accurately and clearly reflects the inner world and emotions of different characters (Primeau, 1996: 26). Insolubility of the conflict arouses the need to tell the own story, which involves not so much the presentation of the facts and depiction of the reality in chronological order, but an attempt to analyze and understand their feelings which is the kind of the way to assess the situation from the outside. The literary model of the mentioned genre can be represented by a cult novel "On the Road" by Jack Kerouac, the inspirer and ideologist of American philosophy of "beat generation" (1957). It should be noted that "road narrative" genre synthesizes to a certain degree the features of traditional genres of American literature (westerns, adventure novel and others), that is why its independence seems ambiguous and doubtful.

But both the books and the movies about such travels and ‘being on the road’ run simultaneously about the movement and the subjective perception of the environment, that are closely correlated and represent an attempt to resist social rules and break established stereotypes.

Drawing a parallel with the novel “Travelcard” by S. Nadolny, on the basis of the research by R. Primeau we can conclude that it is relevant to consider this work as an example of the genre “road narrative”. In particular, in the novel “Travel ticket” there are the signs which can be defined as typical of the road narrative genre, namely:

- The main character sets out on a journey driven by dissatisfaction with the course of his life, reluctance to be within the framework of generally accepted standards:

“Ole Reuter, Studienreferendar, macht an einem Berliner Gymnasium in drei Wochen sein zweites Staatsexamen. Danach wird er in die Schule gehen, weil das Examen das so mit sich bringt und weil alles andere wenig Aussicht hat” (Nadolny, 2010: 70). – “Ole Reuter who has passed his first state exam is going to take his second state exam in three weeks in one of the Berlin gymnasiums. Then he is due to work at school, because the examination involves just that and because there are no other prospects” (translated by Aydarova). The protest against predetermined way of life, an attempt to avoid the imposed social role causes the protagonist to travel with a travel ticket on the roads of western Germany. The idea of the road and the dynamics of movement permeate the plot of the genre. The road and the movement are perceived both by the hero and the reader not only as a literal journey from one point to another, but as a figurative inner search for new ideals, values, acquiring one’s own individuality. The journey of this type does not involve any specific route or a specific purpose. Making chaotic movements the hero seems to be moving through the giant maze, where any direction chosen at random can be easily replaced by any other:

“Es taucht die Frage auf: was mache ich um 6 h 46 früh in Jerxheim? Aber das ist gerade, was ich wissen will. Erst wenn man einmal ohne jedes Ziel um 6 h 46 in Jerxheim war, dann weiß man was daraus werden kann” (Nadolny, 2010: 12). – “... The question arises: what will I do at 6 h 46 in Jerxheim? But this is precisely what I would like to know. Only when you arrive without any purpose at six o'clock in Jerxheim, then you will understand what will happen” (translated by Aydarova).

- The specificity of the genre also lies in numerous descriptions of the protagonist’s communication with a variety of people he encountered on the road, which leads to the dynamic character of the work both geographically and socially. The variegated kaleidoscope

of random passengers splits into separate images, each of which is like a starting point for the reflections of the protagonist about his own fate, uncertain future or distant past.

- Finally, the dominant features of the genre are freedom, irresponsibility, lack of social obligations, often flowing into troubles with law: "...schon das Erklärenmüssen behindert eine Reise. Die Freiheit soll es sein und keine Fessel, kein Joch – niemals!" (Nadolny, 2010: 11). – "...the necessity to explain anything prevents travel. There should be only freedom, no shackles or burdens – never!" (Translated by Aydarova).

Thus, according to some set of features it is possible to assume that the novel "Travel ticket" by S. Nadolny can be regarded as a work belonging in German literature to the genre which is similar to non-canonical "road narrative" of American road prose.

2. Development of the genre peculiarities in the German literature.

At present there are several different terms to define road narrative in the history of German literature because it stands out among traditional literary travelogue genres. In some critical reviews this genre, which is close to cinema genre, is defined as "literary road movie" (as an example can be named movie script of Peter Handke "False Movement" (1976)). The literary scholar Karl Esselborn interprets this notion as "road novel", the linguist Christoph Galle exploits the term "Roadmovie Roman" in his research.

It should be noted that not only S. Nadolny's novel "Travelcard" (Netzkarte) but also its by far later sequel "He or me" are distinguished by the researcher Stephanie Schäfers (2010) as the most important among the works of German travel literature. In her opinion, the novel "Travelcard" can be considered as a particular literary landmark as a work that served a distinct impulse for further development of German road narrative in the 90s. In this work the travel is conveyed by the author in its authentic reality as an experience involved into that daily reality. Emphasizing its marked "cinematographic nature", which is generally characteristic of the works of the literary "Road Movie", the researcher points out the fact that despite its static plot the intermediate character of narration entirely conveys the dynamic nature and mobility of the hero's environment.

In his critical review to this novel the scholar Thomas Überhoff (n.d.) considers among other things the point if this work can be estimated as a contemporary novel about "an odd man out", "an idler" of 20th century. On the one hand, it represents a typical image of an outsider, on the other hand, the protagonist of the novel while travelling manages to find the solution to the inner problems without any illusions, but being completely non-disillusioned he finds the power to get back on track .

However, the rebellious behavior, the denial of social rules and the roving lifestyle also can cause the protagonist's feelings of romantic melancholy, frustration or entirely result in the character's death. Continuing Nadolny's traditions the writers of the literary genre "Road Movie" have been referring to this image of an outsider, the preacher of non-conformist lifestyle to the present day.

For example, in his critical review to the book by Frank Spilker (Frank Spilker: "Es interessiert mich nicht, aber das kann ich nicht beweisen"), published in 2003 the literary critic Herrit Bartels points out that this novel has the number of similar features to the works in "Road Novels" style. The protagonist of the novel is Thomas Toppelman who, by his own definition, perceives himself as "a simpleton" (der Trottel), unable to adjust to the environment. In an attempt to find his real self Toppelman, as a typical representative of "Roadmovie-Romans", takes his time and makes a journey in a high-speed express train around the German territory. Herrit Bartels pays special attention to the fact that this journey described in the classical traditions of "Road-movie" in large part reminds of the novel by Christian Kracht "Faserland" or the novel by Sten Nadolny "Netzkarte". The critic assumes that it is their characters that were the predecessors of the recognized image of the contemporary nomad in the 80s (Nadolny) and the 90s (Kracht).

It should be noted that in terms of self-identification the protagonists of the road narrative works of the 90s represent a completely different picture. If we regard them as extension of classical tradition of not only geographical but social search of freedom from the confines of daily life, it is safe to say that the chaotic pointless movement in space serves as existential categorical imperative, the guarantee of the existence of a person as such, as the scholar Stefanie Schäfers also points out in her work. The protagonist of the contemporary "Road Movie" loses the perceptivity for cultural peculiarities and traditions of different countries as these phenomena are outside the boundaries of the center of his perception and consequently, the descriptions of the local coloring and the peculiarities of the social customs, that played the key role in the travel literature, lose their original importance.

Besides, the researcher stresses the fact that the classical road movie is characterized by the existence of the personages that attract the reader's attention and stand out through their individual traits, though closer to the period of publication of Christian Kracht's novel they look more like sketchy anonymous figures who are deeply depressed about the boundaries of their own individuality and unable to sense the reality of their own personality. It's probably the state of postindustrial society, the processes of general globalization that lead to the fact that anonymity becomes common and generally accepted, there happens the denial of the value of an individual as such (or its self-identification looks like an endless alternation of

numerous masks that gradually dissolve the true nature of a person). For example, the narration that is given on the part of the protagonist in the novel by Christian Kracht finally breaks at the point when he was at Zurich lake, the protagonist of Nadolny's novel "He or Me" disappears and refers to Friedrich Schiller lines from his novel "Don Carlos" to describe his inner state: "In seines Nichts durch bohrendem Gefühle" – "In recognition of my own insignificance". It's not the urge to solve inner problems but lack of direction, the loss of feeling of unity and affinity with the environment, the meaningless and pointless movement for the sake of living for a day, confusion and wandering in the endless maze of roads are the characteristic features of Road-Movie or Road-Novel in the postmodern period.

Conclusion

Thus, S. Nadolny's works "Travelcard" and "He or Me", being generally recognized as the specimen of road narrative genre, can also be regarded as examples, illustrating to some extent the transformation of the literary genre "Road Movie": from experimental during the modernism period (J. Kerouac) up to the firmly established one during the postmodern span, that is frequently assigned by the critics to trivial literature (F. Spilker). As it happened before, Roadmovie-Roman has its followers and attracts its readers; the works by Felicitas Hoppe, Thomas Klupp, Markus Seidel, Johannes W. Betz can be referred to this movement. Despite the plot similarity, this genre is characteristic of genuine dramatic nature and deep sincerity because of autobiographical character typical of the road narrative genre. It should be mentioned that it does not exclude a certain proportion of author's fiction, but contains the "desire to ultimate, non-burdened sincerity" (Oshinsh, 1984) initially represented in "spontaneous prose" of its creator J. Kerouac.

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