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## Concept of Slowness in Sten Nadolny's Novels

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### Abstract

The article studies the concept of slowness in the novelistic work by the contemporary German writer Sten Nadolny. The concept of slowness acquires special significance in the writer's books both in correlation with the title of the most recognized novel by Sten Nadolny and with respect to the originality of the writing style of the author's other novels.

The aim of the article is to define the specific features of the slowness phenomenon which is the cornerstone for character portrayal in novel creativity of S. Nadolny. The reliability of the research results is based on the analysis of extensive critical and artistic material. The study examines his works «Netzkarte» «Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit», «Selim oder die Gabe der Rede», and «Weitlings Sommerfrische». The research employed descriptive and cultural-historical methods.

The authors come to the conclusion that slowness is the main component of the character portrayal in the novel and serves as a means of more expressive realization of the author's philosophy of slowness.

**Keywords:** Sten Nadolny, the Discovery of Slowness, Concept of slowness, Means of character portrayal, Philosophy of slowness.

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## INTRODUCTION

Analyzing and evaluating the creativity of Sten Nadolny in the context of German literature in general, different encyclopedic periodicals and critical reviews agree on the fact that it's the conception of slowness that acquires special significance in his books, both in correlation with the title of the most acclaimed Nadolny's novel «The discovery of slowness» (Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit, 1983) and with regard to idiosyncrasy of his writing style of the rest of his novels.

They also point out the similarity between the slowness motive in the works by Sten Nadolny and other German writers, which, in their opinion, may appear to be successive. The research by Birgit Brix highlights that a peculiar conception of slowness expressed in the works by Peter Handke, such as for example «A short letter to long farewell» (Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied, 1972) extends to Nadolny's creativity where it acquires in its development a clear-cut hint of sarcasm and interest [1].

According to the scholar Ralph Kopeis, the reference to the subject of slowness is not an individual case in contemporary German literature, as an example he sets the Peter Handke's novel «A slow return home» (Langsame Heimkehr, 1979). Kopeis emphasizes that this work exposes problems similar to those characteristic of Sten Nadolny's creativity in general: the presence of threat for the individual in industrial (postindustrial) society. However, Kopeis expresses the idea that the problematic of these works, though similar on the outside, finds a completely different realization in both cases: while Handke's novel is distinguished by pronounced sobriety and monologue-like nature, Nadolny's work poses as light witty reading [2].

Analyzing the checklist of factors, that could condition the success of the novel «The discovery of slowness» the researcher Helmut Mottel also explains this phenomenon in the first place by the affinity of the work to the postmodernism frameworks which does implicate the existence of entertaining elements in it, intertextual connections, etc. On the other hand, the fact that the novel includes the appeal to rock-solid mainstays plays the key role: it was created according to the canons of novel genre of XIX century and at the same time it proclaims the observation of the system of moral and ethical norms. Moreover, the work reflects the whole range of socially important problems for the contemporaries: the issues of intercultural communication, pacifism, feminism – all these crucial problems of modern age are recreated in the unified text of the novel, being realized in the context of a peculiar hermeneutics of slowness [3, p.77].

The value of the given work could be conditioned not only by the appeal to the socially important problem. Birgit Brix's research points out that this work enables the reader to consider the world from a different perspective breaking the habitual boundaries of our perception. Slowness here represents not a quality which a definite personality possesses but artistic conception which involves the technique with the help of which one can destroy something that is supposed to be a truism [4, p.163].

## METHODS

The aim of the article is to define the specific features of the slowness phenomenon which is the cornerstone for character portrayal in novel creativity of the contemporary German writer S. Nadolny. As the case study of research served his works «Netzkarte», (1981), «Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit», (1983), «Selim oder die Gabe der Rede» (1990), and «Weitlings Sommerfrische», (2012). The research employed descriptive and cultural-historical methods.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Beginning with his debut novel by Sten Nadolny «Travel ticket» (Netzkarte) many literary scholars point out its slow narrative nature. However, this peculiarity of writing style of narration frequently causes near reprimands on the part of the readers. Among them is the criticism about the excessive static nature of the work caused by narrative slowness. As an example of a negative evaluation one can set the opinion of the researcher Josef Quack. In his review on the book he emphasizes that the slow-moving narration affected the development of the action not in the best way. From his viewpoint, the content of this work would apparently look more relevant in the form of a short story rather than a slow-moving and shapeless novel [5]. Nevertheless, the protracted nature in its different manifestations can be repeatedly traced in the novels of the writer later on, including intentionally surprising combinations. For example, in the novel «Selim or the eloquence powers» the protagonist of the work Selim is considered as an unsurpassed narrator who easily wins over any audience. However, describing the scenes where he participates, the author deliberately stresses a curious fact: despite all the public opinion, Selim's eloquence is actually far from being perfect: the vocabulary is poor, grammar is awful, it is distinguished by extreme slowness:

«Er hält sich mit Details auf, überlegt des längeren, ob das wirklich an einem Donnerstag war und ob der Mann, von dem er spricht, aus dem Norden oder dem Süden kam.... Jedem Versuch der Beschleunigung begegnet er mit: Moment, das kommt doch erst!» [6, p.410].

«He (Selim) rests on details, meditates for a long time, whether it was really on Thursday and whether the man he was telling about came from the south or the north. Every attempt to hasten narration he invariably encounters with the phrase: «Just a moment! I'm going to tell this further».

Rather frequently and to a great degree in a negative way slowness was mentioned by the critics with regard to the last novel of the author «Weitlings summer house». In particular, the reviews on this work emphasize that the whole story is narrated „ein klein wenig zu behäbig... zu langatmig « – «too slowly, in every detail» [7], gemächlich... absichtlich ein bisschen langweilig sogar» – «without haste, deliberately somewhat boring» [8].

Thus, we can make a conclusion that the exhaustive, slow style of the author, having tendency to detail, served to a great degree as the cause for unfavorable expression of criticism.

However, in the novel «The discovery of slowness», the second in succession and the most accomplished in creativity of Sten Nadolny (it was translated into several dozens of languages, including Russian) slowness is perceived not only as much as the characteristics of the style of narration as it serves to express the individual philosophy of the author. The numerous ecstatic readers' reviews and almost complete appreciation of the literary critics were the testament to the fact that the writer had touched upon a long-standing issue, which topicality is determined in the first place by the facts of our times.

All over the world the life of people for today is characterized by a constant and sweepingly fast-moving pace, the reason for existence is often substituted for pursuit of success and success in itself becomes one of the main criteria of the human value. In such conditions qualities like slowness acquire as a rule a firmly negative connotation when assessed by others. It's rather difficult to imagine slowness as the foundation for an entertaining novel.

However, the perception and conception of slowness as a determining factor and a necessary condition for realization of the personal system of values had been treated in German literary works before. In the work «New Models of Slowness in the German Novel at the End of XX Century» the scholar G.V. Kuchumova points out that the transition from high-speed models to slow models is at large conceived for the current period as a typical phenomenon. As an example the literary scholar sets the works of such contemporary German authors as Wolfgang Busher, Claus Buldel, Wilhelm Genazino and some others.

According to the standpoint of the author of the article, the switch of the cult attitude to acceleration and its substitute for slow but more conscious perception of the world represents a natural process that reasonably accompanies the change of both literary and cultural paradigms. Nowadays the continuous increase of the virtual space volume and the growth of its role in a person's life (consistently and gradually forcing out the real communication) causes a reasonable desire to leave the imaginary experience in order to feel the genuine existence. The slow pace of life presupposes a conscious creation of opportunities for understanding one's own being, the direction of life energy for the realization of one's internal not external development. In her article G.V. Kuchumova emphasizes that in German literature, references to the significance of a slow, contemplative, truly conscious view of life can be found in the work by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe («Faust»), as opposed to the «magical» process of its acceleration. The concept of slowness in the work of a number of German writers («formula of leisure» – G.V. Kuchumova's term) is realized in a variety of ways («simulating slow pace» by K. Kracht and «progressive ordering of space» by R. Jarvis, V. Büscher, «the practice of inner silence» by V. Genatsino and «the mode of enjoying life» by M. Kundera) [9].

In the context of various interpretations of the concept of slowness one should consider the famous German author Thomas Mann with his novel «The Magic Mountain». Numerous references to this book can be found in S. Nadolny's lectures on the poetics, in particular in his hypothetical reasoning about the continuation of Hans Kastorp's life in the events of his new novel. This wish expressed by Nadolny seems logical since both writers are distinguished by common stylistic features: contemplative slowness and detailed descriptions were noted by researchers as characteristic features of Mann's manner of writing [10]. In the above mentioned work S.N. Averkina pays attention to the fact that the slow development of the narrative in Thomas Mann's works may be, in its turn, due to the influence of Austrian writer and poet A. Stifter. In his study P. Becher analyzed in detail the specificity of the expression of slowness concept characteristic of Stifter's works, and its manifestation in the works of such authors as Alois Brandstetter, Peter Meyer and Sten Nadolny [11].

It should be noted that the period of the beginning of the industrial revolution at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was chosen as the historical background of the novel's action. The author repeatedly accentuates the influence of technical progress on all spheres of people's lives, where the global manifestation of accelerated time inevitably results in destruction of the foundations of human nature: «Der Griff zur Uhrkette war häufiger geworden als der zum Hut. Man hörte kaum Flüche, der Ausruf: «Keine Zeit!» War an ihrer Stelle getreten» [12, p.266]. –... The grab of the watch chain had become more common than that of the hat. There were hardly any curses but the exclamations: «No time!» instead.

It is impossible not to draw parallels between the situation described in this novel in connection with the modern day life, but with the only difference: the look at the clock is changed into the look at the mobile phone screen. Analyzing the feeling of a person in the process of the previous technological revolution and general industrialization can easily be compared with his experience of modern computerization processes and the active development of telecommunications, the speed of which is inevitably getting even faster.

The rapidly increasing pace of life is repeatedly reflected in the ironic comments of the author: «Immer gingesum Eile und Zeit: schnell die Reformumsetzen, bevor es zu spat sei! Schnell die Reformersticken, bevor es zus pät sei!» [12, p.268]. – There was always haste and time: quickly implement the reform, before it is too late! Quickly cancel the reform, before it is too late!

This statement does not at all mean that the protagonist of the novel opposes the progress of science and technology, but accepts them only as means of achieving humanistic goals, where slowness, contemplation and resort to reflection are capable of correcting the possible negative consequences of

hasty decisions. The habit of orienting one's life towards given patterned actions, taking only the speed of their execution as a reference point, can lead to depersonalization of an individual, Simon Baar notes in his study. According to him, the figure of the protagonist stands out in the novel by his uniqueness, uncommonness, even obsession from the mass of other characters demonstrating high speed, and thus gives the impression of the only dynamic figure in the narration [13, p.15].

## **SUMMARY**

In his review the literary critic Wolfgang Fruwald attributes the novel «The Discovery of Slowness» rather to the category of a modern literary work which is designed to resemble a historic one. According to his assessments this work is distinguished by the presence of a modern point of view: it is already known to what consequences the rapidly developing technical progress and consumer attitude to natural resources will lead. Without a single mention of today's level of technological development, where human control over technical systems becomes more and more complex, the author managed to skillfully write a novel-warning in which the means a person uses for enhancing the comfort of his own life ultimately threaten to destroy his own life. Here the paradox underlying the idea of the novel is expressed: Je schneller die Geschwindigkeit von Maschinen und Informationen wird, desto langsamer wird der Mensch bis er schließlich zum Stillstand kommt [14, p.7]. – The faster the speed of machines and information transfer becomes, the slower a person becomes until he stops altogether.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The significance of the novel «The discovery of slowness» in the context of German literature can be confirmed by the fact of its presence in the anthology «Novel chronicle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century» («Romanchronik des 20. Jahrhunderts») by the German scholar Walter Hinck. This book includes a literary analysis of the works by the authors, who according to general opinion, not only gained world fame, but also are considered significant for German literature. They are such writers as Henry and Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, and others. As the author of the anthology in the foreword Walter Hinck emphasizes that he tried to collect works of writers whose work is highly appreciated by critics and whose contribution to the development of German literature is doubtless. He especially notes the inextricable connection between history and fiction, and accentuates the fact that in this book he collected works that, in his opinion, include a description, reinterpretation and worthy artistic embodiment of real historical events [15, p.9]. It should be noted that slowness as the fundamental quality of the protagonist, around whom the main intrigue is centered and the storyline develops, is the key component of the characterization of his personality and the necessary prerequisite for the creation of a heroic image – the slowness of perception – is precisely the artistic, introduced from the outside according to the author's intention, with is aimed at more expressive realization of the author's philosophy of slowness. Manifestation of speed and rate of response in Nadolny's presentation is often combined with superficiality, nervousness and aggression which is rather a destructive beginning. In this respect, the figure of the researcher and navigator John Franklin expresses a very different understanding and manifestation of progress, not from the point of view of increasing the level of development of technical means, but in terms of improving the human soul, striving for a humanistic ideal, affirming above all the value of the individual human personality.

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