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Alenka Žbogar

Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

SLOVENE SHORT PROSE DURING THE LAST DECADE

This survey of research in the field of literary studies into Slovene short narrative prose during the last decade focuses on monographs and those anthologies and articles that have significantly contributed to forming contemporary Slovene theoretical and literary historical knowledge. It points out methodological differences in interpretation among scholars from both Slovene and foreign backgrounds. It preserves a traditional grounding in precise German literary theory, and takes into account contemporary European and American sources.

Key words: contemporary Slovene literary studies, Slovene short narrative prose

In 2011 and 2012, the publishing house ZRC SAZU (Publishing House of the Research Center of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences) prepared two scholarly monographs on Slovene short prose. In 2012, Gregor Kocijan's *Slovenska kratka proza 1919–1929* (Slovene short prose 1919–29) appeared, and the previous year Andreja Perić Jezernik's *Minimalizem in sodobna slovenska kratka proza* (Minimalism and contemporary Slovene short prose). Kocijan systematically describes genre and sub-genre characteristics; motifs and themes; and linguistic, stylistic, and narrative features of Slovene short prose between the wars. A leading Slovene authority on the subject, he compresses long years of research¹ into the analysis of an impressive number of syncretic texts that he relates either to realist models or to Ivan Cankar's innovative model of short prose, the latter being of an Expressionist and/or avant-garde nature. The significance of the decade under consideration in Slovene short prose lies in the diversity of content, motivation, stylistic expression, intellectual outlooks, and narrative approaches. It continues Kocijan's exploration of Slovene short prose after 1850, divided into three larger time periods: 1850–91, 1892–1918, and 1919–41 (realistic short prose, short prose during the Moderna period, and Expressionistic and social realist short prose of the interwar period).

A comparison of the research on short prose by Matjaž Kmecl and Gregor Kocijan reveals differences, in particular in attributing significance to the size (length) of short narratives. In *Novela v literarni teoriji* (The novella in literary theory 1975), Kmecl distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative features of the novella.² Most all Slovene scholars of short prose, basing themselves in German

¹ At least Kocijan's *Kratka pripovedna proza v obdobju moderne: Literarnozgodovinska študija* (Short narrative prose in the Moderna period: Literary historical studies 1996) and *Kratka pripovedna proza od Trdine do Kersnika* (Short narrative prose from Trdina to Kersnik 1983) ought to be mentioned.

² By qualitative features he means a novella's structure and unity of time space.

literary theory of the short story³ (e.g., Hans Hermann Malmede, Fritz Lockemann, Manfred Schunicht, Robert Petsch, Walter Pabst, Karl Konrad Polheim, Hermann Pongs, Emil Staiger, Beno von Wiese, and in particular Klaus Doderer), still cite the work forty years later. It is interesting that in emphasizing size (length), he places novellas among “mid-length” narratives (48), although in a number of places he notes its brevity and highlights the minimum length of short prose. The quantitative measure is only an ancillary research tool; for Kocijan, it is one of the central features that “define the breadth and selection of narrative devices” (KOCIJAN 2006: 12). Here Kocijan also differs, for example, with Allan H. Pasco and Milivoj Solar.⁴ Besides the criterion of size, he also queries genre markers in light of the historical and formal, stylistic model. He grounds this in Slovene and foreign literary studies traditions. Among Slovene monographs, he cites those by Marjan Dolgan, Marijan Dović, Miran Hladnik, Marko Juvan, Matjaž Kmecl, Janko Kos, Lado Kralj, Katja Mihurko Poniž, Andreja Perić Jezernik, Katarina Šalamun Biedrzycka, Jože Šifrer, Vera Troha, Janez Vrečko, and Franc Zadavec; among non-Slovenes, he cites Tihomir Brajović, Allan H. Pasco, Bojana Pantović Stojanović, and Aleksandr Veselovski.

Andreja Perić Jezernik’s 2011 article considers short prose in light of minimalist monograph aesthetics in the visual arts, music, architecture, design, and dance. She is interested in minimalistic features in dialog, the beginning of a story, the insight (the minimalist instant of truth), narrator, characters, and action. In analyzing writings by Andrej Blatnik, Igor Zabel, Dušan Čater, Aleš Čar, Polona Glavan, Maruša Krese, Drago Jančar, Vinko Möderndorfer, and Nejc Gazvoda, she uses theoretical findings of Jonathan Culler, Suzanna C. Ferguson, Gerard Genette, Dominic Head, Erna Kritsch Neuse, Jean-François Lyotard, and Allan H. Pasco, as well as Aleš Erjavec, Marko Juvan, Matjaž Kmecl, Gregor Kocijan, Janko Kos, Tomo Virk, and Igor Zabel.

In monograph *Ekspressionistična stilna paradigma v kratki pripovedni prozi 1914–1923* (The Expressionist stylistic paradigm in short narrative prose 1914–23 2010), Jožica Čeh Steger explores Slovene and European Expressionist narration. She ends the study in 1923, because after that the war theme recedes into the background, and because that is the year Andrej Čebokli died, the “most renowned writer of early Expressionist short prose in Slovene” (11). She portrays how content relates to the characteristics of the Expressionist subject, as well as narrative features, which offers boundaries for demarcating the so-called Expressionist model. She derives the model from the linguistic and stylistic, but also the thematic and intellectual attributes of

³ This is how Kmecl justifies the selection: “The present survey has in large part been informed by German theory... This is first of all because Slovene knowledge of literary forms—due to well-known historical facts—for a long time borrowed concepts of literary genres primarily from it. It is probably difficult to speak of a unique, proper Slovene theory of the novella. Ideas about the novella as a unique form of narrative expression are expressed quite peripherally, by the way, and unclearly” (KMECL 1975: 28).

⁴ “Although some assert that size does (and cannot) have decisive meaning, it has been quite unquestionably demonstrated that there are norms that distinguish the body of short narratives from the remaining multitude of narrative works, and that length is a significant component, which defines the breadth and selection of narrative devices” (KOCIJAN 2006: 4).



relevant Expressionist artists and texts.⁵ WW I influenced the motivation and themes in Slovene and European short narrative prose. Many sought a way out of the crisis “in the ethical idea of a new person and mankind” (11). She shows firm theoretical anchoring in European theory of short prose forms, bringing in, for example, Thomas Althaus, Dirk Göttsche, Leonie Marx, Ansgar Nünning, and, among Slovenes, especially Gregor Kocijan.

Alenka Žbogar does research on Slovene short prose both from the standpoint of the didactics of literature and the perspectives of literary theory and literary systems. In the monograph *Kratka proza v literarni vedi in šolski praksi* (Short prose in literary studies and educational practice 2007), she surveys contemporary German and Anglo-American theories of short prose, in particular the German monographs by Manfred Durzak, Hans-Dieter Gelfert, Hans-Christoph Graf von Nayhauss, Wolfgang Hammon and Christiane Dittmann, Ruth J. Kilchenmann, Herbert Krämer, Erna Kritsch-Neuse, Susanne Schubert and Beno von Wiese. She defines the long and short short story (Virk 1989), and anecdotal and epiphanic stories (Charles E. May, Aleksander Kustec). She devotes a separate chapter to problems of short prose genres in literature, quantitatively and qualitatively analyzing eighty-five collections that appeared between 1980 and 2000. Among the quantitative measures she includes place of publication, authors' names, publication trends by year, the length of individual types of short narratives, and genre definitions (scholarly and in the title or subtitle) (ŽBOGAR 2007: 14). Features of morphology constitute the qualitative measures—that is, epic, dramatic, and lyrical narratives. She constructs a typology of the short Slovene narrative on motivational and thematic, plus linguistic and stylistic characteristics, accounting for the works' *Zeitgeist* as well. She applies this knowledge of short Slovene narratives and their features to educational practice, includes reception theory (the theories of Hans Robert Jauss, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Wolfgang Iser), and sheds light on the complexity of and responsibility for selecting (and consistently differentiating) high school literary matter and interpretive concepts.

In 2006, the collection *Slovenska kratka pripovedna proza* (Slovene short narrative prose), edited by Irena Novak Popov, came out in the series *Obdobja* (23). It contained contributions to the 2004 *Obdobja* symposium in Ljubljana by sixty-one scholars of contemporary short Slovene prose, from Ivan Cankar's sketches to Andrej Blatnik's short stories. They analyzed the works from various points of view: aesthetic-formal, thematic-discursive, theoretical, systemic, and in terms of *Zeitgeist*. The collection is divided into nine sections: a set of thematic interpretations, genre studies, comparisons of authors and works, studies of translations, the reception of short Slovene prose in other languages and cultures, linguistic analyses, folkloric, reception, and didactic models of Slovene short prose. They conclude that theory furnishes quite applicable quantitative and morphological criteria for further

⁵ For example, Ivan Cankar's collection *Podobe iz sanj* (Dream images) and Kraus's *Poslednji dnevi človeštva* (The last days of mankind), Bevk's short war prose, Podbevšek's collections *Čarovnik iz pekla* (The magician from Hades) and *Plesalec v ječi* (Imprisoned dancer), the short prose of Stane Melihar, Ciril Vidmar, Jože Cvelbar, Štefanija Ravnikar, Milan Fabjančič, Angelo Cerkvenik, and Andrej Čebokli. There is special attention paid to stylistic pluralism in the prose of Marija Kmet.



theoretical research.⁶ “It is possible to delineate different modeling solutions on the basis of genre features (e.g., epic, lyric) and particular manners of entering a text and narrative elements, as well as constant compositional forms (e.g., framing) (KOCIJAN 2006: 5–6).

Blanka Bošnjak analyses two hundred short narratives from after 1980 in her monograph *Premiki v sodobni slovenski kratki prozi* (Changes in contemporary Slovene short prose 2005). She attempts to define the styles of the thirty authors whose collections she considers, as well as to offer typologies, determine the features of the narrative systems, the subject’s postmodern role, and works’ features connected to special fairytale and mythological elements. At the outset she asserts the thesis that the output is exceptionally diverse and not subject to a single model. She concludes that at least two paradigms arose in Slovene short prose after 1980: the paradigm of “new literary directions” (66), which she calls a postmodern type of short prose, and the paradigm of “past literary directions” (i.e., realism, existentialism, and modernism) (66–67), divided into ultra-modern, irrational and mystical, and neorealist kinds of short prose, with the latter further divided into minimalist and post-existential. She develops the typology on the basis of the Slovene theoretical positions of France Bernik, Miran Hladnik, Gregor Kocijan, Janko Kos, Matjaž Kmecl, Alenka Žbogar, and Tomo Virk; she relies on the non-Slovene theorists Vladimir Biti, Aleksander Flaker, Dominic Head, Charles E. May, Eleazar M. Meletinskij, Allan H. Pasco, Olga Scherer Virsky, Milivoj Solar, Franz K. Stanzel, Michael Lloyd Trussler, and Lucy Ann Wilson. Mieke Bal, Gérard Genette, and Franz Stanzl’s ideas provide the bases for analyzing the subject’s role and narratological consideration of the actors, focalization, and the narrator’s style. The concept of neorealism seems questionable, although Mitja Čander employs it in the anthology *O čem govoriva* (What we talk about), subtitled *Slovenska kratka proza 1990–2004* (Slovene short prose 1990–2004).⁷ The anthology covers short prose writers born after 1960 in whose poetics there are recognizable neorealist features.⁸ She terms “neorealism” contemporary Slovene short prose that discards postmodernism and prefers “post-documentary elements that undergird the impression of being present” (360). Andreja Perić Jezernik (2011) is another scholar who uses this widely criticized term. Bošnjak understands it as a particular type that “preserves the notion of realism, for which the maximally realistic portrayal of reality is key, on the levels of style, plot, and theme, while also presenting reality through an authentic depiction of society, social reality, nature, and everyday life” (2005: 89–90). These are texts that yet preserve familiar post-modern stylistic features, and in terms of plot and theme are composed of neorealist descriptions of contemporary urban environments. As an alternative to neorealism, Bošnjak suggests the term “neoverism.” Andreja Perić Jezernik thinks that neoreal-

⁶ If during the Moderna period the most common theoretical marker was the sketch ‘črtica’, (KOCIJAN 2006: 7), Žbogar concludes that the most frequent genre marker in the title or subtitle of 1980s collections was story ‘zgodba’ (17 %), and in the 1990s, novella ‘novela’ (20 %).

⁷ She relies on Marc Augé and the concept of “the ethnology of loneliness” (352) to portray the spiritual condition at the turn of the century.

⁸ The stories are by Andrej Blatnik, Jani Virk, Andrej Morovič, Dušan Čater, Maja Novak, Vinko Möderndorfer, Tomaž Kosmač, Aleš Čar, Mojca Kumerdej, Suzana Tratnik, Polona Glavan, and Andrej Skubic.



ism is a term “better suited to denote minimalism, because the prefix ‘neo-’ indicates innovation in these literary directions...; in the context of postmodernist pluralism, we understand the term ‘neorealism’ as a designation that encompasses various understandings of ‘realistic’” (PERIĆ JEZERNIK 2011: 63). In place of these names, Alojzija Zupan Sosič⁹ proposes the word “transrealism,”¹⁰ which derives from previous realistic tendencies but acquires new breadth with the altered condition of the literary subject, something she calls “new emotionality.”¹¹

Research into Slovene short prose in literary studies has also included several important anthologies that have aided the canonization of findings from literary studies on short prose and its authors in educational practice. A monograph entitled *Sodobna slovenska krajša pripoved* (The contemporary Slovene shorter narrative) came out in 2006 in the series *Klasje*. Tomo Virk selected the texts, edited, and wrote a commentary for the collection. He included one story or novella each by twenty-four authors.¹² The selection stems from the desire to present “a colorful palette of tendencies and genres in contemporary Slovene short prose, as a rule no longer than about twenty pages, published after 1980, and penned by authors of every generation” (VIRK 2006: 31). The work adheres to the concept of the *Klasje* series,¹³ which is intended for young people in schools and provides fundamental literary historical information about the authors and their times. There is a survey of contemporary short narratives (according to the definitions modernism, [post-] existentialism, post-modernism, minimalism, magic realism, and genre definitions such as women’s literature), and a genre typology: erotic short narratives, crime stories, travel accounts, and short fantasy. The term “shorter prose”¹⁴ is used in the anthology as a synonym for “short prose.” It is also found in an article by Miran Štuhec (2001), and Silvija Borovnik uses it (2013).¹⁵ Virk’s textbook, *Kratka pripoved od antike do romantike* (The short narrative from Antiquity to Romanticism 2002), is similarly conceived. It surveys short prose from the origins of the novella with Boccaccio to Romanticism. The emphasis is on world literature; he refers to Alenka Žbogar (2002).

⁹ She rejects the concepts of postmodernism, minimalism, and neorealism, and adopts the Russian Mikhail Epshtein’s idea of transrealism, with the prefix “trans-“ indicating the repetition and comparability realism as a historical period in literature.

¹⁰ Alojzija Zupan Sosič, *Na pomolu sodobnosti ali O književnosti in romanu* (On the quay of contemporaneity or On literature and the novel), Maribor: Litera, 2011.

¹¹ “New emotionality is a sense of a special spleen, called postmodern spleen, connected with dependence on tradition... The passive boredom and anaesthetized state of the postmodern subject, as seen in New Age hedonism, is the best illustration” (ZUPAN SOSIČ 2011: 102).

¹² Virk’s previous anthology, *Čas kratke zgodbe* (Time of the short story 1998) contained one short story each by twenty-five authors. The following are included (without duplicating works) in both: Drago Jančar, Milan Kleč, Vinko Möderndorfer, Igor Bratož, Silvija Borovnik, Franjo Frančič, Andrej Morovič, Maja Novak, Jani Virk, Andrej Blatnik, and Aleš Čar.

¹³ Gregor Kocijan prepared two similar selections for the series: *Kratka proza slovenskega realizma* (The short prose of Slovene realism 1994), *Cankarjeva kratka pripovedna proza* (Cankar’s short narrative prose 1997).

¹⁴ Gregor Kocijan and Alenka Žbogar consistently use the term “short prose” (as a complement to the concepts of mid-length and long narrative prose).

¹⁵ She includes thirty-eight women writers, with one work each (a sketch, novella, or excerpt), from Zofka Kvedrova to Suzana Tratnik and Mojca Kumerdej.

The selection of short stories of the last two decades of the twentieth century entitled *Čas kratke zgodbe* (1998) was significant for forming Slovene theoretical views of the short story, and we cannot overlook it. It systematically describes the short story's features and situates it theoretically, historically, and in terms of the *Zeitgeist* in the Slovene space, demonstrating that the spread of the genre cannot be attributed “only to American influence—a similar thing happened there in the 1970s and 1980s—but instead likely to the global context, connected with the “spirit of the time” and with the uniqueness of the literary genre we call the ‘short story’ (VIRK 1998: 291). He cites Italian, Spanish, French, Russian, German (Ruth J. Kilchenmann, Erna Kritsch Neuse), and Anglo-American (Poe, Cuddon) literary theory and observes that *Kurzgeschichte* and “short story” do not entirely correspond. On the contrary, German literary studies strictly differentiate the novella and short story, while American literary studies criticizes this and refers mostly to the short story” (VIRK 1998: 295). He thinks that the problem is that certain Anglo-American handbooks of literary studies define “short story” more broadly than “novella” (while others do not).¹⁶ He decides that the short story is a “chimeric muddle” (VIRK 1998: 299) of the story and novella, while focusing on the narratological features of both short literary genres, their historical development, structure (especially beginning and ending), and the ethos of the time, which might be thought to give rise to the fact that the short story “lacks plot and ‘metaphysical’ completion, but often has a kind of irrational note. The short story is thus as a rule a more ‘nihilistic’ genre than the novella” (ibid.: 299). Alenka Žbogar (2006, 2009) and Blanka Bošnjak (2005) confirm this in their research on contemporary Slovene short prose: the short story is clearly a unique short narrative genre that developed as an inheritance of Edgar Allen Poe's short story and that corresponds to the special historical ethos of postmodern metaphysical nihilism and the so-called subject of talking, or passive subject, whose only action is conversation. Alenka Žbogar makes a comparison between the short prose and novel protagonist. If it is true of the novel's protagonist, to paraphrase Dušan Pirjevec, that just as he ends a journey he realizes, too late, which road he should have taken, the subject of a short story sees innumerable paths that seem endless to him. This usually so flusters him that he does not set off at all, and if he does, he learns nothing. He does not try to save the world because he knows it is impossible. He tries to save himself, his day-to-day life. (ŽBOGAR 2009: 541–42) Blanka Bošnjak (2005) observes that the protagonist in contemporary Slovene short prose is coherent when he has a traditional role and carries the action, and incoherent—that is, a diffuse subject—when he appears in a postmodern or sometimes, too, ultra-postmodern kind of Slovene short prose (141–43).

As concerns literary theory, it is necessary to note as well an article by Tomo Virk entitled “Problem vrstnega razlikovanja v kratki prozi” (The problem of genre distinctions and short prose 2004), in which he gives the features of three short narrative genres—the modern short story, novella, and short story—and tries to show that “under the American concept of short story are distinguishable at least two, maybe even three genres with differing formal structures, narrative organization, intellec-

¹⁶ He gives as an example the definition of the short story by Edgar Allan Poe, who said the fundamental markers are singularity and unity of impression.



tual bases, and pragmatic impetus” (VIRK 2004: 279). He basis his view on German thinking on short prose: Erich Auerbach, Manfred Durzak, Ruth Kilchenmann, Erna Kritsch Neuse, Josef Kunz, Jörg-Hans Neuschäffer, and also on Anglo-American theory—for instance, Miriam Marty Clark, Suzanne C. Ferguson, Michele Gadpaille, Charles May,¹⁷ Allan Pasco, and Gerald Prince. Among Slovene theorists he refers to Miran Hladnik, Matjaž Kmecl, Gregor Kocijan, Janko Kos, Aleksander Kustec, and Alenka Žbogar. In an article about Slovene short prose after 1980, the latter (Žbogar 2009) refers in particular to Virk’s insights, but also to Kmecl’s. Among foreign theoreticians she cites Franck Évrard, J. A. Cuddon, Mary Louise Pratt, and Ian Reid. In the article “Kratka proza na prelomu tisočletja” (Short prose at the turn of the millennium 2005), Žbogar concludes that despite frequent thematization of empty interpersonal relationships in an urban environment, new and young Slovene prose¹⁸ have intellectually different bearings. Fantastic elements are customary with authors of new Slovene prose, while representatives of young prose reinterpret them. The former employ folk motifs and fairytale elements; the latter show a marked shift to the metaphysical. An analysis of the output of short prose after 1980, and theoretical positions on the novella and short story, confirm and demonstrate that the short story, in comparison with the novella, reached its peak in the 1980s, and that contemporary Slovene literary studies employs measures that are suited to distinguishing the genres, ones that are more accurate than those which authors of short prose employ. The German theoretician Manfred Durzak and Herbert Krämer’s collection on the theory of the novella, along with Charles E. May and Tomo Virk, furnish the basis for this.

A survey of references in literary studies shows that, among Slovene researchers of short prose, Tomo Virk is most often cited, followed by Gregor Kocijan, Janko Kos, and Marko Juvan, and then Miran Hladnik and Matjaž Kmecl. Alenka Žbogar is cited three times. Charles E. May is the most frequently cited foreign scholar (seven times); followed by Allan H. Pasco (five); Erna Kritsch Neuse, Ruth Kilchenmann, and Franz Stanzel (three); Cuddon’s *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1976), Milivoj Solar, Manfred Durzak, Mary Louise Pratt, Ian Reid, Gerald Prince, Suzanne Ferguson, Gerald Génette, and Dominic Head have two. As regards methodology, we can see that different methods and approaches are employed: Gregor Kocijan uses an empirical and bibliographic approach, objectively and systematically describing the corpus of short prose output in a selected period. At the same time, he investigates the essentials of a literary text, which he clearly sees as its linguistic, stylistic, intellectual, motivational, and thematic composition. He is also

¹⁷ Aleksander Kustec (1999), for example, also cites May.

¹⁸ Two generations separated by the year 1960 appeared on the Slovene literary scene in the 1980s and 1990s. Members of the older one, known as New Slovene Prose, were born around 1950 and began publishing in the late 1970s. This generation came out of the modernist tradition, and the focus of its writing is anti-mimetic and anti-realist, with elements of parody, mixed points of view, realism and fantasy. The protagonist is generally a victim of society. The younger generation, members of which were born around 1960, began publishing in the 1980s. The first of them (Andrej Blatnik, Franjo Frančič, Vojko Stavber)—initially they were called the generation without charismatic mentors—gained renown with the appearance of the collection *Mlada proza* (Young prose) in 1983. Attributes of their writing were explicit thematization of literariness and intertextuality, diverse post-modernist experimentation (palimpsests, simulation, imitation, citation), a return to the past, and free reinterpretation of tradition.



interested in the ethos in which a particular text was produced. It appears that Matjaž Kmecl avoids analyzing literary texts as aesthetic creation. Andreja Perić Jezernik interprets a selection of representative authors and their poetics unempirically, comparing her findings to worldwide trends. Jožica Čeh Steger tends to stress the linguistic, stylistic, motivational, thematic, and intellectual components. She does not include canonical authors whose works have often been analyzed, devoting herself to less researched authors, and taking into consideration the ethos of the time. Alenka Žbogar empirically and interpretively analyses the works of representative and less well-known authors. She includes male and female, older and younger writers, and considers the ethos and social context, employing a systems approach and reception theory. Blanka Bošnjak treats representative authors of the same period unempirically. She apprehends literature as an aesthetic organism, and is mainly interested in the motivational, thematic, linguistic, and stylistic composition of a work.

We can conclude that Slovene literary studies possess reliable methodological, theoretical, and historical instruments for investigating short narrative prose, which are based in Slovene theoretical knowledge deriving from precise German literary studies, but also evincing a broad awareness of European and American scholarship.

The future of Slovene research into short narrative forms likely lies in precise investigation of neglected very short narrative forms—that is, short short stories and miniature stories—because the increase of texts with a minimal number of words has been a trend since the Moderna. An increasing number of very short narratives slip into “the domain of the prose poem” and therefore “generate a great many genre questions” (KOCIJAN 2012: 13). Short prose ought to be studied in a methodologically pluralistic, integrated, and, of course, scientifically objective manner.

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