

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VERSE AND PROSE IN LITERARY FOLKLORE

Marija Stanonik*

The problem indicated in the title has lately been pushed aside, but within the systematics of the theoretical problems of literary folkloristics, it is advisable to give it some consideration. The current paper tries to briefly outline the research reached so far in drawing the line between the two fundamental poetic structures, relying on some authors' observations on their complementary character, and including an independent reflection on their mutual relationship.

The basic question concerning the present theme is, on the diachronic axis, as follows: What came first, verse or artistic prose? The answer is not as self-evident as it might seem at first sight. Vatroslav Jagic hesitated about it¹; judging by daily experience, the majority, however, would agree with an unknown reviewer of the compendium of Slovene prose folklore²: "What existed first, verse or prose? ... Logic says it was prose."³ On the other hand, Jakob Kelemina and "science claim that this subject matter once composed the contents of longer or shorter narrative songs. Later on, the folk lost a sense of the metric artistic form, and the remnants of this disintegration are tales and stories in prose."⁴

A myth or a tale in prose, namely, offer only a little more than mere subject matter which once made up the contents of shorter or longer narrative songs (ballads of a greater or lesser extent) [...] Even our oldest legends have been communicated to us in metric form. But in the course of time, the life of verse came to a crisis: the folk lost a sense of metric artistic form; remnants of this disintegration are tales and stories (also legends) in non-metric language.⁵

Milko Matičetov is slightly ironic in showing his disagreement with such a solution of the question, because for him there is no unambiguous answer.

Very interesting: in the beginning was verse. Even if we turned the statement upside down and claimed the opposite — in the beginning was prose — we could not possibly come any closer to the truth. The truth is somewhere in between these two extremes, neither

* Inštitut za slovensko narodopisje. ZRC SAZU. 61000 Ljubljana. Novi trg 5, Slovenia.

¹ Vatroslav Jagic, "Paralele I izvori naših narodnih priča", in *Historija književnosti naroda hrvatskoga I srpskoga*, Djela Vatroslava Jagica, IV, Zagreb, 1953, pp. 228-298. Compare Maja Bošković-Stulli, "Vatroslav Jagic o usmenim pripovijetkama", in *Usmeno pjesništvo u obzorju književnosti*, Zagreb, pp. 116-124.

² Jakob Kelemina, *Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva*, Celje, 1930.

³ Author not stated. In the column "Reviews: Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva", Celje, 1930, *Dom in svet*, N°9-10, pp. 328-329.

⁴ See footnote 3.

⁵ Milko Matičetov, "Sklepne misli", in *Slovenske ljudske pesmi*, Ljubljana, 1970, p. XXII.

exactly in the middle nor at this or that constant angle, but on a movable point, not defined once and for all.⁶

The author blames Kelemina for his generalizations and maintains that it is impossible to prove whether ballads and legends "that have been forwarded to us in metric form" actually are the oldest, their original form thus really being verse. He explains how he himself sees the question by offering a concrete example:

The oldest legends, i.e., those with a mythic or fairy-tale core but in Christian disguise, are not something exclusively Slovene. Therefore, it is impossible to define their original form only on the basis of what has been found out in Slovenia. If, for instance, the fairy-tale legend, or legendary fairy-tale, about a man being born twice (e.g. type 49) has been communicated a hundred times, from Ireland to the Baltic, and to Sicily and Crete, in non-metric language, and only three times in verse — on Slovene territory —, how is this to be explained? Instead of turning everything upside down, we would rather say: This legendary fairy-tale theme in prose appealed so much to an unknown Slovene author in an unknown past that he turned it into song. This versified form first grew in popularity (locally limited) but, later on, a "crisis" (limited as well) followed. However, we could by no means claim that all known Slovene prose variants (28 in number) are the "remnants" of a disintegrating song, let alone the remaining seventy prose variants from other locations in Europe!⁷

It seems that it is essentially a matter of fundamental misunderstanding, for Maticetov unfolds his explanation further, getting to the point:

The history of several types (e.g. legends, ballads — of heroic or some other contents — myths, tales, fairy-tales, etc.) cannot be explained globally, but only through a detailed study of individual themes. The history of types can only be a resultant or a sum of small but not irrelevant "histories" of verse and prose types.⁸

Firm insistence on the geographical-historical method is a handicap to the author of the words above, preventing him to delve more deeply into theoretical risks which were, however, not so unfamiliar to Jakob Kelemina. Consequently, Kelemina's viewpoints are more productive for the present outline. He consents to the seeming paradox that, as to the origin, prose comes later than verse, but his argument in support of such sequence is rather ineffectual ("Later on, the folk lost a sense of the metric artistic form...")⁹. In this connection, Paul Hazard is much more convincing¹⁰. He bases the thesis of genetic priority of verse over prose on the facilitation which identifies every metric language as such, that is to say, the cyclic repetitions which are manifested in rhythm, rhymes, and several types of figures of speech. "In the beginning was rhythm,"¹¹ declares the French author, and Emil Staiger

⁶ See footnote 5.

⁷ See footnote 5.

⁸ See footnote 5.

⁹ See footnote 5.

¹⁰ Paul Hazard, *Knjige, otroci in odrasli ljudje*, Ljubljana, 1973, pp. 56, 60, 62.

¹¹ See footnote 10.

comes to join him with the statement: "The essence of a lyrical song is rhythm."¹² Staiger's explanations of the "lyrical style", too, are welcome to those who estimate that verse was prior to prose,¹³ (not prose in its daily, discursive use, of course, but in its artistic articulation). We can also find, in support of this statement, psychological reactions to individual experiences

(Words, arranged in lines, organized in a special succession of beats which bring them rhythm and give the sentence and the words a certain harmony which resembles music, and which affects a human in a completely different way than a freely written thought).¹⁴

as well as sociological reactions¹⁵ because poetry leans upon the authenticity of the inner world¹⁶, while prose is, in principle, characteristic for its distance¹⁷.

Explanations such as these are relatively persuasive; a critical observation is, however, that they are, in fact, extra-textual. But help comes here, too. Jurij Lotman explains perspicaciously how "artistic prose was created on the basis of a certain verse system as the negation of that system"¹⁸.

The answer to the question of the hierarchy between the two types of literary art is to be looked for, according to Jola Škulj, "in connection with the questions of the typology of artistic languages, where the hierarchy of these typologies was formed according to the initial criterion of the organization of everyday language"¹⁹. The author builds her "paradigmatization of prose structures" mostly on Lotman's assumptions, and she rejects the hierarchy of linguistic structures in the succession *everyday use of language — prose — verse* after the typology of Tomaševsky and Czerny, explaining that the two were misled because of their synchronic criterion²⁰, while J. Lotman on several occasions smartly proves the thesis about "a higher structural organization of prose"²¹. But he does not stop here; like D.S. Lihačov, he develops the theory about a mutual relationship in the system of prose genres. J. Lotman

¹² Mirko Križman, "Emil Staiger v luči literarnih ved", *Dialogi*, Maribor 9, 1973, p. 595.

¹³ See footnote 12, p. 600.

¹⁴ Tone Seliškar, "Gregorčičeva zapuščina", *Partizanski dnevnik*, 15, October 1944, 3

¹⁵ Soňa Burlasová, "Partizánske a odbojové piesne", in *Slovenské národné povstanie v ľudovej tvorbe*, Kolektivu pracu pripravil národopisný ústav slovenskej akadémie vied v Bratislave, Bratislava 1974, p. 158.

¹⁶ Edvard Kocbek "O poeziji", in *Svoboda in nujnost*, Celje, 1989, pp. 246-253.

¹⁷ Marija Stanonik "Otroška slovstvena folklor", *Traditiones*, 10-12, Ljubljana, 1984, p. 91.

¹⁸ Jola Škulj, "Paradigmatizacija proznih struktur", *Primerjalna književnost*, n°2, Ljubljana, 1981, p. 6.

¹⁹ See footnote 18.

²⁰ "Myths, legends, fairy-tales, stories[are] closely connected to narrative songs. Their world of motifs and ideas is the same here and there." Milko Matičetov, "O etnografiji in folklori zapanih Slovencev", *Slovenski etnograf*, n°1, Ljubljana, 1984, p. 33.

²¹ See footnote 18, p. 6.

speaks about a fruitful relationship between verse and prose (artistic prose, of course), which Jola Škulj summarizes in the following statement: "Verse and prose, therefore, have to be understood in their mutual correlativity and each time in a specific historical relation. Correlativity is therefore typological and historical"²² Also R. Jakobson speaks about this relationship, considering it to be an "oppositional structural binomial", where the "*prose principle*" is typical for its "*tendency towards combination*, while *poetry* is marked with a *tendency towards repetition*".²³

In support of the viewpoint that the origin of versological structure is older than the origin of prose structure, we can also mention the observation that in critical situations verse is given preference over prose²⁴. Also the following consideration adds to the likelihood of the point just made: Because of the conservative role of verse, only songs were actually able to survive through time; the textual level is much more pronounced in them than in prose genres where there is a greater balance between the levels of the text, the texture, and the context. Once the second of the two structures mentioned above had come into existence (presumably it was prose), the development of the two naturally did not follow two separate paths²⁵. Their relationship is one of alternation between moving apart and moving together, a result of which in literary folkloristics it is also required that in comparative studies of motifs both should be taken into account, the non-metric verbalization and the metric one²⁶; however, the question remains open as to which of the two had priority with the motifs that have survived until today²⁷.

A deeper consideration of the relationship between verse and prose reveals that it is impossible to thoroughly apply to oral literature the models used in written literature to draw the line between poetry and prose. In this connection, it might seem a paradox that, contrary to literature, in oral literature prose, while being narrated, is much more personal on the level of texture than verse. In prose, each narrator creates the text each time anew on a more or less standard motif basis, while in verse, lines also exert their conserving influence, which leaves less opportunity for personal variations. Thus, it is no coincidence that sediments of the oldest spiritual substratum of

²² See footnote 18, p. 8.

²³ See footnote 18, p. 9.

²⁴ Živa Gruden, from experience when working with children of a Slovene minority in Italy: "Children speak Slovene badly, worse and worse; songs still go somehow, but prose hardly at all." "Slavistično zborovanje", *Maribor*, 13.19.1988.

²⁵ See footnote 18, p. 9.

²⁶ See footnote 5. Gregor Krek, *Nekoliko opazek o izdaji slovenskih narodnih pesni*, vol.IV, Ljubljana 1873, pp. 119-123.

²⁷ See footnote 20.

mankind have been more authentically preserved, as a rule, in verse and rhythmic structures than in non-metric language.

Prose genres, in contrast to verse, never get automatized, either on the level of the text or on the level of the texture. Therefore, songs can be performed, i.e., sung, by several persons simultaneously, while prose is always transmitted individually, in a great tension and effort of the mind and all creative powers. A good story-teller also employs facial expressions, gestures, movements, thus nearing a "one man theatre". Consequently, there are differences in collecting the materials, recording and editing them. Songs are easier to be written down than prose, so it is no accident that research on prose lags behind research on verse. Not only is a prose text much more liable to changes than a verse text, but also from the phonetic aspect in particular, and the linguistic aspect in general, prose, in comparison with verse, is freer and therefore far more demanding for noting down. Hence the problems of further editing procedures and interventions²⁸.

Finally, I would like to encourage some consideration upon whether the reason why Slovene research on prose folklore is lagging behind is just of a professional nature — or is it because the reasons also lie in some characteristics of the Slovene nation, not yet reflected upon? They may echo the statement, repeated now and again, that we are a people of poets; this only occasionally gives rise to a certain dislike for "this hypertrophy of verse",²⁹ or to jokes like "With Slovenes the fear of prose is panicky."³⁰

Literary folklore meets here with literary science, ethnology and social anthropology.

RESUMO

Este artigo traça um breve panorama do estado actual da questão das fronteiras entre as duas estruturas poéticas fundamentais (verso e prosa), partindo das observações de alguns autores sobre o seu carácter complementar. Inclui também uma reflexão pessoal sobre a sua mútua relação. Em apoio da perspectiva que considera o verso mais

²⁸ Josip Tomiňsek, "Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva", Celje, 1930, in *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje*, 1932, p. 234. (Review) Milko Matičetov, "Basmí koroških Slovencev", in *Koroški kulturni dnevi* 1, 1973, Maribor, pp. 190-191.

²⁹ Marjeta Novak Kajzer, "Pisanje proze je garanje" (Interview with Alojz Rebula), *Delo, Književni listi*, 4 July 1992, p. 26.

³⁰ Franček Rudolf, "Answer to the questionnaire at receiving of Prešeren prize", 1990/ *Naši razgledi*, 9 Febr. 1990, p. 73. Jože Horvat, "Trajanje, najvišji občutek", Interview with the Austrian writer Peter Handke. *Naši razgledi/ Razgledi po svetu*, 23 Sept. 1988, p. 561.

arcaico do que a prosa, observa-se que, em situações críticas, o verso se esquece menos facilmente do que a prosa.

Uma reflexão aprofundada sobre a relação entre verso e prosa na literatura oral revela que é impossível aplicar totalmente os modelos usados no estudo da literatura escrita para estabelecer a fronteira entre poesia e prosa. Deste modo, poderá parecer um paradoxo que, contrariamente ao que se passa na literatura escrita, na literatura oral a prosa, ao ser narrada, é muito mais pessoal ao nível da textura do que o verso. Na prosa, o narrador recria o texto cada vez que o narra, embora o faça sobre uma grelha de motivos mais ou menos fixa, enquanto na poesia os versos exercem uma influência conservadora, o que deixa menos oportunidade para variações pessoais.