

WIESŁAW KRAJKA
Lublin

THE CONCEPT OF THE LITERARY GENRE

The aim of this paper is to present some literary theoretical considerations derived from an investigation of the evolution of the English fairy-story. They are based on my detailed study of the English fairy-story (W. Krajka, *Angielska baśń literacka epoki wiktoriańskiej*, Warszawa—Łódź 1981, pp. 158) focusing on the Victorian phase of the evolution of this genre, but also evoking the preceding and following stages of its history. This book discusses the process by which the fairy-tale of folklore was transformed into a literary, original fairy-story and surveys Victorian fairy-stories as containing some motifs taken from the folk tradition of the genre, as well as some innovatory generic features. My study also characterizes the influence of three fairy-tale traditions upon the shaping of the Victorian fairy-story: the continental Märchen (magic fairy-tale), the native (celtic) fairy-tale about deceiving a stupid ogre and the fairy-tale recording the traditional fairy beliefs of the English people. The second part of the book discusses the following new varieties of the genre created in the Victorian epoch: fairy-story fantasy (creating original worlds of fantasy on the basis of traditional fairy-tale conventions), didactic fairy-story for children or for adults (enriched with elements of allegory or the morality of a parable), romantic fairy-story, metaphysical fairy-story and humoristic (parodic) fairy-story. A glance at the post-Victorian evolution of the genre shows it to be dominated by the allegorical and didactic fairy-story (O. Wilde, R. Kipling), the melodramatic and lyrical fairy-story (O. Wilde), the symbolic fairy-story (O. Wilde, R. Kipling, J. R. R. Tolkien) and the fairy-story for children (especially R. Kipling, J. Barrie). The above study has also pointed to some generic features which are peculiar to the fairy-story: a high degree of the petrification of generic conventions; a considerable dependence upon traditional form of the genre; the fairly closed nature of the genre (its evolution being determined mostly by inherent generic tendencies and only slightly by the literary synchrony); the considerable importance of hybrids

of fairy-story conventions and the conventions of other literary genres.

However the results of this investigation do not merely concern the nature of the genre of fairy-tale/fairy-story. It is hoped that they also confirm some genological universals. The basic theoretical assumption in the study of the Victorian fairy-story was the evolutionary concept of literary genre expounded in its theoretical and practical aspects most thoroughly by C. Zgorzelski¹ and I. Opacki.² This theory views a literary genre as a definite succession of literary historical phenomena determined by the laws of literary diachrony (inherent in a given genre) and synchrony (influences of literary epochs and their dominant literary tendencies and genres). The crucial points in this succession are the different historical varieties of the genre (which are often quite unlike one another) — the whole of its evolution being the development towards its successive varieties and decline from them.³

The evolutionary conception of the literary genre turned out to be an adequate and effective means of characterizing the genre of the English fairy-tale/fairy-story. It helped to distinguish three historical varieties of the genre in question, constituting the crucial points of its evolution: the mythical fairy-tale, the fairy-tale of folklore and the literary fairy-story. They substantially differed from one another as to their distinctive features, social function and mode of existence. The mythical fairy-tale was dominated by the magic element; its reality was disconnected and closely related to human beliefs, rituals and myths. The fairy-tale of folklore was already a compositional sequence. Its reality was also dominated by the magic element which, unlike the magic element in the mythical fairy-tale, was a means of creating an autonomous fictional world. The fairy-tale of folklore differed also from its mythical predecessor as to its social function (it was meant to compensate the peasants for their dull and difficult everyday existence by means of "plunging" them into the wonderful world of fantasy and

¹ Cf. especially the following of his works: *Duma, poprzedniczka ballady*, Toruń 1949; *Historycznoliterackie perspektywy genologii w badaniach nad liryką*, „Pamiętnik Literacki”, 1965, Vol. 56, fasc. 2.

² Cf. especially the following of his works: *Krzyżowanie się postaci gatunkowych jako wyznacznik ewolucji poezji*, „Pamiętnik Literacki”, 1963, Vol. 54, fasc. 4; rpt. [in:] *Problemy teorii literatury*, ed. H. Markiewicz, Wrocław 1967; *Genologia a historycznoliterackie konkrety*, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, 1959, Vol. 2, fasc. 1. The evolutionary conception of the literary genre is also discussed e.g. in the following works: W. Krajka, *Angielska baśń literacka epoki wiktoriańskiej*, Warszawa—Łódź 1981; A. Zgorzelski, *Fantastyka, utopia, science fiction*, Warszawa 1980, pp. 9—10, 180—183; A. Zgorzelski, W. Krajka, *On the Analysis of the Literary Text*, trans. A. Blaim, Warszawa 1984, pp. 109—113.

³ A similar theory is to be found in R. Wellek, A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, New York 1956, chapter XVII.

dreams) and ontological status (it was an anonymous text, created collectively by the peasant community and passed by word of mouth). The literary fairy-story differs from the fairy-tale of folklore primarily in its ontological status: like every literary work of art it is an aesthetic structure, created by an individual author and functioning in the contexts of genological and literary historical tradition; it is also less schematic than the fairy-tale of folklore and more apt to form hybrids with other literary genres.

However the methodological validity of the evolutionary concept of literary genre is evidenced not only by its role in presenting an adequate and comprehensive view of this genre as a whole, but also in its usefulness in characterizing a definite stage of its history — the Victorian fairy-story. With this theory it became possible:

- to find in the material analysed the most essential dynamic tensions between the main tendencies in the development of the genre — the elements of literary tradition and innovation, diachrony and synchrony, the features of the definite varieties of the genre in question, the features of fairy-tale/fairy-story and other literary genres, etc.;

- to show the material investigated (Victorian fairy-story specimens) as related to its natural context of synchrony (the poetics of Victorian literature, its dominant literary tendencies and genres; the writers' generic awareness) and diachrony (the varieties of the genre preceding its Victorian phase, coded in the treasury of its genre tradition);

- to offer an orderly presentation of the multiplicity of the historical varieties of fairy-story both in the genre as a whole and its individual specimens);

- to reconcile the interpretation of single fairy-stories with the presentation of a synthetic view of this genre in its Victorian phase and to harmonize the genological analysis of literary texts (the stratum of descriptive poetics) with the presentation of definite genological tendencies (the stratum of historical poetics).⁴

The description of all these phenomena, determining the general image of the genre in question, as well as of its Victorian phase, was largely facilitated by the application of the evolutionary concept of the literary genre, which formed the theoretical foundation of the study.⁵ It seems however that the theoretical and the practical aspects of this investigation were interdependent. The study of the Victorian fairy-story resulted

⁴ This double task of literary genology was stressed most of all by M. Głowiński, *Gatunek literacki i problemy poetyki historycznej*, [in:] *Proces historyczny w literaturze i sztuce*, Warszawa 1967.

⁵ The effectiveness of this theory in describing literary historical phenomena was also strongly emphasized by I. Opacki, *Krzyżowanie się postaci gatunkowych...*

in creating a literary historical synthesis confirming the validity and adequacy of the theory, and at the same time adding to its universal character.

However some elements of the "static" theory of the literary genre (apparently opposite to the already characterized evolutionary concept) were also applied to the investigation of the Victorian fairy-story. The varieties of the genre, constituting the crucial points in its historical development, were treated as typological paradigms (typical combinations of distinctive features which appeared in varying but always considerable amounts and with varying but considerable emphasis in the literary texts from which the paradigms were derived).⁶ Individual Victorian fairy-stories were compared with these paradigms of the genre varieties — both derived from the earlier tradition of the genre (the magic fairy-tale of the Märchen type, the fairy-tale about cheating a stupid ogre, the fairy legend) and those created in the Victorian epoch (the fairy-story fantasy, the allegorical and didactic fairy-story, the romantic fairy-story, the metaphysical fairy-story, the humoristic and parodic fairy-story).⁷ The application of the typological paradigms of the genre varieties resulted in the polytypic concept of the genre as a whole — that is as a succession of literary phenomena with the paradigms of genre varieties as its crucial points.⁸ The polytypic theory of the literary genre is not incompatible with its evolutionary conception discussed earlier. It did not serve to separate genological notions from literary historical reality by forcing this reality into some schematic, apriori framework. Rather this method helped to achieve a more clear and orderly presentation of tendencies that actually appeared in the history of the genre in question, to present the literary historical material investigated in terms of a clear and orderly genological synthesis.⁹

Another element of the "static" theory of the literary genre applied in my investigation was the method of modelling, crucial to the investigation of the Victorian fairy-story, mostly because of its folklore ori-

⁶ The typological concept of the literary genre was introduced and characterized by S. Sawicki, *Gatunek literacki: pojęcie klasyfikacyjne, typologiczne, politypiczne?*, [in:] *Problemy metodologiczne współczesnego literaturoznawstwa*, ed. H. Markiewicz, J. Sławiński (Kraków 1976).

⁷ Theoretical justification for such an approach was given by H. Markiewicz, *Rodzaje i gatunki literackie*, in his *Główne problemy wiedzy o literaturze*, Kraków 1970, pp. 172—173.

⁸ Cf. the characteristics of the polytypic conception of literary genre in S. Sawicki, *op. cit.*

⁹ The harmonization of the elements of the evolutionary and "static" conceptions of the literary genre, suggested here, concurs in its theoretical aspect with the suggestions given by M. Głowiński, *op. cit.*; S. Sawicki, *op. cit.* and J. Trzynadłowski, *Zmienność i stałość gatunku literackiego*, „Prace Polonistyczne”, 1962, Vol. XVIII.

gin. The oral transmission of folklore texts entailed their double ontological status: as a general model (a set of conventions, schemes, formulas of fictional reality and its linguistic presentation) and as its particular realizations (unique performances of the model addressed to a definite audience).¹⁰ The oral performance of a model brought about its extreme variability and the existence of many variants. After multiple performances of a model its fabular details were so considerably changed and assumed so many diverse realizations that the text of folk literature might be identified only through its most general and most essential features and motifs. In this way the model not only served to classify a text into a given genre of oral literature, but also was a mark of its identity — and this made the method of modelling of such a great importance in investigating the genres of folk literature, as well as those literary genres which derive from it. The research into Russian magic fairy-tales carried out by W. Propp along these lines, resulted in establishing a universal pattern of fairy-tale action (Propp claimed that his pattern not only fitted all the fairy-tales he examined but also all fairy-tales in general).¹¹ Propp's universal pattern of fairy-tale action served in my investigation of the Victorian fairy-story as the main means of defining its traditional nature.

The evolutionary-polytypic concept of the literary genre, which served as a theoretical foundation in my investigation of the Victorian fairy-story, was treated as an element of the literary historical process understood in structural terms (according to the notions of literary structure and the hierarchy of structures derived from the Czech structuralist tradition).¹² According to this, a literary genre (here fairy-tale/fairy-story) is a higher level structure than a single literary work. Genre varieties and the literary texts in which they are embodied constitute the elements of the genre structure which are most essential and connected through significant dynamic interrelationships.¹³

• However the structural character of the literary genre determines not only the nature of relationship between its synthetic image and its

¹⁰ The theoretical problems of oral transmission of folklore were dealt with convincingly and comprehensively by the following works: M. Parry, *Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse Making*, part I *Homer and Homeric Style*, "Harvard Studies in Classical Philology", 1930, Vol. 41, pp. 73—147 and part II *The Homeric Language as the Language of Oral Poetry*, "Harvard Studies in Classical Philology", 1932, Vol. 43, pp. 1—50; A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge Mass. 1964.

¹¹ Cf. W. Propp, *Morfologia bajki*, trans. W. Wojtyga-Zagórska, Warszawa 1976.

¹² Cf. also the discussion of these notions in A. Zgorzelski, W. Krajka, *The Text as a Structure. The Hierarchy of Structures*, [in:] *their, On the Analysis...*

¹³ The necessity of understanding literary genres as literary structures is also

elements (individual literary texts in which it is embodied). Typological paradigms of genre varieties (sets of their distinctive features) and consequently polytypic paradigms of genres, are also literary structures. However these differentiating features — metrical schemes, patterns of style, ways of shaping characters and setting, ideas, etc. — almost never belong to one literary genre only; they may be found in examples of many different literary genres.¹⁴ A literary genre is therefore defined not by single features appearing in its individual examples but by a set of distinctive features uniquely interrelated, forming the unique structural paradigm of a genre or genre variety.¹⁵

This point will be again illustrated by the genre of fairy-tale/fairy-story. The structure of the magic fairy-tale (Märchen), one of the genre varieties of the fairy-tale of folklore, is constituted by the following set of elements (generic distinctive features): the stylization of narration on a yarn; an indefinite time and place of action; the schematism of language (petrified linguistic formulas), action (constant types of events arranged in unchangeable order — cf. Propp's pattern of fairy-tale action; the triple repetitions of some episodes of action), characters (sketchy and typical delineation of characters, their features being frequently exaggerated; conventional types of characters playing fixed parts in the scheme of fairy-tale action), setting (lack of descriptions of nature) and ideas (simple notions and ideas—realizations of the fairy-tale archetypes of good and evil); the victory of good over evil (didacticism); fantastic elements (magic means, fairy characters, incantations, anthropomorphism of animals); the social function of compensating the peasant listeners for their hard everyday existence.¹⁶ However each of these single elements may be found not only in fairy-tales of the Märchen type, but also in many other literary genres and tendencies. This may be set out as follows:

strongly stressed by S. Skwarczyńska, *Wstęp do nauki o literaturze, t. III (Rodzaj literacki a ogólna problematyka genologii)*, Warszawa 1965, pp. 80, 199—200 and others; A. Zgorzelski, *Fantastyka...*, p. 10; S. Skwarczyńska, *Genologia literacka w świetle zadań nauki o literaturze*, "Prace Polonistyczne", 1952, Vol. X.

¹⁴ This is also pointed out by I. Opacki, *Genologia...*, pp. 92—93 and J. Trzynadłowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 7—8.

¹⁵ This conclusion concurs with the ideas expressed by I. Opacki, *Genologia...*, p. 93. However he considers the application of such structural paradigms to the investigation of literary kinds (the lyric, the epic and the dramatic) and not genres, and stresses that given the present situation in literary genology, such an investigation would be difficult to carry out.

¹⁶ So not only intrinsic textual features, but also some aspects of their external relationship to literary historical and even extraliterary phenomena may act as elements of the structural paradigm of a genre or genre variety. This is also pointed out by S. Skwarczyńska, *Genologia literacka...*, pp. 140—142.

— the stylization of narration on a yarn occurs in all genres based on or originating in oral literature, as well as in nearly all prosaic genres of folk literature;

— an indefinite time and place of action is found in most genres (genre varieties) of "fantastic" literature (e.g. utopia, science fiction);

— the schematism of language, action, characters, setting and ideas appears in many genres of folk literature and those literary genres which are strongly conventionalized (e.g. fable);

— the schematism of characters, ideas, and the victory of good occurs in all genres of didactic literature;

— the fantastic element is found in genres of "fantastic" literature (legend, utopia, science-fiction, imaginary history, fable, etc.);

— the compensatory social function is inherent in all traditional folk literature and contemporary peasant literature, and indirectly, in the most general sense — in all forms of literary and artistic creation.

But the uniqueness of the structure of the Märchen genre variety is determined by the uniqueness of combination of all these elements, which is exactly reproduced in no other genre or genre variety.

It also appears that the distinctive features of a genre (genre variety) are differentiated as to their significance for the typological paradigm. Some of them are omitted early, whereas some others continue to appear for a long time in examples of the genre — the second group of features being of course more essential for the typological paradigm of a genre variety. An examination of the transformation of the English fairy-tale into the fairy-story in the Victorian epoch revealed such a stratification of distinctive features. The following features turned out to be most essential for the typological paradigm of Märchen (i.e. they appeared in the greatest number of specimens of this genre variety):

— the pattern of schematic action starting with damage, wrong or lack of something and leading through many stages (the most important of which were character tests and a culminating confrontation between the hero and his evil adversary) to the happy end (the victory of good, the rewarding the good characters and punishment of the evil ones);

— the magic element (fairy characters, magic means, incantations, etc.);

— didacticism (the victory of good over evil).

The range of features of secondary importance (less essential for the typological paradigm and appearing in a smaller number of its specimens) is constituted by the hyperbolic presentation of its fictional world, by sketchy and typical delineation of characters and by the indefinite time and place of action. The features of tertiary importance (i.e. those appearing the least frequently in fairy-stories) were those features mentioned before as constituting the typological paradigm of Märchen which

remained (stylization of narration on a yarn, anthropomorphism of animals, the schematism of language). The above stratification of differentiating features was made not only on the basis of the frequency of their appearance in the material investigated, but also on the basis of their durability in the history of the genre. It became clear that the features most essential to the typological paradigm were at the same time the most durable ones, i.e. they persisted in appearing in fairy-stories when all the other features of the typological paradigm had ceased to appear, acting as the equivalents of an extinct system (typological paradigm of a genre variety).

Literary genology offers a very rewarding and fascinating approach to literary history. It makes it possible to penetrate the material in an objective and thorough way, and to deliver up its complexity and dynamic interrelations (both intrinsic and extrinsic); it also helps to introduce some order of classification and systematization into the great mass of literary texts. Let us hope that genology will be a universal method, adequate and effective not only in characterizing the genres which are considerably conventionalized (e.g. fairy-tale/fairy-story) but also the less petrified ones; that it will adjust its methods and criteria to the genres and genre varieties of contemporary literature which are most often elusive and difficult to identify.¹⁷

It is hoped that the understanding of the literary genre, as presented in this paper, although largely based on the research into this problem carried out in Poland, is neither merely eclectic, nor limited to purely Polish phenomena. The concept of the literary genre which it presents is based on its three concurrent and complementary theories: the evolutionary, the polytypic and the structural paradigms of genre varieties. The evolutionary and polytypic approaches constitute two slightly different formulations of the same theory: the first of them lays more emphasis on the changeability, continuity and historic nature of the literary genre; whereas the second — on the importance of historical genre varieties (which, put in terms of paradigms, help one to achieve an orderly presentation of the main tendencies of the development of a genre). Both the evolutionary and polytypic views of a literary genre are based upon the structural understanding of literary phenomena on the strata of both a single text and a literary historical process.

¹⁷ Suggestions as to some ways of achieving this aim are given by Cz. Zgozelski, *Perspektywy genologii w poznawaniu poezji współczesnej*, "Teksty", 1975, Vol. 1.

O POJĘCIU GATUNKU LITERACKIEGO

STRESZCZENIE

Celem tej pracy jest przedstawienie kilku refleksji teoretycznych nad istotą gatunku literackiego, dla których podstawą były moje badania nad baśnią angielską. Posłużyłem się w nich „dynamiczną” (ewolucyjną) teorią gatunku literackiego (wyróżnienie historycznych, tradycyjnych i nowatorskich odmian gatunku baśni; scharakteryzowanie dynamicznych napięć na różnych płaszczyznach genologicznych; połączenie interpretacji pojedynczego tekstu z historycznoliteracką syntezą) oraz jego ujęciem „statycznym” i politypicznym (traktowanie odmian gatunkowych jako paradygmatów typologicznych, metoda modelowania). Obie te teorie są niesprzeczne, albowiem opierają się na strukturalnym rozumieniu zjawisk, traktując gatunek literacki, odmianę gatunkową i utwór literacki jako struktury literackie różnych szczebli.

Tworzące strukturę genologiczną cechy dystynktywne danego gatunku literackiego (odmiany gatunkowej) należą nie tylko do niego, lecz i do wielu jeszcze innych gatunków i tendencji literackich. Gatunek literacki określają nie powtarzalne pojedyncze cechy wyróżniające, lecz ich niepowtarzalny zbiór (struktura) o niepowtarzalnych relacjach. Poszczególne cechy dystynktywne gatunku literackiego (odmiany gatunkowej) ulegają zróżnicowaniu co do stopnia swojej esencjalności. Niektóre z nich stanowią jądro modelu gatunkowego występując w prawie wszystkich lub większości jego egzemplarzy i współwyznaczając gatunek w długich okresach jego ewolucji, inne czynią to w mniejszym stopniu, jeszcze zaś inne pojawiają się sporadycznie i w perspektywie historycznej szybko tracą status dystynktywności.