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THE ROLE OF TIME IN LITERARY GENRES *

According to Bergson time is the most essential reality, and there is much evidence to support his opinion. The psychological attitudes towards an experience depends, in the first place, upon the time to which the event causing the experience belongs. Such events could have occurred in the past, may act directly or their occurrence can be awaited for the future. They can be associated with a belief that they always recur in favourable conditions or are placed beyond the scope of time, thus beyond the scope of real life.

Various types of literary works develop in conformity with these different psychological attitudes. Consequently the theory of literary genres must, apart of other significant aspects, account for the time factor. What the memory retains from the past makes the subject-matter of epics. The direct perception of the present is expressed by lyrics¹. The centring of attention on the future and the striving for definite aims form the psychological substrate of the drama. All that is real under specific conditions irrespectively of time, what is considered valid at all times, is contained in poetry of mental generalizations, in didactic poetry, and in the true, not necessarily instructive poetry of the mind, either expressing pure ideas or illustrating them by examples in fables. When imagination crosses the limits set by time, life is transformed into the poetry of dreams, of fantastic tales.

The above does not cover all poetical work since the role of time may be restricted merely to the background whereas space relations may be made the essence of poems. Such poetry is descriptive and is characterized positively with regard to space relations and negatively with regard to time.

In this way the list of literary forms based on the role of time is complete:

* In conformity with our announcement in „Problems of Literary Genres“ vol. 1 we present professor Kleiner's dissertation. Our wish is to render accessible to the foreign reader the original concepts of the Author, the eminent Polish historian and theoretician of literature. This dissertation saw the light of day in „Pamiętnik Literacki“ (XXII/XXIII, 1925/26) and was then reprinted in his *Studia z zakresu teorii literatury*, Lublin 1956, p. 49—58.

¹ The connections between lyrics and the present time have been frequently stressed in theories of literature, though some authors regard lyrics as timeless.

- A. Poetry of spatial relations or descriptive poetry.
- B. Poetry of defined time:
 1. poetry of the past or epics,
 2. poetry of the present or lyrics,
 3. poetry aimed to the future or the drama.
- C. Poetry of all times or didactic poems.
- D. Extratemporal poetry or tales².

In contrast with the traditional approach the new criterion distinguishes between descriptive and didactic poetry. The former kind of poetry has been often mixed up with epics (mainly because an epic may contain descriptive passages), whereas the latter has been included both in epics and in lyrics. While the validity of the distinction made between description and didactics is evident and there is little probability that any one will question it, there may be some surprise at the classification of tales as a separate branch of poetry. Indeed, tales are narratives and as such they have been classified as epics if they had not have the form of the drama, the form of dramatic tales.

The fact is that every kind of literary work develops its own characteristic form, though this form must not necessarily be associated with one type of literary work only. A narrative is specifically suited for presenting past events and in that it is an epic³; however whenever the subject of a literary piece has the nature of an „occurrence“, the same form will have to be accepted, even if it has nothing in common with facts from the past and if the origin of the theme is entirely different than in epics. There are, thus, didactic poems that are epic in their form (tales and fables), and also poems of dreams, desires, and fantasy illusively assuming the shape of narratives relating events that occurred *once upon a time*. However, time so „defined“⁴, contrarily to the indication of time in epics, remains unspecified and, in fact, *once upon a time* means *never*, similarly as *in a far country* of fairy-tales means *nowhere*. An undefined time and an undefined place of occurrences are characteristic for tales, whereas epics are characterized by the clear definition of both. Thus tales differ sharply by their most obvious external traits, by what is clearly stated at the very beginning, from the seemingly related epics.

² If, in spite of the acceptance of the significance of time, the traditional division into three groups is to be maintained, then the poetry of the past has to include, as a subgroup, tales telling of a fictitious past, while the poetry of the present must cover lyrics, didactics and descriptive poems.

³ The trait justifying the putting together of descriptive poems and epics has been dealt with in another essay.

⁴ On the contrary in tales *once* means at *any time* („Once upon a time was a mouse...“ has an entirely different meaning than „There was once a powerful king...“) and an unspecified place signifies any place or everywhere.

The apparent similarity consists in the tendency of the human mind to mix up various kinds of reality. Indeed, all that presents itself to human experience or passes as thoughts through the mind falls under one of only two categories: it either does or does not belong to reality. However, the lack of reality can be of various kinds. Something may lack reality because it no longer exists at present but did in the past, the unreality of the past; or it may lack reality because it does not yet but will exist in the future, the unreality of the future; then the lack of reality may be caused by the absence of something in some specified place while it is certainly to be found somewhere else far away, the unreality of distance; and finally something may be entirely beyond reality, it does not exist and never did nor will exist anywhere. Such unreal objects are often of great emotional value to men, so much so that the consciousness of their unreality has a painful and destructive effect on the mind. As a compensation man attempts to impart to nonexistent things traits of undoubted reality, or at least some semblance of reality, by pretending that they are unattainable only temporarily. What is absolutely unreal changes in the feelings of individuals or societies into something past, distant, or future. Dreams are projected into the past, to some place far-away, or to an absolutely certain future. The paradise, the golden age, the Atlantis, the islands of happiness, and the philosophy of national messianism are all examples of such compensations. Tales are a graciously gentle attempt to transfer the desired and dreamt of wonders into an undefined past. They trespass dreamfully and intangibly but forcibly to the field of epics.

However, gradually as the emotional approach toward the past is intensified and expands, even the memory of past occurrences is penetrated by dreams. Slowly memory cedes to imagination and a fiction about the past grows up. This fiction contrasts with and complements the truth about the past giving rise to an epos.

Thus, in spite of essential differences tales and epics become interwoven. This has always happened in the course of evolution and various literary forms have overlapped and mixed together, as possibly they were mixed at the beginning in the earliest forms of lyrico-dramatic epic tales that masked philosophical ideas and views, in some primitive mythical ballads.

The mutual penetration of literary forms also consists in the fact that with regard to time every literary form has in it themes with different traits. Simultaneously, as the technique of literary work becomes perfected and as the volume of literature increases, every literary form tends to take up themes from other fields.

Whenever the human mind is capable to dominate the material of artistic works it always tends to choose what is best suited for its purpose. This is done either because of some kind of mental economy or for other reasons.

Of the powers of the human mind memory is the one responsible for making choices. It has a natural tendency to retain the most important facts. Consequently, primitive epics — similarly as the closely related primitive historiography — are restricted to important matters and never deal with things of little significance or trifles.

Selection is even more evident in the case of endeavours since what is aimed at is always considered as having, at the time the choice is made, the highest value. Thus, with regard to choice, the drama goes further than epics. It centres only on the most essential problems. However, from the biological viewpoint there is nothing more important than the conflict between life and death and therefore the drama is, in its principal forms, a poem of the struggle of death against life, whereas the comedy, which is the analogical form of the drama, praises the struggle of life against all that is harmful to it.

The situation is entirely different in the case of lyrics. Man's choice plays a very small part in what influences the human mind momentarily. In lyrics anything may be significant, can affect emotions, and everything affecting an individual and stirring individual emotions, if even for a brief moment, is important. Thus, lyrics are not subjected to the selection of subjects. They describe all things and there is nothing too trivial for them. It is not till some collective feeling comes into prominence that definite thematic groups develop in the field of lyrics as, for instance, in the case of religious and hymnal lyrics.

In the natural evolution of poetry this threefold approach to the subject-matter is very clearly marked. Homer tells only of gods and heroes, Aeschylus and Sophocles write about an overwhelming and shattering fate, Anacreon sings the song of wine and feasts.

Thematic restriction lies in the essence of didactics and tales. They instruct about important matters or dream of things worth yearning for. On the other hand, descriptive poetry has apparently developed without any thematic restrictions. From the moment when it ceased to be merely an addition to other literary forms and gained an autonomous status it has consciously developed as a separate part of artistic culture, finding delight in displaying its skill to observe and express impressions. It is not so much what is described but how it is done that is important.

Simultaneously with the spread of descriptive literature there appears a tendency to part with any thematic restrictions and the conviction gains ground that everything that is, is worthy of poetry. Lyrics also develop

along similar lines as descriptive poetry. Lyricism, having penetrated to poetry and drama, breaks down all thematic boundaries. In lyrical epics everyday life may be equally important as the battles waged by heroes and the lyrical dramatist is apt to write dramas about everyday life of the „man in the street“. To this social and democratic tendencies and the scientific habit of inquiring into details have been added and together they destroy the aristocratic hierarchy of old literature.

In this way literary works, having nothing in common with the natural evolution of distinct literary forms, are created. Such are, for instance, combinations of lyricism with a scientific approach, psychologically descriptive novels, and lyrical dramas in book form.

Such works have enriched literature, have opened new fields to genius, but have squandered the fruit of centuries of development.

Let us not wonder at the pseudoclassicists and let us not condemn them for their backward contentions. There is much to say in favour of their attacks.

In the first place they were right in the famous, or perhaps notorious, controversy on unity, which was decided in their favour not by academic theorists but by such writers as Ibsen, Maeterlinck and Wyspiański who had revived the three structural bonds of the drama: the unity of time, the unity of place, and the unity of action.

Here again comes up the role of time. The problem of unity in various kinds of literary work can be almost fully explained from the point of view of the time difference and the closely related difference in psychological attitudes.

In psychology unity is known primarily in the sphere of the will. The strive to attain a chosen aim consists in the conscious enforcement in life of the convergent factor or, speaking in esthetic terms, in composing life according to the principles of the unity of action.

The end aimed at distracts the attention from all that is strange to it, concentrates all efforts in the desired direction, and unites the constant effort of the will with the concentration of the mind. Such must be the structure of the drama when it is subjected to the preconceived end. In the structure of the drama the aim must not only be constantly kept in mind but must be potentially contained in every step forward as the drama unrolls. Every step must constitute a link of a uniting chain, must be the natural outcome of the preceding steps, and must logically lead to the next ones. The logic of a consistent action is, in fact, the poesy of this literary form, the name of which means nothing else than action.

The essence of the drama and its compact structure are so closely related that when this composition is destroyed the type of the literary form is changed. Similarly as it is impossible to strain the will perma-

nently and strive consistently for the desired end when energy is dissipated and attention distracted or divided among unnecessary secondary matters, it also is impossible to conceive a drama without expressive unity. When these conditions are not fulfilled the drama changes to a dramatic novel, to dramatic lyrics or to dramatized scenes. In no other field of art the fact is equally plain and obvious that artistic laws do exist and that these laws do, in fact, issue out of „nature“. In this point, in spite of many mistakes on other questions, the views of pseudoclassicists were entirely correct.

The composition of the drama is governed by the unity of endeavours. The composition of epics is based on the turn of memory to the past and is determined by the relations (and not the unity) of reminiscences.

Reminiscences are always grouped round some centring point but they exert no such unifying pressure as the aim does in the case of endeavours. Reminiscences permit a wide radiation of associations and a great freedom in their logic. The simultaneity or a common place of occurrences are sufficient to weaken the control exerted by the centre point in reminiscences. We always have a tendency to remember together all that has occurred at one time or in some place and a natural inclination to indulge in all kinds of digressions without harming the main stream of our memories. Such is too the composition of epics.

However, associations forming the compositional basis in epics can also gain unity. Epics tend to deal with important matters and endeavours are most important also in past events. Thus occurrences from the past are willingly associated into sequences marked out by aims successfully attained or endeavours that failed. Very often a narrative has as its theme the history of efforts and strive thus approaching the drama of the past.

The composition of both the drama and epics is based on objective relations; in both literary forms there is a mutual relationship between all that is presented and all presentations issue one from the other. Lyrics describe impressions at the moment of their reception and momentary psychological states, so the basis of their composition must be subjective. The composition here rests on the unity of experiences. However, the unity of experiences may consist of completely independent and entirely divergent elements. It may be that in the actual stream of life unity may be mixed of great events and trifles, the shock of tragedy and the noise of the street, the death of a beloved person and the colour of a veil. There are no impossible associations in lyrics and no elements so contradictory that they cannot be placed side by side.

This trait, even if not fully realized, was already felt by the authors of primitive lyrics. They mixed into their songs seemingly unrelated refrains and interrupted some sorrowful ballade or heart-breaking consi-

derations by such a recurring refrain as for instance „And lime-trees are still luscious ...“.

It may seem that, since the lack of thematic restrictions lies in the very nature of lyrics, they likewise must have a full compositional freedom. As long as the poet succeeds in enforcing his unity of impressions he is free to introduce any, even contradictory elements.

This is so, but with one reservation resulting from the very essence of the subject. The unity of experience is greatly restricted by the well-known psychological limitation of the consciousness. The volume of psychological experiences which can be recorded simultaneously is very limited and only few impressions can be perceived as a unity. And this gives rise to a principle unknown in epics and paramount for lyrics, the principle of brevity.

All truly lyric works similarly as songs, which in their origin, are strictly related with lyrics, must be short. When their length increases they depart, of necessity, from the typical and either approach epics or are saturated with dramatic elements⁵.

Lyrics have access to the fields of both the drama and epics. What takes place in the present time does not consist solely of impressions, but is composed also of reminiscences and endeavours, and it is the attitude towards them that counts. A literary piece is epic when the truth of past times dominates, however when the actual emotional approach to past occurrences is being expressed, when the memory of past times has clearly the character of actual deeply felt reminiscences, then the dominant role belongs to lyrics. Also endeavours belong to the field of lyrics when they are presented as the actual emotional approach towards the aim striven for, as wishes, or as desires. This is so because the subject-matter is then the actual psychological stimulation of emotions and emotions are the source of lyrics⁶.

If even in lyrics the freedom of composition has proved greatly limited the belief that, in view of the freedom of imagination, tales open an unrestricted scope to fantasy would be all the more illusory.

Tales are characterized by the fiction that the things told in them did take place in the past and in this they follow the laws of epics, which is all the more comprehensible since the logic of dreams has much in common with the logic of reminiscences. However, this is not the only evidence of the restrictions governing the composition of tales. Studies on

⁵ The problem is fully dealt with in the second volume of this author's book on *Slowacki* in connection with the poem *W Sz wajcarii*.

⁶ This is why prophetic poems — i. e. poems of the directly perceived future — have not been treated separately. The essence of prophetic poems lies in the direct perception and the resultant actual impressions, thus they constitute only an ecstatic variety of lyrics.

the tales of various peoples and from various ages show that they are simpler and shorter than some kinds of epics, and that the composition of tales is on the whole more compact.

There is nothing surprising in this fact. Dreams are controlled by desires and the presentation of desires as well as their fulfillment tend to follow the same lines as those set out by the logic of endeavours. Though deprived of the dramatic strain of the will tales are by their nature more dramatic than epics, they are controlled by desires and not reminiscences, in spirit they are directed to the future, though they seemingly look back to a beloved past.

Tales are dramas of fantasy.

In tales the unity lies somewhere in between epic associations and the unity of the drama⁷.

In the classification of literary forms with regard to time the following types of poems are grouped side by side on equal terms: descriptive poetry, epics, lyrics, the drama, didactic poetry, and tales.

Such a classification seems, however, not entirely satisfactory. One feels vaguely some uneasiness that classes are not all poetry in the same degree, that the particular types of poems are not equally poetic.

Is it the effect of romantic prejudices hostile to didactics in literature and apt to depreciate any Delillean descriptiveness? Or perhaps it is the result of the new theories stating that the source of art lies in the subconsciousness and calling for the removal from true poetry of all works displaying solely the controlling faculty of consciousness, of poems arising from observations or from generalizations conceived by the mind?

Without attempting to find an answer to these questions one highly interesting phenomenon must still be mentioned. Undoubtedly poetic characteristics are displayed only by those literary genres that account for time in the concrete (epics, lyrics and the drama) or at least introduce the fiction that concrete time exists (tales). The poetic character of forms in which time plays only a secondary role (descriptive and didactic poems) seems not to be without doubt.

Poetry is strictly associated with the perception of life and life cannot be described without the frame of the moving stream of time.

This is one reason more why the significance of time should be utilized in constructing the theories of literature.

1925—1926.

Tłumaczył *Andrzej Potocki*

⁷ The unity of descriptive and didactic poems is not here considered. In the former case there is the unity of the subject which is being described or, in terms of lyrics, the unity of impressions. In the latter there is the logical and mentally conceived unity or also the unity of the subject dealt with. Descriptive and didactic poetry has no unity of time.