On the Issue of Perception Peculiarities of S. Nadolny’s literary works

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the study of a German writer S. Nadolny’s fiction. Traditionally, his creative work raises disputes in critical literary theory. The research is based on several novels of the author; the article reveals the peculiarities of world perception from the viewpoint of felt reality, and focuses on foreign culture comprehension. This approach is the most topical in the context of tolerance, cross-cultural communication and multiculturalism issues in modern society.

The review of several points of view prevailing in literary criticism is given, touching upon particular qualities of world comprehension of the personages as a method of their communication with the outer world, determining in many aspects the style of the author, and supporting specificity and genuine character of his creative activity. Several viewpoints concerning some other characteristic features of the author’s poetics are also considered.

Culture-historical and comparative-typological method with the elements of the biographical method are used in present research. The choice of the principle of poetics as predominant and personifying the specificity of the author’s intention let denote the key components of this writer’s poetics and define the significance of S. Nadolny’s works in the modern literary process.

Keywords: Sten Nadolny, postmodernism, reception, multiculturalism.
1. Introduction

The literary career of the modern German writer Sten Nadolny provides for deep literary analysis, observations and debates by virtue of heterogeneity and belles-lettres approach of his works. Regarding some of his first books, we can estimate his style as close to the experimental manner of writing in the novel “Travel Card” (“Netzkarte” (1981)), which is devoted to the aesthetics of modernism, including an unhurried narration of “Discovery of Slowness” (“Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit” (1983)) written in the style of a historic novel. At last, the pioneer of Turkish prose in Germany “Selim or the Gift of Eloquence”, (“Selim oder die Gabe der Rede” (1990)) outlined the circle of issues familiar to the reader. Sten Nadolny’s participation in the competition for the I. Bachmann prize in 1980 is known as his literary debut.

The 5th chapter of the unfinished novel “Discovery of Slowness” (Kopenhagen 1801) was given to the bar of the jury. This chapter earned the highest esteem of the judges and the literary world was anxious to see a new masterpiece of S. Nadolny. However, in 1981 Nadolny published his first book “Netzkarte”, which was marginally welcomed. For most of the public, it appeared to be a disappointment.

One of the most popular novels of the author is the novel “Discovery of Slowness”. It was published in Germany in 1983, translated into dozens of languages and is considered as the chef-d’oeuvre of this author.

Nadolny’s novel published in seven years (1990) under the title “Selim or the Gift of Eloquence” was failed to arouse as much a rapturous welcome on the part of the readers as his previous work. Regardless of the fact that the issues (including the problems of intercultural communication and the implosion of migrants from Turkey within the territory of Germany) dealt with in the novel could be defined as the most urgent in the period of the German reality described.

The creative work of Nadolny is reviewed in the critical works of Birgit Brix, Thomas Überhoff and some other authors mostly in the context of post-modernist literature [4, p. 14]. As German literary critic Uwe Wittstock points out in his research considering the post-modernist novel specificity, it is the criterion of originality of a literary work that is graded in many cases. It determines and equalizes that emphatic necessity for the distinctive manner of the author, his utterly individualistic style, not comparable with the styles prevailing in the literature of the period [14, p.49]. The reason for this phenomenon emergence is the fact that the writer uses the experience of the whole heritage of literature. Finally, this is the matter providing for the manifestation of the unique and special style of the author.

According to researcher S.I.Kovaleva, a post-modernist writer feels more like a copyist of literature, an engineer of endless intertextual labyrinths, a mosaic maestro, a designer of a collage [6]. Based upon it, a post-modernist novel is frequently characterized as not surmising an integrated starting point or the system missing any coordinates. In this case, the literary world is plunged into the chaos of a maze. It reflects the multidimensionality and ambiguity of contemporary reality, to a certain extent.

The surrounding reality is also often perceived by man as a rapidly changing and unstable world identified by various complications and fragmentations of virtual illusiveness and antecedent pluralism. The inevitably growing tempo of modern life, scientific and technical progress are perceived by man as becoming more powerful and influential in all fields of achievements of mankind. The conditions of constantly changing surroundings are destined to leave imprints on the ways and scopes of human reception of objective reality. The latter is becoming more incomprehensible and controversial.
In the opinion of Anne Bohnencamp, a literary critic, it is the author’s transfer of the peculiar, extraordinary ways of reception of the surrounding reality often occurring as hostile that distinguishes the majority of Nadolny’s works. It appears to have some specific manifestation in every hero of his books [2].

However, according to the researcher’s belief, “subtraction effect” is integrant in this context; a term mostly correlating with Berthold Brecht’s dramaturgy. This idea embodied in Nadolny’s novels, takes on a peculiar interpretation: a striving for depicting the image features of the surrounding reality perception that can be viewed upon not only as the author’s personal style, but the subject of the story itself. In all his stories the author, in a number of ways, uses such kind of “narrative communication” to present this specific infelt reality perception as a display of a human need for independent perception of the reality as a way of personal cooperation with the outer world.

2. The perception specificity of the novel “Travel Card” (“Netzkarte”)

In the debut novel by Sten Nadolny, the protagonist Ole Reuter doesn’t feel able to succeed in his future career and follow the rules of society; he tries to avoid by all means the trap of social doctrines and makes a trip round the Western Germany with a single travel card. His attitude towards life is expressed not only by means of his attempts to accept general rules imposed by society; on the contrary, the attraction of this travel lies in the possibilities of self-conscious trends of comprehending the surrounding reality and making his own image of the environment. Long, pointless stay in a train provides the traveller with the opportunity of “detached” perception of current reality, “a look through attain window” allows to evaluate the outer world:

“Es ist seltsam, jemanden zu betrachten, der aus einem fahrenden Zug in den Wald schaut. Das Auge nimmt nicht einfach alles auf, was vorüberfährt, sondern muss von Einzelheit zu Einzelheit springen [12, p.21].

“It is quite strange to observe somebody who is watching the forest through attain window. An eye cannot catch everything that passes by, the attention transfers rapidly from one point to another” (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

Parcelling perception of the surrounding reality allows a man to perceive familiar objective links in his own way, to break them into separate pieces and reconnect them anew, which means that trite generalizations and traditional conclusions can be challenged. Only then the new fragment disposition can be taken into consideration, and it becomes possible to tell new stories by building new connections. Such way of perception converting into a process of “regulation of many details available” is analogous to “a look through a train window” and is a means of narration considered to be basic for Ole Reuter’s trip notes.

Besides, the parceling perception effect in the structure of postmodern novel is specific for Nadolny’s oeuvre: it acquires a specific interpretation in the context of intersection with a multidimensional rhizoidal model of the modern nomad’s wanderings, where a choice of one of the possibilities is equivalent to the choice of another opportunity:

“Now, a journey begins to the full, although I paid for a business class ticket to Freiburg. The only thought, that it’s possible to refuse suddenly from the trip to Freiburg and take another train to arrive at Donauworth, Xanthene, Miltenberg and in Mainz, Passau in the evening. Even a sudden change of plans is splendid, and I have no need to make any plans… I can trust in an event, and under unforeseen circumstances, leave the train of my own free will, with the aim of taking another, the first available train, which also departs from the station” (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

Thus, the protagonist’s journey acquires unpredictable and chaotic character, representing a particular image of a mosaic maze. A method of “restranging”, fragmentariness and rhizome promote the demonstration of randomness of the reader’s and the author’s self-expression, perception and interpretation. In Nadolny’s view, in such a case, the writer is not only the creator, but also a designer, a craftsman. In his opinion, the most significant element here is not the oeuvre, but the process of perception and the operation of summing up and regulating images. Obviously, something constantly occurs to our mind, but it seems like something already existing, the things that must be perceived, regardless of either the dreams and hopes, or political statements and literary criticism that are meant [11, p.97].

The researcher of Nadolny’s fiction, Uwe Schneider, also pays attention to the protagonist’s specific method of reality perception in the novel “Netzkarte”. In his book, the reception of the surrounding described by the author is feasible only for the observer, sitting at the window of a fast moving train; it is similar to a cinematic method of perception.

According to Schneider, it is hardly surprising that in the content of the novel, the realities of cinematography are frequently used since the novel “Netzkarte” was designed as a film script. In particular, the middle part of the novel is devoted to film production and describes the protagonist’s feelings of his activity on the film set [13].

In other words, the content of fictitious travel notes of Ole Reuter does not consist in creating the resemblance of the scene and the lived through, as it might have been in the situation with the traveller, sharing his true impressions. It is rather the description of his own state, finding himself in certain circumstances, on research of what both his journey and the novel are aimed at. The opportunity of image depicting is specifically reached by applying to stylistic means used in perception features rendering, which is close to cinematic realm reception [2].

3. Peculiarities of Perception in the Novel “Discovery of Slowness” (“Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit”)

Anne Bohnenkamp find similarity with the uniqueness of the surrounding world “from one detail to another” protagonist’s perception of the most successful in the opinion of many critics novel by Nadolny “Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit”. The work is characterized by the majority of literary critics as a post-modernist historical novel, devoted to the history of John Franklin’s life, who was an outstanding navigator and researcher of the northern seas.

Phenomenal slowness of the protagonist, beginning with the green years, causes a serious problem for him in the communication with the fellows: in all games Franklin is an outsider, suffering through mockery and flout. He is conscious of his unlikeness with the others; he lives through the disappointment of his own parents.

In the period of juvenility, John Franklin experiences difficulty in fulfilling the most immediate tasks; any sudden changes confuse him, no matter if they were orders of the captain or human relations. However, he creates his own “system,” which helps him to navigate in the surrounding world, and at times evokes even involuntary admiration on the part of his acquaintance.
The protagonist’s “own rhythm” is the reason for his own perception of time, which is “too fast” for him, as well as for the environment, due to the parceling of perception that transforms his world into an abundance of separate elements, in the mosaic, kaleidoscopic arrangement of various units and recognized by him as “from one fragment to another”.

Driven by the need for overcoming his slowness, John Franklin continuously tries to integrate the perceptible; he finds the ability of panoramic vision in the high seas and in the landscapes of the North. It is his own perception of the world, differing from the common one, that finally turns out to be crucial and makes the protagonist able to take a non-standard but correct decision connected with saving other people’s lives. Now that he is able to look at the world from a different angle, Franklin avoids common and trivial mistakes, his “defect,” which caused him so much grief in his childhood, turns out to be a benefit [2, p. 23].

4. Peculiarities of the reception of foreign culture in the novel “Selim oder die Gabe der Rede” (“Selim or the Gift of Eloquence”)

This novel of Nadolny refers to challenging topics of multiculturalism and mutual understanding between different nations’ issues. As one of his first works that fully outlined the peculiarities and problems of the first “guest workers” staying within the modern Germany, it attained fame [7].

As a researcher of Nadolny’s creative work, B. Bricks guesses the Turkish image can’t be called the newest in German literature; in particular, it was portrayed in Heinrich Böll’s novel “Gruppenbild mit Dame” [3] and in works by Max von der Grün about representatives of the workers [5]. The creative work of these writers outlined and forced to take social changes in Germany with the appearance of a great number of Turkish migrants seriously. Nonetheless, the Turkish image in these books is related to minor lines in works, without attracting any special attention. As far as Nadolny’s creativity is concerned, according to a literary scholar Manfred Dursak [8], the book could be vied upon as one of the works aim of shaping a positive Turkish character in German literature. The figure of an Oriental person at the center of narration and the protagonist becomes the embodiment of “a new hero.” Reasoning from this fact, the main issue in this fiction comprises not only peculiarities of “foreign culture’s” perception, common for characters in the novel, but also in its interpretation by the representatives of different nations.

It’s underlined in V.P.Belyanin’s research that a literary text has a variety of meanings and forms a wide field for possible interpretations. Hence, the reception of any literary text should be accompanied by empathy that is basically determined by the presence or the absence of relevant life experience that provides for intellectual and emotional reaction of a reader. V.P.Belyanin thinks that any text isn’t complete, as a matter of principle, and the process of reading and comprehension is simultaneously the process of reconstruction and restoration of the incomplete [1].

Turkish scholar N.Kuruyasichi states that the novel “Selim or the Gift of Eloquence” is read by Turkish and German readers differently: the fact that the protagonist of the novel is a Turkish ring fighter Selim can awake intense interest of Turkish readers. For a Turkish reader, acquaintance with the novel presents the case, when his reception is accomplished by self-identification with the hero of the work. The way of Selim is not just the search for “a better life,” but also the aspiration for assimilation and self-realization in another country and culture (in this case, in Germany), and for the majority it represents itself the pages of their past and the possible future. Turkish readers suppose – if we judge by the title of the book “Selim or the Gift of Eloquence” – we should pay attention exactly to that character and they sincerely consider him the only hero of the novel.

It should also be noted that not only Selim’s art of telling stories evokes in a crowd sincere admiration, but also the superiority of his spiritual qualities, abilities and talents, love for risk and at
the same time responsible attitude towards life emphasize the fact that the author is searching for some special lines, absent in the western civilization in “the Genius of Eloquence” and in a person from the East [8].

As for the representatives of the German nation, the perception of the novel “Selim” is accomplished through the prism of historical context, rather than the cultural one. The work is a peculiar monument of its age as a historical novel reflecting the social processes typical for Germany of the 60-80’s of the past century. The book details quite a long period of time during which the student’s protest movement in Germany (so called Generation 68) emerges, develops and suffers a shattering defeat; the process of Turkish workers integration arises, and not less than natural process of manifestation of mistrust, suspiciousness and prejudice on the part of the German nation. This novel fully expresses aspiration to detailed description and to almost photographic accuracy characteristic of all Nadolny’s works. It allows German readers to delve fully into historical events of their homeland.

Another point of view supposes its reception not only as a historical novel, but also as a biographical or an educational romance of Alexander (he is also the main character of the novel). German readers consider him to be the only protagonist; this effect is achieved mostly by the structure of the novel, with the help of using in the text diary prose style fragments, narrated in the first person.

This peculiar form of work evokes in the reader the idea of a specific dialogue between the individuals of the Eastern and the Western cultures – the dialogue being capable to lead to mutual understanding and to shake the settled stereotypes in future. The dispassionate view on a foreign culture helps the main protagonists to realize their mutual unlikeness and come to quite independent, though often wrong, conclusions. But, despite the difference in outlook, quarrelling and arguing, they supported each other in hardships, outlived together their failures in private life, and so the main heroes gradually become true friends. Alexander, not knowing about Selim’s tragic death and thus looking for him, arrives in Turkey: being charmed initially by unknown Eastern world, he soon experiences all the difficulties of living in a foreign country. Travelling alone, not knowing the language, he reflects to some certain extent what Selim once endured in Germany.

“Hatte er wirklich einmal vor Wochen behauptet, in der Türkei leben zu wollen? Wie war er nur darauf gekommen? Je länger er hier blieb, desto fremder, hoffnungsloser und unglückseliger erschien ihm die Umgebung” [10, p. 462].

„Could he have said a few weeks before that he wanted to live in that country? How could he have thought that up? The longer he stayed there, the more hostile, hopeless and unhappy the surrounding seemed to him” (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

However, this very travel and his own perception of a different country allow him to give true understanding and evaluation to the character of his friend:

“In jedem Detail meinte Alexander plötzlich Selims Geist wiederzuerkennen: seinen Leichtsinn, seine Fähigkeit, sich und anderen etwas vorzumachen, seine Neigung, alles nur für den Moment zu erledigen, riskant zu leben und die Zukunft Allah zu überlassen” [10, p. 464].

“In each detail Alexander suddenly recognized Selim’s spirit: his mindlessness, his tendency to delude himself and the others, his ability to settle everything at once, to take risks and to consign his future to Allah” (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

Thanks to Selim’s influence, Alexander manages not only to realize and overcome his internal problems, but to make his dream come true: to establish his own school of oratory. The gift of eloquence and the ability to conduct a dialogue properly, the power to talk lucidly and elegantly, to express thoughts and to find precise words are considered by the author to be the phenomenon of
utmost importance. Besides, one can observe some interconnection between the perception processes regularities and speaking.

In particular, it is possible to draw a parallel between the capability of telling stories, being the key element in portraying the protagonist’s character of the novel and his personal reception’s peculiarity of the environment. One can suppose that both perception and speech should not obligatory include thorough and pervasive reflection of the objective reality. It’s more important for a reader to have a feeling of incompleteness and a room for voluntary creating of his own narrative:

“Zur guten Rede gehörte, dass man mit dem anfang, was der Wahrnehmung entsprach: was man sah, fürchtete, hoffte. Das war natürlich nie schon fertig, sondern gemischt und bewundernswert unklar” [10, p. 257].

“To have a perfect command over one’s speech, one should have begun with things corresponding to perception: what you saw, what you feared of and what you hoped for. Certainly, that was not, as a rule, completed, but perplexed and remarkably obscure” (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

In the novel “Selim or the Gift of Eloquence” the writer underlines the fact that Selim’s oratory is far from being perfect – his vocabulary is miserable, his grammar is horrible, besides it is marked by deliberate usage of details:

“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!” [10, p. 410].

“He (Selim) is lingering on details, meditating for a long time, he is not sure if it really happened on Thursday, and if the man he was telling about was really from the South or from the North. He meets every attempt of narration acceleration by the phrase ‘Wait a minute, I’m going to tell about it!” (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

However the following phenomenon is immanent for his speech. This phenomenon is similar to parceling perception of the entourage; it presents a huge space for variety of interpretation, and also for the search of personal choice among the plurality of interpretations, the meaning being significant for his audience:

“Er hält sich an die Bilder, die kostbaren Bilder, die durch seine Wörter im Zuhörer entstehen – was er sehr gut weiß. Mit ihnen kann er alles… Er malt keine Bilder, sondern nennt die Namen derer, die längst da sind: im Zuhörer“ [10, p. 412-413].

“He (Selim) follows the images, the precious images, that appear before the audience’s minds on his will. He is perfectly aware of it. He doesn’t draw these images, but he calls on those existing in the reader’s minds” (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

Both the listener and the reader are able to expand and fill his text space by his proper associations on his own will. In Nadolny’s opinion, the narration is good if the readers interact in the process, and the room for fantasy, memories, reader’s associations, his spontaneity, intuition, creative impromptu should be left [9, p. 270].

5. Conclusion

Concluding the research, on the basis of heterogeneous works of Sten Nadolny considered in the article, we can point out the particular way of the outer world reception, characteristic for his personages as a method of the author’s perception.

Parcelling, fragmentation and detailed comprehension, correlating with the eclecticism, multivariations, characterizing the paradigm of postmodernism, are the uniting means of portrayal in his works.
The scholar A. Bohnenkamp sticks to the opinion, that the specific character of perception is determined by “the effect of alienation”: in the novel “Netzkarte” – it is the perception of reality from the window of the train; in the novel “The discovery of Slowness” – it is the demonstration of Franklin’s physiological slowness, in the novel “Selim and the Gift of Eloquence” – it is “the view from the outside” on the peculiarities of the foreign culture.

Individual peculiarities of the surrounding reality’s reception are able to serve Nadolny’s characters as a basic of self-awareness and to make their own way of relations with the reality possible, though it often seemed to be too fast, aggressive and threatening. On the other hand, self-perception and multivariability of “the reading” mean the ability to lead the chaos of the investigated world to some subjective immobility.

As the author notes that the objective reality of every single person in time and space is presented in his own unique way. The real picture is expressed only by all reflections combined [10, p. 342] (translated by E.M. Vildanova).

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