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When the Servant Becomes the Master:

Czech Attempts at Organizing the Problem of Descriptiveness

critics:

Stanislava Fedrová, Alice Jedličková, *Viditelné popisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce*, Akropolis, Praha 2016

O popisu. Red. Alice Jedličková. Akropolis, Praha, 2014

> Readers do not particularly enjoy descriptions. It is a rather difficult challenge for their imagination, at the same time defining only the state of things, which attracts attention to a far smaller extent than the plot[1] (J. Bečka, *Úvod do české stylistiky*)[2]

In 2012, the employees of Ústavu pro českou literaturu AVČR (The Institute for Czech Literature of the) Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts launched a grant project, *Poetika deskripce. Průzkum reprezentačního materiálu v intermediální perspective* (The poetics of description. Studies into the literary representation from the intermedium perspective), whose aim, according to its authors, was to:

[1] Translation mine, PZ.

[2] J. Bečka.*Úvod do české stylistiky.*Praha: Rudolf Mikuta 1948, p. 334. All the translations from Czech (unless stated otherwise) by A.G., and into English by P.Z.

> [conduct] an interdisciplinary survey of description in literature and other artistic representations. Literary description will be examined as a parameter of historical poetics of fiction and a projection of the architecture of the period concerned (a set of principles which are manifested in artifacts and techniques of various arts), as well as an aspect of its epistémé. Poetological explication will focus on theorization of description and revisiting its traditional classifications in poetics and stylistics, defining the relation of description and narrative, and on typologization of descriptive forms. The intermedia approach will focus on media transpositions of descriptive schemes, and the cognitive explication will demonstrate to what extent reception of description is influenced by reading competencies, knowledge of other forms of artistic representation, and observation schemes. Analyses will pursue functioning of description as a tool of evoking material reality, a component of story structure and carrier of cultural models.[3]

Given the problems with funding various humanities projects, which have difficulties "standing out" from others which show more respect for the postulates of economic and/or social usefulness (at least from today's "institutional" understanding), one should think about the motives behind the committee's decision to fund a project devoted strictly to specialist issues, hermetically theoretical, and – at first sight – unrelated to any of the practical problems of today's existence (as can be seen from the aims of the ÚČL AVČR project cited above).

The answer to this question is provided by Alice Jedličková and Stanislava Fedrova, the authors of the 2016 monograph *Viditelnépopisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce*[4], the concluding result of an entire research project. In the final remarks, Jedličková conclusively and decisively, although in a slightly "perversely literary" tone, repeats the thesis, stated numerous times across the monograph, that:

> Description has a bigger representative, compositional, and imaginative potential than it is credited with. Genette claims that description is narration's servant. We argue with that claim because we have a lot to say regarding its emancipation. And it is not in the sense of making the description independent from the plot, but in the sense of its complexity […] in terms of dosing, organizing, and modifying the plot. However, we have not been happy with this metaphor from the beginning. We are more inclined to another, equally conventional figure, which evokes stronger narrative connotations: the story of Cinderella. The description of Cinderella is neglected mostly because her prince charming is typically at hand – after all, the prince embodies the story about events.[…] Let us assume, however, that the prince is beyond the scope of our interests – instead, we are interested in a timid, ignored girl, who evolves into a beautiful young woman, whom she has been all along. […] Instead of a dress made of aurora and clouds, we gave her traditional rhetoric and cognitive hypotheses to wear, and in our interpretation, the dialogue between the theory and specific literary texts is the "coach" […] and spontaneous reading experiences. We are heading back home from the ball, where the broom and the dustpan are waiting for us – we still have so much to do…[5]

[3] https://starfos.tacr.cz/cs/project/GAP406%2F12%2F1711. Date of access: 22. 02. 2020.

[4] S. Fedrová, A. Jedličková. *Viditelné popisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce.* Praha: Akropolis 2016.

[5] Ibidem, p. 351.

The partially familiar, partially "meta-fairy-tale-like" tone should not be taken the wrong way, nor suggest that the authors lack scientific dignity. Both *Viditelné popisy* and the preceding *O popisu* (2014)[6], incorporated into the realization of the grant project, edited by Jedličkova and containing papers by Czech, Slovak, and German scholars (linguists and literature experts) provide a meticulous, in-depth analysis of description, using various methodologies, seeking innovative (or "re-interpreted") scientific tools, which would allow a more modern perspective on this method of representing reality in literature. The authors assume that descriptiveness has not enjoyed much esteem among readers and is typically associated with boring, or even irrelevant, passages of literary texts; the fact that this contempt is so common means that descriptiveness attracts relatively little scholarly attention compared to a "pure" account of events. They blame this on, first of all, the school curricula, which even today is full of anachronistic claims and analytical strategies. Moreover, they present descriptions as a static interlude, which distracts from the "really" significant dynamic aspects of the order of a story. On the other hand, descriptions are subject to outdated research taxonomies, which place academic considerations regarding descriptiveness within "classical" stylistics, disentangled from methodological and factual commitments to the peculiarities of the world represented in fiction. As a result, Fedrová and Jedličková reveal with a certain dose of irony, that:

> Even an attempt at proposing an argumentation whose aim is to show description in a positive light, stemming from honest intentions [...], is questioned in a somewhat interesting textbook, due to a question that in itself suggests the answer: "do you enjoy reading descriptions, or do you skip them altogether?" The conviction that description is unattractive or of secondary importance is thus in various (including subliminal) ways imposed on students also in didactic materials, which in theory are supposed to stop students from assigning a negative value to descriptions.[7]

Thus, the aim of those two publications is to eliminate misunderstandings. They partially stem from "a confusion of notions", i.e. stylistic and "instructional" normativism ("how to describe properly") versus demonstrating (culturally accepted and confirmed) model examples of descriptive, international (the shield of Achilles) and Czech (the presentation of a rural chamber in *Babička*, the canonical novel by Božena Němcova) perfection, and partially –from the inert influence of evaluative judgments and a "surplus" of apoetical claims. Among them, a reflection that constitutes a peculiar scientific truism (or rather, a topos) comes to the fore. It gives description a static air (special character), thus situating it not only in an opposite manner, but also (though according to the authors, it is unfair) subjecting it to the dynamic (in a temporary sense) story, which from this perspective, "might do without descriptive interruptions" without affecting the semantic, ideological, or axiological message of a given work of fiction. Similar simplifications of narratologists, especially those frequently quoted in the monograph, attested by the genuine authority of

[6] *O popisu*. Alice Jedličková (ed). Praha: Akropolis, 2014.Also available in English: *On description.* ed. Alice Jedličková. Praha: Akropolis, 2014.

[7] S. Fedrová, A. Jedličková.*Viditelné popisy...*, p. 38. The textbook mentioned is one edited byTaťána Poláškova*Literatura pro 2. ročník středních škol. Pracovní sešit*.Brno: Didaktis, 2009.

a scholar, the opinion of Gérard Genette, that a description "will forever be a servant to the story"[8],playing an ornamental role or, in a better case, completing the information transmitted on the *histoire* surface, inspire Fedrova and Jedličkova to take "a decisively polemical" position, based on a conception which is key to the concept of descriptiveness proposed in the monograph:

> It stems from the comprehensively understood character of a literary work that each extraction of a description from its context – and not only in a syntagmatic sense, i.e. from its closest textual sheath, but also from the macrostructure, i.e. the compositional surface, narrative discourse, and semantic transfer of the whole work of fiction – often leads to its reductive evaluation. The isolated descriptive form, which from the perspective of stylistic parameters seems to be artistically neutral, in a specific context can play a major meaning-creating function. We believe that attuning various elements of a literary work, understood as "sense happening", often goes beyond the interpretation abilities of a description based on stylistic criteria, and that some of the generalizing theses regarding its nature and ways of existing in the artistic style lose their reliability.[9]

In other words, the authors prefer a functionalistic approach, integrally incorporating descriptions present in the narrative space into constructing a globally sense-creating strategy of a literary work. As they admit, there some examples of the complete autonomy of descriptive excerpts, constituting an exclusively "redundant textual filler", which indeed "can be omitted while reading"[10]. However, common reading experience shows that most of such excerpts are dispersed in the narrative space in an organic way, and they harmonize with the other components of the fictional world; this harmony results in the intensification (rather than useless repetition of already mentioned contents, manifested in different ways) of the cognitive and esthetic power of the influence of the literary work. In order to prove, document and demonstrate this hypothesis and its analytical-exegetical validity, the two researchers include a range of subtle and brilliant interpretations in their monograph, which show selected works of the Czech literary canon (mostly from the 19th century) in a new light. This selection is obviously not random; it shows the essence of the common belief that it is the realist prose where the classical, model (so to say) formulae of descriptive representations of the world were formed, and that these models still determine (or at least, they should) the research strategies of approaching descriptiveness. This is because all the subsequent modifications (such as the tools of subjectification, dynamization, or dispersion of the view point broadly discussed in the monograph) continue to stem from the need to polemically approach the "original" or "obvious" model, which is additionally suspected of "fossilization" and slave-like deference to normative conventions. Meanwhile, using a modern exegetical instrumentarium, which Fedrová and Jedličková convincingly try to prove, can extract examples of surprisingly innovative descriptive operations (corresponding with the focalization mechanisms or taking into account the subjective character of looking) in historical novels by

[8] See G. Genette. "Hranice vyprávění". Translated by Petr Kyloušek. In*Znak, struktura, vyprávění. Výbor z prací francouzského strukturalizmu.* Petr Kyloušek (ed). Brno: Host 2002, pp. 240-256. Original text from 1966.

[9] S. Fedrová, A. Jedličková.*Viditelné popisy…,* p. 58.

[10]Ibidem, p. 343.

Alois Jirásek (1851-1930) or the realist prose of Karl Václav Rais (1859-1926). In the former, they find textual evidence of using the so-called pictorial models, i.e. making conditional the representational methods on iconological systems and painting conventions characteristic for specific cultural periods.

The authors decisively assert that the proposals of "updated" reading of texts that have been "read" and "discussed" numerous times, whose interpretation seems to be forever established and – just like themselves – "classicalized", do not mean any claims of "reinterpreting nor questioning older interpretations", and that their objectives are motivated mostly by the need to "clarify what the mechanism of «suggestive» influence of a text is"[11]. In spite of those explicit declarations, it is hard to help but feel that behind those "interpretative etudes" there is, at least implied, a project to "re-edit" the history of literary description, or rather re-work the history of literature so far in such a way as to make the changes of descriptive representation not the dominant factor, but rather one balanced in relation to narration in periodization and classification of narrative paradigms "applicable" in a given period.

In that case, the focus will shift; what used to be considered outdated and anachronistic, functioning at most in the space of literary rubbish or visual tricks (typically due to inert copying literature-studies stereotypes), may turn out to be a signal of literary, perhaps intuitive attempts at an application of innovative descriptive techniques, which are ahead of their time. Such an approach significantly defies the arbitrary correctness of those banal ideas, and justifies the already mentioned, implicitly declared need to "rewrite" the history of (not only) Czech literature.

The final remarks reveal that the considerations regarding (re)defining descriptiveness have just begun, thus précising, *ex post*, the cognitive ambitions of the authors; they propose a "modernized" and synthetic analysis of descriptiveness. For them, they necessarily recapitulate both the Czech and the global state of knowledge, and the competing perspectives on descriptiveness, which all function at the junction of literature studies, linguistics, media studies, history of art, theory of communication, and cognitivism. At this junction (synthesis?) of methodological solutions and ways of defining the basic determinants of prescriptiveness, which belong to numerous fields within humanities, Fedrová and Jedličková seem to find a way of breaking the academic deadlock and finding new paths to explore this topic. These new paths correspond with the requirements which modern literature, free from mimetic delusions yet constantly trying to "reconnect with the world and the reader", imposes on scholars.

Based on the insightful analyses published in the Czech novels, *Zázemí* by Jana Šrámkova (2013) and *Domeček* by Tereza Límanova(2014), Fedrová and Jedličková, through identifying the attempts at recreating the sensual character of experience and the accompanying resignation from oculocentrism, which results in the cognitive support of the remaining senses

[11]Ibidem, p. 337.

and the sylleptic character of (quasi)autobiographical narration or highlighting the cognitive failure of memorial discourses, conclude that:

> Here comes the chance for the physical world and particular objects to regain their former obviousness. Ever since modernism, material objects have been distancing themselves from people further and further. Moreover, as a result of the alienation and epistemic processes of losing faith in the reality of the external world, they cease to be comprehensible. As a result, symbolic meanings start to dominate in prose, which eventually transform themselves into empty symbols. The return to the indirect experience of objects – in which we could find an echo of the realist approach to reality of a kind (we would like to denote this as *postrealism*, as a term following from *post-modernism*) – however, brings about another type of the (non-)obviousness of things.[12]

By referring to the current popularity of "shifts" in humanities (in this case, "a shift towards objects" and a semantic turn) and taking a closer look at various strategies of imposing the illusion of "hard physical concreteness" of the represented world on readers, Fedrová and Jedličková demonstrate what methods and to what extent the transformations in the cognitive domain and the support for the role of sensual/multisensory/sensorimotor experience, which is at the source of the whole complex conglomerate of cognitive processes, which influences the modifications of traditional descriptiveness formulas[13].

The proposals of Werner Wolf (an active patron of their grant project) are of great help, especially those from the book *Popis jako transmediální modus reprezentace* (2007, 2013 in the Czech Republic):

> A description […] seems to be a phenomenon that goes beyond genres. It is transmedial, since this phenomenon marks its presence in more than one type of medium. The thesis about the transmedial character of description is implied by the fact that it concerns a category that goes beyond verbal media […]. The fact that this "transmedial character" is some sort of "inter-modality" makes description an interesting subject of research into intermedia phenomena. For it is difficult to deny the claim that pictures are able to describe the world, perhaps even better than literature is. None would disagree with the opinion that movie scenes have a great "descriptive potential", or that there are musical compositions (especially program music and symphonic poems) that also are able to describe.[14]

Fedrová and Jedličková are predominantly interested in literature (in their monograph, they also deal with the problem of descriptiveness in everyday communication, discussing the evocative and identification dimension of describing non-verbal reality from a linguistic perspective[15]), typically

[12]Ibidem, p. 313.

[13]Jedličková discusses this question in detail in "Experiencialita: rozděluje, nebo spojuje popis a vyprávění?". In *O popisu,* pp. 146-162.

[14]W. Wolf. *Popis jako transmediální modus reprezentace.* Translated by Olga Richterová. Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2013, pp. 11-12.

[15]See J. Hoffmanová. "Nepřítomný popis: kompenzace jeho evokační a identifikační funkce". In *O popisu,* pp. 9-16; M. Zouhar. "Sémantika určitých deskripcií a identifikácia". In *O popisu*, pp. 17-28.

treated autonomously – as a *stricte* linguistic (arbitrarily semiotic) vehicle of representing the world. They also look into relationships between literature and painting, considering different variants of intersemiotic translation, and tracing ekphrastic techniques – from the earliest, prototypical, antique examples from *Imagines* by Philostratusup until their modern transformations and modernizations filtered through the experience of multimodality and without forgetting about the *ut pictura poesis* topos (together with its demontage by Lessing), *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the idea of the correspondence of art. On the other hand, they do not attach any value to Werner's thesis, worrisome due to its self-confidence and easily objectionable premise, in which he attaches a descriptive value to musical compositions.

A lion's share of the monograph is devoted to summarizing and organizing the most important views and conclusions regarding the concept of descriptiveness. They use both the latest elaborations (compilations, or even name lists of scholars who appear in their book are impossible to cite here due to the limitations of space, nor is it possible to summarize the opinions, hypotheses and observations presented in the book), as well as – a significant advantage of the book – more antique rhetoric traditions. For this reason, the issue of ekphrasis, treated as a sort of prototype for all later forms and types of descriptiveness, takes up so much space in the book. They remind readers that the origins of present-day discussions, the aim of which is to define a set of essential attributes of description (seen as a separate literary genre and/or mimetic tool, or a reality-imaginative tool),should be searched for in the meta-rhetorical reflection of Greek and Roman orators who, due to typically pragmatic motivations (projecting the most effective ways of persuading their audience) scrutinized the tactical effectiveness of description-creating techniques. Thanks to this essentially pragmatic approach, they were able to work out and test a repertoire of descriptive tools, which are still valued and used today in terms of their efficiency and are inspirational for extending the literary studies apparatus which helps to scientifically illuminate the communicative (and receptive) power that linguistic statements have, so that they can evoke almost ocular equivalents of the textual "painting with words". For it is then when the convincingly formulated (and often also solved) dilemmas, which are still problematic to scholars, not only to those who try to return the right to literary existence to descriptiveness, but also to those who have spent years restoring the seemingly secondary, redundant, useless, retardational "descriptive insertions" which interrupt (in the spirit of Barthes's "signs"[16]) the consistency of a consecutive order of narrative sequences.

Although *Viditelné popisy* presents an exceptionally rich, impressive, and full (if it is at all possible; the Polish reader will be struck by the almost complete omission of the achievements of our "descriptologists"[17]) state of research, considered both in the approving and (more often) polemic mode, the most interesting aspects of the book concern those parts

[16]See R. Barthes. "Wstęp do analizy strukturalnej opowiadań". Translated by Wanda Błońska. In *Teorie literatury XX wieku*. Anna Burzyńska and Michał Paweł Markowski (eds). Kraków: Znak, 2006, p. 263.

[17]The question of the so-called ocular character of description often returns in the monograph. What is meant by that is the ability to evoke visual imaginative reactions in readers by descriptions. It is especially surprising and difficult to explain scientifically why it is not connected to Ingarden's concept of visual aspects of literary works and the concept of substantiation.

which – although sporadically – resign for a moment from respecting the hermetic rules of strictly academic (post)structuralist discourse and, by exposing the authors' subjectivity, allow insight into the cognitive process behind the interpretative conclusions. Traces of a similar, doubtlessly surprising, "revelation of a technique" can also be seen in, for example, their admittance of problems and difficulties with finding a precise genesis of a descriptive reconstruction of frescos which decorate the walls of the care home where the action of *Harlekýnovy milióny* by Bohumil Hrabal (1981) takes place (as recounted by a fictional protagonist):

> And I walked into the corridor and looked up at the ceiling, at a sprawling fresco that showed a young man sitting on the ground, leaning back on one muscular arm with the other wrapped around his knee; he was draped in a thin veil, barefoot, and had his head turned in the direction in which I, too, was slowly walking, his eyes were filled with desire, the whites of his eyes gleamed […], he had full lips, and never in my life had I seen such a beautiful man, his hair was strewn with flowers and blossoms, they tumbled like ringlets over his forehead, […] and then I saw a blue gown slipping off the edge of an enormous bed with blue cushions tossed against the headboard and covered with a rumpled golden sheet, in the middle of that bed sat a woman in a long white gown.[18]

A comment on those words, which is a part of a broader reflection on Hrabal's ekphrastic passion, apart from a detailed analysis of the ocular techniques used by the author, focuses on the question of the real painting-designatum for this description, and as such relates to the referential character of the novel representation. As a side-note (although a simple "statements of facts" would do), there is a significant declaration:

> One of the authors indeed was under a strong impression that this mystery requires an investigation and should be solved. However, it was not that the description reminded her of anything that she had seen before; it was about *the construction of this text*, obviously different from other descriptions of frescos in the novel: an enchanted protagonist is interested in the composition of the scene, spatial relations, figures, colors, and characteristic details.[19]

The investigation was unsuccessful, despite consultations with art historians and shifting attention to classical iconographic topoi inspired by myths to which Hrabal, through his protagonist, could refer in a veiled way. Eventually, as the scholar states:

> It turned out that there was a specific painting, described in the novel, which was identified thanks to our attempts at finding a potential pictorial model[…].It is a fresco which dates back to the beginning of our era, traditionally known as *Aldobrandini Wedding*.[20]

[18]B. Hrabal. *Harlequin's Millions: A Novel.* Translated by Stacey Knecht, New York: Archipelago Books, 2014.
[19]S. Fedrová. A. Jedličková, *Viditelné popisy…,* p. 289.
[20]Ibidem, p. 291.

This short "work-style digression" is evidence of firstly, the fact that the academic consideration of description hides various, often unexpected, traps, and somewhat by its very nature forces one to activate interdisciplinary mechanisms, as limiting interests only to the meta-fictional sphere of considerations does not bring satisfactory results. What should be stressed is that those results which are supposed to re-evaluate description, to give it (somewhat lost) justice and to remind readers about its indispensable role in evoking and suggesting the illusion of "tangible concreteness" presented in global literature in the objectives of the authors – which, after all, despite its "bad reputation", has always been the role of description.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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KEYWORDS

Ekphrasis

INTERMEDIALITY

stability and dynamization of description

Abstract:
The project *Poetika deskripce. Průzkum reprezentačního materiálu v intermediální perspektivě* was completed in 2017 by Ústavu pro českou literaturu AVČR. The book *Viditelnépopisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce* by Stanislava Fedrova and Alice Jedličkova is the final result, summarizing the project, together with the complementary edited volume *O popisu*. They both constitute a successful attempt at a multi-faceted, diachronic, and synchronic undertaking of the complex issue of literary descriptiveness.

visualization

HISTORY OF DESCRIPTION

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