

Telling the Story of Storytelling (Vincent Šikula: *S Rozarkou/With Rozarka*)

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1966: Two Roads

In Vincent Šikula's first two short story collections we perceive a sort of progression, which turns into a shift away from himself, towards others. The pressure the world exerts on the individual is overcome and counterbalanced by "anti-pressure": the individual's interest in the world. This interest is initially and to a degree of a complementary nature. From the oppression of the world bearing down on the individual Šikula selects items matching the narrator's limitations: sensory data, that vie for the subject's attention in a seemingly immediate (and at first sight unorganised, random) way with the full force of their emotional power, which is elevated to a value.

This complementarity is also reflected in the relation to the Other, who is (implicitly) presumed and portrayed in an equally elemental mode of perception and experience available to the narrator. The narrator's relationship to the story's characters is based on equality, a sort of neighbourly democracy: it keeps in check those who look down on others and elevates those who are looked down upon. Šikula's mode of narration is free of alienation and distance. He does not make use of sarcasm, his narrator does not loom above the characters, nor does he observe them from a distance: he is one of them. By "neighbourly", I refer to the fundamental meaning of the word, consisting in *mutual* closeness, in the fact that we are always surrounded by something or someone while, at the same time, surrounding it/him/her. The result and the limitation of this kind of "neighbourly" approach is the provincial version of the world of fiction, in which everything that goes beyond it, i.e. all the imagined forms of a broader context, form but a blurry, unstructured background. This is an intentional part of the author's concept, as the two different versions of short story *Tancuj/Dance* demonstrate: the version that is included in the collection *Možno si postavím bungalow/Maybe I'll Build Myself a Bungalow*, is the one in which the author suppresses the broader social context.

Šikula maintains the neighbourly mode, characterised by a certain plebeian quality, in his other work and it forms an integral part of his entire oeuvre. However, in his later work, from the late 1960s onwards, there is a tension caused by a tendency to transcend the closed provincially circumscribed and generally enclosed literary world and enrich it by including problems which were previously present only marginally, as a contrasting, though blurry and often unmentioned backdrop for his sketches, short stories and novellas, problems relating to a broader historical, national and social context.

The meaning of artistic expression might be broadened in another way, namely through a universal and timeless subject matter revived and addressed with an unprecedented, fresh intensity of expression. For Šikula this method meant a limitation, necessitating a reduction of the sensory/objective world of his fiction, characters and

setting, and making do with what was absolutely necessary for an intimate, minimalist style. He had to limit his characteristic expansiveness of narration, with its meandering associations and digressions. The current of narration acquired firmer banks, becoming more linear and flowing faster.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Šikula employed both techniques present in his writing until then. The world of his fiction became open to contexts he had not previously reflected, adding a social dimension, while simultaneously managing to focus on the intimate, on individual relationships and individual characters' stories. Šikula embarked on these two creative paths in 1966, publishing at the same time the novella *S Rozarkou*/With Rozarka and *Nebýva na každom vršku hostinec*/Not Every Hilltop Boasts a Pub, a book with a polyphonic narrative.

Rozarka

The novella *S Rozarkou* was first published in the magazine *Slovenské pohľady* in 1965, Issue 2, appearing in book form a year later. Judging by the number of editions, it is one of Vincent Šikula's signature works: by the late 1980s alone it had been published three times in various selections of his works. The fact that the title of his first collection of prose was published under the title *S Rozarkou a iné prózy*/With Rozarka and Other Stories (1972) indicates its preeminent place among Šikula's other works. It was the first of his books to be translated into Czech¹ and the first to be made into a film (in 1969, produced by Slovak State Television and directed by Vido Hornák.)²

S Rozarkou is the best known of Šikula's works, equally popular with readers and critics. The text remains rooted in Šikula's style in terms of its form and intended message; moreover, it builds on the message of his previous works and develops it further. This is a simple, chronologically narrated story of two siblings whose mother has died: the older brother tries to look after his mentally handicapped sister Rozarka but ends up placing her in a psychiatric institution. Compared with short stories from his previous collection, the storyline of *S Rozarkou* is less complicated, the plot reflects the title, the climax and the ending are logically driven by the events described and nothing is left open. Its individual narrative layers are structured hierarchically and serve the purpose of the story; the present is formally separated from the past, as well as from the subsidiary stories. The narrator is more serious, intent on the topic and on making full use of the potential of the story's message. However, the question is whether he has managed to preserve spontaneous colloquial diction, the proverbial "productive indiscipline", which earlier enabled him not only to present his subject vividly but also enliven the act of utterance itself? This question, relating as it does to development of Šikula's writing, will form the implicit background for a contemporary reading of *S Rozarkou*.

¹ *S Rozarkou*. Praha : Československý spisovatel, 1968, tr. Emil Charous; the selection also includes the stories *Manduľa* and *Povetrie*/Atmosphere.

² Information about the film adaptation is cited from *Kalendárium života a diela Vincenta Šikulu*. In: ŠIKULA, Vincent: *Ornament a iné prózy*. Ed. Eva Jenčíková. Bratislava : Kalligram – Ústav slovenskej literatúry SAV, 2006, s. 620 – 621.

My characterisation of *With Rozarka* as an uncomplicated, reader-friendly narration, is based on a comparison with Vincent Šikula's other works. Although contemporary critics often saw his narrative style as expansive, "naively garrulous," his early works showed that he was successfully allusive, able to refrain from spelling everything out, and leaving unsaid and "hidden" what was most important, leaving that up to the imagination of his reader. For example, in *Run/The Run*, the opening story of the collection *Možno si postavím bungalow*, both the motives driving the narrative and the identity of the protagonist remain unexplained; another short story, *Padali hrušky/Pears Falling* relies entirely on the tension between what is said and what is left unsaid. By contrast *V taketo rano/On a Morning Like This*, the unregulated current of the internal monologue allows the reader to visualise the situational context of the gushing narration. In *Mandula*, a story that appeared in his second collection, the author combines several time-levels, with the epic present juxtaposed with protagonist's back story. Šikula's seemingly spontaneous narrator advances in stately, thoughtful and firmly structured compositional patterns, ingeniously hiding them from the reader. *With Rozarka*, by contrast, is linear and strictly chronological. The clearly outlined beginning (the journey home from Šenkvice station) and ending (Rozarka's admission to the institution) concentrate the story within a brief time frame, while all the important information necessary to understand the story unfolds through the narrator's memories that are distinctly separated from the narrative flow of the story. So what happens in these few days to Rozarka? And how does Šikula organise his narration in terms of time?

After her mother's death, the eighteen-year-old mentally handicapped girl can no longer stay with her older sister and it falls to her older brother Ondrej to take care of her. He assumes that they will live together in their parents' house in the small town. This is was not entirely his decision; for this to happen, he had to change his job, and to make things more complicated, he had a long-term disagreement with his father, who moved away from people to a little cottage in the hills while their mother was still alive. On the first night in the house Ondrej realises that Rozarka wants to share his bed, since she was used to sharing her mother's. In order to avoid this, he tries to distract her by telling her stories; this goes on until dawn. In the morning he intervenes when Rozarka gets into an argument with a boy named Siduš over who will be doing the milk deliveries. The second night is a repetition of (and variation on) the first: Rozarka refuses to go to sleep and Ondrej tells her stories until the sun rises (it should be said that this takes place not only at night, since Rozarka's presence requires Ondrej to deliver a continuous, albeit interrupted, monologue, commenting on the situation, recalling past events or stringing together fragments of imaginary or overheard narratives). On their first Sunday together Ondrej prepares Sunday lunch and also sends food to his father, the way their mother used to. The angry father comes down to berate him for omitting to include a bottle of wine as, unbeknownst to him, their mother used to. From this moment on the narration stops being firmly anchored in time the way it was initially ("*On the first night (...)*", p. 10, "*On the second night, too (...)*", p. 22, "*On Sunday (...)*", p. 27)³: the present situation becomes

³ All quotations are from the 1966 edition of the novella *S Rozarkou* (Bratislava : Smena, 1966). Page numbers in brackets refer to this edition, unless otherwise footnoted.

more and more overlaid by Ondrej's stories, which take on a life of their own and mingle with his childhood recollections: of the biology teacher who couldn't recognize bird species, stories about uncle Vendel and the king's mistress, stories of uncle Dreň the broom-maker... The only coherent plotline – apart from the ending – concerns the visit to their father's house and the siblings catching butterflies on their return to town. It is as if in the second part of the novella the time limitations became meaningless and the narrator's memory gradually assumes a kind of dreamy, timeless state (which is well captured in his stream of consciousness as he falls asleep, pp. 37 – 39), which is not all that different from Rozarka's being "stranded" in time, her mental handicap having "laid the curse of eternal childhood" on her). Rozarka begins to take over Ondrej's life, but within a few days this burden becomes unbearable: the physical tiredness brought about by sleepless nights is exacerbated by anxiety about the potential transgression of a social taboo ("sleeping with one's sister" implies the temptation of incest), as well as mental exhaustion that pushes him to adopt Rozarka's mental state and daily routines and enter her elemental world. Ondrej makes two attempts to resolve this intolerable situation: the first, failed, attempt takes the form of a letter to another sister (we gather from the context that he's asking her for help, presumably hoping she would let Rozarka live with her); and the ultimate decision to have Rozarka institutionalized. This is an ambivalent victory, and one he perceives as a failure.

The open, emotionally intense ending emphasizes the ambivalence: "*I did not even kiss Rozarka goodbye. The nurse, or was it a teacher, took her and I have not seen her since*" (p. 59). What is meant by "I have not seen her since"? The phrase could be interpreted in several ways: the most probable, "never", indirectly highlights, in the process of reading, the structural devices of narration, in this case the time difference between the narration and narrated events. In a different type of narration, i.e. third person narration, the narrator is omnipresent and, in a sense, "almighty", and hence capable of comprehending the timeframe of both the story and its characters; in this case the phrase "he has not seen her since" would imply the radical and disillusioning "never." In the case of Šikula's first person narrator, who inhabits the world of his own story (as Franz S. Stanzel puts it, who "is existentially identical with the story"), the very last sentence offers a kind of consolation and might be interpreted as: "I haven't seen her since I left her there until this moment of telling the story". However, given that the "now" is not clearly defined (neither in relation to Rozarka's institutionalisation, nor in any other way), the consolation would be rather dubious. The following questions remain: Why has he not "seen her since"? What has happened to her? Although they form a legitimate part of the semantic composition of the novella (being, so to speak, "generated" by it), any attempt at an answer would transgress the immanent semantic structure. The vagueness of a world constructed out of signs might be explained only by means of its own devices, i.e. as a kind of Delphic oracle, through the ambiguity of the phrase and by taking into consideration two functional aspects of one of the characters: Rozarka has departed from Ondrej's life, and since her brother is the narrator, it follows that she has departed from the narration, the world of the story of which he was in charge, and has thus, ultimately, "departed this life." Unlike in the story *Padali hrušky* this is not an open ending that

implies various kinds of resolution. By deciding to omit Rozarka, the protagonist admits with resignation that his endeavours have failed.

Yet this concerns not only their life together in terms of everyday routine, of the fact that the narrator cannot reconcile his job and domestic duties with Rozarka's inverted routine (she sleeps during the day and stays awake at night.) The practical problems are symptoms of a deeper problem. Ondrej gradually realizes that his sister is beginning to take over his entire existence, crowding out anything that is not connected with her, e.g. his previously satisfying social life ("I started to whine, saying what a good life I'd had in Vrbinke, that she made me change jobs and move house; that I used to have lots of friends and how much I missed them", p. 13; emphasis mine, V. B.). His swallowing up by Rozarka also has another, implied and internalized form of unconscious, downward identification with her world. The possibility of regress is marked by Ondrej's childhood memories, slowly morphing into dreams. The relationship between the siblings is marked by a fatal asymmetry, for the brother starts "belonging" to Rozarka, while she, even though he is taking care of her, does not belong to him (the fact that she has taken over his life does not mean she can fill/fulfil it completely). She escapes him, she is a foreigner in Ondrej's life, a riddle without a solution. For a while he fools himself into thinking that his sister "is able to think in the same way as other people" (p. 24) but constantly runs into a lack of understanding (e.g. on p. 10: "we had a misunderstanding, Rozarka and I").

The asymmetry in the siblings' relationship is also manifested in the imbalance between the rational and the emotional. The first, rational aspect is inevitable for providing, at the very least, the basic conditions and space for the relationship to work and the brother is solely responsible for ensuring this. However, the emotional part of the relationship is not and cannot be balanced either. It is questionable how far the object of Rozarka's "infantile cuddliness" (Pavel Vilikovský's phrase),⁴ i.e. Ondrej, is irreplaceable, whether his sister relates to him in terms of their unique sibling ties or whether, in fact, he represents just another (replaceable) realisation of the caretaker and protector function previously performed by their mother.

The imbalance in the relationship is further reflected in the choice of narrative form and the way Šikula makes use of its expressive potential. Rozarka's brother is both protagonist and narrator, the sole guarantor and manager of the story. This is a technique Šikula employed quite often, although it underwent a dramatic transformation even in his early works. As mentioned, this is a shift from away from oneself, towards someone else, a move that becomes apparent, for example, by comparing his debut short story *Za zákrutou zapískal vlak*/A Train Whistled Around the Corner, which focuses on the experience of the subject, as opposed most of the stories in the collection *Možno si postavím bungalov*; a good example of this shift can be seen in *Padali hrušky*, whose narrator vacates the space completely, letting another character take over. These two objectives – i.e. expressing oneself and speaking of another character (describing their actions or letting the other character express themselves in direct speech, interrupting the storyteller's monologue) -- meet in *S Rozarkou* in a contradictory way: in trying to speak of Rozarka, the brother actually speaks of himself because in the given circumstances it

⁴ VILIKOVSKÝ, Pavel: Na návšteve u Šikulu. In: *Slovenské pohľady*, roč. 82 (1966), č. 12, pp. 18 – 19.

is objectively impossible to present Rozarka as a protagonist, i.e. to present her world, which is inaccessible even to those closest to her. This is signalled by the very title of the story, which is ambiguous or even deceptive or misleading. By being featuring her name in the story's title, the character of the younger sister is seemingly foregrounded, yet by putting the name in a prepositional phrase the author denies her the role of a subject (a fully structured protagonist, such as, for instance, Manduľa in the eponymous story). Her name is thus only a part of an implied, unuttered syntactic construction, a hierarchically subordinated circumstance related to the yet unnamed "who" and "what". If, however, the name represents its bearer, its place within the grammatical structure of the title ought to express her place in the world of the novella (as indeed it does), in other words, the position of a dependent.

The analogy between "meaning" and "technique" on the one hand and "content" and "structure" on the other, is manifested in the text as an analogy between two relationships: that between the siblings and the narrator's relationship to the character. With a little exaggeration it might be said that Rozarka as a character is under the narrative tutelage of the brother/narrator. Unlike Ondrej, she is portrayed from the outside. Their mutual relationship is expressed delicately yet eloquently by the repetitive, echoing nature of their conversations. The long dialogue passages in Šikula's earlier works allowed characters to free themselves from the narrator's supervision, even replacing him for brief moments (good examples might be the monologues of a street sweeper in the story *Uličky malého mesta* /Small Town Streets). Critics and reviewers have often noted the auditory aspect of Šikula's writing, the musicality of his sentences and the rhythms of his dialogues. While this device doubtlessly serves an aesthetic function, in the case of the novella it serves another purpose, that of signalling the limitations of having a conversation with Rozarka. Most of the dialogues Ondrej conducts with his sister are echoic in nature, with the girl reacting to her brother's prompts with a question (the child's "why?"), or by an affirmative or contradicting repetition. Rozarka's replies sometimes literally echo her brother's utterances:

"Is it tasty? 'I asked (...)

'Tasty, 'she nodded.

'When I was sharing a flat (...) we bought some tinned food (...) The one that cost three crowns fifty contained this lovely yellowish fruit bread.'

'Fruit bread? I've never tried fruit bread.'

'You can buy fruit bread, but I don't like it that much. (...) And obviously the best bread is made of flour.'

'Of flour?'" (pp. 27 – 28; emphasis mine, V. B.)

However, Rozarka mostly varies the core meaning of an utterance (as with "sleep" in the following quotation), with entire dialogues being repeated each day, accompanying a basic everyday situation (evening):

"And then we had a conversation, which was exactly the same as the previous night.

'Time to go to sleep, 'I said.

*'But I don't feel like going to sleep,' she said.
 'I slept during the day,' she said. She took my hand, as if she wanted to caress herself
 with it and then spoke into my palm.
 'One has to sleep at night,' I said.
 'I don't feel like sleeping at night,' she said.
 'But you're not even trying,' I said.
 'I don't feel like trying,' she said'' (p. 24)*

In a way, the last conversation between the siblings on their way to the institution is also echoic:

*"St. Rose's chapel was surrounded by abandoned wagons filled with grapes, on
 which the birds were feeding.
 'Rozarka, do you want some grapes?'
 'I don't want any.'" (p. 58)*

The seemingly amiable and aesthetically effective play with dialogue repetitions and variations highlights Rozarka's communication dependency, indirectly diagnosing her condition. Together with other motifs, it creates a tension between reality (what is given) and its narrative "toning down" (euphemisation) by means of indirect references and withholding information on the one hand, and between the inevitability of Rozarka's fate and deferring the inevitable by drowning it in words (indeed: casting a *spell* over it) on the other. The narrative method is thus determined by two contradictory objectives: not to utter the obvious, i.e. not to state Rozarka's condition explicitly and to fill the void with something else, something not directly connected with oppressive reality. As a result, more than a half of the text consists of digressions.

As the story opens and the siblings go to bed for the first time, the narrator addresses the reader directly: *"You wouldn't be able to imagine the situation without me giving you at least some basic information about my sister. Rozarka was eighteen years old. She was quite tall, slim and her face resembled that of our mother. People used to say that our mother had once been a beauty"* (p. 11). What the reader learns from the description is her age and appearance but the core subject of the story, Rozarka's mental condition, is presented only indirectly, by means of her reactions: when she sees a photograph of their mother on the kitchen wall, *"Rozarka thought (...) it was a picture of herself."* (p. 11). Even on the rare occasions that the narrator states something directly, he tends to generalise (*"Rozarka didn't understand"*, p. 7), or use the neutralising conditional (*"If only she were smarter"*, p. 7). On the single occasion when the narrator uses an appropriately evaluative tone (*"Dear Lord, how come I have such a stupid sister?"* p. 40), his words are addressed not to Rozarka but to their older sister, who refuses to take care of her. Despite this refusal to articulate, to state the obvious, the attempt to defer, as if the "labour of withholding" were generated by the equally unarticulated hope that Rozarka might be able to understand but that she is reluctant to try because she wants to do things her way (*"and for a while I felt that she is able to think just like other people"*, pp. 24), Ondrej is well aware that he

is just fooling himself, that this is more wishful thinking than a real possibility. So how can he bond with Rozarka in a way that goes beyond an imperative mode? How can he “talk to her”?

“...I started telling her...”

At the very beginning of the brief story of Ondrej’s life with his younger sister, on their way from Senkvice to their home, he needs to divert her attention from something she cannot possibly understand, namely the “obscene joke” of a lorry driver who mistakes them for lovers. “To change the subject *I started telling her how many fruit trees there used to be along the road*” (p. 7; emphasis mine, V. B.). Interestingly, in the given situation, telling means changing the subject. The narration serves a purpose, it is a means to an end: what the reader is presented with is not a free, “sacred” and autonomous act driven by internal necessity, a performance aiming for aesthetic independence, but rather an immediate reaction to a given situation that the narrator uses to change the subject. It takes Rozarka back to her world of simple and obvious objects, the “produce of nature: *walnut, plum, apple and pear trees*” (p. 7.) This is the first time the narrator resorts to a strategy that he later uses almost constantly: building a protective wall of words between Rozarka and those aspects of reality that she cannot understand and which thus pose a potential threat (by their “obscenity”) for her. At the same time, however, these stories function as mediators, presenting and opening doors to another, albeit more elementary, level of reality, which Ondrej hopes is at least partly accessible to his sister.

What makes the stories Ondrej tells to Rozarka functionally ambivalent is the fact that on the one hand they represent an operational act of changing the subject, of wresting her from reality, yet this cannot be not be achieved without offering something else instead, something that might fill the void left by removing the “immediate” reality, at least for a while. Ambivalence is part and parcel of all narration: it is what makes it possible to visualize what is absent and to eliminate what actually exists. After all, what else is the primal gesture of the mother of all narrators, Scheherezade, but an attempt to “change the subject” from the threat of death? Šikula’s narrator finds himself in a situation that exposes this dual nature of narration (being here and somewhere else at the same time). However, in Rozarka he has a listener who is not allowed to take the final necessary step and return from “somewhere else” back to herself, in order to confront the story (which had enriched, encouraged, instructed or moved her) with the reality of her own life.

This seemingly simple story, set in the intimate space of a brother and sister living together for a short time, takes as its subject matter some of the sources and basic formal principles of narration; this is achieved implicitly, without flaunting these principles or visualising them in a methodical, transparent way (as was customary in the 1960s), thus estranging the story and depriving it of internal urgency. By returning to the basics of literary narration in this way, Rozarka’s unhappy story allows two different, though not mutually exclusive, readings. At first sight the story is determined by the predetermined facts, i.e. her objectively insurmountable mental limitations. This is most obviously

manifested in Rozarka's inability to alter her old habits (used to sharing her mother's bed, she is not able to sleep alone, thus unconsciously giving rise to a one-sided sexual tension that challenges both a social and a cultural taboo: that of incest and of sexual relations with a mentally disabled person). Without questioning these facts, the story also reflects Ondrej's own unconscious position, which emphasizes the familial responsibility for his sister and, more broadly, responsibility for another, the imperative of helping those who are not able to help themselves. However, it is not a question of a commonplace moral dilemma that can be resolved externally but rather an internal conflict, the story's core, although this is not stated explicitly. Ondrej tells stories to his sister mostly at night, in order to delay the outcome that is inevitable right from the start, something that has been looming on the horizon the whole time but has remained unarticulated (soon after their arrival in their home the narrator starts having "*unhappy thoughts, thoughts of Rozarka*", p. 7). Although Rozarka's institutionalisation thus does not come as a surprise to Ondrej, he still regards it as a failure: however, he failed not only as a brother, but also as a modern-day Scheherezade, as a narrator whose thousand and one Arabian nights lasted only a couple of days.

Ondrej's stories take up over half of the entire text. They consist mostly of digressions, which are inserted into the principal narrative frame and whose meaning is hierarchically subordinated to the current events, i.e. what Ondrej and Rozarka are experiencing "now". The digressions relate to the main storyline glancingly, and it is only through the latter that they are "brought to life". The individual stories vary in form. In terms of genre, they include traditional folk tales and legends (the story of Augustine, p. 22); biographically enriched memoir (memories of friends and their nicknames, childhood memories of shooting birds and a conflict with a teacher, p. 14 and pp. 31 – 35); instructive pieces dealing with specific subjects (e.g. albinos, p. 14); as well as regionally-accented legends (uncle Vendel and the King, pp. 35 – 36, uncle Dreň the broom-maker, pp. 50 – 54). Ondrej refers to all the stories he tells Rozarka as fairytales, even if they involve actual memories, for example of the teacher, Miss Foldinárová.) In terms of strict genre taxonomy this label is certainly inaccurate, it is, however, highly appropriate with regard to the given communicative situation, since for this specific listener most stories are indeed fairytales (or vice versa: she takes every story for an account of real events, most likely being unable to tell the difference between fairytale and reality.) A more important difference between the individual stories, which also affects the semantic structure of the work, is the difference in their presentation. Some are presented in the form of brief paraphrases ("*I started telling her how many fruit trees there used to be along the road (...) and that all of them were planted by people from Šenkvice*", p. 7). Others take the form of a dialogue, involving Rozarka in a conversation ("*– A friend of mine (...) can imitate the twittering of a blackbird, a nightingale (...) and any other feathered creature you can think of. – A sparrow, too? – As I've said, any. – Can he imitate a jay, too?*", p. 14). Last but not least, there are stories that are free standing, transcending the given communicative context and taking on lives of their own, as if they stories were no longer addressed to Rozarka, but to the reader ("*Of course, I didn't tell Rozarka all of this*",

pp. 35 – 36; here, in the story of uncle Vendel and the king, the narrator himself distinguishes the version intended for the reader, by means of a “commentary” in brackets, from the edited version he tells Rozarka *in usum Delphini*). The tendency of some of the inserted stories to assert their independence is most marked in the story of the broom maker, uncle Dreň, which is typographically separated from the rest of the text, begins *in medias res* and is not interrupted by Rozarka’s intervention and questions. It is only when Ondrej has finished telling the story that he realises his sister has fallen asleep.

Reviewing Šikula’s novella when it first appeared, Pavel Vilikovský judged some of the inserted stories to be too independent, structurally arbitrary and unmotivated in relation to the entirety of the text: “... the spark is often missing (...), perhaps because the reader cannot follow the author’s chain of associations, but also because (...) the insertion of a ‘fairy tale’ seems random (in terms of motivation, tension, counterpoint, etc).”⁵ By comparison with Šikula’s other works, the inclusion of these “inorganic” elements is motivated by the external situation. Being “with Rozarka” requires the constant telling of stories, in which repetitiveness is not necessarily a hindrance, as in the case of children (“*We both cheered up and I thought I could use the jay story whenever I needed it again, so I will use it*”, p. 15). What is more important though, at least in terms of the development of events and character, is the fact that the “fairytales” gradually start begin to offer relief to the narrator himself and begin playing a key role for him as well: just like Rozarka, Ondrej is transported “elsewhere” by means of the stories he tells his sister, while at the same time these help him to gain distance from her oppressive presence. In this regard the novella turns into subtle apologia for storytelling: “*In moments like this I was happy that the story about a jay came to my mind, that a fairytale like this exist. I was thankful beyond words to whoever wrote it or invented it. Who knows? Maybe it was a gamekeeper and maybe the jay itself...*” (p. 26.). In this respect *With Rozarka* also tells the story of the birth of a storyteller out of need, the story of his gradual inner journey from necessity to joy, with the most complete, freestanding and independent of inserted stories occurring at the end (e.g. the story of the broom maker). What is the narrator like? To what extent is he similar to (or different from) other Šikula narrators?

In terms of time, the relationship between storytelling as a performance and its content might be realized in two ways. The first way is storytelling presented as a memory. In that case, there is a marked distance in time between the actual and the events it relates. The narrator perceives the events he reports on as a discreet event completed in the past, mostly taking the form of a story and is quite confident of its beginning before he even begins to narrate it. This is the approach Šikula used e.g. in the short story *Padali hrušky* but it gains prominence in the short story, *Dlhé týždne s jasnými nocami pred odletmi sťahovavých* /Long Weeks of Clear Nights Before Migratory Birds Fly Away, which appeared in the collection *Povetrie*/Atmosphere where the very first sentence signals a significant decoupling between the act of storytelling and the events narrated: “*When I was a little boy, before I even started school, I had a extraordinary adventure I will never forget.*” There is quite a different way of telling a story that suggest an immediate relation to the narrated events: the events and their narration are interconnected in time,

⁵ Ibid.

the narrator does not know the complete story and is reporting from “within” the events, while summing up certain parts of the immediate experience in the course of events and listing them in the order in which they occur. This approach often employs stream of consciousness, which reflects the mind of the protagonist who participates directly in the events. The best example of this kind of immediacy is Šikula’s story *Za zákrutou zapiskal vlak*, the first story in his first collection,

In *With Rozarka* the author combines both methods: the open, lively immediacy of events that are presented as taking place right now, as well as the emotional urgency of memories that held under a *temps perdu* spell of the past, with which one can’t interfere: “what’s happened has happened” At first glance dominant mode is immediacy, for example in the opening scene, where Ondrej recapitulates the events of the day: “*We’ve just come back from our sister’s place. We took the train to Šenkvice (...)*” (p. 7). The adverb “just” expresses the close, literally immediate, connection between the narrator’s “now” and “then.” The fact that the protagonist, too, is absorbed by the events, despite his role as narrator, that even in his capacity as storyteller he is not detached from his life with Rozarka, is confirmed implicitly by the occasional temporal adverbs in the narrative that move the action forward. Almost exclusively they relate to a moment in time, a single event: Rozarka’s arrival in his life. It is the starting point for all subsequent events, the narrator ascribes to “*the first night*” (p. 10), “*the second night*” (p. 22), as well as the first Sunday (implicitly, indirectly stated as the “first”), thus defining the entire chronology of events. In this respect, the narrative splits into two elementary parts: the past *before* Rozarka and the present *with* Rozarka. This simple chronology is occasionally disrupted in the course of storytelling (as on p. 15, where the narrator distances himself from what is happening by using an unspecified “today”, which implies the presence of the narrative act: “*I was just jabbering away and today, even if I tried I wouldn’t be able recall everything I told her*”; my emphasis, V. B.). The chronology is significantly disrupted only in the end, though not by any complex layering but simply by a shift in position, a new location in time that the narrator assumes by saying “*and I haven’t seen her since*” (p. 59). The previous state of being *with* Rozarka becomes the past, not only because the ways of Ondrej and his sister *are* parting, but also because they *are* parting *forever*. However, this is not something Ondrej can tell us in the course of leaving Rozarka, since this is knowledge to which the narrator, the very same Ondrej, is privy only at some other, later, point when he is no longer directly involved in the events. At this point the story becomes the past and closes for good, and it is this new state of being in the past that retrospectively gives the whole story a kind of patina, spicing it with a bittersweet emotion typical of the way we feel about things lost forever, and activating memory with its ambiguous potential of making what is lost in the past appear in the present, and appealing to our emotions.

“I went home more unhappy than ever before” (emotionality)

In addition to telling a story (to Rozarka and the reader) Ondrej is the protagonist of his own story. This may seem a variation on self-centred narrator/protagonist, typical of some of the stories in Šikula’s first collection. However, this is not really the case, as

shown by the extraordinary amount of attention paid to the protagonist's sister. The real problem is the Other, whom the story should be about. The mental handicap, characterized by her arrested development and ostensibly automatic responses (repetitive and cyclical behaviour), prevents change or progress from one point to the next: that is why Rozarka is by her disposition someone who remains outside the story. Ondrej may tell us what has happened to Rozarka, what *he* has experienced with her and because of her, and where he was eventually forced to leave her, but from her very limited range of elemental, stereotypically repeated responses (cuddling – interest – refusal – crying), it is hard to draw any conclusions as to what Rozarka might actually feel. Like her older literary brother Jozka Pilný (the character in the story *Cestou na šalandu*/On the Road to the Lodging House in Šikula's first collection), she can be "articulated" only to a very limited extent. Thus when the narrator speaks of himself, this is because it is the only way of saying at least *something* about Rozarka.

Ondrej has much in common with many other Šikula characters. As in the short story *Za zákrutou zapískal vlak*, we are introduced to Ondrej at a turning point in his life: the protagonist of the latter story is just starting his military service, while in Ondrej's case he changes jobs, place of residence and – most importantly – his social role. A young man who has so far had "an easy life" ("... *I used to have lots of friends and how much I missed them*", he continues, p.13), becomes the carer of his mentally disabled sister and is supposed to replace their late mother. As he assumes his role, "unhappy thoughts of Rozarka" (p. 7) start going through his head and later he is "more unhappy than ever before", convinced that he "will go mad or kill" himself (p. 40).

Ondrej's relationship to his sister, including his emotional involvement in her fate, is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a burden and responsibility that he took on driven by compassion and a sense of familial responsibility and solidarity and on the other, he begins to feel that he cares for her "in spite of himself" (that is, contrary to his expectations, i.e. "for real", authentically.) His compassion for his sister, however, soon turns into self-pity. This emotional duality comes to the fore in the scene on the first night, as Ondrej tries to console the crying Rozarka: "(...) *she went on wailing, as if wailing were a sort of Our Father, a prayer or whatever; I did not know how to stop her, although I tried to find words of compassion. I pronounced nearly all the nice words I knew, and before I knew it, I switched from nice words to wailing. I started whining (...)*" (p. 13). With this, Šikula reaches the apex of sentimentalism that he began to develop in his earlier works.⁶ *S Rozarkou* is the culmination of a key trend in the author's writing we might tentatively refer to as a regionally

⁶ It may seem odd to suggest a connection between this work and a literary movement that is two hundred years old, especially if we bear in mind its close links with the emerging bourgeoisie of the time. However, although Šikula's stories are set in a rural environment, the type of protagonist who sets himself apart from his community and emphasises the uniqueness of his own experience is actually close in its individualism to the characters of this genre. (This is further evidenced by the fact that the protagonist is not solely interested in what is ordinary or typical in society but in what is marginal.) According to the dictionary definition of sentimentalism „emotion (...) is considered (...) as a criterion for measuring the value of a person and his/her acts.“ The definition fits perfectly a significant part of Šikula's writing in general, and specifically the story *S Rozarkou*. (Cited from Vlašín et al.: *Slovník literárních směrů a skupin*. Praha : Orbis, 1977, p. 274. The author of the entry on sentimentalism is Jiřina Táborská.)

marked contribution to the Slovak version of “sentimental education”, a trend that links Šikula with his younger contemporaries Rudolf Sloboda and Pavel Vilikovský, or Dušan Kužel and Pavol Hruz. At the same time this specific regional footprint, or a kind of “homeliness”, sets Šikula apart from his contemporaries: the sentimentality of Vilikovský’s and Kužel’s early works is characterized by a generational emphasis, while in Sloboda’s case it is contrasted with the rationalising concepts of a conscious self-education and self-creation, and in Hruz’s it is connected to history (whereby, in order to pass the test of history, it has to don the mimicry of word play and cynicism).

Ondrej’s surrendering to Rozarka’s “larmoyant” tendency on the very first night is not the only token of his emotions. In fact, his emotionality is a reason why their life together ends in failure. On the one hand, while Ondrej perceives Rozarka as a burden that he took on driven by the awareness of familial responsibility, this by no means exhausts his relationship with his sister. The sense of responsibility, always based on a rational corrective, is gradually overwhelmed by a strong emotional bond, and it is precisely this bond that prevents Ondrej (only seemingly paradoxically) from continuing to live with Rozarka: “*I could not help myself, I had to caress her.*” (p. 17); “*I should be more strict with Rozarka. I should make up my mind and not change my decision at any price... But Rozarka would cry... And I would feel sorry for her*” (p. 25); “*I reproached her and she snuggled up to me and I was left speechless and immediately forgot all my reproaches*” (p. 40). The emotionality of Šikula’s protagonist is an approach (also used in his earlier works) that does not offer a solution in the given epic framework; it serves as a means of delay and offers only a momentary relief. It provides its agent with a “blessed” moment, when it seems that his wish is about to be fulfilled, granting him a quiet evening that involves a scene, in which children run around playfully (and also, for the uninitiated, also pointlessly) trying to catch butterflies that flutter around a street lamp in an equally pointless way, creating an aesthetically striking sight, intensified by Rozarka’s yearning. For a short while Ondrej finds himself in her world, sharing the moment with her and for a brief moment it seems that nothing could be more natural than fulfilling all her wishes:

“Everything was quiet and even the children were running around quietly, so softly as if they were afraid to stir up the dust under the lamp post, even if it flew really fast... a butterfly, a butterfly, isn’t it beautiful, Rozarka shouted, her skirt flapping, oh, only if she had a net, she could reach higher than the boys, she might touch the light that would start swaying and might shine even brighter and the little girl standing by the wooden table, might prefer to jump on the table, so that she could stamp her feet better ...

The policeman: ‘Children, time to go to bed!’

The children stop running around and their eyes follow the butterfly as it flies away, as if it scared of the policeman.

A little later the policeman tries again: ‘Children, don’t you know what time it is?’

Only now do they notice his uniform.

The policeman: ‘Well then?’

‘Ondrejko, I’d like a butterfly,’ says Rozarka and her eyes shine so brightly that I would do anything in the world just to see them like that.

'Rozarka, it's getting late...'

'Ondrejko...'

The policeman comes a bit closer to the children and they start going their separate ways.

Rozarka keeps looking at me: 'Ondrejko, I would love a butterfly...'

'I'll catch as many as you like.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'Ondrejko, and what kinds?'

'Any kind. I'll catch as many as you wish.'

I take her by the hand and we head home." (p. 49)

This is where Ondrej's narration reaches its emotional and semantic climax: at this moment the impossible really happens *with* Rozarka – the siblings truly share a moment. Everything that happens after this is an anticlimax, the stating of the obvious. Ondrej suspects that he would feel lonely *without* Rozarka but at the same time he has to admit something he has known all along, that life *with* Rozarka is impossible. The weeks spent with his sister gave the protagonist a sort of fulfilment and served as a kind of emotional awakening, but at the same time they made him aware of the irreversible loss, leading him to understand that this is a situation nothing can be done about except to bear it. That is why the seemingly carefree, "just beautiful" scene with butterflies and children contains an experiential corrective. The meaning of the scene *vis à vis* Ondrej's story becomes an implicit parable: the nightmare flying around the lamp is an obvious cultural code for an unattainable desire, its beauty representing something intangible, something one can't catch (or "own", "possess for good"), and even if one did so, then only in a devalued, "dead" form. In the morning, when a villager finds the dead butterfly on her market stall, she "*looks at it with repulsion*" and "*sweeps the butterfly off the table*" (p. 48). Similarly, the moments Rozarka and Ondrej *share* are brief and ephemeral, they cannot be planned ahead and it is not possible to dwell in them for long.

For the characters of traditional sentimental novels, after going through "virtuous suffering", what lay ahead was "a victory or tragic perdition"; characters in sentimental drama "suffer in the most of heartbreaking ways, and in end, by a lucky coincidence, their virtue receives its just reward".⁷ In other words, the emotionality is given an epic or dramatic external expression. Two hundred years later Šikula's protagonist is left with a "thwarted plot", i.e. lyricism: the emotion does not find its expression in action, the attempt to act does not bring the expected result, the world does not change and the protagonist must ultimately deal with his own state of mind and feelings.

The father of Rozarka and Ondrej represents another failed version of emotionality. The old man's carping is a manifestation of a mostly inexplicable and thus irrational defiance of the world and his own family (he abandons his wife but keeps in touch: his bitterness is only partly motivated by the fact that some of his land was nationalised, see p. 45). The father's indifference to his handicapped daughter is in contrast with Ondrej's

⁷ Vlašín, loc. cit., p. 275.

attempt to take care of Rozarka. His abode – an isolated, run-down house on the mountain high above the village – reflects his relationship to other people. He is one of Šikula's maverick characters, albeit one who is reluctant to communicate with the outside world. If he goes down to the village, it is only to get into a fight: "*The day before yesterday, my father barged in out of the blue. First he slammed the gate shut, then he flung the door shut so violently that the window almost shattered and he started to shout. (...) He run around the rooms, then kicked down a chair and off he went*" (pp. 29 – 30). The marginal status of Ondrej's father, symbolised by the place where he live, results from his own decision. His main characteristic is reclusiveness, which runs against the nature of the more open characters in Šikula's other works.

The publication of two more collections of short stories in 1966 clearly demonstrated that the regional "unity of place and characters" implied in his second short story collection *Možno si postavím bungalow* was a determining feature of Šikula's style. He developed a literary world around the textual space of short stories and novellas, which featured a clearly defined regional topography and a varied cast of characters. Individual works are not closed, the characters do not disappear after they have "played their part", they merely change function: the protagonists become extras and the supporting characters are cast in a leading role. A character named Hejgeš from the series of stories entitled *Žobráci* (included in *Nebýva na každom vršku hostinec/Not Every Hilltop Boasts a Pub*) makes a brief appearance in *S Rozarkou* (p. 42), as does Mandula's son in a variation on a dialogue from the novella *Mandula*,⁸ or the town sweeper (pp. 20) featured in the story *Uličky malého mesta/The Streets of a Small Town*; even the village of Hruškovec, the location for Šikula's children's novel *Prázdniny so strýcom Rafaelom/Holiday with Uncle Rafael*, is mentioned in the text. At the centre of Šikula's literary world is a college town surrounded by vineyards with a statue of Ľudovít Štúr in the main square, a literary representation of the town of Modra. The unity of short stories, features and novellas, which are mutually open and porous develops into a unity of the oeuvre, safeguarded not only by the person of the author, but also by the homogeneity of his fictional world. Another contemporary Slovak novelist, Ladislav Ballek, created his epically united town of Palánk out of texts representing various genres. However, in Ballek's case this unity applies only to three books from the happiest period of the author's life, whereas for Šikula this was a creative principle the author observed all his life.

Vincent Šikula is a writer capable of anchoring his texts in a space and and of grounding them epically: "being from somewhere" it is an excellent literary starting point. The credibility of setting makes the stories convincing. Even though the reader is aware of the fact that the setting (as everything else in the work of fiction) is created *exclusively* through narration, it should be created in a way that makes us feel that this world existed before the narrator started telling us about it and that it will continue to exist

⁸ "– Whose kin are you? – he asked him. / – Mandula's, – the boy said. / – Mandula's? (...)" (With Rozarka, p. 52); "– Whose kin are you? – she asked. / – Mandula's. / – Mandula's? (...)" (ŠIKULA, Vincent: *Možno si postavím bungalow*. Bratislava : Slovenský spisovateľ, 1964, p. 76).

when he has finished his story. The story of Ondrej and his sister transcends its local setting but, in order to do so, it has to be set somewhere. It uses the specific point to certain cultural and anthropological axioms i.e. responsibility for another person, caring, an emotional emphasis in the relationship to oneself and the ability to feel compassion and, last but not the least, the act of storytelling, as a way of letting us make sense of the world, at least for a while, while helping others to understand it. The potential is expressed in the title of the novella – there is a very clear echo of the word *rozprávka* (the Slovak word for “fairytale”) in the name *Rozarka*.

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