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# Lyrical Tendencies in the Prose of Slovak Authors from Serbia's Region Vojvodina

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Lyrical tendencies can be distinctly identified in the prose of the 1940s within the literature of the Slovak national minority in Vojvodina, Serbia; however, they only began to gain wider acceptance in subsequent decades. In the 1960s, the lyricization of prose was regarded as a significant innovative development, reflecting the influence of contemporary artistic trends on Slovak Vojvodinian literature from both Yugoslav and international perspectives. The poets Ján Labáth (1926–2018) and Viera Benková (b. 1939) made significant contributions through their prose to transcending prevailing realist artistic methods and advancing the evolution of neo-modernist poetics. Their prose is marked by subjectivity, an internalized perspective on events, and the use of the stream of consciousness technique. The focus on the *sujet* was evident in the nonlinear narrative and the frequent changes in temporal and spatial relationships. A common characteristic was the interplay between narrative and meditative reflective elements. Typical features of their prose include poetic expressive techniques, a rich use of metaphors and figures of repetition, and a general inclination towards ornate expression.

**Kľúčové slová:** slovenská literatúra vo Vojvodine, lyrické tendencie, moderná próza, Ján Labáth, Viera Benková

The connections of the Slovak minority in Vojvodina, Serbia, with Slovak literature and culture in Slovakia itself became significantly restricted after 1948 due to the Communist takeovers in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and the deterioration of bilateral Czechoslovak-Yugoslav relations. As a result of these circumstances, Slovak literature from Vojvodina increasingly drew inspiration from contemporary Yugoslav and global artistic trends, a tendency that intensified in the 1960s with the arrival of a new generation of authors born in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The endeavour to “bridge the enclave boundaries of Slovak Vojvodinian literature and to integrate it into broader literary contexts” (Svetlík 2015: 102) was also deemed significant by the young literary critics of that time, such as Michal Harpáň and Vífazoslav Hronec (both born in 1944), who are now recognized as established authorities.

Among prose writers, Ján Labáth (1926–2018) and Viera Benková (b. 1939) most closely aligned with this perspective. Both of them departed from the prevailing trends of contemporary literary production. In their prose, lyrical experientiality and emotional depth were crucial, accompanied by a reduced *fabula* and contemplative, reflective passages. Thematically, they focused on the tensions between the individual and society, while also addressing the existential condition of human unrest. Labáth’s debut prose book, *Jazdec z Turkménska* [The Rider from Turkmenistan] (1963), along with Benková’s *Lesná studienka* [The Forest Spring] (1973), played a significant role in transcending the typological boundaries of rustic realist prose (Harpáň 1990). Both incorporated the lyrical principle into prose to a significant degree,<sup>1</sup> and their poetics “favoured the modernist ideal” (Svetlík 2009: 7). In their work, one can see an emphasis on the “subjective perception of reality, which primarily manifests itself through the internalization of narrative action, sometimes realized by the ‘mere’ lyricization of prose action but often already done through the application of various modifications of the stream of consciousness as the core modernist method” (Svetlík 2009: 8).

Labáth transcended the traditional realist approach (Čížiková 2011, 2013) and sought to evade the prevailing expectation for engaged literature at that time. He championed the independence of artistic creation and the receptiveness of minority literature to contemporary trends. Benková, a poet known for her distinctly sensual expression, openly engaged with contemporary artistic trends emerging from the Belgrade art scene. In her early prose, she creatively explored the intense emotional experiences of youth but later transitioned to the expression of historical, mythic, and archetypal themes related to the national identity of her minority community. Alongside content innovations – such as the incorporation of musical motifs, modifications to the spatio-temporal characteristics of narratives, and liberal worldviews expressed through young protagonists – she also experimented with form, the concept of time, and the linearity of narration.

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1 In the works of minority realist writers, lyrical passages also occasionally appear, but their function is primarily ornamental and is perceived as a retarding element (Harpáň 1990: 171). Within the realist artistic method, lyrical elements predominantly served a descriptive function in the presentation of space and characters.

The inclination towards lyricization in prose is not exclusively linked to a programmatic rejection of the realist approach. They are largely influenced by the author's sensibility and temperament as well as by intermedial relationships and extratextual realities. In this context, the primary question of this study is whether the lyricization of prose in the works of Labáth and Benková emerged from the inherent poetic qualities of these authors, or if it was a deliberate and strategic attempt to move beyond the conventional model of realist narration.

### Ján Labáth

Lyrical tendencies were somewhat evident in Slovak Vojvodinian prose during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they became more pronounced in the 1960s. While Labáth's early prose may recall the lyricized Slovak prose of the interwar period through its balladic atmosphere and lyrical elements, it primarily embodied the traditions of the Slovak cultural scene in Vojvodina itself – particularly the balladic-lyrical structure characteristic of Ján Čajak the Younger's works (1897–1982).<sup>2</sup> Labáth himself noted that he was inspired by Čajak.<sup>3</sup> He also highlighted the significance of the authorial subject and its expressive traits in the creative process: “I admit that I feel like a poet in every literary form: in a short story, in a novel, even in an ordinary speech [...] and whatever I have attempted to write, it was a poetic line” (Labáth 1996). In other self-reflective texts, Labáth similarly characterized his creativity as fundamentally ingrained, describing writing as a spontaneous process that was not entirely rationally controlled: “Deep at the bottom of the writer's memory are accumulated all personal experiences, memories, feelings, together with people, the world, the past, the present, and the (inseparable) future, along with various mental impulses, knowledge, ideas, artistic experiences from all the books read, from all the images seen, films, theatre performances” (Labáth 1983: 196).

Labáth conveyed his poetic sensibility across every literary form and genre, including in interviews. For instance, when asked if a poet can fall silent, he responded: “And then the bitterness from counting the seconds, the confusion that we found ourselves trapped in our own helplessness, and the swallowing of irritating pills against stifling sorrows, stagnant waters, and short-sighted glances of waxen faces on the slippery surface of a rainy noon beneath the church tower” (Čeman 1971: 81). Lyrical expression was an integral part of his personal repertoire, and the shift in the artistic paradigm during the 1960s further amplified this potential.

Labáth had already demonstrated his poetic inclinations in the allegorical prose work *Báj o Kostolisku* [The Fable of Kostolisko] (1952). He favoured a lyrical and allegorical approach over a mimetic representation of reality. The genre designation in the title does not primarily serve as a formal classification;<sup>4</sup>

2 In connection with interwar prose, Harpáň noted that Ján Čajak the Younger – unlike his father, Ján Čajak the Elder (1863–1944), who was also a writer – employed lyric elements which he related to Slovak interwar prose: “In some prose works, especially in the short story *Dumný briežok* [The Pondering Knoll], lyrical tendencies are expressed quite markedly, not only in the expression but also in the theme” (Harpáň 1988: 277).

3 “Čajak's fairy-tale vision of the Hussites at Ilok Castle, and even in our immediate surroundings, nourished my imagination and later inspired the short story *Báj o Kostolisku* [The Fable of Kostolisko]” (Labáth 1996: 28).

4 Formal and genre hybridity led to the text being described as having a lyricizing quality (Harpáň) or as a neo-Romantic allegory (Čížiková).

instead, it reflects the text's exploration of how space and human destiny are shaped, as well as the pursuit of security in one's connection to their birthplace and land. The tragedy of human fate within a confined space is implied indirectly, such as through the personification of natural events: "Then the entire plain wept: the drizzly drops moistened the black earth" (Labáth 1963: 5). Epical breadth is supplanted by the succinctness of poetry, incorporating repetition, pathos, and emotionality. On the thematic and motivational level, Labáth intertwines the themes of emigration and spatial rootedness in the lowlands; however, in terms of narrative structure – characterized by fragmented action, suggestiveness, and silenced motivation – he anticipates a modernist style and enhanced iconicity in the text. The action takes place in the lowlands, suggesting an underlying conflict between the old and newly acquired homeland (Slovakia, the Tatras – the lowlands, Lower Land), which is a prominent theme in Labáth's work. The story can be pieced together through subtle clues: Paľo, compelled by harsh social conditions, leaves for the United States; after suffering a serious injury, he returns home as a cripple, only to find that his wife has moved on, leaving behind only a parcel of land purchased with dollars. The motif of land, exemplified by the plot at Kostolisko as the peasant's sole certainty, takes on an allegorical significance – the treasure is discovered only by those who endure life's hardships.

In the epilogue, we read: "And Paľo cut the first furrow on Kostolisko. [...] And the lark flutters its wings high, chirping tales of ancient times and of the golden treasure buried at Kostolisko. WHO WILL PLOUGH, PLOUGH HARD, WILL SURELY FIND IT! [...] Paľo sits in front of his own cottage, bound by the fetters he ploughed up in the deep furrow, so that he may never again abandon this land" (Labáth 1963: 6). By using unconventional techniques, the classic tale of the *amerikán* (someone who had returned from working in the United States) transforms into a poetic chant reflecting the human condition. The compositional structure further enhances the poetic character. The text is structured into four parts, creating tension through repetition and the intensification of narrative segments. The plot's condensation suggests a compression of epical space and time. Nevertheless, the emphasis on succinct expression, diminished narrativity, and dramatic brevity creates a broad connotative space. In addressing the *sujet*, Labáth favours poetic devices, particularly personification and anthropomorphization: "The plain sang sadly and joyfully, the lark in the field welcomed the ploughmen who were drawing life from the black earth. And a carpet of flowers spread across the meadows; the reapers struck it down together with the soil. And the scythes rang like bronze hearts, tolling both noon and the death knell" (Labáth 1963: 6). On the formal level, this takes the shape of repeated syntactic constructions, such as in the evocation of the passage of time: "And the years went by one after another, and now and then a dollar came into the household [...]. And the years went by one after another, and the children grew. Only the wife kept withering away" (Labáth 1963: 5). The intense lyrical quality and heightened, accentuated emotionality are further reinforced by the abundant use of poetic devices (metaphors, symbols, emotionally charged words, and syntactic-rhythmic parallelisms), which then give rise to pathos and the construction of a mythical space. Mythicization in Labáth also implies balladic associations. This effect is reinforced by the already mentioned polarity between the epical form and lyrical

charge: “The balladic quality usually represents a meeting place of the lyric and the epic, yet by its nature it is essentially dramatic” (Števček 1973: 252).

Another of Labáth’s short stories from the early 1950s, *Splašené kone* [Runaway Horses] (1953), also contributes to the body of prose works featuring lyricizing elements with its very title hinting at the theme: “Life passes like runaway horses, only dust remains” (Labáth 1963: 8). Although this short story can be analysed thematically as a work grounded in realism – exploring the challenging and tragic fate of a young village woman – it diverges from realistic representation through its lyrical and meditative style, particularly due to the narrator’s emotional involvement. The social theme is only briefly outlined: “Then Mara will have children, many children. Behold, such is the fate of a woman! Poor people always have more children than bread. And the children will have mouths, big mouths, and they will want to eat” (Labáth 1963: 7). Life here is intertwined with the rhythms of nature’s cycle: Ďuro’s death corresponds with a harsh winter, summer signifies Mara’s rekindled passion for love, and spring represents Mara’s tragic demise. Additionally, the motif of the land evokes the archetypal image of woman and mother as nurturer: “And the field grows, the field ripens, it is voluptuous like a young woman. Whoever loves it and lives its life rejoices in a plentiful harvest” (Labáth 1963: 12).

By poeticizing his expression, the objective narrator effectively distances himself from his characters. Their actions and inner life are only accessible to the reader through the narrator’s lyrical images; Mara’s feelings after her husband leaves for military service are evoked by the sentence: “And the fog grew ever thicker, like clouds on the soul” (Labáth 1963: 9). In Labáth’s later short stories, the narrator’s function is modified; alongside the personal narrator, he employs first-person narration as a means of intensified interiorization and reflection. In shaping his prose works as a lyrical expression, Labáth functionally employs techniques of rhythmization and repetition (of individual words and word combinations, as well as of similar syntactic units):

And the field grows, the field ripens, it is voluptuous like a young woman. Whoever loves it and lives its life rejoices in a plentiful harvest. She strains her muscles and swings the scythe. And when the scythe starts talking at dawn and the sun’s rays spread over the women’s cheeks the colour of wild poppies, we begin to triumph in this delightful game of man with the earth. Harvesting is laborious, but it provides bread ... The scythe rings from morning to dusk, and the ears of grain fall like felled firs, rustling in a sacred chorus, and sweat streams down the bodies (Labáth 1963: 12).

In *Runaway Horses*, repetition plays an important role, shaping the internal structure of the narrative. The rhythm is semantically connected to the theme of the harvest and to the *sujet*’s handling of the tragic story of a young peasant widow. The sound dimension thus becomes a direct component of the text’s compositional arrangement.

Labáth was primarily an important poet who liberated poetic expression from the traditional symbolist dependence on the correlative relationship between the subject and the environment, favouring instead an imagery of nam-

382 ing. His poetic output in the first creative period was characterized by critics as “impressionistic pansensualism” (Harpán 1986). He then applied the method of impressionistic capture and the evocation of feeling or disposition also in his prose, most often in the description of natural spaces:

Her eyes resembled the whirling sky over the abyss, over the abyss with roaring torrents, and the sunny morning that suddenly appeared to him above the mountains quivered with the tenderness of dew, like her, when, like a shy doe, she leapt over the roaring waterfalls of life and embraced space with a gaze toward unconquerable horizons. Two firs on the slope conversed in the language of lovers, and the meadows hid their heated faces in the embrace of flowers (Labáth 1963: 29).

In several texts, comparable sources of inspiration can be recognized regardless of the genre. Elements of impressionistic and sensuous expression, infused with a melodramatic touch, were frequently inspired by nature and the circumstances faced by the characters. In addition to the unity of emotional and sensuous perceptions of reality, recurring themes often emerge, such as a fascination with natural imagery (“The waves captured the sun in their embrace,” Labáth 1963: 63) and the passage of time, represented by the motif of a sundial.

Other thematic connections between Labáth’s poetry and prose can be identified, particularly motifs of solitude, attachment to one’s native region, the loss of home, existential uprooting or disinheritance, and the nearly obsessive exploration of the passage of time.<sup>5</sup> There is often a clear equivalence in the emotional and sensuous perception of reality between the lyrical subject in Labáth’s poetry and the epical narrator in his prose. As stated by Jan Mukařovský, “in poetic naming, the active intention of the subject from which the expression proceeds becomes far more clearly visible than in intellectual naming” (Mukařovský 1948: 162). A similar phenomenon can be seen in Labáth’s authorial subject; in his prose, this is manifested through production strategies reminiscent of lyrical writing – such as text segmentation, linguistic and stylistic choices, and reflective discourse – as well as in the development of characters who, through profound contemplation of their existential circumstances, lean towards the intellectual archetype. Consequently, Harpán could claim that in Labáth’s prose debut “the permeation of lyricizing elements into prose was internally motivated by the author’s primary poetic vocation” (Harpán 1990: 185). The prose works are organized around a single semantic core: human uprootedness and the dead-end nature of life, which is expressed as a fateful, and ultimately misguided, departure from one’s homeland. In terms of subjective experience, Labáth’s protagonist highlights external stimuli while primarily concentrating on internal conflicts, redirecting the narrative action inward towards the subject. Similar to how the lyrical subject is stylized in poetry, the

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5 Especially in his second creative period, from the 1970s onwards, Labáth’s poetry is marked by a reflective recording of the dehumanization of civilization and of the individual, as well as the destructive influence of time on human existence. Formally, he favours poetic sequences in which, using an associative method akin to automatic writing, he synthesizes lived experience. This culminated in the collection *Váhy* [Scales] (1976), featuring poems close to prose, where each verse resembles a line of prose.

protagonists in Labáth's prose – regardless of the narrator's type – express their lived experiences through emotions, impressions, attitudes, and reflections. As noted by Harpáň, “lyricizing tendencies are therefore not merely an expression of the author but above all arise from the inner psychic and emotional tension of the characters” (Harpáň 1988: 287). His characters are typically sensitive, introspective, and contemplative, struggling with frustration stemming from unfulfilled lives. Even the reflections of the impartial narrator convey a tone that is lofty, bordering on the pathetic. Stylistically, he juxtaposes elevated, abstract terms with concrete ones (such as universe, eternity, and flight – earth): “He was convinced that they would search together for that magical herb to heal all the wounds of the world. And now he was silent, feeling how eternity, emerging from the night, engulfed him, and though power coursed through his body, his legs were anchored to the earth. It was that earth he had once come to in this settlement, and of which he had thought he had freed himself, that he had gained wings and the eye of flying eagles” (Labáth 1963: 19).

The characters struggle to identify the causes of their unrest and oscillate between their past and present states of existence. They seek answers in the past, where their romantic relationships were formed, yet in the present these relationships fail or remain unfulfilled, leaving them deeply frustrated (the short stories *Mimo sezóny* [Out of Season] and *Odpołudnie* [Afternoon]).

Labáth addresses the issue of life's errors and being away from home in several prose works (*Noc plná hviezd* [Night Full of Stars], *Odpołudnie* [Afternoon], *Jazdec z Turkménska* [The Rider from Turkmenistan], *Svetlá v kozube* [Lights in the Fireplace], *Jesenný deň* [Autumn Day], and *Tiene, ktoré je neskoro privolávať* [Shadows It Is Too Late to Summon]). In the title story of *Rider from Turkmenistan*, the main character, during a visit to the circus, internally examines a love triangle and his relationship with his partner, with whom he cannot communicate:

The morning was gloomy, but it did not bother him; he took it in with full lungs and felt a kind of elevation flowing through him at every new crossroads. [...] *What does Maňa know of the magic of such a morning? he said to himself. Mathematics won't help here. – It seems this is the essence of our misunderstanding. Yes, now I have it! We disagree in valuing a certain morning, when desire grows in the pupils of the horizon ... and the frozen jugs break. Ours is breaking now. I feel the shards falling. It is a terrible sound, those falling shards: one could lose one's life in it, or betray oneself* (Labáth 1963: 44, emphasis in original).

A young man has given up studying architecture; he is characterized by uncertainty and disorientation and struggles with misunderstandings in his relationships. To articulate his mental states (the source of tension), he employs a poetic mode, and the prose takes on a reflective, meditative character. František Miko understood lyrical expression as a means of ventilating problematic situations (Miko 1969), and Labáth similarly used it to present the inner turmoil of his characters. The key metaphor for this feeling is the “rider from Turkmenistan”, “torn from his native soil and cast among the poles of the earth” (Labáth 1963: 47). According to Harpáň, Labáth uses the story to confirm a given maxim

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384 or idea, which he sometimes formulates verbally, as in this short story: “Never cut the roots of a tree, or it will wither” (Labáth 1963: 47). He employs the technique of the objective narrator (also marked graphically by a different typeface) while simultaneously presenting the thoughts of his characters. He does not depart from this narrative model, yet, through their speech, he often reveals himself as a poet, as in the prose work *Night Full of Stars*:

And again he remembered descending into the mine for the first time, that feeling of helplessness and captivity in the corridors of the labyrinth, which grinned with its dullness, the appearance of lifeless flowers ... Even then he sensed that he would not escape it, although he kept repeating to himself: *It will be only a short time, just until I find another job, somewhere above ground, among people with red cheeks, who love the freedom of green plains, like myself, the sun, and the lively streams gurgling down the slopes* (Labáth 1963: 15–16, emphasis in the original).

Miko examined subjectivity in the epic through two lenses: the authorial perspective and that of a character (Miko 1969: 61). In the cited passage, the author’s direct involvement in the depicted events is conveyed through the character of the miner Jano, who expresses himself using figurative language. Considering the character is portrayed as an ordinary worker, his speech does not seem entirely convincing. In other prose works, where poetized passages serve more as markers, the story is still conveyed from the viewpoint of an objective narrator: “He kissed her and felt the smoothness of her bare arms and felt the fire. That her body radiated. They walked side by side, carrying the universe on their shoulders, restless and spinning like magnificent horses. They walked through the night, scented with freshly cut hay and the heavy, loose earth, which is the primal matter of every life” (Labáth 1963: 19).

This profound contemplation of significant life themes, expressed through poetic devices such as similes, metaphors, symbols, imagery, and various forms of repetition, still had its limitations. The lyrical ornamentation, which hindered the text from achieving an epic form (Harpán 1990: 185), emerged as the predominant characteristic of Labáth’s later work, particularly in his poetry. Although critics initially viewed the lyrical tendency in his prose favourably, they eventually began to see it as an excessive mannerism. The shortcomings of ornamentalism, characterized by an abundance of words that describe a limited reality (Rakús 2003), can sometimes lead to significant transgressions of aesthetic boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Although in his later short-story work Labáth moved toward documentary prose, in the novel *Dialky* [Distances] (1982) he returned to lyricization, even taking the form of Baroque ornamentalism and linguistic mannerism, fully revealing its semantic and structural limitations (Hronec 1988).

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6 “And as they walked amidst the interwoven rhythm of bodies and voices, stars of the southern sky shone in their eyes, and through their blood the metallic soldiers from the old bell tower struck with hammers, awakening the echoes of the revellers’ drunkenness from a long-forgotten carnival” (Labáth 1963: 53).

## Viera Benková

Viera Benková introduced a powerful and genuine female voice into the largely male literary environment of the Slovak minority in Vojvodina. By the second half of the 1950s, she had garnered attention for her evocative erotic-romantic poetry, with her early works characterized as emotionally driven and introspectively centred on the subject. In her later poetry, she primarily explores the ontological and universal issues facing humanity, while also addressing the mythical and archetypal contexts related to the national identity of her minority community.

Her initial prose works, published in the early 1960s – *Lyrické premeny decembra* [Lyric Transformations of December] (1960) and *Ulica číslo 22* [Street Number 22] (1961) – were characterized by Benková herself as prose poems. Descriptions of natural phenomena dominate the text, prominently featuring personification, as illustrated by the line: “The fog awoke and, shivering from the cold, combed its dishevelled head against the poplar crowns. The path suddenly softly wept and laid its grey face upon the dry grass. The valley puffed cheerfully” (Benková 1961: 76). Even so, Benková utilized a more pronounced exclusivity of expression, text rhythmization, and poetic condensation: “Suddenly, the hand, dishevelled, ignited the burning fire. The marsh marigold of desire, parched with thirst, was flooded with a magical fragrance. Tenderness pressed the lips into the hands, in boundless longing. A moment of self-indulgence – the eternity of desire!” (Benková 1961: 89).

Benková’s prose works from the 1960s, later included in the collection *Lesná studienka* [Forest Spring] (1973), are largely interconnected thematically, motivically, formally, and semantically with her poetry. Similar thematic starting points, anchored in two central motifs – love and nature – acquire a different form and genre but share a foundation in the themes of the subject’s sensitivity and emotionally charged situations. For this reason, Benková’s prose works were often perceived as expanded poems: “The majority of her short stories structurally function as an extended literary organism of her poems: fabular units intended to illustrate and concretize the emotional world of the authorial subject are appended to the lyric simultaneity” (Harpaň 1988: 289), or instance, the motif of frenzy and related terms such as fire, storm, and flood evoke the fundamental emotion of love: “She had May frenzy in her heart/when under the willow she gave love/woman” (Benková 1964: 29). The same motif is expressed differently in prose: “She blazed, did not wait, and did not resist. It was like a flood and fire. It carried us and consumed us. And she, stripped of herself and her senses, gave herself to me like no woman before. We were in a flood that carried us like a storm, like a sea gone mad. It engulfed us, exhausted us, and we felt that we were drinking in the juices, ambrosia, which for her was liberation and for me an intoxicating draught” (Benková Popitová 1973: 46).

The same motif conveys comparable connotations in the short story *Ambrózia* [Ambrosia]: “Man and woman. A young man and a forty-year-old woman. She spoke carried by the current of words and feelings. Hearing words about love is always pleasant, but about the dark frenzy that festers in a person, it hurts. The flood that liberates does not bite or wound – that is the true frenzy of love” (Benková Popitová 1973: 40). Events are only sparsely indicated, often relegated to the realm of reminiscence, which is enhanced by various narrative

methods such as stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and free indirect speech, along with narrative techniques like parallel temporal lines, retrospection, dreamlike insertions, and shifts in narrative perspective. From the perspective of the story, the prose is fragmented, and its *fabula* is reduced. The *sujet* is structured around an alternation of narrative and meditative and reflexive elements. Reflecting the subjectivity and occasional expressiveness of the narrator's voice, the portrayal of the protagonists' emotional landscape unfolds naturally.

Drawing from Miko's conception of expression, Harpáň identifies two categories in Benková's prose debut: the experienced (memories, impressions, and images) and the living-through (emotional processing of those memories, impressions, and images). He observes that different individual prose works display varying proportions of living-through and experienced elements. Prose that aligns with the lyrical principle is characterized by a focus on lived experiences (Harpáň 1974: 235). An example can be found in the tale of a man, a failed violinist, featured in the prose work entitled *Koncert pre husle a muža* [Concert for Violin and a Man]. The impartial narrator depicts the protagonist's intricate relationship and internal conflict. The narrative incorporates snippets of dialogue and introspective passages in which he seeks to define emotions like love, passion, and jealousy: "A woman's jealousy is like fire – closer to wood than to a human being, closer to the trait – to possess, than to the passion – to give oneself" (Benková 1973: 51). By combining several temporal planes (past-present), the narrator oscillates between the effort to objectify the presented (most often segmented) events and the artistic shaping of the represented reality through an emphasis on the aesthetic function of language: "The authorial narrator of these stories, who almost coincides with the subject of the lyric, overlays the story he narrates with his own inner experience, not allowing it to fully constitute itself in narration – that is, in the process of epic development" (Harpáň 1990: 198).

Working with language entails frequent phrasing and rhythmic structuring using syntactic devices such as parallelism, isolated sentence elements, inversion, ellipsis, aposiopesis, and others, as well as the incorporation of marked (expressive) lexical expressions. One-member sentences or paratactic coordination of syntagms and clauses are often found, such as in the example: "He brushed a strand of hair from my face. He listened to the race of waters in the cold grass; he listened to the murmur of the earth. We lay on the headlands. The sun was hardening, rounding, spinning together with our heads" (Benková 1973: 71). In the short story *O jablku a opekancech, o dvoch láskach a jednej neláske a o Čániho žite* [On the Apple and the Sweet Baked Dough Balls, on Two Loves and One Unlove, and on Čáni's Rye], the mosaic-structured narrative predominantly employs verb-noun sentences to evoke one of the characteristic themes of Slovak minority literature in Vojvodina – migration to the Lower Land. This is not an objective or documentary portrayal of historical events; rather, it offers a subjective and emotionally charged perspective. The language is abundant in visualization and chromatic imagery: "There they stood by the beech forest. Like a raven crowd in white. Only the children disrupted this monotony of colours with their pink little faces. Blue scarves and red boots. There were about thirty of them, recalls the past" (Benková 1973: 67). Returns to the past, both in-

dividually and collectively, emerge as a central theme in Benková's work. In her later prose works (*Dom* [Home], 1987; *Stred sveta* [Centre of the World], 2007), the historical documentary perspective is interwoven with reflections on the author's personal memories.

### Conclusion

The early prose of Labáth and Benková, characterized by its strong lyrical component, marked a significant departure from the prevailing realist orientation in the prose of Slovak writers in Vojvodina. Their key features encompassed a focus on *sujet* elements (such as nonlinear narration, retrospection, and shifts in narrative perspective), the internalization of plot, and the individualization of characters – factors that significantly contributed to the formation of a new modernist literary paradigm in Slovak Vojvodinian prose during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Benková and Labáth, in their inherently poetic approach, either could not or chose not to suppress the lyrical principle when crafting the epical world, even in prose. In addition to their marked subjectivity and the internalization of experiences, a key feature of their lyrical and epical works is the thematic and motivic closeness of the material they depict, along with similar approaches in their linguistic expression, characterized by the infusion of lyrical elements. Through latent narrativity, they imply the subject of the narrator, who, however, does not propel the story forward with the narration but rather hinders its progression through retrospective reflections, memories, and contemplations on fate and failure. The literary subject, usually an I-narrator, frequently alludes to the author. This is a characteristically modernist theme – internally conflicted, disillusioned, and dissatisfied. In Labáth's case, the source of uncertainty arises from his departure from his native region, whereas in Benková's case, it stems from a searching subject – most commonly a young woman – who is open to the world. The predominant subjectivity in the prose expressions of both author-poets is most prominently reflected in the linguistic aspects and the formal arrangement of textual units. They utilize a fundamental principle of the lyric: the sonic instrumentalization of the text, which encompasses rhythm and its variations, various forms of repetition, and sound elements. This approach enhances the aesthetic quality of the work and influences its perception as an artistic artifact. The incorporation of rhythmic qualities in narrative texts, particularly in macro-stylistic structuring, typically enhances the audience's engagement. At first glance, the elements of the lyric seemed to hinder the creation of a more cohesive, linear narrative, as they slowed it down. However, the introduction of the lyric also led to a greater aestheticization of linguistic expression and an expansion of the connotative aspects of the intentionally withheld plot. This type of text required greater effort from the reader during the process of reception, yet it simultaneously provided a more profound aesthetic experience. The lyrical sensibility and restrained narrativity found in the prose of Labáth and Benková, while aligned with broader modernist narrative trends, primarily reflect their innate poetic inclinations.

*Translation John Peter Butler Barrer*

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