The Birth of the Novel out of the Lyric: The Bulgarian Novel of the 1990s

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This article explores certain notable specifics of the novel genre within the context of 1990s Bulgarian literature. The novel during this period was characterized by innovative endeavours, as well as genre heterogeneity and fluidity. Throughout the decade, novels developed features that can be considered intrinsic to poetry, such as fragmentariness, a hyper-subjective perspective on existence, multi-layered semantic complexity, linguistic and stylistic originality, and experimentalism. In this specific instance, the issue is not about the direct influence of poetry on prose, but rather the effect of the broader literary context of the time, which encouraged genre and stylistic contamination in the novel. The study focuses on several notable works from the 1990s, including Zlatomir Zlatanov's *The Japanese Man and the Stream* and Emilia Dvoryanova's *Passion, or the Death of Alice*. The analysis also centres on Georgi Gospodinov's *Natural Novel*, a seminal work of the period in question, in which the prominent and multifaceted presence of poetry makes the interplay between prose and the lyric particularly visible. The article also discusses the impact of the genre heterogeneity found in 1990s novels on the subsequent evolution of the Bulgarian novel.

Kľúčové slová: román, lyrika, postmodernizmus, fragmentácia, žánrová kontaminácia

Like many post-socialist literatures, the 1990s represented a time of remarkable dynamism for Bulgarian writing. The processes it underwent were predominantly characterized by a diverse array of experiments, including thematic, genre, and stylistic explorations. In response to the norms and restrictions placed on creativity during the socialist years, literature after 1989

became focused on examining its own boundaries and experimenting with diverse poetic forms.

In this environment of innovation and experimentation, the fundamental aspects of the novel also evolved. This was a development linked to a defining characteristic of the entire genre system of Bulgarian literature during that period. The prevailing critical perspective is that poetry occupied a central role in the 1990s, with the lyric dominating the decade's artistic developments. This critical consensus is largely founded on the observation that the most significant literary developments were predominantly and consistently expressed through poetry. Many collections of lyric poetry published during that period were not only conceptual but also programmatic, making it undeniable that the prevailing literary trends of the decade were expressed through poetry. An important typological feature of Bulgarian literature in the 1990s is that, at the end of the previous century, postmodernism was primarily expressed in poetry, despite being traditionally linked to the novel, where its characteristics are most densely concentrated. This does not imply that prose was entirely absent from the literary developments of the era or that its expressions were any less significant. Nevertheless, due to its conceptual nature, poetry gained greater prominence in the 1990s and became the focal point of the era's defining phenomena. Its elevated status thus allowed it to generate influences that permeated other genres.

It is now widely recognized that in the 1990s, the novel adopted characteristics often considered inherent to the lyric, such as a distinctly subjective perspective on existence and a fragmentary style of expression. Nonetheless, their emergence in novels was more attributed to the broader array of factors shaping the artistic landscape than to poetry's direct influence on prose. The existential story of 1990s fiction often aimed to distance itself from the literature produced under socialism; while the latter had emphasized universal messages and broad representations, the 1990s novel came to be characterized by narrative fragmentation and a focus on subjective experience. Post-1989 literature generally dismissed claims to totality and universality, presenting a portrayal of human existence that was often private, fragmented, and personal. The principle of fragmentation enabled the novels of that era to convey the sensibilities of contemporary individuals, their perceptions of the modern world, and the post-socialist perspective more generally.[1] From this perspective, postmodernism served as the primary influence on the processes within the novel genre, challenging the legitimacy of grand narratives and embracing an inherent genre hybridity.

1 It is hardly accidental that in his comments on those tendencies in the development of the genre, the literary historian Mladen Vlashki speaks of manifestations of a "lyrical worldview" in the novel: "As if naturally, the changes that took place in Bulgaria after 1989 were accompanied by the retreat of the broad epic panoramas, which were pushed back by an ever-increasing fragmentariness in the representation of the world and of the individual. Today, different 'truths' about an individual's life exist on an equal footing, and in their artistic representation the means and techniques intrinsic to other literary genres, or even arts (mostly music, but also fine art), seem to have become more applicable, with the precedence they give to suggestion, sensuality, and inferencing taking place in the reader's imagination over analysis, argument, and explanation" (Vlashki 2014: 184). Vlashki mainly comments on novels dating from the early 2000s, but they were actually continuing a trend that had already taken shape at the turn of the millennium.

By the end of the last century, postmodernism had emerged as one of the most prominent trends in both Bulgarian and Eastern European literature as a whole. Its significant impact stemmed primarily from the alignment of its inherent features with the post-totalitarian literatures' readiness for a substantial shift in the literary status quo. When viewed through the lens of postmodernism, the elements that surfaced in the Bulgarian novel during the 1990s are hardly unexpected. One of the most prominent themes among them was the metaliterary aspect, as most works from this period explored writing, authorship, and language in various ways. Another common trend was the contamination of mass literature genres, such as crime novels and thrillers, with themes typically found in "highbrow" fiction, including existential and identity themes. The novels of Maria Stankova exemplify this trend, blending "elements of a crime [novel] with those of a social-psychological narrative" (Kirova 2002: 142–143), while Alek Popov's fiction intertwines elements of the horror and thriller novel with themes of existential absurdity, the search for meaning in the recent socialist past, and issues of contemporary life.

The contamination extended beyond novelists' reliance on the resources of popular or genre fiction. It also explored routes that more directly relate to the subject of this article, including the interplay between narrative and essay writing, as well as fiction and humanitarian insight. A frequent outcome of this coexistence was a mixture of styles, resulting in a heterogeneous language where the language of fiction coexists alongside poetry and specialized vocabulary from the humanities. It was a blend that defined several of the iconic novels of the 1990s.

Published in 1993, Zlatomir Zlatanov's *The Japanese Man and the Stream* employs a coding style characteristic of the era, seeking to redefine the parameters of the novel genre. The narrative is fragmented and non-linear, filled with references to various theoretical concepts in the humanities, while embedding this erudite perspective within a criminal plot. The book encourages various interpretations, with the criminal intrigue serving as just one facet – arguably not even the most significant. Beyond its role as a plot device, its presence is primarily valuable as a complement that provides a perspective on the book's other thematic layers. *The Japanese Man and the Stream* can also be read as a generational novel, as its protagonists are a group of fellow students, depicting the biography of a generation from the 1970s to the early 1990s. The characters' story encapsulates the realities of social existence over two decades, turning the novel into a reflection on the era of late socialism and the early transition period immediately following 1989.[2] A distinctive characteristic of the novel is its style, which blends artistic language with theoretical concepts from the humanities. This stylistic blend is a defining feature of Zlatanov's work in the 1990s; as a writer of both fiction and poetry, he employed a distinctly heterogeneous language during this period, prominently incorporating vocabulary and terminology from the humanities, irrespective of the genre.

2 Summing up the multilayered thematic scope of the novel, the literary critic Svetlozar Igov writes: "The novel *The Japanese Man and the Stream* is already a book of the Transition. More sophisticated in terms of narrative techniques, problematics, and plot lines (it can be read both as a psychopathological study and as a crime novel), the world in which it situates human destinies is no longer stagnant but highly dynamic and yet messy" (Igov 2003: 542).

Another significant work from the 1990s that prompts a similar interpretation is Emilia Dvoryanova's *Passion, or the Death of Alice* (1995). The book was published midway through the decade, and quickly became one of the most widely discussed novels of the time. It employs one of postmodernism's most typical genre patterns and combines a plot structure drawn from mainstream literature – specifically, a crime story centred on a murder investigation – with extensive erudition and existentially significant themes. As anticipated, the criminal intrigue plays a minimal role; rather, the novel's true theme emerges from the transformation of scholarly knowledge in the humanities into a compelling literary plot. This knowledge encompasses various fields, and collectively, their references play a crucial role in shaping the novel's meanings. Music occupies a notably significant position, as the compositions of Bach and the intricacies of polyphony are presented nearly at the level of specialized musical expertise. The novel also teems with references to the Bible and mythology, along with various tenets of the contemporary humanities, presented in a distinctly thesis-like manner. The plot and the protagonist's persona highlight the central theme of *Passion, or the Death of Alice* – the complex identity of the self. Equally important in the narrative are the metaliterary and metalinguistic issues, which were highly relevant in Bulgarian literature in the 1990s. While Dvoryanova's novel may appear fragmentary and non-linear in its plot and narrative technique, it is, in fact, intricately structured, allowing its key elements to serve a pivotal role across the plot, composition, and semantic levels simultaneously.

The role of music is revealing in this respect. The meticulous depiction of the art of polyphony in the novel serves a greater purpose, as the composition aligns with the musical structure of the fugue, which is reflected in its subtitle "novel-fugue". Polyphony emerges as a central feature of *Passion, or the Death of Alice*, both narratively and semantically, with the events of the plot as well as the themes of the book being rendered through the different voices and perspectives of the novel's characters. While the work is polyphonic in its composition and narrative, it is polysemantic in terms of language, as its world of meanings relies on a rich layer of key terms that possess multiple interpretations – be they literal, figurative, or specialized in various fields of art and the humanities. Indeed, the novel's language most strikingly highlights its connection to the lyric, as it strives for qualities traditionally associated with poetic discourse, including multi-layeredness, ambiguity, stylistic originality, and even experimentation. In *Passion, or the Death of Alice,* the language is highly stylized, ornate, and somewhat mannered.

The works of Zlatanov and Dvoryanova exemplify the generic hybridity and fluidity that define the novel of the 1990s, highlighting the emergence of artistic elements and techniques that closely resemble those found in poetry.

Perhaps the best resource for exploring the convergence of the novel and the lyric in Bulgarian literature of the period is the highly acclaimed novel, *Natural Novel* by Georgi Gospodinov. Published at the very end of the decade in 1999, this work marked the prose debut of its author, who was already recognized as an iconic poet of the decade and a prominent figure of the generation that had emerged in Bulgarian literature after 1989. The novel garnered high praise from both readers and critics, and its importance within the framework of literary historical developments stemmed largely from its ability to encapsulate the existential, social,

and literary pursuits and the experiences of the past decade. At its core is one of the characteristic literary themes of the turn of the millennium – the problematic identity of modern man. This is accompanied by a prominent literary postulate of the 1990s and of postmodernism itself – the decline and impossibility of "grand narratives". These allow Gospodinov's work to transform fragmentation into its own highly conceptualized feature, so that it is adopted both as a narrative principle and as an emblem of being.

Natural Novel diverges significantly from the traditional novel narrative and structure. It is envisioned as a mosaic of predominantly short fragments where various themes and plots intertwine. In one of these narratives – which we can tentatively designate as "the main storyline" – a young man navigates a divorce and endures the heartache of separating from the woman he loves. Nonetheless, at least three characters in the book can be considered as main protagonists, as their life events intersect at certain points. By maximizing narrative subjectivity, Gospodinov even assigns his own name to two of the characters. The characters' stories are only partially developed within the novel's heterogeneous narrative, which also encompasses a condensed history of life in Bulgaria during each decade from the 1960s to the 1990s, a natural history of insects and plants, childhood memories, and stories inadvertently overheard by the narrator. The text's thematic and generic heterogeneity is enhanced by random lists, diary-like entries, snippets of biographies, quotations and pseudo-quotations, and lines from poems that serve as epigraphs for individual chapters.

The real subject of the novel may actually be its own creation. The work literally emerges in response to the question it poses: "How can a novel be possible today?"[3] In the very course of its own creation, the book describes and tests a series of alternatives to the genre – a novel of beginnings, a novel of verbs, and a novel that resembles the faceted vision of a fly or perhaps the pattern of its flight. These elements not only embed *Natural Novel* within the metaliterary trends of the 1990s but also reshape the literary explorations of that period into the plot itself, inventing alternative genre forms of the novel that capture the spirit of the decade. The demonstrative metaliterary nature of *Natural Novel* is further enhanced by references to various postulates of the contemporary humanities, particularly those that significantly impacted the Bulgarian intellectual landscape at the turn of the millennium. In the original Bulgarian text, the motto ironically and subtly alludes to Michel Foucault, one of the most influential thinkers for Bulgarians at that time, as "One **M**odern **F**renchman". Nonetheless, although *Natural Novel* includes numerous references to literature and the humanities, its scholarly layer remains unobtrusive and does not hinder the reader's understanding; instead, it serves as an organic element of the narrative, contributing meaningfully to the complex human experience that the work seeks to convey.[4]

One of the most distinctive and prominent features of Gospodinov's novel is its fragmentary nature, which is precisely what fosters the connection, or

3 All citations of the novel are from the U.S. edition of Gospodinov's *Natural Novel*.

4 As critic Boyko Penchev notes in this regard, "this is not a question of transfusing blood from theory into literature, but rather of the rare ability to lend emotional substance to what might be called the spirit of the 1990s in literature" (Penchev 2021:182).

even kinship, between the work and poetry. The astonishing wealth of themes in *Natural Novel* is, furthermore, condensed into just 150 or so pages. This succinctness and compactness inevitably evoke comparisons to poetry, highlighting the capacity of lyrical expression to condense a broad spectrum of meanings while simultaneously layering them.

The fragmentary format is probably the sole means to construct and maintain the compositional and semantic integrity of a work as kaleidoscopic in nature as *Natural Novel,* which defines itself as "faceted". This allows for the justification and defence of the text's heterogeneity, which brings together not only thematically and generically distinct fragments but also diverse perspectives on the world.[5] The fictional reality is presented through the perspective of the tragic, but also of the comic, the sublime and the significant, as well as the mundane and the trivial. Maintaining multiplicity at all levels is achievable solely through the consistently applied principle of fragmentation, which provides this otherwise short novel with both conceptual integrity and semantic depth.

One distinctive feature of *Natural Novel* that aligns it more closely with the lyrical outlook is the narrative's subjective, and even hyper-subjective, nature. The work is crafted from a deeply personal viewpoint; even when describing the collective experiences of Bulgarians in the decades after the 1950s, it filters these narratives through individual lives, employing the (auto-)biographical principle. This approach owes much of its success to the book's overtly auto-fictional layer, which is further highlighted by the shared names of the narrator-protagonist and the actual author. While the novel explores various themes, including the socialist past and the social conditions of the early 1990s, which imply an "epical" approach and broader, more comprehensive portrayals of historical and social experiences, Gospodinov deliberately sidesteps these in favour of a subjective interpretation. In the spirit of the post-totalitarian literary trends and the rejection of monolithic representations, the novel advocates that the valid perspective in literature is one that acknowledges personal history and the individual perspective.

In addition to the fragmentary and subjective nature of the narration, poetry also features more directly in *Natural Novel.* Many chapters are preceded by epigraphs, several of which include poems written by Gospodinov himself. The epigraphs, like other sections of the novel, exhibit a rich diversity in genre, encompassing quotations from figures such as Democritus, Philodemus, Linnaeus, and Lucian ("In Praise of the Fly"). Various fragments include a library catalogue, a soup recipe, riddles, excerpts from wall writings, selections from articles in old magazines, and an assortment of phrases. While many of them feature striking statements or original images, they are also inherently connected to the themes of the chapters which they precede. Some of them encapsulate key elements of the novel; for instance, the epigraph "He collects stories, but he himself has no story" clearly highlights both the book's central theme of disintegrating identity and the narrative's structure as a mosaic of stories and micro-plots. The

5 Commenting on the use of fragmentation in the literature of the 1990s and how it differs from that of earlier periods, Boyko Penchev states: "The leading idea in the 1990s was to build a whole from elements that are not just small but also heterogeneous" (Penchev 2021:182).

epigraph "I wish someone had said: this novel is good because everything is uncertain in it" offers a reference to the defining genre of the text and the unique approach it takes in seeking a new form for the novel.

As previously noted, some of the epigraphs are verses. They are also diverse; some consist of distinct lines ("In the temple of that rose / A black beetle took the vows"), while others feature an original poetic image ("Fine milk was God and melting"). There is even a haiku ("This tramp is so drunk / That when he pees The spurt alone keeps him from falling").

What significance do these lyrical fragments hold within the overall context of the book? While the removal of the verses might allow the text to maintain its core meanings, it would undoubtedly lose significant nuances and subtle emphases that guide the reader's attention and enhance understanding. When applied to their respective chapters, they highlight specific meanings and enhance the effect of certain images. Furthermore, in many instances, they achieve this not in a direct or literal manner, but in a more nuanced way that depends on the reader's focus, imagination, and engagement. In a work like *Natural Novel*, which emphasizes the layering of meaning over plot, their significance becomes essential. It is undoubtedly no coincidence that the novel concludes with a "final epigraph", as indicated by the title of the brief final chapter. In reality, it is a poem: "I will become totally extinct / he told them / I will become totally extinct / he told them / like the dinosaurs." Due to the absence of a traditional plot development, the book cannot conclude with a denouement or an event that resolves the tension in what happens to the characters. The quoted poetic fragment serves as a plausible conclusion for the novel; it acts as an epilogue that reflects not only the narrator's current state but also that of the other characters, each grappling with their fractured identities and bleak perspectives.

At the same time, the short poems create their own lyrical plot. While they often resemble excerpts from larger poetic works, these are not actual quotations from any of Gospodinov's previously written and published poems. In contrast, these are merely lyrical fragments or poetic images that have emerged from the author's imagination and could potentially evolve into complete works, resulting in independent poems. This is precisely what occurred with some of them – the line "goats and roses were courting beside me," which serves as the epigraph to chapter 43 of the novel, expands into an entire poem in Gospodinov's later collection, *Letters to Gaustin* (2003).[6]

Indeed, in *Letters to Gaustin*, the epigraphs from *Natural Novel* are featured even more prominently. Gospodinov arranged several of them into a poetic cycle, or a short poem, entitled "A Natural Novel in 8 Chapters":

6 In *Letters to Gaustin*, this new poem is part of the whole mystification, a pseudo-quotation attributed to Gaustin of Arles, a 17th-century author invented by Gospodinov, and it serves as a motto to the poem "Systema Naturae". The fictional Gaustin appears in varying identities in different works by Gospodinov, where he represents the author's alter ego.

1. In the temple of that rose
A black beetle took the vows.

2. God was fine milk
And melting.

3. The Zen Zone

4. Where does all this excess love go
Who's the sweeper, who throws away the trash,
Where is the garbage can?

5. I will be an ice cream vendor
Going broke in winter's splendor

6. Somewhere people live in houses with an 'a'...

7. This tramp is so drunk
That when he pees
The spurt alone keeps him from falling

8. I will become totally extinct
he told them
I will become totally extinct
he told them
like the dinosaurs

This new work is a highly laconic version of the novel, presenting a much more abstract and metaphorical synthesis of its meanings. This could be described as a "translation" of the novel into the language of poetry – a language that is not foreign but rather inherent to the work. When the verse epigraphs are separated from the prose work and compiled together, they gain a more distinct and robust identity as an independent lyrical genre. Some of them, categorized as poetry within the cycle "A Natural Novel in 8 Chapters", blur the line between poetry and prose due to their function as epigraphs, allowing them to be interpreted both as excerpts from poems and as prose fragments. The lingering question is whether "A Natural Novel in 8 Chapters" is a wholly autonomous work, entirely separate from the novel itself. Would a reader who is unfamiliar with the novel perceive it in this way? And if so, how?[7]

7 Reflecting on the role of the epigraphs and the appearance of the poem "A Natural Novel in 8 Chapters", literary historian Albena Hranova writes: "Doesn't prose flesh out and conceal the impossibility of completing several poems? [...] Is the repetition simply a reduction of the novel, or do the epigraphs have relevance and significance only through the memory of prose and storytelling gone mute? Is the poem 'Natural Novel' a literalization of the intention to write a novel of beginnings, or is it testimony to the end of that intention?" (Hranova 2004: 25).

Regardless of the answer, there appears to be something else of greater importance. The inclusion of poems in the novel, along with their significance beyond its pages, highlights the work's genre hybridity and fluidity, emphasizing their role in the broader realm of meaning within *Natural Novel*. The lyrical epigraphs, their metamorphoses, and especially the dialogue that they provoke between fictional prose and poetry, appear to reveal the novel's lyrical genesis and its realization, not solely through the principles of prose but also through those of the lyric.

Natural Novel seems to suggest a possible literary and historical thesis that the novel of the 1990s emerged from poetry. Gospodinov's book highlights the interplay between various genres, particularly through the explicit presence of poetry and its qualities and functions – an interplay that is both intrinsic to and largely defining for the literature of the 1990s. Considering that Gospodinov, like other authors of genre-heterogeneous novels published during the decade, is also a poet, the genealogical link between poetry and prose from that period becomes apparent.

However, such a bold statement would be overly categorical and exaggerated. The 1990s literary decade was profoundly shaped by poetry, leading to its influence on prose and resulting in a trend where the compositional, narrative, and thematic aspects of novels were enriched by lyrical principles. In this specific instance, as previously discussed, the issue is not merely a simple, one way influence of poetry on fiction. Instead, it pertains to a broader literary context that fostered and invigorated poetics through the contamination and transformation of genres and styles. In this regard, it was not the case that prose was changed by poets-turned-novelists under the influence of their experiences with the lyric; rather, the literary trends of the 1990s encouraged authors to cross genre boundaries, transfer, and heterogeneously apply their skills diversely across different literary genres.

The impact of lyrical principles on the novel has proved to be quite a resilient tendency in contemporary Bulgarian literature. It remained prominent even after the turn of the millennium, when, as is often observed in contemporary literatures, poetry diminished in prominence and interest in the novel grew. For instance, in 2003, Petar Chuhov, known to the public as a poet, released his novel *Snowmen*. The model of *Natural Novel* is easily identifiable within it. Although *Snowmen* does not possess the semantic complexity and conceptual foundation typical of Gospodinov's work, its narrative shares a similar auto-fictional quality and is structured as a mosaic of short fragments interspersed with poems. In terms of Bulgarian literature as a whole, there has been a marked persistence in the use of hyper-subjective fictional narratives, distinguished by an almost total absence of plot in favour of essayistic and self-reflective observations. A prime example is the poet Silviya Choleva's sole novel, *Green and Gold* (2010), which weaves together self-observation, self-analysis, a return to memories, and an attempt at (auto-)biographical recapitulation.

The contemporary Bulgarian novel still prominently features the tendency to employ a fragmentary narrative structure. This enduring tendency has inspired some of the most notable Bulgarian writers of the 21st century to explore it through a variety of original interpretations. The novel's mosaic structure,

which provides conceptual unity across plot, narrative, and thematic levels, continues to be a hallmark of Gospodinov's writing style in his later works, *Physics of Sorrow* (2011) and *Time Shelter* (2020). Fragmentation, expressed as polyphony and semantic layering within the narrative, continues to be a hallmark of Dvoryanova's novels written after *Passion, or the Death of Alice*. Narrative polyphony, manifested through the interweaving of multiple narrative voices and perspectives within the novelistic space, is a defining feature of the writer Teodora Dimova (*Mothers*, 2005; *The Devastated*, 2019). The inclination towards genre fluidity and the blurring of genre boundaries, especially prominent at the turn of the millennium, has left a legacy that continues to be evident today.

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