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978-0-521-09152-7 - A History of the German Novelle

E. K. Bennett

Excerpt

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Chapter I

THE NOVELLE AS A LITERARY GENRE

The attempt to define a particular literary genre presents two difficulties and dangers: to restrict it to certain very definite characteristics and to insist that these are essential to the genre necessarily involves the exclusion of a large number of works which are usually regarded as belonging thereto; to establish a formula, on the other hand, which covers all the various examples usually included in the genre is to widen the definition to such an extent, leave it in such general terms, that it will cease to be an exact definition altogether. A minimum of definition, to be elaborated in the course of this survey, is the following: a *Novelle* is a narrative in prose, usually shorter than a novel, dealing with one particular situation, conflict, event, or aspect of a personality; it narrates something 'new' in the sense of something unusual or striking. The shortness of a *Novelle*, indeed of a short story, is a very relative matter. Storm's *Späte Rosen* occupies a few pages; Tieck's *Der junge Tischlermeister* over four hundred. Both of them claim to be *Novellen*. The most that can be said on this score is that the *Novelle*, because it does restrict itself to one centre of interest, tends to be shorter than a novel, which has many.

The aim of the present chapter is to establish a definition of the *Novelle*, which will serve as a basis for a description of the development of the genre during the nineteenth century. A twofold method of investigation is possible: to ask whether the genre as such possesses

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certain inherent characteristics *a priori* which determine its essential nature: to arrive at a definition by tracing historically the origin and development of the genre. The first method may or may not yield important results. But there is always the danger of importing into an *a priori* definition characteristics which have in fact been obtained from a consideration of actual examples of the genre. It may, however, be said that with regard to many genres the specific quality is not merely in the form but also in the subject matter;¹ that certain subject matters seem to be specially suited for certain definite forms. Thus a given idea might seem to the poet to demand treatment in sonnet form. The ordinary reader gives expression to a similar belief when, hearing an anecdote from actual life, he exclaims: 'What a subject for a short story!', signaling thereby that he recognizes both the suitability of a certain subject matter for a particular literary form, and also, however vaguely it may be, the characteristics of that literary form.² Such an exclamation on his part is of course no proof of the *a priori* essential nature of the genre in question. It may and probably does merely signify that from his acquaintance with a large number of short stories he has obtained a certain impression of what a short story should be, and that the anecdote in question seems to him to be likely to provide something similar if subjected to literary treatment.

All literature can be divided into three basic genres: the epic, the lyric, the drama, each of which has certain inherent characteristics which determine its form; and though there may be lyrical dramas, and dramatic epics, yet there is no difficulty in assigning any individual work to one of the three categories. But within these basic

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categories the difficulty of subdivision is considerably greater. What for instance are the exact distinctions between an ode, a hymn, a song—all subdivisions of lyrical poetry? Or within the sphere of epic literature how is it possible to say where a Novelle ends and a novel begins; or when a work must strictly be called a Novelle and not rather a tale? The three basic genres correspond to something fundamental in the relationship of the poet to the world outside of himself: they exhaust all possible relationships between poet (subject) and world (object).

(1) The objective world is absorbed in the subjectivity of the poet, so that the dualism between the poet (subject) and the world (object) ceases to exist: lyric poetry.

(2) The subjectivity of the poet is absorbed in the objectivity of the world: dramatic poetry. Every character in the drama may be a part of his ego, through all of them his ego speaks, but his ego as a whole never appears.

(3) The relationship between the subjective poet and the objective world is represented as existing, the presence of the two factors, the contact between them is apparent: epic poetry.³

That is to say, in all epic poetry we are aware of that which is told and of the teller of it; and the relationship between the two is of course capable of infinite variations and modifications. In pure lyric poetry all that is sung or said is part of the poet himself; in dramatic poetry the poet disappears entirely behind the characters which he has created. But in epic poetry the poet and the world which he is creating are both present to our consciousness; and it is part of the charm of epic and narrative literature generally that we are again and again reminded

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of the person of the narrator. Often indeed, especially in Novellen, the teller of the story appears as a definite character within the narrative, a method of composition to which the term Rahmen- (framework) technik is applied.

In the seventh chapter of the fifth book of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* Goethe sets up the following distinction between the drama and the novel: 'Im Roman sollen vorzüglich Gesinnungen und Begebenheiten vorgestellt werden; im Drama Charaktere und Taten... Der Romanheld muss leidend, wenigstens nicht im hohen Grade wirkend sein; von dem dramatischen verlangt man Wirkung und Tat'. That is to say, the drama deals primarily with characters and the deeds which are the outcome of those characters; whereas the novel deals primarily with events as something which befalls, happens to persons—coming from outside upon them, not arising from within them. The hero of the drama is more active, the hero of the epic more passive. These characteristics of the novel are particularly noticeable in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* itself. Here the hero is almost entirely passive—the meeting with the troupe of actors, the adventure in the wood, the experiences at the count's castle—all are things which happen to the hero from without. If this be true of the novel it is even more true of the Novelle—at least it is revealed in a more striking form. For the manifold events of the novel are concentrated in the Novelle in one definite, striking, fateful event, which befalls a certain person or group of persons: an event which is often of supreme importance in the life of the person concerned, and always of so much importance that the narration of the changes which it produces in his life seems to

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the poet worth recording. Thus in Kleist's *Novelle*, *Michael Kohlhaas*, the hero's horses are taken from him and justice is refused him. Out of that event which befalls him is developed the whole action of the *Novelle*. The event need not be a tragic one nor lead to tragic consequences. Humorous *Novellen* and *Novellen* with a happy ending are as legitimate a form as those which move towards a tragic conclusion. In Keller's *Novelle*, *Kleider machen Leute*, the fact that he is mistaken for a nobleman brings about a change in the fortunes of the tailor's apprentice which ultimately leads him to happiness and fortune. This *Novelle* again affords a good example of the passivity of the hero. Far from setting out to deceive, he resists at first the unmerited honours which are thrust upon him but then yields to the force of circumstances which shape his future fate.

By its concentration upon one event as coming from without and striking into the life of a person or group of persons like a flash of lightning—not as the outcome of their characters but as something which befalls them—the *Novelle* presupposes an irrationalistic view of life. It is a presentation not of character as fate as in the drama, but of chance as fate. And thus a modern critic, von Lukačs, can describe it: 'Das Wesen der Novellenform ist kurzgefasst: ein Menschenleben durch die unendliche sinnliche Kraft einer Schicksalsstunde ausgedrückt'.⁴

Though it can hardly be maintained that the *Novelle* is an inevitable literary genre *a priori*, yet the fact is significant that by its very insistence upon the one event which, in order that it should be worth narrating, produces a great change in the life and fortunes of the hero, it tends at least to express a certain view of life, which

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may be described as fatalistic; and that its inner form at least is conditioned by the fact that it has to show that that which on the surface is chance is in reality fate.⁵ For this very task are demanded a great severity and economy of form, which are characteristic of the Novelle. The novel can in comparison with the Novelle allow itself a great deal more freedom of movement. It presents a succession of events which affect the development and fate of the hero. The Novelle, by its concentration upon one, restricts itself to just those aspects which are immediately connected with the one event. The novel, to describe it graphically, advances in a definite direction from one point to another. The line along which it moves need not be absolutely a direct one, and indeed rarely is; it can twist and turn, pause, spread itself out, loiter, only its general direction must be towards the point which is its aim. Compared with this the Novelle is a circular line moving round a fixed point, of which centre it must not lose sight until the circle is completed.

If the Novelle be compared with the tale, it will be seen that the difference between the two genres consists in the presence of this one centre of interest in the Novelle which is not essential to the tale. The form of the tale is indeed merely that of a short novel: a proceeding from one given point along a more or less direct path to another. A tale like a novel can narrate the life history of a single person; so indeed can the Novelle. But the Novelle will narrate the history of the hero's life in relation to some central point or situation. An instance is furnished by one of the finest Novellen in German literature, *Die Judenbuche* by Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. This Novelle narrates the life of the hero Friedrich Mergel from his

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birth until his death, but always in relation to the one action which forms the core of the Novelle: the murder of the Jew. The twenty-five years during which he lived in exile are passed over in a paragraph, because they stand in no sort of relationship to the central event. In a novel or tale they would have been at least of equal importance with the childhood or the last days of the hero.

In the following pages various other aspects of the Novelle, as presented by different critics, are enumerated chronologically, with the intention of obtaining a definition of the genre from a consideration of the views of writers contemporary with the actual authors of Novellen to be later discussed. Friedrich Schlegel in his *Nachrichten von den poetischen Werken des G. Boccaccio* (1801) is the first theoretical writer on the Novelle in German literature. He describes it as an anecdote, a hitherto unknown story, which must be able to arouse interest by itself, without reference to the ordinary course of human culture and history. It is as it were a story torn away from any cultural background. And since it has to dispense with this background, which would lend significance to it, and nevertheless aims at arousing the interest of the audience, it must contain in its form something striking and attractive. This interest may be aroused for an anecdote, which is a mere nothing in itself, by the art with which the narrator presents it. Schlegel points out the possibility of retelling and remodelling already known stories in such a way that they acquire the charm of novelty; and hints that here the personality of the narrator may be the real attraction: 'To what narrator of individual stories without inner connection, either historical or mythical, should we listen for long, if we did not begin to take an

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interest in the story-teller himself?' The attitude is characteristic of the Romantic exploitation of the subjective even in a genre which in some respects is intensely objective. And he proceeds: 'The Novelle is particularly suited to present a subjective mood and point of view, indeed the profoundest and most peculiar, indirectly and as it were symbolically and especially adapted to this indirect and hidden subjectivity because it tends greatly to the objective'. That is to say, by the very objectivity with which it narrates an event, it supplies the poet with an opportunity of expressing his own subjective feelings in such a way that they are not obviously laid bare. As an illustration of this apparently paradoxical state of affairs from actual examples, Goethe's own Novelle may be cited. Gundolf denies that it is in any sense the expression of a subjective experience, and describes it as merely an example of Goethe's technical ability and desire to create an example of a given form.⁶ Superficially it does not appear to be in any sense a part of his great confession, yet he himself said of it: 'Man fühlt es der Novelle an, dass sie sich vom tiefsten Grunde meines Herzens losgelöst hat';⁷ and anyone who reads it through with care will easily recognize the elements of personal experience which are concealed in it. The same thing is true of Kleist's Novellen: beneath the matter-of-fact narration of the horrors which form the subject matter of Kleist's stories, vibrates his whole desperate uncertainty and questioning attitude to life, no less than beneath the action of his dramas. Again the historical Novellen of C. F. Meyer, which would appear to represent a maximum of objectivity, are another instance of the truth of Friedrich Schlegel's statement, Meyer himself having

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written of them: 'Je me sers de la nouvelle historique purement et simplement pour y loger mes expériences et mes sentiments personnels, la préférant au Zeittroman, parce qu'elle masque mieux et qu'elle distance davantage le lecteur'.⁸ Friedrich Schlegel proceeds further in his definition of the Novelle: 'And though it tends to define the particulars of locality and costume with precision, it is content to do so in general terms, in accordance with the rules and habits of thought of a cultivated society, in which it (the Novelle) has its origin and home'.⁹ The point which Schlegel makes here that the Novelle is at home in a highly cultivated society and has its origins in such a sphere is stressed also by Goethe. Finally Schlegel describes the symbolical Novelle as the summit and the real flower of the whole genre.¹⁰

The next attempt at a definition of the Novelle to be considered is that given by Goethe in a conversation with Eckermann in 1827 in which with commendable terseness he describes it thus: 'Was ist eine Novelle anders als eine sich ereignete, unerhörte Begebenheit?' (an event which is unheard of, but has taken place). 'This conception of it is the real one, and many a work which passes in Germany under the title Novelle is not a Novelle at all, but merely a tale or what else you like to call it.'¹¹ It will be observed that Goethe, true to his distinction between dramatic and epic, describes the Novelle as a 'Begebenheit'. With regard to the two descriptive words, 'eine sich ereignete Begebenheit' would seem to suggest that the Novelle must narrate an event which has actually occurred, and indeed in another place he debates whether a story which is not true can be of any interest. But perhaps it is safer to assume that he means here that the event narrated

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must have taken place in the world of reality and not in a purely imaginary world of fancy. Wieland had insisted that the characteristic of the Novelle consisted in the events it narrated having taken place neither in a fairyland, nor arcadia, nor *pays du tendre*, but in the real world, and that they should be, if not everyday events, at least such as might occur every day.¹² Schleiermacher too required that the Novelle should describe the actual circumstances of the bourgeois world.¹³ According to all these views therefore the purely fantastic lies outside the realm of the Novelle and belongs to that of the fairy tale. It will be seen later that the Romantics did not in their Novellen regard this distinction between the world of reality and that of fancy, and continually passed from one into the other. With regard to the second adjective ‘unerhörte’, every definition of the Novelle contains a cognate word which expresses strangeness, unusualness, unexpectedness—the element of the strange, the unheard-of being certainly one of the essential ingredients of the Novelle. However, that element is capable of very different interpretation and treatment, and whereas the Romantics tended to exploit the wilder more fantastic possibilities of the word, later writers of Novellen have been content to present the unusual and wonderful in less startling forms. With regard to the distinction between the Novelle and the fairy tale, the latter, by the very fact that it removes the events into a world of unreality, can dispense with logical connection in their presentation and allows for that very reason more arbitrary rights to the imagination; whereas the Novelle, because it has to present the unusual, ‘das Unerhörte’, as having taken place in the world of reality, requires the strictest motivation and the most careful