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DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0102.08



“The Nature of the Novella” by Hryhorii Mayfet: Formation of the Theory of Literature¹

Abstract

The article reconstructs Hryhorii Mayfet’s theory of the novella, which he presented in his two-volume work *The Nature of the Novella* (1928–1929). The Ukrainian scholar’s theoretical suggestions fit into the general context of German and American literary critics’ search for the key features of the novella genre. The article also reveals the history of the controversy over Mayfet’s book in the Ukrainian literary process of the late 1920s and early 1930s, which took place between Volodymyr Derzhavyn, Felix Yakubovsky, and the critics of *New Generation*. This discussion, which lasted almost four years, demonstrates how ideological control was increasing in Ukrainian literary criticism in the early 1930s.

¹ The publication was written as part of and with the support of the Philipp Schwartz-Initiative of the Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation (Germany) at the European University Viadrina (Frankfurt/Oder). I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Annette Werberger and Prof. Andrii Portnov for their assistance in preparing this article.

Suggested citation: Pashko O. (2023). “The Nature of the Novella” by Hryhorii Mayfet: formation of the theory of literature. *Trimarium. The History and Literature of Central and Eastern European Countries*, 2(2), 193–215.

DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0102.08

Submitted: 28.06.2023 / Accepted: 07.04.2023

Keywords

short story, novella, composition, Ukrainian literary criticism of the 1920s and 1930s, Hryhoriy Mayfet, Volodymyr Derzhavyn, Formalism, Felix Yakubovsky, Oskar Walzel, Otmar Schissel von Fleschenberg, Brander Matthews.

“real literature impresses incomparably more
than the most conscientious reportage”

Hryhoriy Mayfet. *The Nature of the Novella*
(Mayfet, 1929, p. 135)

The fate of Hryhoriy Yosypovych Mayfet (1903–1975) repeats the fate of many repressed literary critics of the 1920s generation: articles in periodicals in the second half of the 1920s, often accompanied by editorial notes about disagreement with the author’s position, sometimes a publication of a book, accusations of “formalism” in the early 1930s, declarations of self-criticism, silence, and finally arrest. For those who survived the Stalinist camps, there was rehabilitation and a limited opportunity to return to literary life in the mid-1960s, and silence again after the end of the “Thaw”.

Mayfet went through almost all the stages of this “path of suffering,” but, unlike Hryhoriy Kochur, he failed to return to literature in the 1960s: he published several articles,² wrote several books “for the future,” and published many film reviews in the northern Pechora press, the place where he settled after the camp and then voluntarily lived. “Obviously, I will have to continue working only for myself,” “I am not writing anything, because it’s not worth writing when there is no possibility of publishing anything” (1972) (Rotach, 1988) – this is how the scholar assessed his “literary rehabilitation” in his letters to

2 In 1965, Mayfet was reinstated to the Writers’ Union, and his articles on the novels of Semen Zhurakhovych and Hryhor Tyutyunnyk were published in the periodical *Literaturna Ukraina*. The revised version of *The Nature of the Novella* was not republished: “The manuscript was returned with a categorical suggestion for a radical reworking of the material. His illness deprived him of this opportunity” (Rotach, 1989).

Petro Rotach. During his lifetime (in 1968), he managed to transfer his library and his archive to Kyiv, presumably out of fear that the KGB would confiscate everything the third time, as it did in 1934 and 1950, during his first and second arrests.

However, Mayfet's work remains *terra incognita* to this day, even after the exceptional attention of researchers to the period of the so-called “Executed Renaissance.” Only his friend and literary critic, a Poltava resident, Petro Rotach, wrote about the scholar's biography (Rotach, 1966; Homin, 1974; Rotach, 1988; Rotach, 1989). Of his theoretical works only those on translations have been republished (Mayfet, 2017).

Hryhorii Mayfet was born in Poltava to a priest's family. The scholar graduated in mathematics and philology (including *aspirantura* in Western European literature at the Taras Shevchenko Institute (Kharkiv)). However, he worked as a literary critic for only six years in his life, from 1928–1934: while writing his PhD thesis, he simultaneously published critical essays for leading literary journals in Ukraine, as well as taught Ukrainian and Russian languages and literature, music history, and literary reading, and – for only three months – taught the history of Western European literature at the Poltava Pedagogical Institute. From 1934 to 1946, Mayfet was imprisoned; in 1950, he was arrested for the second time and left for life as a “povtornik” (re-arrested) in Pechora (Kanin village). From 1946 until his retirement in 1965, he worked as a worker at a power plant, an economist, an accountant, occasionally gave foreign language lessons, taught for a very short time, and actively wrote film reviews in the Pechora press for several years. On September 13, 1975, in Pechora Mayfet committed suicide, having never returned to his native Poltava, except as a visitor during short trips.

The scholar's research interests were very diverse: from the theory of the novella to translation studies, poetry, and a reflexive approach to literature. He wrote about the oeuvre of Stefan Zweig, with whom he corresponded. Mayfet is also the author of novellas and memoirs about literary life in the 1920s; regrettably almost none of his extensive work has been published.

This article discusses Mayfet's works on the theory and history of the novella, which were published as a two-volume book *The Nature*

of the *Novellas* (1928–1929). In this book, he announced the release of the third volume (Mayfet, 1920, p. 5),³ but censorship and ideological restrictions in Ukraine increased, and these plans never materialized.

The articles collected in *The Nature of the Novella* are a successful combination of the scholarly and essayistic voice, with precise definitions of terms coexisting with metaphorical imagery. This two-volume edition is also interesting for its genre. Each volume contains both abstract information – analysis of theoretical works on the short story – and studies, or rather, *slow readings* (as Mayfet defines his own method, borrowing the term from Mikhail Gershenzon [Gershenzon, 1926, 13]) of selected texts, most of which are novellas by Ukrainian writers of the 1920s. The scholar examines the construction of works by Yuriy Yanovsky, Arkady Lyubchenko, Geo Shkurupiy, Hordiy Kotsiuba, Oleksa Slisarenko, Ivan Mykytenko, Yevhen Pluzhnyk, Valerian Pidmohylnyi, Volodymyr Yaroshenko, and others; he also analyzes works by such foreign authors as Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig, Joseph Conrad, and Stacy Aumonier.

Mayfet defines the purpose of writing the two-volume work as theoretical, namely to present research that is interesting for a “competent reader” examining “problems of literary technique of fiction” (V.D., 1930, p. 199). No less important was the popularization goal: “to contribute to the improvement of the quality of literary production in a laboratory-critical way” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 4)⁴, which inevitably led him to simplifying the book’s academic language.

However, it is precisely this practical orientation of the book that justifies the “formal”⁵ analysis of the works. Indeed, the immanent

3 In his short book *Poetics of the 1940s*, Mayfet described the main genre and compositional features of the novella. These include the plot, development, Spannung, climax, and denouement, which brings it closer to the drama; he distinguished static (portrait, landscape) and dynamic motifs in the short story; he emphasized the anecdotal roots of the novella [Mayfet, Hr., *Poetika*, p. 22, cf. – 24]. In his works, Mayfet often used German-language literary terminology: *Vorgeschichte* (prehistory), *Nachgeschichte* (posthistory), *Spannung* (tension), *Ich-Erzählung* (I-narrative), *Ungeschlossene Komposition* (unfinished composition, open ending).

4 Mayfet also emphasizes that “the technique of the short story is the basis of the fictional technique” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 232), and speaks of “the rise of interest in the novella in modern Ukrainian literature” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 229).

5 I use the word “formal” here not as a definition of the school of formalists in Russian literary criticism of the 1920s. An analysis of Mayfet’s works shows that

approach to literature is important to Mayfet, who emphasizes that he "confines himself to the formal characterization of the theme and structure of the novella" (Mayfet, 1928, p. 4) and that the sociological method is alien to him. The scholar never treats a work under analysis contextually, or in its cultural and historical, nor socio-political or socio-economic setting. The researcher believes that between "ideology and artistic image, among other necessary factors, lies formal technique, without which it is impossible to construct a work of art" (Mayfet, 1928, p. 5). The approach to literature as a set of techniques (according to Viktor Shklovsky) is unacceptable to Mayfet, who believes this often leads to artificial construction of a literary work ("juggling with techniques") or to the commercialization of literature (Mayphet, 1928, p. 6). Here are some definitions of "form" proposed by Mayfet in his early work on the poetics of poet Pavlo Tychyna. Drawing on reflexive⁶ and receptive approaches, the researcher defines "form" primarily through the category of the reader: "the only objective fact of poetic creativity for the reader is the form of the work" (Mayfet, 1926, p. 4)⁷. "Form," according to Mayfet, is a function of artistic task or style. Looking for a good definition of the nature of a literary work, the scholar speaks of "the functional subordination of the elements of form to stylistic dominants" (Mayfet, 1929, p. 5), and in another place, he notes the "conventionality of anatomical operation with living artistic material" and the "primacy of the artistic task over form." (129). A literary work, according to Mayfet, can be defined as "a functional complex of elements of external and internal form; the significance of this standpoint lies in the methodological

his interests included both the works of German scholars of the so-called "rhetorical school" and the works of American short story theorists who developed formal analysis of the text. It is important that in substantiating the "formal characterization" of works, Mayfet cites the work of Hans Braches (Braches, 1975) and the claim of Ivan Franko that a poet "must be well acquainted with the writing technique" (Mayfet, 1928, p. 4) as a precedent for the formal approach.

6 Mayfet was one of the few Ukrainian literary critics of the 1920s who wrote about the reflexive method in literary studies (Mayfet, 1925).

7 The researcher also substantiates the concept of form from an artist's point of view, and here he refers to music theory, namely to the work of music theorist E. Prout "Musical Form" (1917): "form is the plan of the work, and this plan is binding on the artist" (Mayfet, 1926, p. 32).

elimination⁸ of components under analysis” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 4). It was probably important for the scholar to study both the compositional and technical features of a literary work as well as its stylistic, primarily figurative, components.

In a polemic with Shklovsky, he formulates his vision of a literary work as an organic whole: “Every artist arrives at a compositional design organically in the process of realizing their task. This latter should be the argument that determines the function of the composition” (Mayfet, 1928, pp. 99–100). For Mayfet, it is important to consider the technique in the context of the overall teleology of the work, its acquiring of multiple meanings, and its symbolism. He illustrates his point with a mathematical model. Thus, a literary work is never just a sum of techniques: “a true work of art,” the researcher explains, “is always something more than a simple sum of its components, its techniques. To use a mathematical analogy, one may recall that general change in the laws of theory when one has to move from finite quantities to infinity; in the latter case there is even a theorem saying that the sum does not equal the terms of a sequence, a position directly opposite to that used in operating with finite quantities” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 244). The fundamental feature of a literary work is ambiguity, a certain symbolization; a work of art “inevitably hides ambiguity, which is always characterized by a certain increase in relation to the usual sum of its components – techniques. This increase provides the literary work with what the English call *survival*; while it is called here, of course, in quite conventional terminology, the symbolism of a literary and artistic work” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 244). In this context, the title of the two-volume edition, *The Nature of the Novella*, i.e., something organic, sounded like a polemic both against the articles of the famous 1920s researcher of the novella Mikhail Petrovsky, who spoke of the “morphology of the novel” (Petrovsky, 1921; Petrovsky, 1925; Petrovsky, 1927), and Mike Johansen’s “morphological studies” (Johansen, 1928), but it was most polemical against Shklovsky’s works.

8 Presumably, this refers to the mathematical term “elimination” – “the elimination of an unknown from the equation.”

As already noted, in his works on the novella, Mayfet describes his own methodological approach as "reading." "The method appropriate to the task is reading the work, understanding and interpreting it; this concept includes both the immediacy of perception and the possible subjectivity of this immediacy" (Mayfet, 1928, p. 6). This allows for different methodological approaches and re-readings; obviously, Mayfet does not deny that even an "ideal" literary critic engages in subjective reading; on the contrary, he emphasizes the importance of intuition for a literary critic: "For me, the science of art is a degree of gradual 'realization,' a means of extending the field of intuition" (Mayfet, 1926, p. 5). Accordingly, he characterizes "formal study" as follows: "the formal method translates certain means of artistic enchantment of poetry into the realm of 'consciousness,' that is, it makes certain 'conditional closures'" (Mayfet, 1926, p. 5).

When analyzing the composition of the novella, Mayfet distinguishes three parts: 1) the beginning; 2) the novella itself; 3) the climax (Mayfet, 1928, p. 83). He divides episodes into main ones (which drive the plot, are dynamic (successional), and are responsible for the arrangement of components) and auxiliary ones. Essential elements of the novella include the static portrait and landscape, which the scholar always pays attention to when interpreting the works of writers and identifying sources of motivation in the novella. According to Mayfet, the essential features of the novella⁹ are internal contradiction¹⁰ and a specific ending (i.e., "climax" or "decisive end point in the unfolding of the plot" (Mayfet, 1928, p. 87), which "should be set up by every previous step of the short story" (Mayfet, 1928, pp. 87–88).

9 Mayfet used the terms "short story" and "novella" synonymously and believed that both genres were characterized by plot tension and a surprise ending. For example, he translated the title of Michael Joseph's work "How to write a short story" as "How to write a novella" (Mayfet, 1928, p. 31). American short-story theorist Brander Matthews also used these concepts synonymously, i.e., for him Maupassant's novellas are short stories (Brander, 1901).

10 The internal contradiction of the novella was also discussed by German Romantics, in particular, Ludwig Tieck, who talked about the decisive turn of the narrative (*entscheidenden Wendepunkt*), as well as the antithetical construction of the novella, see Walzel, 1926, p. 247. Only in the work of Ukrainian literary scholar Vasyl Fashchenko do we find a cursory analysis of Mayfet's theory of the novella (Fashchenko, 2005).

Mayfet's interpretation of the works of Joseph Conrad,¹¹ whose popularity the researcher explains by association his short stories with the adventure short story, may serve as an example of "slow reading" (Mayfet, 1929, p. 98). Mayfet offers the following view of the compositional model of the writer's works:

it is not a circle with one center, but an ellipse with two foci, one of which is the background in the broad sense of the word, and the other is something human. There is a strong link between the two foci, with the adventure playing the role of a bridge between the reader and the psychological fabric of the work, which, briefly speaking, provides the theme, the idea of the work; this adventure is like a spotlight whose task is to illuminate the psychological side of Conrad's book: this is the essence of the transformation of the adventure genre he has made... With this graphics of movement, Conrad seems to call upon the reader to compose the novella together with him, as a result of which a composition emerges (Mayfet, 1929, p. 99).

Consequently, Conrad arrests the reader's curiosity by silence, by the presence of a secret¹²; the regressive description of episodes is connected with the disclosure of the secret; the presence of several storylines creates several so-called "illuminations"; "the appearance of several narrators is accompanied by a tendency to break chronology" (Mayfet, 1929, p. 105). Conrad often uses intriguing beginnings and rejects the "omniscient" author, by turning to first person narration (*Ich-Erzählung*) and slang. Conrad's novels are also distinguished by signs of cinematic poetics ("simultaneous film montage" (Mayfet, 1929, p. 98), i.e., a montage of real events and memories). Moreover, his works often take on an unfinished form

11 Mayfet worked with the Ukrainian translations of Conrad by S. Vilkhov (Serhiy Tytarenko) and Mykhailo Kalynovych (Conrad, 1926; Conrad, 1928). An appearance of a translation was often an incentive for him to write an essay (for example, in the second volume of *The Nature of the Novella*, a section on "The Modern Foreign Novella" (Kyiv, 1928) appeared) (Mayfet, 1929, pp. 302-342).

12 In Stefan Zweig's works, Mayfet also notes amusement, psychologism, first-person narration, and emphasizes the "psychological centeredness of the novella"; discusses the importance of landscape; and the lack of portraits; in general, he characterizes his works as "mystery novellas."

(here the researcher uses the term *Ungeschlossene Komposition* from German literary criticism) (Mayfet, 1929, p. 150). According to Mayfet, all these are features of the external form of short stories. One should single out the musicality of the description, the significance of the landscape, and visual impressions among Conrad's stylistic features,

In reconstructing Mayfet's theory of the short story, it will also be helpful to look at the theoretical part of the two-volume volume, in particular, the abstracts of five books by American writers and critics, including Edward O'Brien, Josephine Bridgart, Michael Joseph, and John Frederik, as well as the work of writer and professor at Princeton and Harvard Universities, Bliss Perry.¹³ The most influential of these scholars of the short story was Edward O'Brien, who edited the annual “Best Short Stories” (later “Best American Short Stories”) from 1915 to 1941 (Levy, 1993, pp. 36–38). Mayfet also cites the works of American critic and Columbia University professor Brander Matthews (1852–1929), one of the most prominent American short-story theorists.¹⁴ In his work *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (1901), Matthews conceptualized the ideas of E. A. Poe, expressed in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846). According to the scholar, the short-story is a short text, the combination of whose elements should influence the reader. Therefore, authors working in this genre have an absolute grasp of form, and the suggestiveness of the short story, like the French drama of the classicist era, is created by the unity of action, time, and place, and a limited number of characters (Matthews, 1901, pp. 15–17, 30, 35). The Matthews–Poe concept of the short story has become very influential in American literary criticism (one of Matthews' followers is the already mentioned Bliss Perry) (Achter, 2005) and has been used by authors of handbooks with recommendations for novice writers (Achter, 2005, p. 299). The combination of attention to literary theory,¹⁵ writing skills and

13 Bridgart Josephine. *How to Write Short Stories*. Cincinnati. 1921; Michael Joseph. *How to write a Short Story*. New York, 1926; John Frederick. *A Handbook of Short Story Writing*. New York. 1924; Bliss Perry. *Short story writing*. 1926; O'Brien. *The Advance of the American Short Story*. New York. 1923.

14 Brander Matthews proposed this spelling to define the genre of the “short story.”

15 There have been attempts to think about the short story genre in a different way, for example, James Cooper Lawrence emphasized the antiquity of the short story, and placed it in an archaic era (Lawrence, 1917, p. 274–286).

commercial success was an interesting feature of the American literary situation in the first quarter of the twentieth century (the phenomenon of “formalized Short Story Poetics” [Achter, 2005]). Andrew Levy believes that the authors of “the how-to-write-a-short-story handbook” were the first scholars to introduce “creative writing” as an academic discipline¹⁶ [Levy, 1993, pp. 77-107]). Such American handbooks attracted Mayfet’s attention and were analyzed by him in detail.

On the one hand, Mayfet emphasizes the practical approach of American handbooks and guides for aspiring authors. However, all of the American critics analyzed by Mayfet focus on the main structural characteristics of the short story, primarily the construction, style, plot, mechanisms of creating “suspense” (stimulating the reader’s curiosity), and the peculiarities of such a compositional technique as point of view. Out of the variety of theses of American critics outlined by Mayfet, I will mention only an interesting comparative parallel. For example, the Ukrainian scholar compares Josephine Bridgart’s concept of the plot with Shklovsky’s theory, and asks about the genesis of his ideas about the compositional features of the novella: “Isn’t this what Bridgart discusses, the need for two hostile groups in the novella, the need to defeat some obstacle, or what Shklovsky calls ‘the main conflict’ as a source of motives?” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 28). John Frederick’s research attracted the attention not only of Mayfet but also of the reviewer of *The Nature of the Novella*, the prominent Ukrainian literary critic Borys Yakubsky. In his review, he emphasized the importance of both refined style and a certain rhythm in the composition of the novella: “Of the elements of style, we must first of all note rhythm, which is achieved on the one hand in the linking of sentences, and on the other in the linking of individual parts within a sentence” (Mayfet, 1928, p. 67). The problems of rhymed prose and rhythm in fiction interested Mayfet not only in his works about poetry (Mayfet, 1926), but also in the context of the style, rhythmic organization of prose,

¹⁶ “Despite the haphazard, correspondence-school quality of many of their efforts, the handbook writers were members of the first generation of scholars to embrace creative writing as an academic discipline” (Levy, 1993, p. 78).

and features of the composition. When examining style, he often talks about the peculiarities of narration, and pays special attention to first person narration (he often calls this narration “an oral tale” (*skaz*),¹⁷ a reproduction of an oral story)¹⁸. Mayfet also makes an interesting and perhaps unique attempt to compare the concepts of American short-story researchers in the 1920s, which were replicated in handbooks, with texts on writing aimed at novice writers, Ukrainian and Russian authors (Shengeli, 1926; Shklovsky, 1927; *Observer* [1927]).¹⁹

In *The Nature of the Novella*, Mayfet also describes the formal features of several types of short stories. Firstly, he refers to the detective short story as a kind of “mystery short story”²⁰; secondly, to the peculiarities of the “inserted short story” and its inclusion in longer narratives; thirdly, to the principle of framing: “ring framing” of the main core of the short story” (this can be a motif or simply “thematic and lexical repetition” [Mayfet, 1929, p. 93]). In the theoretical chapter of his book “Toward a Poetics of the Inserted Novella,” Mayfet refers to Ukrainian writer Yevhen Pluzhnyk’s novel *The Disease* and Valerian Pidmohylny’s novel *The City*²¹ and defines two types of insertion of the novella into a larger literary form. The first occurs when “the constructive features of the genre” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 267) of the inserted novella are preserved and when it is distinguished by a special narrative: the fact of oral storytelling, “the most important sign of the independence of the small form” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 273); or the second possibility is when

17 The term “skaz”, borrowed from the works of Russian literary critics, was often used in the Ukrainian terminology debates.

18 The problem of the “narrative style” (*Ich-Erzählung*), stylization for oral storytelling, and of rhymed prose in the context of the history of Ukrainian literature was studied in the 1920s in the works of Agapiy Shamrai (Shamrai, 1930, pp. v–XLIII). The problem of rhymed prose and poeticization of prose is very important for Ukrainian literature, because this stylistic style persisted throughout the entire nineteenth century: from the works of Hryhorii Kvitka and Marko Vovchok, through the realistic prose of Panas Myrnyi, and then continued in modernist prose, such as that of Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi (Mayfet, 1929, p. 297).

19 *Observer* is the pseudonym of Oleksa Slisarenko.

20 Here, Mayfet probably draws terminologically from Shklovsky’s “Novella of Secrets” (Shklovsky, 1929).

21 Using Petrovsky’s term (Petrovsky, 1925), Mayfet calls such a novella a “novella of the person” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 268).

“the small form becomes deformed according to the requirements of the large form” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 280).²²

The second volume of *The Nature of the Novella* contains a historical account of the Italian Renaissance novellas, which begins with a reference to Otmar Schissel von Fleschenberg’s *The Greek Novella: Reconstruction of its Literary Form* [Die griechische Novelle: Rekonstruktion ihrer literarischen Form] (1913). Probably, one should raise the question of rethinking Fleschenberg’s concept in Mayfet’s works, and even more so, of rethinking the works of the German school of literary criticism, in particular, the poetics of the novella, in the works of the Ukrainian scholar.

This article attempts to compare Mayfet’s theoretical considerations with the works of Oskar Walzel, Richard M. Meyer, Richard Müller-Freienfels, and Otmar Schissel von Fleschenberg. At this point, it is difficult to speak of a conceptual reconstruction; rather, we are talking about individual works of which Mayfet was aware and on which he presumably relied in formulating his own theory. And although such a reconstruction is now fraught with dotted lines and hypotheticals, I believe that this line of research is important for identifying the genesis of Ukrainian literary criticism in the 1920s. In his well-known work “Deutsche Stilistik” (1906), Meyer distinguishes between the novella and the novel as a short adventure story and story with a development of events. Therefore, the German scholar situates the novella closer to poetry (lyrical coloring) and drama (dramatic structure) rather than the epic (Meyer, 1906, p. 168). In his *Poetics* (1914), Müller-Freienfels²³ sees the main difference between the novella and the epic in the way it is presented, in its orientation toward oral performance and reader perception.²⁴ The scholar adds that the style of the novella,

22 Mayfet supports his arguments with the theses of Viktor Zhyrmunsky (Zhyrmunsky, 1923) on the correlation between the “an oral tale” (skaz) manner and the “neutral” word; according to Zhyrmunsky, “the relationship between the subject and the composition is inversely proportional” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 296).

23 A translation of R. Müller-Freienfels’s *Poetics*, edited by Oleksandr Biletsky, was published in Kharkiv in 1923 in Russian (Müller-Freienfels, 1923).

24 These points are natural, since R. Müller-Freienfels belongs to the “psychological” school and, in explaining the theoretical problems of literature, focuses primarily on the category of the reader.

its structural features (complete composition and narrative dynamism) result from the mode of narration (often the presence of a narrator), which brings it closer to drama (Müller-Freienfels, 1923, p. 133). In his famous article “The Artistic Form of the Novella” (1915), Walzel calls for defining the formal characteristics of this genre. Relying primarily on the theories of the novella by Goethe and the German Romantics, he analyzes its principal genre features: brevity, distinctive characterization of protagonists, the presence of a turning point (*Wendepunkt*), framing, and the importance of oral narration (here Walzel develops the ideas of Müller-Freienfels) (Walzel, 1926, p. 252). The problem of framing and the inserted short story can be studied with reference to theoretical research in the works of Fleschenberg, Hans Braches, or Petrovsky (Fleschenberg, 1913; Petrovsky, 1921; Petrovsky, 1925; Petrovsky, 1927; Bracher, 1975). A contemporary of Mayfet’s, Ukrainian literary critic Volodymyr Derzhavyn, examines the scholar’s methodology in the context of Wilhelm Dibelius’s “compositional and psychological focus.” “The compositional analysis used by Dibelius, a well-known Berlin expert in English fiction and more of a historian than a literary theorist, is quite close to what is called “plot analysis” in Russian literary studies and “literary morphology” in Ukrainian literary studies (works by Petrovsky, partly by Shklovsky, and by Mayfet)²⁵” (Derzhavyn, 1928, p. 145). Derzhavyn does not repeat this important thesis about the genesis of Mayfet’s methodology (namely, the development of Dibelius’s ideas in Ukrainian literary studies) and limits himself to stating that Mayfet’s work has a descriptive approach to the study of the literary work.

To understand which school Mayfet belongs to we should talk about his understanding of the theory of the novella which was widely represented in foreign literary criticism at the time, and also about the formation of his own concept, which could often be censored upon publication. These non-academic factors are important for explaining some of the fragmentation of Mayfet’s theory, his sometimes deliberate inconsistencies, his caution in formulating

25 An unfortunate editorial correction, when the mention of Petrovsky and Shklovsky’s works should have come after the phrase “analysis of the plot.”

opinions, conscious absence of references, veiled contexts and subtexts, and the ability to place scientific ideas between the lines with hints. This can be called “academic Aesopian language.” Such “imitation of profanity” may have been a strategy of survival in the rather closed Soviet intellectual space of the second half of the 1920s and an opportunity to publish one’s work.

Mayfet’s research initially received quite favorable reviews, for example, the journal *Vaplite* described him as a “thoughtful, cultured and observant” critic who is well versed in the formal method and “knows how to apply it to literary practice” (Rezentsent, 1927). In his overview of Ukrainian journals, “A.N.” from the Dnipropetrovsk-based journal *Zoria* said that the scholar “engaged in fine formal criticism of art, but did not lose the sociological thread” (A.N., 1929, p. 32). In 1928, influential critic Abram Leites mentioned Mayfet’s “expressive analysis” of the novellas (Leites, 1928, p. 95). In 1929, Mayfet’s *The Nature of the Novella* was even included in the list of readings recommended for self-education in literary circles in Donbas, albeit with the explanation that the book requires a “qualified reader” (Donbasovets, 1929, p. 45).

Initially, professional readers also welcomed Mayfet’s book quite favorably. His first book, *The Nature of the Novella* (1928), was reviewed by Volodymyr Derzhavyn (Derzhavyn, 1928, pp. 130–133), Borys Yakubsky (Yakubsky, 1928), Isaac Yampolsky (Yampolsky, 1928), and Felix Yakubovsky (1929). However, the controversy that arose around this work is a good illustration of how the freedom of expression in Ukrainian literary criticism was narrowing in the 1920s. A fierce debate over *The Nature of the Novella* took place between Volodymyr Derzhavyn and Felix Yakubovsky.²⁶ Derzhavyn, who had been well acquainted with Mayfet at the Department of Literary Studies at the Kharkiv Institute for People’s Education (KHINO) and with whom he shared a common research interest, wrote a total of three

26 Felix Yakubovsky (1902–1937), Ukrainian literary critic, studied at the Kyiv Institute of People’s Education (KINO) in 1920–26, worked for various Kyiv newspapers, like *Bolshevyk*, and *Proletarska Pravda*, collaborated with the Kyiv branch of the Taras Shevchenko Institute, taught at the Kyiv Institute of Social Education (1930–1931), the Polish Pedagogical Institute in Kyiv (1933–1935), and was a literary critic of the Writers’ Union of Ukraine (Sheptytska, 2020).

reviews. Although all of them were cautious, the scholar nevertheless defended the need for an immanent approach to a literary work, both openly and under pseudonyms.

On the one hand, Derzhavyn, perhaps ostensibly, tried to prove to the reader that Mayfet’s book is important as a preliminary analysis necessary for the sociological interpretation of literature. It is quite unfair, but probably forced by circumstances that he assessed Mayfet’s study and the rather weak book of Petrenko *Marx’s Method in Literary Studies* (Knyhospilka, 1928) as “a turning point in the development of Ukrainian literary theory” (Derzhavyn, 1928, p. 131). On the other hand, the reviewer rightly emphasized that the reader is presented with an “exemplary analysis of the composition” of the novellas (Derzhavyn, 1928, p. 132). Derzhavyn’s summary review²⁷ of the two volumes of *The Nature of the Novella*, published in 1930 in the journal *Hart*, seemed to round out the discussion of the book. The critic noted that Mayfet confined himself to “purely descriptive analysis” (V.D., 1928, p. 198); he tried to protect the researcher from the harsh attacks of Yakubovsky, not only of “formalism”, but also of “a hostile attitude to Marxism in literary criticism” and even the formation of a “national-state theory of literature” (V.D., 1928, p. 198).

In 1929, almost simultaneously with the second volume of *The Nature of the Novella*, Yakubovsky’s book *From the Novella to the Novel: Etudes on the Development of Ukrainian Fiction of the Twentieth Century* (1929) came out. In a scathing review, a certain W. Dietrich (probably a pseudonym of Derzhavyn), while criticizing the methodological principles of the study (“a systematic contradiction in the main method” [Dietrich, 1929, p. 253]), revisits the polemic between Yakubovsky and Mayfet, in an attempt to expose the shaky ideological ground of Yakubovsky. Derzhavyn’s inflammatory response is provoked, first of all, by Yakubovsky’s use of key points of Mayfet’s analysis of the compositional features of Geo Shkurupiy’s novella “The Provocateur”, as well as by Mayfet’s accusations of formalism. Derzhavyn’s sharp reaction was caused by the following point by

²⁷ The article is signed by V.D. Before the cryptonym was deciphered in the annual table of contents of the journal *Hart* (1931, No. 1-2), the work had not been identified as Derzhavyn’s for some time.

Yakubovsky: “We think that in our estimation and motivation of certain motifs of Shkurupiy’s work, Mayfet’s purely formal description can be used as material that once again confirms our thoughts about Geo Shkurupiy’s fiction” (p. 257) (Yakubovsky, *From the Novella* 1929, p. 256). And actually, why can’t we use Hryhoriy Mayfet? Derzhavyn asks sarcastically: “This, of course, is a logical consequence of the frivolous and superficial attitude to both Marxist and formalist methodology. We should not stain our snow-white robes in the fields where the “evil one” roams. Do it for us, Mayfet (as Mayfet did for Shkurupiy), and add a small editorial note that will settle the matter” (Dietrich, p. 256). In the end, Derzhavyn seems to note conciliatorily: “We do not consider either Mayfet to be a ‘hopeless’ formalist or Yakubovsky a revisionist and vulgarizer of Marxist literary criticism” (Dietrich, p. 256).

The debate continued for several years, and its participants remained the same. In 1932, during the period of active struggle against “formalism” and the ideological campaign of self-criticism,²⁸ Yakubovsky, in his self-denouncing speech *Against Eclecticism and Opportunism: In Favor of Leninism in Literary Criticism* (Yakubovsky, 1932), again returns to Derzhavyn’s role in defending one of the official “formalists.” Of course, this was no longer a discussion of what formalism is and what its characteristic features are, but the assignment of a certain “stigma” that made it possible to crack down on this or that author. The repentant critic essentially writes a denunciation of Derzhavyn and does so in a seemingly self-deprecating manner: “The later defense of Mayfet by the second ‘specialist’ who appeared on the pages of *Hart* under the letters V.D., proved to me especially clearly the falsity, the harmfulness of this “criticism” of mine (regarding the use of the word “specialist” (*fachivtsia*) in Soviet journals) ... So Mayfet, according to Derzhavyn, is a formalist “without special pretensions,” a formalist who knows his formalism and does not seem to oppose Marxism... obviously, defending a formalist against Yakubovsky in those conditions was an easier and more profitable job than defending him against the

²⁸ On the phenomenon of self-criticism in Ukrainian literary criticism see: Babak, Dmitriev, 2021.

front of Marxist criticism" (Yakubovsky, 1932, pp. 64–65). Perhaps we are looking at one of the longest-running ideological literary controversies in literature: The battle against Mayfet around the "minor representative of Ukrainian formalism" (Yakubovsky, 1932, p. 65) lasted about four years and ended... with the victory of the "defender of the formalist" Derzhavyn.

It is unclear how, after the slanderous article, both Derzhavyn and Mayfet avoided making self-incriminating statements. Perhaps by mid-1932 other problems had already emerged in the ideological field of literary criticism. Moreover, in 1934 Mayfet participated in the First Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow, and represented the Ukrainian delegation (Rotach, 1989). In November 1934, he published a sociological interpretation of Anton Chekhov's short stories, in an attempt to insert himself into the sociological discourse.²⁹ However, this return to literary criticism, which had already completely changed its ideological landscape, was quickly cut short in December 1934 by his arrest and conscription into the so-called "Kirov recruitment" (Rotach, 1989). Yakubovsky was arrested later, in August 1937. Derzhavyn, according to the information available today, was not arrested at all; since 1931, he had been working at the Institute of Linguistics of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, and in 1941 he even defended his dissertation in history on "Xenophon's Athenian Policy as a Program of the Oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants" at Kharkiv University. Mayfet's name came up occasionally in his emigrant articles, as he would mention a "thorough monograph," an "exemplary, though little known, work by Hryhoriy Mayfet" about Tychyna ("The Fiction Prose of Teodosiy Osmachka," 1952; cf. Stefanovska, 2021, p. 180).

The literary controversy over *The Nature of the Novella*, built on hints and subtexts, probably had a personal angle as well. In this context, Derzhavyn's remark in one of his reviews that the critics of the *New Generation* should learn from Mayfet is interesting and important. This phrase was perfectly understood by

29 Here are some of the points: "What class position did Chekhov occupy in these social conditions?", Chekhov as "a representative of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia of this period", "Chekhov's criticism is half-hearted, opportunistic, and incomplete" (Mayfet, 1934, pp. 182, 185).

his contemporaries and became polemical against theorists of the so-called “leftist” short story, in particular Oleksii Poltoratsky (Poltoratsky, 1929, pp. 111–130). According to Poltoratsky, the “leftist” short story focuses on a plot organized by “external material events” (Poltoratsky, 1929, p. 111), and is characterized by an unexpected ending, a sudden beginning *in medias res*, and “using the means of the so-called mystery” (Poltoratsky, 1929, p. 120). He traces its roots to European and American short stories, and in his opinion, Shkurupiy and Slisarenko are the most prominent representatives of adventurous story in Ukrainian literature. In *The Nature of the Novella*, Mayfet brilliantly demonstrates the awkwardness and unmotivated construction of the plot in the detective novella “The Provocateur” by one of the creators of the “leftist” story, Shkurupiy.³⁰ This illustrates the theoretical confusion in the ambitious studies of such young critics as Yakubovsky and Poltoratsky, who praised the formal achievements of Shkurupiy’s prose. However, the eloquent title of the novella itself cannot but attract attention: is it a coincidence that in the era of impending mass repression, the mastery of the “Provocateur” had become a fierce topic of discussion?³¹ And is it a coincidence that representatives of the *New Generation* periodical, whose polemical style was considered provocative and scandalous by their contemporaries, were so sensitive to the criticism of this particular novella?³²

30 Shkurupiy’s text *The Provocateur* “proves the impossibility of imagining how the episode was actually implemented” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 225); “in the real genre, there should be no misunderstandings about the actual implementation of the episodes” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 226), “the novel gives the impression of a superficial record, a retelling of mechanically connected moments” (Mayfet, 1929, p. 227).

31 In his memoirs written in exile, the former Taras Shevchenko Institute graduate student Hryhorii Kostiuk recalled this “morphological” method of Poltoratsky in connection with his alleged denunciations: “if Poltoratsky with his „morphological method” of political denunciation had not come to the surface of literary life. First an article about A. Lyubchenko, and later about O. Vyshnia” (Kostiuk, 1987, p. 280).

32 A separate and still unresolved issue is the connection of Yakubovsky himself with the “leftist” literary movement; for example, at the beginning of his literary career he was close to the Futurists (Ilnytsky, 2003, pp. 83–84, 125) and probably collaborated with the Kyiv literary group “Mars” (Yakubovsky, 1932, p. 60).

Echoes of this controversy, in which discussions of the compositional features of the novella, ideological denunciations, and personal relationships, can be seen in other pages of the leftist *New Generation*. In several consecutive issues in 1928, the Mayfet-Derzhavyn tandem was insulted and slandered. The object of criticism was Mayfet's "grave-digging." "In No. 6 of *Krytyka*, we find Derzhavyn's review of Mayfet's *The Nature of the Novella*. The review is surprisingly favorable. It abounds in epithets such as "beautiful," "thorough," and "wonderful," which even the review by the "sworn praiser" Yakubsky does not contain. One place in the review is very revealing: "H. Mayfet's patterns should be studied... first of all by those shrewd critics who, having written a "leftist story" instead of a "short story" or a "leftist novel" instead of a "novel," consider it "sociological morphology," and call serious formal analysis "grave-digging"³³ (D.G. 1928). The *New Generation*, recalling Derzhavyn's gratitude in the pages of *The Nature of the Novella*, provocatively reduced this literary controversy to "family matters" (D.G., 1928, p. 336).

Thus, summarizing the academic significance of Mayfet's research, it can be argued that even if limited by the requirement of practical orientation of theoretical considerations, the researcher formulated the first theory of the novella in Ukrainian literary studies. He touched upon many fundamental issues discussed by European and American theorists of the novella (short story) in the 1910s and 1920s. The scholar identified the features of the novella as a genre, its difference from the novel, the peculiarities of composition, the specifics of plot construction and the role of the climax; described the features of the inserted short story and the framing short story; emphasized the importance of the point of view for the composition; discussed the relationship between the style and the narrator; identified the distinguishing features of the adventure, detective, and mystery novellas; and discussed the similarities between the construction of the novella and the drama. Mayfet's theory of the novella, rooted

33 We are referring to Poltoratsky's own statement in the *New Generation*: "There is no need to talk about Ukrainian researchers. We have here either the grave-digging of H. Mayfet or the worst kind of general opinions of subjective psychological critics who prefer to call themselves Marxists" (Poltoratsky, 1928, p. 436).

in the formal study of literature, could not have been understood by critics in a situation where ideological pressure was intensifying in literary studies, so there was no constructive discussion of the theory of the novella in the 1920s. The tragic fate and silence of Hryhoriy Mayfet demonstrates shows how difficult and dangerous it was for a scholar to remain a literary theorist in the “red” 1920s.

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