

## Artículo de investigación

## The German Novel of the 1960-70s: Artistic Conception of History

## Немецкий Роман 1960-1970гг.: Художественная Концепция Истории

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Written by:

**Gulnara Tavkilevna Gilfanova**<sup>226</sup>[http://elibrary.ru/author\\_items.asp?authorid=795725](http://elibrary.ru/author_items.asp?authorid=795725)

ORCID: 0000-0002-8173-6268

**Alfia Revanerovna Valeeva**<sup>227</sup>[https://elibrary.ru/author\\_items.asp?authorid=284626](https://elibrary.ru/author_items.asp?authorid=284626)

ORCID: 0000-0001-7381-7650

**Elena Alexandrovna Nikulina**<sup>228</sup>[https://elibrary.ru/author\\_items.asp?authorid=396564](https://elibrary.ru/author_items.asp?authorid=396564)

ORCID: 0000-0002-1269-8720

## Abstract

In the German-language literature of the 1960-70s, novelistic prose emerged, which not only narrated about the German identity but also appealed to international solidarity and the formation of historical worldview. The German novel of the second half of the 20th century, associated with the original artistic conception of the history of a yet divided Germany, was given new meaning in the works of such writers as Johannes Bobrowski, Erwin Strittmatter, Franz Fühmann, and Jurek Becker. Bobrowski's artistic style laid the foundation for a generation of writers following his original creative legacy. Thus, the goal of the study is to consider the perception and rethinking of Bobrowski's artistic experience by the writers. This manifested in their interpretation of the "multicultural" writer's creative method, reliving their childhood years, and introducing the reader to the history of their homeland using new literary devices.

**Key Words:** artistic conception of history, artistic style, East German literature, German novel, neo-historical novel.

## Аннотация

В немецкоязычном литературном пространстве 1960-1970 г.г. начали появляться произведения романной прозы, повествующие не только о немецкой идентичности, но и о призыве к межнациональной солидарности и формированию исторического мировоззрения. Немецкий роман второй половины XX века, «впитавший» в себя самобытную художественную концепцию историю еще разделенной Германии, был наполненным новым содержанием благодаря ряду таких писателей как И. Бобровский, Э. Штриттматтер, Ф. Фюман, Ю. Бекер. Прослеживается четкая преемственность художественного стиля Бобровского целым поколением писателей, обратившихся к его самобытному творческому наследию. Поэтому целью нашего исследования является изучение степени рецепции и переосмысления художественного опыта И. Бобровского упомянутыми выше писателями. Это проявилось в том, что им удалось переосмыслить творческий метод 'мультикультурного' писателя и вспомнить пережитые годы детства, познакомить читателя с историей родного края, используя новые литературные приемы.

**Ключевые слова:** художественный стиль, немецкий роман, литература немецко-восточного пространства, «неоисторический» романский жанр, художественная концепция истории.

<sup>226</sup> Kazan Federal University, Naberezhnye Chelny Branch, Russian Federation

<sup>227</sup> Naberezhnye Chelny Pedagogical State University, Russian Federation

<sup>228</sup> Moscow Pedagogical State University, Moscow, Russian Federation

## Introduction

Modern German literary critics more and more often address the issue of the existence of East German literature before the so-called “turn” at the end of the last century (Chugunov, 2019). Unfortunately, in Western and Russian German studies, the cultural heritage and, first and foremost, the literature of former East Germany have been criticized. However, according to the Russian literary critics A.A. Gugnina and E.A. Leonova, writers of East and West Germany were united by the tradition of German culture and literature, common mentality, and counter-migration. The German novel of the 1960-70s is among prosaic genres, considering the historical changes in the national mentality and analyzing the fundamental changes in the German public life before the country’s unification. Thus, the subject of the study is novelistic prose by famous German-language authors Johannes Bobrowski (1917-1965), Erwin Strittmatter (1912-1994), Franz Fühmann (1922-1984), and Jurek Becker (1937-1997). The study of the novelistic prose by the writers is of interest in terms of continuity of their individual style in the artistic interpretation of the historical process in the context of East German literature of the 60-70s, which determines the relevance of the topic under study. The novelty of the study is related to the fact that in Russian literary criticism, there is no research considering the specifics of the creative style of Bobrowski, who rethought his country’s past and present and developed a new artistic interpretation of German postwar history (Gilfanova, 2017). The writer’s literary legacy greatly influenced works by Strittmatter, Fühmann, and Becker. Their writing style changed to a degree, which determined the emergence of works with an ambiguous artistic conception of history (Leistner, 1989).

## Methods

The methodological basis of the study included the concrete-historical and historical-functional methods, as well as the method of system analysis.

We used the principles of a systematic approach and comparative historical analysis of the works by significant East German writers of the 60-70s and the neo-historical prose of the “multicultural” writer Bobrowski to identify the degree of reception of his work and the specifics of the artistic conception of German postwar history. In the course of the study, the connections of Bobrowski’s novels with the historical tradition or its functioning within a

certain social formation were clearly traced. The historical and functional study of Bobrowski’s works allows us to say that his individual style was perceived and artistically comprehended by such German authors as Strittmatter, Fühmann, and Becker (reminiscences and quotes).

## Results

Researchers of German-language literature, including W. Emmerich, H.-P. Ecker, R. Schnell, and A. Muschg, despite their controversial statements, recognize the fact that in the 60-70s, Germany was living in anticipation of the historic events that took place two decades later. The Swiss writer and philosopher Muschg called this process “wind of change”. In this period, fundamental changes of similar scale occurred in the literature of both East and West Germany. The process of convergence of different literary systems was reflected in themes, motifs, and genres (Vilisova, 2005). Thus, the 60-70s were the years of heated debates on the relevant issues of the political situation in Europe, as well as the mastering of the cultural heritage of the past by East German literature, analyzing German-language prose, rich in terms of genre and stylistic forms. East German literature was updated and began its artistic reflection on the postwar past. Such East German writers as Bobrowski and his followers Strittmatter, Fühmann, and Becker came to the fore, representing the neo-historical direction in East German literature of the 70s.

The German writer Erwin Strittmatter had been recognized by readers long before Bobrowski and had already presented his own image of country life. However, his “The Blue Nightingale, or the Beginning of Something” (*Die blaue Nachtigall, oder Der Anfang von etwas*, 1976) contains numerous borrowings of Bobrowski’s aesthetic devices (Strittmatter, 1978). Telling stories about everyday life, Strittmatter reconstructs the events in the life of a small village where he spent his childhood and youth. Due to this, the reader learns about the historical past of the country.

The speech of the main characters betrays their Slavic origin: <...> “How I met my grandfather” <...> (the narrator); <...> “the old men argue in Sorbian” <...> (grandfather Urishka and grandfather Kulka).

The “stenographic” novel develops in the rhythm of everyday life in both poor “Sorbian villages

near Hoyerswerda” and rich settlements “where the real life was, the village of Proshim” (Strittmatter, 1978, p. 121).

The real past reveals itself when the narrator recalls the events of past years: “Every week a battalion of men flocked to the city labour exchange <...> unemployed, they lined up waiting for the stamp” (Strittmatter, 1978, p. 163). It is easy to recognize those who “regained homeland”, soldiers, so-called patriots, promoting Nazi ideology upon returning from the battles of 1914: “In the hall of the tavern, grandfather and grandmother Urishka held a ball for those who “regained homeland”. Here are the words again – the embryos of patriotic grandiloquence <...> until the day of the “regained homeland” ball, I did not know fear” (Strittmatter, 1978, p. 125). The main characters of “Lithuanian Pianos” (*Litauische Claviere*, 1966) by Bobrowski – lawyer Neumann, Gottschalk, barber Berger, gendarme Vazgen, Lemke – speak of such hateful stereotypes as racism, cult of power, and hatred: “over the table <...> words rise and snap: ‘national disgrace’, ‘German honour’, and the like” (Bobrowski, 1971, p. 373).

In “The Nightingale Stories” (*Die Nachtigall-Geschichten*, 1972), Strittmatter, presenting an original version of German history, does not coherently describe the events of the time. However, it is continued in the novella “My Friend Tina Babe” (*Meine Freundin Tina Babe*, 1977), following the complex process of the development of the writer’s aesthetic values. The story “Circus of the Wind” (“Zirkus Wind”, 1982) gives a colourful description of skilful wandering artists, magicians, and clowns who left deep marks in Strittmatter’s memory. This device was borrowed from Bobrowski. The improvised circus performance of the “little people” (Antonja, Marie, Weismantel) reveals the secret atrocities of the rich. Both writers choose alternative narrative methods to tell the young German generation about the unjust deeds of the rich using folklore (Bobrowski, 1971). In our opinion, the following Strittmatter’s statement is true: “Circus is a field rich with poetry, a poetic ‘province’ that deserves to be studied” (Strittmatter, 1978, p. 10). Folklore allows revealing the historical truth and developing a person in a humanistic way. This means that the worldview orientations of both writers coincide, which is expressed in the ideological content and artistic form of their works.

A proof of the perception and borrowing of Bobrowski’s creative method can be found in works by the German writer Franz Fühmann (1989). Rethinking of Bobrowski’s artistic experience, reliving of childhood experiences, and analysis of behavioural strategies are expressed, according to B. Leistner (1989), in Fühmann’s cycle of stories “The Juggler at the Movies” (*Der Jongleur im Kino, oder Die Insel der Träume*, 1970) and his Hungarian diary “Twenty-two Days, or Half a Lifetime” (*Zweiundzwanzig Tage, oder die Hälfte des Lebens*, 1973). The latter analyzes autobiographical past taking into account modern reality (Fühmann, 1974, p. 139). This is a clear reference to Bobrowski’s poetic styl.

In this philosophical novel-essay, Fühmann organizes the narrative in such a way that the unreal becomes the component determining the plot. “Dream: I am sitting in a plane and know that I am flying to Finland <...> The interior of the aircraft resembles a kitchen; instead of the pilot’s cabin a kitchen closet; <...> on the left a refrigerator; beyond, dimly, several tiers of bunks. <...> on opening the door I find the gnome...” (Fühmann, 1974, pp. 431-432). Both Fühmann and Bobrowski served in the Wehrmacht and, based on personal experience, created fictional historical works, conceptually different from the traditional historical novel of postwar Germany. The priority of seemingly episodic descriptions fundamentally changes the intention in a fictional historical text. In Bobrowski’s novel “Levin’s Mill, 34 Stories about My Grandfather” (*Levins Mühle, 34 Sätze über meinen Großvater*, 1964), old Bobrowski (bearing the same surname as the author) dreams of his ancestors (Poleske, Ksistof, Michael, and the oldest of them – Zbilut). These “journeys” of the main character to the past, his genealogy are one of the devices determining the writer’s style, which made him an innovator in the historical novel of the last century.

Bobrowski’s creative method, manifested in the artistic organization of the plot, was recognized and used by Jurek Becker in his first novel “Jacob the Liar” (*Jakob der Lügner*, 1968), characterized by the interest in the most mundane things and the absence of fear of everyday life. Similarly to “Levin’s Mill”, “Jacob the Liar” synthesizes actual and fictional history: the events of the plot are fictional; the narration is first-person, from the perspective of the narrator, telling the reader the truth (Chistyakova, 2003). Becker borrows Bobrowski’s model of relations and creatively uses it in his work. Becker’s logical, coherent, laconic, and original style is

often compared with that of Bobrowski. Following him, Becker uses a short narrative form with a detailed description of events. The West German literary critics I. Gumpert and R. Melchert distinguish some brilliant episodes in “Jacob the Liar” (Chistyakova, 2003, p. 12).

Imperceptible transitions in time and space involving the main characters, natural, “folklore flamboyance” of the language, and non-standard narrative style in the novels “Levin’s Mill” by Bobrowski and “Jacob the Liar” by Becker allow them to convey the main intention (Glushkin, 2017).

In “Levin’s Mill”, not only the folklore tradition is used, but also the structural elements of the comic (satirical) novel. Thus, the objective narration includes the author’s opinion on the events of the novel for its adequate perception by the impartial reader. Becker, similar to Bobrowski, considers the historical past of the German people, overcoming the traditional narrative form, as well as established and conservative ideas and way of thinking of a whole generation of Germans.

### Discussion

The aesthetic (stylistic) devices, used by Bobrowski in his historical prose, were borrowed and developed by such famous German authors as Strittmatter, Fühmann, and Becker. Based on their own literary experience, each of them enriched their works with artistic conceptions of German history in the style of Bobrowski.

Modern German literature has preserved its interest in Bobrowski’s poetry and prose, which are recognized, held in high esteem, and sometimes referenced in prosaic works alluding to his narrative style.

The artistic originality of Bobrowski’s works is manifested in the poetics of his prose, reflecting his artistic conception of the history of postwar Germany. The ambiguous phenomena of the turn of the millennium ensure that Bobrowski’s style, characteristic of the late 60s and early 70s literature, will attract the attention of more than one generation of aspiring poets and writers of the new Germany.

### Conclusions

Germans and Eastern Europe, the Cold War, the conflict between East and West, the loss of homeland, introspection, and search for self are the main among many aspects of Johannes

Bobrowski’s works. A representative of “rubble literature”, philosopher, linguist, theologian, and, first and foremost, patriot, Bobrowski analyzes the ambiguous situation in postwar Germany, using such literary devices as collage, montage, and stream of consciousness, creating metatext, which goes beyond the artistic reality. In his literary works, “voices from the past” of Germany are heard (German thinkers J.G. Hamann, J.G. Herder, and C.U. Boehlendorff and Lithuanian pastor K. Donelaitis). Personal experience, the “factual” is intertwined with fiction, synthesized into one integrated whole, presenting an original artistic version of German history. Bobrowski’s artistic style and aesthetic conception were perceived and rethought by Erwin Strittmatter, Franz Fühmann, and Jurek Becker at a new level of meaning. The creative union of the authors allowed for the creation of the neo-historical genre, which provided the basis for the development of German-language literature at the turn of the century.

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