

# Lustrum

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Separatum



# Lustrum



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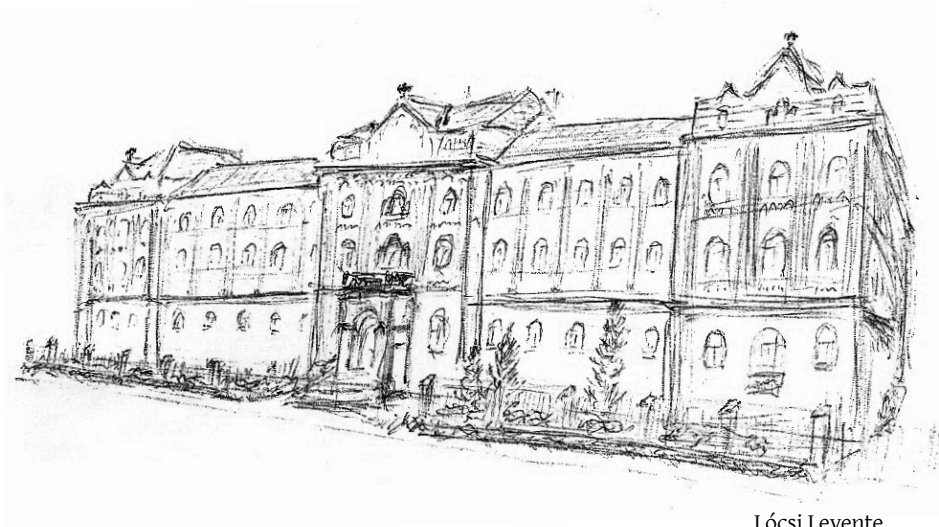
Ediderunt  
László Horváth, Krisztina Laczkó, Károly Tóth,  
et  
András Péterffy (Appendix)

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Lócsi Levente

Wolf Schmid

## Eventfulness and Context

With Examples from the History of Russian Literature

Eventfulness, a category that has been introduced into the discussion by the Russian structuralist Jurij Lotman, is an important narrative phenomenon and a major narratological tool, but it is not an objective category that can simply be applied to texts. Eventfulness is at least in some of its parameters a hermeneutic, subject-dependent and context-sensitive category indicative of interpretation.

Subject-dependency and context-sensitivity do not threaten narratology. Narratology should do more than design clinically sterile, aseptic analytical tools whose purpose is to generate objective descriptions that stand alone and have nothing to do with context and interpretation. Such a narratology would indeed not be very attractive. In the non-empirical humanities in general, there is little merit in the dichotomy between objective description and subjective, context-sensitive interpretation. I will give an example from the field of narratology. An event is a special case of a change of state. But the task of *recognizing* a change of state is, more often than not, heavily dependent on interpretation, either because the explicit properties of the initial and final states are not equivalent and thus require suppositions to be made if they are to be comparable, or because the difference between the states themselves is not clear. In many of Anton Chekhov's stories, for example, critics are bitterly divided over whether a change in inner state, diagnosed by both hero and narrator, ever takes place at all. A striking example is Chekhov's late story "The Lady with the Dog". It is highly controversial whether the hero really changes from a cynic despiser of women, without whom he could not live a day, into a truly loving man as the narrator, following the hero's self-assessment, makes us believe.

It might be argued that the categories of narratology as such are pure, and a certain degree of subjective contamination occurs only when they are applied to individual texts, if at all. But what about categories such as the implied author, free indirect discourse, and others whose status and delimitation have been the theme of scholarly controversies for many years?

In so far as it can be assumed that eventfulness is indeed a narratological category, my aim here is to consider its usefulness, the range of its applications and the way it depends on context and interpretation.

Let us begin by clarifying the basic terms of the theory of eventfulness:

1. Narrativity: The defining characteristic of narrative is not the presence of a narrator nor another feature of discourse or communication, but rather the content of what is narrated. Texts that we describe as narrative contain a temporal structure and reveal changes of state. This concept can apply to a representation in any medium, but excludes representations whose referents do not have a temporal structure and consequently do not contain any changes of state. Thus, drama, lyric poetry, film, comic strip, ballet, pantomime, and narrative painting are also narrative, in so far as changes of state are portrayed in them.

2. Change of state: A change of state is when two separate states, i.e. sets of properties which refer to an agent or to the external situation at a particular point in time, are juxtaposed. We can distinguish internal and external states on the basis of whether the represented features are linked to the inner life of the agent or to elements of the external situation.

3. Story: The minimal condition of a story is that at least one change of state must be represented. Edward Morgan Forster's famous example of a minimal story is still too extensive. In his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) Forster had coined the example: "The king died and then the queen died." As Gérard Genette pointed out for a minimal story it is sufficient to have simply, "The king died."

A change of state that gives rise to narrativity and is the basis of a story implies at least the following:

(1) a temporal structure with at least two states, the initial situation and the final situation (the king alive and the king dead),

(2) an equivalence of the initial and final state, i.e. the presence of a similarity and a contrast between the states (being alive and being dead form a classical equivalence),

(3) both states and the change that takes place between them must concern one and the same acting or suffering subject (in our case this is the poor king).

4. Event: An event is a special type of change of state that fulfils two conditions: reality and resultativity (effect).

The first basic requirement of the event is that its associated change of state must be real (real within the framework of the fictional world). It follows that these changes of state, which are wished for, imagined, or dreamed, are not events. However, the real acts of wishing, imagining, or dreaming can qualify as events. Those mental events that are not followed by a realization in reality are common in the works of Chekhov.

Resultativity, the second requirement of the event, is a correlate of the event's reality. The change of state that constitutes an event is neither inchoative (begun), nor conative (attempted), nor durative (confined to an ongoing process). Rather, it must be "resultative" in that it reaches completion in the fictional world.

Reality and resultativity are necessary conditions of an event in the strict sense. However, it is clear that these requirements alone are not sufficient to turn a change of state into an event, for they can both be fulfilled by trivial changes of state.

5. Eventfulness: Eventfulness is a scalable property of events. This means that events can have varying levels of eventfulness.

There are five features a change of state must display if it is to be described as an event. These features are listed in a hierarchical order according to importance:

(1) Relevance. The first condition of eventfulness is that the change of state must be relevant. Eventfulness increases to the degree to which the change of state is felt to be an essential part of the universe in which it occurs. Changes that are trivial in terms of the axioms which underlie the particular universe do not give rise to eventfulness and thus do not produce events.

The idea of relevance is, of course, a relative one, as Chekhov illustrates in a story with the narratologically promising title "An Event". The story at first glance is about nothing more than how a cat gives birth and an enormous dog, named Nero, eats all the kittens. But, in Chekhov's hands, it illustrates the subjectivity which can influence how we evaluate relevance. The birth of the kittens is a happening of great significance for the little children Vanya and Nina. Then, while the adults readily accept Nero's eating the kittens and feel nothing more than surprise at the dog's insatiable appetite, the children feel that the world has come to an end.

Generally speaking, the criticism of the events in Chekhov's "eventless" stories tends to undermine the apparently self-evident place of relevance in realism by showing how the evaluation of relevance depends on the subject and its physical and psychological state.

(2) Unpredictability. Eventfulness increases in proportion to the extent to which a change of state deviates from the *doxa* of the narrative, i.e. what is generally expected within a particular universe. This does not mean that the event must rest, as Lotman suggests, on the breach of a norm or the violation of a prohibition. Instead, the essence of the event lies in the fact that it breaks with expectations. A highly eventful change is paradoxical in the literal sense of the word. According to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, a paradox (*para ten doxan*) is something that is against the expectation; it is not what we expect. *Doxa* refers to the story and its protagonists and is not equivalent to the reader's script. A script is what

the reader expects in the action on the basis of certain patterns in literature or the real world. A change of state that comes as a surprise to the protagonists in a particular universe can be perfectly predictable for an expert reader if it is genre characteristic. It follows that the reader's script concerning the course of a work and the protagonists' expectations concerning the course of their lives must be treated as distinct and separate notions.

A change of state that can be seen to follow the normal rules of a fictional world is predictable and thus will have a low level of eventfulness, even if it is of great importance to the individual protagonists involved in it. If a bride marries her groom, it is not, strictly speaking, eventful. But it is likely to be surprising for everyone involved, including the bride herself, if, as in Chekhov's story "The Betrothed," she abandons her prospective husband just before the wedding after all the arrangements and plans have been made. If this happens, the failure to marry is far more eventful than the expected marriage would have been.

Another of Chekhov's marriage stories, "The Teacher of Literature," illustrates how unpredictability is not a constant feature but can change during the course of a narrative. Masha Shelestova seems unattainable to Nikitin, the teacher of literature, and declaring his love for her means gathering all his courage and taking a truly heroic step, for it seems completely impossible to him that he could ever marry his sweetheart. The reader, however, can tell from Masha's behavior that she is not likely to resist the proposal with any great conviction; and, after the hero takes the decisive step, he must himself recognize that what he supposed to be a border crossing was actually a perfectly normal act that everyone expected.

(3) Persistence. The eventfulness of a change of state is in direct proportion to its consequences for the thought and action of the affected subject within the framework of the story.

Chekhov frequently disguises lack of persistence in his stories by bringing them to an end before the storyline of the characters themselves has ended. Interpreters who transform the potential of the open ending into reality are imbuing the change of state with a resultativity and persistence which are not present in the construction of the story itself.

(4) Irreversibility. Eventfulness increases with the irreversibility of the new condition which arises from a change of state. That is to say, the more improbable it is that the original condition can be restored, the greater the level of eventfulness. In the case of "rethinking" (the mental event that was of such concern to the Russian realists), an insight must be gained that excludes any return to earlier ways of thinking. An example of irreversible events is provided by the chain of conversions that runs through Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.



None of the converted persons could conceivably return to their godless initial position in the future.

Chekhov's narratives cast doubt on every aspect of the idea that there can be irreversible mental states and decisions to act. In none of his works is the certainty about a character's definite border crossing more precarious than in "The Betrothed". A shadow is cast over the finality of the bride's escape by the act that it is Alexander who persuades her not to marry. Alexander, who perpetually calls on women to break their bonds, is as much subject to a repetitive cycle as Andrey Andreich, the bridegroom who is forever playing the violin and, as his name shows, nothing more than his father's son. Will the bride really be able to escape the cycle of her old existence, or will she be drawn back into it by the force of repetition that rules the world she is trying to leave? This contentious question is raised by the famous final sentence that Chekhov made ambiguous by modifying the final draft to include the phrase "as she supposed". "She went upstairs to pack, and the next morning she said good-bye to her family, and left the town, gay and full of spirits – as she supposed, forever."

(5) Non-iterativity. Repeated changes of the same kind represent a low level of eventfulness, even if they are both relevant and unpredictable. Chekhov demonstrates this with the marriages in "Darling" and the concomitant radical changes of state in Olya Plemyannikova, the heroine of the story. The complete reformulation of her basic values to fit in with the world of her husbands seems to be an event in her first marriage, but repetition shows it to be the unchanging emptiness of a vampire's existence.

The eventfulness of "The Betrothed" is undermined by the fact that the breakout of the title heroine occurs in a context of negative iterations which envelop the female characters, the mother and the grandmother, just as much as they do the groom and the mentor. Perhaps the journey of the former bride to Petersburg, her return home, and her "as she supposed" ultimate breakout "forever" are nothing more than the beginning of a new cycle.

Among the five aforementioned features, the first two, namely relevance and unpredictability, are the most important. If a change of state is to be called an event, it must display both these features to some degree.

Ockham might have argued that is too plentiful a list of features and that some overlap with others; unpredictability, for example, seems to imply non-iterativity. But this is not so. The features have been obtained by means of induction rather than by deduction. They are derived from the prose of the Russian post-realist Anton Chekhov, in which they are independent of one another.

6. Tellability: Our last basic term, introduced by William Labov, designates something that is worth telling, i.e. the *raison d'être*, the point of a story. In

a narrative with a high degree of eventfulness the eventfulness will, as a rule, coincide with tellability. In narratives with low eventfulness or no eventfulness at all, tellability can stem from the absence of an event that the reader might have expected. Though the non-expectedness of a change of state is an important prerequisite for an event, the non-fulfilment of an expectation is not, as such, an event. But it can be the point of a narrative. This can be seen from the *Tales of the Little Quarter*, a collection of stories by the nineteenth-century Czech writer Jan Neruda. In one of them, “How Mister Vorel Broke in His Meerschaum Pipe”, the hero attempts to establish a new grocery somewhere in the Little Quarter of Prague where there has never been a shop before. Jurij Lotman would have called this a “shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field” or the “crossing of a prohibition boundary”. The grocer’s border crossing, i.e. his attempt to establish a new grocery, is doomed to fail because of the reluctance of the established bourgeoisie to accept change in their lives. The boycott of the new shop leads to the border violator’s bankruptcy and eventual suicide. The death of the grocer is therefore not completely unexpected for the reader or the fictional world. It is a somewhat foreseeable consequence of what precedes it and is therefore a change with a relatively low degree of eventfulness. The actual ‘tellable’ thing in this story is the failure of an intended border crossing or the lethal consequences of a completed border crossing. The whole collection of stories in *Tales of the Little Quarter* is devoted to the uneventfulness of this microcosm, to the impenetrability of its borders. This is symbolized by the oft-mentioned city walls that surround the Little Quarter.

At least two of the five features listed above, namely relevance and unpredictability, are not objective ones, but rather depend on interpretation. This dependency has two facets: (1) reference to textual entities and (2) context-sensitivity.

Let us examine the first facet. It is not only the characters in a fictional world who can evaluate the relevance and unpredictability of a change of state in different ways, as was demonstrated with Chekhov’s tale “An Event”, but the narrator and implied semantic entities, such as the abstract author and the abstract reader, can also evaluate the relevance and unpredictability of a narrated change of state in different ways. Moreover, we need to take in account the fact that real readers can have individual concepts of relevance and unpredictability that do not conform with those of the fictive and implied entities.

As we have seen, relevance and unpredictability are heavily dependent on the subject evaluating the change of state. Each of the depicted, narrating and reading entities is a subject on his own and has its own social and axiological contexts that determines his or her norms and expectations.

Regarding the second facet, the assessment of relevance and unpredictability is heavily context-sensitive. But what is context? What does it mean to be context-sensitive? At least four meanings of context can be distinguished.

i. “Context” means the system of the general social norms and values of the author’s time or of the time depicted in a work. The force of social perspectives on literature in the 1970s, however, led to a tremendous overestimation of the relevance of reconstructing the social context of the author’s epoch or of the epoch depicted in a work. To understand the eventfulness of *Madame Bovary*, there is no need to study the social order of France at those times or the curriculum of French convent schools or the state of medical science. It is clear that Emma’s expectations of happiness have been spoiled by reading too many bad love novels and that Bovary is a poor surgeon. It is a happy truth that literary works provide, more or less overtly, information about the norms and values in terms of which their eventfulness should be understood. This is the reason why we can understand medieval narratives, such as Wolfram’s *Parzival* or Gottfried’s *Tristan*, not having studied the social norms of the time depicted. Lotman points out that in medieval novels death is an event only when it is connected with either glory or dishonour. When Parzival slays the red knight, it is not eventful per se, but only for the reason that the inexperienced young knight does it in a non-chivalrous way. This is clear from the text alone.

ii. More specifically ‘context’ means the individual social norms, ideologies etc. that are attributed to the depicted, narrating and implied sending and receiving entities of a narrative to motivate their behavior. The intersection of contexts in a narrative is a challenge to the real reader. He cannot simply be immersed in the depicted world and take the position of a hero, but rather the reader is invited to check the relevance and unpredictability of an event against the background of the different contexts.

iii. The reconstruction of another context, that is to say the *concept of the event* in different genres and literary movements in a given period is also very important. Genres and movements are characterized by certain concepts of what is eventful. In Russian literature of the 1830s, for example, epic poetry developed event concepts quite different from those of contemporary narrative prose, and late romanticism allowed for forms of border crossing different from those of contemporary early realism. To understand eventfulness, it is necessary to know the event code of the genre and movement in question.

iv. The *intertextual* context is very important but often underestimated. As previously mentioned, a change of state that comes as a surprise to a character may not be surprising at all to well-read readers because they are prepared by pretexts. On the other hand, eventfulness may emerge in view of the pretexts.

Let me give an example. In Pushkin's novella *The Stationmaster* the title hero drinks himself to death out of grief for the presumed ruin of his daughter who was abducted by a young hussar. But after her father's death, the daughter proves to have made her fortune. Both the changes of father and daughter emerge as highly surprising and thus eventful when perceived against the background of pretexts. The daughter's happiness contradicts the sad fate of all the poor Lizas, Marfas and Mashas, the peasant heroines of Russian sentimental literature, who, having been seduced by a young nobleman, eventually drown themselves in the village pond. The father's behavior contradicts the generosity of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, a pretext that is presented by four illustrations adorning the walls of the Russian stationmaster's humble room. Instead of patiently waiting for his presumed prodigal daughter, the father, the real prodigal one, drinks himself to death.

Following Viktor Shklovsky, it can in general be said that literature is perceived against the background of preceding literature rather than against the background of real life.

Now an important question arises: What is the role in the reception of familiar and repeated things in stories? Parents know that children never tire of listening to the same story again and again, and they do not allow the slightest deviation in the sequence of the actions. Is that not a reason to assume a certain amount of pleasure from familiarity and repetition? Here is another example, this time from the world of adults. What fascinates an experienced female reader of hospital romances who knows in advance that the heroine eventually will marry the chief doctor? The same question can be asked about crime series on television. What surprise can arise here if, following the design of the series, from the beginning it is clear that the offender is played by the most prominent actor? If narration exhausted itself in the satisfaction of the desire for the new and unheard, what could explain then the obvious pleasure from the familiar and repeated?

Does the reader or spectator, so to speak, wind the clock back, pretending not to know the action? Does he forget the script each time? Or, does he concentrate on other components of the work, for example the so-called "form"? The latter is perhaps true for experienced readers rereading a piece of "high" literature, but hardly for readers of hospital romances and viewers of crime series. Obviously we have to take a particular kind of pleasure into consideration that arises from the unfolding of an event even if its result is highly predictable or if the same story is received several times. Perhaps we could speak of a certain rituality, a mode that lets us perceive and appreciate the unfolding event in all its stages and phases and in all its detail. In any case, the ritual perception of repeated occurrences is connected with an immersion in the emotional reactions of the characters

exposed to positive or negative peripety. In this immersion the recipient can identify with the characters, delving into their inner world. So the recipient can experience the represented peripety in a certain way as his own. This is part of what Aristotle had in mind for his term catharsis.

All this means, however, that besides the aesthetics of deviation proclaimed by the Russian formalists we have to acknowledge an aesthetic of identification and recognition. Of course, the two aesthetics have different efficacy in varying spheres and epochs of culture and are realized by recipients in differing degrees.

If it is true that the pleasure from narratives derives not only from their eventfulness, i.e. from the unexpected, but to a varying degree also derives from the familiar, the repeated, that is received in a ritual way, the question arises: Where lies the usefulness of the category of eventfulness? Eventfulness is a culture-specific and historically changing phenomenon of narrative representation. The category is therefore particularly important when it comes to dealing with problems of cultural typology and the history of literature and thought.

The following examples from Russian literature illustrate different concepts of eventfulness. In old Russian literature, i.e. Russian literature up to the seventeenth century, which was strongly influenced by religious thought, eventfulness does not present itself as a positive quality. There is no unpredictability in hagiography, the leading genre of the time. Of course, hagiographical texts as a rule represent changes of state, and they often culminate in miracles. Miracles, however, are not surprising or unforeseeable in this textual world, for they follow holy models and affirm the Christian world order. Martyrdom, another subject of hagiography, or the conversion of a pagan ruler, which tells the *Lives of the Princes*, are formed according to holy models and do not establish genuine eventfulness. Essentially, hagiography contents itself with small, relative changes of state or, when major reversals are to be reported, follows models that do not question the truth of revelation. Essentially, hagiography does not admit fundamental surprises.

But within this ideological, closed system of thought that looked at the whole world history through the prism of the history of salvation and excluded all paradoxical, unpredictable changes, was there not a universally human, timeless need for the new and unheard? What then satisfied the needs for surprises? On the one hand, these needs were met by small, doxical changes; on the other hand, the aesthetics of identity and repetition dominated the aforementioned pleasure from the rituality of narrative.

Eventfulness in our modern sense appears in Russia only in some secular tales of the seventeenth century that were influenced by western European novellas of the Renaissance. These secular tales tell of morally dubious heroes

and their border crossings that are no longer punished at the end as was the case in religious tales. The hero in “The Tale of Frol Skobelev”, for example, is able to rise in society and then marry the daughter of a dignitary whom he has cunningly seduced earlier, all without prospect of worldly retribution.

This phase of secular narrative, of course, was never more than an episode; it was not returned to in the subsequent development of Russian literature before the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, the classical concept of literature pushed eventful narration aside. The classical episteme is defined by the idea of order and seeks to classify all phenomena. This leads to the predominance of description over narration. Varying predications are not the basis of changes but characterize things in terms of their nature and possibilities, both of which serve to predetermine development as something essentially non-contingent. This means that eventfulness in the modern sense is impossible, since the unpredictability and border crossing that are its constituent features have no positive place in the eighteenth century’s image of the world.

Eventfulness gained the upper hand only with the prose of sentimentalism and romanticism around 1800. The event was increasingly modelled as a change in the internal, mental state of a character. This development culminated in the realist novels, in which, of course, a variety of event concepts are deployed. In Ivan Turgenev’s novels, people are basically portrayed as unchangeable. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, on the other hand, give form to mental processes that have been described as cases of insight, illumination, and sudden understanding. The realist event concept culminates in Rodion Raskol’nikov’s ‘resurrection’ in *Crime and Punishment*, the sudden understanding of the meaning of life gained by Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina* and Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, and in the Karamazov brothers’ final acknowledgement of guilt. It should be remembered that with both authors the internal change is linked with transcendental forces. Clear enough in Tolstoy, this is clearer still in Dostoevsky, who uses the saint’s life as a model when crafting the chain reaction of conversions in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Not by chance that the story of the first conversion is told in the language of hagiographical style throughout. This reflects Dostoevsky’s attempt to reconcile hagiography and realism, to write a realistic *vita*, and thus move realism to a higher level.

While the novels of the two realists show people who have the capacity to undergo fundamental transformations and transcend the boundaries of morality and the logic of personality, Chekhov’s post-realist narratives place a large question mark over the eventfulness of the world and the ability of people to change. Chekhov’s narration is centered on interrogating the idea of a mental event, an existential or social insight, an emotional switch, or an ethical/practical

reorientation. If an event does not occur, the tellability of the stories lies in how they represent its prevention and in how they illustrate the reasons that lead to the intention of change and prevent it from being realized. Chekhov's post-realist poetics thrive on the fact that tellability and eventfulness are no longer congruent. Consider, for example, the famous play *The Three Sisters*. The heroines, who lead unfulfilled lives in rural Russia, seek a fundamental change, as expressed in the repeated phrase "to Moscow, to Moscow". The tellability of the play lies in the impossibility of crossing the topographical, occupational, and, last but not least, existential borders involved.

Socialist realism appears at first glance to have been a development in which eventfulness thrived. The conversion of the doubter or miscreant into a liberator of the people who supports the right side in the struggle was one of the most popular scripts in this kind of literature. On closer examination, however, this way of thinking, with its similarities to salvation history, turned out, to limit the possibility of border crossings just as much as the Church literature of the Middle Ages.

The picture in the literature of post-communist Russia is extremely varied. In the neo-realist, neo-mythic, and postmodern movements, the eventful stories of "high" realism are continued, are transposed into mythic iteration, or have their illusory nature exposed. In all cases, though, event and eventfulness are useful narratological categories that can help us describe even the thought that defines the most modern literature.

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Kedves Olvasó!

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