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The Aesthetics of Endings in Ēvalds Vilks's Short Stories During the Thaw: typological parallels with Italian Neorealism

Zanda Gūtmane

Riga Technical University, Liepāja Academy
Lielā St 14, Liepāja, LV-3401, Latvia
University of Latvia, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art
Mūkusalas St 3, Riga, LV-1423, Latvia
Email: Zanda.Gutmane@rtu.lv
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0348-0092
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Abstract. The article explores the aesthetics of endings in the short stories of Latvian writer Ēvalds Vilks (1923–1976) during the Thaw (1956–1964), searching for typological parallels with Italian neorealist cinema. While socialist realism ideology demanded optimistic and future-oriented endings, Vilks's stories during the Thaw reveal an obvious transformation: from schematic endings in the early 1950s to pessimistic and closed endings in the late 1950s and later to ambivalent endings that combine the everyday with conditional hope. Based on the concepts of open and closed structures in narratology, the study analyzes twenty-five stories to identify structural and thematic trends. The comparative approach shows that Vilks's prose, which focuses on ordinary people and everyday life, resonates with the narrative strategies of neorealism, which emphasized the unresolved, tragic, or ambivalent nature of endings. Thus, Vilks's endings demonstrate a move away from socialist realism towards a more authentic representation of human experience.

Keywords: socialist realism; short stories; neorealism; narrative structures; aesthetics of endings.

Introduction

One of the most notable masters of Latvian short prose is Ēvalds Vilks (real name Ēvalds Lācis, 1923–1976). Beginning to publish his works soon after World War II, Vilks initially adapted to the requirements of Soviet ideology. However, soon after Stalin's death, he became aware of the degrading effect of ideological restrictions on literature and sought to find the fullest artistic expression for his works. The change in his creative

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strategy is most clearly visible during the liberalization or Thaw of the Soviet regime (1956–1964)[1].

The liberalization processes in the culture of the USSR manifested themselves as criticism of the ruling doctrine of socialist realism and relative creative freedom, as well as in the acquaintance with the ideologically approved part of Western culture. In Moscow and other large Soviet cities, the Thaw's freedom was much greater compared to the Latvian SSR. However, information about the development trends of Western culture also reached Latvia through the center, and several manifestations were possible to experience. Even that was enough to begin the reassessment of the canon of socialist realism and to begin overcoming the cultural crisis (Gūtmane, Ignatjeva, 2023).

Along with discussions about realism and limited exposure to Western modernist literature[2], neorealist cinema is also considered one of the catalysts for overcoming the crisis.

Regular acquaintance with cinema from abroad began in 1956, when an Italian cinema week was held in Moscow and Leningrad, and since 1959, the Moscow International Film Festival has been held regularly. Neorealism did not establish a cultural hegemony comparable to socialist realism (Hamilton, 2019, pp. 1–2), however, it had a significant impact on the culture of the USSR. By the late 1950s, both Russian and Latvian press made frequent references to Italian neorealist cinema, and its impact was evident. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, a representative of the so-called sixties generation (*shestidesjatniki*) of Russian literature, even admitted that their generation was shaped not by Marxism but by Italian neorealism (Volkov, Nelson, 2018). Although literary experiments under the doctrine of socialist realism were quite limited, they could be safely pursued in directions considered legitimate by Marxists and socialist realists, namely, within the narrowed trajectory of modifications of realism.[3]

This study explores the typological affinity of Vilks's prose to Italian neorealist cinema, focusing on one of the most essential elements of narrative structure – the finales of the works. The analysis focuses on stories written during the Thaw: the short story collections *Zaļais koks* (*The Green Tree,* 1960), *Piecas minūtes par vēlu* (*Five Minutes Late*, 1961) and *Es tevi nevaru pamest vienu* (*I Cannot Leave You Alone*), which was not published as a separate book but appeared in the collection *Stāsti* (*Stories,* 1963). For contextual

[1] The prerequisite for the political and cultural Thaw was marked by the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953. The beginning was the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" of February 25, 1956, and the end was the suppression of the Prague Spring in August 1968.

[2] During the Thaw, the most translated works in the USSR were those of classical realists but also works by authors close to modernism (Hemingway, Remarque, Camus, Sartre, Kafka, Salinger, Fitzgerald in Russian; Hemingway, Camus, Salinger also in Latvian) (Gūtmane, Ignatjeva, 2023).

[3] At the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Andrei Zhdanov (Zhdanov 1934/1977) declared that the new Soviet literature should be grounded in a transformation of the traditions of realism and romanticism. Similarly, the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács (1950, p. 14), one of the key revisers of the doctrine of socialist realism – or the "new literature" of the Soviet Union – located the basis of progressive writing in the traditions of realism.

comparison, stories from Vilks's earlier collection *Rudens dienās* (*In Autumn Days*, 1955) written in the pre-Thaw (1953–1955), are also considered.

Stories by Vilks were selected because he was a prominent representative of the new generation of writers of the Thaw period. Second, he played a crucial role in both the transmission and modernisation of Latvian classical and realist prose traditions, as well as in the revival and development of the short story genre (Hiršs, 1986, pp. 302–333; Smilktiņa, 2005, pp. 12–16), thereby contributing to overcoming the literary crisis caused by socialist realism (Gūtmane, 2019, pp. 251–256). Vilks has been described as a "master of simplicity" who, in the tradition of the "folk tale", grounded his works in everyday situations (Smilktiņa, 2005, p. 14). Yet even within this seemingly traditional framework, he succeeded in "opening the floodgates to a much freer flow of prose" (Smilktiņa, 2005, p. 16).

Even at a superficial glance, the stories written by Vilks during Thaw evoke associations with the neorealist manner, which, according to Luchino Visconti's description, is the "poetry of real life" (Lawton, 1979, p. 11). Although neorealist films "have a documentary-like appearance, even though it be achieved through totally contrived means" (Lawton, 1979, p. 11). In addition, it has some standard criteria: "factual narration, geographical specificity, political commitment, on location shooting, non-professional actors, and linguistic authenticity" (Leavitt, 2020, p. 4).

Vilks is a master of the short prose genre because his stories stand out in the context of the works of his contemporaries (Miervaldis Birze, Zigmunds Skujiņš, etc.) with special ending sentences and a pronounced compositional conclusion. Since "it is at the ending that the narrative gains its full retrospective meaning" (Genette, 1980, p. 236), and the last sentences "do often serve to scaffold our retrospective interpretation of a book" (Rabinowitz, 2002, p. 303), this narrative component determines the overall message in a masterfully crafted story. This article aims to analyse the endings in Vilks's stories, highlighting typological parallels with Italian neorealist cinema, thereby revealing Vilks's artistic quest as a potential means of overcoming the dogmas of socialist realism.

This article contributes to research on endings in socialist realism and neorealism, applying these frameworks to the analysis of Vilks's short stories. The text analysis section will examine the corpus of endings of all stories (twenty-five) in the previously mentioned collections, assessing whether the endings are open or closed, which images are used (optimistic or pessimistic), and how intonation signals a future perspective. The analysis of Vilks's stories uses the views of narratological theorists and other literary scholars on the unity of the structure of a literary work, endings as significant structural units of a text, and possible classifications of endings (Eco, 1979; Genette, 1980; Rabinowitz, 2002; Mortimer, 2008; Bal, 2017; Taha, 2017). The analysis of the finale of the Vilks's stories uses paraphrases or microquotes from the text.

Ultimately, this article represents an initial attempt to explore the intersections between prose and cinema and to assess the typological parallels with neorealism within the context of Latvian literature.

1. Italian Neorealism in relation to Realism and Socialist Realism

In a broader cultural perspective, the origins of neorealism can be traced to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, to 19th-century realism, and to *verismo* – a variant of Italian realism and naturalism at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries which focused on the life of the lower social classes, the so-called objective reality, and described it in a detached, uninvolved manner. The term *neorealism* itself first appeared in 1930 in an essay by Arnaldo Bocelli. It began to be used to denote a new group of film directors, was also adopted abroad to describe a new mode of narrative creation (Bondanella, 1983, p. 13). Neorealism "emerged in response to a common climate" (Leavitt, 2020, p. 5) during the Second World War and continued into the late 1940s and early 1950s. While many place its conclusion between 1948 and 1951, others argue that "it lasted longer, persisting well into the 1950s, and perhaps as late as 1960" (Leavitt, 2020, p. 4). Traditionally, films such as Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession,* 1943), Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, 1945), Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), and Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948) are included in the legacy of neorealism. In literature, Primo Levi and Alberto Moravia are often mentioned as key figures in shaping Italy's new, post-fascist or neorealist writing (Konewko, 2016, p. 9). This aesthetic, widespread in Western culture, became "one of the most influential cultural currents of the modern age" (Leavitt, 2020, p. ix). Its significance for Western culture is immeasurable: "In the decade following the end of the Second World War, the innovations of Italian cinema were met not only with global admiration but also with widespread imitation, permanently reshaping how films were made and understood worldwide" (Leavitt, 2020, p. ix).

The analysis of "the human condition in light of the social environment and of objective psychological insights, and as avoiding the then prevalent stylistic and formal hedonism" (Lawton, 1979, p. 9) embodied in neorealist works forms the conceptual basis of the movement and is grounded in the realist worldview. Yet neorealism differs from 19th-century realism and naturalism, and other predecessors: the legacy of impressionism is particularly significant, as it gave subjectivity to the depiction of reality. It is the presence of impressionistic subjectivism that constitutes a fundamental difference between neorealism and realism.

The neorealist movement is associated primarily with leftist intellectuals, who hoped that the idea of communism would eventually prevail in Italy after the defeat of Fascism (Konewko, 2016, p. 9). The origins of Italian neorealism in the 1930s and 1940s can also be traced to Soviet cinema, the translations of Russian film theory, and the teaching of Russian filmmaking techniques at the national Italian film school (Konewko, 2016, p. 14; Haaland, 2012, p. 4). The process was also reversible: "Having emerged under the influence of Soviet cinema ..., neorealism in its turn influenced the work of the young Soviet filmmakers of the 1950s" (Salazkina, 2011, p. 183). Also, the common roots in Marxist ideology unite neorealism and socialist realism. As Lawton (1979, p. 9) observes:

> But, while naturalism's sympathy for the worker offered no solution, often neorealism emulated socialist realism. However, while numerous neorealist works reveal a more or less explicit faith in marxist dialectical conflict, in the inevitability of historical evolution, and in the irresistible power of collective effort, they do not generally share the doctrinary optimism of socialist realism and its faith in the consequent inescapable solution.

In this way, neorealism emerges as a hybrid formation – rooted in realism and open to a modernist worldview. It also resonates with socialist realism yet is characterised by a denial of optimism and a desire for a more open, ambiguous portrayal of human experience.

2. Comparing the endings of neorealist and socialist realist works

The ending of literary works has been the focus of researchers since the beginning of literature, because "[r]eaders assume that authors put their best thoughts last and thus assign a special value to the final pages of the text" (Rabinowitz, 2002, p. 304). The ending is the most important element of the work's composition, creating aesthetic impact and cognitive meaning. Following Umberto Eco's (1979, pp. 8–10) reflections on open and closed texts, discussion among literary scholars about the role of narrative endings has continued. For example, Taha (2017, pp. 4–5) explained the distinction between closed and open closure: "The closed, classic closure provides well-defined answers and solutions to all the questions and problems arising in the body of the text. ... The text is closed since there is nothing to add to it." In turn, the open closure is the inverse of the closed closure. This approach can be applied to both dramatic works and films, as well as literary works. The film examples in this article are used as a heuristic model.

Italian neorealist films are characterised by pessimistic, often even fatal endings. These works are largely free from sentimentality; they depict life in its rawness and prosaicness, rejecting idealisation and utopian visions. Human beings are confronted with the inexorable passage of time and the ordinariness of everyday life, as the tragic dimension dissolves into routine and underscores the insignificance of the individual – thereby making an essential departure from classical realism.

For example, *Ladri di biciclette* ends with the stolen bicycle never being recovered, as the father and son walk home toward a future likely to resemble the everyday struggle they have just endured. Such endings are usually emotionally heavy and hopeless. In Visconti's *La terra trema*, a peasant family's fate is ruined, yet life in the village continues as usual. In another of his films, *Bellissima,* the heroine realises that her daughter has no chance of entering the film industry and is forced to abandon her dream. Similarly, in Giuseppe De Santis's *Riso amaro,* the heroine dies at the end, but the rice harvest carries on.

The endings of these and other neorealist films are problematic to categorise, as they are either conventionally closed or paradoxically open. In some cases, the hero dies or abandons his desires, yet the endless cycle of everyday life continues. In some cases, "the future ... is ambiguous, open-ended, and perhaps vaguely threatening, but, without a doubt, interesting" (Lawton, 1979, p. 22); in others, there is an ambivalent or symbolic form

of hope. For example, in *Roma, città aperta*, a resistance member, a priest, is executed, but this is witnessed by children. On one level, these children may symbolically carry forward the idea of resistance; on another, they are themselves products of the fascist regime, their personalities already shaped by it. Therefore, "they signify a resolution that is decidedly partial, a transformation that is manifestly unfinished, a future that is necessarily deferred. This is only a happy ending, therefore, if it is recognised not to be an ending at all" (Leavitt, 2018, p. 16).

In socialist realist art, the finale, by contrast, carries a clear meaning: the overall message of the work must be imbued with a dose of forced optimism. Such endings reveal how socialist realism radically departed from realism, approaching the binary oppositions characteristic of romanticism instead. As Andrei Zhdanov (1934/1977) emphasised in his speech at the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, the new Soviet literature was to be based on an ideological transformation of the traditions of realism and romanticism:

> In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as 'objective reality' but to depict reality in its revolutionary development ... Our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis, cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism …

The endings of works are therefore particularly significant, as they enable the message of revolutionary romanticism to be realised and reveal the extent to which a given work adheres to the canon. Since the art of socialist realism can be compared to iconography, where the artist must reproduce the established forms, colours, gestures, actions, and symbols of the canon (Clark, 2000, p. 4), the prescribed models also determine the structure of finales and the shaping of the overall message.

The role of the finale in socialist realism was articulated during the Thaw in 1957. The Russian writer and literary critic Andrei Sinyavsky (pseudonym – Abram Tertz), the editor of the periodical *Noviy Mir*, and later a dissident, in the essay *What is it – socialist realism?* concluded that the ending of a socialist realist work is always joyful from a supra-personal perspective, even if it is tragic for the protagonist (Tertz, 1988, p. 21). Although classical aesthetics also allows for the rapprochement of the tragic and the comic to create resignation, Soviet aesthetics tended to trivialise this general principle. The socialist realist author must affirm unwavering faith in the ultimate triumph of the socialist idea. As Tertz (Tertz, 1988, p. 21) ironically remarked, "lost illusions, shattered hopes, and unfulfilled dreams, characteristic of the literature and systems of other eras, are unnatural for socialist realism. Even if it is a tragedy, it is an 'optimistic tragedy'".

This comparison shows that, despite their shared Marxist vocabulary, the fundamental orientation of neorealist art diverges radically from socialist realism. While the protagonists of neorealist films, like those of socialist realism, are ordinary working people who stand "with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life", the overall message and resolution of these works contradict Zhdanov's vision of creativity as "impregnated with

enthusiasm and the spirit of heroic deeds" (Zhdanov, 1934/1977). The finales of neorealist films could never serve as models for socialist realist literature, which was tasked with realising revolutionary romanticism. Instead, neorealism articulates the insurmountability of reality, the uncertainty and complexity of the future, the hopelessness of struggle, and the marginality of both individual and collective action.

3. Soviet critical perspectives on neorealist cinema during the Thaw

Initially, neorealism was classified as a form of progressive art in Soviet Latvia. In 1957, the newspaper *Padomju Students* (*Soviet Student*) explained: "Neorealists in their works focus their main attention on the lives of ordinary people, devote their best sympathies to them, show the difficult life of the working people, but at the same time also reveal the nobility of characters, their development, and dynamics" (Aizkalns, 1957, p. 4).

Latvian literary critic Pēteris Zeile also contrasted the progressive forces of the people with the bourgeoisie, which did not understand neorealism: "Bourgeois ideologists are not fond of either critical realism ... or neo-realism, which truly reveals many contradictions of bourgeois society, depicts the hard life of ordinary people, their nobility and desire for a better, brighter future" (1963, p. 2). Similarly, Konstantīns Andrejevs, director of the Latvian State Museum of Fine Arts, wrote about an exhibition of Italian contemporary art in Riga: "all progressive cultural workers are increasingly fighting for a realistic and democratic direction in art" (1957, p. 4).

Yet these praises were accompanied by ideological reservations. Neorealism was also criticized for its "bourgeois limitation", since "its representatives only vaguely set forth a positive ideal as the basis for a way out of the miseries of capital" (Aizkalns, 1957, p. 4). According to ideological requirements, the conclusion of a work had to contain the prospect of a solution and affirm the vision of a positive future – something neorealist narratives did not provide (Zeile, 1960, p. 2; Anon., 1959, p. 157).

The popularity of neorealism resonated with the growing view that literature in the Soviet Union was stagnating because it had become detached from the realities of life. This concern was first articulated by the Russian journalist and writer Vladimir Pomerantsev in essay *Ob iskrennosti v literature* (*On Sincerity in Literature*), published in *Noviy Mir* in 1953 and, a month later, in Latvian translation in the magazine *Karogs* in 1954. The essay's call to abandon embellishment and to allow "not a single line without the breath of life" (Pomerancevs, 1954, p. 76) was quickly taken up by Latvian critics. Apparently under its influence, realism once again entered literary debate, stimulating reflections on its contemporary transformation. Critics also reminded readers that realism was not obsolete (Aksenovs, 1961, p. 3) but remained a vital and powerful tradition that "will yet show its mighty power" (Anon., 1960, p. 6).

Despite the ambivalent assessment, critics observed the influence of neorealism in the cinema of the Soviet Union and all socialist countries. Moreover, it was noted not only by Soviet (e.g., Miglāne, 1967, p. 3; Tauriņš, 1980, p. 2) but also by foreign critics: "recently, modern films have been made in which the influence of Italian neorealism is strongly

felt" (Anon., 1958, p. 8). Rarely was neorealism also recorded in the literature (e.g., Niedre, 1958, p. 110). This allows us to conclude that the concepts of Italian neorealism, like other artistic practices originating in the West, were explored in the Soviet Union, but only to a limited extent. At the same time, they are also subjected to evaluation and criticism. Certain aspects were acknowledged, but their alleged unsuitability for a so-called progressive depiction of life was consistently emphasized. This very process – the recognition of external phenomena followed by ideologically framed critique – enabled the absorption of foreign aesthetics into artistic practice and, over time, contributed to the gradual erosion of the socialist realist canon.

4. An analysis of the endings of Vilks's Thaw-period stories

Not only was Vilks actively writing short prose in the second half of the 1950s, but he also published a series of literary, critical and essayistic articles in which, responding to Pomerantsev's call, he urged a true depiction of life and called for attention to seemingly insignificant themes and characters – the so-called ordinary man (Vilks, 1956, p. 106). He argued that "... art does not recognize the sweetening of life with saccharin ..."; and that "the ordinary man ... is big enough as he is, he does not need a photographer's jacket or a retoucher's paint" (Vilks, 1955, p. 2). Although the attention to ordinary people, characteristic of neorealism, is already evident in his earliest publications, it was during the Thaw that Vilks fundamentally reoriented the endings of his stories and, with them, the overall message. The structure of the stories' endings highlights the author's shift in attitude toward the principles of socialist realism and reveals his return to depicting real life. With the help of endings and a structure that matches them, Vilks guides the reader into his understanding of the world because "... the closure of a literary work is the chief part of the text constituting the convergence point between the author and the reader. For both, this is a source of taking a stand on the extra-literary reality and on the world in general" (Taha, 2017, p. 6).

Further analysis reveals that Vilks returns to the basic principles of literary fabula formation, abandoning constructed solutions that are far from reality and create a logical but unsatisfactory result: "Fabula, understood as material or content that is embedded in the story, is defined as a series of events. This series is constructed according to certain rules. We call this construction the logic of events" (Bal, 2017, p. 7). This is the path from the misunderstood romanticism of socialist realism to a realistic, and neorealist observation of life.

The stories in the collection *Rudens dienās* (1955) were written both during the peak of dogmatic socialist realism and in the pre-Thaw period. Awarded the Latvian SSR State Prize, the collection is characteristic of Vilks's early work, reflecting themes, characters, and symbols that closely adhere to the canon of socialist realism. For example, the story *Karmena* (*Carmen*, 1952) portrays a girl reluctant to work in a collective, but its conclusion depicts her growth and willingness to cooperate, ending with the words:

"Everything will be fine"[4] (Vilks, 1963, p. 60). *Divi nezināmie* (*Two Unknowns*, 1951) tells of a young man who fails to attract the attention of his beloved girl, yet the closing phrase introduces hope, as the evening inevitably and peacefully moves towards dawn (Vilks, 1963, p. 67). In *Traktors iet tālāk* (*The Tractor Goes Further,* 1953), a similar disappointment is overcome by work obligations: the protagonist ends the story driving a tractor – a standard symbol of the new era, future, and power in socialist realist literature – cultivating fertile land (Vilks, 1963, p. 72). *Putenī* (*In a Blizzard,* 1955) depicts a party secretary who falls ill after walking in a snowstorm, but upon looking out the window feels spring approaching, as a snow-covered lilac bush appears to have "bloomed with unusual flowers"[5] (Vilks, 1963, p. 102). In the finales of other stories, Vilks introduces an optimistic intonation even in otherwise discouraging situations. So, the endings of all twelve stories in this collection are marked by openness and a future-oriented outlook, employing a repertoire of clichéd motifs characteristic of socialist realism – morning, spring, sun, waves, wind, oven, train, tractor, ship, and others. Such symbols, inherited from romanticism, function as typical examples of the canon's imagery.

The reliance on iconic socialist realist formulas persists in the title story of the collection *Zaļais koks* (1960), which depicts rural life from the eyes of a city dweller. His reflections, prompting consideration of the endless flow of life and nature, conclude in the early morning hours: the night gives way, and a brisk wind ushers in the symbolic promise of a new day (Vilks, 1963, p. 260). In later stories, however, Vilks continues to focus on the figure of the ordinary man while moving away from the optimistic narrative scheme. Instead, the endings take a different direction – rejecting the future and conveying disappointment, often through abrupt and closed conclusions where the plot halts with departure, rupture, or destruction. Even when the story maintains open ending, the perspective of the future appears bleak, with the narrative gaze turning back toward the past.

In the story *Dambrāna pēdējais pirkums* (*Dambrāns's Last Purchase,* 1956), an elderly farmer and horse breeder is troubled by the fate of Salnis, a horse that once belonged to him but now is the property of the *kolkhoz*. The animal, old and incapacitated, is deemed useless for work and scheduled for liquidation. When the farmer is denied the chance to buy back his horse, he shoots it and dies himself. The neighbour who witnesses the event can only respond with the resigned remark: "What a misfortune..."[6] (Vilks, 1963, p. 268) The story *Mācītāja sieva* (*The Priest's Wife,* 1959) reflects the Soviet ideological stance on religion. It recounts the life of a poet's former youthful love, now married to a priest. Vilks reveals her inner reflections, closing the story with the bleak realisation that her life can no longer be started anew (Vilks, 1963, p. 277). Similarly, the protagonist of *Nekur vairs nav jāiet* (*Nowhere Else to Go*, 1957) is a man who, after retiring, returns to his factory because he finds no meaning outside of work. His only hope is that when he dies,

[4] "Viss būs labi."
[5] "... uzziedējis neparastiem ziediem."
[6] "Kāda nelaime..."

he will be granted "three handfuls of oil-soaked and compacted earth,"[7] while the factory whistle might sound a little longer on that day (Vilks, 1963, p. 285). The closing tone here is underlined by a bitterly sarcastic gesture toward the socialist realist promise of a "bright future". *Apvainojums* (*Offence,* 1957) tells the story of a man whose neighbor unlawfully mows the hay assigned to him. His attempts to seek justice fail, and the story ends with a sense of hopelessness, as he realizes that his cow will starve in the winter, leaving him with nothing but curses (Vilks, 1957, p. 7). Even *Viss notika vasarā* (*Everything Happened in the Summer*, 1958), a romantic story about the failed love between Kaspars, a driver, and Justīne, a philology student, closes with a mundane, anti-climactic image: a car splashing through puddles, placing everyday routine above love or dreams (Vilks, 1963, p. 389). Of the seven stories in this collection, only one ends with a note of hope; the others conclude with distinctly pessimistic or tragic intonations.

Closed and fatal endings also appear in the collection *Piecas minūtes par vēlu* (1961). All three stories revolve around something missed, overlooked, or left unfulfilled. *Satikšanās* (*Meeting*, 1961) recounts a meeting between former lovers, who quickly realise that nothing binds them anymore, and part ways (Vilks, 1963, p. 403). In the title story, the protagonist fails to receive the recognition he deserves; it comes too late, after he has already left (Vilks, 1963, p. 447). Particularly significant in the context of socialist realism is *Pie pasaules vārtiem* (*At the Gates of the World*, 1961), which portrays the dilemma of elderly rural people. Anete and Oto travel from Riga to Moscow to take a flight to America and join their son, yet they are plagued by doubts and an overwhelming desire to return home. In the traditions of socialist realism, Vilks depicts an impossible situation, creating the illusion that a Soviet citizen has every opportunity to leave the country. Yet his protagonists do not act upon this possibility – not because of ideological attachment to the Soviet homeland, but because they are unable to abandon their homes and lives. Vilks resists the clichés of socialist realism, which typically idealised the homeland as a land of happiness and contrasted it with the "decadent" West. Instead, he reveals the despair of an old woman caught between choices. Unable to withstand the tension, Anete dies, and the apples she had picked for her son fall and roll to all sides as a symbol of irretrievable loss (Vilks, 1963, p. 414).

In contrast to the obligatory optimism of socialist realism, Vilks's *Es tevi nevaru pamest vienu* (1963) introduces ambivalent neorealist endings centred on responsibility. The title story is about the bus driver, who demonstrates responsibility for what happens in his presence. He prevents a man who has just been released from prison from committing a new crime and drives with him to the prosecutor because he cannot leave this man alone (Vilks, 1963, p. 472). Vilks continues the theme of responsibility in his stories of the 1960s, especially in his most famous story, *Divpadsmit kilometri* (*Twelve Kilometers*, 1963) which ends with the sentence: "I feel responsible for everything that happens in the world."[8] (Vilks, 1968, p. 227) After its first publication in the magazine *Karogs*, the

[7] "... trīs saujas no šīs eļļas piemirkušās un sablietētās zemes."
[8] "Es jūtos atbildīgs par visu, kas notiek pasaulē."

author received sharp criticism; therefore, the story was published in the collection *Mežonis* (*Wild man*, 1968) only after several years.

Yet another story *Velosipēds* (*Bicycle,* 1962) in the collection highlights an individual's readiness to take responsibility for his own life. This is a particularly poignant and psychologically nuanced story about little Linarts, who does not receive his long-awaited birthday present. His father, an alcoholic, fails to meet the boy's expectations, leaving Linarts not only disappointed but also ashamed in front of other boys. Although in the end it seems to him that the horizon is obscured by dark, heavy clouds, determination and courage gleam in his grey eyes (Vilks, 1963, p. 502).

The stories in this selection reveal that, while continuing to explore complex themes and sombre tones, Vilks nevertheless strives once again to turn pessimism into optimism. In stories after 1961, dramatic events or a depressing past no longer leave the characters powerless or hopeless. Vilks offers an ambivalent perspective and an open-ended finale that suggests the characters' determination to move forward despite obstacles. However, these endings indicate the presence of a neorealist and existentialist worldview.

By creating both a closed, pessimistic ending and an open, but ambivalent, ending, Vilks abandons the utopian finales of socialist realism, establishes a connection between the beginning and the end, and offers a logical plot structure that aligns with the principles of neorealism. Because, in "a coherent system, beginnings lead to endings, and endings determine how we understand beginnings." (Mortimer, 2008, p. 213) The narrative of Vilks's stories is compositionally well-thought-out and complete and ideologically grounded in the belief that literature's roots lie in reality.

Conclusion

Reviewing these stories, it becomes clear that Vilks remained true to his principles: he consistently wrote about ordinary people and their seemingly insignificant problems. However, in addressing these small-scale themes, he demonstrated remarkable storytelling skills – his texts are compositionally, structurally, and poetically sophisticated. An analysis of their endings reveals changes in the way the world is perceived and represented. Up to 1955, Vilks used the forced optimism characteristic of socialist realist endings, creating formally open, future-oriented endings that are, in fact, closed, because the canon does not allow for another scenario. From 1955 to 1961, his stories ended with deep hopelessness and disbelief in the possibility of progress; the endings are clearly closed. In contrast, after 1961, his stories moved into the ambivalent zone of conditional hope, acknowledging adverse circumstances while still suggesting responsibility and perseverance.

In Vilks's case, the evolution of endings defines the basic message of his prose, marking a departure from the canon of socialist realism and signalling a radical disregard for its principles. Undoubtedly, changes in creative principles are related to a range of additional factors not considered here, including the writer's personal life, as well as the pressures of criticism and censorship. The analysis of the endings in the selected corpus of stories confirms their typological proximity to the aesthetics of neorealism. It allows

us to conclude that neorealism, along with other influential Western cultural phenomena, served as a source of inspiration for Soviet Latvian writers to expand the possibilities of artistic interpretation and overcome the dogmas of socialist realism. In this way, the presence of neorealism indirectly contributed to a return to the principles of realism and to an honestly told story, helping pave the way for overcoming the literary crisis.

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