

Can one Write a Scholarly Paper in a Form of Poem? Genre Changes in Academic Writing over History¹

Dawid Lipiński

Abstract

The article *Can one Write a Scholarly Paper in a Form of Poem? Genre Changes in Academic Writing over History* shows the development of three literary genres that were used in ancient times to express scientific and philosophical reflection. These include philosophical treatise, dialogue and didactic poem. During the development of scientific reflection, the first genre dominated the other and become the determinant of modern scientific discourse. In this article I try to answer the question how it happened and what are the consequences on the formation of modern scientific genres.

Introduction

At the beginning of my doctoral studies I was infatuated by the genre of dialogue, and particularly by its ancient version. I remember asking my friend who worked as an adjunct at that time, ‘Could I write my PhD thesis in a form of dialogue?’ After a while of pondering on my query, he replied that in his opinion it is impossible to find any significant contraindication except the one that most probably the reviewers would dismiss such a thesis notwithstanding footnotes and the whole scholarly apparatus. Although I expected such an answer it induced some sort of revolt in me: ‘Why is it the form, not the content, that decides about the scholarly work's merit? Obviously, the latter should be of major importance. And what about the case in which one would decorate the content with a beautiful form? Why should the text shape be a impediment?’. As a graduate of classical studies I started to think why do the contemporary scientific writings have one specific form and not any other? Looking at the ancient scholarly discourse one may notice that it was expressed not only in academic prose, but also in didactic epos or dialogue. The last of the enlisted enabled the reflection of a deep insight into the nub of a given problem.

In this article I will consider this issue. To get to the point, first I go back to the times of ancient Greece, the birthplace of the early scientific literature and philosophy. This is commonly associated with the activity of natural philosophers who have taught their views in the *logos*; a genre that was strongly embedded in the oral tradition of the Greeks. Only with the change of thinking

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related to the dominance of writing, this species gave way to dialogue, scientific treaty and didactic epos. The scientific discourse seems to have dominated the scientific treaty to a large extent in comparison to the other two genres. This process co-occurred with the arrival of the Enlightenment. Therefore, the prevailing genre became the direct ancestor of modern scientific treatises. Its style has been evolving over the centuries giving shape to the contemporary articles, dissertations and monographs. Thus, the perception of the scientific genres changed, turning from analyzing their form and focusing on the stylistic and functional differences. However, at the end of my article I will show, that this is also changing. More and more frequently we start thinking about the form. Some authors are gradually moving away from the determinants implemented to our concept of scientific discourse by scientific treaty. It is now becoming acceptable to formulate scientific conclusions in experimental paraliterary forms, like a poem.

Separation of speech and writing

The foundations of the European science² are connected with ancient Greece and, especially, these philosophers of nature who were active in the territory of Ionia. Since the preserved historical sources are scarce, the exact moment of the emergence of scientific reflection is hidden away of our sight. In his book *Script, Text, and Literature: Literate Practices of Ancient Greeks and the Europeans' Matrix of Cultural Memory* (2013), Paweł Majewski rightfully points out that this moment was connected with the discovery of 'the self' separated from 'the world' and vice versa. This separation had not been present yet in Homeric epos and must have taken place only about the 7th/6th century B.C. It gave rise both to the lyrical poetry which was focused on 'the self' separated from 'the world' and to philosophy which dealt with the world and ignored people or reduced them to indistinctive elements of nature (Majewski 2013, pp. 63-64).

According to Majewski this separation had to be influenced to some extent (but not fundamentally) by the invention of writing around this time. But this was at most just the initial stage that was to develop fully in Greece in 200 years' time.

2 What I am talking about here is science taken generally as a reflection about the world, without its division into particular branches. I want to stress that I am going to describe the beginnings of European science as the source of the contemporary scholarly discourse. I am aware though that scientific reflection had its beginnings in various places of the world simultaneously.

Unfortunately, we cannot say much about writings of Ionian philosophers. The main reason for this state of affairs is the lack of preserved writings and the fact that all excerpts that we bequeathed by means of indirect speech of the late authors (Majewski 2013, pp. 62-64). Hence it is difficult to say anything about scholarly writing genre of that time. It seems that the main activity of these philosophers must have been based on spoken and not written teaching and it is highly probable that for instance Thales, the father of Greek philosophy, did not leave any written output of his. Only his pupil, Anaximander of Miletus, is supposed to have written the first treatise in the history of philosophy, *On Nature*. Both the only fragment preserved to our times and doxographic testimonies indicate that it had the form of *logos* i.e. the form of lecture written in a half-poetic and half-colloquial language containing many paratactic constructions. Hence it was an attempt to reflect the spoken lecture of the philosopher in a literary way. (Gajda-Krynicka 2005, p. 375). Subsequent texts of philosophers were inevitably losing their poetic features but they were consequently written in a simple and unrefined style mimicking or mirroring the colloquial speech as for example in the case of Anaximenes' *logos*, also entitled *On Nature* (Gajda-Krynicka 2005, p. 377). One should search for the reason of this peculiar form in the fact that at the time writing was still a *novum*, an innovation which was as groundbreaking as the invention of movable type system in the 16th century or the Internet in the 20th century. People of that time did not think in terms of writing yet. For them writing was just the means of recording the colloquial speech and their thoughts. Written texts were not created then for their own sake but only to preserve utterances and that is why they were mimicking colloquial speech. The change of this situation was taking place successively over the next 200 years, particularly since Plato and Aristotle's times (see Majewski 2013) , exactly at this point in history in which the beginnings of scholarly writing genres should be searched for.

In ancient Greece the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. was the period of time in which writing has become a familiar thing and people started to think in terms of writing. At that time speech and writing completely split and the beginnings of academic writing genres can be identified. Only the full development of thinking in terms of writing made the conducting of a systematic philosophical inquiry in a written form possible and enhanced its independence from the spoken lecture. From this moment onward one can talk about the scholarly text as an independent entity and not only the record of thoughts being spoken aloud; only since that time it has been possible to talk about the full development of both the academic prose which was independent from colloquial speech and dialogues that preserved some similarity with spoken conversation.

The academic prose was fully developed in the Aristotle's philosophical treatises. One can say that they persisted in the genre of philosophical lecture (*logos*) originating in the tradition of natural philosophy, since all the Aristotle's works were documents of his didactic and research activity. They were not only transcripts of his lectures given in the Lyceum but also independent works not intended to be voiced and, in fact, never delivered before. The new genre initiated by Aristotle had the distinctive features of methodical and disinterested search for truth, rigour of reasoning, sophisticated and specialised scholarly lexicon as well as austere, objective style of language. These features deny some classical philologists' supposition that Aristotle's works were just a set of notes to lectures. On the contrary, what these features justify is the assertion that Aristotle's treatises were independent and fully-fledged literary works. Aristotle was then the first scholar ever who conducted his methodical inquiries due to employing writing and in the form of writing (Podbielski H. 2005, pp. 671-672). In a word, Aristotle was the inventor of the first scholarly genre i.e. scholarly treatise and his works created a benchmark for future scholars. Amongst Greek scholars that advocated this genre one may list for instance Euclid (*Elements*, *Optics*), Hero of Alexandria (*Metrica*), Herophilos of Chalcedon (*Anatomy*, *Optics*); amongst Roman authors there are Marcus Terentius Varro (*On the Latin Language*, *Agricultural Topics*), Celsus (*On Medicine*); after the ancient period the scholarly treatise remained the standard genre of academic discourse and gave rise to the contemporary scientific texts.

One generation before Aristotle, his master, Plato, invented the second scholarly genre, namely the dialogue which constituted a kind of opposition to the scholarly treatise. According to Marcin Podbielski, as far as the dialogues' literary form is concerned they are small dramas written in a direct speech. Their protagonists are authentic people that we know from the history of Athens, for instance, famous sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias), Socratics (Charmides, Crito), rhetoricians, chiefs, poets and philosophers. The dialogues were then some kind of mimicry (not transcripts) imitating authentic discussions conducted over 5th and 6th century B.C. in Athens (Podbielski M. 2005, p. 549). Plato chose this genre because he did not trust written word. As he writes in his autobiographical letter VII:

There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself. Notwithstanding, of thus much I am certain, that the best statement of these doctrines in writing or in speech would be my own statement; and further, that if they should be badly stated in writing, it is I who

would be the person most deeply pained. And if I had thought that these subjects ought to be fully stated in writing or in speech to the public,¹ what nobler action could I have performed in my life than that of writing what is of great benefit to mankind and bringing forth to the light for all men the nature of reality? But were I to undertake this task it would not, as I think, prove a good thing for men, save for some few who are able to discover the truth themselves with but little instruction. (Plato, 341c-e)

During one of his lectures devoted to the form and content of Plato's dialogues professor Witold Wróblewski³ pointed out that there is some kind of paradox involved in the words of Plato quoted above. On the one hand Plato says that he does not want to put his theory of Forms into written words which he does not trust because they could corrupt his views, but on the other this is exactly what he does, namely he presents his views in a written form of his dialogues. Do we then deal with a contradiction here? The answer is “no”. Plato did not conceive of dialogues as a typical written word but as a reflection of real speech and discussion. In a word, not only does Plato protest against written word, but also against lectures and scholarly treatises that do nothing more than describing and referring a given view (see Rakoczy 2014, pp. 77-78). For Plato this practice can lead to corruption of author's thoughts. A dialogue is a different thing as it is in this genre that a given problem finds its full explanation and where interlocutors can confirm their understanding of an issue being discussed. Moreover, they can obtain answers to their doubts. Thus, a well-written dialogue constitutes a defence against improper understanding of an issue presented by a scholar.

Dialogue as a scholarly discourse genre

Dialogue as a scholarly discourse genre was highly popular in ancient times, especially as a form of philosophical and rhetorical investigation. This genre was practised in ancient Greece by for example Xenophon (*Symposium*), whereas in Rome by Cicero (*Brutus*, *On Divination*) for example. In comparison to scholarly treatise dialogue seems to have been more widely approved by the ancient writers. Stephen Greenblatt in his book *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* rightly points out what was the reason for this state of affairs:

Humans, Aristotle wrote, are social animals: to realize one's nature as a human then was to participate in a group activity. And the activity of choice, for cultivated Romans, as for the Greeks before them, was discourse. There is, Cicero remarked

³ The series of lectures titled “The Form and Content of the Platonic Dialogues” took place in the Chair of Classical Studies at the Nicolaus Copernicus University during the winter semester of the academic year 2006/2007. Professor's remark quoted from his notes to the lecture.

(...), a wide diversity of opinion about the most important questions (...). Cicero does not want to present his thoughts to his readers as a tract composed after solitary reflection; he wants to present them as an exchange of views among social and intellectual equals, a conversation in which he himself plays only a small part and in which there will be no clear victor. (...) The exchange itself, not its final conclusions, carries much of the meaning. The discussion itself is what most matters, the fact that we can reason together easily, with a blend of wit and seriousness, never descending into gossip or slander and always allowing room for alternative views. (Greenblatt 2012, loc. 972-974, 981-983, 986-988)

Unfortunately, together with the end of Antiquity this genre of scholarly discourse also came to an end of its popularity and yielded to the scholarly treatise. The first cause of this fact was a cultural change connected with Christianity. Greenblatt describes this change as follows:

Ancient Greeks and Romans did not share our idealization of isolated geniuses, working alone to think through the knottiest problems. Such scenes—Descartes in his secret retreat, calling everything into question, or the excommunicated Spinoza quietly reasoning to himself while grinding lenses—would eventually become our dominant emblem of the life of the mind. But this vision of proper intellectual pursuits rested on a profound shift in cultural prestige, one that began with the early Christian hermits who deliberately withdrew from whatever it was that pagans valued: St. Anthony (250–356) in the desert or St. Symeon Stylites (390–459) perched on his column. Such figures had in fact bands of followers, and though they lived apart, they often played a significant role in the life of large communities. But the dominant cultural image that they fashioned—or that came to be fashioned around them—was of radical isolation. (Greenblatt 2012, loc. 961-968)

The rise in popularity of dialogue for a short time around renaissance (Mikołaj Rej's *A Brief Discussion amongst Three Persons: a Lord, a Commune Chief, and a Priest*, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Dialogue of the Dead*) could not restore the ancient status of the genre to scientific discourse which was finally and completely dominated by the Aristotelian treatise. This text seemingly initiated the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which promotes rationalism as well as empiricism, and that definitely headed toward short and objective text, devoid of the literary style of dialogues (see Biniewicz, Starzec 1995, p. 398).

Summarising issues connected with dialogues and treatises as two distinct scholarly genres, it seems to me that the difference between them as far as the content is concerned is analogous with the difference between contemporary monograph and dissertation. Dialogue presents the process of coming to a conclusion and gives the opportunity to prove and criticise a given hypothesis, in which it resembles the mode of free conversation. On the further stages of the genre's development dialogue was replaced by dissertation which constitutes a

monographic exposition of an author's mental process, deaf to opinions of others if they are not known to the reader. Generally speaking I reckon that modern mindset is unfavourable to dialogue, which seems to be a drawback of the contemporary science in Poland and that this drawback is getting deeper nowadays⁴. It is perfectly visible in the case of most polish conferences where the guest scholars just want to present their papers without any regard for others and without any will to take part in discussions; to the contrary, they act as if they were insulted by questions being asked to them. The organisation of polish conferences itself reveals this fact since organisers increasingly shorten the time for discussion just to manage as many presentations as possible, quite often even stopping them brutally to not to be late for a dinner whereas at every scientific meeting it should be the based upon discussion with other scientists.

Didactic epos as a popularizing discourse genre

The forerunner of didactic epos was Hesiod and his *Works and Days*. Strictly speaking this work does not deal with scientific issues. Although it is rather a collection of some moralistic advices and admonitions, in the Hellenistic period it became a source of inspiration for many eposes which were focused on the description of some natural phenomena. For example, Aratus of Soli created a poem about constellations and weather forecasts titled *Phaenomena*; in turn Nicander of Colophon wrote *Theriaca* devoted to substances used against venomous creatures and bites. Still it has to be pointed out that these poems did not present the results of authors' investigation and research (although a didactic merit of these works is considerable) but rather a kind of interpretation and translation of other scholars' knowledge into poetic discourse. This understanding is supported by an ancient anecdote that describes the creation of *Phaenomena*. According to it, Antigonus Gonatas on whose court Aratus sojourned was to command the poet to convert Eudoxus of Cnidus' astronomical treatise to poems and by doing this to exalt astronomer's name (Appel 2005, pp. 281-282). So, the didactic epos was not an independent and proper scholarly genre but rather its poetic variation which though without scientific merits, had didactic advantages.

4 My comments in this part based on my own observations, as well as the opinions of my colleagues. These relate to the practice of scholarly communication in Poland, apart from the situation in other countries, which may be quite different. While the above-described state of affairs is more characteristic of the doctoral and student conference, it doesn't seem to without affecting the conferences organized by experienced scientists, where a certain „political correctness“ seems to exclude too critical discussion, according to the rule „not to hurt anyone“.

Contemporary and atypical discourse genres

Undoubtedly the form of modern scientific texts was directly influenced by Aristotelian treatise and the period of the Enlightenment. At that time a new scientific approach became widely recognised and appreciated. It was based upon objectivity, transparency and reproducibility of experiments. Stanislaw Gajda writes: ‘today, to create a scientific texts, it is not enough to know how to write and speak at all, you have to overcome scientific stylistic norm’ (Gajda 1982, p. 99). What he mentions next, as a characteristic for scientific discourse, are stylistic features such as: intellectual character, abstractness, impersonality, not emotional, objectivity, logic and accuracy (Gajda 1982, p. 112). As we consider the above listed distinguishing features of ancient treatise, it's easy to understand why this genre was admitted for the formulation of scientific thought, and why such form as dialogue was rejected. Moreover, with regard to scientific texts Gajda says that ‘in contrast to the artistic texts, here is directly desirable conventionalization and stabilization of forms’ (Gajda 1982, p. 109). Therefore, it is not surprising that contemporary scientists who are concerned with scientific genres (in Poland they include the already mentioned Stanisław Gajda, Jerzy Bartmiński, Stanisław Mikołajczak), generally do not refer to their form (understood here as to literature, for example, a poem, poetic prose, etc.). Jerzy Biniewicz and Anna Starzec distinguish four foundations of modern scientific texts division⁵ (Biniewicz, Starzec 1995, p. 399):

- differences in objective and methodological sciences,
- properties of the process of scientific communication,
- properties of genres,
- author.

Based on the third category, which might seem to pay attention to the form of scientific texts, Gajda distinguishes the following types: article, dissertation, study, memoir, speech, co-speech, preprint, report, thesis, bibliography, abstract, encyclopedia, article of encyclopedia, dictionary, essay, review, criticism, opinion, information, report, companion, script, lectures, readings, talk, patent, norm, letter, instructions, guide, work, exercise, conversation, consultation, examination, discussion, a voice in discussions and polemics (Gajda 1982: insert between pp. 176 and 177). Quite apart from the merits of distinctions such texts, can be seen here that all these genres of scientific communication are determined on the basis described above stylistic features of scientific discourse,

⁵ The scope of the concept of scientific texts in this approach not only includes written texts, but also spoken.

which, in theory, excludes the possibility of formulating proposals by the researcher in literary genres. This excludes theoretically, but not practically.

In 1984 John W.V. Storey of the University of New South Wales in Australia, being annoyed by the fact that his speech had been scheduled as the last lecture on the yearly meeting of the Astronomical Society of Australia, decided to fit in by delivering his paper in a thirty-eight-stanza poem. As you can see from this example, it is possible to formulate the scientific conclusions in literary form, however, as indicated by the context of this speech, it is far from the acceptable standards. Due to what has been said above about conventionalization and stabilization of scientific texts forms, resulting directly from the feature of communicativity of scientific texts (Gajda, 1982: 109), it seems that there is no change in the approach of the scientific community to the 'literariness' of scientific genres, or rather its absence. Admittedly it can be seen that in such magazines as "Qualitative Inquiry"⁶ is possible to allow oneself for loosening rigid structure of a scientific article (eg. the entire article written by James J. Scheurich consist of three Zen poems of his authorship, or article 28 *Good Years of Live* by Mary E. Weems, who is placed in a poem), but this is due to a specific matter of scientific discipline which relates to the journal⁷, and the editors of this journal themselves admit that the articles contained therein are to experiment with form and content, and therefore does not postulate to change the traditional transfer of scientific content. So, one can write a scholarly paper in a form of poem but at least for the time being it will be treated as some kind of performing arts rather than an admissible form, at least for most scientific disciplines.

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6 For drawing attention to the existence of this magazine I thank Dr. Joanna Bielecka-Prussia.

7 Lynn Butler-Kisber notes that such a way of writing articles in this journal due to the fact that „increasingly, educational research suggests that the more traditional, textual descriptions of qualitative findings do not adequately reflect the complexity of studying human behavior. Nor do they satisfy the ethical issues of voice and relationship to which researchers have become more sensitive, or permit the possibility of multiple interpretations that the postmodern world has come to accept“ (Butler-Kisber 2002, p. 229).

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