

The Relocation of Literature

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The Poetics of the e-Novel

The bold, world-creating ideas of Jacek Dukaj and their bravura execution have made readers of his prose (most prominently, *Lód* [Ice]) begin to ask themselves more or less the following questions: “What will he think of next?” or “How far is he going to go?” These questions concern his work purely in terms of their literary qualities: the way he shifts the boundaries of what is imaginable, and shifts human language toward the boundary of the Other.

On the other hand, since Dukaj has become associated with Wydawnictwo Literackie, a gradual process of mutual interpenetration between his literary oeuvre and forms of expression belonging to other media has begun. Here I have in mind the book covers designed by Tomasz Bagiński and his film version of the story “Katedra,” the publication of that text in a special edition, the subsequent appearance of *Wroniec* (Carrion-crow; with illustrations by Jakub Jabłoński that give the book the flavour of an illustrated fairy tale, or comic book), and finally, audiobooks and e-books.

These are not particularly innovative moves, of course – such techniques (aimed no less at drawing in new readers than at anything else) have been employed by other authors connected with mainstream literature, not fantasy writers. And adaptations, filmic or theatrical, are nowadays in no way necessarily dependent on the author. The new communications situation, caused in large measure by the development of social media, has made audio versions or electronic forms a normal part of the process of preparing a book. This is also undoubtedly a result of economic imperatives: the book must be sold, and additions or *recherché* forms of publication are a kind of advertising manoeuvre, one easy to deploy on the internet. Literature itself is not enough these days. The time of authors releasing twenty novels in a row in deceptively similar covers has passed. And perhaps new forms of promotion or advertising also demand some creative invention in these matters?

Recently a “fashion for reading” has arisen, fed by numerous book blogs (and literary criticism blogs, sometimes) and social media profiles¹ or, for example, “book challenges.”² This is a sign of changes in the sphere of literary communication. Reading has become a hipster activity, and though this situation may well have given rise to “Empik readers” focused on reading as a form of participation in mass consumption, it has nonetheless to some degree corrected the state of reading in Poland, which in recent times had veered toward disaster.

Dukaj’s next step, though – the release of *Starość aksolotla* (The Old Axolotl; literally “The Axolotl’s Old Age”),³ represented something more than merely a gesture of subscribing to an existing trend: the demarcation of a new trend, linked to literature’s emergence beyond its natural surroundings – its relocation to a new place. Thus, this novel was not (and will not be) published in paper form – it was planned as an e-book from its very conception. That is an extremely important fact, with considerable influence on the novel’s interpretation.

What is relevant here is not simply the text’s publication in *epub or *mobi format, but the capitalization of the possibilities of this new form: the addition of graphics and above all hyperlinks, which refer the reader to notes explaining the novel’s world and serving as footnotes. The book is nonetheless not a hypertext novel – Dukaj has not done away with the “hard bone of story” or turned (at least for now) toward non-linear narratives. In *Starość aksolotla*, references and graphics constitute a kind of supplementation of the represented world. The author of *Lód*, like most fantasy authors, has already explained his worlds before, but the descriptions of the laws that govern them were (as a matter of fact quite adroitly) woven into the narrative. The decision to move definitions into the footnotes gets rid of unnecessary baggage that slows down the narrative, but at the same time, the reader is able (perhaps even more than before) to reconstruct the author’s thoughts.

As the author himself has explained,⁴ something else is in play here, namely the creation of a poetics of the e-novel, and thus a multi-layered novel, i.e., one created with the intention of fully exploiting the possibilities offered by the digital medium. His footnotes (broadly defined, to include sound, image, and film) blur the boundary between the real and the virtual. Fantasy is probably particularly well-suited to that, since fantastic worlds in particular demand the reader’s participation in “translating” them into thought, the concrete meaning of some elements being harder to firmly grasp. The books published in electronic form mostly belong to certain genres (mainly fantasy and detective or crime fiction); Dukaj lists several virtues of e-books, but probably their most important feature is the fact that a multi-layered novel (“the encounter with the text amid dozens of other information streams”) broadens and extends the reading process. Though the human brain (unlike a computer) does not naturally lend itself to multi-task

¹ Such as: “Lubię czytać” (I Like Reading), „Nie jestem statystycznym Polakiem, lubię czytać książki” (Unlike the Average Pole, I Like to Read Books) or “Nie czytasz? Nie idę z Tobą do łóżka” (You Don’t Read? I Wont Sleep with You).

² Including the challenge to read 52 books in the course of one year.

³ Jacek Dukaj, *Starość aksolotla. Hardware dreams* (The Old Axolotl. Hardware Dreams), Allegro 2015. Pagination in the main text with SA subscript, when published in *pdf format. Translator’s Note: This is the first book by Dukaj published in English translation. All quotations from *The Old Axolotl* are taken from the English translation by Stanley Bill, Kindle edition, Poznań: Allegro, 2015. It should be noted, however, that the translation lacks the hypertext feature. TDW.

⁴ J. Dukaj, “Bibliomachia,” in *Książki. Magazyn do czytania* (Books. A Magazine for Reading) 2015, no. 1. See also: “Wymyślić e-booka od nowa. Z Jackiem Dukajem rozmawia Michał Cetnarowski,” in *Nowa Fantastyka* 2015, no. 4, 4-6.

functioning, the younger generation, raised and shaped through the use of digital artefacts, will perhaps in some way adapt to such functioning (this is camouflaged evolutionism, appropriate for Dukaj). Dukaj's text published in the magazine *Książki* is worthy of recommendation, and polemicizing with; the author concludes it with the statement that literature will manage fine without the form of the paper book. A statement which I find staggeringly resonant.

If *Starość aksolotla* does not quite signify an e-book revolution, it is, notwithstanding, an important and innovative step, which – if continued by others – may be a milestone in the development of a new genre. Of course, it could have gone a step further by joining filmed sequences and a soundtrack to the main file, as well as more graphics. But we should remember that that would entail enormous costs.⁵

I am positing the thesis of a synergy at work within a particular literary event (the publication of *Starość aksolotla*). I have in mind a special kind of “collaboration” among the problems addressed by the novel, the book's form, and an extra-literary text by Dukaj (the piece in *Książki*), which together have a cumulative effect that offers more than would be felt if they were approached separately. They speak of the transhumanist evolution of the human and to changes in the realm of literary communication (and thus include a metaliterary element). Let us examine the subject matter of *Starość aksolotla*.

Post-Apo

The first decade of the 21st century – in the sphere of pop culture, broadly defined – has been marked by the unmistakable presence of apocalyptic thought. Superheroes in science fiction or quasi-sci-fi films save the world from annihilation (or self-destruction), while in a new wave of horror movies they do battle with zombies. It thus would appear that post-humanism, whether in its “wet,” proteinaceous or “dry” version (compare with *hardware/software*⁶) awakens our dread, as we sense an inhuman menace. That is clearly an oversimplified interpretation, since in truth these narratives speak primarily of the human “up against” challenges and deal with typically human problems. Curiously, a fascination with “hardware” – equipment, matter – appears for what is probably the first time in Dukaj's work. Perhaps the concept contains something from the third wave of post-humanism (the first being transhumanism, the second – ecopost-humanism) – the anthropology of the thing? Until now, hardware played only a secondary role in Dukaj's work – though it was essential to the extent that it was functionalized as a “transmitter” of humanity.⁷ Here its role is primary and, at the same time, continues to be a “transmitter.” Insofar as in zombie movies we are dealing with the return of (displaced) corporeality and death, in *Starość...* – the proteins are in retreat.⁸ One sentence therein – “The bones of Japanese people

⁵ The book is cheaper than previous novels (printed on paper) by Dukaj. The use of several dozen logotypes of guilds and alliances is a reference to the poetics of the computer game, which – by its very nature – operates graphic identification more easily than does (textual) literature.

⁶ “Years before the Extermination, the programmers had reached such a level of harmony with the digital world that they had completely lost touch with hardware. This led to the emergence of a separate clan of IT whizzes, whose main task was to crawl under desks and grates and in whose heads the priceless knowledge of which cable went into which port and which cards cooled the best under which radiators was preserved.” Dukaj, *The Old Axolotl*.

⁷ In importance, this is analogous to the matter of which spirit is a reflection in gnostic systems.

⁸ “Bartek liked to walk in his mech until the very edge of the rooftop, until his gyroscopes trembled from the slightest breath of wind. There he would observe the life of the dead city, the urban zombie [...].”

and the finer bones of electronic gadgets and plastic junk crunched under the metal tread of his feet” – brings to mind the famous opening scene of the film *Terminator*⁹, in which the caterpillar track of a tank rides over human skulls, symbolizing the new era of domination by machines.

I think the symbolic scene of embodiment is the one where Grześ, for the first time as a machine, visits Vladivostok and finds the remains of a woman holding some machinery that continues to operate. He does not know how to use it, so: “Bartek reached for her hand and snapped off the mummy’s index finger. Now he could use the finger to operate the tablet.” When it then worked – “It was like a return to his homeland, like a view over the roofs of his native city, or the taste of the bread of his childhood. At that moment, Bartek could have dropped to his knees and kissed the Holy Land of Google.” One form of (organic) matter yields to another (inorganic) – but the spirit lives on. On the internet.

In fact the scene uses the grotesque in the manner of Józef Baka: “He racked his brain (non-brain) over things, wobbling on his two wheels and squinting the camera around the street-morgue”; as well as grim horror: “A gust of wind blew a plastic bag onto her head, so that now it looked as if she were suffocating, gasping for her last breath under the plastic.”

Dukaj thus fits nicely into this pop-culture current with his *Starość aksolotla*, except that he approaches the theme with characteristic originality. Since this is in at least some sense a post-apocalyptic novel, it begins with a catastrophe: a neutron wave destroys all organic matter, leading to the extermination of biological life on earth (more on this later). The only salvation is a rushed transfer to inorganic matter, or “hardware.”

Such a transfer can be effected by “uploading,” or scanning the “contents” of a human brain into a computer’s memory. That is what the protagonist of the novel – Bartek (Grzesiek in the original), born in Poland – does. Digitalization is carried out only by those who actually have easy access to the right technology – the InSoul3 (for short: IS3, or colloquially, in the Polish, “ay-es-unek”). IS3 is the hardware needed for collating the contents of the brain to such an extent as to create a manoeuvrable avatar in virtual environments. The idea was finally rejected, but a black market of amateur code and solutions from “neurosoft” artists has blossomed in the depths of the internet. Thus salvation was easily accessible chiefly to teenage nerds. And already here, at the very beginning, we find allusions to the tech-gnostic view of evolution: “But your spirit, your spirit will survive.”

Bartek and the other 18,000 survivors thus constitute society’s new elite.¹⁰ The action of the novel takes place in the near future. There are not many extrapolations into the future, but the few there are pack considerable heft. Let us take as an example the prognostication of Google’s monopoly – the reader may receive the impression that that giant has taken over the virtual world entirely.¹¹

⁹ *The Terminator*, dir. James Cameron, US, 1984.

¹⁰That means barely 0.00025 % of society (reckoning by the figures for the year 2015).

¹¹Dukaj writes half-jokingly about marihuana: “the legal status of marihuana in the Republic of Poland reached the level of ‘quantum law’: marihuana is located in a superposition of legality and illegality – it is both permitted to possess and use it, and not permitted to possess and use it” (*SA*, glossary [not in the English translation]).

The remaining chapters of the novel take place in a post-apocalyptic reality. The few surviving “souls” have moved to various types of robots and are trying to organize their lives, and above all to ensure their survival. Interestingly, intellects deprived of biological bodies do not evolve (the most they can do is duplicate themselves), so that Bartek, as one of a handful of hardware specialists, finds his expertise much in demand. Fractions form among the survivors, generally in conflict and competition with each other (at this point, the footnote definitions become very handy, completed by a logo for each of the groups).

Dukaj’s descriptions of “switching” from one form of functioning subject to another are intriguing.

He woke up [...] without any senses, without a body, and with only his instincts and the threshold of pain intact. He thrashed about in that confinement cell for a true eternity– or more precisely, for four and a half minutes– until he found a crack no wider than a bit in the local Matternet and, slipping through it, entered the municipal CCTV network. Surveying the desolate streets, strewn with corpses, he fell into a depression and slowed to a hundred ticks a second.

Bartek is suffering from the same ailment as the protagonists of *Linia oporu – nolensum*, a particular kind of melancholy, and perhaps nostalgia – the longing for an older way of functioning and the sense of disjunction between one world and another. Previous novels by Dukaj were marked by ambivalence toward new stages in the development of *homo sapiens* – on the one hand, enthusiasm for evolutionary change; on the other, sorrow at the loss of humanity. This is probably most palpable and pronounced in *Starość aksolotla*. Bartek’s depressive states abate when he installs a sleep simulation application. In any case, the description of the initial stages of his life as a transformer is styled after a mythic tale, a kind of hardware odyssey (“It had all begun with Bartek putting himself back together”). We should note that a “transformer” is someone with a changed or changing form – as a perfunctory etymological study shows. Dukaj’s use of the term is clearly a reference to the intelligent race of robots who star in the eponymous films, TV shows, and comics (that is: it would be wholly within the realm of logic for the heroes of *Starość aksolotla* to have called themselves thus, being aware of that context).¹²

Dukaj’s newest novel presents as its protagonists a group of individuals who have made an incomplete uploading procedure, which, though it shifted them to a new environment, also maimed them in a certain way. That is why:

Steel fingers grip the delicate glass with surgical precision. There are special programs to support the motor skills required for vodka drinking. Of course, they cannot really drink vodka, and the drinks are mere mock-ups. They cannot drink anything, they cannot eat anything –quarter-ton mechs in the [...] bar. All they can do is perform these gestures of life, laboriously repeating the customs of bygone biology.

¹²“Beneath a two-storey billboard plastered with a poster for Michael Bay’s *Transformers 9*, in the middle of the deserted commercial district of Tokyo, two manga sexbots boxed at each other’s pouting polymer faces.” Michael Bay did direct several blockbuster films about the Transformers – 2014 saw the release of the most recent installment in the series.

In other words:

None of us would pass any half-decent identity test. We're transformers – and we don't even know what that means. We don't change, we don't learn. We don't sleep. We long for our bodies. We repeat ourselves mechanically, day after day, year after year, eternity after eternity. And through all this we have never managed to find any other life for ourselves but this awful parody of human life.

Allow me one more quotation: “The problem of epigenesis kept Bartek from getting any shut-eye at night (not that he had eyes to shut, but the feeling was the same).” Where in earlier novels descriptions of this peculiar melancholy were relatively sparse, in *Starość aksolotla* they take up a good deal of space, even becoming rather excessive.

From a sense of being crippled, a peculiar lack, there arises the idea of a return to biology, with a project “Genesis 2.0.” Robots with human brains join in the reconstruction of the human being, equipped with a map of its DNA, and yet the result is unsatisfactory: “Well, the genome is the same. But the different types of gene expression – which genes activate, which don't, and at what stages – all that is stored outside the DNA, in the stream of intergenerational memory.” Just as the human being who has undergone upload is not the same human being, so the person rebuilt from scratch, in the laboratory, is not the same person – every transition carries a heavy loss. But also the benefits that issue from such a reboot. Mechs (robots) finally build orbital stations, finding it easier now that “there was no need to design them as hermetic cans of warm air for protein wimps.”

Dukaj also offers what seems to be a critique of capitalism: “Until now, it's always snuck up on us through the back door, together with all its ethics, aesthetics, mentalities, lifestyles, complexes, and dreams. Not because capitalism is a part of human nature, but because it makes for the simplest, most obvious solution to the problem of managing limited resources.” People were happy (equal, free, healthier, knowing a social structure without much hierarchy) in the times before they began to farm, when they functioned within a hunter-gatherer culture; the discovery of the possibility of cultivating land was exile from paradise: “Civilization began, but with it the fall into capitalism and the slavery of work with its whole cultural superstructure.” Human beings – even cursed with mechanical bodies – are unable to free themselves from the imperative of work: “Can you find any meaningful existence in doing nothing, in stagnation, in the vegetative passing of days and years?”; no, it is merely a “ghostly theatrical reenactment of human beings *working in order to live*.” And so, Dukaj appears to be saying, capitalism is bad, but there is no other way – it is the only forward path for civilization (in previous novels, he wrote in a similar way about conservatism and hierarchal social structure).¹³

In any case, the world will not stand for stagnation, and the human beings created by the mechs – humanos (*ludziaki* in the original) – have begun to function in the new world, though that world is removed from the cultural continuum:

¹³If the mechs did not strive to pursue the imperative of capitalist growth, they would reach an impasse in their development.

Then the mishmash began, like everywhere else: the humanos start to IS, transform, enter alliances, and give birth to their own humanos, this time on a heavily Hollywood-influenced epigenesis, and it all gradually eats into the Mother, vectors superimpose themselves on vectors – you hit fast forward and after thirty kilodays this is the paradise you get: *The Lion King*, a compendium of Disney and Pixar, a kiddie park of cartoons and comics, more and more infantile with every generation and more and more disconnected from the truth about man.

Dukaj wouldn't be Dukaj if the characters in his novel did not try to find out how organic life on earth came to be exterminated, where the neutron wave came from and whether its aim was in fact the destruction of humankind. A chain of logical reasoning leads them to the conclusion that a highly technologically advanced civilization "cancelled" life on earth through the use of a *wormhole*, a space-time tunnel, in order to preventatively remove a threat (from the perspective of multiple millennia, *homo sapiens* could become one). Now knowledge is no longer increasing, since "[a]fter the Extermination, we've just been forced to use these tools *differently*. The Ray blasted us out of one-track complacency. The technology hasn't changed; only the aims and meanings we apply to it have changed." Questions that were asked before the extermination of the human race – for example, those regarding the limits of personhood – have lost their meaning; "We've dropped outside the old system of coordinates," one mech says to another.

We see here how the influence of intertext can operate in two directions. The first operates as it were within the novel itself – through quotations, allusions, and references to various cultural texts, functioning according to the laws of postmodern non-satirical parody. The second works centrifugally, moving from the text outward; it is intersemiotic and operates by means of images and even tactile means (if someone should bring a robot to life using a 3-D printer). Some elements manage to work in both directions, overcoming the closed aspect of the text and placing it in a broadly shared human universe of cultural texts. Here is one example.

I will take the risk of asserting that *Starość aksolotla* is probably one of Jacek Dukaj's most romantic novels, in the sense that it is exceptionally effective at ornamenting historiosophical theses with romantic contexts, while at the same time maintaining (or even intensifying) its patchwork, postmodern intertextuality.

Romanticism, to simplify somewhat, was a reaction against the norms of the Enlightenment, and thus, social rules, scientism and rationalism. It postulated a turn toward the invisible, while not refusing the aid of, in Mickiewicz's words, "lens and eye." Techgnosis is based on a similar principle – joining scientific knowledge with the mystical (extrasensory).

The novel ends with a poetic reflection on the passage of time from a cosmic perspective:

[...] Life without life, and all the while there is no energy left even for astonishment, with the vectors, natures, dreams, and civilizations flitting past so rapidly, 200K, 300K, a million days after the Extermination, and another million, and 5M, 10M, and probably nobody even remembers the Extermination any more, probably nobody remembers man any more; with no power or resources left for memory, is there any point at all, there's no point, since there's really no difference, no difference, and you know with absolute certainty that only hardware remains. 100M, 200M, 300M, the joyful clock of the void ticks on, and in the cracked lenses of the rusted mech galaxies and universes rise and set.

The whole of the novel is bookended by quotations. At the beginning, there is an epigraph from Nikolai Berdaev (“These were times of such decline in philosophical culture that it was considered a serious argument against the existence of the soul that it was nowhere to be found during an autopsy”); at the end – two quotations from W. Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* (the second reads: “... Indeed, only by some such trick could I do justice to the conviction that our whole present mentality is but a confused and halting first experiment”). Dukaj uses the epigraphs as a kind of framing device for his own reflections: firstly, he locates his novel as a link in a certain chain of thought, and secondly, he provides a kind of justification for showing only the first chapter in the evolution of *homo sapiens* (unlike Stapledon). For in fact, what use do such grand narratives serve for us nowadays?

Chapters within the book are heralded by juxtapositions of images and phrases which Dukaj calls “ex-libris”: the textual fragments are parodies of familiar cultural texts, combined to form a kind of collage. Let us examine some. The first, “All that lives must die, passing through steel to eternity,” is a paraphrase of Gertrude’s words from an early scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “All that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity.”¹⁴ “Oh body! my homeland! thou art like steel” borrows from the opening of Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* (“Litwo! Ojczyzno moja!” [Lithuania! My fatherland]).¹⁵ “Death is not the end” is the title of a song by Nick Cave.¹⁶ The ex-libris “Bots may safely charge when the man guards them well” is a parody of the lines “Sheep may safely graze and pasture / Where a shepherd guards them well” in the well-known aria scored by Johann Sebastian Bach (the original German text is by Salomon Franck) in his cantata “Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd” (The lively hunt is all my heart’s desire).¹⁷ “The show must go on” is the title of a song by the rock group Queen.¹⁸ The phrase “Would you kindly... kill!” borrows from the computer game *BioShock*.¹⁹ “The sky above paradise was the color of television, tuned to an axolotl channel” paraphrases the famous opening line of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.”²⁰ There is even a paraphrase of the book of Genesis (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them,” Genesis 5:2)²¹ in the following: “So mech created man in his own image, in the image of gadget created he him: male and female created he them.” “What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?” is taken directly from William Blake’s poem “The Tyger.”²² “War, war never changes” comes from the computer game *Fallout 2*.²³ “One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star” are Zarathustra’s words from the prologue to Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.²⁴ “All those worlds will be lost, like tears in rain”

¹⁴Translator’s Note: Of course the term “ex libris” references the tradition of personalized labels for books in private libraries, with another layer of irony issuing from the fact that Dukaj’s book is available only in electronic form. TDW.

¹⁵A. Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz, czyli ostatni zajazd na Litwie*, Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2004, 5.

¹⁶Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Murder Ballads*, Mute 1996.

¹⁷Translator’s Note: This is a typically clever and agile solution by translator Stanley Bill; the original plays on a line from Mickiewicz’s “Świtezianka.” TDW.

¹⁸From the album *Innuendo* (1991).

¹⁹*BioShock*, 2K Games, 2007.

²⁰William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, New York: Ace Books, 1984, 3.

²¹*Holy Bible*. King James version.

²²William Blake, *Complete Writings: With Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, 214.

²³*Fallout 2*, Black Isle Studios, 1998.

²⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman, New York: Viking Press, 1954, 129.

is a paraphrase of a line of dialogue in the film *Blade Runner*, based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* ("All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain").²⁵ "The truth is out there" is the advertising slogan from the cult 1990s TV series *The X-Files*.²⁶ "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth" is a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 146.²⁷ And the phrase "The mech is not enough" appears to be riffing on the title of a James Bond film from the 1990s.²⁸

This collage of phrases points us in two directions: toward science fiction texts, on the one hand, and toward texts of a mysterious, mystical, or Romantic bent, on the other. Each of them, moreover, illustrates a particular scene in the novel. The image components of these ex-librises are also significant and allusive. The image that accompanies "Death is not the end" is a combination of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man and elements of traditional iconography depicting the formative beginnings of humankind (a tree and a fig leaf). The graphic component of "So mech created man in his own image, in the image of gadget created he him: male and female created he them" parodies Michelangelo's painting of the Creation of Adam (a robot offers an apple to a child).²⁹ It also, I believe, references Christopher Robin and Pooh's walk together through the Hundred Acre Wood. The graphic for "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth," meanwhile, pays homage to images of the fall of Icarus.

This collage thus creates a fairy-like spectacle of references that give the impression of "intellect transfer" having already been felt as a premonition in various cultural texts – the same device employed by H+ narratives and techgnosis. Allusions to Romanticism and spirituality are, for their part, intended to show that such worldviews shape attempts to inscribe humanity into the laws of evolution, understood not so much in Darwinian terms as in categories of metaphysics, historiosophy, or even anthroposophy. They are suffused with mythization, but in a parodic, pastiche, cut-up form – seemingly half in jest, without serious intent (since sinking into pathos is not acceptable), and yet not entirely... This is the latent loftiness of postmodernity, hidden behind postmodernism's intertextual pastiche.

Multiplying Larva

Starość aksolotla is built out of: the main (body) text, two epigraphs, the title, chapter titles, illustrations, ex-librises, footnotes (hypertexts), conceptual sketches of mechs and logotypes of alliances and guilds. One might in fact say that it is an illustrated novel with footnotes.³⁰

And yet, the images do not function merely to stimulate reading as in illustrated books for children, nor do they constitute some form of *Biblia Pauperum*, in which images are supposed

²⁵*Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott, USA 1982. There is no such line in Dick's book.

²⁶*The X-Files*, created by Chris Carter, USA, 1993-2002.

²⁷Translator's Note: This is another agile transposition by Bill. The original quote is from Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve). TDW.

²⁸*The World is not Enough*, dir. Michael Apted, USA 1999.

²⁹There is also a direct reference to the Pièta in the sequence beginning with the ex-libris "All those worlds will be lost..."

³⁰Nonetheless, *Starość aksolotla*, as a science fiction novel, is not an allotopia, as that term has been defined by Krzysztof M. Maj. "Allotopia (αλλότοπια, other place) is a kind of fictional world (*storyworld*) based on an ontogenetic model of world-building that renders any plot development dependent on prior mediatization on an encyclopedic scale" (K.M. Maj, *Allotopie. Topografia światów fikcyjnych*, Kraków: Universitas, 2015, 258.); it is worth noting that extensive footnotes here create something like an encyclopedia which is joined to the imagined world and allows readers to find their way through it.

to replace the text. They are meant to be an intersemiotic, immersive expansion of the literary world, as they represent a bow to early 21st century virtual graphic culture. They thus represent that second direction of intertextual influence mentioned above.

Thus, here we return to Dukaj's thesis that literature is translocative. The author of the present work is by no means an expert in the analysis or interpretation of computer games, but it is not necessary to be one in order to observe that elements of computer RPG (in particular) are increasingly being borrowed in literature. Not only at the level of craft (plot construction, narration, characterization), but also at the intertextual level, if we consider, for example, the *Wiedźmin* series (probably the most effective ambassador of Polish culture in our time). And so: certain computer games are becoming more and more "literary," and certain novels more and more "virtual." The borders between these orders are disappearing, but literature is present wherever you look.

The question thus arises of how this relates to intertextuality more broadly? I think methodological issues are more relevant here than changes in the "object of study." Why? *Starość aksolotla* is, on the one hand, merely an illustrated book with footnotes, while, on the other, it demarcates new trends in literature. But that is also a matter of perspective – a computer game can no longer be called a book with images. Taking economic issues into account, as mentioned at the outset, it was not possible to further expand the possibilities of *Starość Aksolotla* (with films, or an audio track). The producers of computer games, however, have a much greater budget at their disposal. Perhaps we should look forward to hearing that the author of *Lód* has begun collaborating with a studio that creates games (not that I am suggesting this happen...)? That would be one of the logical consequences of how Dukaj's craft is developing. For the moment, however, Dukaj has become involved in the Allegro-produced project *Legendy Polskie* (Polish Legends), which groups writers and filmmakers together under the direction of Tomek Bagiński, to create film parodies of Polish cultural texts.³¹

For now, let's get back to the text. The axolotl (*ambystoma mexicanum*) is a freshwater amphibian predator. It is an endemic species, occurring in one region only – lake Xochimilco in Mexico. The axolotl is affected by neoteny, meaning that at the larval stage (representing an early but post-embryonal stage in an animal's development) it has the ability to procreate. Neoteny is caused by a lack of iodine in their natural environment. After being injected with hormones in a laboratory, the axolotl is capable of changing into a land creature. In the world of Dukaj's novel, within the framework of the Genesis 2.0 project, the *ambystoma* is able to regenerate easily, having been well-studied as an endangered species.

The analogy seems obvious: the human being (whether viewed as a species or an intellectual-spiritual construct) is an axolotl – an endangered, predatory species, which does not develop but, in spite of its immaturity, multiplies. Bartek has this to say:

An entire life form from nothing, just for the hell of it, from a stupid impulse of evolution. What was meant to be a larval, transitional form ends up reproducing itself. And now look: the monster's entire adult life turns out to be completely redundant. Just a freak of nature. Why does it exist? Why?

³¹See: <http://legendy.allegro.pl>.

Everything fits into a whole: people give life to people, and thanks to the death ray – a particular hormone – they managed to create a higher form: transformers. “Because someone always, always has to come from outside, and only then are they ripped by force out of their axolotl-ness.” The next stage of man is the mech; the proteinaceous human is merely a larval stage. The old age of the axolotl is sad – it is a superfluous, forgotten offshoot of evolution. For the moment we are multiplying larvae, waiting to be given a growth hormone.

Of course, Dukaj is not consistent – on the one hand he is interested in development, on the other hand, Bartek laments: “We should never have transformed. We injected the hormone – the IS – and what do we remember now of our humanity? What?” But it is the lament of a (progressive) conservative. Parenthetically, we can observe that at such moments of lamentation and nostalgia, Bartek’s escape into dreams applies a higher dose of digital sleep from the Morpheus application.

The subject of Dukaj’s novel always took the position that essence, substance, the centre (life, intellect, the human being – however we understand it) will finally outlast all change, even if the conditions in which it functions are also subject to change. In writing *Starość aksolotla*, he has added yet another argument: literature will manage without the paper book – it will survive whether in the form of e-book, computer games, or televisual series. It will, it goes without saying, change in the process, but will not disappear. And we can similarly say of our species that it will manage, even without its biological foundations. It will transfer to *hardware*, then to something else, it will undergo certain modifications, and its poetics (metaphorically speaking) will change, but will survive all kinds of change.

And this, I feel, is one of the most important lessons that can be drawn from reading Dukaj’s novel. Life (broadly understood) is a mutual, synergic interaction of form and content, where one thing significantly influences another, and evolution, impossible to evaluate axiologically, ethically, or aesthetically, is progress, as a result of which (despite losses) both parties emerge improved with regard to prevailing conditions. “Content” will survive. And there is one more lesson: we are multiplying larvae, living with a hope of making it to the next round of “growth hormone.”

To go one step further: if this analogy works, it means that literature has reached the moment of “growth hormone” applied externally. And it also is reaching a new level of quality. For that, we are sure to make it on time.

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ABSTRACT:

In this article, the author performs an analysis and interpretation of Jacek Dukaj's novel *Starość aksolotla*, in which Dukaj enacts his vision of the poetics of the e-novel, released directly in digital form, enhanced with many graphics and hyperlinks to footnotes that explain the represented world. The author puts forward his thesis on the synergy of elements in a literary event, such as the publication of this novel, resulting in the presentation of a well-argued thesis on the transfer of literature outside its basic medium, the printed book (and simultaneously coherent with the views of the subject of Dukaj's novel on the transhumanist evolution of *homo sapiens*).

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Piotr Gorliński-Kucik (born 1987) – is a literary scholar who works on contemporary Polish prose; in 2016 the book *TechGnoza, uchronia, science fiction. Proza Jacka Dukaja* (TechGnosis, Refuges, Science Fiction. Jacek Dukaj's Prose), prepared by him, is being published. |