

Micrology

as a Tool of Literary Theoretical Practice. A Case Study Using Erskine Caldwell's *Journeyman*

Małgorzata Dorna

From the Notes of a Scholar of "Micro" Forms

I was not a writer to begin with; I was a listener. In those early decades of the century, reading and writing were not common experiences. Oral storytelling was the basis of fiction.

Erskine Caldwell¹

I'm not interested in plots. I'm interested only in the characterization of people and what they do. [...] I never know how anything is going to end. All I ever know is the first line, the first sentence, the first page. The work terminates itself with dictation from me. Signs and portents indicate in some manner that a conclusion is just around the corner. -

Erskine Caldwell²

It seems obvious that the pleasure of writing (like the pleasure of any form of artistic creation) consists of an incessant joy in weaving plots (as was asserted by Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis), engaging in the act (so beloved of E. Caldwell) of "storytelling," the act of narration, that not only allows memories and sometimes obsessions or fears to be concretized, but also makes liberation from them possible. Perhaps precisely in this skillful weaving of plots, rendering readers' experience of them comparable to reading nonfiction or documentary texts, lies the seductive power of the prose of Erskine Caldwell, one of the most highly-rated American twentieth century writers, next to William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.

¹ E. P. Broadwell, W. R. Hoag, *Erskine Caldwell, The Art of Fiction* [w] *The Paris Review*, 1983/No 62, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3098/erskine-caldwell-the-art-of-fiction-no-62-erskine-caldwell> (accessed: 31 January 2017)

² *Ibid.*

His narrative is composed of a series of interconnected (not necessarily in terms of plot, but most often through the character of the narrator) sequences of scenes and of images segueing fluidly from one to the next, the interpretation and description of which becomes not only a matter of “metapsychology,” as psychoanalysis has sometimes been called,³ but also for hermeneutics, studying the work in isolation, or for phenomenology, when we accord a work the status of an individual existence, carrying out its concretization and, in effect, its transcendence as well. Because we get to know the narrative (as with any polyphonic work of art) in an intentional way, discovering successive layers, taking both the real, literal meaning when particular images or scenes are associated with a concrete event, character, place and time, and the metaphorical meaning which emerges from the existence of unarticulated thoughts, insinuations, and, importantly, from the presence of what are known as layers or places of “indefiniton.”⁴

It is thus no accident that in performing an (unavoidably perfunctory) analysis of the concept of the ontology of the work according to Roman Ingarden, a contemporary theoretician underscores that Ingarden’s concept must be read as including “two perspectives of intentional inspection: of the literary work existing in life (existential ontology) and the literary work perceived in an always individual, unrepeatable way (aesthetic concretization).”⁵

It seems that from the point of view of micropoetics that kind of subjective examination, involving concretization and simultaneous experience, identification with the narrating subject – possesses fundamental importance.

From there only one step remains to be taken toward a thematic critique, interested not so much in archetypes, symbols, and motives as poetic images perceived by the reader, as Jan Błoński desired- “clearly, in rapture”⁶ or, in other words, in a state of merging with the psyche and world of the author (or sometimes of the narrator and author in one person), with the apprehended microcosm (step-by-step) as an instance of independent, separate, individual existence.

We can thus accept that micrology (the study of that which is small, insignificant, minor) or micropoetics (a fundamentally deceptive term, one difficult to define precisely and whose theoretical connotations are hard to pin down, as readers can learn for themselves by reading the Aleksander Nawarecki’s essay on “black micrology”)⁷ grows out of the literary studies tradition that took shape after what is commonly called the “anti-Positivist breakthrough,”

³ This term has been used with reference to the literary-theoretical consequences of Freud’s teachings by the authors of one of the most popular contemporary textbooks of poetics: A. Burzyńska and M. P. Markowski in *Teorie literatury XX-tego wieku* (Literary Theories of the 20th Century), Warszawa 2006, p. 47

⁴ P. Szydeł, “Fikcja literacka oraz prawda w dziele literackim w polskich badaniach teoretycznoliterackich” (Literary Fiction and Truth in the Literary Work in Polish Literary-Theoretical Studies) in *Pobocza* (Side-spaces), No. 4–5, August 1999, <http://kwartalnik-pobocza.pl/pob08/pasz4.html> (accessed: 27 January 2017)

⁵ B. Garlej, “Koncepcja warstwowości dzieła literackiego Romana Ingardena ujęta w perspektywie ontologii egzystencjalnej i jej konsekwencja” (Ingarden’s Conception of Layering of Literary Works Viewed from an Existential Ontology Perspective and Its Consequence) in *Estetyka i Krytyka* (Aesthetics and Criticism) 33 (2/14), p. 115

⁶ This is a reference to the title of an essay in book form by Jan Błoński, *Widzieć jasno w zachwyceniu* (Seeing Lucidly in Enchantment), PIW, Warszawa 1965, in which this beautiful phrase means something more than perceiving the text through intense emotion in moments of illumination or revelation.

⁷ A. Nawarecki, “Czarna mikrologia” (Black Micrology) in *Skala mikro w badaniach literackich* (The Micro Scale in Literary Studies), ed. A. Nawarecki and M. Bogdanowska, Katowice 2005, pp. 9–25

when it was acknowledged that literary theory demands the elaboration of its own scholarly tools, different from those used in the natural sciences.

The encounter with a particular text, a close, penetrating gaze into it and analysis of it through the prism of micrology or micropoetics (or nanopoeitics, to reference the terminology of the natural sciences) – all of that has been defined (with a somewhat jocular air of mystification, imitating an encyclopaedia entry) in the essay by A. Nawarecki cited above. Following in the tracks of the reflections of one continuator of thematic criticism,⁸ Nawarecki turns his attention to concrete motifs (images) and to how they are subjectively interpreted, determined not only by the personality of the reader, but also by the aesthetic of the text and the apparent personality of the writer.

In the process there arises a certain aggregate or arsenal of scholarly tools and genre determinants of the work, all with equal claims to legitimacy. The former include a close perspective of interpretation (standing “face to face” with the text) and a lack of the need to invoke a broad context of meanings, or symbols, motifs and topoi that are also present in other works, or finally, conventions and aesthetics dominant in a particular period or epoch. The former constitute a somewhat larger group: the small size of the work, the intimacy of thought and reflection, the lack of a pre-defined system (for example, a sequence of images ordered by means of a logical or narrative-based “key”), the belief in the importance of the particular case or event, and in the significance of everyday activities that are seemingly unimportant, perceived in the “here and now,” sometimes without authorial commentary.

Micropoetics, it is worth noting once more, seems to rule out everything that is located outside the text being analyzed, for the needs of whose interpretation there ought to be developed an aggregate of tools (potentially inscribed in the work), enabling the interpretation of the phenomenon of recurring images, symbols, metaphors, and thus everything that determines the characters’ existence and their “individual fate,” determines the beauty of a destiny perceived in a personal, subjective manner. The world of the micronovel, referring to the conventions of “storytelling,” is based on the creation of a solid, aesthetically recognizable structure, composed of crumbs, fragments, narrative trifles, presented in a form that is almost that of documentary reporting, free from commentary and evaluation. This type of “splinters,” fragments of what is called “the literature of fact,” based on a blow-by-blow, a fragmentary reportage, on a specific construct of narrator, who enters into the characters’ world fully and utterly, so as to experience their life brutally, “without anaesthetic.”

If we accept, with Ewelina Suszek, that “Silesian literary micrology, interested in what is small, insignificant and ephemeral, inscribes itself within a certain general tendency”,⁹ then the diminutive dimensions of Erskine Caldwell’s novel *Journeyman* fit perfectly into that tendency or perhaps new current, increasingly and ever more vividly present in the context of contemporary criticism and literary theory.

⁸ A. Nawarecki here mentions Przemysław Czapliński, author of the book *Mikrologia ze śmiercią. Motywy tanatyczne we współczesnej literaturze polskiej* (Micrologues with Death. Thanatological Motifs in Contemporary Polish Literature) as a precursor in the attempt to look at a short text from a close perspective.

⁹ E. Suszek, “Moda na małe? Innowacyjność śląskiej mikrologii literackiej” (A Fashion for the Small? The Innovation of Silesian Literary Micrology), *Postscriptum Polonistyczne*, 2016/1 (17), p. 180

The fundamental condition here is always (as with the case of thematic criticism) the scholar's identification with the text, an identification which is in fact difficult since it can only be achieved by means of rejecting or limiting the ballast of antecedent knowledge, whether pertaining to literary history or theory. The work of art in this context becomes a phenomenon that demands hermeneutic description, rigorous reading, interpretation conducted phase-by-phase, layer-by-layer, using "single-use" tools whose use outside of the context of the particular text analyzed most often turns out to be fruitless.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, a kind of vogue prevailed in Poland for the literature of the American south, and in particular, the stories of Erskine Caldwell, which were adapted relatively frequently for the theatre and television. The Polish premiere of *Jenny* took place in July 1968 at the Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw, directed by Witold Skaruch; in March 1971 Teatr Telewizji showed *God's Little Acre*, directed by Ireneusz Kanicki; and a few months later, in June 1971, selected episodes from *Journeyman* were dramatized in a production featuring a star-studded cast, directed by Gustaw Holoubek.

Even then it was well-known that Caldwell's prose (strongly expressive, compact, dense in content) "worked" beautifully on the stage. That, however, does not mean that such texts as *Journeyman* (1935),¹⁰ *Tobacco Road* (1932), *God's Little Acre* (1933) and *Trouble in July* (1940) were not perceived merely as aggregates of well-written, "beefed-up" bits of reportage on life in the countryside, tied together by means of the main characters and the specific features of the places described. It is precisely those places the people inhabiting them, and the means of narration, that evoked the stylistics of overheard, remembered stories, and the dramatisation of the characters' behaviour that made Caldwell's prose an exceptional phenomenon within contemporary literature.

The Storytelling Method – Scenes from Provincial Life

Telling a story, or, perhaps better, "weaving a story," seems to be one of the oldest existing forms (in the domain of popular literature) of utterance, seen thriving particularly in small, hermetic communities, living at a significant cultural and societal remove from everything that we tend to call "civilization." The protagonists of stories told in the oral tradition, people with firm roots in the collective consciousness of the group or local community, of which the narrator or storyteller (in view of his manner of perceiving small, seemingly unimportant matters, of no concern to those looking "in from the outside") is also a member, usually appear more "real" than the characters we find in the pages of "literary fiction." Caldwell was aware of that fact and relatively frequently touched on that question in the interviews where he commented on his writing technique: "If you let a person grow like that, little by little, you will have a character that is believable and maybe memorable to the reader."¹¹

In practice this means primarily that the person telling a story not only describes its world, taking on the point of view of a character (which often occurs in more conventional literary fiction), but also possesses a certain "insight" into the characters' psyche, is present in situations

¹⁰Translated into Polish in 1959 by Krzysztof Zarecki as *Sługa boży* (literally the Servant of God).

¹¹E. P. Broadwell, W. R. Hoag, *Erskine Caldwell, The Art of Fiction*, op. cit. (accessed: 1 February 2017)

in which a character talks to himself, engages in conjectures, wonders, considers, in which cases the use of the past tense is helpful, possessing as it does a somewhat different dimension in paradocumentary prose (of which storytelling can pass as an example) than in conventional literary fiction.¹² Furthermore, events that seemingly belong to the past acquire (in the consciousness of the listener) the status of events taking place before his eyes, practically in the “here and now,” which also results from the use of techniques of prose dramatization. What we are talking about here is thus a “change in narrative perspective,” a phenomenon also referred to in analyses of texts inspired by reportage and “new journalism,” which perspective endows marginal, insignificant matters, or behaviours on the part of characters that we might well overlook in the context of a more traditional form of narration, with added weight.¹³

*You learned by listening around the store, around the gin, the icehouse, the wood yard, or wherever people congregated and had nothing to do, Caldwell recalled. You would listen for the extraordinary, the unusual; the people knew how to tell stories orally in such a way that they could make the smallest incident, the most far-fetched idea, into something extraordinarily interesting. It could be just a rooster crowing at a certain time of night or morning. It's a mysterious thing. Many Southern writers must have learned the art of storytelling from listening to oral tales.*¹⁴ The prose texts that took shape in this way, usually small in size, shorter than a multi-layered novel, which were connected by the use of recognizable elements of writing craft typical of New Journalism, such as: scene-by-scene construction, the inclusion of entire dialogues lending not only plausibility but also dramatization to events, the use of a “third-person point of view,” and the consolidation of details documenting the characters’ life status.¹⁵

In the real world, in the situations referred to by Caldwell in the above quotation, storytelling ordinarily begins as a presentation of an event that arouses the curiosity of the audience, forcing the listener to sharpen his attention and concentration, just as might happen when listening to a well-constructed reportage. It is thus no accident that *Journeyman* begins with a scene in which Clay Horey, sitting as usual on the porch of his house, where he sits “week after week, year after year,” witnesses, through “the glare of the sun on white sand,” something completely unexpected as he squints his eyes: a “mud-spattered rattletrap of an automobile” coming to a stop out front.¹⁶

At that exact moment Clay begins talking to himself, complaining and grumbling, listening closely to the familiar noises that the reader recognizes together with the character. We thus hear “the jabbering of a jaybird and the screech of a tightening plowshare,” as we wonder, right along with Clay, what “man in the whole world [...] would come from that direction, and at that time of day,” when his eyes are misted over from the heat and a pot of hot chicory, that

¹²J. Jeziorska-Haładyj, *Tekstowe wykładniki fikcji*, Instytut Badan Literackich PAN, Warszawa 2013, pp. 142–143

¹³The term “change in narrative perspective” (*zmiana perspektywy narracyjnej*) has been used by (among others) K. Frukacz, “Amerykańskie nowe dziennikarstwo po polsku? Transfer poetyk, problemy adaptacyjne” (American New Journalism, Polish-Style? Problems of Adaptation in the Transfer of Poetics) in *Biblioteka Postscriptum Polonistycznego*, No 5/2015, pp. 53–55

¹⁴E. Caldwell, quoted in: S. W. Lindberg, *Słowo wstępne, The Stories of Erskine Caldwell*, The University of Georgia Press, Georgia -Athens-London 1996, p. 13

¹⁵K. Frukacz, “Amerykańskie nowe dziennikarstwo po polsku?”, p. 54

¹⁶E. Caldwell, *Journeyman*, New York 2011, e-book edition.

“doggone old chicory” which is no match for “a jug of corn.” Thus before we meet the person who has arrived in the automobile, before we resent his peremptory way of speaking and are taken aback by his dilapidated, dusty black clothes, we already know that “It can’t be so doggone much of anybody” and “If it is, he’s way off his track.”¹⁷

Thus, Caldwell’s micronovel begins with a short, no-nonsense description, a simple factual statement: “The mud-spattered rattletrap of an automobile rolled off the road and came to a dead stop beside the magnolia tree. The tall gaunt-looking man who looked as if he had been living on half-rations since the day he was weaned sat grim and motionless, with his hands gripped around the steeringwheel.”¹⁸

The passage seems strangely familiar, because it resembles both the classic style of utterance typical of paradocumentary literature (colloquial language, forcible and simultaneously economic), known to Polish readers from the prose of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*,¹⁹ a best-seller in its time, and the realia (stylistically very different) of John Steinbeck’s drawn-out, almost sentimental epics.²⁰ It is true that in Caldwell’s prose, instead of the Ford (freighted with symbolism in the literature of the South) we hear an incessantly failing “rattle-trap,” a car whose make is unknown and difficult to determine, usually “without water in the radiator, and with not much oil in the crankcase,” and in which “the backward-running engine [...] begins to wind up [...] of its own accord after the switch has been turned off,” coughing and sputtering, “with a whirr like the breaking of the mainspring in an alarm clock,” an engine whose insistent sounds can only be drowned out by “an earsplitting backfire in the shattered exhaust pipe.”²¹

What becomes much more important here than the make of the car (if we look at the whole scene through the prism of the text’s specific dramaturgy) is the fact itself of its (the crumbling rattle-trap’s) extremely noisy entrance into the (hitherto peaceful and quiet) living space of Clay Horey, a naïve, good soul who looks at the surrounding world from the perspective of his porch or veranda, sometimes through a hole in the boards of the mended barn that belongs to his equally goodhearted neighbour, Tom, a corn producer.

It seems that precisely that perspective, involving observation of the external world in relation to a character’s experiences (an inhabitant of the isolated, hermetic South) from a particular point, always from the same place – gives the dimension of reportorial verisimilitude to the characters who appear in the text. Caldwell often underscored that he only wrote about people he actually knew, whom he observed “as they really lived, moved, talked” and whose way of seeing reality became his own.²²

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹T. Capote, *In Cold Blood*, New York 1965.

²⁰J. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York 1996.

²¹E. Caldwell, *Journeyman*, op. cit.

²²D. Brinkley, “He Loved the South, but Painted Its Evils in Words,” *The New York Times*, 17 December 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/17/books/he-loved-the-south-but-painted-its-evils-in-words.html> (accessed: 2 February 2017)

His prescription for literary success seems utterly natural and simple from today's perspective, in a cultural context which long since assimilated the concept of the New Journalism:²³ don't wait for inspiration, take notes on everyday occurrences as a daily correspondent does, don't take any interest in what others are publishing, write short, pithy texts, listening acutely to the speech rhythms of those whose stories turn into the canvas of your narrative.²⁴

So we find that Caldwell (as befits a "born" reporter) hurries after his characters following their every step. He leaves the porch with Clay to ask the newly arrived stranger who he is, perceives his "leather-skinned face" that "looked as if it had been sprayed with brown paint" and finally hears the visitor's reluctant introduction: "My name's Semon Dye [...] What's yours?"²⁵

At the moment of this unusual self-presentation Semon does not even attempt to maintain an appearance of social propriety: he begins appraising Clay's property with a professional eye, asking the kind of unceremonious questions that a bailiff in court asks before an auction begins.

It thus appears that from the very beginning, Caldwell (deliberately seeking to dramatize his text) relies on contrasts: the sound of the engine against the blazing hot morning, the black clothing of the stranger and the white of the sandy, abandoned, rather sleepy road covered with clouds of dust, the naïveté and gullibility of Clay in collision with the haughtiness and insolence of Dye. And then there is the latter's hand, stiff "as though it were a pole wrapped in an oldcoat," held out unexpectedly in a gesture of greeting against Clay's hand, which "fell against [his] thigh like a bag of buckshot."²⁶ It is also perfectly logical that this suggestive opening scene that plays out by the wooden porch where Clay is accustomed to sit contains the dramaturgy typical of New Journalism, defined by Tom Wolfe as follows: "It seemed all-important to be there when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. [...] Eventually I, and others, would be accused of 'entering people's minds' [...] But exactly! I figured that was one more doorbell a reporter had to push."²⁷

When consistently followed, the procedure of using a close-up narratorial perspective, involving the dramatization of events and attribution of particular importance to them, is additionally underlined with grotesque and irony, as well as expressiveness, clarity and intensity in the characters' behaviour, where each of them sticks to his assigned role: on the one hand, the naïve "good soul," the poor farmer leading a hitherto quiet life (Clay Horey); on the other, the ruthless, cynical scoundrel who arrives unannounced in front of your house (Semon Dye). Everything here is stamped with dramatic intensity: Clay's short, crisp utterances as he talks to himself in an "aside" like an actor in an amateur theatre, the distinct profile of Semon Dye,

²³T. Wolfe, "The Birth of 'The New Journalism'"; New York, 14 February 1972. , <http://nymag.com/news/media/47353/index9.html> (accessed 27 May 2017).

²⁴E. T. Arnold, *Conversations with Erskine Caldwell*, University Press of Mississippi, USA 1988, pp. 246–247

²⁵E. Caldwell, *Journeman*, op. cit.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷T. Wolfe, "The Birth of 'The New Journalism,'" op. cit.

who solemnly demands that others recognize him as “a man of God” and who, in his decisive, brusque, rather painful gestures (as when he does not hesitate to jab poor Clay between the ribs with his bony finger or crush his hand in a numbing, seemingly endless handshake) imposes admiration and respect for his person, dirty and highly suspicious though he may be, covered with dust and dressed in a worn-out capote.

Thus, we see in action both the age-old model of tragedy in action as developed within hermeneutics and grasped in the categories of the “aesthetics of the tragic,”²⁸ and the model (familiar from the dramas of classical antiquity) of the struggle between good and evil inscribed in the fate of the human being, “eased” slightly by the workings of Fate, whose personification and messenger, its unsettling and intriguing embodiment, is none other than Semon Dye. In the context of the micronovel, this “tragic conflict” becomes endowed, in addition, with a characteristic aspect of irony, dark humour, and grotesque, which Caldwell achieves through the collision of the solemn and sublime with the trivial, the pathos and rhetoric of “church” discourse (skilfully deployed by Dye) with the bluntness of the colloquial speech style of farmers, sometimes called “white trash” (a term containing obvious racism against blacks) and the language of the Afro-Americans who work on Clay’s property.

And yet the presence of a journeyman preacher in prose of the “school” called the “literature of the South” should not fundamentally surprise anyone. What is surprising, then, is not its presence but the meaning ascribed to that presence, not particular scenes, but the value attached to those scenes. Caldwell, raised in the family of a poor Presbyterian minister, who wandered the sandy roads and byways of Georgia in a beat-up automobile, would reminisce years later about the crucial role played amid the hermetic, isolated communities of cotton and tobacco planters by the “country minister,” endowed with a close relationship to “the raw ingredients of life” visible in birth and death, “because a minister was everything: a sociologist, an adviser, psychiatrist,” and, in the case of Caldwell’s father at least, someone who “understood poverty in a way that an outsider who comes in to look at it cannot.”²⁹ That is doubtless why the figure of a “lay preacher (as Semon calls himself) takes on certain shades of demonism, because he is a preacher “from hell” who will stop at nothing to satisfy the craving for conversion of all those who have “the devil [...] in them.”³⁰

The drama that began, as we saw, with the dramatic arrival of Semon Dye plays out in a handful of equally powerful scenes, and the time of its duration is kept to a minimum: a few mild April days, lasting until a Sunday evening, when, after a sermon lasting several hours, delivered in a local schoolhouse, the character disappears forever. A whole sequence of short, expressive scenes begins with the moment when the self-styled preacher, who presents himself with the proud title of a “man of God,” takes final control over the life and property of the initially somewhat mistrustful Clay. It was in fact Clay Horey himself who declared with

²⁸See the definition of the tragic developed by Maria Janion, presented in her essay collection *Romantyzm, rewolucja, marksizm. Colloquia Gdańskie* (Romanticism, Revolution, Marxism. Gdańsk Colloquia), Gdańsk 1972, pp. 13–91

²⁹A. Lelchuk, R. White, “An Interview with Erskine Caldwell,” in *Conversations with Erskine Caldwell*, ed. E. T. Arnold, Jackson 1988, pp. 83–84.

³⁰E. Caldwell, *Journeyman*, op. cit.

outrage and bombast at the outset: “Damn the man who’d drive right spang up [...] and let loose a stink like that!”³¹

That thought is later revealed to be the key to understanding the text, and is yet more on point in that over the course of the narrative, such an opinion, expressed by Clay with anger, with a sense of his own helplessness and powerlessness, grows to reach practically the level of a universal maxim. It is noteworthy that, “the man” drives up (where from, nobody knows, with the inevitability of Fate, like the verdict of a cruel and implacable destiny) and captures everything for himself: the heart of shy young Dene, Clay’s last wife, who the preacher has no trouble “emboldening,” the well-kept car that he wins in a game of dice together with the whole farm, a keepsake watch and a small amount of credit taken in anticipation of the next year’s harvest. “The man” drives up and casually seduces the mulatta servant “Sweet,” who is beautiful and aware of her beauty, at the same time, quarrelling with her fiancé, Hardy, at whom he fires a gun, calmly, almost reluctantly, not shooting to kill, only to scare him a little.

And, finally, “the man” drives up and demoralizes the whole town of Rocky Comfort, driving out the alleged devils who have harassed the townspeople for years, in the process making an emotional show, a display worthy of a contemporary performance artist, turning his own body into not so much an avant-garde “art object” as the object of a kind of barbaric, primeval cult. He defeats ubiquitous evil, delivers an epic sermon lasting hours (observing all the rules of rhetoric), leads the townsfolk in a mass orgy, the better to “praise God,” simultaneously experiencing ecstasies, animalistic joy at participating in the age-old rite of sacrifice, fulfilment and redemption. He is accompanied at all points by the narrator, who, quotes his words with reportorial exactitude, not permitting himself any kind of commentary, even when Dye is addressing a group of women who are hungry for new experiences, at first terrified, then ready to do practically anything he asks: “The Lord told me how wicked you folks in Rocky Comfort are [...] We want you in heaven. We need you there. In heaven we want all the beautiful girls and women now in Georgia.”³² A short and pithy commentary appears just a few pages further on, when the narrative (referring to basic knowledge in the field of social psychology) attempts to explain the behaviour of the townspeople in one sentence without evaluating or interpreting it: “A few people in Rocky Comfort considered themselves already saved, and wished all their neighbors to be denied the pleasures that they themselves had forsworn.”³³

We should also pay attention to the fact that Semon Dye is presented from two different narrative perspectives: first as a character in a reportage on life in the countryside of the American South, a swindler and crook, ably taking advantage of the naïveté of simple farmers, drinking corn liquor with them and looking at the world, like them, through a hole in the barn timber, and then (in keeping with the principles of the aesthetics of tragedy) as a strong, intriguing personality, acting according to the rules of the game he himself has designated. Semon is not, in the end, the Almighty, even if he is happy to claim an intimate relationship with the Lord. He is God’s humble servant, or perhaps his mighty servant, but

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

in any case, subject to the laws he proclaims. He is unmasked by the moment (shown against the background of the mass orgy in which the townspeople take enthusiastic part) when his physiognomy, the physiognomy of a “lay preacher” undergoes a peculiar transformation and we see him through the eyes of the enthralled crowd, when none other than Semon Dye, in the throes of erotic ecstasy, “was sprawling on the floor, writhing and kicking [...], as though each successive movement would be his last on earth.”³⁴

So in fact the appearance of the preacher, because of the scene quoted above, which fulfils the function of a dramaturgical counterpoint in the linear narrative, has (if looked at from the perspective of the text as a whole) a dimension not only of “scandalous” paradox and grotesque but also of a symbol deeply rooted in the collective unconscious. The unusual nature of this uninvited guest, this servant through whose lips God himself speaks, is manifested in small, seemingly insignificant gestures and words that are carried out (as he is given to say) to “praise God!” It is he, Semon Dye, the personification of both good and evil, the envoy of God and the Devil who silently throws the dice in a fluid, dance-like movement when the stakes are maximally high for Clay, concerning the loyalty and recovery of Dene, the fourth and, it appears, most beloved wife of that unhappy, hopeless and disillusioned farmer. It is he, too, this unexpected visitor, wrecking the lethargic peace and quiet of the provincial one-horse town, who befriends Tom, Clay’s soft-spoken, introverted neighbour, desiring to turn him (in a most perfidious way) into someone much more important than just a witness or vigilant observer of scenes choreographed by Dye. Tom, due to his nature (a fondness for stubborn silence, simplicity, cowardice and a certain kind of conformism), sanctions all of Semon’s offenses by the very fact of his presence at the most important moments in the text, rendering their immediate acceptance possible.

There is no theatre without spectators or “public opinion,” and Semon Dye appears to be fully conscious of that fact, as he flawlessly manipulates the fates of his potential and actual victims. Haughty, bossy and insolent, greedy and brusque, he seems to conceal within him some sort of “mystery,” something that ties his person to the world’s ageless order, that makes him an artist and a prestidigitator, a rogue and vagrant, a rascal and personal servant to a rather distant and obscure, typically silent God, indifferent to people’s struggles and situations. After the departure of this preacher, the first summer downpour washes away the fresh marks of his tires on the sandy road leading somewhere far away. Perhaps it is a sign of purification. Yet the text provides no proof of that, and such an interpretation may be a bit of a stretch.

Clay once again takes up his old, beloved place on the porch, now in the company of his third wife, the prostitute Lorene, for the possibility of meeting with whom Dye has previously made him pay dearly... “They both sat silent for a while, each looking down the road towards McGuffin. Clay felt weak over the loss of his car, but he would not have felt so badly if Semon had not gone away as he had. He had hoped to have the satisfaction of seeing Semon drive out of the yard and out of sight down the road. He felt cheated now.”³⁵ But these are not the final, parting words with which Caldwell chooses to close the novel, which does not end at

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵E. Caldwell, *Journeyman*, op. cit.

the moment of the preacher's departure, as would a well-written reportage or a collection of short, sharply expressive, intensely meaningful paradocumentary texts that follow the conventions of New Journalism (whose literary trademark came to be the crossing of genre boundaries or, as twentieth-century adherents put it, "a mixture of inventions, fiction, and document") cannot end with some kind of concrete conclusion.³⁶

As Erskine Caldwell would have it, postulating that the writer follows a certain road determined by the fates, whether really existing or merely capable of existing, of characters who are always true to life: "a conclusion is just around the corner."³⁷ How can the author so sure, however, that this road does not (like most roads in the South, leading through sun-scorched waste lands) in fact lead from nowhere to nowhere? The answer to this question, fundamental to an analysis of Caldwell's prose style and to grasping the individual traits of his writing, is provided by a close look at the text and an attempt to describe it using the tools of micropoetics.

Why Micropoetics?

When performing a fairly superficial analysis (a more penetrating one could easily provide the basis for a longer scholarly work) of a few selected scenes from Erskine Caldwell's story, it is important to answer the fundamental question: Why micropoetics? After all, it would be possible to study *Journeyman* using tools typical of structural analysis, concentrating on such elements as the position of the narrator, the trajectory of the linear plot, or the psychological construction of the characters. We could also venture to describe and explain the text in terms of hermeneutics. In both of the cases mentioned, however, in either of those interpretative approaches, the reading would take place at a clear loss for the work studied, which (when subjected to traditional vivisection) would be submitted to oversimplifications, all the more so since conventional methods of analysis demand the advancement of a thesis, which would place further limits on the field of interpretation.

Positing a thesis and gathering arguments in favour of it would essentially close off the path to a believable interpretation of the micro-novel *Journeyman*, the more so since, as becomes clear from the statement cited earlier (in the epigraph) by the author, the characters appear to drive him, to force him to follow their lead, on the condition, however, that their literary construction be based on a paradocumentary concept of truth, on honesty and straightforwardness in the means of presenting their fates. Moreover, in following a character, and in possessing journalistic dash, the verve of the reportage-maker, the storyteller focuses his attention on details, shows characters from a close perspective, quotes their conversations and thoughts, and renounces (or keeps to a minimum) his own commentary. Thus, in giving up his right to evaluation and interpretation, the author simultaneously accords that the right to readers, whose presence (like that presence of the listeners to stories being told out loud) is a completely obvious and natural fact. That fact corresponds to Caldwell's personal experience: "Well, I was not a writer to begin with; I was a listener. In those early decades of the century, reading and writing were not common experiences. Oral storytelling was the basis of fiction."³⁸

³⁶J. Durczak, quoted in: J. Jeziorska-Haładyj, *Tekstowe wykładniki fikcji*, op. cit., p. 88

³⁷E. P. Broadwell, W. R. Hoag, *Erskine Caldwell, The Art of Fiction*, op. cit.

³⁸E. P. Broadwell, W. R. Hoag, *Erskine Caldwell, The Art of Fiction*, op. cit. (accessed: 1 February 2017)

In examining Caldwell's prose, whether we look at *Tobacco Road*, *God's Little Acre*, *Tragic Ground*, or *A House in the Uplands*, a literary scholar cannot escape the conviction that all of these texts are connected by a specific formation of space in lieu of action (the southern states of the USA), a way of proceeding that evokes the reportage narrative, and above all, methods that involve getting to know the characters' world, step-by-step, by accompanying them in their daily, seemingly dull, monotonous and ordinary lives. These features only reveal themselves most fully when we bring to bear on our analysis the tools of micropoetics, with the stipulation, however, that the direct experience of the text, the fact of being somehow inside the represented world, relates above all to Caldwell's skilful application of the knowledge and practice of reporting and journalism.

Caldwell's links to the concept of New Journalism seem obvious. The influence that writing for a daily newspaper could exert on the stylistic craft of this author of micronovels is elucidated by the famous remark of Thomas Connery in which he offered his own definition of reportage and paradocumentary prose. In his lapidary essay "A Third Way to Tell the Story: American Literary Journalism at the Turn of the Century," analyzing the phenomenon of the enormous popularity of the criminal sketches Lincoln Steffens (father of the genre of "descriptive narrative") published in a daily newspaper, Connery wrote: "It was not the 'news,' demanded by most newspapers, nor was it the more elaborate fictional short story required by magazines. It was as though readers have been given a window on New York [...] Steffens enabled his readers to 'see' and not just 'hear' about the city."³⁹

The key formulation here is the question of *seeing* – not only knowing from hearsay; this could be further elaborated on by clarifying that the point is not just seeing, but seeing through the "window," experiencing important things, with the concept of importance defined in the context of a particular time and particular social relations. In the case of Caldwell's prose, what is "important" plays out in small, provincial communities, because that is where stories are told, and that is where people listen to them attentively, experiencing (as we experience in looking through a window) the life of other people, often strangers. The task of the writer or storyteller is to open just such a window.

³⁹T. B. Connery, "The Third Way to Tell the Story," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. N. Sims, Evanston 2008, p. 13

KEYWORDS

Erskine Caldwell

micropoetics

ABSTRACT:

The aim of this essay is to show a way of using the tools of micropoetics to analyse a specific text, Erskine Caldwell's novel *Journeyman*, which represents a specific genre of literary utterance, and also the influence of the New Journalism on Caldwell's technique. Important here is the small size of the work analyzed, the belief in the role of chance, everyday occurrence, colloquial style, the lack of literary references or borrowings, and the specific method of presenting the characters. A characteristic feature of Erskine Caldwell's prose is also the dramatization of certain scenes and an effort to "theatricalize" the characters.

s t o r y t e l l i n g

SOUTHERN PROSE

n e w j o u r n a l i s m

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Małgorzata Dorna (1954) is an alumnus of the Faculty of Polish Philology at the University of Gdańsk and presently a second-year doctoral student at the same university (the topic of her doctoral thesis, to be written under the guidance of Prof. Jan Ciechowicz, is “The Theatricalization of Polish Public Life in the Late 20th and Early 21st Century. Between Play, Spectacle, Ceremony and Rally”). She is a passionate practitioner of art criticism, theatre studies and teaching. Her work has been published numerous times in the cultural magazine *Wybrzeża* (The Shore; pieces entitled “Migotania” [Flickers], “Autograf” [Autograph], “Jednak Książki” [Books, Still]) and on the website of the Polish branch of the International Association of Theatre Critics; she is a regular collaborator with at the BWA Gallery in Piła. Interests: easel painting, literary theory, opportunities to use the techniques of literary studies in the practice of art criticism, literature of the American South.