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The Description Effect

More and more studies allow us to conclude that there exists a description effect that determines the goals of writing and the directions of literary research.

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The Description Effect

Tomasz Mizerkiewicz

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The problem of description in a literary work of art and in other texts, explored more and more closely in recent years, appears to be an underestimated cause of change in literary studies. More and more studies allow us to conclude that there exists a description effect that determines the goals of writing and the directions of literary research. Description often affects the meaning of the work, its affective layer, stage and film productions, and the format of the books itself. It comes as no surprise that such a number of important, though usually diverse, problems continues to exert a strong influence on literary studies, where description appears in various forms as an effective verifier of research methods.

We present a panoramic view of the various interventions of description in contemporary literary studies, because one may notice the effectiveness of description and its continuous impact better from a certain distance. First, it should be emphasized that description raises a number of issues related to the “performance” of a work of art. Marta Karasińska discusses it in relation to dramatic works, whose goal seems to be to make the viewers reflect on description and discuss the transposi-

tion of descriptive sections into action but also to examine various ontologies of description. The relations between description and the form of the book are equally important, as evidenced by Katarzyna Krzak-Weiss and Bogdan Hojdis. They argue that the descriptive layer of text is often a key point of reference for the editor. The author and the editor engage in a dialogue, or even a dispute, about the most desirable method of illustrating the text and the editorial work for the described. The tasks of description in self-referential works seem to be extremely interesting. Agnieszka Waligóra discusses the role of description in Andrzej Sosnowski's "deconstructionist" poems: description both evokes and quickly annihilates all forms of mimesis. In postmodern literary works, description was something that limited the possibilities of self-referentiality. Respectively, Joanna Grądział-Wójcik emphasizes the essential values of description in women's self-referential poems. She analyses numerous works by female poets which allows us to appreciate the role of descriptive passages, which often function as a pretext in the works of male poets. Brygida Helbig-Mischewski, an excellent Polish writer, would fully agree with such a line of reasoning. She comments on her own work in this issue. According to Helbig-Mischewski, description determines the affective dimension of her works and her personal styles of reading and interpreting literature in general. Thanks to description, she was able to develop self-reflective states, where reflection and knowledge had a different ontology than in the writings of many men who value adventure and plot. It turns out that description also has its gender genealogy that is worth reconstructing. All the more so because, as Marek Wedemann proves, Stanisław Przybyszewski in his works openly condemned descriptions, insofar as they did not concern the writer's misogynistic antics. After all, description was used by Przybyszewski as a useful means of reaching reality, which brings us back to the initial remark on the effectiveness of description. Perhaps, therefore, description should be studied in a manner demonstrated by Izabela Sobczak. She discusses historical and contemporary roles played by description in case studies in many fields of science. It is perhaps only in such a context that we touch upon the complexity of the description effect.

Description is effective in a manner that we are still not able to grasp fully. Perhaps troubled book publishers best exemplify how description determines what can and cannot be done with a text. Therefore, more often than we have realized so far, it is description that determines and sets out the conditions for change in literary studies.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

From Description to *Opsis*

Marta Karasińska

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The category of literary description, according to the established tradition, attested by an entry in a dictionary of literary terms, is predominantly associated with narrative genres, or – in extremis – with a lyric monologue, which, after all, also represents narrative genres. Description, according to the classical definition (which has been since “updated”), “presents elements of the represented world that do not concern events. It is a background against which events take place, providing information on the appearance of characters, etc., it is essentially a timeless conceptualization, it shows elements and features of a given object in their equilibrium and especially frequently – in their spatial orientation”¹. In other words, it presents elements and characteristics of the represented world as a basic compositional element of a text. Importantly, this element limits the Ingardenian (*nomen omen*) appearances typically proposed in a text to a projection of their visual dimension.

The represented world is not a construct reserved only for prose and poetry. Moreover, “the third genre”, ignored in the general reflection upon literary description, fully meets the criteria of the above-mentioned definition and displays its presence in an especially complex way, making it, as an ontic basis of on-stage reality, *de facto* one of the most important questions concerning drama theory. The reality presented to the audience is material and spatial, yet it primarily stems from language. Spatialization is a basic compositional dynamism in drama. So, if the ultimate goal of description is to construct the represented world in a text, one should ask how this can be achieved using the artistic means characteristic for each of the three literary genres.

¹ Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo 1976), 280. [translation mine, PZ]

The strictly-defined category of description, traditionally connected mostly with epic, despite its significance, has never been a central problem to considerations regarding drama theory. Among the few scholars who have dealt with this issue, Anne Ubersfeld stressed that the fact that she depreciated the role of description in drama results from the peculiar character of dramatic texts. For the theatrical text is:

“[...] the only literary text that absolutely cannot be read according to a diachronic succession of reading, and that opens itself to understanding only through layers of synchronic signs tiered in space, spatialized signs. Whatever spatialization is produced by a literary text, whatever spatializing a reader accomplished when reading a novel (a novel localizes the activity of its characters through description), it remains true that the space of a novel is flat, even materially flat.”²

According to Ubersfeld, poetry is similarly flat. However, dramatic texts are the “flattest”:

„[...] it does not describe its own spatiality. (Place descriptions are always quite sketchy and, with rare notable exceptions, found only at specific places in the text.) Also, place descriptions serve a functional, rarely poetic purpose involving not an imaginary construct but rather the practice of performance, arrangement within space.”³

However, Ubersfeld recognizes that this rule can be broken – for instance, in Racine’s plays. This inconsequentiality is related to the obviously numerous articulations of dramatic poetics, similarly to the whole corpus of works of literature which are subject to the directive of description to various degrees.

The rule of principal delineation of gentheological forms (also applied to past phenomena), considered anachronistic in the age of “annihilation of genres”, also questions the rigorous assignment, sometimes exclusively, of certain conventions and artistic measures (*ergo* also description) to each one of them. The famous circle by Emil Staiger or the methodological narrative breakthrough which dominates the category of the short story, have been arguing for years in the space of theoretical discourse that in drama, to a greater or lesser degree, one can always find literary phenomena typical for prose. The ancient distinction between *diegesis-mimesis* seems to ultimately find a harmonious symbiosis in the Aristotelian *opsis*, also in theatrical practice. Questions concerning its place and means of articulation in the structure of a play will generally be reduced to questions about ways of manifestations of represented reality in it, predominantly everything related to its potential stage role.

Patrice Pavis quotes an old thought by Jean-François Marmontel, who distinguished between narration and description:

„Narration is representation of facts, just like description is representation of objects”⁴

² Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, translated by Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 94-95.

³ Ibidem: 95.

⁴ Patrice Pavis, *Słownik terminów teatralnych*, translated by Sławomir Świontek, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo 1998) 319. [translation mine, PZ]

He proceeds to explain that:

„In theater description is done through a visual representation of things, while narration shows events *in actu* as elements of the story line. Hence, in theater narration is realized through discursive means characteristic for the visual way of stage presentation.”⁵

Jerzy Ziomek treats the written record as one of the possible elocutions of a text⁶. As a result, this claim allows for treating the description of the represented world for the stage as equal to narrative description. This project of the world *in potentia*, limited to a literary work, world on the level of unfinished linguistic record, is able to realize itself materially through executive dispositions it contains, which are also discussed by Ziomek⁷. The “descriptiveness” of drama, significantly and partially pointed out by Ubersfeld, in the parts which are subject to the laws of “stage display” in execution comes from the rigor of diachrony to a synchronic projection, which is sometimes treated as the “spatialization” of literature. Description and descriptiveness, both executive directives, are obligatory qualities in drama, performative *par excellence*, for the goal of drama is to show rather than describe. It goes from successive *récit* to simultaneous *représenter*.

The way of existence of the represented world in drama has been of interest for phenomenologists – both Ingardenian, focusing mostly on the literary work itself, and representatives of the American school, for whom drama and theater constituted an adequate example of philosophical theses. However, the problem of the model of a world presented in a given work as a phenomenon creating a physically-manifested stage reality appears in both conceptualizations. For Roman Ingarden, a spectacle is a borderline case of a literary work, which subjects drama to the double power of realization in the process of stage performance, both as a written text, and materialized staging, maintaining in the previous form the layer of represented objects and meanings, while changing the layer of sounds and schematic appearances. According to Ingarden, the represented world in drama consists of the objects (things, people, processes) shown:

- directly on stage (perceptive appearances)
- in two ways
 - a) directly on stage
 - b) through language, if they are spoken about on stage
- only through language, although such objects remain in relationships with objects shown directly on stage⁸.

⁵ Ibidem. [Translation mine, PZ]

⁶ Jerzy Ziomek, *Semiotyczne problemy sztuki teatru*, [in:] Idem, *Powinowactwa literatury. Studia i szkice*, (Warszawa: PWN, 1980), 139.

⁷ Jerzy Ziomek, *Projekt wykonawcy w dziele literackim a problemy genologiczne*, [in:] Idem, *Powinowactwa literatury. Studia i szkice*, (Warszawa: PWN, 1980).

⁸ R. Ingarden, *O funkcjach mowy w widowisku teatralnym*, [in:] *Problemy teorii dramatu i teatru*, selected and edited by Janusz Degler (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1988).

The duality of appearance of the represented world pointed out by Ingarden, ordained on the level of literary text, is divided in stage realization into entities materialized in the theatrical space, and those which are closer to the linguistic medium, remaining only in the sphere of direct descriptiveness of a word. This observation is both obvious and fundamental for considerations regarding the role of description in drama texts, which are somewhere in between the narrative function, typical for literature, and the spectacle's *opsis*.

The concept of drama as a music score can be useful for conducting analyses regarding the executive aspects of drama, *ergo* materializing translation of its descriptiveness (in the Anglo-American theory known as *from page to stage*). In Poland, it has been popularized by Zbigniew Raszewski⁹, who was nevertheless highly skeptical about it, proposing to consider "the issue of drama" in a close relation to its ultimate, theatrical purpose. Drama understood as a music score, as a text to be performed, despite Raszewski's reservations, inherently contains more or less precise indicators regarding its theatrical realization, "describing" also the shape of the stage world. Although these premises are not always formulated in the form of an *expressis verbis* description (typical for stage directions), they still project stage appearances, sounds or movements.

The descriptive directive of drama can concern one of the three spatial formations:

- space shown on stage
- adjacent space (by the stage)
- narrated space.

Each has a different model of descriptiveness which brings it into existence. The project of a world dedicated to a three-dimensional, **directly, sensually-perceived** stage space is the most characteristic for drama. Dispositions contained in a literary text regarding its materialized appearances, sounds, and sometimes also smells or – in rare cases – tactile impressions are the moving spirit for its fulfillment. The adjacent space (by the stage) excludes the indirect visual projection, limiting itself to sounds, light, and activities which constitute and stem from it, sometimes also describing it with words and characters, which can be treated as a theatrical **metonymy** of a sort. The narrated space is controlled by the language, as a **substitute of stage materiality**, stemming from the power of literary description that brings it to life in its proper, only narrative, shape.

The phenomenon of constituting space created in drama goes beyond the restrictive, established poetological principles, which mainly come down to description articulated on the narrative level. Descriptiveness, which I see as a broader category than description (which is still frequently associated mostly with the general interpretation proposed in dictionaries of literary terms), in drama most frequently occurs in the guise of an obligatory compositional directive, which purely pragmatically only determines the stage picture of the place of action, generally ignoring its stylistic aspect. Instead of literary "overproviding" of description, drama typically

⁹ Zbigniew Raszewski, *Partytura teatralna*, [in:] *Problemy teorii dramatu i teatru*, selected and edited by Janusz Degler (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1988).

offers its functionality.¹⁰ The aesthetic expression related to it typically occurs only in the material, theatrical articulation of the text. The dominating, practical dimension of description/descriptiveness submits them to various forms of genealogical drama, oscillating between the maximum condensation of details (for example, direct, long descriptions in stage directions in a naturalistic drama) and immanent, indirect descriptiveness derived not from the descriptive parts of a text expressed in words, but from the assumed theatrical poetics, the musical score of stage movement or actions of a character. A broadly-treated description modeling the stage reality in a drama, typically “frozen” in the stage directions opening subsequent acts of a realist drama ultimately turns out to be a potentially dynamic category, constituting a physical basis for the events presented in the play.

In his famous paper *O opisie*,¹¹ Janusz Sławiński points out this trend in research into description, which by treating it as an “extra-linguistic” category considers it a compositional element of the morphology of the represented world. He associates its significance mostly with the structurally defined action and the kinds of actors performing it, and yet – by the same token – shifts description from the linear story to close to the stage, a three-dimensional scheme of the represented reality. In its dramatic articulation, it is subject to the rule of specific, historically-shaped theatrical aesthetics.

The image of the world generalized from a literary text generally depends on two factors which determine it:

- inner-textual executive dispositions contained in stage directions and dialogues
- the theater convention to which a given play belongs, established aesthetic norms, and repetitive staging standards which do not require any additional specific information, defining the shape of the world in the main text and trivia.

This situation concerns ancient Greek tragedies which always take place in the same scenery, Terentius’s comedies, or more conventionalized comedies dell’arte. The three typified kinds of decorations for tragedy, comedy and pastoral drama also applied to the classicist theater. The so-called “free regions” used many times as scenography for subsequent premieres even in the first half of the 20th century are a distant echo of this rule. In many cases, the knowledge of the theatrical architecture to which a given play was addressed – the ancient amphitheater, the Renaissance’s Terentius stage, or the Elizabethan theater – is significant in the reading of the presented reality belonging to a play, which does not require any description.

The way of manifesting description constituting the represented world in drama can be called gradational: from its direct form, most typical for prose texts, through indirect description, to the broadly understood category of extra-linguistic descriptiveness.

¹⁰Poetic stage directions “to be read” in symbolic dramas are an obvious exception. One intriguing example is *Bazylissa Teofanu* by Tadeusz Miciński, which describes in great detail elements of the interior of a temple presented on stage, giving the character of such a ritual to a show which takes place in the presence of the audience, unaware that they are taking part in it. The genre modus of stage texts, discussed here only marginally, combining the poetics of space with the poetics of drama, similarly to other literary genres, obviously plays a fundamental role in considerations regarding literary description, transferring it in the field of historical poetics.

¹¹Janusz Sławiński, *O opisie*, „Teksty: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja” 55, No 1 (1981): 119-120.

Direct (or proper) description, identical with the general definition from a dictionary of literary terms. It appears not only in the form of trivia (similar to prose), but also in dialogues, not infrequently taking over the function of a lyrical monologue. The first one concerns two out of the three listed formats of space (presented and adjacent); the main text, through telling it, may also additionally present the appearances of the last one – narrated. Direct description most often corresponds with the traditional narrative description – **objectified** in the form of stage directions and often **subjectified** in dialogues.

Stage directions, as trivia in a drama, exhaust the dictionary criteria of description quoted at the beginning and find their fullest realization in the realist-naturalist drama, most closely corresponding with the descriptiveness of the traditional naturalist and realist novel. Presenting the picture of the created world, they display qualities of developed and concise description defined by Sławiński¹². Descriptions contained in stage directions most often include interiors directly shown on stage, and through designed, selected theater signs suggests the presence of adjacent, imagined rooms and landscapes. Hence, in reference to stage directions, we could distinguish a **visualizing and suggesting description**. It does not have a cumulative character, because it does not develop itself. It remains beyond chronological order, for the order of the subsequent sequences does not play any role in the theatrical practice. The description of a stabilized picture, transferred on stage, sentenced to simultaneity, framed in a snapshot which cuts it out of reality, is subject to inversion; it can begin from any piece and be developed in any direction. In the realist or naturalist convention, it has a clearly enumerative character.¹³ It does not meet the traditional criterion of cohesion of a literary text or dialogues in drama, transferring itself from the stylistic-syntactic level to the assumed theatrical convention and stage pragmatics. A clear example of the enumerative description of the place of action, characteristic for a naturalist drama, doing its duty for the postulate of photographic mirroring of reality, can be found in *The Weavers* by Gerhart Hauptmann. It contains two typical subjects of description space and characters, both for realist prose, and for constituting the world of stage sound:

A small room in the house of Wilhelm Ansorge, weaver and cottager in the village of Kaschhach, in the Eulengehirge. In this room, which does not measure six feet from the dilapidated wooden floor to the smoke-blackened rafters, sit four people. Two young girls, Emma and Bertha Baumert, are working at their looms; Mother Baumert, a decrepit old woman, sits on a stool beside the bed, with a winding-wheel in front of her; her idiot son August sits on a foot-stool, also winding. He is twenty, has a small body and head, and long, spider-like legs and arms. Faint, rosy evening light makes its way through two small windows in the right wall [...]. On the stove rail rags are hanging to dry, and behind the stove is a collection of worthless lumber. On the bench stand some old pots and cooking utensils, and potato parings are laid out on it, on paper, to dry. Hanks of yarn and reels hang from the rafters; baskets of bob-bins stand beside the looms [...]. The room is full of sound — the rhy-

¹²Janusz Sławiński, *O opisie*, op. cit.: 124.

¹³In *O opisie*, Sławiński points out the descriptive category of *enumerato* (p. 127 and 129), which “stiffens” the text and leads to a “dictionary order”, threatening its artistry. It is obligatory for stage directions in many subgenres of broadly-understood realist drama; within the “localizing model” defined by Sławiński (p. 129) situating objects in space, it has a utilitarian character which remains beyond literary aesthetics. Its artistry is realized in its stage design, constituting a dominion of aesthetics of art and is a theatrical realization *à rebours* of ekphrasis.

mic thud of the looms, shaking floor and walls, the click and rattle of the shuttles passing back and forward, and the steady whirr of the winding-wheels, like the hum of gigantic bees¹⁴.

According to Sławiński, while reporting Roland Barthes's reflections¹⁵, for drama, stage directions are "a place of a break", similar to descriptions in prose. In classical or realist drama, this break is most often naturally related to an interval preceding the subsequent act, constituting a signal of the passage of time¹⁶ and change of location. Typically, an elaborate description of a scene, clearly distinct from the plot and inaccessible to the perception of the viewer, is only an instruction for the stage arranger. Elements which are subject to description can appear only as a background for events, beyond plot functions (especially when it is designed as a flat painted scenography). However, they can also actively participate in the events, like Chekhov's famous gun. The descriptiveness of the trivia, in line with its basic purpose, plays a crucial role for the material, scenographic articulation of the represented world designed in a drama, significantly organizing the shape of the stage space, defining the theatrical aesthetics, stage movement, and actors' play. Stage directions are subject to the temporal directive of the **present tense**. In the case of realist genres, they employ evaluative terms characteristic for prose descriptions. Poetic, romanticist, surrealist, expressionist dramas also often resign from "dry" descriptions. Although, for example, in the latter they still seemingly shape places of action "external" to the protagonist, they in fact constitute a projection of the psychological interior of individuals. An example of a "mental landscape" enriched with sounds added to a living room typical for a realist stage¹⁷ can be found in *The Road to Damascus*:

„KITCHEN

*It is dark, but the moon outside throws moving shadows of the window lattices on to the floor, as the storm clouds race by. In the corner, right, under the crucifix, where the OLD MAN used to sit, a hunting horn, a gun and a game bag hang on the wall. On the table a stuffed bird of prey. As the windows are open the curtains are flapping in the wind; and kitchen cloths, aprons and towels, that are hung on a line by the hearth, move in the wind, whose sighing can be heard. In the distance the noise of a waterfall. There is an occasional tapping on the wooden floor.*¹⁸

The **main text** and the description it contains is approaching a story included in the dialogue taking place. In principle, it refers to the location and objects not shown on stage; thus, it is closest to forms of description characteristic for prose. However, in isolated cases, it defines elements of the presented reality within the stage and adjacent space. Although marked with the subjectivism of a talking protagonist (which sometimes brings it closer to a lyrical mono-

¹⁴Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Weavers*, translated by Mary Morrison, New York, 1925.

¹⁵Janusz Sławiński, op. cit.: 122.

¹⁶Classicism drama, respecting the obligatory principle of three unities, presented stage events limited to 24 hours in subsequent acts, marking the passage of time in the description of the place of action, by, for example, placing the sun or the moon behind a window.

¹⁷Strindberg's description displays characteristics of pictorial imaging, giving it an artistic autonomy, characteristic for later expressionist and expressionistic movie. For example, in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* by Robert Wiene, representative for the genre, there appears a motif of a prison-interior and barred window, used years before in *To Damascus*.

¹⁸August Strindberg, *The Road to Damascus*, translated by Esther Johanson and Graham Rawson, 2013.

logue), it can thus take over the functional role of stage directions. The individualized subject of a statement often decides its emotive and evaluative dimension:

„Jean

[...] Once I went with my mother inside the garden, to weed out the onion bed. Close by the garden wall there stood a Turkish pavilion, shaded by jasmine and surrounded by wild roses. I had no idea what it was used for, but I'd never seen so fine a building. People went in and out, and one day the door stood open. I sneaked in, and saw the walls covered with pictures of queens and emperors, and red curtains with fringes were in front of the windows now you know what I mean.

He takes a lilac branch and holds it under the young lady's nose

I'd never been in the Abbey, and I'd never seen anything else but the church but this was much finer.¹⁹

The poetics of a classical drama has fixed forms close to short stories and prose descriptions, dividing the corpus of a play with narrative parts. Their presence allows for the presentation of places and events that are difficult to show directly on stage due to technical limitations and customs premises. The ancient *teichoscopy* belongs to especially famous applications of narrative-descriptive strategies in drama; one drama character gives an account of events that take place beyond stage (for example, an envoy's account), employed in the *bienséance* tragedies by Racine, which use this technique to give an account of cruel and immoral events. On-stage monologues, tirades, or action expositions, close to the category of a short story, are marked with narrative descriptiveness. The objectifying description finds an important place in an epic drama, in principle not only trans-genre, but also fulfilling the ideological socio-political mission. The works of Bertolt Brecht, in line with his artistic *credo* deconstructing the Aristotelian drama tradition, shifts the stress from on-stage action and actors' performance to dry description and storytelling, sometimes – like in the case of *Mother Courage and Her Children* – having a character of a grand war epic poem. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* constitutes an expressive form of episoding drama on genealogical level, closing in a narrative frame in a “play-within-a-play” way the story of Grusha, who travels through an epic world, as told by a folk singer.

An indirect description, i.e. quasi-description, situated in the main text, but not independent, situational, related to the *ad hoc* context of a given scene. To some extent, it constitutes an equivalent of the “dispersed description” defined by Sławiński²⁰. The manifestations of places, objects and people which stem from it can barely be generalized from the dialogues and the accompanying stage behaviors. Sometimes, subject to a peculiar “narration of points of view”, it shows the same elements of the presented world as seen through the eyes of several characters in a “dialogued”, differentiating way.

Descriptiveness, a super-linguistic category. Although it stems from the literary record of a drama, it remains beyond the direct semantics of a word. On stage, it is realized with the use of a code other than a linguistic one. Often, it does not require stage directions. It results from selected dramatic-theatrical poetics which suffices in terms of description, from

¹⁹August Strindberg, *Panna Julia*, [in:] idem, op. cit.,: 134.

²⁰Janusz Sławiński, op. cit.: 124.

the rhythm of dialogues (plays by Aleksander Fredro, *Porwanie Europy* by Marek Rymkiewicz), and scores of movement (comedies-ballets by Molière) in designing stage appearances; it does not need lexical denotations. It selects pictures, colors and spatial compositions out of the dynamics of the presented actions. The obligatory stage visualization, situated in the matter of descriptiveness of the world, is sometimes a subject of a meta-theatrical game, like in the case of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, where the protagonists select pieces of the surrounding reality by using pantomimic gestures²¹. Tomasz Łubieński jokingly refers to the compulsion of materializing the stage universe, subject to intersemiotic re-codings in the stage directions to *Koczwiska*, creating the presented world according to the rule “if you can hear it, you can see it”.

Ultimately the shape of the presented world directly on stage is always the result of negotiations between the author and the stage arranger. Thus, a theoretical reflection should be a significant development of reflections regarding description and descriptiveness in drama, due to their potential theatrics, apart from their obvious semiological conceptualization, referring hermeneutic and cognitive optics.

Manifestations of the descriptiveness phenomenon found in drama not only correspond with forms of description in prose in their significant representation, but also notably broaden their register. This is a reflection of Roland Barthes, who in his *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* categorically states that:

[...] the role of storytelling is not to “represent” [*representer*], but to construct a spectacle [...] ²²

which proves the invalidity of the custom, well-established in the poetics discourse, of excluding studies into describing drama. Barthes denies the ability to present the world with a realistic description, which inevitably will be transformed into a spectacle. Extracted with a frame (stage frame), it always demonstrates its theatrical character. Confirmed by Barthes’s reflections, the potential theatrics of any literary text, transitivity of epic/stage description, in consequence makes an obligatory category for all literary genres out of dramatic description as an executive directive. Thus, perversely, by pointing out the ignoring of theoreticians, dramatic descriptiveness could be considered to be the most complex and functional, fulfilling all the models of descriptiveness in a work of literature.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

²¹Artists responded to the theatrical “dictate” of scenography with a concept of an empty space or “naked” stage postulated by some of the representatives of the Great Theatre Reform.

²²Roland Barthes, *Wstęp do analizy strukturalnej opowiadań*, translated by Wanda Błońska, [in:] *Studia z teorii literatury. Archiwum przekładów „Pamiętnika Literackiego”*, edited by Michał Głowiński, Henryk Markiewicz (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo 1977), 156.

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KEYWORDS

staging

STAGE DIRECTIONS

t h e a t e r

music score

ABSTRACT:

The compositional category of description and more broadly understood descriptiveness in drama has always been marginalized in the theatrical-literary discourse. However, the models of description appearing in it, due to its stage purpose, are characterized by not only the richness of articulation, but also constitute an element *sine qua non* in creating the presented reality. It includes three spatial models: space shown on stage, adjacent space (by the stage), narrated space. Direct description proves to be the most typical for drama, which occurs either in stage directions, or in the main text. However, the dispersed quasi-description contained in the dialogues or the sub-linguistic descriptiveness realized excluding the semantics of a word.

s p a c e

d e s c r i p t i o n

DRAMA

m a i n t e x t

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Relations Between Description and Illustration as an Editorial Problem

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The connection between description and illustration dates back to the antique normative (though not necessarily related to the school of Aristotle) reflection on literature. Indeed, in rhetoric, literary description is also referred to as *illustratio* or *demonstratio*, i.e. the argumentative part of the narrative, which includes the *topoi* of persons, things, or actions. Descriptions of characters, places, time and actions were supposed to make the argument plausible and convincing for the audience.¹ In medieval paraenesis, description often took the form of not so only a potential but also an actual visualization. For example, in the public space of St. Mary's Basilica in Gdańsk, in a manner associated with dissemination,² the Tables of

¹ Teresa Michałowska, *Opis – pojęcie*, in: *Słownik literatury staropolskiej*, ed. Teresa Michałowska *et al.*, Wrocław, Ossolineum 1990, p. 522.

² Dissemination is both a legal and an editorial term. It refers to the process of making the content of the work available to recipients without making a copy. Publishing is the process of making a copy and sharing it with others.

the Law were meant to encourage the general public to lead an honest life. Moral encouragement was strengthened by visualization, which was secondary to description, because the biblical message was combined with visualization of everyday life in the fifteenth-century (landscape, architecture, character clothing).³ Of course, this historic image should be interpreted in the context of biblical hermeneutics, but it would also be possible to explain it in the context of literary hermeneutics, because the quarters are accompanied by German inscriptions and subscriptions in Gothic minuscule. What is more, the Ten Commandments in verse were popular in the late fifteenth century.⁴ In the more private sphere of books, for example, wood engravings (e.g. of demons who wished to possess human souls), which accompanied the descriptions and recommendations in xylographic and printed handbooks about the “art of good dying,” played a parenetic role.⁵

In the following centuries, illustrations undoubtedly influenced the quality of book editions; they rendered the message of the text more plausible, complete, and attractive. However, is there a closer connection between description and illustration in a literary text? We want to ask, and ultimately answer, this question from the perspective of an editor who wishes to publish a literary work and therefore has to decide whether illustrations should or should not be included in the text. Jan Trzynadlowski first paid attention to the underestimated role of the anonymous or collegial editor in this process.⁶ Apart from textual studies and editorial studies, Trzynadlowski also distinguished between editing for print, defined as a technical and critical adaptation of a given work by an author or an editor-researcher (in the case of posthumous editions) to print. Trzynadlowski’s views did not meet with immediate approval, which is why he considered it appropriate to respond to the reviewer of his dissertation *Editing: Text, language, study*, Stanisław Dąbrowski, thusly:

The reviewer is indignant that I allow the editor to shape the concept of the work in accordance with the technical concept of the book. The careful and above all calm reader understands what I mean by this. [...] Let me repeat after Kleiner that not every author imagines his work as a book, and yet it all boils down to (what else could it be?) the strict correspondence between the layout of the work and the layout of the book (i.e. the technical concept). The concept of the work is a completely different matter! The publisher who finances the edition has the right to reject the work if he does not like the concept, including its quality. It is like this all over the world. Does the publisher have to print everything that the author brings? I distinguish between the “publisher” and the “editor” because it also depends on the structure of a given publishing house. But this is a completely different matter. Until now I was writing about adapting the text, which is often very complex, to the structure of the book, e.g. textbook, album, series, etc. If the editor had nothing to say in this matter, no series could be published! Why should we try to prove the superiority of one over the other? It does not make any sense. Both of them, despite their various responsibilities, have to cooperate with each other so that a script or typescript gives rise to a well-thought-out book.

³ Adam Labuda, *Malarstwo tablicowe w Gdańsku w 2 poł. XV w.*, Warsaw, PWN 1979, p. 132 ff.

⁴ Wiesław Wydra, *Polskie dekalogi średniowieczne*, Warsaw, Pax 1973; Teresa Michałowska, *Średniowiecze*, Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 1995, p. 382.

⁵ Maciej Włodarski, *“Ars bene moriendi” w literaturze polskiej XV i XVI w.*, Cracow, Znak 1987.

⁶ Jan Trzynadlowski, *Edytorstwo. Tekst, język, opracowanie*, Warsaw, Wydawn. Naukowo-Techniczne 1976; *idem*, *Autor, dzieło, wydawca*, Wrocław, Ossolineum 1979.

Regarding the responsibility or rather the joint responsibility of the editor-publisher (the publisher as an institution and the editor as a person): all over the world, the editor is co-responsible for the edition he has been working on.⁷

The cooperation between the publisher and the author could oscillate between two extremes. Eliza Orzeszkowa claimed that “[i]llustrating a novel is an honor and an artistic pleasure for the author ...”⁸ According to Henry James, on the other hand, all illustration is an unbearable interference in literary text, which should stand on its own.⁹ This dispute sometimes took an unexpected turn, because literary studies were and still are influenced by philosophy.¹⁰ Indeed, the relationship between description and illustration in literature, in which we are interested, is not only a question of aesthetics, but also a question of theory, cognition and ontology, because it has to do with the empirical aspects of reading (and studying) a literary text. It was the case with the famous discussion between Roman Ingarden and Stanisław Lem. For Ingarden, a philosopher who worked in phenomenology, a literary text was a two-dimensional phenomenon with four layers.¹¹ According to him, the first dimension was a horizontal dimension: the textual message is linear, because the text is read, sequentially, over a period of time. It is the linearity of the text that distinguishes it, for example, from a painting, which is a field (a planimetric work), and from an architectural work, which has a solid (spatial) character. The linear dimension of the text determines its existence (ontology). On the other hand, the second, vertical, dimension of the text is realized by the reader in the process of cognitive reception. It consists of four layers: the speech sounds, the meanings units, the represented objects and the schematized aspects. According to Ingarden, the very nature of a linguistic message means that every text contains places of indeterminacy or gaps. It is the active reader who completes (thanks to experience or imagination) the details of the character or any given situation that have been presented schematically in the text.¹² Stanisław Lem noted, however, that it would mean that the reader of the work possesses unique psychological and intellectual powers – he thinks “in” images. However, the average reader, who knows literary conventions, enjoys reading because he enjoys more or less sophisticated linguistic constructions.¹³

⁷ Jan Trzysnadowski, *W odpowiedzi Stanisławowi Dąbrowskiemu*, “Pamiętnik Literacki” vol. 71 (1980), no. 4, p. 443.

⁸ *Listy zebrane*, vol 1, ed. E. Jankowski, Wrocław 1954, p. 133.

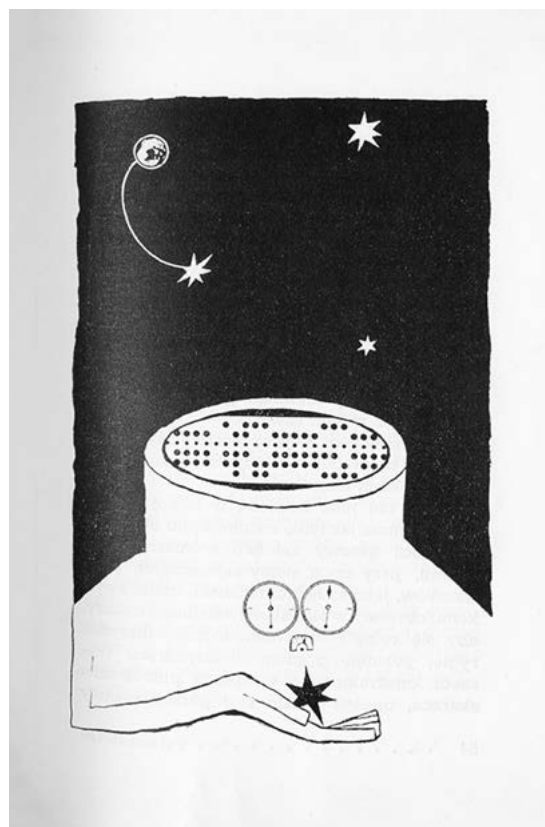
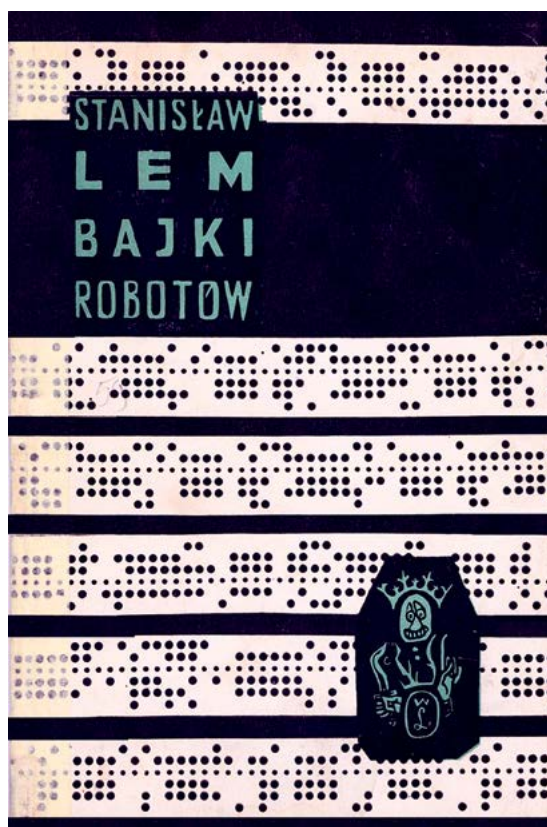
⁹ John Robert Harvey, *Victorian Novelist and their Illustrators*, London 1970, pp. 166-167.

¹⁰ Magdalena Saganiak discusses ancient and modern conditions of theoretical and literary research in *Poetyka opisowa wśród współczesnych nauk o literaturze*, “Tematy i Konteksty” 2013, no. 3, pp. 78-96.

¹¹ Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation of the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Language*, Evanston 1979.

¹² It is worth noting that the concept of “places of indeterminacy” aroused considerable controversy (see, among others: Henryk Markiewicz, *Miejsca niedookreślenia w dziele literackim*, in: *idem, Prace wybrane*, vol. 4: *Wymiary dzieła literackiego*, Cracow 1996, pp. 58-59). It should also be noted that the problem of mutual relations between word and image has been eagerly discussed by researchers in various disciplines and the positions of Ingarden and Lem are just one of many. See also: Edward Balcerzan, *Poezja jako semiotyka sztuki*, in: *Pogranicza i korespondencje sztuk*, ed. Tadeusz Cieślowski i Janusz Sławiński, Wrocław 1980; Seweryna Wysłouch, *Literatura a sztuki i wizualne. W perspektywie semiotyki*, in: *idem, Literatura a sztuki wizualne*, Warsaw 1994, Mieczysław Porębski, *Obrazy i znaki*, in: *idem, Sztuka a informacja*, Cracow 1986, Jan Białostocki, *Obraz i znak*, in: *idem, Historia sztuki wśród nauk humanistycznych*, Wrocław 1980.

¹³ Stanisław Lem, *Filozofia przypadku. Literatura w świetle empirii*, vol. 1, Cracow, Wydawn. Literackie 1975, pp. 34-36.



Il. 1. Stanisław Lem, *Bajki robotów* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1964). Illustration by Szymon Kobyliński.

Interestingly, only two of Lem's novels were illustrated. *Fables for Robots* (Wydawnictwo Literackie 1964) were illustrated by Szymon Kobyliński¹⁴ and *The Cyberiad* (Wydawnictwo Literackie 1965) was illustrated by Daniel Mróz¹⁵ [il. 2]. Indeed, it should be mentioned that Mróz established a special bond with Lem, which is reflected in the illustrations. Mróz and Lem probably met in the editorial office of *Przekrój*; Mróz was a regular illustrator and creator of the magazine's characteristic and original layout. Although the artist did not like science fiction, which he described as "cosmic bullshit," he was fascinated by Lem's sense of humor and decided to illustrate his stories.¹⁶ He managed to capture the uniqueness of Lem's stories, and the writer was delighted with Mróz's illustrations.¹⁷ When Lem was preparing the extended edition of the work, he suggested to the artist new ideas on the basis of which, as he claimed, "Funny Drawings can be conceived."¹⁸ Lem wrote to Mróz:

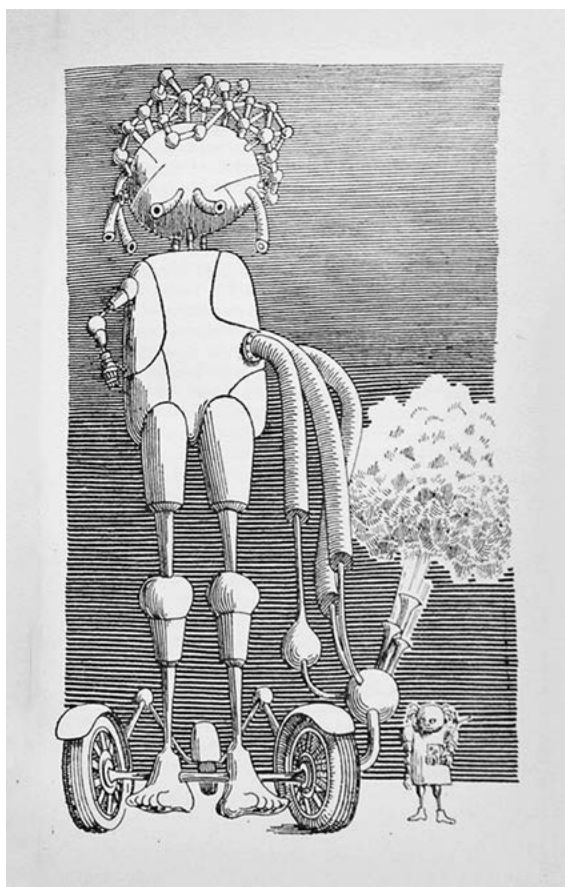
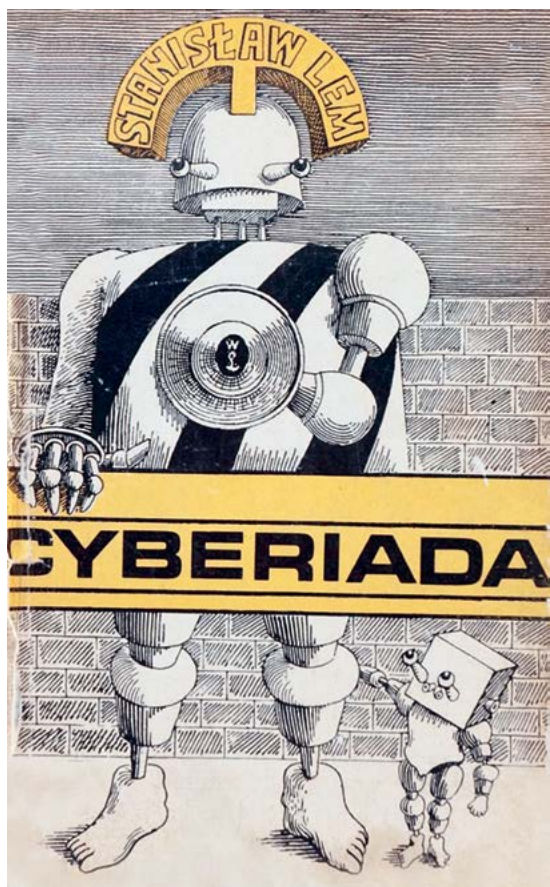
¹⁴The cooperation of the two authors resulted in another joint book 10 years later, entitled *Śmiechu warci: Zbiór karykatur*, which contained satirical drawings by Kobyliński and a foreword by Lem. It was published by Horyzonty, see: *Śmiechu warci: Zbiór karykatur ze wstępem Stanisława Lema*, Warsaw, wydawn. Horyzonty 1974.

¹⁵Daniel Mróz eventually created two series of illustrations for *The Cyberiad*. The first series was used in the first edition from 1965 and the second in the third extended edition from 1972. See: Tomasz Gryglewicz, *Ilustracje Daniela Mroza do „Cyberiady” Stanisława Lema w kontekście krakowskiego surrealizmu po II wojnie światowej*, "Quart" 2015, no. 3–4, pp. 187–199.

¹⁶*Kosmiczne pierdoły: Kultowe ilustracje do dzieł Lema na wystawie w Gdyni*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 22 Aug. 2012.

¹⁷T. Gryglewicz, 189. See: Piotr Sitkiewicz, „Bestiariusz Lema według Mroza”, In *Bestiariusz Lema według Mroza*, ed. Janusz Górski, Piotr Sitkiewicz, (Gdańsk, wydawnictwo Czysty Warsztat 2012), 61–86.

¹⁸From a letter to Daniel Mróz dated June 12, 1971, see: Stanisław Lem, *Listy albo opór materii*, ed. Jerzy Jarzębski, Cracow, Wydawn. Literackie 2002, p. 83 (original spelling).



Il. 2. Stanisław Lem, *Cyberiada* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972).
Illustration by Daniel Mróz

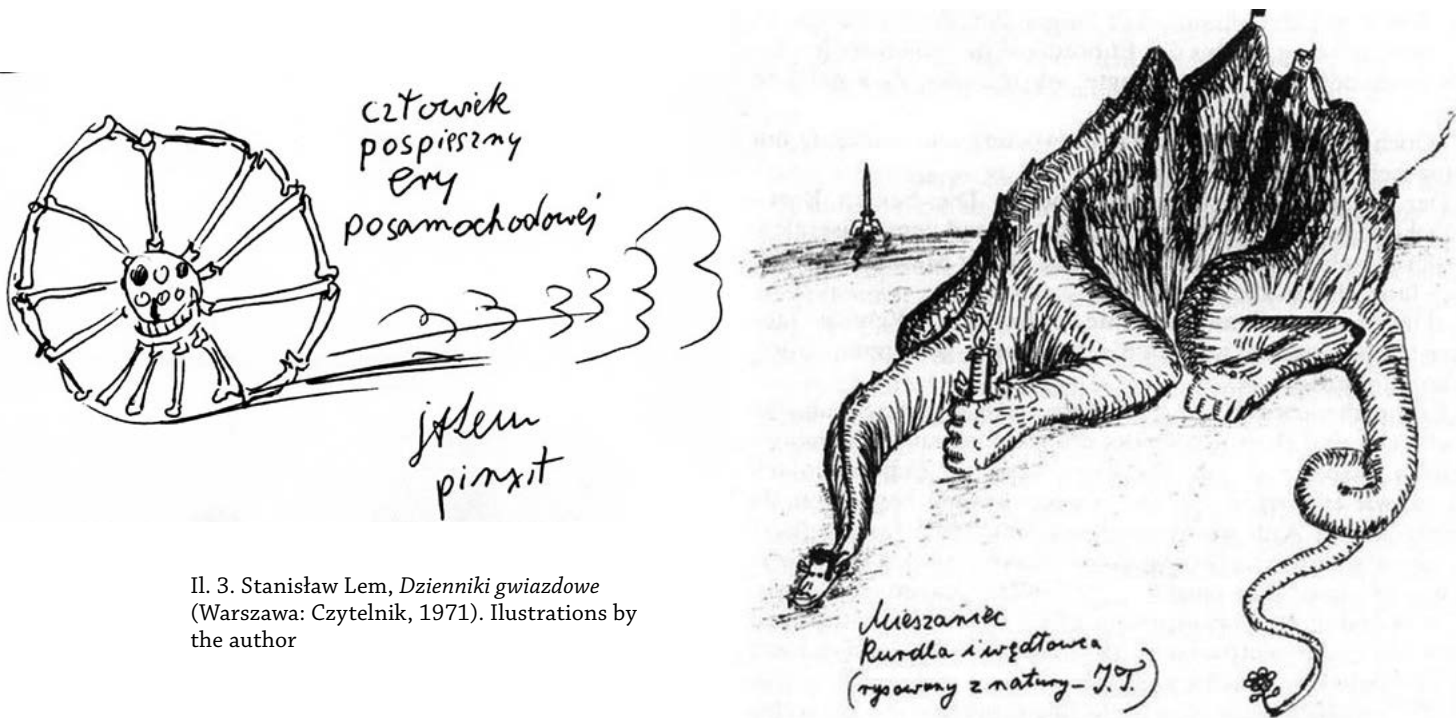
I think there are a number of ways here. For example, some typical nineteenth-century wood-engraving techniques could be parodied. You could take a Brontosaurus from a paleontological atlas and draw its cross-section, and place the cross-sections of Scientific and Research Institutes in the center. People can be drawn as something plastic, shapeless, clumsy, and deficient [...], so you can get inspiration from different things. At home, I have a German Book about robots, which shows robots from different eras, and I'd like to send it to you [...] **because I really want you to create illustrations for this edition.**¹⁹

Why are illustrations featured only in two of Lem's texts? Perhaps because the publishers thought that the target audience of these texts were young readers and illustrations are a very important element of storytelling for them.²⁰ Other reasons are also possible and, since hermeneutics may draw on structuralism or semiotics,²¹ let us explain things properly. Perhaps the reason was that in futuristic novels for "adult readers," from *Astronauts* (Czytelnik 1951) to *Fiasco* (Wydawnictwo Literackie 1987), the represented world did not have its counterpart in the non-textual reality and pub-

¹⁹*Ibidem*, p. 86; original spelling (emphasis KKW).

²⁰Janina Wiercińska, *Książka obrazkowa dziecka – tradycje i współczesność*, in: *idem, Sztuka i książka*, Warsaw, PWN 1986, p. 76 ff. (In the 1980s, *Fables for Robots* became a school reading in Polish primary schools).

²¹On the methodological dependence and non-artistic dimension of literary hermeneutics. See: Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Malden, Blackwell 1995 and Michał Januszkiewicz, *W-koło hermeneutyki literackiej*, Warsaw, Wydawn. Naukowe PWN 2007.



Il. 3. Stanisław Lem, *Dzienniki gwiazdowe* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1971). Illustrations by the author

lishers feared that illustrative “support” could narrow down, or worse, deform, the interpretation of descriptions, which after all did not have their designates (referents) in the real world. Deformation in particular could, unintentionally, lead to ridicule and irony, and the publisher did not want that to happen, unless the writer envisioned incongruence²² to be an integral part of his literary work. To put it mildly, few people discussed non-biological intelligence in the 1960s, and hardly anyone thought that fables for robots and heroic cyberepics celebrating electroknights could be written using historical literary forms and stylization.²³ Comedy was also a generic feature of the science-fiction grotesque *The Star Diaries*, whose hero was the space traveler Ijon Tichy (Iskry 1957).²⁴ Some editions also featured illustrations by Lem himself²⁵ and his works, printed for the first time in the fourth extended edition (Czytelnik 1971),²⁶ were the complete opposite of the technological visions of Kobyliński and Mróz, perfectly in line with the grotesque convention of the stories.

²²Jerzy Ziomek wrote about the function of opposites in satirical works, *Komizm – spójność teorii i teoria spójności*, in: *idem, Powinowactwa literatury*, Warsaw, PWN 1980, pp. 319-354.

²³In the times of Gomółka (i.e. when the first editions of *Fables for Robot* and *The Cyberiad* were published), this game of opposites could take on a particularly expressive character, which the contemporary reader hardly notices. On the one hand, “Polish Stalinism” adopted the slogan of Lenin, “communism - Soviet power plus electrification,” with different social results, as shown by Edward Redliński in *Konopielka* (1973). On the other hand, the “historical correctness” of the movie *Knights of the Teutonic Order* by Alexander Ford (1960), including the historical realities of medieval knighthood, was discussed by the general public at the time (both seriously and as a joke). The aforementioned Szymon Kobyliński took part in the discussion. He was a long-time promoter of knightly and noble culture and the history of the Polish military (see: the edited volume: *Szymona Kobylińskiego gawędy o broni i mundurze*, Warsaw, Wydawn. MON 1984).

²⁴In the 1973 edition of *The Star Diaries*, the story *The Futurological Congress* with Lem’s illustrations was published (first published in the collection of stories *Bezsensowność* from 1971).

²⁵It should be noted that Lem was skeptical of his artistic abilities. He observed in an interview with Tomasz Fijałkowski: “It’s not bad - I see that I can earn a lot with drawings, this might be my big chance” (*Świat na krawędzi. Ze Stanisławem Lemem rozmawia Tomasz Fijałkowski*, Cracow, Wydawn. Literackie 2000, p. 135).

²⁶The author’s illustrations were also used in the 5th edition by Czytelnik (1976) and foreign editions (American: Nowy Jork, The Seabury Press, 1976; Nowy Jork, Camelot and Discus Books, and German: Berlin, Volk und Welt 1976; Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1978). Wydawnictwo Literackie later used them as well (2001, 2002, 2003, 2012, 2016, 2018, 2019). See: Anna Baranowa, *Śmieszne i straszne. Rysunki Stanisława Lema. Na marginesie wystawy w Galerii dylag.pl Kraków 13 marca – 26 kwietnia 2008*, “Quart” 2008, no. 2, p. 112.



Golda i Abel Karaim na jarmarku.

Il. 4. Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Meir Ezofowicz* (Warszawa: S. Lewental, 1879).

Illustration by Michał Elwiro Andriolli

Let us quote once again the words of Eliza Orzeszkowa, because it is in her modern times that perhaps the most illustrated editions of literary works were published. Interestingly, Orzeszkowa said that “[i]llustrating a novel is an honor and an artistic pleasure for the author”²⁷ not in connection with the publication of *Nad Niemnem* – a novel full of descriptions of nature but devoid of illustrations – but in connection to *Mirtali*. A painter, whose name remains unknown, refused to draw illustrations for *Mirtali*, claiming that Orzeszkowa depicted ancient Rome “unrealistically or indeed idealistically.”²⁸ Not disheartened, Orzeszkowa wrote in a letter to her Warsaw publisher Franciszek Salezy Lewental:

I hope that in our long-term relations, my Dear Sir you have not once judged me presumptuous or arrogant. This time, however, I am convinced that this painter was not right and he accused me of this because he did not want to reveal some other important reason. Maybe he did not like the novel enough to feel the artistic urge to illustrate it or rather translate it by means of a pencil.²⁹

²⁷Listy zebrane, vol. 1, p. 133.

²⁸*Ibidem*, p. 132.

²⁹*Ibidem*, p. 132.



Il. 5. Adam Mickiewicz,
Pan Tadeusz (Lwów, 1882).
Illustration by Michał Elwiro Andriolli

... Starzec trzęsąc wzniesioną prawicą:
„Nie masz zgody Mopanku pomiędzy Soplecią
I krwią Horeszków!” ...

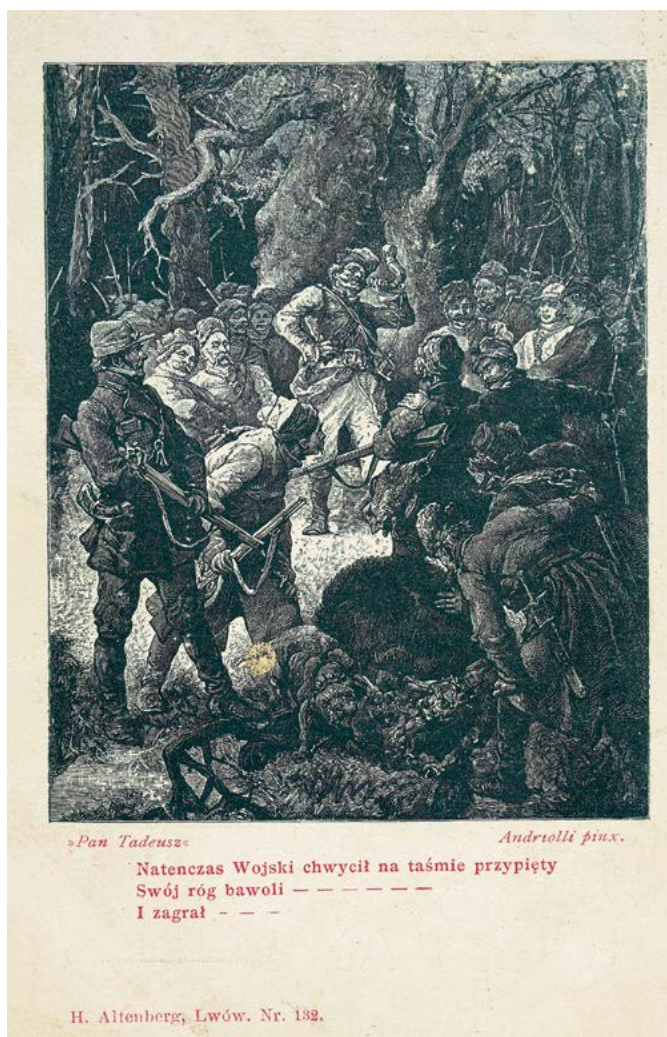
Having listed other reasons for the painter's refusal to illustrate *Mirtali*, Orzeszkowa further writes:

[...] All these ideas come to me in relation to the task of the artist who illustrates the novel. For what should he repeat in his drawings after the writer? **Above all, people.** A mistake made by the author in the number of columns or the size of the described town should not prevent the artist from drawing people. If the writer describes an architectural detail or a piece of clothing incorrectly, then the artist can make it as it really was. It will not cause disharmony in the work – Andriolli did not cause disharmony by drawing my Gołda with loose hair when I described her with braided hair. [...] **Well, the illustrator will not be asked to draw Roman sky, climate, or flora and fauna.**³⁰

Orzeszkowa not only explained how she perceived the role of the illustrator, but also why *Nad Niemnem*, a work filled with descriptions of “climate” and “flora,” was not illustrated. She also provided reasons for why *Meir Ezofowicz*, which features the aforementioned description of Gołda (“Next to old Abel stood Gołda, slender, simple, serious as always, with her coral necklace almost touching her waist, in a gray shirt and a braid on her back”³¹) was translated into images by Michał Elwiro Andriolli. This painter was known for artistry in rendering human types, as evidenced in a series of engravings for the Altenberg edition of *Pan Tadeusz* (1882).

³⁰*Ibidem*, p. 132 (emphasis, K.K.W.)

³¹Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Meir Ezofowicz: Powieść z życia Żydów*, Warsaw 1879, p. 156.



Il. 6. A postcard with a reproduction of a drawing by Michał Elwiro Andriolli to *Pan Tadeusz* (Kraków: Druk W.L. Anczyca i Spółki [until 1905])

Among numerous descriptions found in Mickiewicz's epic, Andriolli chose those concerning the looks and psychology of the characters. And although not everyone liked³² his "gallery" of "suggestive human types – people who lived in a manor house of Polish nobility, set in a charming, somewhat romantic scenery and rendered in a romantic manner,"³³ it was nevertheless charming.

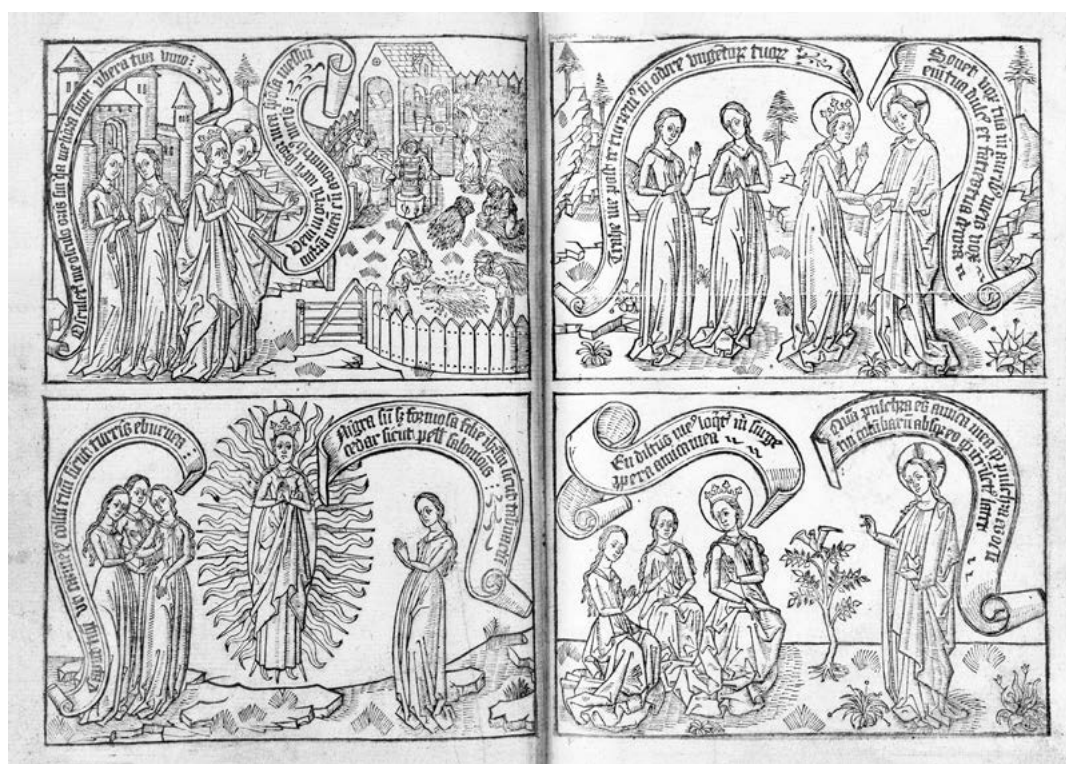
It was so charming, in fact, that even though many illustrations for *Pan Tadeusz* were created later by, among others, Stanisław Masłowski, Tadeusz Gronowski, and Jan Marcin Szancer (who also focused on characters), Andriolli's works were still immensely popular. They soon "got a life of their own." They were published in the form of postcards, which made them even more popular. Andriolli's other engravings, including to *Konrad Wallenrod*, and the works of other illustrators (including Juliusz Kossak, Włodzimierz Tetmajer and Czesław Borys

³²Aleksander Świętochowski writes: "... whenever I hear that this once great artist is to illustrate some masterpiece of our literature, I am terrified. I expect to see some bizarre characters, unnaturally twisted [...] in provincial and theatrical poses [...]. Unfortunately, this is what happened in *Pan Tadeusz*. It is a shame that a good idea and effort were wasted..." *op. cit. ibidem*, p. 246.

³³Małgorzata Komza, *Mickiewicz ilustrowany*, Wrocław, Ossolineum 1987, p. 247.

Jankowski)³⁴ not only for the works by Mickiewicz (see Piotr Stachiewicz and illustrations to Sienkiewicz's *Quo vadis*), were also popularized in the form of postcards.

This interesting tendency to publish illustrations of literary works in the form of postcards shows how important these works were to the contemporary audience, thus revealing one of the most important reasons for why publishers decided to include illustrations in their editions. In most cases, they were not accidental works, but texts intended to encourage the Polish nation and fulfill an important social and patriotic mission. Illustrations for the works by Mickiewicz, Sienkiewicz or Słowacki were not so much “artistic supplements” but patriotic manifestos. These manifestos were published, even though the production costs of the illustrated editions were understandably higher. Indeed, in order for the illustrated editions to reach as many people as possible, they were sold on a subscription or installment basis.³⁵



Il. 7. *Canticum canticorum* (The Netherlands, c. 1465); k. 1v–2r (a copy from the collection of The Morgan Library & Museum in New York, reference number PML 21990).

³⁴Alicja Bajdor, Halina Natuniewicz, „*Pan Tadeusz*” w ilustracjach, Gdańsk, KAW 1984, p. 21.

³⁵Małgorzata Komza, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

Indeed, as Antoni Gawiński observes in relation to the relationship between description and illustration:

Following the thoughts and intentions of the author, illustration should be but an explanatory moment, **as if emphasizing the greatest beauty of the work, expressed visually**. Which moments to choose as worthy of such emphasis and suitable for them? The artist, the illustrator, should decide. How to understand and experience them? His talent and creativity should give the answer to that question: one cannot limit an artist. However, one should require from him that the concept of the illustrated moment be as close as possible to what the poet gave us in his living word. An **illustrator** is not actually a composer, but a virtuoso who **translates a written picture into a visual picture**.³⁶

Therefore, this would mean that illustrations should not only be identified with a book for a younger audience (in relation to aesthetic and/or cognitive reasons). Illustrations are included in the publication as a result of more complex decisions. In some cases, the publisher wants to increase the value of the book. In other cases, the publisher wants to (or sometimes even has to) supplement what is inexpressible in the written text by means of illustration.

Sometimes, the word and image “ratio” may be in favour of the image. Of course, communication by means of pictures and not text is not an invention of modern culture. The origins of this phenomenon may be traced back to ancient times, in which more or less compelling *imagines* played an important role. Arranged as if in a comics sequence, they could be “read” without text.³⁷ Similarly in the Middle Ages – in the numerous xylographic editions of the Bible, *Biblia pauperum* or *Canticum canticorum* [fig. 7] – pictures which both the literate and the illiterate could “read” almost completely eliminated the text (which only the literate few could understand).³⁸ In Poland, editions of comics by Kornel Makuszyński and Marian Walentynowicz are an interesting example of the relationship between description and illustration. In their comic books about Matołek the Billy Goat, Fiki-Miki the monkey, the Wawel dragon or Wanda (published from 1933 to 1938), visual sequences almost completely replaced descriptions, and 4-line rhymed captions contained other narrative elements and, sometimes, dialogues. It should be noted, however, that this compositional “symbiosis” was obtained by means of a layout in which poems and pictures were consistently combined with the verse text in each column. A publisher in the 1930s could achieve such a layout because the illustrations were technically quite simple. As regards printing techniques, illustrations can be divided into mono-tonal (lines printed in a single color without shading) and multi-tonal (halftone), with monochromatic and multichromatic illustrations in each group. (Makuszyński and Walentynowicz’s publications contained multichromatic mono-tonal illustrations). Line engraving includes technical drawings, maps with dashed or dotted fields, facsimile of handwriting, drawings (in ink, carbon, pencil, etc.), wood engravings, copper-

³⁶ Antoni Gawiński, *Dziady, cykl ilustracji Czesława B. Jankowskiego*. “Prawda” 1900, nr 8, pp. 92–93 (emphasis, K.K.W.)

³⁷ Anna Świderkówna, Maria Nowicka, *Książka się rozwija*, Wrocław 1970, pp. 231–270.

³⁸ Maciej Włodarski, *Obraz i słowo. O powiązaniach w sztuce i literaturze XV-XVI wieku na przykładzie „ars moriendi”*, Cracow 1991, pp. 5–7.

plate prints, vignettes, spacers, initials, photographs (photocopies) of drawings or prints. Halftones include: diapositives (slides) and photographic prints, paintings (both made using paints and the technique of, for example, aquatint), some graphics (e.g. etchings), reproductions of manuscripts (illuminated or with faded ink), etc. The decisive factor in this classification is the presence or absence of tonal gradations. Since halftone was more expensive because the paper had to be smooth, publishers often decided to attach (sew in) individual pages with multi-tonal illustrations into a book printed on cheaper, i.e. more porous, paper. However, such pages could not be attached just anywhere in the book, but (again for financial reasons) only between sections or in the middle of a section. This, in turn, required that illustrations, which did not appear in the immediate vicinity of the text to which they referred,³⁹ had to be edited. In other words, it was necessary to prepare additional captions, references in the text, and often also a list of illustrations. All this additional editorial work was not necessary when illustrations could be printed on the same paper as the text. The thing is that smooth paper, on which high-quality mono-tonal and multi-tonal illustrations can be printed, is either premium heavyweight chalkboard paper or coated paper, such Chromolux, which was patented by the West German company Zanders Paper in 1958.⁴⁰ Today, color magazines and school textbooks are printed on coated paper but it was not available in the 1930s. And in the 1960s, behind the Iron Curtain, the Polish printing industry did not have access to this type of paper.

The mutual coexistence of word and image in the book is therefore determined not only by philosophical views, aesthetic experiences, cognitive theories or the psychology of development and teaching. In this article, we only wished to signal this problem and point out to researchers that, on a daily basis, this coexistence is also conditioned by technological and thus financial resources. The lack of funds often (especially in the times of the Polish People's Republic) meant that no illustrations were published in a book, because each illustration meant an increase in production costs, and thus also the price of the book. If illustrations were not necessary, i.e. apart from publications for children and teenagers, they were not included.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³⁹See recommendations for editing illustrative material in one of the newer editorial guides – Marian Wolański, *Edycja tekstów. Praktyczny poradnik*, Warsaw, Wydawn. Naukowe PWN 2008, pp. 226 ff.

⁴⁰Information on Zanders Paper GmbH may be found online at rynekpapierniczy.pl [date of access 15 Feb. 2020].

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KEYWORDS

Adam Mickiewicz

literary description

illustration

STANISŁAW LEM

ABSTRACT:

This article attempts to answer the following question: is there a connection between description and illustration in a literary text? We ask this question from the perspective of the editor who has to publish a literary work and therefore must decide whether to include illustrations or not. We refer to the illustrated editions of works by, among others, Stanisław Lem, Eliza Orzeszkowa and Adam Mickiewicz and demonstrate that the decision to illustrate (or not) was motivated by many different factors – aesthetic, patriotic, didactic, technological and economical.

Eliza Orzeszkowa

LITERARY EDITIONS

editing literature

NOTE ON THE AUTHORS:

Bogdan Hojdis (b. 1963 in Bydgoszcz) – graduate of and professor at AMU Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, medievalist, literary scholar, and editor. Author and co-author of *O współistnieniu słów i obrazów w kulturze polskiego średniowiecza* [On the Coexistence of Words and Pictures in the Culture of the Polish Middle Ages] (2000), *Literatura staropolska* [Old Polish Literature] (2009), *Literackie fragmenty w XVI-wiecznej sylwie rodziny Pieniążków ze Skrzydłnej* [Literary Fragments in the 16th Century Silva Rerum of the Pieniążek Family from Skrzydlna] (2009), *Tematyka średniowieczna w polskiej fabule filmowej* [The Middle Ages in Polish Film] (2013). In the years 2014–2017, he managed several digitization projects of printed and manuscript collections at the Library of the Poznań Society of Friends of Sciences. He has worked in editorial projects financed by NPRH: Polish prints up to 1543 - editions and the bibliographic and bibliological monograph (UAM). He also completed the parliamentary edition of *Dzieł wszystkich* [Collected Works] of Jan Kochanowski (IBL PAN).

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Autothematic Description in Poetry by Women: The Case of Joanna Pollakówna

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I.

Poetic meta-reflection¹ is an important, though underestimated, aspect of poetry written by women. Most poets thematize (their) manner of writing, reflect on the role and purpose of poetry, and sometimes, in the process of developing their own poetic projects, theorize on the subject. Metapoetry defines the poetry of some female authors and autothematic reflection is always present in their poems, growing and evolving over the years. I refer to the original and significant—in terms of quality and sometimes also in terms of quantity (one's entire poetical *oeuvre*)—metapoetic projects of Wisława Szymborska, Julia Hartwig, Krystyna Miłobędzka, Urszula Koziół, Bogusława Latawiec, and Ewa Lipska, as well as numerous self-reflective texts by Anna Kamieńska, Halina Poświatowska and Joanna Pollakówna. Among younger poets, we should mention Joanna Mueller, Marzanna Bogumiła Kielar and Julia Fiedorczuk. This list of examples is not complete, but it is not accidental either.

¹ In this text, I use the terms autothematic poetry, metapoetry, and meta-reflection interchangeably. I am aware of the differences in the origin and meaning of these terms and of the problems related to their definitions, meanings and use. I am also aware that the interpretation of a given phenomenon depends on the literature and language employed in its description, which are constantly changing and evolving. For example, meta-reflection is a category developed by the structural-semiotic paradigm in the context of postmodernity and new methodologies. Autothematic writing as a complex category was discussed at the conference *Nowy autotematyzm? Metarefleksja we współczesnej humanistyce* [New autothematicism? Meta-reflection in modern humanities], which took place on November 28 and 29, 2019 at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (a monograph with the same title will be published in 2021).

In literary studies, the dominant assumption is that metapoetry, as a special form of thinking about poetry in poetry, is the domain of male authors. Or, to put it differently, in poetry studies, metapoetry is examined almost exclusively in works created by men.² However, if we were to look at the writing practice itself, it would be difficult to find noticeable differences in the popularity or intensity of meta-reflection in poetry by women³ and by men. However, we could find certain differences in the process of close reading, in poetic idiolects and in the thematic saturation of their metapoems. I will not focus on these potential, though clearly noticeable, differences. Instead, I will concentrate on a different and more interesting problem.⁴

I will focus on metapoetry, which employs description (metapoetry in description): it is one of the basic forms of poetic expression, which both employs and thematizes how the subject expresses/ constitutes herself. I will discuss the meta features of this poetic technique, asking questions about the role of the medium of language in constructing and deconstructing the represented world. In other words, poetry which employs autothematic description may be considered an interesting form of self-reflective writing. Naturally, it is not only present in works written by women; it should be remembered, however, that as a rule, metapoetry written by men is more often examined in literary studies and works by women are largely unexplored. Therefore, although I will focus on poetry by women, my analytical insights and observations may apply to poetry in general. The analytical focus on poetry by women may, on the one hand, lead to a reevaluation and reexamination of metapoetry, and, on the other hand, it may allow us to see the texts of poets in a different light, outside of “literary sanctuaries:”⁵ not solely as “poetry by women” (i.e. a subcategory of “real” poetry that is not subjected to gender classification), but as poetry which is not limited to certain themes and styles. Meta-reflection, as well

² This is the case, for example, in Andrzej Niewiadomski’s monograph on metapoetic reflection in modern Polish poetry, where only Anna Świrszczyńska was mentioned: Andrzej Niewiadomski, *Światy z jawnych słów i kwiatów ukrytych. O refleksji metapoetyckiej w nowoczesnej poezji polskiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2010).

³ When I write about poetry by women, I mean literature that is not necessarily women’s literature, or does not want to be associated with this category, including both literature in which the female experience is described and the “I” identifies as female and poets who do not reveal their gender, creating a “universal” subject or ignoring the feminine aspect of the described experience. It is therefore a concept that is broader than “women’s poetry,” which, moreover, is difficult to define and has been widely discussed in literary studies. See, for example, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowską in: “Literatura kobieca a literatura kobiet,” in *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, ed. Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, Kraków 2020), 21–33.

⁴ For example, Joanna Mueller proposes a distinction between “gender” specific types of autothematic writing, interpreting meta-reflection in poetry by women as a kind of self-defense against labeling it as “women’s poetry.” “The latter probably just like to write about writing – and poets thus want their readers to focus on the text in itself, and not just on the props and themes,” Maria Cyranowicz, Joanna Mueller, Justyna Radczyńska, “Solistki bez chóru. Pożyteczne refleksje,” in *Solistki. Antologia poezji kobiet (1989–2009)*, ed. Maria Cyranowicz, Joanna Mueller, Justyna Radczyńska, drawings by Pela Dwurnik, Marta Ignerska (Warszawa: Staromiejski Dom Kultury, 2009), 227.

I discuss metapoetry and linguistic poetry by women in opposition to its stereotypical presentation in literary studies in more detail in: Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, “Inna teoria poezji? *Ubi leones*, czyli o autotematyzmie w wierszach kobiet,” in *Stulecie poetek polskich*, 369–406.

⁵ I discuss “sanctuaries” for poets in more detail in Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, “Polska poezja kobiet XX wieku. Próba porządkowania doświadczeń,” in *Stulecie poetek polskich*, 35–93. I refer in it to Janusz Sławiński’s text, in which he discusses Polish poetry from 1956 to 1980 in the context of political struggles: “Poetry was granted special rights as a sanctuary of language; it was excluded from restrictions imposed on other published texts. In order to enjoy its privileges, it had to accept its imposed status – that was it,” Janusz Sławiński, “Rzut oka na ewolucję poezji polskiej w latach 1956–1980,” in *Teksty i teksty* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1991), 108. For example, love poems could be found in “sanctuaries” for poetry by women, provided that they were not too erotic and did not break any taboos. Poetry by women could be considered high art if it was devoted to “feminine” themes. In other words, if poetry emphasized its “femininity,” it was considered uncomplicated, banal, and secondary.

as linguistic and avantgarde experiments, are definitely outside of such literary “sanctuaries” where poets have been appreciated and granted artistic freedom.

At this point, we have to mention that in literary studies, “poetry by women” (and “writing by women”) has been associated with a certain style of description. It dates back to 1928 and Irena Krzywicka’s article in *Wiadomości Literackie*, entitled *Jazgot niewieści, czyli przerost stylu* [Female gibberish, or the excess of style]⁶. According to Krzywicka, female writers, among other things, used descriptiveness, comparisons and epithets excessively, exaggerating trivial things. Their style was decorative, and form triumphed over content. Their texts were not considered intellectual. However, the stereotypical “meticulous” and extensive descriptions, artificial emotionality, and stylistic excess associated with poetry written by women is only one of many possibilities and does not necessarily lead to metapoetic reflection.

Therefore, I wish to distance myself from these historical and literary connotations, as well as from gender divisions, and instead focus on a particular form of description which is a separate, though not autonomous, metapoetic autothematic technique. Description itself, according to Janusz Sławiński, who analyzed it in terms of narration, is made of “sentences which are answers to the questions about things, places and characters.”⁷ Sławiński observes that description may take different forms, including introductory, dispersed, extended and integrated description. In her examination of poetry, Seweryna Wyślouch observes that description is “commenting on the properties of things, characters and phenomena” and at the same time “the most controversial literary technique; it has been criticized in literary studies by many, from Lessing to Przyboś.”⁸ Wyślouch classifies poetic description in terms of form, distinguishing “anarchic” description (after Sławiński), which is “uncontrollable listing,” description with a coherent framework, description with a semantic dominant, kinetic description and description which deforms space.⁹ For Wyślouch (similarly to Sławiński), form and syntax are the most important. For example, the use of lists and listing translates into a detailed, visual and vivid poetic image. For Wyślouch, the use of lists becomes a basic distinguishing feature of description and determines its classification, in accordance with the intensity and features of the compositional system. For example, “anarchic” description, full of extensive comparisons and metaphors, is tamed and “organized” by rhetorical devices (repetitions, frames, gradations, contrasts, etc.) With its focus on categorization and description of mechanisms which generate a given phenomenon, structuralism still accounts for the semantics of the analyzed forms, signaling “an epic attitude towards the world,”¹⁰ directing attention to a specific “technique of seeing,”¹¹ or the way of seeing the world, as exemplified

⁶ Irena Krzywicka, “Jazgot niewieści, czyli przerost stylu,” *Wiadomości Literackie*, no. 42 (1928). See also: Joanna Krajewska, „Jazgot niewieści” i „męskie kasztele”. Z dziejów sporu o literaturę kobiecą w Dwudziestolecie międzywojennym (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 2010); Agata Zawiszewska, *Między Młodą Polską, Skamandrem i Awangardą. O kobietach piszących wiersze w latach 1918–1939* (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe US, 2015).

⁷ Janusz Sławiński, “O opisie,” in *Próby teoretycznoliterackie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1992), 194 (emphasis – JS).

⁸ Seweryna Wyślouch, “Od Lessinga do Przybosa. Teoria i kompozycja opisu,” in *Literatura a sztuki wizualne* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994), 24.

⁹ Wyślouch, 25.

¹⁰ Wyślouch, 25.

¹¹ Wyślouch, 38.

by the aforementioned Adam Mickiewicz and Julian Przyboś. In the end, however, we arrive at a methodological, universalized and autonomous “technical” description.

Nevertheless, neither Sławiński nor Wysłouch take into account the autothematic character of description. However, considering Sławiński’s discussion of Roland Barthes’s “effect of reality,”¹² we should point to the meta-reflective potential of description. Indeed, it has an intrinsically contradictory nature. In relation to Flaubert, Barthes diagnosed it as the interpenetration of the “aesthetic” and the “referential”: “in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity.”¹³

Autothematic description gives just such an illusion (or desire) of referentiality: it promises to signify “reality” and provides it with a linguistic alibi, by means of the “revenge of a mortal hand.” A model example is autothematic description in Wisława Szymborska’s *Radość pisania* [The joy of writing]: it both creates and destroys the world in which “this written doe” is running “through these written woods.”¹⁴ Such an autothematic and autonomous poetic image exemplifies how the described object and language come face to face in writing,¹⁵ revealing the time and place of this “meeting” and asking questions about its rules and purpose. The focus is not on “reality”, but on the very process of producing its effect. This process is not always as evident as in Szymborska’s poem: “They forget that what’s here isn’t life./ Other laws, black on white, obtain.” Eventually, doubts triumph over conclusions and the basic dilemma remains unresolved:

Jest więc taki świat,
nad którym los sprawuję niezależny?
Czas, który wiąże łańcuchami znaków?
Istnienie na mój rozkaz nieustanne?

Is there then a world
where I rule absolutely on fate?
A time I bind with chains of signs?
An existence become endless at my bidding?

Thus, autothematic description would be a candid description, a meta-description. It is still subject to the formal distinctions listed above. Nevertheless, they do not matter at this point. The (seemingly) transparent descriptiveness of the poetic sentence seems to be the exact opposite of *Radość pisania*. It helps the reader “forget that what’s here isn’t life.” A discreet but effective “mortal hand” is trying to erase what it has done.

¹²Sławiński, “O opisie,” 191–194.

¹³Roland Barthes, “The reality effect,” translated by Richard Howard, *The rustle of language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 148.

¹⁴All quotations from the poem *Radość pisania* are from: Wisława Szymborska, *Wiersze wybrane*, selected and organized by the author, new revised edition (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2010), 116. The English version is from “No End of Fun,” 1967. Translated by S. Baranczak & C. Cavanagh.

¹⁵Barthes, “The reality effect,” 125.

At this point, Julia Hartwig's poetry, so ideologically and linguistically different from Wisława Szymborska's works, is an interesting interpretative point of reference.¹⁶ Julia Hartwig is also expressing her metapoetic awareness, though she rarely openly reflects on the nature of language and writing techniques in her poems. Indeed, she rarely asks about the essence of poetry – the “clear unclear.”¹⁷ It does not mean that she is not concerned with recording and documenting reality. Hartwig often writes about the affirmative role of poetry, seeking a “vision of harmony” and trying to “keep up the rhythm” of life and language (*W pochodzie* [In procession]).¹⁸ She thematizes the problem of expressing the world in words both in poems (“Sudden touch of Monge Square / by one uttered word” (*Wymówione*) [Uttered]¹⁹) and authorial comments (“I want my poetry to be clear and simple, even when it expresses what may seem inexpressible”²⁰).

In her intellectualized and discursive poems, she indirectly formulates her poetic program in opposition or in dialogue with other, especially avant-garde, programs. Hartwig opposes “poetry made of crumbs, peels, debris, vague allusions, imprecise words, and unfinished thoughts. Allowed to not to be beautiful, excused from sloppiness.” She opposes poetry which gives up on tradition and culture, “timeless symbols” and “the common paths of human myths” (*Co mu ślina na język przyniesie* [Talking without thinking]).²¹ We learn about her understanding of poetry and its tasks as if in passing: from anecdotes and stories about events and people (often about other anonymous poets). Observing, experiencing and describing the world is conveyed and substantiated, both in terms of syntax and versification, by the sentence.²² This is seen in a poem in which the world represented by a “young poet” turned out to be “after all in his attempts real / if despite June heat / I believed in November rain and snow / that banished him to the bar after he lost his girl” (*Wahanie nad książką młodego poety* [Hesitation over a young poet's book]).²³ Using a descriptive sentence with subtle hints of meta-reflection, Hartwig does not lose confidence in language, taking the side of those artists for whom “the most appropriately chosen word is above all a carrier of poetic meaning, it expresses a certain reality, even if it is transformed by imagination.”²⁴ Her “credible sentence,” combined with the technique of description, seems to be the basic “poetic unit.” It defines her poetry at its core, as in these autothematic verses:

¹⁶It is closer to Czesław Miłosz, see Anna Legeżyńska, “Gdyby Czesław Miłosz był kobietą...,” in *Pochwała istnienia. Studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig*, ed. Barbara Kulesza-Gulczyńska, Elżbieta Winiecka (Poznań: Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2015).

¹⁷You do not count during writing / and yet everything is counted / you do not hide / and yet you are hidden / you do not show off / and yet they see you and they recognize you/ Admit / that this is somewhat vague – Julia Hartwig writes in the poem *Jasne niejasne*; Julia Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane” (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2010), 442. Hartwig's poems discussed in this article were translated by M. Olsza.

¹⁸Hartwig, 375.

¹⁹Hartwig, 465.

²⁰Julia Hartwig, “Dawać do siebie dostęp zachwytowi. Wystąpienie z okazji nadania tytułu doktora *honoris causa* Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu,” in *Pochwała istnienia. Studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig*, 11.

²¹Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane,” 127.

²²“The need to communicate, to find a response to what we write, breaks through the darkness and seeks an understandable expression for itself,” the poet said, receiving an honorary doctorate in Poznań, “The choice of syntax is connected with the readability of poems. As for me, I build a poem in a sentence, almost never in a verse, which I would call scattered, typical for futurism, for example. A sentence as a logical unit, used in everyday language, is easier for the reader to understand,” Hartwig, “Dawać do siebie dostęp zachwytowi,” 8.

²³Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane,” 179.

²⁴Hartwig, “Dawać do siebie dostęp zachwytowi,” 8–9.

Wierzę w zdanie W przystanek który szuka formy
 składnej i skromnej jak codzienna mowa [...]
 cierpię łagodnie lecz trwale na ból niedookreślenia [...]
 Nie przeszkadza mi to podziwiać rozpiętych szeroko w oknie
 gałęzi lipy dosłyszeć skrzeku sroki
 uprzykrzonego i błogosławionego ponieważ jest [...]
 Ale zdanie zdanie wiarygodne
 sprawia że znowu czuję pod stopami ziemię
 (Potrzeba)²⁵

I believe in a sentence In a pause that seeks form
 as neat and humble as everyday speech [...]
 I suffer mildly but persistently from the pain of the indeterminate [...]
 It doesn't stop me from admiring in the window
 Linden branches hearing the screech of magpies
 annoying and blessed because it is [...]
 But a sentence a credible sentence
 makes me feel the ground under my feet again
 (Need)

In both poems, by Szymborska and Hartwig respectively, the purpose of the metapoetic descriptive sentence is not so much visualization as the problematization of the existence of the described object and of its poetic “credibility.” Its interpretive potential (those “linden branches” that are visible “in the window” and in-between lines) is determined by the tension between creation and invalidation, invalidation and creation – the game is played in poetry and through poetry, although poetry is not the ultimate goal. By displaying or merely suggesting the gesture of describing reality, the author demonstrates its inevitability and unnoticeability and at the same time the writerly consciousness of the subject, which also becomes a non-poetic (ethical, personal, metaphysical, and existential) commitment.

Indeed, autothematic themes and techniques in poems by women are rarely selfless, autonomous, and focused on poetry itself and its affairs, similar to language poetry. Using descriptive techniques (but not only), they are often placed in biological or natural contexts and focused on the experience of everyday life. They also (re)present a given subject in terms of identity, psychology, looks and biography, using the form of a self-portrait. On the one hand, description is strongly referential, naturalistic, and somatic, and, on the other hand, the very act of describing is emphasized, and the creative frame seems to bring the constructed image to the fore. This is clearly seen, for example, in the poetry of Bogusława Latawiec, which (especially in her later works) “is set” in nature, meadows and gardens, which the poet knew in life. The combination of description and landscape in Latawiec’s poetry is framed autothematically. It becomes a plane of communication and correspondence of beings, as exemplified by the metapoetic lively landscape in *Ptaki Warty* (The Birds of the Warta River), in which the rules for describing the Warta river refer to the general

²⁵Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane,” 184.

laws that govern the world.²⁶ This poem is also a metaerotic poem that may be read in an autobiographical context. According to Wojciech Ligeża, in Latawiec's poetry, "the boundary between autothematic and descriptive writing" disappears, "the act of perception is the act of writing," and "fragments of landscape intertwine with words and letters."²⁷ Interesting examples of poetry devoted to nature and "set in" a landscape, which authenticates the world in description and at the same time metapoetically questions it, may be found in the works of Marzanna Bogumiła Kielar and Julia Fiedorczuk. It grows in successive volumes, transforming into original metapoetic and ecopoetic projects which explore the possibilities of a descriptive sentence.

Autothematic procedures seem to reinforce non-autonomous linguistic goals and individual epistemological projects in poetry by women. Not only language or linguistic dilemmas, but also (self-) conscious description of experience is emphasized. Sometimes, it transforms into an "autobiography" of a subject who is aware of the self-creation power of the word. The poetry of Halina Poświatowska is a good example. According to Grażyna Borkowska, in the autothematic text *** (*Lubię pisać wiersze...*) [*** (I like to write poems ...)], Poświatowska does not employ the convention of a manifesto but uses the convention of a self-portrait instead, "which makes 'technical' terms seem existential. Words and even metalinguistic formulas are translated into objective, phenomenal or visual specifics."²⁸ Poświatowska is thus the author of not only "sanctuary" love poems, but also, which is less obvious, metapoems, in which the word strengthens the presence of the "I" in reality, offering an original version of a vital meta-description. Such complexities may be found in the works of other poets as well.²⁹

According to the most common definition of autothematic poetry, which usually concerns poetry by men, meta-reflection focuses on text, language, and the poem and the most important thing is to problematize the poetic medium. Such a definition is not always useful in interpreting poetry by women. The poetic self-awareness in poetry by women is usually subordinated to the understanding of the subject and the questions of identity. Metapoetry by women exposes experiences that are difficult to express in words. It demonstrates that by bringing to the fore the medium of language, self-reflection also helps express and thematize non-linguistic issues connected with identity, the subject's psychosomatic condition, and physical and psychological problems. This variant of meta-reflection that is "contaminated" with life is prominent today because reading practices are rooted in the cultural contexts of interpretation, which make the reader more sensitive to the autobiographical rather than the autonomous aspect of autothematic writing. Thus, meta-description does not so much trigger the "the reality effect" as expose its individualized perception and understanding. It inspires formal explorations and tests the medium of language. At the same time, the form of the poem is explored. I would like to discuss this latter question in reference to a poem by Joanna Pollakówna.

²⁶See the interpretation of this poem: Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, "...zobaczone, dotknięte, pomyslane". Bogusława Latawiec i Julian Przyboś," in *Przemiarki do istnienia. Wątki i tematy poezji kobiet XX i XXI wieku* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016), 162–179.

²⁷Wojciech Ligeża, "Rytm środkowy," *Twórczość* no. 1 (1983): 119.

²⁸Grażyna Borkowska, *Nierozważna i nieromantyczna. O Halinie Poświatowskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001), 179.

²⁹As, for example, in the pre-war works of Beata Obertyńska, for whom nature was an active component of meta-poetic metaphors; see: Anna Wal, "Liryka autotematyczna," in *Zakłęte przestrzenie. O twórczości Beaty Obertyńskiej*, ed. Zbigniew Andres, Zenon Ożóg (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2005). On vital autothematism in Poświatowska's poetry see: Grądział-Wójcik, "Inna teoria poezji? Ubi leones, czyli o autotematyzmie w wierszach kobiet," 379–384.

||.

Joanna Pollakówna used autothematic techniques in her poetry rarely yet consistently and intriguingly over the years.³⁰ According to Mateusz Antoniuk, Pollakówna's metapoetry is a coherent though diverse whole, endowed with "theoretical and literary consciousness, in which words turn out to be unreliable and ambivalent carriers of meaning."³¹ Antoniuk further observes that this doubtful tone may find its justification in the deconstructive concepts of Derrida and Barthes, as evidenced by, among others, a rhizome metaphor.³² The rhizome metaphor may be found, for example, in *Poezja* [Poetry] from the collection *Szpitalne lato* [Hospital Summer] (1972), where "wild vegetation [which] feeds on us" "grows into a foreign shape" and "our ideas which we know from the stalks / strangely divide into an alien orchid."³³ Nature does not only give rise to Pollakówna's autothematic metaphors, which are in principle dense, difficult, and somatically and synesthetically disturbing, as if taking over or demonstrating the inertia and the autonomous power of language that the subject is trying to control. The poet repeatedly returns in her poetry to the question of language as a mode of expression in an almost post-modern manner, sensing and dismissing with anxiety the crisis of linguistic communication.

The naturalization of autothematic reflection plays a significant role in Pollakówna's works. Self-referentiality may be found in the descriptions of landscape: it "creates" and questions the represented object at the same time. This is what happens in *Pracownia* [The study], a short yet intriguing poem included in *Szpitalne lato* immediately after *Poezja*, where affirmation seems to give way to skepticism.

Pracownia

Jaki świat się wykluwa w ślad za słowem moim?

Wątlę, przedwcześnie wzeszły,

wypłonionym

krajobywdokiem tańczy w chłodniejszym powietrzu?

Jakieś fragmenty nie domalowane

– bezbarwne plamy

Jakieś fragmenty zbyt cyzelowane

– struktury piany

Jakieś gorzkie ułamki rzeźb prawie udanych

wśród szkicowych perspektyw

wśród farb rozbełtanych.

*Październik 72*³⁴

³⁰"The meta-linguistic and metapoetic reflection is focused on the senses: there are a lot of autothematic themes in these poems," Adam Dziadek observed, emphasizing somaticity and sensitivity of Pollakówna's poetry; Adam Dziadek, „Efekt brzmienia – o wierszach Joanny Pollakówny,” in *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*, ed. Anna Kozłowska, Jan Zieliński (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UKSW, 2017), 113.

³¹Mateusz Antoniuk, „Dukt pisma się zasupła niepewnym gryzmołem...». Joanny Pollakówny wiersze o wierszach,” in *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*, 101.

³²"The vision of 'the betrayal of the text,' which does not accept the original intention of the author may be associated with the visions of Roland Barthes. Barthes exposes the complexity of language, presenting the text as a place where subjectivity is blurred and the author is absent etc.," Antoniuk writes; Antoniuk, 104.

³³Joanna Pollakówna, *Wiersze zebrane*, selected, edited and prefaced by Jan Zieliński (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2012), 228. Pollakówna's poems discussed in this article were translated by M. Olsza.

³⁴Pollakówna, 229.

The study

What world is hatching out of my word?

Frail, prematurely risen,

etiolated

landscape dancing in colder air?

Some fragments are left unpainted

- colorless fields

Some fragments are too perfect

- foam structures

Some bitter fractions of almost successful sculptures

among sketchy perspectives

among mixed colors.

October 1972

The first sentence, which is also the first verse, is “divided” into two interconnected semantic themes, the source of which is the creationist metaphor of the world “hatching out of my word:” a biological theme (the creation of life) and a metapoetic theme (the creative gesture of a “mortal hand”). The metaphor develops into a description of reality, which, however, remains quite general and enigmatic. It does not evoke a holistic and vivid image. The “form,” the material, the multimodality of art, and technical issues are exposed (“some fragments are left unpainted,” “foam structures,” “fractions of sculptures,” “sketchy perspectives,” and “mixed colors”). The poem takes the reader inside a studio, an intimate and secluded space, offering instead of the promised “landscape” an image of the world that is a “byproduct” of the creative process. The “I” withdraws, hiding behind description, which develops in subsequent verses. The repetition of questions and unfinished answers endows it with a specific rhythm. The poem tries to answer the question asked in the first verse, which is fundamental to the description: “What world is hatching out of my word?” The answer is not satisfactory; there are many adjectives and participles in the poem (frail, risen, etiolated, unpainted, colorless, perfect, bitter, almost successful, sketchy, mixed), and it is rhetorically based on listing (the catalogue) and provocative pronouns but the world presented in the poem turns out to be indefinite, unfinished, and contaminated with fragmentation, sketchiness, and inattentiveness. The poem is an inadequate description – it is an imperfect description. It (re)presents the world only in fragments and fractions, sketches and unpainted spaces. The “creator/author” seems to focus on what is not important, losing energy on mentioning the shortcomings and hardships of creation. However, this is also a meta description, a self-referential poem that talks about a creative process that was “almost successful.” The subject is vividly present in it as well. We do not know exactly what the “landscape” (re)presents: it is only an index of the world which is created “out of my word.” We know, however, that the word and the world belong to someone: they belong to the “I” that has been inversely emphasized in the first line. The “I” is explicitly referenced only in the beginning of the text, but it is a crucial moment in terms of versification: the “I” is as if watching over the entire text. The question from Szyborska’s poem returns but this time it is formulated in a different poetic diction: “Is there then a world / where I rule absolutely on fate?” Indeed, the “I” in *Pracownia* does not describe a doe and the hunters who are chasing it, but removes itself from the poem: it withdraws from the announced description. Thus, it is not the act of creation but its result that is questioned. In this “almost successful,” bitter, and “mixed” description, the key role is played by the word “almost.” Problematic relations between the “world” and the word make us think of Barthes’s “effect of reality.”

The subject that creates reality with words is at the same time attentive and reservedly sensitive in her description. The “I” watches over the weak, defenseless world (“frail, prematurely risen,” “etiolated,” and “dancing in colder air”). Metaphors refer directly to physiological processes, pointing to the naturalness and difficulty of creating life/art. Etiolation is a process during which plants which grow in hostile conditions, i.e. places with insufficient light, do not produce chlorophyll and develop elongated stems. Yellowish, fragile, undeveloped leaves and shoots dance, searching for light; the plant is fighting for survival. It is worth remembering this motif.

“Etiolated landscape” combines biological and painterly connotations, evoking a faded old painting or an old-fashioned reproduction. Thus, it points to the (significant) role of visual arts and painting in Pollakówna’s poems, emphasizing the descriptive abilities of poetry and the motif of “the sister arts” and *ut pictura poesis*. This is how Anna Legeżyńska interprets *Pracownia*, noticing in the poem a reference to “the technique of abstract painting that departs from mimetic representation.”³⁵ This poem may also be read as a potential or imperfect ekphrasis³⁶ or hypotyposis of a work of art in general. Thus, the text is a statement about the process of (re)presenting the world, demonstrating how the author approaches the subject of her description. Such a self-reflective moment is inscribed in the poetics of *ékphrasis*, which as a form of “paying attention to,” “explaining,” and “speaking about the image” points to the problem of representation in literary works. As a verbal representation of graphic or visual representation, ekphrasis becomes, as Adam Dziadek observes, a contemplative theoretical act, emphasizing the self-reflectivity of the text.³⁷ It is possible thanks to description, which exposes meta-linguistic signals. Indeed, description is not important in itself: it propels a subjective interpretation of a work of art, focusing on the problem of representation.

The “etiolated landscape” is the only painted trace of a “real” landscape in the poem, visualized in a metaphorical juxtaposition. It fights for survival in art (not only in literature). Antoniuk wrote about Pollakówna’s postmodern metapoetic awareness, about her “metalinguistic intuitions,” which point to the “anarchic power of writing” and the “unreliability and deceitfulness of language,” which “merely pretends to be successful.”³⁸ As an intellectual, Pollakówna must have been aware of these great problems of the humanities of the second half of the 20th century. However, the game played in *Pracownia* seems to be particularly complicated.

Let us return to the “etiolated” metaphor of the poem. Just as a plant’s shoots wither due to a lack of light as it intuitively strives for the sun, so the world cannot be constituted in a fractional, fragmentary description with no metaphysical foundation. According to Anna Legeżyńska, “[t]here is no [...] principle according to which the fragments of the colorful composition could create a whole; it lacks meaning and order. In this case, both reality (the world cannot be described in words) and transcendence (the fragmentary sketch does not represent the metaworld) are inexpressible.”³⁹

³⁵Anna Legeżyńska, “«Metaświat» w wierszach Joanny Pollakówny,” in *Od kochanki do psalmistki... Sylwetki, tematy i konwencje liryki kobiecej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2009), 274.

³⁶On the scarcity of ekphrasis in Pollakówna’s poetry see Ewa Górecka, “Między znakami: słowo i obraz w poezji Joanny Pollakówny,” *Świat i Słowo* 15, no. 2 (2010): 19–20;

³⁷See Adam Dziadek, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004), 76–83.

³⁸Antoniuk, “Dukt pisma się zasupła niepewnym gryzmołem...,” Joanny Pollakówny wiersze o wierszach,” 101, 104.

³⁹Legeżyńska, “«Metaświat» w wierszach Joanny Pollakówny,” 275

In turn, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska emphasizes that "Pollakówna seems to move from the level of experience [...] to the level of transcendence with great ease" and "both worlds cannot be represented in the language of mimetic description."⁴⁰ Therefore, description is deconstructed in the poem: it becomes (intentionally) an inadequate description that does not authenticate the described reality, but seeks Light, traces of transcendence in its allegorical ruins, bitter fractions and mixed colors. Moreover, the subject does not even intend to describe the world created "out of a word," whose existence outside the poem is assumed. The "I" does not persuade the reader to believe in the power of the word and forget "that what's here isn't life." Instead, the "I" draws attention to what is happening in the studio, seeking answers to the most important questions.

Indeed, let us look inside the poem and examine its "divided" rhythm. The poem is syllabic (though irregular), playing with traditional formats of the Polish alexandrine and the hendecasyllable:

```

----- / ----- 13 (7+6)
-----
----- 7
----- 4
----- / ----- 13 (7+6)
----- / ----- 11 (5+6)
----- 5
----- / ----- 11 (5+6)
----- 5
----- / ----- 13 (7+6)
----- 7
----- 6

```

The first sentence syntactically follows the verse, imposing on it the recognizable rhythm of the Polish alexandrine, with a caesura after the seventh syllable. The Polish alexandrine is used twice more in its complete form (in the fourth and the ninth verse) and in the very last verse, where it will break into pre- and post-caesura parts, strengthening the fragmentation of the described world. The Polish alexandrine is interwoven with the hendecasyllable in its classic form (5 + 6) but it also appears in other variants: 7 + 4 (the second and the third verse) and in the form of pre-caesura hemistichs ("colorless fields," "foam structures"), which are not completed in the post-caesura part: as if the description could not develop into a comprehensive image, as if it suddenly stopped, even giving up on punctuation (only in these two verses there are no stops). Despite these deviations and small rebellious attempts, the poem is a typical irregular syllabic poem,⁴¹ in which irregularities are part of the system: they are planned and controlled. Indeed, irregularities are possible only because there are rules that can be broken, though always within certain limits. The verses fall apart in predictable places. Contrary to how it may appear, the poem does not transform into free verse (although the layout could suggest it). The second sentence is the least predictable in terms of versification. Also, the governing metaphor of the poem is expressed in the second sentence. The sentence is long, and its syntax is somewhat confusing. Vocabulary is difficult as well. Nevertheless, stress (on the penultimate syllable) and rhyme structures are typical of the syllabic poem. The rhyme scheme is elabo-

⁴⁰Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska, "Małomówność J. Pollakówny. Sygetyzm jako metoda twórcza i apofatyzm w dyskursie o chorobie i transcendencji," in *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, 791-792.

⁴¹Maria Dłuska calls it an irregular poem. In her opinion, it is a syllabic poem bordering on free verse that is "more unpredictable," Maria Dłuska, *Próba teorii wiersza polskiego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980), 227.

rate and deliberate, although imperfect and dispersed. In the original Polish version, the lines are (inter)connected by imperfect rhymes: *moim – wypłonionym, wzeszły – powietrzu, domalowane – cyzelowane, płamy – piany, udanych – rozbełtanych*, also in keeping with the internal consonance of *szkicowych – perspektyw*. The rhyme scheme only appears to be “left unpainted.” In fact, it is “perfect” in its imperfection, drawing on assonances and consonances. Viewed from the inside, the text is rhetorically ordered by repetitions, alliterations and parallelisms. Nothing is accidental, sketchy, or unstructured. All irregularities and imperfections are controlled. The poem finally finds its rhythm, trying for a moment to transform into an amphibrach. The transformation is “almost” successful: it is fragmental and thus perfect. The reader must pause to accentuate the words that follow one after another (“**rzeźb / prawie**”) and to read prosodic words (“**rzeźb prawie**”).

The syllabic poem is thus “almost successful:” some verses and rhymes are “left unpainted,” inaccurate and unfinished, but there are no semantic “colorless fields” in the text. Despite its apparent sketchiness, the poem, through its form, rooted in a recognizable versification tradition which engages in a dialogue with the epic descriptiveness of the classical Polish syllabic poem, questions the modernist belief in the communicative crisis of language. Pollakówna, similarly to Hartwig, seems to “suffer mildly but persistently from the pain of the indeterminate” and repeat through the form of the poem: “I believe in a sentence In a pause that seeks form.” Even if a mimetic description of the world is not possible, a mimetic description of its creation is possible by repeating the creative gesture, by the very pursuit of versification that is “almost successful,” which is a testimony to the search for Meaning. It is worth paying attention to this stylistic, architectural, and therefore also metapoetic potential of versification-in-description, because it is also thanks to poetics that imperfection collides in this poetry with perfection, endowing it with interpretive anxiety.⁴² It is no accident that the author opens the studio door, allowing the reader to take a sneak peek at the technicalities of writing poetry.

Pollakówna’s *Pracownia* shows us an etiolated, fragile, and distorted world, which “is dancing in colder air.” Against all odds, it fights for life, inevitably heading towards death, often associated in this poetry with cold air and coldness.⁴³ Instead of reality, it metonymically focuses on its representation in language, using the meta-poetic potential of description. The desire for Meaning is also coded in the form of the poem. Pollakówna’s “taciturn”⁴⁴ and “short, sketchy, fragmentary”⁴⁵ poems do not develop into large-scale images, but they can, thanks to brief description, give the reader a metaphysical thrill of a different, indescribable world.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁴²In his discussion of *Małomówność* [Taciturnity], Piotr Śliwiński explained what worries him in Pollakówna’s poetry: “Her rhythm and orderliness seem inappropriate for traumatic themes, strongly penetrated by pain and marked by disorder. [...] Lyrical ‘perfection’ in this case does not close or restrain, which makes it impossible to predict the shape of subsequent works. Because perfection is open to imperfection, through which the drama of transience and eternity enters the poem; it is so important that it somehow renders the issues of poetics secondary. The poem is a credible sign of this drama. It is enough;” Piotr Śliwiński, “Zmysły i sensy (Joanna Pollakówna),” w *Przygody z wolnością. Uwagi o poezji współczesnej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002), 89.

⁴³Pollakówna’s final collection of poems published posthumously is entitled *Ogarnęłam mnie chłodem* [You embraced me with cold] (2003).

⁴⁴*Małomówność* [Taciturnity] is the title of the collection of poems written and selected by Pollakówna from 1959 to 1994.

⁴⁵Jerzy Kwiatkowski, “Felieton poetycki,” *Twórczość* no. 12 (1975): 125.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses autothematic description as a technique of metapoetic reflection. On the one hand, it is analyzed in the context of the structuralist theory of description and on the other hand, in the context of poetry by women, where meta-reflection is an important but underresearched phenomenon. Many poets use autothematic writing not because they want to problematize the poetic medium, which is to create Barthes's "reality effect," but because they want to construct their individual epistemological projects and inform the speaking "I." I analyze poems by Wisława Szymborska, Julia Hartwig, Bogumiła Latawiec and Halina Poświatowska and interpret a poem by Joanna Pollakówna anew.

Julia Hartwig

Joanna Pollakówna

poetry by women

DESCRIPTION

Bogusława Latawiec

Wisława Szymborska

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“I Do Not Describe:”

Description in Stanisław Przybyszewski’s Works and Aesthetic Views

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In an 1897 letter to his friend, the Viennese critic Alfred Neumann, Przybyszewski claimed that he did not describe. This statement was part of a more elaborate argument in which Przybyszewski distinguished between his writing and literary tradition, referring to the latter only by means of depreciating periphrases, such as “disgusting philistine artist” or “descriptors of reality” (*Wirklichkeitsschilderer*). He did not even try to hide strong negative emotions (“I spit,” “I hate”).¹

I hate, Przybyszewski wrote, the endless **descriptions** of [*Beschreibung*] furniture, of heroines’ and heroes’ beauty, in short, I hate all **descriptions** of [*Beschreibung*] reality. [...] Until now, every novelist has made the same foolish mistake, namely that [...] every person that appeared in front of the audience was **described** in the beginning [*beschrieben*]. (It was referred to as “characterization” [*charakterisiert*]). Then, his or her life story was recounted, his or her room was **described vividly** [*geschildert*], etc.²

¹ See Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Listy*, vol. 1, ed. Stanisław Helsztyński (Gdańsk-Warszawa: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauki i Sztuki; Spółka Wydawnicza „Parnas Polski”, 1937), 173-174. Helsztyński translated the fragments of the German original, which the addressee of the letter included in Przybyszewski’s literary profile published on July 15, 1897 in the journal *Wiener Rundschau*. I translate the phrase “Ich schildere nicht” as “I do not describe” (in place of “I do not represent”) because of its connection with the nouns ‘Schilderung’ and ‘-schilderer’, translated by the publisher of *Listy* as ‘description’ and ‘descriptors,’ in terms of synonymy; the style of the original is more economical - it basically uses derivatives of two verbs: ‘schildern’ and ‘beschreiben,’ which in translation correspond to: ‘describe,’ ‘specify,’ ‘represent,’ ‘describe vividly.’

² Przybyszewski [emphasis – M.W.]; Alfred Neumann, “Zur Charakteristik Stanisław Przybyszewski s”, *Wiener Rundschau* 2, no. 17 (1897): 667-668, reprinted in *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski. Rezensionen – Erinnerungen – Porträts – Studien* (1892-1995). *Rezeptionsdokumente aus 100 Jahren*, ed. Gabriela Matuszek (Paderborn: Igel Verlag Wissenschaft, 1995), 67-68.

Such a strong aversion to descriptiveness by default made Przybyszewski the "opposite" of a literary naturalist, whose trademark was accurate description. According to researchers, it was in naturalistic novels that description was favored or even became the compositional dominant.³ However, as David Baguley notes, in theoretical discourse, the terms 'nature,' 'naturalism' and 'description' may be used interchangeably.⁴ This affinity was noticed and explored by nineteenth-century authors who parodied naturalism, using "thick description" as the basic parodic trick.⁵ In one of the parodies from the era, the naturalist novelist solemnly declares under the portrait of Zola: "description is the formula of Art, the last word of our School" (*la description est la formule de l'Art, le dernier mot de notre Ecole*).⁶

From the beginning, Przybyszewski formulated his aesthetic views in opposition to Zola's school, with particular emphasis on its German sub-school.⁷ Already in 1892, in his debut essay *Zur Psychologie des Individuums. Chopin and Nietzsche*, he contrasted his "new art" with "empty naturalism with its mean and meaningless *coins de nature*,"⁸ thus openly challenging Zola's famous definition of a work of art as a "corner of nature seen through a temperament" ("Une oeuvre ne sera jamais qu'un coin de la nature vu à travers d'un temperament").⁹ As Gabriela Matuszek observes, it was "a clear attempt to overcome naturalism in art," which flourished in Germany from 1889 to 1893.¹⁰ In his autobiography, which he wrote twenty years later, Przybyszewski analyzed his first essay, together with its sequel, an essay devoted to Ola Hanson, in the context of his more mature writings. Przybyszewski drew attention to the fundamental continuity of his beliefs.

This little booklet, he wrote, is nothing, but it also contains everything that was supposed to develop in my soul: I wrote the second part half a year later [...], and this booklet is nothing, but it contains an embryo of my later book *Na drogach duszy* [On the Paths of the Soul] which, apart from my manifestos in the weekly *Życie*, is my literary testament [...] made in cordial blood of sincerity.¹¹

³ See Henryk Michalski, *Przestrzeń przedstawiona. Szkice z poetyki mimesis w powieści XIX-wiecznej* (Warszawa: IBL, 1999), 67-68.

⁴ David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction. The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 184 (chapter 8: *Naturalist Description*). The works of Emil Zola and thus the entire "realistic and naturalistic canon of writing" invariably provide literary theorists with standard examples of description as one of the two (next to narrative) basic narrative elements – See Philippe Hamon, "Qu'est-ce qu'une description?", *Poétique*, 112 (1972): 465-485.

⁵ See Zdzisława Mokranowska, "Parodia", in *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku*, ed. Józef Bachórz i Alina Kowalczykowa (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991), 682.

⁶ Hippolyte Parigot, "Dialogue des morts. Naturalistes", in *Génie et métier* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1894), 296. Quote after Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*, 184.

⁷ Years later, he wrote about writers associated with the magazine *Die Gesellschaft* that "Zola was their God – Zola was the 'greatest' genius of the 19th century." He characterized *Jung-Deutschland* thus: "though it idolized French and Scandinavian naturalism, it did not leave a single great 'naturalistic' work behind" – Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Biblioteka Polska, 1926), 95, 126.

⁸ Stanisław Przybyszewski, "Z psychologii jednostki twórczej. Chopin i Nietzsche", transl. Stanisław Helsztyński, in *Wybór pism*, ed. Roman Taborski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1966), 35.

⁹ Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880), 111. Quote after Edward Przewoński, "Emil Zola jako krytyk naturalistyczny", in *Krytyka literacka we Francji*, vol. 1, ed. Antoni Lange (Lwów: Księgarnia H. Altenberga, 1899), 122.

¹⁰ Gabriela Matuszek, "Der geniale Pole"? Niemcy o Stanisławie Przybyszewskim (1892-1992), 2nd extended edition. (Kraków: Universitas, 1996), 13.

¹¹ Stanisław Przybyszewski, "Moja autobiografia", *Wiadomości Literackie* no. 18 (1928): 2. According to Henryk Biegeleisen, the text was written "a year before the great war."

Time distance (“later”) and classification (“apart from” manifestos published in *Życie*) indicate that the writer had in mind his essay about the works of the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland, which he finished in November 1895. It was published in Berlin in 1897 as the book *Auf den Wegen der Seele*.¹² It was this article, in its original and complete edition, published from April to May 1896 in the Berlin magazine *Die Kritik* and entitled *Ein Unbekannter* (A Stranger), that Przybyszewski strongly recommended to the young Krakow poet Maciej Szukiewicz as the most accurate expression of his views on art: “I have expressed everything that has been a burden for me for the past three years.”¹³ Szukiewicz, who acted as an intermediary between the writer and his Polish audience, published Przybyszewski’s letter with said recommendation and the translation of the relevant fragments of the essay in Przybyszewski’s extensive biographical note. The note was originally published in February 1897 in Wilhelm Feldman’s *Dziennik Krakowski* and reprinted two months later with minor changes in Adam Wiślicki’s *Przegląd Tygodniowy*.¹⁴ Thus, the readers of both journals learned about, among others, Przybyszewski’s antithetical view of “contemporary” and “new” art. In *Ein Unbekannter*, and in an essay about Munch that had been published two years earlier,¹⁵ Przybyszewski confronted the paintings of the Norwegian painter, the author of *The Scream*, with the works of Max Liebermann, one of the greatest representatives of realism and impressionism in German painting.

Liebermann paints the sheep as they are. [...] He paints women who are mending fishing nets just like thousands of other women who live by the sea. [...]. In short: Liebermann paints nature *sans phrase*, **descriptively** [*deskryptiv*], pedantically, ignoring the “idea.” He is a typical **naturalist** who grew up in the era of Americanism, thoughtlessness, lack of time, and above all in the era of photography.¹⁶

When Przybyszewski criticized descriptiveness in painting, identified with “naturalism in the broadest sense as a representation of «reality»,”¹⁷ he was also talking about contemporary literature. “For art,” he wrote, “which we love in our times, we need a notebook in literature and a good eye and a firm hand in art.”¹⁸ In the Polish version of *Na drogach duszy*, he did not juxtapose “two opposite poles in art”¹⁹ but referred to Liebermann specifically as the “pope

¹²In the Polish book entitled *Na drogach duszy* (Kraków 1900), the essays about Vigeland and Edvard Munch, previously published under the same title in *Życie* (1898, no. 42-44, 49), were combined with the manifestos *Confiteor* and *O „nową” sztukę* published in *Życie* in 1899 (no. 1 and 6).

¹³Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 117 (letter dated in Berlin 7 May 1896).

¹⁴Maciej Szukiewicz, “Stanisław Przybyszewski (Próbka sylwetki literackiej)”, *Dziennik Krakowski* no. 330-347 (1897); *Przegląd Tygodniowy* no. 14-16 (1897). According to Hellsztyński, it was “the first serious Polish work” devoted to the author of *Totenmesse* (Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 143, footnote. 2).

¹⁵See Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Psychiczny naturalizm (O twórczości Edvarda Muncha)”, in *Synagoga szatana i inne eseje*, selected, edited and translated by Gabriela Matuszek (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1995), 99. The article was published in February 1894 in the Berlin magazine *Neue Deutsche Rundschau*.

¹⁶Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Ein Unbekannter”, *Die Kritik* no. 83 (1896). Quote after Maciej Szukiewicz, “Stanisław Przybyszewski”, *Przegląd Tygodniowy* no. 15 (10 April 1897): 176 [emphasis – M.W.]. See Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Auf den Wegen der Seele. Gustav Vigeland”, in *Kritische und essayistische Schriften Werke*, ed. Jörg Marx (Paderborn: Igel Verlag Literatur, 1992), 18. Polish translation of the entire article in: Przybyszewski, *Synagoga szatana i inne eseje*.

¹⁷Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Na drogach duszy* (Kraków: L. Zwoliński i S-ka, 1900), 28.

¹⁸Przybyszewski. The writer was more precise in German: “Zum Naturalismus braucht man in der Literatur das Notizbuch, in der bildenden Kunst ein gutes Auge und eine sichere Hand” (Przybyszewski, “Auf den Wegen der Seele. Gustav Vigeland”, 21 [emphasis – M.W.]); *die bildende Kunst* = Fine Arts.

¹⁹See Szukiewicz, “Stanisław Przybyszewski”, 176.

of naturalists.”²⁰ This remark cannot be found in the German version of the text. The point was not to dethrone or criticize Zola but to criticize his followers: “Liebermann, the pope of naturalists, says «Die Phantasie ist Notbehelf.» So, according to Zola, what is left is a temperament. But temperament is just a phrase.”²¹ This distinction was more prominent in the German original. Kazimierz Wyka pointed out that it was absent from the Polish version because Zola was “maliciously juxtaposed” with his “weak and sick heirs,” including, according to Przybyszewski, decadents and impressionists:

[...] where Zola piles monstrous masses of stones, they pile with great difficulty delicate particles of their feelings and impressions; where Zola, opposing his doctrines, creates powerful images and transforms the affairs surrounding him into truly amazing symbols, his epigones want to evoke a mood with such recurring images that it would be easy to compose a dictionary of these images: white swans on quiet channels, black birds hovering over purple seas, white lilies swaying around glistening altars.²²

However, what is the most important from the point of view of our considerations is the beginning of this paragraph (which Wyka omitted): “*Ihre Kunst ist eine beschreibende Kunst par excellence*” (Their art is *par excellence* descriptive art).²³ It proves that when Przybyszewski criticized naturalism, he in fact criticized descriptiveness. Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska aptly summarized this by paraphrasing the above fragment of *Auf den Wegen der Seele*: “Przybyszewski was a writer endowed with exceptional theoretical awareness. He condemned the naturalistic “descriptors of reality” but valued Zola for his ability to intensify expression and transform certain objects and phenomena into symbols, demonstrating how the author views the world.”²⁴ Kralkowska-Gątkowska also quoted the letter to Neumann, which brings us back to Przybyszewski’s views on his works.

In the preface to the “quasi-short story” *De Profundis*²⁵ (published in 1895 as a separate booklet entitled *Pro domo mea*; Przybyszewski sent several copies to Szukiewicz²⁶), in addition to criticizing naturalism as “a soulless brutal art for the common people, bourgeois art *par excellence*,”²⁷ Przybyszewski also provides the following *désintéressement*, commenting on description as a narrative technique: “I am not interested in furniture or the arrangement of the room that I once described [*beschrieben*]. I look at people from one point of view: I am

²⁰Przybyszewski, *Na drogach duszy*, 28.

²¹Przybyszewski. Przybyszewski recalled the motto of the German painter years later, observing that Liebermann “triumphant, was holding a banner with the slogan, which read that only the most consistent naturalism would save art, while ‘stupid fantasy’ was a silly ‘Notbehelf:’ a substitute for art” (Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 191).

²²Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Auf den Wegen der Seele* (Berlin: Kritik-Verlag, 1897), 58-59. Quote after Kazimierz Wyka, “«Naga dusza» i naturalizm”, *Przegląd Współczesny* no. 10 (1937): 115. Naturally, Wyka’s article is a subchapter of *Modernizm polski*, published over twenty years later. See Kazimierz Wyka, *Modernizm polski* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1959), VII.

²³Przybyszewski, “Auf den Wegen der Seele. Gustav Vigeland”, 44.

²⁴Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska, “Kompozycja powieści Przybyszewskiego”, in *Studia o przemianach gatunkowych w powieści polskiej XX wieku*, ed. Tadeusz Bujnicki (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1987), 10.

²⁵See Gabriela Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny. Eseje i proza – próba monografii* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), 254.

²⁶See Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 117, 123 (letters dated 7 May 1896 and 17 June 1896).

²⁷Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Pro domo mea* (Berlin: Storm, 1895), 5.

interested in their souls.”²⁸ The writer defined his position in this matter much more precisely in the above-quoted autobiographical note, which he wrote at Neumann’s special request on June 1, 1897. Neumann wanted to write “a longer piece” on Przybyszewski in the *Wiener Rundschau*.²⁹

I do not describe [...], Przybyszewski declared, emphasizing these words, If there happens to be a description [*eine Schilderung*] in the text, it serves only to determine the mood in which a given individual is; then, however, it is a real experience, the character experienced it in his soul. [...] For me and my characters, the shape or color of trousers is not important. What matters are the state of their souls, the mutual reaction of impressions, and the resulting conflicts.³⁰

It was probably the first statement issued by the writer regarding his poems in prose and fiction that was meant to be published in the press.³¹ It can therefore be said that Przybyszewski’s conflict with naturalism thus moved to the domain of the latter. Przybyszewski had already written four novels in German at the time. Though he finished his latest novel in German, *Satans Kinder*, in December 1895, it arrived in bookstores much later.³² At the beginning of March 1897, thanking Szukiewicz for the essay devoted to him in *Dziennik Krakowski*, Przybyszewski attached to the letter a copy of a “new romance,” which, in his opinion, was “perhaps the best text of the past era.”³³ Neumann, who in April 1897 published two reviews of *Satans Kinder* in the Berliner journals *Neuland* and *Wiener Rundschau*, thus characterized Przybyszewski as a novelist in his biographical essay for *Wiener Rundschau*: “He liberated narrative prose, namely, he rescued the novel from the bonds that constrain it, since he created **the psychic novel** [*psychischer Roman*], a literary genre that did not exist before and for which there is no technical name.”³⁴ However, in order to further his argument, the critic referred to a quote in which the writer commented on his visual poetic prose.

I mean, wrote Przybyszewski openly, this mixture of poetry and an outline of a situation, this fantastic form, removed from life and the world, which *Vigilien*, *Requiem aeternam* and *De profundis* exemplify. Dream and vision merge into one. Reality may only be known vaguely, it is somewhere there in the background, only to show the true life of the soul. What actually happened is completely irrelevant, only the reaction of the soul to this partially unknown experience remains.³⁵

²⁸ Przybyszewski, 10. Translation after Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, “Wstęp”, in *Programy i dyskusje literackie Młodej Polski* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977), XLV. Translation of the entire text in Przybyszewski, *Synagoga szatana i inne eseje*.

²⁹ See Matuszek, “Der geniale Pole”?, 60. Neumann and Przybyszewski exchanged many letters from March 1897 to April 1898 – Roman Taborski, “Przybyszewski w Wiedniu”, in *Wśród wiedeńskich poloników*, 2nd extended edition. (Kraków-Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1983), 128.

³⁰ Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 174; *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 68–69 [emphasis - Przybyszewski].

³¹ Neumann used extensive fragments not only in the biweekly publication of the Vienna Secession from mid-July 1897 (as he informed the writer in a letter), but also in an article entitled *Der deutsche Roman und Stanislaus Przybyszewski (Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Snobismus)*, which was published in April 1898 in the Berlin magazine *Monatsschrift für neue Literatur und Kunst*.

³² Others are part of the *Homo Sapiens* trilogy: *Über Bord*, *Unterwegs*, *Im Malstrom*.

³³ Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 142–143 (letter dated in Berlin, 9 March 1897).

³⁴ Quote after Matuszek, “Der geniale Pole”?, 60. See *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 66 [emphasis - Neumann].

³⁵ Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 173. See *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 66–67. In correspondence with Neumann, the writer of course referred to German titles of his works (*Vigilien*, *Totenmesse*): their Polish “versions” were first mentioned in 1899.

As Stanisław Eile observes in his article about the form of the novel created by Przybyszewski, "the characters' monologues are full of visions, dreams and hallucinations but their domain was early prose poems."³⁶ According to Eile, the author of *Homo sapiens* was endowed with "an extraordinary theoretical consciousness, especially in comparison with other novelists of his era;" therefore, although "the most general ontological and aesthetic assumptions were the same in all his writings, in fiction he referred to issues that were characteristic of this form of writing."³⁷ Indeed, Szukiewicz was right when he distinguished between rhapsodies, "positive images of the soul" which "almost completely exclude the real world," and the novel, which is a "negative image because it does not present the soul. The soul in the right place, but only for a moment, for a second, in an elusive flash."³⁸ To sum up Neumann's argument, when we talk about Przybyszewski as an original novelist, we should refer to the writer's authorial comments (cited by the critic on the next page), in which the author of *Satans Kinder* contrasts the contemporary novel with the new novel.

The novelist **before me**, he observes, influenced the reader's imagination in advance [...]. There was no freedom; everything was said, the reader knew that the action took place in a given year and in a given city, people were described, they attended school and had specific features of character etc. [...] I do not mention the past, the reader only accidentally learns about it from a conversation, when something about past life or external things is mentioned. It is not known exactly who my characters are, where they are or where they come from.³⁹

Przybyszewski confirmed his stance, using similar phrases, in his late work *Moi współcześni* [My contemporaries]. He explained "what he meant when he turned to the novel after a few poems:"⁴⁰

All that was the only goal of the contemporary popular novel has become a minor thing for me, a silly accident. The simplest plot in the world, without any complications, that keeps the reader interested: what, where and when something happens is not known, I deleted all descriptions from my novels, all external manifestations that were not or could not be psychic projections of a given state in which a given individual finds himself [...] – I clung to the human soul with the same curiosity with which the anatomist or physiologist begins an interesting autopsy.⁴¹

The last sentence is particularly symptomatic, considering that since at least the 1860s, the dissecting room had been emblematic in naturalist writing.⁴² Przybyszewski's words confirm the thesis formulated by Stefan Kołaczowski, and then developed by Wyka, that "Przybyszewski inherited the ruthless pursuit of truth [...] from naturalists" but directed it "not to the

³⁶Stanisław Eile "Powieść «nagiej duszy»", *Teksty* no. 1 (1973): 80.

³⁷Eile, 69.

³⁸Szukiewicz, "Stanisław Przybyszewski", *Przegląd Tygodniowy* no. 16 (17 April 1897): 190-191.

³⁹Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 174; *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 68 [emphasis - Przybyszewski].

⁴⁰Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 235.

⁴¹Przybyszewski, 237-238.

⁴²See Guy Robert, *Emil Zola. Ogólne zasady i cechy jego twórczości*, translated by Irena Wachlowska, afterword by Halina Suwała (Warszawa: PIW, 1968), 21.

outside world but to the psyche.”⁴³ That is why Wyka is right when he writes that when Przybyszewski describes Munch as “a naturalist of psychological phenomena,” he in fact “does not characterize someone else but describes himself.”⁴⁴ Przybyszewski treated Munch’s paintings for the rest of his life as the equivalent of his visionary prose, which is clearly demonstrated by a fragment of *Moi współcześni*. The writer sees the famous *Scream* as a transposition of *Totenmesse*: “I cannot imagine, he writes, that a literary work could be more powerfully transformed in color.”⁴⁵ In turn, according to Marta Wyka, as far as literature was concerned, Przybyszewski could find inspiration in the works of Joris-Karl Huysmans, who was, by the way, a dissident from Émile Zola’s Médan group. In his 1891 novel *Là-Bas*, Huysmans makes his alter ego, Durtal, explain the tenets of “spiritualistic naturalism.” The novel should “preserve the truthfulness of the document, the precision of detail, the rich and nervous language of realism, and at the same time touch the soul.”⁴⁶ However, how can these contradictory tendencies be combined in writing?

One of Przybyszewski’s answers was to limit the role of description in its current form and function, namely as presenting a character from the point of view of the world around him, i.e. from the outside. According to Zola, “the proper role of descriptive passages in the novel” was, as Edward Przewóski explains, “only to render a man who cannot be separated from his surroundings, because he is complemented by his clothes, the house he lives in, the city he lives in and the province in which he resides, ‘complete’ and ‘whole.’”⁴⁷ As we know, Przybyszewski rejects all this external ballast and uses description, if he cannot do without it, “only to determine the mood in which a given individual is.”⁴⁸ Thus, “crumbs of empirical reality are filtered through the characters’ feelings,” which, according to Matuszek, leads in extreme cases, as in *Satans Kinder*, to “the total destruction of the represented world.”⁴⁹ In turn, Kralkowska-Gątkowska who, “due to the fragmentation of descriptions” calls Przybyszewski’s naturalism “amputated,” argues that the goal of this narrative strategy is the creation of “conditions for the development of vision,” that is, preparing a place for a different type of space in which the laws of physics would be suspended and the laws of physiology would be in force.⁵⁰

I describe the reduced ‘background,’ she further observes, the depleted quasi-empirical space of

⁴³Stefan Kołaczkowski, “Twórcze fermenty”, *Wiadomości Literackie* no. 18 (1928): 1. See Wyka, “«Naga dusza» i naturalizm”, 114. Kołaczkowski was the supervisor of Wyka’s doctoral dissertation, which then gave rise to his book on Polish modernism (Wyka, *Modernizm polski*, VII).

⁴⁴Wyka, “«Naga dusza» i naturalizm”, 117. See Przybyszewski, “Psychiczny naturalizm (O twórczości Edvarda Muncha)”, 99. Matuszek also claims that this German essay from 1894 was the writer’s artistic credo – See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny*, 31. Leonhard Lier and Hans Pauli, the reviewers of Przybyszewski’s debut novel *Unterwegs* from 1895, had a similar opinion (Matuszek, “*Der geniale Pole*”?, 42-43).

⁴⁵Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 195.

⁴⁶Marta Wyka, “Przybyszewski – powieściopisarz”, in *Stanisław Przybyszewski. W 50-lecie zgonu pisarza*, ed. Hanna Filipkowska (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1982), 89. Przybyszewski openly and eagerly admits that Huysmans influenced him: “And if there is a violent influence I am allegedly under, then I could only point to Huysmans as the one who had the strongest influence on me and who controlled my soul for some time” (Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 119).

⁴⁷Przewóski, “Emil Zola jako krytyk naturalistyczny”, 132-133.

⁴⁸Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 174.

⁴⁹Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny*, 273.

⁵⁰Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska, “Antymimesis i wizja. Typy konstrukcji przestrzeni w powieściach Stanisława Przybyszewskiego”, in *Przełom antypozytywistyczny w polskiej świadomości kulturowej końca XIX wieku*, ed. Tadeusz Bujnicki and Janusz Maciejewski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1986), 143-144.

Przybyszewski's novels as anti-mimesis. I want to emphasize the writer's reluctant attitude towards a category that was overestimated by naturalists. I also think that leaving the remains of realistic scenery here and there is significant and demonstrates that the writer openly breaks with the tradition of the genre.⁵¹

Indeed, we should not talk about breaking, but about reversing, the cognitive perspective. It stems from the conviction that the nature of external reality is projective and therefore superficial, and from the belief that the path to true nature leads through layers of individual and collective unconsciousness which only new art is able to explore.⁵² Therefore, it would be a kind of an epistemological turn, which entailed changes in the artistic medium. Przybyszewski often commented on it, even when he wrote favorably about expressionists from the *Zdrój* group in Poznań.

Expressionist art, he wrote, begins when 'impressionism' (no matter whether it manifests itself in realism, extreme brutal naturalism, proper impressionism, or in any other 'ism' which represents nature and reality in art) ends [...]. And I, maybe the last representative of this 'impressionism,' struggling to go through the abyss of the 'real,' the illusive and the misleading Being towards the essential reality that is only the Soul, the 'naked soul,' the monad 'without windows' which gives rise to the world by and in itself, I agree completely to this agenda.⁵³

Perhaps better than in authorial comments, Przybyszewski exemplifies the modernist paradigm in such a summary of his work, which Jerzy Franczak describes thus:

Modernism is a post-realistic paradigm. [...] Realism turns out to be a useless convention and is rejected ... in the name of achieving reality. Modernists believed that 'reality,' both material and mental, was elusive, complex, multiple and unstable, but they still believed that the purpose of their art was to express this elusiveness. Their dispute with realism was both aesthetic and epistemological. In other words, modernism is a secondary and negatively mimetic project animated by the search for more adequate ways of presenting reality. Its attitude to realism is dialectical: it creates both anti-mimetic and 'realistic' art.⁵⁴

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁵¹Kralkowska-Gątkowska, 153.

⁵²See Beata Szymańska, "Letejska strona sztuki (Koncepcja nieświadomości w polskiej literaturze modernistycznej)", *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* vol. 22 (1976): 183, 186; Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik, "«Mitologia mózgu» – casus Stanisława Przybyszewskiego", in *Poetyka intersubiektywności. Kognitywistyczna teoria narracji a proza XX wieku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2012), 50.

⁵³Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Ekspresjonizm, Słowacki i "Genezis z Ducha"* (Poznań: Zdrój, 1918), 6, 10.

⁵⁴Jerzy Franczak, *Poszukiwanie realności. Światopogląd polskiej prozy modernistycznej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 26-28.

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KEYWORDS

description

NOVEL

naturalism

ABSTRACT:

The article addresses the well-known problem of the complex relations between the works of Stanisław Przybyszewski and naturalism. However, this problem is not discussed in terms of ideology but poetics. The focus is on description and descriptiveness as components of a literary (or painterly) work of art and their role in representing the world, i.e. relations between aesthetics and epistemology.

r e a l i s m

MODERNISM

expressionism

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Some Comments on Autothematic Description (and Not Only).

Wiersz (Trackless)

by Andrzej Sosnowski from the
Perspective of Philosophy of Language*

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Wiersz (Trackless) was first published in the volume *Taxi* from 2003. It soon became one of the most recognizable autothematic poems by Andrzej Sosnowski. Characteristic lines such as “wiersz wychodzi z domu i nigdy nie wraca” [a poem leaves home and never returns], “wiersz nie pamięta domu którego nie było” [a poem does not remember a home that never existed], and “wiersz traci pamięć za rogiem ulicy” [a poem loses its memory behind the corner of the street]¹ have permanently entered the quotes canon used for commenting on poetry from the turn of the 21st century (as those which are evidently subject to the traditional, structuralist analysis, convinced of its finiteness and exhaustiveness of interpretation). The poem in question belongs to the *stricte* deconstructive network of notions, indeed freeing itself (at least at first glance) from the ties of tradition (one of the connotations of “memory”) or the power of the author. The poem is homeless, and it does not have any ties with its source – a source which does not exist itself. Or maybe this is not true?

¹ The first one was originally used in the poem *Acte manque* from the volume *Sezon na Helu*. It should be mentioned that an auto-quotation is a form of memory in itself, as indicated by Marta Koronkiewicz (Koronkiewicz Marta, *Zmysłowe nawyki, w I jest moc odległego życia w tej elegii. Uwagi o wierszach Andrzeja Sosnowskiego*, Wrocław: Fundacja na Rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019), 52. And so even a poem that cannot be traced has some story and location, even if its place is poetry itself. *Mise en abyme* – for which auto-quotation is indisputably some form – in a way provides this “homeless” poem a defined framework, which should be stressed from the beginning.

Let us have a look at the whole text:

Wiersz traci pamięć za rogiem ulicy
W czarnym powietrzu brzmią wołania straży
Szukałem siostry i nie mogłem znaleźć
Nie miałem siostry więc nie mogłem szukać

Nie miałem siostry jak sięgnąć pamięcią
Wstecz wzdłuż ulicy której dawno nie ma
W naszej okolicy zgubi się w podwórkach
Nie zna białego ranka Pije w suterrenach

Marzy godzinami przy murku śmietnika
Moje ciemne powieki ciężkie są od wina
Wiersz wychodzi z domu i nigdy nie wraca
Wiersz nie pamięta domu którego nie było

Dla tej ciemnej miłości dzikiego gatunku
Wstecz wzdłuż ulicy której dawno nie ma
Idzie bez pamięci i znika bez śladu
Nie ma wiersza pamięci siostry ani domu²

One should pay attention to indications of “loss” (of memory) and “escape” (from home), paradigmatic for the whole poem, as two major characteristics of poetry; this rhetorical device is actually used before the key declaration of “a home that never existed”. If anyone or anything was able to leave anywhere, the place in question must have ceased to exist. If memory can be lost, it must have been active before; at least, this is what commonly-understood logic would suggest. However, in the deconstructive mode of the poem, both the home and the memory – understood as peculiar sources of literature – are only phantasms created “backwards”, supported by the Derridean opposition against the metaphysics of presence. A poem **exists** – it does not require any mythological beginning, reason, or past to exist; it is culture (customs, habits) that orders us to seek relationships for it. However, each new relationship will be secondary to its unprecedented freedom, trying to find an organized cosmos in the chaos, tempting scholars with undiscovered, yet actually existing truths (as one wishes to believe).

And yet, home and past do exist, at least through negation: even if they are only a distant echo of the Derridean metaphysics of presence or cognitive familiarization of the wild world, they

² Andrzej Sosnowski, *Wiersz (Trackless)*, w *Dożynki 1987-2003* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2006), 237.

A poem loses its memory behind the corner of the street/ Cries of guards can be heard in the black air/ I was looking for my sister and could not find her/ I didn't have a sister, so I couldn't have been looking for her// As far as I remembered I hadn't had a sister/ Backwards along the street which is long gone/ In this neighborhood she would get lost among the backyards/ She does not know early dawn Drinks in the cellars// She spends hours daydreaming by the dumpster/ My dark eyelids are heavy from the wine/ A poem leaves home and never returns/ a poem does not remember a home that never existed// For that dark love of a wild species/ Backwards along the street which is long gone/ She walks without memory and disappears without a trace/ There is no poem memory sister or home [translation mine, PZ]

are some points of reference for the poem. It is difficult to evaluate the character of those ties beyond the notion of loss, which is clearly evoked through the sister persona. According to Joanna Roszak, *Wiersz (Trackless)* may also refer to George Trakl, an important Austrian poet, who suffered the loss of his sister, Greta, for whom he had rather un-family-like feelings³. The sister is gone, and what is left are words “set free”, denoting “Trakl’s sister”, constantly reminding us about the annihilation of some element of reality,

However, the character of Greta may not necessarily refer the reader to any specific person (according to Roszak⁴). It is enough to have a look at the works of language philosophers (especially Gottlieb Frege, John Searle and Bertrand Russell⁵), who argue for unclear relations between words and objects. First and foremost, the term “sister” (or even “Trakl’s sister” is not a proper name, but rather a description whose real denotation may not exist – or more than one such an object may exist⁶. The “existence of an object” is not exhausted by any collection of descriptions, so even if one admits that specific words are closely related to some person to whom they refer, it is impossible to claim that they grasp the whole object, exhausting its possible denotations⁷. Greta Trakl represented far more than being just a sister of a specific poet: there are definitely people who are unaware that her brother was a poet, or that she had siblings at all, and who associated her with other characteristics (appearance, character, behavior). Thus, the description does not determine the actual existence of a character such as “Trakl’s sister”; in one sense, such an entity does not exist at all (because even a purely theoretical character of its existence significantly goes beyond any possible linguistic denotation), and in another, each language user may have a different description of such a possible protagonist, and so he or she may think of a completely different object.

Terms such as “sister” or “Trakl’s sister” should label some element of reality, simplifying the identification of an object in communication. However, one should also notice that we need synthetic knowledge in order to verify our knowledge of the factual rather than purely textual existence of such a person⁸ (and we assume that poetry readers deal predominantly with literature, i.e. text – they do not normally need to compare a poem with a history of Austrian poetry and analyze the author’s biography). According to Frege’s theses, even if we assume the purely “textual” existence of Greta (in which case, we would not need synthetic knowledge), her name – and so the whole persona to whom it refers – does not have any sig-

³ See Joanna Roszak, *Kim jestem Ja i kim jesteś Ty (w poezji Andrzeja Sosnowskiego)?*, w *Wiersze na głos. Szkice o twórczości Andrzeja Sosnowskiego*, edited by P. Śliwiński (Poznań, Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna i Centrum Animacji Kultury, 2010), 143-144.

⁴ See Roszak, 144: Roszak claims that the sister figure is extra-linguistic.

⁵ Digressions about the sense, meaning and role of description and proper names have been taken from three papers which have been important for language philosophy: Gottlob Frege, *Sense and reference*; John Rogers Searle, *Proper names*; Bertrand Russell, *Denoting*. All three papers can be found in the volume *Logika i język. Studia z semiotyki logicznej*, selection, translation, introduction and notes by J. Pelc (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1967).

⁶ Some philosophers argue that the existence of a proper name does not decide the actual state of “being” of a given object (for example “Aristotle” has been long dead, or “Romeo and Juliet”, who never actually lived). However, Frege would explain that the latter case – through belonging to literature – does not contain any denotations understood as a relationship between a name and what it denotes.

⁷ See Searle, *Proper names*.

⁸ See B. Russell, *Denoting*.

nificance, only possible meanings⁹. Finally, according to Russel (again), the terms “sister” or “Trakl’s sister” are not proper names, and so they are unable to simplify this labeling of reality (creating an impression that it refers to it directly, and that its object remains original, unique and special), and they are also a complex description in a way, because in order to decipher its potential denotations, we also need to know who Trakl was (or generally – a reference to a person who would be its relative). In other words, this term is completely devoid of a reference, both in terms of meaning (based on the relationship with reality), and sense (stemming from the text itself). The “sister” who appears in the poem is thus a “free” word, somewhat detached from the “real” object. Although it is slightly against linguistic logic, we may say that it is perfectly aligned with its function in Sosnowski’s poetry: to connote a sense of “loss” and loosen the ties between *signifiant* and *signifié*.

Thus, there is no sister, but there is no Trakl either, which is rightly pointed out by Roszak¹⁰. *Wiersz (Trackless)* is defined at the very beginning as a poem examining some key characteristic of a postmodern (or interpreted in a postmodern way) work of art: an independent artifact, free from various ties. Thus, (*Trackless*) becomes a metonymy of the poem in general, describing not only the work by Andrzej Sosnowski, but also all other literary works. This is supposed already in the title, which makes the general term “wiersz” [a poem] superordinate. Its characteristic is further defined by the ambiguous word “trackless”, which means “having no paths or tracks on it”, or even (in case of animals), impossible to follow (or trace; however, this claim is more controversial). The poem is in constant motion – it is lost in the backyards, walking down disappearing streets – and so it does not leave any traces that would allow us to reconstruct its history, which means that it is deprived of a narrative of its own past. Ultimately, the poem-protagonist loses not only its tradition or family relations, but also the very intertextual reference. *Trackless*, *trackl-less* also means taking Trakl away from it. According to interpretative traditions, the poem refers to the Austrian poet, and so it is deprived of a definite, reconstructable “track” – which he used to enter the world, determined by references to the past, i.e. memories of a sister, house or street. It is additionally deprived of its inspiration – Trakl – which destabilizes the fundament of its own existence.

Thus, the process of freeing the poem is full: a reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein and the notion of family resemblance¹¹. A literary work that operates a reference – even if meticulously hidden – to some kinship, in fact presents (as Thomas Mann would put it) the story of the downfall of the family in question. The sister is nobody’s sister, and Trakl cannot be referred to as a brother, unless the character of their relationship had ever allowed such a classification. Trakl becomes an “unowned” entity, deprived of roots in the world (founded by family, i.e. memory, tradition, history); he only appears in the form of an “alternative summoning”. The poem referring to Trakl in fact renounces him, choosing the freedom of a roadless track (which, *notabene*, allow George and Greta – no longer brother and sister – to fulfill

⁹ See Frege.

¹⁰ Roszak, 143.

¹¹ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, translated by B. Wolniewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1997); *Dociekania filozoficzne*, translated by B. Wolniewicz, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012).

their romance, impossible during their lifetime, by making the relationship not incestuous), rather than ties. In the philosophical interpretation, the family resemblance supposed by Wittgenstein, which decides about communication opportunities thanks to the acceptance of not so much the identity of specific elements (the universal compatibility of names) as the possibility to accept their similarity for the sake of agreement, is abolished. It is thus impossible to start a conversation: *signifiant* is completely deprived of *signifié*.

However, if the poem (the one in question by Sosnowski – and any other) indeed did not leave any traces, it would be completely incomprehensible. Not in the sense of “incomprehensible poetry”, represented most famously by Andrzej Sosnowski, but in the sense of complete lack of communicativeness. Separating any statement or element of reality from what is known, recognizable, and nameable makes this element inaccessible, and hence alien¹² (such a poem would have to detach itself from the basic guarantor of intersubjectivity, i.e. language). However, the suggestion – even if reflexive, negative and autothematic – that the poem is independent, and additionally directly stating what the poem is independent from, allows us to construct some interpretative framework (or at least a collection of dispersed reference points). Yet again, description through negation is used here: poetry is free from home, family and memory – speaking directly, it is free from any roots and stability – however, mentioning those terms allows us to situate it in the real world. Although the poem has no past, the very mention of the word “past” (which may be of significance in other linguistic games, even if it is entitled to this significance based on strategic essentialism) allows us to understand against what the poem stands, and thus to give it some features, and specify what position it has in the world (or its position against the world). It allows us to simply describe it, and thus allow some basic cognitive activity.

All of the above obviously leads to the deconstructive notion of a trace – and the poetic category of a trope¹³. In Derrida, a trace is what is “added” through the reading process to other elements of reality (inspiring associations, motivating to notice or rather construct certain relations)¹⁴, rather than something juxtaposed with meaning (a thought, figure, reference), something that leads to meaning. A trace is thus established backwards: instead of leading from the source to the destination, it leads from the destination to nowhere, since the source does not exist (or rather, it does not exist according to postmodernism; it functions only in such a way as “Trakl’s sister” does – as a term without denotation, an empty description). Thus, it attracts attention not to the starting point, but to the way – some movement, an interpretative gesture. In this sense, a track becomes similar to a trope – a semantic transformation. They are based on the same rule: they inspire cognitive activity; however, their “vectors” are different. A trace leads us “backwards”, forcing us to exam-

¹²The same conviction can be found in Searle.

¹³Of course, this category has numerous descriptions in the humanities; however, here I do not treat them in the „traditional” way, but as some universal functioning rule for poetic texts, which transform the literal meanings and extract new, cognitively valuable qualities. For the traditional interpretation, see, for example, Agata Stankowska-Kozera, *Poezji nie pisze się bezkarnie. Z teorii i historii tropu poetyckiego* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2007). On the cognitive role of metaphors (and other tropes) – see for example Krzysztof Stepnik, *Filozofia metafor* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, 1988).

¹⁴See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Forma i znaczenie. Uwagi o fenomenologii języka*, translated by B. Banasiak, in: *Pismo filozofii* (Kraków: Inter Esse, 1992).

ine what is retrospectively possible “behind” a word, even if “it” does not exist, whereas a trope pushes recipients “forward”, towards a field that is only opening, inspiring us to lay possible interpretative paths, to map the “unknown ground”. Another difference between a trope and a trace lies in the actor; someone “leaving traces” is impossible to define before capturing him or her (according to Sosnowski’s poetry this moment is the mythical goal of any form of creative activity), whereas a “tracker” is relatively easy to identify – a subject, reader, interpreter, or critic.

However, Sosnowski’s poem initially does not motivate readers to pick up any trail. Instead, it notices the trackless character of literature “as such”, always through negation (as in the case of “Trakl’s sister”), forcing readers to look for traces and immediately deconstruct their character. The meanings transmitted by the poem are *trackless*, impossible to track, because the descriptions are deprived of their denotations; they function as “dead words”, similar to the famous roses of Boethius, who claimed that even if all the flowers in the world died, we would still have a word for them; in other words, even if our world was left without any roses, we would still have their name. The poem in question is thus: “For that dark love of a wild species/ Backwards along the street which is long gone/ She walks without memory and disappears without a trace”, and ultimately “there is no poem memory sister or home”. The trace left by (*Trackless*) is the lack of trace, and searching for any history belonging to it (understood as concise narration) is pointless, as it would be a history of loss – loss of memory and all relationships, including spatial, temporal (after all, the poem loses its way and forgets), semiotic, and referential. Such a history would not have the “traditional” structure, trying to collect dispersed motifs and combine them into stories, and so it would not be a history, but rather some description of “tracklessness”.

As a result, it shapes a paradoxical situation: it gives life to traces which by definition do not lead to any particular destination, and in the case of the poem in question, they lead us to some defined nothingness. As it seems, this is perfectly summarized by the whole poetic project by Sosnowski, full of various references and allusions, which expose their own “suppression”, “obliteration”. Any attempts at further definitions are first of all an elitist intellectual play, aimless going back to subsequent levels of mediation (like in Heidegger’s hermeneutics), and secondly, resisting the characteristic of poetry, which is key in Sosnowski. A poem’s duty is to move, constantly getting lost, even if it leads to looping and negating its own existence.

In this sense, the deep structure of the poem *Wiersz (Trackless)*, or any poem in general, is the analogous turn of the structure of *mise-en-abyme*, based on constant, trope-like movement directed at itself. An autothematic poem that – according to Jonathan Culler – consists of a “speaking” layer and a layer that “discusses speaking”, a statement level and a “meta” level¹⁵, has an easy-to-grasp trope: the layer that “discusses speaking” – the narration of an autothematic poem – leads us to the “proper” text, which exists somewhat before this narration (or under it: under the description).

¹⁵See Jonathan Culler, *Changes in the Study of the Lyric*, w *Lyric poetry beyond New Criticism*, edited by Ch. Hošek and P. Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 38-55.

The constantly-pursued text to which the description leads exists only conditionally (“would it exist, if the description is exhausted” or “would it really exist, if one exhausted the description (achieve the impossible)?”). The descriptive or discussing layer of an autothematic poem remains its proper tissue; however, it is similar to a trope, which never exhausts its meanings on “what is”, but rather waits for “what will be”; in this sense, it perfectly imitates the structure of description, for there is no object whose descriptive catalogue can ever be full¹⁶.

Wiersz (Trackless) is different, although it is definitely an autothematic poem. It is subversively metareflective, as it attempts at describing movement in the opposite direction (using the structure of a trope, typical for *mise en abyme*): not towards creating new paths, but towards covering (its own) tracks. However, the descriptive formula, which (*Trackless*) realizes out of necessity, brings those traces to existence, whether it likes it or not, even if it is to immediately negate them. Description is used to grasp a paradoxical story, which is a lack of a story, an entity which is a negation of entity: the character of description itself allows it, description, to talk about roses when the flowers are dead; it offers a chance to mention a sister who is long dead – and even a sister who is nobody’s sister. Perhaps the unique ability of *Wiersz (Trackless)* to talk **about traces using a trope** (and it is known that – at least if one is to believe in the cognitive abilities of literature – a trope does not need a trace in order to lead somewhere) is this troubling incompleteness of description predestinating the incompleteness of a description, which stops at accepting “sorority” yet avoids specifying whose sister a given object is (or was), and thus depriving the word of the indirect link between language and what is external to it (if “it” exists at all).

Perhaps it is a unique ability because it is performed while in a trance or intoxicated – it is enough to pay attention to the archaic phrases referring to alcohol. Perhaps it is unique because it opposes the traditional or accepted literary and interpretative practices (hence the subject hears cries of guards). Perhaps it is because the poem required many hours (spent daydreaming next to a dumpster) in order to break free from “normal” structures, to go from “blackness” “towards whiteness”. Ultimately, it indeed becomes a “wild species” – abusing description not to acknowledge some entity, but to negate it; not to ease denotation, but to make it impossible, since the “sister” that is key to it is “nobody’s sister”, whose blurred, interrupted traces lead somewhere towards Trakl, but are immediately annulled by negation¹⁷. Also, ultimately – perhaps – although a poetic trope does not require a trace, since it does not require game, only a hunter, still a tracker (interpreter) has to either find a trace (and follow it), or create it themselves. He or she does it so that the surrounding space is no longer *trackless*, in order to achieve a goal; even if this goal appeared only at the moment of pursuit, he or she does it because ambiguity is against their cognitive habits.

¹⁶See Searle.

¹⁷Thus reading is not a “find a reference” game; on the contrary, it is an order “not to look for references”, see Justyna Tabaszewska, *Gubienie śladów i tropienie przesunąć, czyli czytelnik w grze Andrzeja Sosnowskiego*, „Teksty Drugie” No 5 (2013), 62-76.

After *Wiersz (Trackless)* follows *Trackless*:

I ktoś to tak pięknie wykonuje
 bataliony, desant i pancernych
 że w salonie powieści Dekameron – czy tak? –
 zwyczajnie wszyscy mdleją i proszą o jeszcze?
 oksymoron? Nie musimy być onieśmieni,
 trzeba gruchać, trzeba wdzięcznie słuchać, dziewczeczko.

i każdy w swoim czasie bierze posadę w centrali
 i każdy układa wcześniej kilka melodii pod balet
 dla podmorskich tancerek. A moja syrenka?
 jakaś dziwna owocowość wkradła się w twoją bluzkę
 po ostatnim praniu – powiedz mi, co to jest? O,
 niech skonam. O, nie zgadnę – Deophanteomatic?
 księżyc jak zimny prysznic po zachodach słońca.
 ciemny brzask na śniadanie z końcem opowieści.

Pobudka w piasku należy już do kina.
 ale trzeba by jeszcze poświęcić niebo
 z lotu ptaka. W deszcz desant reverse
 liryczny na podobieństwo Westerplatte
 odlot kropelek, tęcza, uśmiech słońca,
 kiedy swoją drogą schodzą czwórkami na plażę
 w komplecie. Chodziłoby tu o helską Jamajkę?
 Idę czwórkami przed siebie, chodzę i powracam
 nieprzytomny w Jastarni, budzę się w Juracie
 przytomny i zbawiony, na wakacjach –
 akcja
 niebyła w filmie, który nie może się zerwać,
 chociaż raz się zaczął. Raz nawet się zaciął¹⁸.

There are no questions about traces and tropes; the trope-like structure is set in motion, and so there is no need to describe it. Now one should only admire it; after all, a movie “once started” will cause zealous interpreters to look for possible meanings, although each meaning may (and must) prove impossible. Derrida himself wrote about it when he discussed “poetics”

¹⁸Sosnowski, 238.

And who so beautifully performs/ battalions, airborne, armor/ that in the living room of Dekameron – is it so? -/ everyone just faints and asks for more?/ oxymoron? No need to be intimidated,/ one has to coo, listen politely, little girl./ and everyone takes a job at the central/ and everyone composes several tunes for ballet/ for submarine dancers. And my little mermaid?/ some strange fruitiness has come to your blouse/ after you last washed it – tell me, what is it? Oh,/ as I live and breathe. Oh, I won't guess - Deophanteomatic?/ moon like a cold shower after sunsets/ dark dawn for breakfast with the end of a story./ Waking up in the sand belongs to the cinema./ but we should also bless the sky/ from a bird's eye view. In the rain airborne reverse/ lyrical just like Westerplatte/ little drops flying away, rainbow, sun's smile,/ when I walk down to the beach my way/ in a set. Maybe it is about Hel's Jamaica?/ I walk in fours ahead, walk and return/ unconscious in Jastarnia, I wake up in Jurata/ conscious and redeemed, on a holiday -/ action/ was absent from a movie, which cannot break down,/ once it started. Once it even got stuck [translation mine, PZ]

as some “experience” which, according to him, denotes a journey, a wandering, a verse that can go off the beaten track and worry the traveller, who may do the same¹⁹. *Wiersz (Trackless)* is a manual for *Trackless*: it argues against looking for traces, because the subject him/herself “walks in fours ahead, walk and return/ unconscious in Jastarnia” and “wakes up in Jurata”, suddenly “conscious and redeemed”, and so escapes any causality and logics; he/she forgets about his/her own roots, which thus cease to exist, and so his/her memory is characterized by maximum economy²⁰. In this sense, *Wiersz (Trackless)* becomes a double autothematic poem. For if *Trackless* is a meta-reflective poem – which is indicated by numerous textual and artistic references – *Wiersz (Trackless)* must somewhat double this meta-reflexivity. This is why it talks about traces, even though it is a trope itself; this is why it manages to create a separate, wild species, while at the same time containing its own content – i.e. loss – and a manual to it: do not trace possible references, for each will be, to a lesser or greater extent, only a ghost of the self that is used to traditional reading. To speak Derridean: a poem is some removable road, which does not lead anywhere, whereas poetry is a spiky hedgehog that hides its (irrelevant, ghostlike) essence²¹. *Wiersz (Trackless)* is both a poem about a wilderness and a poem about a poem about a wilderness: thus, Sosnowski (at least to some extent) makes the trope-like autothematic dream come true, i.e. the simultaneous “speaking” and “discussing”, their perfect simultaneity. However, it pays a high price for that; first of all, such a poem can only talk about loss, since it allows for identifying “self” with a “story of self”: only the self is subjectless, and so description is its “essence”. Thus, “talking” necessarily turns out to be “talking about nothing”, an empty description, which has no denotation. Secondly, reaching the destination means end of the story, but life (the subject’s life) goes on. And since it cannot push new life forward, towards new tropes, it has to retrospectively establish traces which led to it – or which would lead to it, if the destination required them.

“Life” does not require “understanding”; everything is possible, especially when intoxicated, even “Hel’s Jamaica”, especially if one absorbs artistic ways of arranging reality, either belonging to the cinema or literature, and replay them, those composed “tunes”, to politely “listen” and “coo”, and – for example – to record the album *Trackless*. The answer to the question “what is poetry” remains impossible, for instead of understanding, it is better to “feel it in your heart”²². This means that one has to, after all, tell stories and leave traces, even though the destination was reached a long time ago, as the end of the world is “dark dawn for breakfast”, awareness of the end of the world; it is against existing and the strong urge to understand, and thus everyone –in spite of everything – asks for more.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

¹⁹Jacques Derrida, *Che cos'è la poesia?*, translated by Michał Paweł Markowski, [w:] „Literatura na Świecie” No 11/12 (1998), 155-161.

²⁰Derrida.

²¹Derrida.

²²Derrida, 156.

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KEYWORDS

Andrzej Sosnowski

mise en abyme

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ABSTRACT:

The paper attempts at interpreting the famous poem *Wiersz (Trackless)* by Andrzej Sosnowski based on some theses of language philosophers (Fregge, Searle, Russel). The notions of a trace and trope extracted from the poem serve as the basis for interpreting the phenomenon of *mise en abyme* (which, as is suggested, has a trope-like structure). Issues such as a trope, trace, *mise en abyme*, language philosophy, are problematized according to the category of description, which is understood as: 1. The basic way of framing “lack” and “loss”, key terms in Sosnowski’s poetry; 2. A key element of an autothematic poem which – according to Jonathan Culler – consists of the described and describing layers; 3. Fundamental way of cognition, especially in the face of ambiguities related to the category of a name supposed by language philosophy.

language philosophy

Jacques Derrida

trope

trope

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Arranging a *Niebko*.

The Role of Description in My Prose

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I will start with an example of description from my novel *Niebko*:

Backyard. She would spend hours playing with children outside; wandering around apartment blocks, collecting pieces of glass from around kiosks and dumpsters, because this was where most bottles tossed away by drunkards could be found. They would collect scattered, colorful candy papers, little leaves, and would arrange them into so-called *niebka*. None knew who came up with this name. They would dig little holes in the ground, arrange beautiful patterns using candy paper, flowers and leaves, cover it all with a piece of glass, and bury it all. You had to remember the topography of the spot well, know where the treasure was hidden.¹

Why did the narrator enjoy arranging *niebko* so much? Why did I use this word as the title of my book about people who were displaced and uprooted, based on the biography of my parents and grandparents, as well as on my own childhood? Perhaps because to arrange a *niebko* is to stop, pay attention to something, kneel down. In this game, the ground metaphorically touches heaven. In order to arrange a *niebko*, one has to dig deep and hide a treasure to which we later return and which we rediscover, which we guard. **For me, description is to uncover something and to create such treasures, little gems of existence. It is a way of putting together the spiritual with the mundane.**

¹ Brygida Helbig, *Niebko* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WAB 2013), 284. All translations of excerpts from Helbig's prose henceforth by me, PZ.

Ever since I started writing, I have favored description, regardless of whether it was an essay for my Polish homework, or my first short stories. I started writing poetry when I was a child, describing my feelings (which were inspired by specific events), such as: “Today we are leaving for East Germany/ oh what joy, how happy I am!”. Or later, when I was 14: “Little waves shimmer in the sun, reed shines in the golden sun, I look at the azure, further and further, at the lake of my dreams”. Those were states of happiness, the feeling of being one with nature, easefulness, metaphysical longing, the urge to be close to someone. I would write my poems – especially ones that were more descriptive – in beautiful places, relishing this special state of mind of being there. My state of mind required expression, extension, deepening, relishing, so I would write; for this purpose, I always carried a piece of paper and a pen with me. I felt that some unusual scenery would allow me to experience something special and to create special descriptions. My favorite places were near water, with reflections of the sun dancing on the surface; they would tempt me with their depth.

Apart from poetry, I also kept a diary from the age of 13. It was my way of slowing down, learning reflection and mindfulness (although obviously at the time I did not know the latter word), deepening my life. It helped me to enter my own space of absolute, uncontrolled freedom. Actually, this was the reason why I devised my own alphabet – so that no one would have access to that intimate world of mine, I would protect it from strangers. My diary also had a ritualistic significance; it allowed me to start “a new life” and to describe its quality. It created an opportunity to be reborn, purified; it was a way of communicating with what we would today call a higher spiritual self, the universe, or God; thus, it was a prayer of a sort. Today, such practices are rather popular, and in Germany, therapeutic writing has been fashionable since the 1970s. However, in Poland, this topic has not been discussed much, and I was simply too young to look at it from a meta-perspective. It was a purely intuitive activity, a natural need.

At the time, my favorite book was *Anne of Green Gables*. For me, the events were of secondary importance, and I found the descriptions of places which were important for the protagonist to be the most interesting, especially the descriptions of her room, her favorite tree, and the Lake of Shining Waters, as well as what was happening in her head, her attitude to life, and the creations of her famous imagination. All of these things were increasingly anchored in my own psyche; they became part of my internal, and eventually also external landscape. I would read *Anne* ponderously, typically while sitting on the windowsill of my tiny room, looking at a sunset or my favorite poplar, which I named – following Anne’s example – “Snow Queen”. I would read very slowly, and, more significantly, I would reread the books numerous times. I am confident I have read all seven volumes several dozen times. Nothing could surprise me in those novels; I was not interested in the plot twists. What made me happy was going deeper and deeper into that world, because this is what having read the novels so many times and relishing the descriptions of the internal life of the unconventional, creative protagonist allowed. I saw *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett in a similar light.

Some of my girlfriends read *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Winnetou* at the time, but I was never interested in such books. I was not into adventure books, was not thrilled by action-packed plots; on the contrary, I found it off-putting, especially when the story lacked moments that allowed for some reflection, when there were too many things happening. Despite those reservations,

as a teenager I read *The Three Musketeers* (recommended to me by a friend), and even *With Fire and Sword*, but I have never reread those books, whereas *Anne* was like the Bible to me. I liked its lyricism, depth, calmness, its slightly parable-like character. I was not interested in pace or moving forward on the horizontal line; I craved frequent stops and going deep, repetition, mythical time, and analyzing universal truths.

My favorite book from the obligatory reading list at school was *Nad Niemnem* by Eliza Orzeszkowa, which is famous for its descriptions, which are much detested by students. I loved them, although sometimes I found the descriptions of nature, which seemed to be the goal in and of itself, deprived of any psychological element, to be boring (I think that even Orzeszkowa had some such descriptions). However, typically, those descriptions of nature came together, intertwined with the description of what was happening with the protagonists. Such descriptions made me feel blissful. Later, as a university student, I fell in love with *Siekiereza-da* by Stachura, with its song-like character, reflexivity, and melancholy. I felt even stronger about *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz and how he managed to create such suggestive pictures with great psychological depth out of memoirs – a symbolic autobiography. Schulz's images and atmosphere, which approach fantasy writing, myth, collective subconsciousness, have become a great source of inspiration for me.

Full of huge wardrobes, big sofas, pale mirrors and kitschy artificial palms, our apartment was getting deeper and deeper into the state of neglect as a result of my mother's negligence, who would while her days away in the shop, as well as the negligence of the long-legged Adela, who, unsupervised, would while her days away in front of a mirror standing on a longish dressing table, leaving everywhere around traces such as hairs, combs, shoes and corsets, all scattered around.²

I will admit that my own descriptions in my early diaries and first attempts at writing prose were incredibly kitschy and probably extremely boring. My novel *Łzy*, which takes place at a cemetery, is one example. I left it in my room when I went to Germany, and my parents later threw it away. I never won a literary contest in primary school, even though I tried, encouraged by my Polish teacher who enjoyed my essays, always full of pathos. However, in my essays for the competition – or at least in one of them that I remember – I bored readers with lyrical descriptions of girls who would spend hours looking out of a window, living in their hermetic world, to which I myself liked to escape for various reasons. As if I did not have any experience in “conquering” the outside world, as if I did not have access to action, plot, and tension! One reason may have been that I did not have much sense of subjectivity as a result of my strict upbringing. In my childhood, there was no room for adventure or free will, which would have allowed me to move the world. I can see a lot of interdependency between writing and life...

Even today, I find it hard to construct short stories or novels based on surprising plots, such as a journey. I think that the only short story approaching a literary reportage, which I constructed consciously on this scheme, is *Steinfels - teren prywatny*³, an afterword to *Niebko* of

² Bruno Schulz, *Sklepy cynamonowe* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1989), 13. [Translation mine, PZ]

³ Brygida Helbig, „Steinfels – teren prywatny”, *Tygiel Kultury*, nr 1-6, 2015: 169-180.

a sort. In this short story, I describe capers related to looking for the grave of my grandfather, a Galician German, in Bieszczady. The protagonist leaves Berlin in her old Skoda for the Bieszczady wilderness to find her own roots; hence, she leaves the state of passivity, going against her everyday attitude towards reality, i.e. participating in it. Thus, I find this short story significant. The narrator goes on a mission, and it is a big one. There are not so many descriptions, focusing strongly on the story itself. Description also brings the risk of boredom and stagnation. In *Steinfels*, whenever it occurs, its role is to inspire interest or even create some tension, or to lay groundwork for some action, more so than in my other works;

I am several kilometers away from the Ukrainian border. Poles go there every day to trade, importing Ukrainian beer, which they use to sedate the inhabitants of a care home on the Polish side. And Ukrainians come to Krościenko to sell their alcohol and candy next to Biedronka. "But apart from that it's all peace and quiet here. Sometimes there are helicopters hovering above the border, there have been some gunshots lately, but nothing has happened here yet!"⁴

However, I would like to return to my early professional writing. My first poetic novel, *Pałowa*⁵, had a highly descriptive character and was largely based on my aforementioned teenage diaries. In this novel, just like in the diaries, descriptions sometimes have a symbolic meaning, referring to mythical spaces and uncovering the internal life of the protagonist for the reader. The first scene of the novel is a description of the protagonist being lost in great fumes, while the landscape of her soul is highly oneiric:

Slowly, swinging her hips, she walked step by step down the dusty stairs of her house, and walked the carved riverbed of a dried river; it was a huge, broad gorge paved in colorful leaves, the leaves were cold and wet, fall-like and gashed by the rain, she walked with her head covered in a scarf, a hot scarf that hugged her back and neck, the wind smacked her in the face, she walked slowly, step by step, her feet on the leaves, so she walked step by year and year by step, very rhythmically and decisively, leaving behind steaming mist like a pale wedding veil.⁶

The final scene of *Pałowa* is a symbolic description of rebirth – a memory of a holy communion and an announcement of a haircut:

Anna Maria was standing on a balcony and even the priest could not see her. Anna Maria was looking at the girl, who was slowly and shyly walking up to the altar, and knelt down at the feet of the holy Host. Anna Maria was crying bitter tears. Tears of return and farewell. (...) She was standing there like a bride, on this green, on this hill, with her groom's arms around her – wind, time... She was standing, she was kneeling, she was looking at the water. And when the dust twirled around her, she understood that her hair is broken, damaged, matted. I will have a haircut tomorrow, she thought. And because everything went away, Anna Maria thought herself up from the beginning. She simply thought herself up once again.

⁴ Helbig, *Steinfels*, 171.

⁵ Brygida Helbig, *Pałowa* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo „b 1”, 2000).

⁶ Helbig, *Pałowa*, 10.

I believe that for me, writing was a performative, magical activity of creating something inside me, some inner reality. **One of the most important tools of this self-creation was description.**

For a long time, I found it difficult to avoid kitsch while writing descriptions. Already in *Pałowa* I started to dilute it with the grotesque. I think that I owe that to Gombrowicz, then to the Gdańsk “Totart” and the artists from the Berlin “Klub Polskich Nieudaczników”, which freed me from the claws of shallow sentimentalism and the banal. I started my attempts at telling the plot and constructing action, at least as an alibi, but under the conditions of the satirical, grotesque character of the text. Although before I favored description, now a grotesque disfigurement of events and creating “anti-plots” have become the domineering element of my prose, as can be seen in *Anioły i świnie w Berlinie*,⁷ *Enerdowcy i inni ludzie*.⁸ However, even in those two books, I do not build tension; instead, I put genre scenes and a punchline next to each other. They no longer consist of satirical descriptions – they are dynamic, with energetic storytelling. But it is never serious, as if all action was like a puppet show to me, and the most important thing being what the puppets represent. **In order to avoid description-related “boredom”, I have learned strong metaphorization, linguistic games, and rhythm apart from satire.**

A few more words about *Enerdowcy i inni ludzie*. This prose book contains, among other things, the psychological short stories *Lieber Rainer* and *Kallemalle*, in which I attempt a psychological analysis of former inhabitants of East Germany, their frustration after unification, as well as their mutual relationships characterized by various traumas. **There are numerous elaborate descriptions of the internal lives of the protagonists, which I often make more dynamic through free indirect speech. For me, it is an important stylistic device, the aim of which is to “liven up” description:**

Uta already had her own apartment, she hated her mother, a kindergarten teacher, who spent her life serving and being submissive to her husband, a doctor, who traveled to conferences with his mistresses, and in his free time trained Uta, always dissatisfied with her achievements. Uta was in a permanent state of rebellion against that old woman. She would never be like her: deprived of free will and bitter. After her husband died, all she does is complain about the world. She is forever sick, fussy, she takes no responsibility for her own life, groans, moans, grumbles, she can go wherever she wants, do whatever she wants, just get lost.⁹

She does not let him go to pubs, slowly disappearing from the landscape, to have hot dogs and minced chops, to go to Saxon Switzerland with Dieter and Uwik like they used to, where they could sleep with a knife in their hand in the rocks, and laugh, joke after joke, feeling like a real man. She did not let him look around at women, and it was not his fault that all those waistlines, breasts and buttocks attracted him like a magnet. Like those Turkish girls who started to appear in the streets. Reiner would only have to scare away their husbands.¹⁰

⁷ Brygida Helbig, *Anioły i świnie w Berlinie* (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma, 2005).

⁸ Brygida Helbig, *Enerdowcy i inni ludzie* (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma, 2011).

⁹ Helbig, *Enerdowcy i inni ludzie*, 13.

¹⁰ Helbig, *Enerdowcy i inni ludzie*, 14.

Enerdowcy also contains a typical lyrical short story, which consists almost solely of description – *Meksykańska dziewczyna*. In that short story, there are hardly any inhabitants of East Germany; it is a story about the life of the first-person narrator, operating in pictures, intimate, and suggestive of autobiography. Its plot, if one can talk about the plot of a text which is one long description of a state of mind, takes place in Międzyzdroje, by the sea. The open space supports the narrator's project to look deeply inwards and into the past. The events, even the dialogue, become part of description, almost like a "photograph" found somewhere deep in a memory drawer or taken by the mind itself. Is such a description static? Not necessarily, for something moves in it. **Such a description is like a "moving" picture. There is motion in it, but this motion is not linear; rather, it is spiral, fuelled by associations, feelings, and intuition:**

And it was not so long ago that I myself was 17 and had ordinary potato pancakes in Międzyzdroje, rather than Berlin kebab. I fed seagulls, swans. I threw myself in the cold water with my boyfriend at midnight. I laughed out loud. And so. Long ago. (...) To be an old woman is not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is being a bitter old woman. (...) People talk to each other, but often they do not hear each other. "The cucumbers are quite good", says the husband. "Tablecloth, what tablecloth?", says the wife. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to buy pickled cucumbers at the beach. My mum tells me about her headaches. And my daughter says to that: "You know what, your body is screaming." Mum bursts out laughing. They are worlds apart from each other, but they can laugh about it. They walk down a rainbow over an abyss. It is me who stays in the abyss.¹¹

And what does it look like in *Niebko*? Although there are numerous historical events happening in the background, it is actually very descriptive. The novel starts with a description in the first sentence: "Willi collects Easter bunnies". I try to attract the reader's attention to an intriguing detail from Willi's everyday life, the space in which he lives. "He likes best those by Lindt, in a golden paper, with a tiny bell and a red ribbon around the neck. He will not allow anyone to eat them. Careful! Stay away from the bunnies." I describe an object and the emotional attitude of a character to that object, and this is a mystery. The emotion must be interesting enough so that the reader wants to find out about its origin:

Basia. (...) always burns something in the kitchen because she is forever chasing something, forever running away from something. She takes vitral from a drawer to at least rescue her children. So here we have Wunderwaffe, laughs Ewa. She is seemingly laughing, but she obediently swallows one pill after another in the blood-red sauce, because, first of all, it is impolite to refuse your mother, and secondly, she has already believed it herself that she would be more vigorous. Marzena also swallows, and how! So eagerly.¹²

The objects described here, the Easter bunny and vitral, are supposed to attract the reader's attention. And they do it due to the emotions of the protagonists – weird, incomprehensible, intriguing. Of course, there will be numerous events in *Niebko*, but I typically present them as descriptions. **I select events from the lives of my protagonists, Willi and Basia, which**

¹¹Helbig, *Niebko*, 72.

¹²Helbig, *Niebko*, 5.

have been retold to the narrator by her parents over and over again, so that they became an element of a picture in her head. Thus, I describe them, rather than tell what pattern they created in the mind of the narrator, how they make her feel, or “what they do with her.” Of course, I also want them to “do” something with the readers, to make them feel something, to make them think. But mostly, I want them to feel. Descriptions of the state of the narrator’s mind are a recurring element of *Niebko*. Those are never a simple psychological diagnosis, as I mostly use allusions, ambiguity, references, and I pass over some elements; all of that is supposed to lead the reader to a transgenerational trauma, the transformation and symbolic healing of which are what *Niebko* is about.

Thus, *Niebko* consists almost solely of pictures, although they are absent from the graphic layer of the novel. My plan was to include some drawings or photographs that would highlight its poetics in the novel, or even its meditating character, but the publishing house said no. However, sayings repeated by parents, family proverbs, and songs sung by ancestors, which are frozen into an acoustic or visual “picture” in the mind, return like a chorus. Quotes repeated in several places stop the pace of events, which is not focused on moving forward in the first place. In *Niebko*, everything is a “holy picture” of a sort, which the narrator creates and at which she looks (it is holy only to her, obviously). **Thus, even events are presented by the narrator in the form of a description, the constantly-recalled aspects of the same experience, repeating, deepening, completing, and adding new elements to that collage, new flowers to a niebko, new colors to the kaleidoscope.**

Additionally, the elements of the outside world frequently construct a metaphorical bridge to the inner world of the protagonists and the narrator. A description of the post-war Szczecin is an example: “Ruins in the Old Town. Bullet marks on the walls of the beautiful tenant houses, like those in Berlin, just one story shorter. And smaller ones, from shooting from street cannons. The whole city is riddled. Riddled city, riddled people.”¹³ And to that I will add: the entirety of *Niebko* is riddled; full of marks and holes, empty places, silence. How does one describe silence? I think I do it by suspending an unfinished thought, stepping aside as the narrator into the shadows, and allowing the picture I just sketched to “take over.”

I like the chapter about the narrator’s childhood and her grandparents in *Niebko*. I try to convey their life’s rhythm, and how it left its marks on her body:

Her world was predominantly about grandma and grandpa. Grandpa Jakub was an unusual man. He had beautiful, although slightly-faded blue eyes, and he could tell the future. He loved horses. He would swing her in a cart pulled by another one of his friends through the town basked in the sun. She would ride with him, basked in the light, blissful and almost dead from happiness, full of ants on her fingertips, with the violently swinging sky opening up in her head, with the drumming of horse hooves in her ribs. Nothing more beautiful can be imagined, nothing more intoxicating.¹⁴

¹³Helbig, *Niebko*, 235.

¹⁴Helbig, *Niebko*, 269.

I like to base my novels and short stories on facts, writing “autobiographies” and new “biographies” over and over again. The external action is already “given”, so I do not need to invent it (I do not like it!), I “just” look for this little bit more to each story. Instead of creating tension, I focus on the psychological and metaphysical dimension of events. At some point, metaphors enter the text; on some level, it starts to somewhat come out of the text, as if the story, thanks to the persistent digging deeper and deeper, suddenly found a connection to old stories and pictures of humanity, myths, symbols, and archetypes. And then everything arranges itself, and we have “big magic”, about which – in a somewhat kitschy way – Elisabeth Gilbert and Julia Cameron write.¹⁵

In the novel *Inna od siebie*, based on Maria Komornicka’s/Piotr Włast’s biography, I also (and maybe even more) worked in a kaleidoscopic, movie-like way, juxtaposing frozen images from the life of this genial writer, who took on the identity of one of her ancestors, Piotr Włast, in 1907. **The pictures from Komornicka’s/Włast’s life are put together with images from my own life, of which the reader is, of course, unaware. In my opinion, those scenes are the strongest, and while writing them, I felt a connection to my own biography**, like, for example, in the scene in which the father punishes her teenage daughter for being rebellious.

Of course, there is action in *Inna od siebie*, but it is clearly suspended, intertwined with descriptions of slowed-down actions and the movements of the protagonist, which, apart from their obvious meaning, have another, psychological, though only suggested (for example with a metaphor, allusion or omission) dimension.

The novel opens with a description of a dead body, dressed by nuns in a dress for the funeral. Through this final picture from Włast’s biography, I introduce the reader to the very center of the problem.

The corpse does not protest. The corpse does not care.

- Really, sister?

Sister Franciszka has some doubts, taking out from the wardrobe some modest, dark clothes, some kind of a robe, for the stiff, bony corpse, which they had just washed – skinny, lamentable. It lies there in the same way he was born; one could cut him down and put salt on him, and he would not do anything. Especially that he was in pieces while still alive, yet maybe not salted. Consumed raw and without any seasoning. And so he lies there and he no longer squeaks, he had even stopped complaining. And there is so much prejudice against them.

And no longer than two days earlier he called himself Piotr, demanded various privileges, and he was nothing but trouble.

¹⁵Elisabeth Gilbert, *Wielka magia* (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, 2015), Julia Cameron, *Droga artysty* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szafa, 2017).

I devote several pages to a sarcastic description of this situation, and then I move on to the final months of Włast's life, spent in a care home. **When describing his internal life, I use a lot of irony, which typically occurs together with free indirect speech, which, as I have already mentioned, highlights the "borrowed" character of a picture, somewhat transformed by the narrator's psyche, and so full of nuances and perspectives. Thus, it becomes a "living picture" of a sort.** The most important thing is not what happened, but rather what the protagonists experience and see in it, what the narrator sees in it, and what the reader can see in it.

Ever since I started writing, I have been most fascinated about discovering the truth, the secret of our existence, with finding the essence, the source of us. For me, writing is a completely spiritual activity, to a large extent based on extracting things from memory, and creating and analyzing "sacred" pictures, i.e., those which are key for me. In this practice, the external connects to the internal, the material with the spiritual. Heaven connects with earth (like in a *niebko*), a metaphorical meaning with a literal one, and the metaphysical dimension results from penetrating some matter, an object, nature, experience, body, emotions. I would place thusly understood writing with images, or "describing", in a "feminine" creative paradigm, although it could also be employed by men. However, it is not a coincidence that in patriarchal societies, it was usually men who were fascinated with adventure novels full of action and tension, rather than descriptions and images. Whenever I arranged *niebka* with my girlfriends in the backyards, there were no boys with us (except for our younger brothers, who were forced to spend time with us). Today, men (and not just artists) are beginning to find pleasure in arranging *niebka*, practicing mindfulness and contemplation. Perhaps this is a sign of changing times. I see here a (perhaps a bit utopian) chance of creating the *new earth*¹⁶ which modern mystics write about. This is a vision of earth in which previously ignored values are becoming more appreciated, where *yin* and *yang*, the left and the right hemisphere, a description and a story, and intuition and intellect will be equally valuable. For so far, they are not.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

¹⁶Eckart Tolle, *Nowa Ziemia* (Konstancin Jeziorna: Wydawnictwo Medium, 2016). Wizję takiego świata moim zdaniem roztaczała w swoich pracach naukowych w swoisty sposób niemal od początku swojej działalności także prof. Maria Janion. Napisałam o tym kiedyś doktorat: Brygida Miszewski, *New-Age-Diskurs in der polnischen Literaturwissenschaft und Lyrik der 70er und 80er Jahre* (Monachium: Peter Lang, 1995). Esencję tej dysertacji przedstawiłam w języku polskim w: Brigitta Helbig-Mischewski, „Guru przełomu tysiąclecia. Dyskurs Nowej Ery w pracach Marii Janion”, *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (43/44) 1977, 165-192. [http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja-r1997-t-n1_2_\(43_44\)/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja-r1997-t-n1_2_\(43_44\)-s165-192/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja-r1997-t-n1_2_\(43_44\)-s165-192.pdf](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja-r1997-t-n1_2_(43_44)/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja-r1997-t-n1_2_(43_44)-s165-192/Teksty_Drugie_teoria_literatury_krytyka_interpretacja-r1997-t-n1_2_(43_44)-s165-192.pdf)

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KEYWORDS

i m a g e

mysticism

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P L O T

creation

g e n d e r

D E P T H

ABSTRACT:

The paper is devoted to the creation and function of description in the prose by the author, as well as about the mutual relations between the categories of description and storytelling. The function and structure of description is compared to the childhood game *niebko* (also known as a *sekret*), referring to the title of one of her novels (*Niebko*, 2013). The author considers the (not only artistic, but also psychological) genesis of the dominance of description in her prose. She points out the methods which she used to “liven up” descriptions in her prose, so that it is not too static and “boring”. She considers descriptions as a tool to “deepen” experiencing her own existence, as well as that of the reader – and so their mystical and therapeutic aspect.

MINDFULNESS

prose

short story

therapeutic language

metaphor

SPIRAL

autobiographism

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Brygida Helbig-Mischewski (Brygida Helbig) – writer and literary scholar. Her research interests include migration literature, modern Polish and German literature, intercultural communication, gender. Her latest novel is *Inna od siebie* (about Maria Komornicka/Piotr Włast, 2017). She devoted her habilitation to this writer, *Strącona Bogini* (Universitas, Kraków 2010), in German *Ein Mantel aus Sternenstaub* (2005). Her novels *Niebko* and *Enerdowce i inne ludzie* were in the final of the Nike literature award. She studied Slavistics and German philology at Bochum University. Her PhD thesis was mostly devoted to prof. Maria Janion, she received habilitation from the Humboldt University in Berlin. Editor of: *Fährmann grenzenlos. Deutsche und Polen im heutigen Europa* (with Gabriela Matuszek, 2008) and *Migrationserfahrungen im vereinten Europa* (with Małgorzata Zduniak-Wiktorowicz, 2018). She writes for Cosmo radio station in Germany, founder and scientific board member of the University of Three Generations in Berlin. Currently a professor at AMU in Poznań. She lives in Berlin. |

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Case Study

The individual has always been at the center of case study research. Driven by the desire to examine social reality and its inherent diversity, the researcher observed individual “actors” in their natural “surroundings.”¹ According to the *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, sociology was one of the first disciplines to use case study research strategy, and it thus freed scientists from their small offices and allowed them to immerse themselves in the real world. The center of this new approach was Chicago in the 1920s. Inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey’s and Georg H. Mead’s works on social relations, sociologists began to observe and examine specific social groups. Inspired by the texts of philosophers, researchers William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki published a pioneering case study devoted to Polish immigrants in the United States. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published in five volumes between 1918 and 1920, was based on letters exchanged between families from Poland and the United States and also included reports about the living conditions of immigrants.² Indeed, the history of case study has Polish roots.

The researchers Birgit Lang, Joy Damousi and Alison Lewis point to even earlier beginnings for the case study, defining this strategy as one of modernity’s crucial narrative forms and means of explanation.³ The British historian and philosopher John Forrester considers the years after 1850 to be the “golden age of case study,” mainly thanks to case writing, which was the fastest and the most popular form of writing in the time of crisis.⁴ It is hard to name a better example of global destabilization than the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when all values were reevaluated and ontology as such, including history, narrative, language and the subject, was questioned.⁵ The lost and troubled individual sought new and stable ways of acquiring knowledge, discovering them only in the contact with a “case” (in the double sense of the word): (i) an accidental event and (ii) the specific, the individual and close to the subject’s life and experience. *Case* began to function as a lens through which it was easier to see the world.⁶

¹ *Case Study Research in Political Science*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, E. Wiebe, vol. 1, Thousand Oaks 2010, p. 110.

² *Chicago School*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, op. cit., p. 140.

³ B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *Introduction*, [in:] *A history of the case study. Sexology, psychoanalysis, literature*, Manchester 2017, p. 1.

⁴ J. Forrester, *Foreword*, [in:] *Case Studies and the Dissemination of Knowledge*, ed. J. Damousi, B. Lang, K. Sutton, New York 2015, p. IX.

⁵ See R. Sheppard, *The Problematics of European Modernism* [in:] *Theorizing Modernism* ed. S. Giles, New York 2004, pp. 1-51.

⁶ *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* links the word case etymologically to a random / possible event that is also historically unique, see *Paradigmatic Cases*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, op. cit., p. 645. In *Oxford English Dictionary*, case may be defined as a situation of a particular type; a person suffering from a disease; a particular situation; a court case; a person who needs special treatment; a matter that is being officially investigated, see *Oxford English Dictionary. The definitive record of the English language*, Adam Mickiewicz University Library, [online]. [date of access May 6, 2020]. Available at <https://www-1oed-1com-1018678nj32b5.han.amu.edu.pl/>. Case, as a subject of case study, may also be defined in different ways. Robert K. Yin points out that “classical case studies usually define a single person as a case” but it can also be a group of people, an event, or a non-person. The researcher claims that each researcher should be able to define the type of case he/she is discussing independently, see R. K. Yin, *Case study research. Design and methods*, Thousand Oaks 1994, pp. 60-62.

In times of ethical relativism and the declining authority of the Church, only an external force, namely criminal law, exercised power over the moral life of a person. Respectively, a mysterious force acting from within, the human psyche, became the subject of interest of a new medical discipline: psychiatry (as well as psychology and sexology). Michael Foucault emphasizes that an individual, considered as a specific case, has unique features that distinguish him/her from others (as the result of experience) and, at the same time, like everyone else, is limited by gender and law. As the French philosopher wrote in *Discipline and Punish*, individuality is therefore, in fact, documentation and a set of codes (the physical code of signaling, the medical code of symptoms, the educational or military code of conduct and performance), which are transcribed by institutions in the process of “examination:”

The examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a ‘case:’ a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power. The case is no longer, as in casuistry or jurisprudence, a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule; it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.⁷

In 1996, Forrester engaged in a dialogue with Foucault in *If p, Then What? Thinking in Cases*. Forrester argues that the new teaching system introduced at Harvard Law School in the 1870s changed the perception of a case. It was no longer merely the derivation of law, but a key component in determining its development. The case method of teaching allowed students to experience real law, compare a given case with other cases and learn how to create a precedent. At the same time, students learned about what is the most important in the lawyer’s profession: the complexity of human life.⁸ Medical sciences have also adopted the new didactic method, moving away from “*ex cathedra*” teaching. Forrester argues that the anti-humanism of the 1960s, found in the works of Foucault or Jean Paul Sartre, should give way to a positive humanism and a new understanding of morality. It should not be based on the naive concept of universal goodness, but on a specific case and proof.⁹

However, it does not mean that Forrester does not agree with Foucault. Undoubtedly, at the turn of the century the tendency to dehumanize the individual, defined only in terms of case study, was strong. The individual became the subject of analysis, especially when he/she was alienated or considered asocial: as a homosexual, a criminal or a hysterical woman. In her book *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture in the Fin de Siècle*, Elaine Showalter explains that the well-known case of Jack the Ripper could be linked to the desire to limit women’s independence by “scaring” them into staying at home. Today, we read the famous image of a naked prostitute with her intestines exposed as an accurate representation of how a woman was objectified in twofold manner: (i) seen only as the body, the silent woman was a *case* that could be studied, measured, and experimented on; at the same time, (ii) as a case (suitcase, container), the woman became an object that should be opened and analyzed.

⁷ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York 1975, p. 191. The philosopher claims “the technology of power” was first developed in the 18th century.

⁸ See J. Forrester, *If p, Then What? Thinking in Cases*, “History of the Human Sciences” 1996, no. 3, vol. 9, pp. 15-16.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 20.

The woman-as-a-case was deprived of her individual experiences, which were nothing more than statistics quoted by male scientists in their works.¹⁰ In medical discourse, the desire to open the woman and discover her anatomic secrets led to the development of gynecology and even sex reassignment surgery. When the American gynecologist Marion Sims first used the speculum to examine the female body, he described himself as a “colonizer” and a “conqueror” who conquers a new, unknown territory.¹¹ The mystery of female anatomy, which is hidden behind the closed door of the body, has also been discussed in literature, as exemplified by the figure of the *femme fatale*.

The main goal of psychoanalysis, which emerged in the second half of the 19th century, was to understand the internal dynamics of the individual (not just women). Indeed, psychoanalysis was seen as a discipline which combined science, art, psychiatry and literature.¹² The latest discoveries in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, sexology and forensics were used by writers who created their own “case” literature; for example, inspired by unsolved detective and medical cases, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote *The Case of Lady Sannox* (1893) and the famous *Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927).¹³ Writers and theoreticians had been inspired by medicine much earlier, especially as regards naturalistic poetics. In his essay on the experimental novel, Emil Zola pointed to the direct reference source which was *L'Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (*Introduction to the study of experimental medicine*) by Claude Bernard. Zola stayed close to the letter of medical study, pointing out that in some cases, one only needed to change the word “medicine” and “novel” to move from the field of medicine to literary studies.¹⁴ Zola claims that the writer must assume the role of the impartial observer who draws inspiration from nature and the experimentalist who organizes experiences, i.e. “animates characters in the story” according to the principles determined by the studied phenomena.¹⁵ For Zola, description is the most important instrument of poetics, since the novel is nothing more than a “protocol of experience that the writer repeats before the eyes of the audience.”¹⁶

The features of the naturalistic novel correspond to the features of the case study. The writer, taking on the dual role of the observer and the experimentalist, describes what he sees, while classifying, organizing, and creating context. Similarly to a researcher, in addition to describing, the writer should also contextualize his research.¹⁷ Thick description in case study re-

¹⁰See E. Showalter, *The Woman's Case*, [in:] E. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture in the Fin de Siècle*, New York 1990, pp. 127-134.

¹¹Ibidem, p. 129.

¹²B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, op. cit., p. 10.

¹³Interestingly, the theorists of the modern novel of the early twentieth century, Mikhail Bakhtin and Erich Auerbach, were looking for an antidote to the uncompromising modernist prose which undermined the value of literature in earlier works that were more closely associated with realism and naturalism: Virginia Woolf's works were valued more than the works of the more radical James Joyce, while the prose of Thomas Mann and Alexander Pushkin was valued more than the prose of Robert Musil, see ibidem, p. 12.

¹⁴E. Zola, *The Experimental Novel*, New York 1964, pp. 178-179.

¹⁵Ibidem, p. 182.

¹⁶Ibidem, p. 183.

¹⁷According to the *Encyclopedia*: “Case study is not a separate method or tool isolated from the research context”, see *Case Study as a Methodological Approach*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, op. cit., p. 68. Bent Flyvbjerg argues that context-based knowledge is necessary to discuss intricate human affairs and at the same time it is necessary for the researcher's learning process; see B. Flyvbjerg, *Case Study*, [in:] *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 4th edition, Thousand Oaks 2011, p. 310.

search, first employed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is a scientific description which focuses on details in context.¹⁸ The attention to the nature of the described object, which is presented under the supervision of the observing and involved subject, characterizes both case study research and the naturalistic novel.

If one looks for a common denominator between the case study and the novel, one should pay attention to the narrative form.¹⁹ The sociologist Yiannis Gabriel begins his case study about Victor, the wild child from Aveyron, thus:

I am sitting in a friend's office in Berkeley, just prior to delivering a lecture. The topic of my lecture is nostalgia, an emotion that I cannot help but experience as I am revisiting my alma mater. I pick up a book from his library more or less at random and am interested to notice that the book refers to the case of Victor, the wild child of Aveyron. [...] But my fascination with the book increases dramatically when I notice on the book's first page the signature of Herbert Blumer, the book's original owner.²⁰

Gabriel's story ends where it began, at his office in Berkeley. The researcher thus creates a self-contained case study structure (using a framing device). Apart from description, storytelling is another tool used in case study research. Gabriel also points to the specific feature of the study, which is luck / the ability to discover something interesting by chance (serendipity).²¹ Interestingly, Zola also emphasizes the importance of spontaneous writing: the experimental idea is momentary, individual, and peculiar, which is a testament to the work's originality and the author's ingenuity.²² As the above example demonstrates, the researcher does not always speak from the distant, observational and objective position which Zola postulated in the naturalistic novel. According to case study theory, the researcher should be involved in the subject of his/her analysis; he/she should interact with it and use the "mutual trust" created in the process as a guarantee of its success.²³ Objectivity in a case study is not about creating universal principles, but about capturing the uniqueness of a given case and understanding it in the context of the environment in which it took place.²⁴

Storytelling and the researcher's involvement play an important role in the most famous case studies described by Sigmund Freud. Although case study, as Susan Wells points out, is not a literary genre, Freud's works have been and still are very popular; they are widely read and discussed and, in fact, belong to the modernist literary canon, with particular emphasis on

¹⁸See *Thick Description*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, p. 116. John Gerring also draws attention to the importance of descriptiveness of case study, pointing out that specific case studies are not so much problem-oriented as, above all, informative and cognitive. See J. Gerring, *What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?*, "The American Political Science Review" 2004, no. 2, vol. 98, p. 347.

¹⁹The German literary critic of the early 20th century André Jolles describes case study as an archetypal form of narrative. See B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *Introduction*, [in:] *A history of the case study...*, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁰See Y. Gabriel, *Case Studies as Narratives: Reflections Prompted by the Case of Victor, the Wild Child of Aveyron*, "Journal of Management Inquiry" 2017, no. 4, vol. 28, p. 403.

²¹*Ibidem*, p. 408.

²²E. Zola, op. cit., p. 183. The importance of researcher's intuition in case studies is also discussed by B. Flyvbjerg, op. cit., p. 308.

²³See *Case Study as a Methodological Approach*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, op. cit., p. 66.

²⁴*Ibidem*.

the cases of Dora, the Wolf Man, and the Rat Man.²⁵ Freud's relationship with the latter patient was so intense that the psychiatrist was referred to as the "captain." Elaine Showalter and Leigh Gilmore observe that in Dora's case study Freud creates a narrative that is focused on itself, which obscures the subject of the study: Ida Bauer's hysteria.²⁶ Thus, the case study almost becomes the researcher's autobiographical story.

Case study as a writing genre which draws on medicine, psychoanalysis, and forensics is based on a detailed description with a clear narrative structure. Sometimes, the voice of the author is clearly present in the narrative. However, case study in its original form was and still is regarded primarily as a research strategy. In his famous *Case study research. Design and methods* (the only monograph devoted to case study published in Polish), Robert K. Yin, an American sociologist, tries to explain to beginners how to properly conduct case studies. He clearly defines the case study as a holistic method that combines project management, data collection techniques and a unique analytical approach.²⁷ Respectively, Gerring refers to political science and indicates that case study primarily involves definition and not analysis of cases or creating causal models. Gerring also points out that although case study is one of the most commonly used research strategies, its methodological definition does not exist, mainly because it is "just" an analysis of a single phenomenon.²⁸ Drawing on Gerring, Flyvbjerg claims that the researcher does not make a methodological but a thematic choice; he/she decides to analyze a specific case.²⁹ Case study is still in a methodological vacuum: the method of conducting the study is not determined by a pre-defined strategy that would involve, as Yin argues, subsequent stages which guarantee its correctness. This strategy is defined by a given case, and a given case may be examined in many different ways: qualitatively, quantitatively, analytically, hermeneutically or using mixed methods. The choice of a given method does not determine whether we are dealing with case study; the scope of the case is crucial in that respect.³⁰

²⁵See S. Wells, *Freud's Rat Man and the Case Study: Genre in Three Keys*, "New Literary History" 2003, no. 2, vol. 34, p. 354. Wells discusses the narrative structure of Freud's cases: starting from a detailed description of therapeutic meetings with the patient, through an analytical summary, to generalizing conclusions. Freud is not the only medical writer who combines literary writing with professional experience; Oskar Panizza and Alfred Döblin also developed a new paradigm and new descriptive practice. In *Psichopatja criminalis* (1889), Panizza discusses fictional cases of real patients, parodying medical case studies. In turn, Döblin was inspired by events related to the social justice system, shocking crimes, especially involving sexual violence. Importantly, literature has also inspired medicine. The novel *Venus in furs* (1870) by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch aroused widespread controversy and triggered discussion among psychologists and psychiatrists about sexual deviations. Inspired by *Venus in Furs*, the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing published *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), in which he classifies and lists 19th-century sexual deviations, such as homosexuality, fetishism, masochism, and sadism, thereby confirming the new status of the literary text as a source of medical data, see B. Lang, *The shifting case of masochism: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's Venus im Pelz* (1870), [in:] B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *A history of the case study*, op. cit., pp. 19-54.

²⁶See E. Showalter, op. cit., p. 137, see also A. Więckiewicz, *(Auto)analityczny opis przypadku. Wspomnienia Izydora Sadgera o Zygmuncie Freudzie*, "Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka" 2019, no. 35 (55), p. 268.

²⁷R. K. Yin, *Case study research ...*, op. cit., p. 18. Yin defines a case study thus: "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." Hans Gerd-Ridder formulates a similar definition in: H. Gerd-Ridder, *The theory contribution of case study research designs*, "Business Research" 2017, no. 10, p. 282.

²⁸J. Gerring, op. cit., p. 341.

²⁹B. Flyvbjerg, op. cit., p. 301.

³⁰Ibidem.

Although, according to Gerring, case study has not been precisely defined, we may distinguish its specific features,³¹ including description and experience. In a case study, we are dealing with the experience of both the subject of the study (which is unique and peculiar, close to real life and current events) and the experience of the involved researcher who enters into the relationship with the subject he or she is analyzing. Described in detail but read as a coherent narrative, a case study may function not so much as a method, research strategy or approach, but, as Helen Simons argues, as a “story of the case.” The “story of the case” is not dominated by a specific method but is focused on the concrete case as such, its structure and context.³² Although the researcher is a decision-making person within the framework of the study, he/she cannot overshadow the subject of the description with his/her own superstitions and pre-judgments. In Polish literary studies, case study as “a story of the case” is employed by Tomasz Umerle in *Literackie praktyki codzienności. Teoria i studium przypadku* [Literary practices of everyday life. Theory and Case Study]. Umerle analyzes amateur writing of female high school students as a “literary practice of everyday life.”³³ Umerle draws on his own experience as a teacher and an academic in the study, but at the same time, thanks to description, he brings to the fore the teenagers’ novel *Ułomna logicznie* [Logically disabled], which he does not subject to excessive interpretation or strict literary categorization, providing only explanatory commentary.

Undoubtedly, the above example confirms that case study has become part of literary discourse in recent years. Ryszard Nycz first signaled it in “Teksty Drugie” in 2007, when he discussed the concept of anthropology of literature. Nycz explains that in an era of non-paradigms, when research methods are challenged, case study seems to be an adequate and productive approach, untainted by premature hypotheses and generalizations, with a clear focus on what is real, experimental, specific and individual.³⁴ For the Polish theoretician, as for Simons, the issue of experience is crucial: a case study is primarily a way of documenting the experience of the individual and his/her story.³⁵ However, unlike the American scholar, Nycz does not try to contain case study within one coherent, holistic story. On the contrary, he points out that individual case studies should be corrected by new ones and be part of a “complex open network.”³⁶ Nycz is also careful when it comes to referring to case study as a method. Instead, he talks about a makeshift method or a bricolage research strategy, pointing to the key issue that locates the idiographic tradition at the heart of this strategy. Description as part of the research poetics moderates theoretical impulses and the oppressive nature of interpretation. In an era when literature is no longer defined in terms of communication, description emphasizes its cognitive character. This shift from communication to cognition, and from interpretation to description, becomes the main goal of using case study research strategy.

³¹J. Gerring, op. cit., p. 346.

³²H. Simons, *Case Study Research in Practice*, Thousand Oaks 2009, p. 5.

³³See T. Umerle, *Literackie praktyki codzienności. Teoria i studium przypadku*, Poznań 2018.

³⁴R. Nycz, *Antropologia literatury, kulturowa teoria literatury, poetyka doświadczenia*, “Teksty Drugie” 2007, no. 6, p. 45.

³⁵H. Simons, op. cit., p. 8.

³⁶R. Nycz, op. cit., p. 45.

In generic terms, as a text dealing with a specific phenomenon or an individual that functions as a narrative, case study dates back to modernist's patterns of dealing with reality and new phenomena (e.g. mental disorders). Literature and other disciplines, such as sociology, medicine, psychology, or sexology, have influenced one another – they have borrowed narrative forms from one another and built the foundations for transdisciplinary cooperation. Today, as Lang, Damousi, and Lewis point out, case study functions as a nomadic genre (or a quasi-genre); it is somewhat vague and does not belong to a single specific discipline³⁷ (although it is undoubtedly worth noting that the crime novel could be considered a continuation of the literary case study today). As a research method (or a quasi-research method), case study, after a period of stagnation, is again achieving a high position in medical research, especially as regards the analysis of complex cases.³⁸ On the other hand, case study research finds new applications in literature as a result of the anthropological turn.³⁹ In this context, attention should be paid to the ontology of the literary text. Although it interacts with the researcher, the text wishes to be read and interpreted on its own. Cognitive description is an adequate mediating strategy that enables both the researcher who conducts the study and future scholars to rediscover literature, not so much as the subject of research, but, as Nycz points out, as a guide.⁴⁰

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³⁷B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *Conclusion*, [in:] *A History of the Case Study...*, op. cit., p. 127.

³⁸*Ibidem*.

³⁹However, that is not to say that case study as not so much a research strategy, but a creative method, has not appeared before in the form of naturalistic and realistic poetics.

⁴⁰R. Nycz, p. 47.

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KEYWORDS

case study

ABSTRACT:

The article discusses case study with a focus on the history of the term and its transdisciplinary application, from medicine and sociology, through law, psychiatry, psychology, sexology, and literary studies. The author discusses the differences between case study as a genre (Brigit Lang, Joy Damousi, Alison Lewis, Yiannis Gabriel) and case study as a research strategy (Bent Flyvbjerg, Gerring John, Ryszard Nycz), which has been recently also employed in literary studies. Determining the scope and features of case study is accompanied by an analysis of description as a key tool in formulating “the story of the case.”

research method

DESCRIPTION

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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