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Poetics of Description

There's something to describe again. This could be the easiest way to summarize the changes in the way of thinking about mimetic or representative tasks of literature. (...)

It is very possible that we all participate in the birth of the new descriptive literary studies and perhaps even descriptive humanities.

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T

introduction	<i>The Great Return of Description</i>		s. 4
theories	Marta Tomczok, <i>Ontology of Non-modernity in Piotr Szewc's Poetry</i>		s. 6
	Marcin Jauksz, <i>Shadows of Everyday Life. The Poetics of the Description in The Doll in the Light of Notes on the Composition of Bolesław Prus</i>		s. 20
	Rafał Kochanowicz, <i>To Describe the World with a Memory. The Antecedents in the Most Recent Fictional Digital Games</i>		s. 36
practices	Justyna Szczęsna, <i>"Everything is Worth Describing:" The Case of Jacek Baczak</i>		s. 50
poetics dictionary	Tomasz Umerle, <i>Documents of a Literary System as a Subject of Empirical Studies</i>		s. 62
poetics archive	Gerard Ronge, <i>Towards Expanding a Set of Functions: How to Read Janusz Sławiński's O opisie</i>		s. 74
critics	Anna Gawarecka, <i>When the Servant Becomes the Master: Czech Attempts at Organizing the Problem of Descriptiveness</i>		s. 86

The Great Return of Description

Tomasz Mizerkiewicz

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There is something to describe again. This could be the easiest way to summarize the changes in the way of thinking about mimetic or representative tasks of literature. The reality is defined in various ways - speculative, traumatic, experimental, memory, emotional, etc. – and it stands or at least is delirious beyond the record. Thus, description is not only a rhetorical machinery producing an illusory “effect of reality”, according to Roland Barthes’ well-known formula, but it is one of the key components of any linguistic undertaking that tries to describe a certain reality in an inventive way, trying to try to find its peculiar, re-feeling ontology.

Recently, Toril Moi also asked for a description as an important research tool (we printed an excerpt from her Revolution of the Ordinary on this subject). There have also been discussions on the meaning of description in various scientific disciplines (initiated by Sharon Marcus, Heather Love and Stephen Best), because it is a scientific procedure that is constantly used in medical, scientific, sociological, and psychological research, among others. This is an important area for recognition of expert literature and linguistics, which all other disciplines must take into consideration.

The issue of the poetics of description is therefore gaining importance as a particularly interesting area of research and development of conceptual ideas. We thus recall in this issue that this topic was carefully studied in the tradition of Central European structuralist research. The classic theoretical findings on this subject were made by Janusz Sławiński, whose contemporary reading is proposed by Gerard Ronge. An interesting recently-published volume of Czech researchers uses the archives of Czechoslovakian structuralism, and at the same time examines the needs of current research on description in multi-media culture (Anna Gawarecka). It develops the issue of description as a component of the poetics of the latest video games (Rafał Kochanowicz). The description also turns out to be very important for research on the possibilities of the digital archiving of literary life documents and other, as Yuri Tynianov would say, literary facts (Tomasz Umerle).

*Finally, description becomes a decisive component of those literary texts that deal with the most painful experiences. Karl Ove Knausgård wrote his famous *My Struggle* based on the conviction that it is death that can no longer sustain the thesis about the purely linguistic nature of reality. Therefore, it is worth revisiting an important Polish literary book from the 1990s, Jacek Baczak's *Zapiski z nocnych dyżurów*, with his stories about people dying in hospices, for which at that time we probably did not have enough catchy research languages. Perhaps tracing the very poetics of Baczak's description allows for a better insight into the problems of his touching book (Justyna Szczęsna). This is probably why the bygone, dead world of the Polish provinces of the 1960s and 1970s, shown persistently in the poetry of Piotr Szewc in his surprising form of literary animism, needs a sensitive description so much (Marta Tomczok). It is also worth returning to the golden age of literary description, to the times of the great realistic novel, to see the subtleties of the knowledge of the psychological significance of the description in Bolesław Prus' *The Doll* (Marcin Jaukszt).*

When proposing the topic "poetics of description", it happened to us as an editorial office for the second time that we provoked unexpectedly numerous reactions from researchers and researchers. We are keen to give this conceptual fervor back, so we have prepared two issues on this subject. It is very possible that we all are participating in the birth of the new descriptive literary studies and perhaps even descriptive humanities.

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

Ontology of Non-modernity in Piotr Szewc's Poetry

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Anachronism

Piotr Szewc's poem *Gorzkie żale* [*Bitter Sorrows*], from 2013, brings a suggestive picture of the Polish village. It is so evocative that one can have the impression that the described events are taking place at this very moment, and nothing else is happening apart from them: no wars erupted, no children were born, no plant and animal species died, no people died. All that matters is that:

Mice bite the poppyseed beds in granary the pods burst
beans pour with holes roof leaks from aspen
leaves fall and they stick to shoes when we settle on the stairs
of the entryway like black army they flow these bitter sorrows of our
daily bread collect eggs says grandma in the cold rain
cows get wet bristly hens nap the cat meows familiarly
chaff cutter sauces it vomits with chopped straw before dusk
a stray pigeon looks for a home he has already left short day ripped
off a calendar it hurries through ploughed fields¹.

¹ Piotr Szewc, "Gorzkie żale" ["Bitter sorrows"], in: *Tymczasem. Wybór wierszy* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo WBPiCAK, 2019), 51. Unless otherwise stated, all lines quoted in the article come from this collection, marked with the "T" symbol, the full title of the work and the notation of the publication page. All poems and lines in this article have been translated by A. Kocznur. The original text:

Myszy pogryzły makówki w spichlerzu pękają strąki
sypie się fasola dziurawy dach przecieka z osiki lecą
liście i kleją się do butów gdy przysiadamy na schodach
sieni jakby wojsko czarne płyną gorzkie żale chleba naszego
powszedniego zbierz jajka mówi babcia w zimnym deszczu
krowy mokną drzemią nastroszone kury kot miauczy znajomo
pyskuje sieczkarnia rzyga pociętą słomą przed zmierzchem
zabłąkany gołąb szuka domu już odleciał krótki dzień oderwał się
od kalendarza pośpiesznie przeprawia się przez zaorane pola

What is striking in the above description is the accumulation of ordinary activities and things, their excess, over-exposed practicality. If we look at it not as a flaw in the text, especially an aesthetic flaw, but as a signal of the renewal of the category of description, we could find in this poem elements of Tim Ingold's concept of creating a story about materials². The British anthropologist claims that our attention should be focused primarily on practical stories of things: 'To **describe** [bold – M.T.] properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate³.'

The command "collect eggs", issued by the heroine of the poem, the grandmother, means as much as the most important political decisions of that time. Simultaneously – let us stay with the impressions of a surprised reader – it is a little bit striking with its simplicity, a strange suddenness of turning away from the important problems of modernity, and annoying with its out-of-the-box behaviour. Why should anyone care about the order "collect eggs" at all? Why did it find itself in poetry?

Written a few years ago, the text is not only about the time it was written. It is a memory of a village from half a century ago, which has snuck into the present and became part of it. The complicated temporal situation of *Gorzkie żale*, as well as the entire poetic output of Szewc, seems to be the result of the poet's free attitude towards the past and the present, but above all of his assimilation of the category of anachronism, which he sometimes identifies with the mixing of times, free association of perspectives, anticipation of history or retrospectives placed in the future. It is also thus with Ingold's description criteria. As Marek Zaleski writes:

Anachronism is considered a tool for recovering the past trapped in the present, the present not necessarily appropriated by regimes of power and knowledge. The Benjamin's metaphor of "evoking images of the past" is especially meaningful here. We deal with the past history as if it were a text, the reality – the present or the past – is deposited in the text in the form of images that can be compared to images potentially existing on a photosensitive plate⁴.

The category, briefly discussed by the researcher, is associated with this poetry for many reasons. In 2006, when Szewc published his volume entitled *Całkiem prywatnie* [*Quite Privately*] and suspended writing novels, Polish literature faced the problem of consumerism and advanced capitalism (Michał Witkowski's *Fototapeta*), emigration (Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki's *Dom Róży*, Zbigniew Kruszyński's *Powrót Aleksandra*), exile and the exclusion of various social groups (Magdalena Tulli's *Skaza*). At the same time, the issue of the past and its representation became much more important than all the others, but it appears in such linguistically and poetically diverse stories (including Andrzej Bart, Stefan Chwin, Jerzy Ficowski, Mikołaj Łoziński, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz) that even today it seems difficult to put them in order and present them as a single synthetic concept.

² The category of material in Szewc's poetry requires a separate study. I deliberately do not write here about materiality, because it is precisely this notion that raises many legitimate doubts in Ingold's research. Cf. Tim Ingold, *Materials against materiality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³ Ingold, *Materials against materiality*, 14.

⁴ Marek Zaleski, "Alaryk ante portas, czyli korzyści z anachronizmu", in: *Sam początek. Lata 1944–1948 w literaturze okresu Polski Ludowej*, ed. Hanna Gosk, Bożena Karwowska (Warszawa: Elipsa Dom Wydawniczy, 2017), 195.

The anachronism of many of Szewc's poetic texts can also be proven by their themes and characters: first of all, Czołki, a village located in the Sitno municipality in Zamość district, mentioned by the poet dozens of times, Łabuńka, Czarny Potok, Stabrów, Majdan, Łapiguz; everyday things, animals and plants, whose names are not remembered today:

The three-spined stickleback, sift, snowberry, leghorn chickens, pet speckled hens, little owl, canary yellow, sagan, common brimstone; people known only to their loved ones and the author: Mrs. Bilowa, Mr. Kawa, Mrs. Baranowa, old Kuczyński, Miss Skórkowa; long gone village habits and rituals, like May devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary by her statue, grazing cows in the field, sowing grain with one's own hands, traditional dishes, plucking geese, slicing potatoes in spring, opening poppyheads in autumn, and using traditional measuring tools.

What has recently been completed belongs to a not very interesting and not quite well digested and preserved past. Examples of such a past are things, situations and events Szewc describes. They are not suited for symbols and metaphors (because of their young age and inconspicuousness⁵, but also, frequently, because of the lack of connection with the so-called high culture or the peasant "etymology"), in many aspects they cannot compete with the problems of the urban world, nor can they be called important from the point of view of social life, art or science (such as politics or economics)⁶. A simple calculation shows that the beings described in this poetry are the source of many modern ways of grasping reality, including the anachronism mentioned above: a category derived from the dualistic conviction of the separate existence of time, temporality and modality. All of this makes it necessary to analyze them not by means of traditional concepts, but on the contrary, by concepts that are new, strongly linked to or derived from poetic material.

Meanwhile, restoring operability to anachronism, Zaleski places it in the dictionary of modern terms and makes it responsible for strengthening certain divisions and orders. The aim of this article, on the other hand, is to prove that Piotr Szewc's poetry has nothing in common with the categories of western thinking on which modernism is based, but exceeds them in the direction of a new ontology that denies, for reasons unknown, modernity. It is composed of various, fragile combinations, presented for the purposes of this sketch in three, perhaps exaggeratedly ordered, groups: dead - alive⁷, present - past, human - inhuman⁸. Thanks to the proposed division and discussion of selected poems belonging to the

⁵ Cf. on this subject: Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, "Twórczość niepozorna i nowa fenomenologia. O wierszach Piotra Szewca", in: *Twórczość niepozorna. Szkice o literaturze*, ed. Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Lucyna Marzec (Poznań: Pasaże, 2015), 75–83.

⁶ Many of Szewc's poems, especially those from the volumes *Całkiem prywatnie* [*Quite Privately*] and *Moje zdanie* [*My Sentence*], are emphases, and they also process themes closely related to the presentation of nature and suburban and rural landscapes by graphic artists, including Leszek Rózga, Leopold Lewicki, Barbara Rosiak, Stanisław Fijałkowski, and painters (featured on the cover of *Światelka* [*Little lights*] watercolour by Henryk Wańek).

⁷ Antinomy, recorded without a hyphen as "martwe żywe" [dead alive], appears in the poem *Dawno nieobecne* [*Long time ago unrepresented*]. Piotr Szewc, "Dawno nieobecne", *Cienka szyba* [*Thin glass*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014), 33.

⁸ The names of the groups, which are of an opposition nature, in fact mean the link between the objects covered by this nomenclature and the passages. In turn, passage [fr. *passage* – aisle] is understood not so much as an oppositional set of adjectives, but as a link that denotes mobility, or even "slipping" of meaning.

aforementioned orders, it will be possible to show that the new ontology does not reduce itself to a private mythology functioning on the edges of the subject's socio-political involvement, but is a quite serious, strong proposal to negate reality and to dismantle most of the divisions that make up it, including above all the division into what is important here and now and what is anachronistic.

The Lublin village of the sixties and seventies may seem not only anachronistic, but also a backlash. In trying to explain this difficult to define concept, introduced by Susan Faludi in her work *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*⁹, Piotr Forecki used such different terms as ricochet, reaction and - in a literal sense - "the violent rejection of a flask just after shooting a firearm". Belonging to the dictionary of feminism, and therefore a tradition unfamiliar to Szewc, backlash also means "an antagonistic reaction, opposition, confrontation with the social changes taking place and progressive ideas appearing"¹⁰. The role of backlash can be played not only by a specific social reaction, but also by literature or art. Consistently recorded testimonies from the life of the Lublin village in the 2000s, and especially family relationships, alternated with memories, are for Szewc a "confrontation", a response to the logic of late Polish capitalism, which he mentions time and again in *Całkiem prywatnie* [*Quite Privately*]. An example of manifestation of such a stance can be the *Foreign Body*, a poem with embedded memories of 'gomulskian district Poland':

[...] I remember black and white
childhood videos the meagrest gomulskian district
Poland so it overtakes me embrace me in vain
I try to unite this foreign body propitiate it consolidate it or I lose
energy I won't get her back I get up I leave I lie down
I remain (*Foreign body*, T, 28)¹¹.

In Szewc's poetry, districts of Poland is not only the leading theme, it is the one that is equivalent to the emergence of time from the edges of anachronism, a reactionary backlash, and finally a "cap" on reality, where at a closer look it turns out to be itself. As in *Przetarłem oczy* [*I rubbed my eyes*], where the subject, walking between new houses located on one of Zamość's streets (Spadek), starts to recognize the past in them:

[...] and they disappeared new homes have taken the place of the old ones other
just broke up in the pedestrians I wanted
to recognize old friends I thought of my (*I rubbed my eyes*, T, 58)¹².

⁹ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1991).

¹⁰ Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem*, 23.

¹¹ [...] przypomniły mi się czarno-białe
filmy z dzieciństwa ubożuchna gomulowska Polska
powiatowa no więc zagarnia mnie zawłaszcza na próżno
staram się go ciało obce zjednać umocni się albo tracę
energię już jej nie odzyskam wstaję wychodzę kładę się
zostaję (Ciało obce, T, 28).

¹² [...] i znikwały nowe domy zajęły miejsce starych inne
właśnie się rozpadły w przechodniach chciałem
rozpoznać dawnych znajomych pomyślałem o moich (*Przetarłem oczy*, T, 58).

Splices

While contemplating the possibility of analyzing Szewc's poetry with the category of inconspicuous work, Mizerkiewicz referred to the concept of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's presence:

[...] the special, somewhat distant status of inconspicuous creativity comes from the fact that it belongs - in Gumbrecht's words - to the culture of presence of a given time. It is created not for the purpose of establishing logical relations, hierarchy, fiction and interpretation, which, for example, the activities mentioned above assume distance and referring to the world seen as a game of meanings. It would rather see its task in recognizing how certain phenomena coexist, creating together something essentially plotless a collection of equivalent objects perceived as present¹³.

Mizerkiewicz is a pioneer in recognizing the plotless; juxtapositions of equivalent objects, as Szewc's poetry turns out to be a collection of splices and sequences, full of memories, deceptions, twists of reality, but also very accurately remembered facts. No one has ever written about this concept, although it seems to be imposing, in relation to the poetic work of the author. Incidentally, explaining it by means of the same tools that criticism applied to the prose of the author of the *Zagłady* [*Shoah*] - that is, above all, the category of small homelands and mythography - does not make much sense, not only because the range of problems undertaken by the poet in his collections *Całkiem prywatnie*, *Moje zdanie*, *Cienka szyba* and *Światelko* is more extensive than the aforementioned concepts¹⁴. It also makes no sense because the stable reality of Zamość, known from the novel trilogy, has been broken, wiped out and disintegrated here, becoming a collection of various particles, ontologically confusing entities, unclear discourses, and unsystematic knowledge. One can find in it the ghosts of the dead, half-living figures, phantoms, dreams, old, useless objects, places difficult to locate on the map, torn out of atlases and characters' biographies, in a word - a series of information which cannot be easily ordered or used in any way. In another place, Mizerkiewicz compares this condition of things to "fluidity" and "wandering"; he talks about loosening the ties between objects, and finally about changing the space of human subject's life from earthly to aerial¹⁵.

Szewc's poetry seems to be a laboratory of the ontology of nonmodernity, a place where the divisions between power and knowledge, technology and nature, artificially imposed by modernity, are removed and new alliances are formed. Following Bruno Latour, this way of building relationships can be called "assemblance" (fr. *rassembler*). It is expressed, among other

¹³Mizerkiewicz, *Twórczość niepozorna*, 78.

¹⁴On the subject of the category of "small homeland" and its politicization, of which, according to Krzysztof Uniłowski, Szewc's prose also became a hostage, cf. Krzysztof Uniłowski "Do czego liberałom potrzebne «małojczyzny»?", *FA-art.*, nr 3-4 (2003): 132-139. Cf. also: Jarosław Borowski, "Smak prowincjonalnej magdalenki. Zamość, którego nie ma w prozie. Piotra Szewca", in: *Literackie twarze Zamojszczyzny* (Zamość: Wydawnictwo Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej w Zamościu, 2009); Wacław Pyczek, "«Jadę do Zamościa»". Geografia poetycka Piotra Szewca", in: *Literackie twarze Zamojszczyzny* (Zamość: Wydawnictwo Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej w Zamościu, 2009); Agnieszka Nęcka, "Drobiazgi życia wyrwane. O poezji Piotra Szewca", in: *Literatura i obiekt/yw(izm)*, ed. Barbara Gutkowska, Agnieszka Nęcka (Katowice: Oficyna Wydawnicza Wacław Walasek, 2014); Artur D. Liskowacki, "Martwe żywe. O poezji Piotra Szewca", *Elewator* nr 2 (2016); Paweł Mackiewicz "Tymczasem. Tutaj", in: Szewc, *Tymczasem*.

¹⁵Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, "Przestrzenne czytanie wierszy Piotra Szewca", *Nowe Książki*, (2019).

things, in comparisons like: “defining - or not defining - matter, law, consciousness and animals’ souls, without using modern metaphysics as a vantage point¹⁶ Therefore, the category of the culture of presence, explained by Mizerkiewicz on the one side as a dialectic of the uncovered and hidden, and on the other side as a certain formal characteristic of Szewc’s texts, is worth complementing with the possibilities offered by the notion of nonmodernity for the interpretation of this poetry, designed in a reflex of doubting the perfect idea of modernism and under the influence of the environmental and economic crisis that Western capitalism led to, which, after 1989, is also increasingly present in district Poland¹⁷.

The concept of nonmodernity, the basis of which will be considered further, should be understood literally. Technology, which is an important subject of Szewc’s poems, is based on simple solutions that are outdated today and concerns primarily agriculture. Its intermediary (material carrier) is the grandfather, as in the poem *Kształt chwilowy* [*Temporary shape*]:

The beginning of the holidays grandpa’s sharpening scythe Czołki sounds steady
it’s about noon in the bushes chickens chatter in a drowsy way... (*Temporary shape*, T, 52¹⁸)

Or in the poem “Jak żdźbło” [*Like a grain*]:

[...] we drove the ruts through Sitno yellow butterflies flutter the forest smelled
I collected blackberries fly to the sky because from here is closer grandpa shouts from a wagon¹⁹

The heroine of many memories from Czołki is also the grandmother. Usually, Szewc describes her work in the field in the rumble of a tractor and a reaper-binder: “Peter she says do a grain wisp bind it”²⁰.

In another line from the volume *Moje zdanie* [*My sentence*], reality appears as a barn in which the broken tools are closed:

[...] on a barn floor near the tractor it left a mark but he only
in the meantime wherever she didn’t remember dressed warmly because
november or december above the tub we opened with a knife
poppyheads I was so bored my legs went numb dusk (*Only in the meantime*, T, 55)²¹

¹⁶Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, trans. C. Porter, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

¹⁷Latour, 9-10.

¹⁸Początek wakacji dziadek klepie kosę Czołki dźwięczą miarowo
dochodzi południe po krzakach kury sennie gdaczą... (*Kształt chwilowy*, T, 52)

¹⁹[...] jechaliśmy kolejnami przez Sitno żółte motyle trzepotały las pachniał
zbierałem jeżyny leć do nieba bo stąd bliżej dziadek woła z furmanki (*Jak żdźbło*, T, 49).

²⁰Piotrusiu mówi zrób powróśło zwiąż to” (*Zwiąż to*, T, 38).

²¹[...] na klepisku koło ciągnika odcisnęło ślad ale on tylko
tymczasem gdzieśbyś nie pamiętała ciepło ubrani bo
listopad lub grudzień nad wanną nożem otwieraliśmy
makówki strasznie mnie to nudziło nogi ciepły zmierzch (*Tylko tymczasem*, T, 55).

Or like a home from *Tak trzeba* [*It's a must*]:

The road the ladder car used to take I have to push through
so much of the unnecessary here
padlocked house empty barn in a cell mattocks get rusty²²

It seems important not only that Szewc describes outdated agricultural tools, but also that instead of modernized technology, he shows the process of destruction. Thus, he cuts out the time of transformation from the story, but also the period of the collapse of the village of PGR (State Agricultural Farm) and its transformation after 1989. One can reflect on the point of this process. After all, it is neither about elevating the most frequently difficult human work and quite primitive tools, nor about emphasizing its exhaustive character. Szewc writes about inconveniences in a passing and casual way, repeating the language one uses to speak about them to a child, not wanting to frighten him too much. From a poem about the wheat harvest *Zwiąż to* [*Bind it*]: “hemp rope wounds the hands grasshoppers are jumping” (*Zwiąż to*, T, 38).

The elimination of technical progress from the description of life in the post-war Lublin village means, first and foremost, a departure from the concept of time as an irreversible axis and the idea of capitalization. At the same time, it means abandoning the modern preservation and museumisation of the past. It also has the traces of archaization, a phenomenon accompanying progress, which for the modern man, as Latour claims, means the return of the repressed, with whom the past has been identified, confirming the conviction that it can be controlled. In Szewc's poetry, the archetypal displaced does not frighten, time does not flow, and the proliferation of memories does not mean their invasion, but, as Mizerkiewicz claimed, “a community of equivalent objects perceived as present”.²³ The poet ends with the illusion of the consequences of the times, so characteristic of modernity. His protagonist, driving with his grandfather and mother in a wagon, suddenly becomes motionless (in a space-time sense) and throws out the words of the poem: ‘we stopped, the horse lowers its head and grazes for over forty years waiting for us to move on’²⁴. In Szewc's poems, what has been separated in culture for centuries becomes a liquid, hard to define mass. This is clearly shown in the ending of the poem *Na rowerze* [*On the bike*] from the *Światelko* volume:

[...] throw away matters mix up grind split off the wheels
are still spinning I have to wait until the present gonna spill out
like a less and less clear stain²⁵.

One can risk a thesis that wherever Szewc writes about time in a way that is far from the tradition of Western culture (let us recall that these statements, like many others, are not treated

²²Drogą którą jeździł kiedyś drabiniasty wóz muszę się przeciskać
tyle tu wszystkiego niepotrzebnego
dom zamknięty na kłódkę pusta obora w komórce rdzewieją motyki (*Tak trzeba*, T, 61).

²³Mizerkiewicz, *Twórczość niepozorna*, 78.

²⁴“stanęliśmy koń opuszcza głowę pasie się już ponad czterdzieści lat czeka aż ruszemy” (*Jak żdźbło*, T, 49).

²⁵[...] wyrzucić sprawy mieszają się ucierają oddzielają koła
jeszcze się kręcą muszę czekać aż terazniejszość rozleje się
jak coraz mniej wyraźna plama. Piotr Szewc, *Na rowerze*, in: *Światelko*, 11.

in this case as metaphors; otherwise, the understanding of time as a figure of a certain cultural revolution would surely have to be changed), formulates text *We have never been modern* a little bit out of tune with this intuition:

This retrospective attitude, which deploys instead of unveiling, adds instead of subtracting, fraternizes instead of denouncing, sorts out instead of debunking, I characterize as nonmodern (or amodern). A nonmodern is anyone who takes simultaneously into account the moderns' Constitution and the populations of hybrids that that Constitution rejects and allows to proliferate.²⁶

The concept of nonmodernity is even more evident in Szewc's poetry in two of the three splices mentioned. The first one is formed by human relations with the dead, while the second one is created by relations with animals. The source of both - just like spiral, not linear time - is Polish peasant culture, immobilized in memory from the second half of the 20th century. However, contact with ghosts, which is one of the main themes of *Cienka szyba* and *Świątełka* turns in Szewc's books into something more than a folk belief based on Catholic rituals (such as May or funeral prayers). Just like the movements of time, the presence of these phenomena does not arouse fear, doubt, surprise or any concern in the subject. It is exactly as it should be. It happens as if nothing else happened then in the world. This is reminiscent of one of the remarks made above in connection with the poem *Gorzkie żale* [Bitter sorrows], which evoked the same effect of indifference as here as well, while agreeing to the expected state of matters. The poet states it casually, like in the poem *Bukiecik* [Little bouquet], where the only proof that the subject has a ghost in front of him (i.e. Mrs. Stasia, who came for a moment to the grandmother) is short: "weird because she's been lying next to mom for a long time."²⁷

Perhaps the most important thing in the perception of the living-dead splice is that it does not belong to any transcendence and does not result from belief in anything, nor is it religious. The natural context for these reflections is the aforementioned Catholicism, but just as time does, declared faith in God does not fit into the poetry of Szewc in any rigid framework; it is experienced by the subject as anything else under the influence of only known decisions. The process of experiencing the absent resembles reaching for the present with one's hand, and in this sense it is more like a gesture by Gumbrecht than Latour; the present, "it should be possible to touch with the human hands"²⁸.

Szewc writes suggestively about experiencing the presence of the absent in the title poem from the collection *Cienka szyba* [Thin Glass], where the dead relatives - "grandmother grandfather father Lutek Jacek"²⁹ - are compared to pigeons who "merged on the silhouette"³⁰ and the medium, separating the living from the dead, is called "thin glass."³¹ Particularly important seems to be the observation about the way in which the deceased appear in the life of

²⁶Latour, *We have never been modern*, 47.

²⁷"dziwne bo przecież od dawna leży obok mamy" (*Bukiecik*, T, 50).

²⁸Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Produkcja obecności. Czego znaczenie nie może przekazać*, tłum. Krzysztof Hoffman, Weronika Szwebs (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016), 23.

²⁹Piotr Szewc, "Cienka szyba", in: *Cienka szyba* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014), 34.

³⁰Szewc, *Cienka szyba*.

³¹Szewc, *Cienka szyba*.

the subject, together and separately (“you sit together and each separately”)³², which means precisely this Latourian hybridity, indecisiveness, the non-complexity of being, simultaneity. Szewc repeats the same thought in the title poem of the next volume - *Światelka* [*Little light*]:

Some side by side, others separately grandma
your big duvet is too small to
cover us³³.

The concept together - individually - first appears in the volume *Cienka szyba* [*Thin Glass*], in the poem *Wszystko osobno* [*All Separate*]; however, it does not concern the intertwining of life and death, but the passage of time: the destruction of the grandmother’s house, the subject’s apartment, the falling polystyrene foam. Material impermanence also becomes the beginning of a reflection on the need to transcend modernist divisions and invent an ontology that would allow to dismantle them on the one hand and show them as an “ensemble” of individual beings on the other. If you look at the *Wielka szpula* [*The Great Reel*] from this perspective, you will find that in Szewc’s thinking, we can “bond” and “juxtapose” everything that is usually considered mismatched, separable and inconsistent: “one sticks together the other shreds the third tears”.³⁴

Suggestions and conclusions

The aforementioned review makes it possible to juxtapose Szewc’s concepts with another project that is critically oriented towards modernity: the theory of new animism by the Israeli anthropologist Nurit Bird-David, who in her book *Us, Relatives, Scaling and Plural Life in Forager World*³⁵ introduced the category of “plural life”, based on Latour’s findings, among others. Without entering into the details of her work, but only pointing out the most important issues, such as redefining personhood, beings other-than-humans, non-humans and spirits, or finally making the relatives studies the most important category, it is worth suggesting a reflection on a community seen on a small scale, such as the communities of southern India Nurit-Bird studied, in relation to the poetry discussed.

As Szewc describes, the environment of the closest ones consists, like communities such as Nayaka, of relatives, who are not only living people, but also animals in a changing relationship (*devaru*) with them. Abandoning traditional ethnography, especially the classical theory of animism³⁶, Nurit-Bird diagnoses the crisis of contemporary Western societies caused, among other things, by the melting of categories describing small communities in global categories, such as the nation or the state. A way to save the progressive melting of micro-phenomena is

³²Szewc, *Cienka szyba*.

³³Jedni obok siebie inni osobno babciu
twoja duża kołdra zbyt mała żeby nas
okryć [...]
Piotr Szewc, “Światelko”, in *Światelko*, 43.

³⁴„jedno się klei drugie strzępi trzecie urywa” (*Wielka szpula*, T, 115).

³⁵Nurit Bird-David, *Us, Relatives. Scaling and Plural Life in Forager World* (California: University California Press, 2017).

³⁶Bird-David, *Us, Relatives*, 154–155.

to develop certain models of actions and behaviours that can become models for the future. It is also Latour's idea of reading Philippe Descola in a similar way³⁷. The model, which can be described on the basis of Szewc's poetry, is the story of a certain family that has lived in Lublin county at least since the war. We see it in the sixties and seventies, occurring in the childhood and youth of the main character, sometimes called Piotr, so that he can be juxtaposed with Piotr Szewc without much hesitation. The main protagonists of this story are his grandparents and mother, her siblings, sister, cousins, and neighbors. However, the group of relatives does not end there: it also includes animals, such as the dog Cygan, plants like a shepherd's purse, places and objects like a gate or a well. We continue to observe how one of the members of the community, the aforementioned Piotr, leaves it, but with the help of various mediations with the outside world tries to return to it, among others in the form of a bird. This may sound peculiar, but if one analyses the trail of the human-bird in this poetry, it turns out that it is not the Christian tradition with its representation of the human soul, but it is animism that constitutes a practical theory for understanding Szewc's thoughts.

Starting from [*Całkiem prywatnie*] [*Quite privately*], the poet carefully observes the birds. In *Szare pióra* [*The Grey Feathers*], he thinks about their dead bodies (a pigeon smashed by a car), and in *Sroki za oknem* [*Magpies outside the window*] he returns to the stereotype of a thieving bird, but it is only in Leszek Rózga's graphics-inspired *Liczna rodzina* [*A large family*] that he expresses his desire to enter the community of canopies, which he will implement within various species in virtually all subsequent volumes. Simply remember the poems *Gawrony przyleciały* [*Rooks have arrived*] from *Cienka szyba* [*Thin glass*] or *Kuropatwy ze Świątełka* [*The partridges from Świątełko*], where the birds are dead neighbors, or the poem [*Spoza czasu zaszypanego śniegiem*] [*Out of the time of the snow*] from the same collection, in which the voice of the Warsaw jackdaw is spoken by the deceased mother. The dead relatives have long been part of the earth, plants, and air. The belief that they should not be found in the cemetery follows Szewc constantly, for instance in the two-line *Jak chryzantema* [*Like chrysanthemum*]:

In the October fog a tree crown turns yellow like a giant chrysanthemum
the wind blows leaves I blow up petals I'm looking for you there³⁸.

At the same time, he himself, the subject of these poems, stops trusting the human condition and becomes someone other than just man: "I had a flock of sparrows I didn't have any/crumbs I felt I was one of them"³⁹. But the kinship with birds does not stabilize this hybrid nature either. In the last two lines of the poems [*Zagnieżdziłbym się*] and [*Płatkami śniegu być*], the subject simply becomes part of the atmosphere, air, a particle of the weather and blends in so perfectly with the surroundings that it disappears. If one were certain about the philosophy Szewc proclaims and its foundation in Catholicism, it would be possible to say that the subject dissolves in the emptiness of his own loneliness, unrestrained after the death of

³⁷Latour, *Nigdy nie byliśmy*, 64.

³⁸W październikowej mgłę korona drzewa żółci się jak wielka chryzantema
wiatr rozgarnia liście rozdmuchując płatki tam was szukam
Piotr Szewc, "Jak chryzantema", in: *Cienka szyba*, 41.

³⁹"obstało mnie stadko wróbla nie miałem ani/ okrucza poczułem się że jestem jednym z nich"
Piotr Szewc, "Jeden z nich" [*One of them*], in: *Moje zdanie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009), 5.

his loved ones, but it is not so. Having discovered that they too are part of the community of “nonhuman kins” (Bird-David), Szewc does not describe suicidal dreams. With this gesture, the poet seals - as has been said - his concept of the ontology of nonmodernity, which can be treated as an alternative to the contemporary disintegration of the world, but also as a way for the subject to come to terms with problems which in Western culture do not have the right formulas to alleviate or effectively deal with. These include illness and the death of the family, the accompanying dull emptiness, mourning, isolation from society that turns into egoism and other behaviors that do not serve the common good. In the animist-inspired ontology of the nonmodernity, the aforementioned states become something inconclusive, reversible, and contain an opportunity to turn back time and come into contact with what has not yet happened. In a new animist-inspired ontology of nonmodernity⁴⁰, the aforementioned states become something inconclusive, reversible, and contain an opportunity to turn back time and come into contact with what has not yet happened. The apparent lack of logic, which gives the impression of freedom of thought or interpretation of the disinvoltury, results here only from the need to remedy the most urgent (and not only) human problems, which - when entrusted to nature, referred to history, postponed in time - they become, or may become, supportable.

Description plays a special role in these decisions. Referring to what is static, anachronistic, lifeless in art, description in Szewc’s poetry is at the same time a complicated story-telling, giving things motion, fluctuations, and time travel. It also becomes an opportunity to enumerate everyday, inconspicuous, unsophisticated materials, and often turns into a list, almost an enumeration. Since Szewc’s poetry in many places resembles laying foundations, the description is a form of a basic ontological statement, a form of review - not just of beings, but of lives, and not necessarily only the living.

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

⁴⁰Cf. Anselm Franke, “Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls, or: The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries”, w *Animism. Volume 1*, red. Anselm Franke (Berlin – Oslo – Antwerp: Sternberg Press, 2010), 11–53.

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KEYWORDS

o n t o l o g y

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ABSTRACT:

Referring to the theories of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Bruno Latour and Nurit Bird-David, the author attempts to prove that Piotr Szewc's poetry is accompanied by a concept that questions the logic of the modern world based on technical progress and an isolated, egocentric subject. The aforementioned concept is an ontology of the non-modern. It is directly inspired by Latour's concept of nonmodernity (amodernity), supported by a reflection on the new animism of Bird-David. The analysis includes four poetry volumes, published between 2006 and 2017, and a selection of poems by Szewc from 2019.

ALIVE

DEAD

present

past

birds

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Shadows of Everyday Life. The Poetics of the Description in *The Doll* in the Light of Notes on the Composition of Bolesław Prus

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Discussing the descriptions of space and the objects filling it in the literature of the late nineteenth century is, it seems, a closed chapter for the study of literature. However, the poetics of description, which with the transformation of the realistic paradigm in literature¹ is also changing, finding itself at the heart of the problem of crystallizing literary modernism, invites one to keep looking at the problem of nineteenth-century mimesis with the feeling that not everything is already obvious. Bolesław Prus' *The Doll*, which occupies a special place in his legacy², is a symptomatic work in Polish literature and, as all signs point to, the first chance

¹ In her book on realism, Pam Morris speaks of the characteristic of realism towards "over-rational coherence that seemed to underpin plot structure, narrative perspective and characterisation in realist novels", which is denied by modernist writers.; Pam Morris, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003), s. 24. As Michael Irvin writes in his classic position on imaging, it was natural for writers of the Victorian period to "to see, or at least to try to see, the stories that they composed". Irvin, who is not so much interested in the writer's efforts as in the degree of belief in the image drawn in the words on the reader's side, sees the description as neglected, and the key theme for the problem of representation in the nineteenth-century novel: "The great Victorian novelists usually had a great deal of scene-painting to do, either because, like Dickens, they were imaginatively prolific, or because, like Eliot and Gissing, they believed strongly in the formative and restrictive power of the social milieu, and hence saw potential significance even in minor physical aspects of the environment"; Michael Irvin, *Picturing. Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: George Allen, 1979), p. 3-5.

² In the novel, in which the writer included "all his contemporary ideological weave and the drama of Polish life", as Zygmunt Szweykowski wrote, "all the means Prus used previously, almost all the shades supplied to the reader will find their place here in such a full, synthetic, and at the same time attacking the original band as in no other work by this writer"; see: Zygmunt Szweykowski, *Twórczość Bolesława Prusa*,. II edition, (Warszawa: PIW, 1972), p.161, 193.

to use in practice the “composition notes” written down after a long break (since 1886). An attempt to translate his reflections on contemporary times into artistic notation has been aimed at optimizing communication efficiency in the eyes of Prus, bringing the artist closer to maximum control based on the text of meanings, which is the next step in achieving the great goal to make the world better or perfect, to build a society composed of useful individuals, and to make these individuals happier. This program, which in Prus’ notes is summarized by the formula $\pm Sz \pm Ut \pm D$ (indicating a possible increase or decrease in the degree of happiness [pol. *Szczęście*], usefulness [pol. *Użyteczność*] and perfection [pol. *Doskonałość*] adequately) This program from the very beginning is connected with the tasks of describing the world and of describing ordinary life, which is “a product and part of a certain atmosphere”, as Erich Auerbach wrote. Behind the author of the fundamental study on mimesis, one can point to the roots of the Balzacian Prus’ sensitivity and apply the statement, as if:

The newness of this attitude, and the new type of subjects, which were seriously, problematically, tragically treated, caused the gradual development of an entirely new kind of serious or, if one prefers, elevated style; neither the[...] level of conception and expression could easily be transferred to the new subjects; at first there was some uncertainty in regard to the kind of serious attitude to be assumed³.

One of the key issues for Prus is “how to decompose, complete and change the events of everyday life, so that they provide material for all feelings, thoughts and desires, even the most sublime, and on the other hand, the ugliest and the most comical” [all trans. – AK]. Of course, in a realistic novel, the answer to this question must be linked to the background of events, while the routine must be shown in the closest possible connection with space: recognizable and credible. However, the poetics of Prus’ description adds another, extensive, dimension to it: “Description is a series of definitions” says the writer. The last word of these definitions is $\pm Sz \pm Ut \pm D$ [NK II].

The Doll as a “training ground” for Prus’ theoretical assumptions is at the same time a psychological project, a project whose progress can be tracked thanks to the preserved notes. Growing out of Prus’ ambition to become a “serious writer” and to break with the image of a publicist, chronicler and humorist, these notes are an attempt to find ways to capture current times in a novel form. By breaking with the important element of the novel tradition, in parallel to Henry James⁴, Prus pays attention to the narrative psychological details associated with the

³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature - New and Expanded Edition*, intro. E. Said, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [2014]), p. 481. In the case of Prus, what would matter here would be the labels of a publicist and humorist who faces a task that is too complicated, taking on the novel form. The issues of composition treated very seriously by the writer are among those who, for this “seriousness of everyday life”, tried to find the appropriate tone.

⁴ “The interiorization of plot, as well as the careful notation of characters’ opinions about themselves and those who surround them, came to dominate late-nineteenth-century psychological novels, especially those of Henry James, whose work achieved a complete separation between moral skepticism and the comic tradition in which it had been rooted. This period injected a new moral seriousness into concerns that had hitherto tended to provoke laughter or irony, thereby continuing a more general tendency in the history of the novel. Thanks to this transformation, the school of empathy bequeathed to the twentieth-century novel its rich understanding of the infinitesimal fluctuations of the human psyche”. Thomas Pavel, *The Novel in Search of Itself: A Historical Morphology*, w: *The Novel. Vol. 2: Forms and Themes*, ed. F. Moretti (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 24-25.

surroundings in which they occur. The world Prus describes emerges from his experience of Warsaw, but he arranges its spaces for the use of individual characters, building from them a panorama of states rather than a catalogue of unmoving locations. The relationship between the characters and the objects they are looking at seems to be a key issue raised in the notes from the mid-eighties, set in the idea of the necessity of dynamizing the spaces described and showing the phenomena in their complexity. Prus explores here within the psychological diagnoses familiar for years and authors valued by him - John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and Hippolyte Taine - which reflect the same thoughts that also appear in Clark Murray's textbook, probably read by the author of *The Doll* at the turn of 1886 and '87⁵. *A Handbook of Psychology* is an analysis of the mental life of a human being and his cognitive and emotional processes, connected with an important belief in the special power of literature, which cannot:

[R]eproduce the visual aspects of a remote object or a past scene with the vividness which may be given to itself by painting or sculpture, nor can it stir the soul with the uncontrollable emotions which music excites; but its range is unrestricted by any of the limitations within which these arts are confined. It can even, by what has been somewhat significantly named word-painting, produce with some success a visual Image of what is delimit in space or time and the pictures, thus conjured before the imagination, instead of being limited to an instantaneous situation, may range through any period, and be quickened with all the liveliness of movement, of change. [...] historical events, to an unfolding chain of argument, to illustration of a universal truth, **it can enlist intellect in the work of emotion, and direct an emotional outburst to its aim** with a certainty which is impossible under the vague impulses of music⁶.

This sense of art's causality, reflected in the book, which can be considered an expression of a relatively popular understanding of the mechanisms of the human psyche, points to an important aspect related to the functioning of literature in society. It is affirmed in Polish literature by the phenomenon of biased works in the first decades after the fall of the January Uprising. Despite the feeling of exhaustion and the progressive familiarization with the difficulties of an aesthetic compromise, which were the works primarily focused on the educational effect, the idea of controlling the process of the reception of a literary work does not disappear with the maturation of realism, the development of naturalistic techniques and, finally, the birth of modernist sensitivity.

1. Prus confirms this in his notes, made at the same time as the idea for *The Doll*:
2. What influence do I intend to exert on the will of the reader?
3. How to present a thing so that it is *understood* <and *seen*>?

How to present details so that he can see , *sense* and *feel* them?[NK II, 145]

⁵ Murray's book was published in print at the turn of October and November, having already received permission to print in April 1886. Prus mentions it in the Chronicle of 14.11.1886, which suggests that it may have come into its possession soon after it was published in print. However, it does not discuss it, which leaves in the sphere of speculation the fact of an imminent interest in the textbook for psychology. Cf. Bolesław Prus, *Kroniki*, ed. Z. Szwejkowski, t. 9, Warszawa: PIW 1960, p. 260, 528.

⁶ Clark Murray, *A Handbook of Psychology*, (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1885), p. 385 [epub version]

From that time, there is a belief that phenomena should be described in at least two sentences in order to allow for a “feeling of change” [NK II, 189] that “psychological effects must be noted, for they give the description an affective color” [190] and pay attention to what someone “cares [about] the most” [190]. This is shown most vividly in the first description of Wokulski’s shop, as presented in the novel:

Making sure his tie was on and his watch and wallet in his pocket, Ignacy took the big key from his table and, stooping a little, ceremoniously unlocked the door of the back shop, which was fastened with an iron bar. He and the servant went in, lit a few little gas-jets and, while the servant was sweeping the floor, Ignacy perused his timetable for the day through his eye-glasses:

‘Put 800 roubles into the bank, hm... Three albums and the dozen wallets to be dispatched to Lublin... That’s it! An order to Vienna for 1200 guildens... Fetch the delivery from the railroad depot... Tell off that saddler for not sending the cases... A mere nothing, to be sure! Write to Staś... Oh, a mere nothing...’

When he had finished, he would light a few more gas-jets and by their glare would survey the merchandise in the showcases and cupboards.

‘Cuff-links, pins, wallets... good!... Gloves, fans, neckties, that’s it!... Walking sticks, umbrellas, travelling bags... And here, albums, handbags... The blue one was sold yesterday, of course... Candlesticks, ink-wells, paper weight... The porcelain... Why did they turn that vase around, I wonder? Surely? No, no damage... Dolls with genuine hair, the puppets how, the merry-go-round... Must put that merry-go-round in the window tomorrow, the fountain in already out of date... Oh, a mere nothing, to be sure! It’s almost eight o’clock!... I’ll wager that Klein will be first, and Mraczewski last. Of course!... He met some governess or other and bought her a handbag on his account, and with a discount... As long as he doesn’t start buying without a discount and without a bill...’

So he muttered to himself and walked about the shop, stooping, his hands in his pockets, with the poodle following. When his master stopped and eyed an object, the dog would sit down and scratch his thick curls with his hind leg, while the dolls, large, medium and small, blond and brunette, standing in the cupboard in a row, would stare back at the them with lifeless eyes⁷.

In the above fragment, saturated with the pale darkness of the morning, one can see a gradual adjustment of the lighting as imagined by the reader, widening the horizon of looking at it with the lighting of gas-jets: first when Ignacy enters the room with a servant, then when the old salesman lights other lamps, making a revision of the cupboards and showcases. The items counted with this morning’s inventory are subjectivized, inscribed in the most recent history of the shop, carefully noted in the character’s head. The description is conducted from his perspective, but not only Rzecki looks. Apparently, they are also seen through the “dead eyes” of the dolls in the novel, which, due to the intriguing title, cannot be ignored at this point.

⁷ B. Prus. *The Doll*, trans. D. Welsh, intro. S. Barańczak, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1996), p. 6, epub version.

The fact that their look in this fragment is quite uncanny gives the description of the routine a special character, and additionally includes the element of the unknowable in the dynamics between the novel's perspectives and the descriptions of "states of things". It is important in the current attempt to name the boundaries of positivist formation in the context of the first part of Herbert Spencer's⁸ *A System of synthetic philosophy*, which was published in Polish at the time. It also makes us realize that the dynamics of the intersecting looks and limited "illumination" significantly defines Prus' writing already in the early parts of the novel, in which dolls and other dead objects can also have a voice when given enough attention.

"There are many physical lights", Prus writes in February 1887, and he mentions, for example, candles, stars, electricity, lightning and the Sun. "Similarly," he continues, "there are many classes of spiritual illumination, and each of them has a different degree of virtue and sublimity." [NK II, 162] The writer mentions characters who can provide such a special illumination of things, including a sage, a hero, a child, or a craftsman [NK II, 163]. They can also be, he points out, objects.

The literary world of Prus as a whole creates, in the words of Zofia Mitosek, "a model of interpersonal and inter-subject relations"⁹, but also the relationship between man and objects. The motif (the title one?) of the doll analyzed by the researcher is only one of the topics. As already quoted above, the "conversations" by Rzecki with objects "inhabiting" showcases under the watchful eyes of the dead dolls resting on the shelves build a special atmosphere of permanence, an atmosphere that grows out of a very thorough way of describing people, the spaces they stay in and the objects they come into contact with¹⁰.

The way Rzecki looks at the shop, and how Prus describes the shop using this character, has crucial meaning in the light of his theorizing about the description. And although, if one believes Ewa Paczoska¹¹, Rzecki's room as described a moment before the quoted scene does not have any signs of intimacy, the shop is certainly his second (or maybe just his first) home. In it, the character's relationship with space, though firmly rooted in routine, is combined with constant excitement, and everyday life becomes an endless adventure. "How to decompose, complete and change," asks Prus, "the events of everyday life. That they provide material for all feelings, thoughts and desires, even the most sublime, and on the other hand, the ugliest and most comical?" [NK II, 163] The psychology of the time did not give a direct answer to this. As Murray wrote,

⁸ Cf. Maciej Gloger, *Pozytywizm: między nowoczesnością a modernizmem*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 2007, z. 1, s. 11; Henryk Markiewicz, *Młoda Polska a dziedzictwo pozytywizmu*, in: *Dialogi z tradycją. Rozprawy i szkice historyczno-literackie*, (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), p. 159.

⁹ Zofia Mitosek, "Lalka" – epizod czy nazwa?, in: *Mimesis. Zjawisko i problem* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1997), p. 254,

¹⁰ As Katarzyna Kościwicz wrote: "Carefully carried out and aimed at capturing the whole, the description known from physiological sketches is reduced in Prus' novels to ephemeral observation, a captured moment, a face of a passer-by caught out of the crowd, on which the protagonist's attention is focused. Only from these fragments passed through the filter of the characters' consciousness is the whole built", Katarzyna Kościwicz, *Doświadczenie nowoczesności w "Lalce" i "Emancypantkach" Bolesława Prusa*, w: *Bolesław Prus. Pisarz, publicysta, myśliciel*, ed. M. Woźniakiewicz-Dziadosz, S. Fita (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2003), p. 48

¹¹ Ewa Paczoska, "Lalka" – balkony i wnętrza, in: "Lalka" i inne. *Studia w stulecie polskiej powieści realistycznej*, ed. J. Bachórz, M. Głowiński (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 1992), p. 98-99.

“it has been claimed that the source of ridicule is the various properties of objects”, such as “inappropriateness, triviality, moral nothingness, which is accompanied by a feeling of strength, or an exaggerated image of oneself”, but, notes the psychologist, the feeling is always depends on two conditions: one subjective, one subjective. Therefore, without knowing in what direction the mind remains at a given moment to a given property of the object, it is impossible to say in advance what kind of feeling it will¹².

And Prus is aware of what can be seen, when he writes about the memories, that their confrontation with reality can lead to “comedy, embarrassment, even horror, and then surprise, admiration, worship”. [NK II, 45] The writer’s answer to the question of how to show the world’s everyday matters is partly in the fragments devoted to everyday life contained in the first parts of *The Doll*, but they are built using a special structure of plans used in the description:

The foreground is made up of people and things that are not only embraced by our external senses, but even know their thoughts, feelings and will. They are like me.

The background is made up of people and things that are only seen with external senses.

The third plan is made up of people and things perceived only by sight and hearing.

The fourth plan is made up of people and things known only from the news, from not very accurate stories.

The fifth plan of a person, things and phenomena that we guess, unclearly guess their existence. [NK II, 53-54]¹³

Subordinating the description of the subject’s perspective comes from the desire to make the described phenomena, spaces, objects and people in them as close as possible to those perceived sensually in life. This relativity is settled in the psychological mapping of the world by the subject, reconstructed by philosophers important for the author of *The Doll*’s philosophy. Emphasizing the relations between objects by following the above description the principle of association and comparison related to the creation of images translates into a review conducted by Rzecki. Prus does not order the narrator to list the store’s inventory; what is in the store is catalogued by the protagonist: Rzecki, while walking, carries out the task of actively focusing the reader’s attention. The first parts of the novel, however, are based on a similar principle, with fragments about Izabela’s visit to the shop or the following Wokulski-flâneur contemplations.

¹²C. Murray, 344.

¹³In October, Prus will return to the issue, this time describing the plans as such: “I. That which is me, what I see and feel throughout the whole being. II. What works on me and what I work on. III. What works on me, but n what I have no influence on. IV. What I see and hear, but no longer works on me. V. What I know from rumors and very distant indirect influences.” [NK II, 75].

The dynamics and subjectivization the writer attributes to the “effective” description also stem from the psychological notes of Julian Ochorowicz, who in his *“Wrażenia, uwagi i spostrzeżenia”*, published in the mid-seventies, notes, “there is no consciousness without a change of impressions”, “experience is not about the amount of received impressions, but about the way they are perceived and preserved”, “sensual pleasure is (...) weaker than mental pleasure”. The “processing” that the mind does is of key importance here; they are the foundation of identity, because, as Ochorowicz says: “‘I’ still perceives the material for its existence in the form of internal impressions”¹⁴. It is this game, which takes place in the subject, which ultimately constitutes a mental reality; it is thanks to it that the space exists first of all, but also for Prus’ characters. For the writer, the description has to be created in such a way that “the notions detached symbolize real objects, which in the human soul have a deliberate effect, i.e. they best summarize the property characterized by the notion” and “control the choice of objects in such a way that the chosen symbol arouses a clear idea, but still a certain feeling”. [NK II, 56] Let us use as an example fragments showing Wokulski’s expedition to Easter mass:

He went into the church and was struck by another sight. Some mendicants, male and female, were begging for the charity which God would repay to the charitable in the next world. Some of the faithful were kissing the feet of the Christ who had been tortured and put to death by the Roman State, while others had fallen on their knees on the threshold and were raising up their hands and eyes as if gazing at supernatural vision. **The church was plunged in gloom, which could not be dispelled by the glow of several hundred tapers in silver candelabra.** Here and there, on the floor of the chapels, could be seen **indistinctly the shapes** of people lying outstretched or crouching down to conceal their piety and humility. **Looking at their motionless bodies, a man might think** their souls had left them for a time and flown to some better world.

‘Now I understand,’ thought Wokulski, ‘why visiting a church intensifies faith. Here everything is arranged so as to remind us of eternity.’¹⁵

In this passage, the writer truly arranges the phenomena in such a way that, from the description, “it is possible to arrange a specific gallery[ies] of objects, groups and phenomena”. [NK II, 56]; this is seen by the protagonist himself, who evaluates the interior design and low lighting, which does not allow the boundaries of the temple to be seen. He again “plays” with light and suggests associations. The immobile people seem to belong to this space, they build it together with the meanings, which Wokulski suggests to the reader. The mechanism of such construction of meanings is continued in further parts of the description of the temple, subordinated to the perspective of the figure:

His gaze shifted from these shadows absorbed in prayer towards the light. In various parts of the church he saw tables spread with carpets, on them trays full of bank-notes, silver and gold, and near them were ladies seated in comfortable chairs, dressed in furs, feather and velvet, surrounded

¹⁴Julian Ochorowicz, *Z dziennika psychologa. Wrażenia, uwagi i spostrzeżenia* (Warszawa: Władysław Dębski 1876), p. 110, 179, 217.

¹⁵Prus, 242.

by cheerful young people. The most pious were accosting passers-by, all were talking and enjoying themselves as if they were at a ball. It seemed to Wokulski that at this moment he could distinguish three worlds. One (which had long since departed from the earth) had prayed and erected powerful buildings to the glory of God. The second, poor and humble, knew how to pray but only erected cottages—while, the third built palaces for itself, but had forgotten how to pray and made God's House into a place for fashionable gatherings, like carefree birds that build their nests and sing on the graves of dead heroes.

'And I? What am I—a stranger to them all?'¹⁶

Elements of space are again subordinated to the perspective of the protagonist, whose attention is drawn to what is illuminated, but who also takes a critical approach to it. A number of people lead Wokulski to a sense of alienation, thus not satisfying his needs; they can also lead the reader to "complex and mental feelings". [NK II 60], as Prus suggests, against the background of the social criticism conducted in a fragment. Perhaps all this can be subordinated to a psychological perspective, which would be helped by Murray's words, combining Prus' theoretical experiments with the tradition of thinking about engaged art:

An artist, being a moral activist, should have a certain moral goal in his artistic activity, as well as in other spheres of his conduct. Since a work of art is a product of intellectual pleasure, an artist should not underestimate the value of moral feelings, since any blatant rapprochement with them would harm his aesthetic purpose. (...) Aesthetic pleasure results from considering the way moral signs of life have been combined to make an aesthetic impression.¹⁷

When the narrator of *The Doll*, following one or the other character, actually catches his eye on something, he tries to stop this image, to render it as if with a concrete thought. For what is inexpressible, he seeks in such moments his expression; ordinary objects and events are illuminated from many sides and arranged accordingly to capture the laws of life. Also, in these fragments, Prus "subordinates" to the theory of description, which, however, as it says from the first notes of this issue of the composition devoted to "should be full, solid. It is necessary to describe the form and material, superficiality and internal structure, not only the front of the object, but the back and sides". [NK II, 56]. However, the remark written a little earlier seems to remain unchanged: "a feeling should be a background for every description of objects", laying the foundations for the moods present in Prus' writing, the moods coloured by the attitude of his characters: "apart from the objects described, there may be a couple of feelings put together like colours or standing next to each other like tones", and "objects with these feelings may be in harmony or disharmony" [NK II, 44].

In realism, as Morris noted, "the reader's epistemological progress through novels imitates the way we acquire empirical knowledge of the actual social and physical worlds by means of observation of factual details, behaviour and events."¹⁸ The researcher indicates the principle

¹⁶Prus, 242.

¹⁷Murray, 348.

¹⁸Morris, 20.

on which *"The Doll"* is based more than any other novel of the time, revealing to the reader each of the characters gradually, at first limiting the reader's knowledge and only with time rewarding this description from many perspectives and sides, giving an idea not only of the front but also of the "back and sides". To this, one can add, after Michał Głowiński¹⁹, that Prus anticipates the meanings of the novel scene, loosening its relationship with the cause and effect sequence of narration, making the reader look around the situation rather than harnessing it primarily in a series of resulting events. In the scene, the meeting with Isabella will be important for most readers, but the previous description of the church and the characters' impressions and feelings assigned to the images determine the essence of the crack between the protagonist and the chosen one in his heart, tired and bored with her tasks and difficulties of fate. Both the reader and Wokulski are linked by the idea that "all these ceremonies" give "time and opportunity to get acquainted". [L I, 203].

To modernize the way in which the reader is introduced to the world depicted and build the tension of expectation, *The Doll* makes use of the principle of curiosity that functioned in psychology in Prus' day. He ambitiously moves from details to generalizations, often trying to put into practice a principle for translating phenomena he described in November 1886:

For a phenomenon to be well understood and felt, it must be presented in such a way that it affects all our talents.

This can be achieved by using juxtaposition. Because when e.g. a phenomenon works only on our senses, then when we compare it with the biological one, we move our thoughts and feelings. And vice versa: when we have a mental phenomenon, it is good to compare it with a physical one, so that it moves our senses.

The description is complete and satisfactory when it moves all human abilities.

Also, to move all abilities, we decompose the phenomenon as many inferior v. components as there are human abilities. [NK II, 125]

The list of talents is not short, but it opens the brilliant notes on composition in 1886 and thus can be taken as an actual point of reference for the complete description. It would not be productive, it seems, to check whether the description of Łęcki's apartments, one of the more traditional in the novel, achieves this ambitious goal of hitting all the "keys" (as Prus calls them) [NK II, 15]. However, it certainly brings with it the realization of the assumption of showing objects in the eyes of people looking at it, the study of space by considering the possible reactions that it causes:

The apartment had many advantages. It was **dry, warm, spacious, light**. It had marble stairs, gas, electric bells and taps. Each room could be linked with the others if required, or form an entity by itself. The furniture was adequate, neither too much nor too little, and each piece was distinguished by comfortable simplicity rather than striking ostentation. **The sideboard made one feel**

¹⁹Cf. Michał Głowiński, *Powieść młodopolska. Studium z poetyki historycznej* (Kraków: Universitas, 1997), p. 188-189.

certain that the silver would not disappear; **the beds brought to mind well-deserved repose**; the table might groan, and the chairs could be sat on without fear of their collapsing, while anyone might doze in the armchairs.

Anyone who entered moved about freely: no one needed to fear that something would get in the way, or that he might break something. No one was bored while waiting for the master of the house, for he was surrounded by things well worth looking at. All in all, **the sight of antique objects still able to serve several more generations instilled a solemn mood in the beholder.**

Its inhabitants stood out against this background.²⁰[bold – MJ]

The following story about the Łęcki family, interesting and rich in details, remains in an uninterrupted relation with the spaces they occupy. The indescribable description can be complemented by the characters themselves. The technique of characterization of the figure through its *milieu* is a characteristic of the prose of the nineteenth century, inseparably linking the protagonist with space, allowing the reader to deduce the psyche based on material, hard evidence. Similarly, the Rzecki's sad chamber, as Prus shows, before the reader follows the subject to the shop, is meant to signal the "spiritual" age of the protagonist, his belonging to the melancholy generation, but also the stability of his character. The very description of the room, the enumeration of the objects in it (briefly characterized, juxtaposed with others) allows for associations related to specific elements of the decor (faded curtains), the way they are used, the way they are cared for (stained tablecloth) and whether they are used at all (candles and pliers intended for trimming their wicks).

Like Isabella's introspection in Chapter VI of the novel, insight into Ignacy's past is intended to show the novel's spaces not only in synchronic but also in diachronic terms. First presented in the absence of the principle, Wokulski's shop in the protagonist's diary acquires a different character, this time "illuminated" by the perspective of a child. This space, warmed up by the warmth of Rzecki's memoirs, is painted according to the aforementioned rule from the notes that "a feeling should be the background of every object description". [NK II, 44] In the eyes of the young man, the storehouse will become almost a cave of bandits, a space of extraordinary rapture comparable to that experienced by the heroes of the *Arabian Nights* fairy tales:

I had known Mincel's shop for a long time, for my father used to send me there to buy paper, and aunt for soap. I would always hurry there with joyful curiosity to look at the toys in the window. As I recall, there was a large mechanical Cossack in one window, which jumped and waved its arms by itself, and in the doorway were a drum, a sabre and a wooden horse with a real tail.

The interior of the shop looked like a large cellar; I could never see the far end of it because of the gloom. All I know is that pepper, coffee and herbs were sold on the left, at a counter behind which huge cupboards rose from floor to ceiling. But paper, ink, plates and glasses were sold at

²⁰Prus, 109.

the counter to the right, where there were glass cupboards, and for soap and washing-powder one went into the depths of the shop, where barrels and piles of wooden boxes were visible.

Even the rafters were loaded. Suspended there were long rows of bladders full of mustard seeds or paint, a huge lamp with a shade, which burned all day long in winter, a net full of corks, and finally a stuffed crocodile, nearly six feet long.[

Rzecki's memory may be a lesson in sentiment for the reader. The "joyful curiosity", the character of which he speaks, introduces into the crowded space, whose fairy-tale character evokes child's sensitivity and an impossible to saturate craving for experiences. All the listed objects evoke sympathy and positive emotions. The mood of the recollecting Rzecki, a bit melancholic, a bit tetric, has been tinged with enthusiasm that saturates the memory.

The shop, built from Rzecki's subjective impressions is also shaped according to Prus' compositional rule of "differentiation"; i.e., showing the components of an object or phenomenon and combining them with a specific perspective, in this case the perspective of a child. He "undresses" a bit differently (on the first factors) Łęcki's daughter, using this description once again to show that the concrete meaning of what we are looking at is determined by the context:

Izabela was an uncommonly pretty woman. Everything about her was original and perfect. More than average in height, a very shapely figure, copious blonde hair with an ash tint, a straight nose, a somewhat supercilious mouth, pearly teeth, ideal hands and feet. **Her eyes were especially impressive, being sometimes dark and dreamy, sometimes full of light and merriment, or sometimes clear blue and as cold as ice.**

The play of her features was striking. When she spoke, her lips, brows, nostrils, hands, her whole figure seemed to speak too — **and above all her eyes spoke, and seemed to want to pour out her soul into that of her interlocutor. When she listened, she seemed to long to drink up the speaker's soul. Her eyes knew how to fondle, caress, weep without tears, to burn and freeze.** Sometimes one would think she was about to put her arms around someone and lean her head on his shoulder: but when the fortunate man melted in delight, she would suddenly make a gesture which said she was not to be caught, for she would either disappear or thrust him away, or simply tell a footman to turn her admirer out of doors ...²¹

The dynamics of both these descriptions - the shop in the old days and Izabela - focus on the impressions of the looking subjects. One is Rzecki recalling his former self; the other is an alleged admirer of Isabella, whose changing character makes it difficult to discern the situation, and his relationship with a young woman. Prus, according to the declarations from the notes, first calls the whole "phenomenon" - whether it is a shop or a beautiful and genuine woman - however, it quickly moves on to naming the components and building tensions within the presented entity. Isabella's elusiveness may become a rule of avoiding reality, while the loss of her amber may be the position she occupies in the face of spiritual phenomena, which is

²¹Prus, 98.

examined by a psychologist. The situation is not so simple, and the writer also acquires this awareness. Perhaps behind Murray an understanding that,

we cannot (...) say that knowledge begins with what could be considered to be general in the strict sense, nor with what could be considered to be single in the strict sense. Since we cannot agree to either one theory or the other, we can only conclude that **knowledge must begin with something undefined**. We have already found out (...) that the raw material of knowledge, as well as of all mental life, is impressions. It is true that impressions cannot yet be called cognition; but cognition begins with showing impressions in the consciousness, namely, identifying those that are similar to each other and distinguishing those that are different from each other. Whenever I am aware, even if in general terms, that the impression I am now experiencing is different from other impressions and similar to some other impressions I have previously experienced, this impression becomes, to some extent, specific, it is clearly known²².

The core of this argument could not have been foreign to Prus. After all, it was Hippolyt Taine, in an important study on intelligence (present in the writer's book collection, and already published in Polish in 1873), who wrote that "We may, then, for want of a better name, say, with Condillac, that the internal primordial event which constitutes our knowledge is sensation"²³. Thus, an indication of the undefined in the cognitive process may have hit the fertile ground, especially in the light of an important entry on composition theory from February 1887:

a) Composition solves two types of issues:

A) The general theme breaks down into a number of specific sentences, forming an organic whole.

B) <Something> The fact expressed in a particular sentence is complemented by other facts, which with the first one form an organic whole.

The first type is practiced by speakers, moralists, etc. The second is chroniclers. The novelist combines both.

General sentences can be called general laws, specific sentences - facts. Well, both fact (f) and law (P) are only one side of the equation. **The other side of the equation is some power, some part of the reader's soul in which a certain game of feelings, thoughts and desires must be evoked.** [NK II, 166-167]

According to Tomasz Sobieraj, "the cognitive horizons of Prus' masterpiece are thus marked by a penetrating ideological discourse with many problems and values that constitute the consciousness of the cultural formation of the 19th century"²⁴. Their multiplicity increases the attractiveness of reconstructing this sensibility, but also, as from the novelist of those

²²Murray, 206.

²³Hippolyt Taine, *On intelligence*, trans. T.D. Haye, (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1895) p. 219.

²⁴T. Sobieraj, "Lalka" na horyzoncie dziewiętnastowieczności (modernizmu), in: *Świat "Lalki". 15 studiów*, ed. J. A. Malik, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL 2005, p. 10-11.

times, requires a focus on the effects on which it focused. The power which Prus writes about is the reverse of the coin, where on the obverse, facts arise from certain laws or confirm them, which is a necessary point that must be taken into account in determining his cognitive horizon.

Similarly, Murray's concept of the impression "in a certain way defined, clearly known" and Taine's statement that "all progress of knowledge consists in distinguishing more and more precisely a phenomenon from phenomena different from it and in identifying it with those to which it is similar"²⁵ are points of reference for Prus' location of the novel as an artistic activity, dedicated to the task of representation, but also, above all, to build a special image, a situation to evoke a specific feeling, further the cognitive effect and specific action (influence on the will) [NK II, 151], against all doubt. All of the above is invariably on course for realistic conventions; however, the novelty of *The Dolls* is to trace Prus' spirited analysis in the practice of description, analyses which on the one hand allow the reader to feel and understand the world of the characters in the fullest possible way, and, on the other hand, testified to this world of elusiveness.

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

²⁵C. Murray, 206.

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KEYWORDS

description

SPACE

psychology

ABSTRACT:

The article defines the importance of late nineteenth-century research and psychological reflections for the construction of descriptions in Boleslaw Prus' *The Doll*. The issues related to the description of the world and the man - as shown by the author's 'composition notes' from that time - built an important thread of his epistemological and artistic reflection. Theoretical notes by the author of *The Doll* make it possible to present this novel in a slightly different light: as a testing ground for techniques developed in the psychological workshop of influence and impressions for the interested reader.

POSITIVISM

*composition theory***NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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To Describe the World with a Memory.

The Antecedents in the Most Recent Fictional Digital Games

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The development of electronic technologies, as closely related to the game industry, affects not only the quality of digital productions (almost photorealistic graphics, diverse gameplay, virtual reality, etc.), but also obviously, allows for an increasingly complex development of the stories contained in the games. The consequences of such evolution should therefore be considered not only within the context of juxtapositions between the next generations of computer processors, consoles or graphic card models, but above all from the perspective of theme-based changes, worldviews and new content that shape the cultural dimension of digital games as expansive multimodal narratives¹. Although 30, or even 20 years ago, computer games were associated mainly with their ludic aspect, nowadays, by presenting complex stories, they are part of cultural, social and ideological discourses. This is not only a matter of the topics that have been raised for years, such as violence, simulation of killing, or issues related to game addiction in children and young people²; these factors, though very important and still connected with the games, do not exhaust the whole list of subjects and controver-

¹ The issues of multimodality in games are discussed, among others, by Christy Dena, "Beyond Multimedia, Narrative and Game. The Contributions of Multimodality and Polymorphic Fictions", in: *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, ed. R. Page (New York, 2010) 183-201; and: Krzysztof M. Maj, *Światotwórstwo w fantastyce. Od przedstawienia do zamieszkiwania* (Kraków: Universitas, 2019), 259-280.

² An example of the extremely negative perception of computer games because they have violent motives is the book of Iwona Ulfik-Jaworska, *Komputerowi mordercy* (Lublin, 2015).

sies. To name a few, there is the problem of racism, which appeared in the comments and reviews of the third part of the Polish *Witcher3*, or the criticism of the title, from the feminist perspective⁴. Thus, it is obvious that digital games - especially the most complex and fictionalised ones - although they represent a fragment of the so-called entertainment supersystems (being sometimes, as in the case of Blizzard's production *World Of Warcraft*, their foundation), they become a significant medium transmitting, apart from e.g. historical information, also contemporary ideological and world-view content⁵. Such a wide range of topics gains its cultural significance and evokes - hardly countable - evidence of reception, because when designing stories in games, creators use traditional ways of creating them, characteristic for literature and film. The evolution of digital games therefore reveals important trends, related both to the direction of topic changes, to the popularity of certain plot solutions, as well as to the reproduction of specific means of expression. Considering the specificity of the phenomena of computer entertainment (interactive exploration, dialogue, cutscenes, gameplay), this process can be analysed on two different levels:

- at the level of new theme-based projects: as a multimodal potential, which is an interpretative proposition for the player, who will more or less connect, read and understand the story in the game;
- or at the level of programmed realizations: as e.g. necessary (or voluntary) role-playing solutions, which the player will co-create.

The first case, however, concerns the changes in the topic choices of the dominant, and the second case concerns the ways of their presentation.

Moral change

One of the most visible changes in the area of the latest, fictionalized digital games is a turn towards moral issues, especially family matters. And it is irrelevant whether, as part of their world-creating efforts, programmers and screenwriters refer to a universe already present in popular culture (e.g. the world of *Star Wars*, Andrzej Sapkowski's concepts, etc.) or create the world from scratch (e.g. the post-apocalyptic reality of the *Fallout* series). In each case, we are confronted with the same tendency: a combination of the most recent scenes of the stories co-created by the player with the theme of family relations and conflicts. For example, in the first two parts of the digital series *The Witcher* (2007;2011) the creators focused the player's attention mostly on the epic aspect of political and wartime events in which the protagonist participated and had an influence. The third part, however (*The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, 2015), together with the expansions (*Hearts of Stone*, 2015, *Blood and Wine*, 2016) - already much

³ See: <https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem> [access - 12.01.2020]

⁴ See: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2015/05/31/why-feminist-frequency-is-dead-wrong-about-the-witcher-3/#2c22c0d435bf> [access - 12.01.2020]

⁵ About the *Witcher's* universe as an entertainment supersystem writes, among others Zbigniew Wałaszewski, "Wiedźmin: pierwszy polski supersystem rozrywkowy", in: *Obraz literatury w komunikacji społecznej po roku '89*, ed. A. Werner, T. Żukowski, (Warszawa, 2013), 128-129.

more elaborate and technically perfect - introduce the player/user/recipient into the meanders of complex family and customary arrangements. By understanding the causes of human drama, an analysis of parents' and children's behaviour determines the progress of the game, both in the basic part of the game (one of the main threads was directly titled "Family Matters") and in the expansions. The positive ending of the virtual adventure depends de facto on how the player interprets e.g. the role of a parent - Geralt or the relationship of two adult sisters marked by childhood trauma⁶.

Similar changes can also be seen in the successive stages of development of the most - so far - modularized MMORPG, which remains *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. BioWare's production was released in 2011 and became famous for a number of difficult to count dialogues (among other things, voice acting was used on an unprecedented scale), stories, plots and cutscenes⁷. The basic version of the game, as well as two subsequent feature extensions (*Rise of the Hutt Cartel*, 2013; *Shadow of Revan*, 2014), concerned the epic dimension of galactic battles and intrigues. However, a significant turning-point occurred in 2015, when, with the extensions of *Knights of the Fallen Empire* and *Knights of the Eternal Throne* (2016), the developers introduced the main theme, showing the vivid study of the Emperor's family's pathological breakdown. From now on, the audience's attention is to be caught not only by the arcade gameplay, but above all by the analysis of the attitudes of parents and children. The story is co-created by the player and thus conditioned by a number of variables (player's choices), but in its essential message, it shows the consequences of the domination of one of the parents (father) in the educational process, which in grown-up children manifests itself in a lack of empathy and a tendency to psychological manipulation or emotional blackmail. The player, regardless of the character he or she creates (the protagonist), follows and co-creates this family story in order to learn, apart from the course of events across the galaxy, the mechanisms of depravity, moral compromises and possible solutions to family problems.

These examples are of course one of many. In the following, you can cite titles such as: *Fallout 4* (2015), *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), *Assassin`s Creed: Origins* (2017), *Assassin`s Creed: Odyssey* (2018), or *God of War* (2018), which one of the reviewers wrote about:

"Not long ago, it was hard to imagine that I would be reflecting on paternity and apparent roughness, inspired...by the evenings spent with the God of War game. Over 50 hours of Kratos and Atreus' journey to the highest peak of Midgard, however, makes me think about it. During the journey, the relationship between father and son changes, and I - in a way - with them⁸."

The role of the family, its functions, educational aspects, relations between spouses, parents and children are no longer just a trivialized background for the events co-created in the games

⁶ See: Rafał Kochanowicz, „Zmiennik wybawiony albo tryumf wiedźmina. Cyfrowy dialog z kulturą i obyczajowością (Wiedźmin 3), w *Literatura i Kultura Popularna XXIV*, ed. Anna Gemra (Wrocław 2018), 313-327.

⁷ See: <https://www.pcgamer.com/star-wars-the-old-republic-scoops-guinness-world-record-for-voice-acting/> [access - 12.01.2020]

⁸ See: <https://www.eurogamer.pl/articles/2018-04-22-god-of-war-i-trudna-relacja-ojciec-syn> [access - 12.01.2020]

(although there is no lack of such examples); they begin to determine the main vector of the plot development. After all, the popularity of this subject is hardly connected with the sense of the authors' pedagogical mission. It is simply universal and therefore free from the historical or local contexts that define the situation of potential players and recipients from around the world.

At the same time, the moral change, as understood in this way, results in the use of specific methods of presentation in games, thanks to which the existential and psychological aspect of the co-created story is highlighted. The specificity of the technologically conditioned changes in the multimodal character of digital narratives and the choice of new topics have caused the descriptive layer in the latest productions to be constructed within the framework of variously designed antecedents.

Digital antecedents

References to the past are, so to speak, an inseparable element of digital world creation in games, the authors of which specify ideas related to a comprehensive vision of the fantastic universe (usually). At the beginning, when the first digital productions of "paper" role-playing games, kept in the Dungeons and Dragons convention, such as *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* (1998), detailed information about the world in which the game takes place was contained in extensive textbooks. In addition to instructions on how to use the program, control or the characteristics of game characters and classes, the user found in them an outline of intrigue and a more or less detailed description of the world:

Discouraging the Unworthy

Enjoying your world, are you?

It must be nice, being so secure in where you are, what you do, and who you know. Most everyone around you is much the same, I'd imagine.

And you're all such a herd of sheep! Slow and simple and when the knife comes from behind to catch your throat, all you'll have time to do is squeak, "Baaaa!"

Or maybe you're different? Maybe you've got the fortitude to see beyond the safe illusion. Or maybe you're just a fool, rushing in where pagan deities fear to romp. Either way, we need your skills...and your heart.

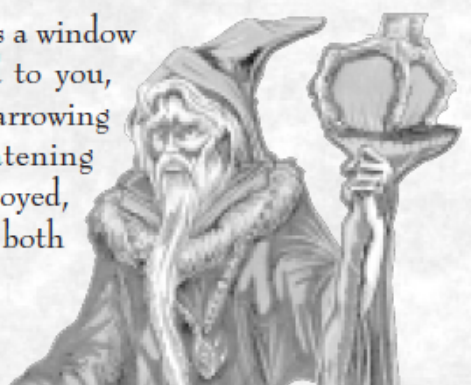
I am the Ur-Mage Klavis Verge – no doubt you've heard of me!

Eh? What?! Well, no matter – you're ignorant to a lot of truths in the universe! I'm here to educate you. To open your eyes...

Accept this: your world is not your own. At best, it's a window on a reality of *Might and Magic*: Enroth. A new world to you, perhaps, but a land of long tradition...now facing a harrowing danger. If it collapses beneath the horrors now threatening to over-run it, your world will most assuredly be destroyed, shattered all the way down to its foundation. Survival of both worlds- your own and Enroth - depends on your actions.

No pressure, though.

You have the tools before you. You call them by



The storyline contained in the game was already transmedial; it would begin in the book and develop and end during the game on the computer. With time, however, and with the development of technology, the role of textbook descriptions has been reduced, and their function has been taken over by the lexicons, diaries, chronicles, codes and encyclopaedias incorporated in the game. Today, knowledge about the world of the game can also be organized by using the online tutorials, or by using algorithm-based Wikipedia and fandom databases. The first references to the past were usually epic and historical. Descriptions of what had preceded the events in the game showed the world on a macro scale, as in the history of the continent, the land, wars, etc. The situation began to change when more and more complex dialogues appeared in the games, and the storyline vector of the development of events stopped being exclusively about the epic dimension of the story (saving the world, the galaxy, etc.) and was designed by the creators in such a way that the viewer could also learn more about the history of this or that character. An example in this case is the production of BioWare - *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords* (2004) - in which the player's character not only fights for the right cause, but frequently talks to his galactic travel companions. In this way, the user gains information necessary for further gameplay and learns about the personalities of the virtual interlocutors. It can also be said that BioWare has popularized this aspect of the virtual adventure, which involves extensive dialogue as a way to provide descriptions of the world and to introduce customary topics. While in earlier productions, however, dialogues were a complementary feature, in the title crowning the series, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011), conversations with companions (and with other characters from the game world) are already a modal dominant point of the main story (they are simply the principal way of passing information to the player by using voice acting), which, by the way, also affects their functional aspect in gameplay. A properly performed conversation (success depends on the interpretive skills of the player) results in an increase in – via a numerically expressed modulator (called *Presence*) – trust, fidelity, and commitment to the companion character. The higher the level, the greater the influence of the assistant on the elements of the virtual environment, which makes the gameplay easier (defeating opponents, etc.). The main feature of such a dialogue is, however, that in the great majority of cases, the conversations are reminiscences. The characters talk about what happened to them before they joined the main character's crew, they confide their old secrets, and sometimes, if this is the will of the player, they have an affair with the avatar he or she is leading. It is worth mentioning that there are over forty of these companions - only in the basic version of the game - and to each of them, the creators have linked a separate, individual story, closely matched to the character class chosen by the player (e.g. Jedi Knight, Imperial Agent, etc.). If the avatar refers to the convention of the Empire, his companions expose the social and cultural nuances of this faction. This gives the player additional information about the game environment, which influences the further stages of the game. The aforementioned extensions (*Knights of the Fallen Empire*; *Knights of the Eternal Throne*), on the other hand, have significantly developed the customary aspect of the conversations: the player's protagonist learns the story and motivations of members of the whole family (mother, father, sons, daughters), while at the same time the creators - by introducing additional film interludes and the so-called trailers⁹ incorporated in the game - have intensified the retrospective character of the intrigue. The films, which open up new ventures show, in order: the twin brothers growing up under the supervision of their father (*Knights of the Fallen Empire*), and in the second case: the

⁹ You can view them on the website: <http://www.swtor.com/eternal-throne> [access – 12.01.2020]

dramatic childhood of the daughter and the brave behaviour of the mother (*Knights of the Eternal Throne*). The axis of events is thus a family conflict, and the solution to it - depending on the choices and improvisation of the player - is the key to overcoming the chaos in the whole galaxy. Without a doubt, the BioWare programmers, even though the events in the game take place about 3600 years before the so-called Battle of Yavin, refer in this way to the Skywalker family's narrative, but they are much more elaborate in the psychological layer of conflict.

A similar approach was taken by programmers from CD Projekt Red in the third part of the digital *Witcher*. Again, references to the past and the retrospective way of creating a story are dominant. Geralt, led by the player, is not only a "monster killer", but most of all a detective recreating the course of past events. By improvising, the player combines the Witcher's hypotheses and discoveries and follows the process of deduction, thus learning about the course of the distant events and very often their moral basis. "Family matters" - as a theme of one of the main threads - here represent an excellent example. Through Geralt, the viewer becomes somehow a "confessor"/"psychoanalyst" of a tyrannical, lost alcoholic husband and father, thereby exploring the causes and consequences of the collapse of family ties¹⁰. This quite long and multi-stage conversation with the "Bloody Baron" also provides, apart from personal information, a whole range of descriptions and nuances related to the reality of the fantastic world. Therefore, it has a similar world-forming function as the dialogues in BioWare's production.

The individualised past, childhood experiences, and memories both sad and joyous which the player co-creates as part of the dialogue (he chooses optional questions, answers and comments of varied fatal function) do not exhaust the retrospective description of the worlds shown in the games. The trick, which the creators increasingly use, is the playable and un-playable flashbacks, referring to film poetics, and unique, surrealistic journeys to the past. In the third part of *The Witcher*, Geralt uses the help of an oneiromancer to dream of Ciri's past in Novigrad; the viewer watches a heavily metaphorized film interlude. In the expansion *Hearts of Stone*, Geralt, controlled by the player, recreates the couple's ruined life. By activating subsequent requisites, the player watches genre scenes from the past, as if adapted for the film about Ebenezer Scrooge. In *Blood and Wine*, Geralt takes a "sentimental journey" with one of the characters to the magical land of fairy tales, an escapist oasis of childhood.



¹⁰Kochanowicz, 323.

The end of the main quest - in the basic version of the game - is connected with the cinematic recall of key moments in the game, when the player makes a decision on how a parent (Geralt) should behave in relation to his adopted daughter (Ciri). Almost identical solutions were used by the developers from BioWare, sending the hero on a quest to the inside of his mind to cleanse his subconscious from the invasive memories that were forced upon him. They are, as in *The Witcher*, a recapitulation of critical choices made by the recipient/co-creator.

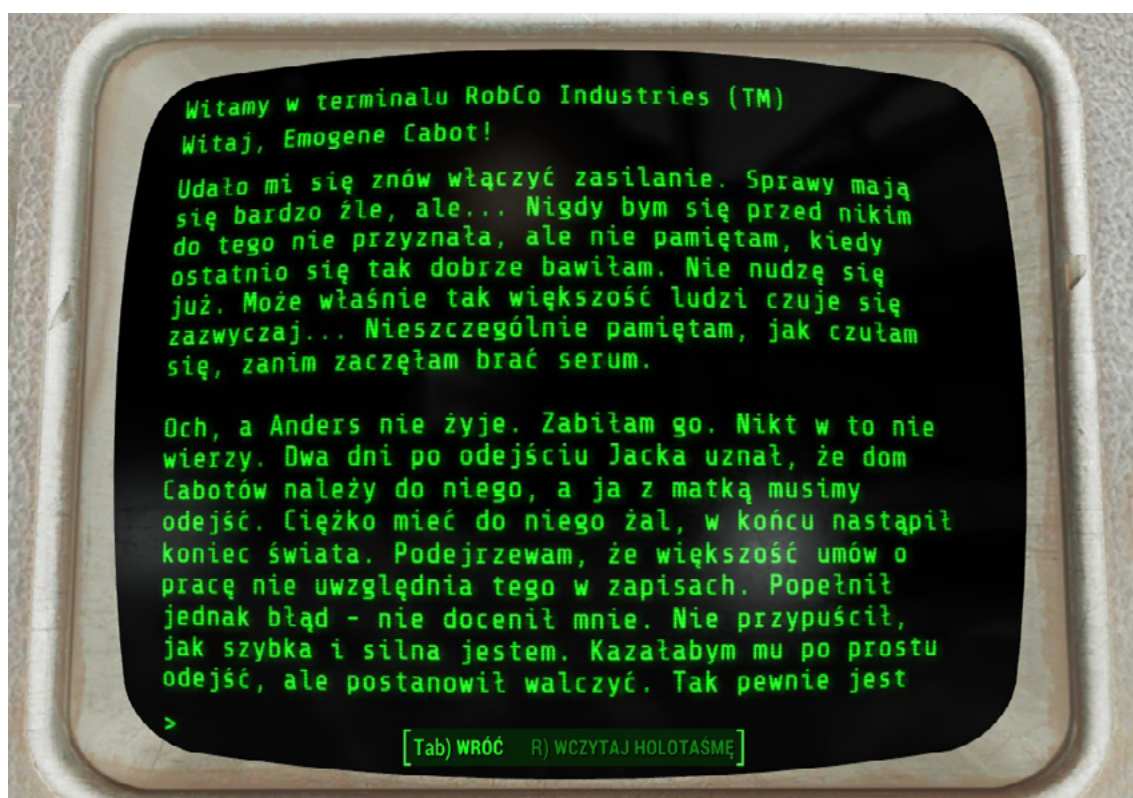


In both cases, therefore, we are dealing with a situation in which the creators settle the past of the player himself. During the whole game, it was he who decided in what direction and how the intrigue would be developed, and the effect of his ideas and intentions can be played out/ viewed within the context of a particularly concrete, summarizing adventure retrospection. It is also obvious that these psychologizing procedures are another step in the development of digital world creation. In a way, the potential of the extended, mysterious lands that the player can explore is being used up, so the creators of new adventures move - one would like to say - inside the virtual characters. It seems this is not a random trend, as there are still plenty of similar examples, starting with the motif of "Memory Triggers" from *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, which the main character has to find in order for the player to learn the motivations of his father's actions in the shown film flashbacks, through the flashbacks in the last two parts of the series *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, where the family story is added and explained on the basis of playable or strictly film flashbacks. Next is one of the most recent productions published by Electronic Arts: *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* (2019), in which the creators have related the development of the led protagonist to the motif of unlocking memories from a child's training; the player acts them out, and the protagonist masters the skills extracted from memory in this way. And the fourth part of the game series produced by Bethesda, *Fallout 4* (2015) concludes. The latter title is also very important because both the idea of the world itself and the game environment are almost entirely based on differently concretised antecedents.

Topically, the past, as a "paradise lost" due to atomic destruction, justifies the existing, post-apocalyptic reality, in which the player takes on the role of the "Only Survivor" from Crypt 111 (the shelter)¹¹ and sets off in search of his son. The open-world convention has a world-centric

¹¹You can choose either a male or female protagonist.

character in this case. The plot threads help the player to freely explore the extensive, virtual imitations of ruined Boston and its suburbs. The protagonist survived the cataclysm in a state of hibernation but woke up several decades later. His journey is thus determined from beginning to end by a retrospective perspective, and the world becomes a maze of memories, both his own and the others'. The exploration in *Fallout 4* does not consist of just travelling, but is primarily connected to a kind of reconstruction of the dramatic events and fates of people who left their traces in the form of computer blogs, letters, recordings, notes etc. By finding them, the player gets to know the individual dramas of people experiencing family tragedies, struggling for survival, gradually falling into madness, or changing, under the influence of radiation, into monsters.



Fallout 4

The number of such remains, which is difficult to count, as well as the need to find them, which is designed in the storyline, clearly defines the retrospective character of the description of the world being explored and actually gives it meaning. As Krzysztof M. Maj points out:

"The reader of the world-centric narrative will pay much more attention to descriptions of the environment, details from the history of a fictional world, political, philosophical and scientific nuances, as well as to everything that may require any follow-up, suggesting the potential of a particular narrative system."¹²

¹²Maj, 62.

Referring to the above reflection on world-forming concretisations in *Fallout 4*, one might add that without discovering the memories and antecedents, the adventure would not make much sense; it would simply be a virtual walk in ruins. However, the creators also implemented other solutions in the game characteristic of the open-world convention, such as housing (building one's own place), thus realizing the idea of a possible, simulative "inhabitation" of the virtual world. Like in *The Forest*, in which Michał Kłosiński discusses the context of the hermeneutically defined issue of "inhabiting" digital worlds, gameplay in *Fallout 4* also "assumes and presents such factors as fatigue, health and hygiene of characters, as well as the level of hunger and thirst¹³". These aspects, combined with the coded possibility of constructing residential and defensive buildings (...) with the simulated need to build a safe space of the house where it is possible to record the state of play, cooking and resting the characters" intensify the impression of immersion in *Fallout 4*. Therefore, they significantly reduce the distance between the player and the virtual environment, which, in turn, considerably affects the reception and interpretation of the traces of someone else's existence, which are extracted from the ruins by the protagonist. The intentional character of the gameplay so programmed by the creators also confirms the motif of a journey to "inside the mind of the character". It is true that most of the accounts from the past in *Fallout 4* are text or sound recordings, but in line with the new trends of expanding the boundaries of reality to be explored, the Bethesda programmers also send the protagonist on a journey to the "inside the mind" of the murderer (Conrad "Connie" Kellogg). The controlled protagonist walks through a "synaptic maze" activated by a chip and the player learns, step by step, the causes and stages of development of a pathological form of personality (traumatic childhood, negative influence of the environment, family tragedy, etc.). Critical fragments of memories are presented in the form of situational scenes, revealing the psychological nuances and - one would like to say - the "human face" of the killer.



Fallout 4

¹³Michał Kłosiński, *Hermeneutyka gier wideo. Interpretacja, immersja, utopia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2018), 57

The goal of the exploration designed in such a way is - apart from gameplay - to offer the user a way to interpret the world in which he or she has temporarily “lived”. The player is not only supposed to explore, but also to understand the layout of dependencies, which will make it easier for him/her, in the subsequent phases of the game, to make such or other decisions. The information related to this is also contained in the virtual environment itself. The creators have taken full advantage of the specific nature of the environmental narrative, by filling the digital space with significant details and items¹⁴. Their decoding and reading also consists of reconstructing the past and can trigger both emotions - when the viewer encounters, for example, macabre visualizations of the Holocaust - and deeper thoughts when he finds unsuccessful attempts to avoid it:



Fallout 4

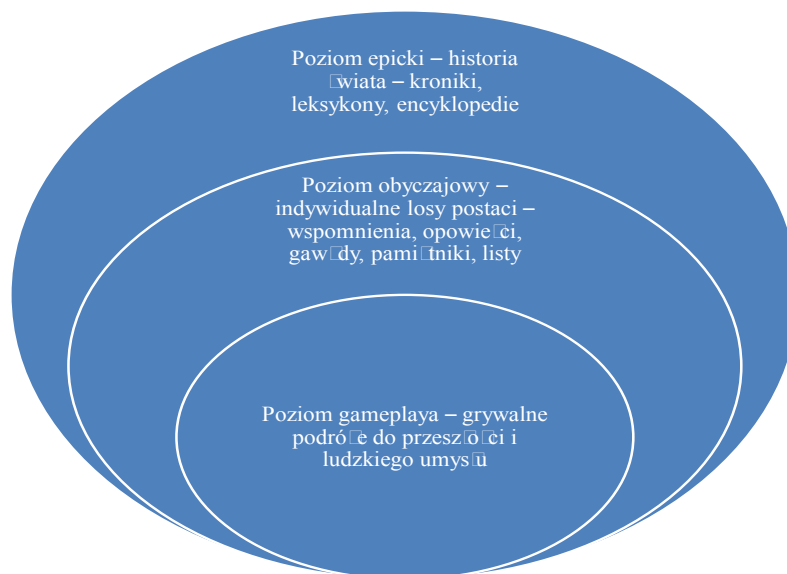


Fallout 4

¹⁴In the game, the original music was also implemented in the sound layer - classical compositions and songs referring to the Cold War era.

Conclusion

If one were to juxtapose the antecedent concretizations appearing in the most recent computer games in the form of a diagram, it would be as follows:



The above examples demonstrate the changes taking place in the area of digital entertainment: from epic to inner space, from world problems to individualised dramas. However, they also remain a manifestation of a greater cultural trend, which is no longer just about the convergence of the media as a tool of communication, but also, one might say, about the “convergence of poetics”. The multimodality of digital narratives (computer games), manifested in the variety of ways in which the recipient is provided with information about what is happening in the world of the game, implies similar phenomena about which Werner Faulstich wrote extensively in relation to film:

“The movie, by using a movable decoration, taken from empirical reality, distracts the viewer from that reality and then, via catharsis, reunites him with it. Its experiential dimension - together with the structure of the literary work - personifies the maternal principle: by giving a meaning, it brings consolation.”¹⁵ [translation – AK]

In the fictionalized digital games, creators reach for both the poetics of film and of literature. They use film-like “decorations” and implement a text of a literary nature. The fictional story created in this way, although its final form depends on the improvised actions of the player, therefore has a double dimension. First, the world-forming story marks and defines the boundaries of the presented reality. Secondly, it gives it a meaning and “brings consolation”. Designed in games and difficult to count motifs of the past, retrospectives, memories, movie

¹⁵Werner Faulstich, *Estetyka filmu. Badania nad filmem science fiction Wojna światów (1953/1854) Byrona Haskina*, transl. Marek Kasprzyk, Krzysztof Kozłowski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2017), 138.

flashbacks become a basic descriptive category, a kind of narrative vehicle, helping the recipient/player to organize the story by arranging it from scattered fragments. It is, thus, filling a narrative gap that appears at the moments when the arcade aspects of gameplay are becoming dominant. At the same time, however, it is also a testimony to the increasingly frequent attempts to humanize the digital world.

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

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KEYWORDS

world creation

COMPUTER GAMES

transmedia narration

ABSTRACT:

The development of digital role-playing games brings with it not only qualitative transformations, but also a change in the choice of topics. An example of it is the “moral change”: game developers increasingly refer to family issues. As a result, there are changes in the method of creating the story presented in the game. The role of the game’s retrospectives is becoming more and more important in a variety of ways. The functions assigned to them are connected with both the introduction of moral issues to the games and with world creation, because the descriptions of the world presented in the retrospective perspective become the basic source of information about its boundaries and features.

family

RETROSPECTION

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Rafał Kochanowicz – professor at the Institute of Polish Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Author of *Fantastyka – klucz do wyobraźni*. (2001), *Fabularyzowane gry komputerowe w przestrzeni humanistycznej. Analizy, interpretacje I wnioski z pogranicza poetyki, aksjologii, dydaktyki literatury* (2012). Co-editor of the volumes *Fantastyka w obliczu przemian* (2012), *Fantastyka. Pajdologia. Dydaktyka* (2018). He is interested in the widely understood fantasy, computer games and pop culture.

“Everything is Worth Describing:”^{*}

The Case of Jacek Baczak

Justyna Szczęsna

ORCID 0000-0002-2044-3867

^{*} “*Wszystko jest warte opisania*” .
Interview by Mirosław Dzień,
“Kwartalnik Artystyczny” 1996, No 1,
p. 58. Translation mine, PZ.

Jacek Baczak’s words “Everything is worth describing” can be treated almost like his policy statement. It appeared in both the contents and the title of one of his first long interviews, given after he published his debut *Zapiski z nocnych dyżurów*¹. Baczak first published the book using his own modest resources in 1994. However, it soon lost its private, intimate status, as in 1995, Znak published an extended edition with a foreword by Jan Błoński and containing the drawings by the author. In 1996, Baczak received the Kościelski Foundation Award for it. 25 years have passed since the book was first published, yet time has not affected its significance. Moreover, it seems time has only confirmed the relevance of this originally modest book.

Watching – seeing – describing

In the interview, Baczak confessed:

The experience of describing draws in (...). But it is not just about writing, but rather about watching, seeing. I often stop reading (...) *Martwa natura z wędzidłem* by Herbert and other books, which I like to reread, and I think about how they saw it, where this or that vision came from... Those people, events, rooms, details... Perhaps love is the key word here? (...) I think that everything deserves to be described, everything is worth describing. Because everything is worth something, has its value – even in the eschatological sense – because it was created and redeemed. Because it exists².

¹ In this paper I use the second edition by Wydawnictwo Znak. J. Baczak, *Zapiski z nocnych dyżurów*, epilogue by Jan Błoński, Kraków 1997. All the quotes come from this edition, with page number given after each one. Henceforth shortened version of the title. All translations into English by PZ.

² “*Wszystko jest warte opisania*”..., p. 62.

These words clearly define Baczak's self-awareness, revealing the origins of his creative inspirations and fascinations. The definite repetition of the sentence "everything deserves to be described", "everything is worth describing" is probably amongst the most crucial interpretative leads. "To describe everything" is to describe the beginning and the end, something that happened in between, and what has been marginalized. It also means describing something that others are unwilling or afraid to describe; to go beyond the world's boundaries, which have been consistently omitted before, to take a closer look at the realities and existences which can be found there, and to see them wisely and mindfully, so that ultimately one has to subject oneself to the need to describe them.

The clear difference between "watching" and "seeing" is the second lead here. Baczak began his search from painting, which for him was a crucial experience. Mindfulness, understood as the need to scrutinize the world, the other, and oneself, was the basic disposition of the author. This mindfulness stems from the awareness that all important things require us to stop, pay attention, understand, and reflect upon them. Mindfulness guarantees the passage from the registering "watching" to the self-aware "seeing", subsequently allowing one to describe and capture existence and being.

In Baczak, next to this first perspective defined by the order of "watching – seeing – describing", there is another, defined by the words "existing", "creating", "redeeming", "eschatology". They all form a coherent sequence introduced by the first, superior word: love. Baczak seems to be asking himself and us: "Perhaps love is the key word here?". This question only seems to sound provocatively naïve. In fact, Baczak refers to a very basic issue: an attitude to the world and others which has its source in the love understood most deeply as Agape³. A relation to the world and other people can be saturated with emphatic closeness and kindness only in such a perspective. They become the imperative, forcing us to be mindful of others. They create a space for coexisting and co-understanding, which remains significant also from the eschatological perspective. Even more so, they are confirmed and reinforced in this perspective.

"This experience devastated me, it changed my way of thinking"⁴

Baczak, deeply believing in the value of describing everything that exists and what has been "created and redeemed" takes on the challenge of describing also those things which others are unwilling or afraid to describe. He enters the world of hospices, which is absent from culture, unsaid, marginalized to the sphere of inexistence⁵. "(...) a world which contemporaneity removes from our sight, it is disgusted by it, and does not want to know it"⁶. He takes on the

³ This connection between empathy and Agape was also indicated by A. Łebkowska, *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków 2008, p. 52.

⁴ T. Drzycimska, *Jacek Baczak*. The text is completed by an interview with Baczak.. "Dzielnice Magazine", 9.04.2014 DzielniceWrocławia.pl, date of access: 17.01.2020

⁵ See Hanna Serkowska, *Zapiski z (przechodniości) bezradności, Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media 2 (7) (2016): 115-123*. DOI: 10.18276/au.2016.2.7-08. Serkowska returns to *Zapiski...* and Baczak in the book *Co z tą starością? O starości i chorobie w europejskiej literaturze i filmie*, Toruń 2018.

⁶ *Twarze, twarze, twarze...*, "Konteksty" 1996, No 1-2, p.158.

sphere of exclusion, suffering, slow passing away and death. Every day, he touches the end; he faces other people's death. He decides to remain in a painfully locked world and to accompany the dying. He confronts the naïve youthful illusion of endless life with a tangible presence of evanescence and death, poignant desolation of the world. Having experienced this and bearing the weight of confrontation he gives up to "the unbearable compulsion to share this experience"⁷, the compulsion to describe.

The first duty of those who are close to people passing away is to accompany them. This company gives hospices sense and it is the point of working there. However, later on, this difficult company is also connected to the coercion to face one's vision of life and to verify childish illusions. After all, Baczak appears in a hospice as a young man seeking his own way, and as an artist. This duality of his role is "uneraseable". It leaves a clear trace in his sensitivity, providing him with languages for coping and describing the hospice world available at the starting point; it is a world of magnified strangeness. Thus, his description cannot be constructed from ready-made matrices, schemes, tested and familiar languages. The description must be constructed from the simplest, translucent, ascetic elements. It has to be poignantly credible; it has to serve. It has to touch.

To describe the beauty of exhaustion

In Baczak, it was painting that inspired a fascination in the human physicality and the beauty of a perfect, harmonious, sensual body. He created "awed by the human body, especially the face"⁸.

I drew hundreds of sketches, nudes, semi-nudes. I remembered long hours spent in the studio, when the light illuminated my models' torsos. I copied drawings from anatomical albums. I slowly opened myself to the silent beauty of the hand, neck, shoulders, not to mention the whole universe of the face. In drawing of the muscular shoulders and delicate female backs, expressive faces and sinewy hands – I found some sensual pleasure. I was reduced to awe and focus. (p.43)

Before, he was completely absorbed in the "silent beauty", experiencing constant "awe and focus", and thus unable to bear the hospice confrontation with bodies that were suffering, damaged, helpless. Until then, such bodies were to him unfamiliar, "non-translucent, losing their obviousness and unnoticability"⁹, "bodies sick, suffering, maturing, aging, branded"¹⁰. They were bodies that were different, painfully unfamiliar, scary, perhaps even inspiring momentary fear and disgust; Bodies that were damaged, used-up, infirm, paralyzed. However, they still required care, attention, and delicateness.

⁷ "Wszystko jest warte opisania"..., p. 62.

⁸ T. Drzycimska, *Jacek Baczak*...

⁹ A. Łebkowska, *Somatopoetyka*, in: *Kulturowa teoria literatury 2. Poetyki, problematyki, interpretacje*, ed.. R. Nycza i T. Walas, Kraków 2012, p.119. The author compares the most important issues regarding somatopoetics and points out to the relations between the translucent and non-translucent body. The translucent body is "obvious and thus unnoticeable, and as a result: not worth describing or representing" [translation mine, PZ]. The non-translucent body loses its obviousness and unnoticability. This is what happens in Baczak.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 120.

And now I looked at different bodies. Bodies that constituted a separate book of genesis. A separate book of experiencing beauty.

Old bodies, leaning towards the ground. Weak bodies, pale, shrunken, twisted, full of scars and scratches.

Dry, covered by skin that was soft to the touch like a sheet of paper, yet full of thousands of wrinkles and folds. Bodies that were typically thin, boney, with clearly visible veins, which cracked whenever an injection had to be made or blood drawn. Leaving behind dark, livid stains.

I looked at bodies which sometimes scared me with their damages and deformations.

There was disgust in me¹¹, which was fading away with my getting used to it. Eventually I saw a completely different kind of beauty in them. The beauty of helplessness and satiation.

Exhaustion. (pp. 43-44)

This transition from the fascination with the beauty of harmony and perfection to familiarizing, and then deeply, ultimately accepting the beauty of exhaustion reveals the difficult road that Baczak took in an unusual way. For a description is never unpunished: it reveals not only the things that are described, but also the person who describes them. It unmasks his heedlessness, superficiality, and his schematic way of thinking. However, it also uncovers his sensitivity, emphatic care, mindfulness, and warmth. This is what happens in Baczak. We find details which attract attention in the cracks of kind descriptions and longer pieces of description scattered across the text.¹² They reveal not only the close glance, painting-like attention to detail¹³, but also – or perhaps first of all – common human mindfulness, kind empathy, taking a closer look at another person, focusing on them¹⁴. We can see "a prick by a splinter of co-suffering"¹⁵. The problem is that it is not enough to stop at an ascetic description of "clearly visible veins, which cracked". They need to be described in a somewhat further, deeper way. They have to be seen also from the perspective of "dark, livid stains", which are left after an injection has to be made or blood drawn. But this requires stopping, time, being with the other, and attentively accompanying them. The stopping and closeness are also necessary to feel bodies which are "[d]ry, covered by skin that was soft to the touch like a sheet of paper, yet full of thousands of wrinkles and folds" (p. 43). The details captured in this description are possible to register only when watching becomes seeing, and an accidental brush becomes a kind touch. This is when even a short conversation becomes something "creating the world" (s.56):

¹¹This quote inspired the title of the book on Baczak – P. Czaplinski, "Była we mnie odraza", in *Mikrologi ze śmiercią. Motywy tanatyczne we współczesnej literaturze polskiej*, Poznań 2001, pp. 187- 194.

¹²See J. Sławiński, *O opisie*, w: tegoż, *Próby teoretycznoliterackie*, Warszawa 1992, p. 195 for a typology of descriptions.

¹³Ibidem, p. 212. Sławiński writes: painter, scholar, tourist, are "professionals in methodical observation, hence their perception of the surrounding world explains well all the detailed descriptions" [translation mine, PZ].

¹⁴Baczak was aware of this and stressed this fact: "One of the forms of attention is also kindness. It is a form of leaning in, focusing. It was really necessary in that place. (...) I learned kindness towards other people." J. Baczak, A. Karoń-Ostrowska, *Byłem dobrym salowym*, "Więź" 1999, No 2, p. 92.

¹⁵"Wszystko jest warte opisanie"..., p. 60.

A woman, Ania, had been here for fourteen years, paralyzed, with amputated legs. Unable to turn on her own. Her body was literally flattened and spilled because of lying all the time. She had been looking at a wall and a window of the same room. (...)

And yet she had known every day what day of the week and what month it was. And whenever I answered her question about the weather outside – she stopped talking, closed her eyes, or was smiling shyly.

Perhaps she was remembering the falling snow, the smell of smoke from a bonfire in fall, or pools of warm rain.

And I would put away my broom to the corner, peel some tangerines for her, trying to tell her what was happening outside. About the strong smell of the ground and naked, dark trees.

Wasn't this creating the world? (p. 56)

These forms of being with another person, open to closeness and kindness, create a space for co-being and co-understanding which stem from even the narrowest cracks of the text – a space which encourages one to describe people who face baring, experiencing the devouring sense of physical and mental devastation.

The first and the most basic language that Baczak uses to describe the people who are under his care is the body language. The body is predominantly the sign of human transience. Everything that happens to it inevitably takes it to the deadly defragmentation. Ania is paralyzed, with amputated legs. Unable to turn on her own, her body was literally flattened and spilled because of lying all the time (p.56). Władziu has “twisted legs and a bedsore on his side the size of two palms. Living spots of meat (...) where the skin does not grow back” (p.76). “There was something striking about Jaś’s appearance. Right behind his left ear the surface of this head was discontinued. He had a huge indentation which his thick hair could not cover” (p. 76). Baczak’s man is “without a shadow of a doubt a *somaticus*”¹⁶, presented in “a suffering and dying physicality: with tears, sweat, blood, and excrements”¹⁷, described in a physicality experienced through pain and infirmity. It is also a *homo patiens* – a person for whom paralyses, paresis, and amputations write a painful history of life and set new limits for the desperately shrinking space for existence. It is a person described by a language of deformations and physical disabilities, which become stigmatizing signatures of their being.

Describing c(C)ountenance

In the context of such a clear identification of suffering and deformed bodies, the scarce presence of facial expressions in *Zapiski...* is surprising. They are rare and limited to several

¹⁶D. Czaja, *Twarze, twarze, twarze...*, p. 158. This opens the broad perspective of somatopoetics. A. Łebkowska, *Somatopoetyka – afekty – wyobrażenia. Literatura XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków 2019. In this context, especially the part *Ciało i zmysły*.

¹⁷D. Czaja, *Twarze, twarze, twarze...*

hardly repeated elements: a paralysis that causes a grimace, a trickle of food from a paralyzed mouth, or the childish naivety in the constantly confused eyes of the patients. Eugeniusz's face stands out in this context; on the one hand, it is similar to others due to its paralysis, and on the other, it is painfully different because of the sense of an ending, which the grimace cannot hide.

Eugeniusz was brought on my shift. And it was also on my shift, some weeks later, that he passed away. I fed him, I changed his diaper, I shaved him. He was paralyzed from waist down (...). He ate very slowly and would choke on his food. He choked violently and spat on everything around him. A part of his face was paralyzed, hence there was a trickle of food coming from the left corner of his mouth. He was relatively very young, not even in his forties. (...)

I remembered his eyes, they stood out from the rest. (...) In case of many patients their eyes resembled children's eyes, as if they were constantly asking about something, unsure. Gienek had eyes of someone who knew where he was and who realized the gravity of his state. Perhaps this was the reason why they attracted attention, clear and sad. There was suffering in them, fatigue from constant pain, or simply general fatigue. Those were the eyes of someone who had had enough, but was unable to do anything but wait (p. 26-27).

This meeting with another person, who was suffering horribly and aware of his own passing away, is based on the most deeply understood close company. Directness is the call and key to it, and "only meeting someone face to face is direct"¹⁸:

(...) access to the face is immediately ethical. (...) What a face is in a specific way boils down to perception, despite the fact that a relations with a face can be dominated by it.

Firstly there is only rightness of the face, its right and helpless exposure. The skin on the face is the most naked, the most exposed. It is the most naked, but also modest in this nakedness. Also, the most exposed: for there is some basic poverty in the face (...). The face is exposed, endangered (...)¹⁹.

Entering the space of the indirectness of "a face to face meeting" opens access to the most deeply ethical, sensitive to "its right and helpless exposure". Eugeniusz's face is a face of a man who "knew where he was and who realized his state" (p. 27), "someone who had had enough, but was unable to do anything but wait" (p. 27). His understanding face exposes this awareness and displays it in public in a moving way. One can only accompany him in this waiting, and later give this heroic passing away the simplest testament.

The faces of hospice patients are also faces of people who live in the shadow of death – they showcase the valleys of past tragedies, lines of desires that burnt out a long time ago, traces of past harms and scares of abandonment. These faces want you to stop and remember, "becoming an epiphany", enduring "seemingly irreversible borders between what is physical and spiritual"²⁰.

¹⁸E. Lévinas, *Całość i nieskończoność. Esej o zewnętrzności*, translated by M. Kowalska, Warszawa 1998, p. 43.

¹⁹E. Lévinas, *Etyka i nieskończoność. Rozmowy z Philipp`em Nemo*, translated by B. Opolska-Kokoszka, Kraków 1991, p.50.

²⁰D. Czaja, *Twarze, twarze, twarze...*

I was a cleaner and a barber. Shaving had a hidden taste of getting to know someone. Standing in front of unshaven faces of old men, I rediscovered them. The razor blade removed the foam, and then I could see the familiar wrinkles and lines. I could see carved mountains and valleys from close-up. A rugged landscape of experiences, which each time turned out to be new and painful. It became an obvious sign of resignation, acceptance. I always shaved them at the end of my shift, slowly, telling jokes and talking. And yet shaving sometimes became a holy ritual. Dealing with their faces, gradually and unclearly I realized that I was dealing with something holy. With time, those faces all blended into one in my memory, which perhaps became the face of that rule, maybe the rule of time. It accommodated so many meanings, that it became a silent, overwhelming presence.

I was living in front of the Countenance.(p.83)

To describe death

Writing about *Zapiski...*, Dariusz Czaja stressed that “[t]hey have the value of a testament. They are a record of initiation into dying and death. Into a sick, dying, dead body”²¹. Hospice patients carry death in them in the most moving way possible, and they experience the imminence of death in life in the most tangible way. For them, it ceases to be a distant foreshadowing of the slowly approaching end:

(...) I heard someone vomiting violently. I sprang to my feet and opened the door. I stepped back, horrified. She was sitting motionlessly, leaning forward. Her walking stick was next to her, in a pool of thick, clotted blood. The whole floor, her bathing robe, hands and face were covered in dark red blood. She was dead. We washed her. I took her body into my arms and carried her to bed. Then I washed her blood off the floor with a cellucotton rug, as well as the tiles, the walking stick, and the toilet.

I couldn't do it. It was a violent stroke, an internal organ broke. The only thing I remembered was a grey head that fell forward, helpless hands, a pulled-up nightshirt which uncovered her knees. And the red floor, with the walking stick and broken, thick glasses in the pool of blood.(p.36)

He was getting weaker and weaker (...) I saw fear in his unnaturally gleaming eyes. (...) The fear was starting to step aside, substituted by exhaustion. His heavy, uneven breath stopped in the morning, while it was still dark outside. We took the body to the morgue by noon. I saw someone who had realized he was dying. I saw his fear.

It was all over his body, stinking with sweat.

There was nothing majestic about it.

I tried to be quiet when someone discussed death. I wanted to remain silent.(pp. 36-37)

²¹Ibidem.

This confession about the need to remain silent about death is confirmed by the way in which Baczak describes it. He talks about it in the simplest ways, translucent, ascetic. He removes and disassembles everything that would be a redundant embellishment, a literary game, everything that would redirect the reader's attention from the most significant thing.

To describe the bodies of the dead

Baczak talks mostly about all those who are dying and have died. They are in the center of the world that he describes.

They would often pass away at dawn. They left behind cold, stiff bodies, which we would take to the morgue in the morning. Bodies that made me feel guilty, to which I often talked while washing them in the morgue. But I also felt their presence. I tied jaws, closed eyelids, covered those often smoothed faces with white sheets. I dressed them in trousers, buttoned their shirts on their chests, from which sometimes the remaining air would escape with a tiny noise. I wrapped those bodies until they started to resemble parcels ready to be thrown into the mouth of the earth in the grand, endless transformation.(p. 11)

When they pass away, the living, feeling human being goes beyond the limits of physicality. The line between "what is alive, and what is dead (body-corpse); between what is human and what is non-human"²².

I opened the morgue door and closed it behind me. The buzz of dozens of flies, the swearing of a jock and the smell of the decomposing body kept me there.

I stretched shoes in the heels so that we could put them on their feet. I helped cut a jacket into two parts and stretch it on both shoulders. We dressed the body on the surface, but not fully. It was impossible to do it well. Some parts of the body became semi-liquid. A warm-colored liquid would pour out of the face whenever we moved the body. Stefan's body had been lying there for a long time, it was over thirty degrees outside, the men from the funeral parlor arrived too late. (...)

Stefan had ceased to be someone. He became something. (...) Looking at that slightly moving face, which was no longer a face, I could feel it clearly and strongly.(p.18-19)

Traces of the not so distant being a person, being "someone" disappear from the dead person's body. The body loses its subjectivity and becomes unfamiliar, scary. It transforms into "rotting matter", "garbage", "waste":

The rotting, lifeless body becomes complete garbage, a transitional mass, an ambiguous element between what is animalistic and what is inorganic, an inseparable other side to humanity, whose life mixes with what is symbolic: a dead body is a fundamental waste. A soulless body, non-body,

²²A.Łebkowska, *Jak ucieleśnić ciało: o jednym z dylematów somatopoetyki*, "Teksty Drugie" 2011, No 4, pp. 21-22.

ambiguous matter (...), a body is a waste, transitional matter, a mixture, but also the opposite of the spiritual, the nonmaterial, the divine law²³.

A dead body – as seen by God, and not from a scientific perspective – is the source of ultimate disgust. It is death devastating life. It is something thrown-up, and you cannot set free from it, you cannot defend yourself against it²⁴.

Baczak is evidently torn in his way of seeing and describing the dead. He flounders between two extremes, as if he were subject to “the ambivalence of death”²⁵. He constructs elaborate descriptions of evening meetings with the dead in the morgue. It seems that he wants to believe that a dead body is not just “rotting matter”, but “a presence that refers to absence”²⁶, “a symbol of loss”²⁷. This is the only possible perspective from which to read his stories of evening visits to the morgue and the words whispered there. This is the only way we could believe his words “I kept feeling that I was with someone” (p. 47).

I turned on the lights and closed the door behind me. (...) I lifted the sheet or the pillowcase from the face. I kept feeling that I was with someone. I talked to a motionless man or woman, I apologized, I whispered some words. And I would also draw. (...) I preferred to talk to them quietly, calling them by their names. As if they were asleep. (pp. 47- 48)

Baczak, familiar with the helplessness and insufficiency of words, decides to use another language. He eventually finds it in post-mortem portraits, which for him are “another form of a conversation, an attempt at expressing something which was too big for words”²⁸. That is where he looks for preserving the memory, recording traces left by the dead.

To describe fleeting things

The world of hospice patients is a limited, shrunk world. It is limited and closed first by the hospice walls, then by the thin walls of the rooms inside, and ultimately by beds and bedside tables. That world is completed by small, everyday things and objects, which co-create the painful spectacle of illusion of normal existence, thus becoming a counterbalance for dying, devastation and decomposition.

I forgot that dying is as common as becoming. Without this dark half, the destructive part, the decomposition, the shrinking, our world would not be what it is. I used to live without thinking about it, doing things that had to be done. I bought cigarettes, fruit juices, cookies and candy, salty sticks, cream, some good sausage for them. I would take old, broken alarm clocks for repair and then bring them back. I would visit rooms, talk, repair rosaries and turn on radios in search

²³J. Kristeva, *Potęga obrzydzenia. Esej o wstręcie*, translated by M. Falski, Kraków 2007, p. 103.

²⁴Ibidem, p. 10.

²⁵L.-V.Thomas, *Trup. Od biologii do antropologii*, Łódź 1991, p. 73.

²⁶Ibidem, p.43.

²⁷Ibidem, p.44.

²⁸T. Drzycimska, *Jacek Baczak...*

for a mass. (...) I would tidy shelves, water the plants, clear ashtrays, arrange holy pictures against plant pots. (pp. 40-41)

This world of things coexisted symbiotically with the world of their owners. It accepted their slow rhythm of existence, and gradually, the slow rhythm of passing away.

The women were delirious, talking to themselves, closer and closer to the end. Objects seemed to decay from the inside with spots of gray mold, nets of cracks, ash twitching in the air. In the icy wind. (p.13)

The death of the patients annulled these worlds of things. Thus, not only people died, but also their bodies. The world of objects, so precious to them, passed away with them. The death of a person meant annulment of redundant, unwanted objects. The story of their passing away was thus completed by the ritual of post-mortem tidying-up, removing traces of the world which irreversibly ceased to exist.

They died suddenly and silently, like candles that were blown out. I would clean the bed, then the shelf, taking some leftovers, praying books, candy wrappers, holy pictures, one shoe, a comb – and when the family did not want those things, I would take them to the basement and watch the boiler consume all those things, which said so much about them. (p.11)

This description – short, concise, based on a dry list – is the simplest way of saying goodbye to an ending, individual world. It is an expression of helplessness in the face of an ending, translucent in its ascetic simplicity.

This is how Stanisław Rosiek opened the edited volume *Wymiary śmierci*, a collection of thanatological texts:

Enough has been said and written about death. One needs genuinely unusual ways to add something new to this discourse. We have experienced a devaluation of words concerning death. (...)

There are only the dead, and they are worth (and necessary) to talk about. But also about the living, who appear alongside the dead (...). Only about this. The rest (...) is typically empty jabbering, which is unbearable especially when it is dressed in a sophisticated style. The more beautiful, the worse. (...) The less style, the better. In the face of eschatology, one should pace themselves. One should speak little and plainly"²⁹.

Baczak kept this restraint in the face of death with meticulous care. In the simplest way possible, he accompanied the dying, and he maintained this simplicity also for describing his experiences.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

²⁹S.Rosiek, *Słowo wstępne*, in: *Wymiary śmierci*, edited and preface by S.Rosiek, Gdańsk 2010, p.5.

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KEYWORDS

J a c e k B a c z a k

20th century Polish literature

death in literature

20TH CENTURY POLISH PROSE

SOMATOPOETICS

body in literature

ABSTRACT:

Zapiski z nocnych dyżurów by Jacek Baczak is devoted to the world of hospices, which is generally absent from the world of multiplied presence. Baczak tries to describe it, to express the suffering of this place through words, slowly passing away, and death. His description cannot refer to ready-made matrices, schemes or tested and familiar languages. His description is thus constructed from the simples, the most translucent, ascetic elements. Thanks to this, it becomes poignantly genuine and serving. While restrained in the face of death, it is also moving.

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Documents

of a Literary System as a Subject of Empirical Studies

The paper identifies and discusses the category of “documents of a literary system” as a subject of literary research. Those documents are subject to dispersed description procedures: as elements of research infrastructures of general use (such as catalogues, repositories, databases) and subject infrastructures, for instance literature-specialist documentation, bibliographical or philological research papers (such as bibliographies, critical editions, dictionaries), and then a subject of research into literary systems, based on empirical data (documents and their descriptions).

Modern research into literary systems stresses the role of knowledge mediation of literature by research infrastructures – both general and specialist – which collect, share and describe literary reality, preceding its “modeling”: “models of literary systems are not simply arguments about the existence of and connections between works of literature in the past; they are arguments made with reference to the disciplinary infrastructure– the bibliographies and [data] collections; analog and digital – that transmit evidence of past works and relationships to the present”¹.

The success of empirically-oriented literature studies depends on the descriptions of literary reality provided by the infrastructure: the understanding of the procedures for creating those descriptions is thus crucial for conducting such research.

In the present paper, I propose an analysis of the problem of extending the procedures of describing the documents of a literary system as a challenge – not just for the methodology of conducting empirical research (such as the development of tools for scientific modeling of literary systems based on available data), but also as a challenge for such an application and adjustment of the existing research infrastructures, which will provide long-term development for empirical literary research.

Documents of a literary system | The documents of a literary system include various “records”, pieces of evidence, testaments, and displays of “[t]he complex of activities, or any section thereof, for which systemic relations can be hypothesized to support the option of considering them «literary»”².

¹ Katherine Bode, *A World of Fiction: Digital Collections and the Future of Literary History*, (University of Michigan Press, 2018), p. 43. [translation mine, PZ]

² Itamar Even-Zohar, “The «Literary System»”, *Poetics Today* 11, No 1 (1990): 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772667>.

From the perspective of research into literary systems – rooted in the traditions of bibliography, bibliology, scientific information, and documentation studies – this diverse, elaborate collection of documents is on the one hand subject to cataloging, classification and indexation within the framework of a broadly understood organization of knowledge (for instance, in the form of a bibliographical description, indexation in a printed dictionary or encyclopedic elaboration, or in the form of meta-data for digital items); on the other hand, they play specific functions as elements or subsets of an empirically studied literary system, documenting the creation, reception, and circulation of literary texts.

In practice, studying those functions is predominantly based on re-using the existing descriptions of scientific or cultural-heritage documents, especially with the use of digital methods.

Literary system | The notion of a literary system – in terms of the context that is of interest to us here – is related to historical-literary, bibliographical, bibliological orientations, the history of the book, and their re-interpretations and developments in the spirit of empiricism³, “new empiricism”⁴, “cultural materialism” or cultural analytics, and not with formalist, structuralism, or semiotic (in which a literary system connotes rather with studies of inter- and intra-textual relations) orientations.

This “system” has both social and empirical dimensions; in accordance with the definition by the major representative of *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*, Siegfried Schmidt, it assumes “the focal shift from isolated literary texts to text-thematizing activities of producers, mediators, recipients, and post-processors of literary phenomena in their respective social context”⁵. Empirical studies should take into consideration the material aspects of production, circulation, and reception of literature, although simultaneously they should also present conclusions which will support and complete interpretative and theoretical studies⁶.

Thus, the category of documents of a literary system does not include only those documents whose contents can be defined as literary criticism or artistically-literary. Those include all writing documenting the activities that create a literary system: they can be its direct expression (like literary texts), intentionally created in order to document a literary system (like literary bibliographies or literature-specialist elaborations), or become a document belonging to a literary system in the eyes of the researcher (like bookselling financial documents, reports of cultural institutions, legal documents regulating cultural policies).

³ See e.g. Siegfried J. Schmidt, “Dlaczego empiryczne badania literackie? Dlaczego nie?”, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 99, vol. 2 (2008): 107-119; Bogdan Balicki, “Empiryczna Nauka o Literaturze – kierunek w badaniach literackich i szkoła naukowa”, *Teksty Drugie: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja* 124, No 4 (2010): 30-50; “The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Application”, ed. S. Tötösy de Zepetnek, I. Sywenky (Edmonton-Siegen 1997).

⁴ Katherine Bode, Robert Dixon, “Resourceful Reading: A New Empiricism in the Digital Age?”, in *Resourceful Reading: The New Empiricism, eResearch and Australian Literary Culture*, ed. K. Bode, R. Dixon (Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2009), 1-27.

⁵ Siegfried J. Schmidt, “Empirical Studies in Literature and the Media Today”, *Poetics* 18 (1989): 2.

⁶ Bode, Dixon, “Resourceful Reading: A New Empiricism in the Digital”, 15.

Theory of documents and literary studies | The definition and scope of a literary system implies that documents forming the basis for its analysis should be broadly defined. Etymologically, a “document” comes from the Latin “doceo” and “mentum”; “doceo” refers to teaching, indicating (in relation to the pedagogical practice), whereas “mentum” is a suffix used in order to transform verbs into nouns⁷. Modern documentation studies/science refer/s to this etymology in order to highlight the relationship between documents and the human activities of “marking” both external and internal reality (physical and intellectual objects), thus signaling the broad semantic spectrum of this term.

This broad definition of a document, widespread in documentation studies, was affected by the 20th-century French documentation and bibliographic tradition. In the 1930s, Paul Otlet, an influential Belgian researcher, used to claim that objects can be documents, providing the example of material culture, natural objects, artifacts, archeological findings, and works of art⁸. In her seminal 1951 work, *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?*, Suzanne Briet defines a document as “any physical or symbolic sign [*indice*], preserved or recorded, intended to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon”⁹. Briet assumes that documents are characterized by: “materiality” (i.e. they are physical objects and traces); intentionality (an intention for the document to be a broadly understood piece of evidence); processing (they have to be “made documents”); and phenomenology (they are perceived as “documents”)¹⁰. As explained by Michael Buckland, according to Ronald Day, the very placement of a document in an organized relation to other evidence – in its semantic context – provides this object with a document status¹¹.

This tradition influences bibliography, bibliology, and book history¹², which remained under the influence of the heritage of bibliographical-documentation thought by Otlet and Briet in the first half of the 20th century, and later of studies into scientific information and documentation studies. This resulted in the creation of a research stream, which argues that contrary to their etymology, the subject of interest of the present-day bibliography, bibliology and book history is not limited to “books” or written documents. D. F. McKenzie, an influential bibliography theoretician, argued that bibliography should deal “with the facts of transmis-

⁷ Niels W. Lund, “Document, text and medium: concepts, theories and disciplines”, *Journal of Documentation* 66 (2010), No 5:, 743. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411011066817>.

⁸ Michael K. Buckland, “What is a document?”, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 48 (1997):, No 9: 805. doi:10.1002/(sici)1097-4571(199709).

⁹ In Buckland, 806.

¹⁰ Buckland.

¹¹ Buckland.

¹² What I mean by that is a complex of disciplines that deal with describing documents from the perspective of their historical, technical and technological, textological contexts, as well as the issues of creating registers and descriptions of documents. Their mutual relations are complicated, and moreover these notions gain new meanings in different geographical contexts. See e.g. N. Harris, *Analytical bibliography. An alternative prospectus*, <http://ihl.enssib.fr/analytical-bibliography-an-alternative-prospectus>; Niels W. Lund, “Document theory”, *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 43 (2009), No 1, 1–55. doi:10.1002/aris.2009.1440430116; Jack Andersen, “The collection and organization of written knowledge” in *Handbook of research on writing history, society, school, individual, text*, ed. C. Bazerman, (New York: Erlbaum, 2008), 177– 190; Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111 (1982), No 3: 65–83; Joan Shelley Rubin, “What is the History of the History of Books?”, *The Journal of American History* 90 (2003), No 2: 555–75. doi:10.2307/3659444; Robert Darnton, “«What is the history of books?...» revisited”, *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007), No 3: 495–508.

sion and the material evidence of reception”, where these texts are “verbal, visual, oral, and numerical data in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography”¹³.

Documentation studies, which constitute a continuation of bibliography and documentation in the spirit of Otlet and Briet, but in the direction of studies into scientific information, established the broad definition of “documents” and permanently related it to a reflection on systems of organizing knowledge, significant to the broadly understood digital humanities.

As pointed out by Niels Lund, the broad definition of documents assumes their relationship with human “actions” or “practices”. It is impossible to isolate documents from their social space, as they are inherently “socialized” and thus should be studied in the context of “documentation” processes: a document is “any results of human effort to tell, instruct, demonstrate, teach or produce a play, in short to document, by using some means in some ways”, i.e. documents. Thus, they highlight the medium of interpersonal communication, its mediation¹⁴.

Studies into literary systems are – as Bode stressed – a somewhat natural consequence of secondary connection¹⁵ of literary studies (especially historical-literary) and bibliography, bibliology and book history, as well as broadly understood studies into organizing knowledge. When this secondary connection was made – through empirical and qualitative literary studies in the 1980s, or at the turn of the 21st century within the framework of “new empiricism” and digital humanities – the dynamic collection of testaments of human practices, going far beyond traditionally understood documents, such as books and periodicals, incorporated into the context of digital systems of organizing knowledge became the subject of research related to the traditions of bibliography, bibliology and book history.

Documents of a literary system used in studying literary systems | According to Katherine Bode, in literary studies “bibliographies and scientific editions are the most obvious and visible forms of empirical research”¹⁶. These are research endeavors based on evidence and facts: “bibliography describes material forms and the publishing histories of works of literature, whereas a scientific edition identifies and compares various forms in which a given literary work is published. Such empirical research provides the necessary infrastructure for modern literary studies”¹⁷. “Histories of books, publishing, print and reading”¹⁸ constitute another group of studies from this field, and finally, there are also studies into the strictly understood empirical literary studies (a tradition established by the already mentioned Siegfried Schmidt). Ultimately, empirical studies are assisted by modern humanities computing (digital humanities), which allows for effective processing of large databases.

¹³Donald F. McKenzie, “Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts”, (London: British Library, 1986), 5.

¹⁴Lund.

¹⁵Bode, Dixon, “Resourceful Reading: A New Empiricism in the Digital”, p. 6ff.

¹⁶Translation mine, PZ.

¹⁷Bode, Dixon, 4. Translation mine, PZ.

¹⁸Bode, Dixon, 6. Translation mine, PZ.

Considering the scientific orientations, resources and studies defined by Bode, and the previously defined scope of activities which constitute a literary system, one may be tempted to formulate a list of documents which allow for studying it empirically.

Types of activities constituting a literary system include the creation, reception and circulation of literary works (the character of these processes can be artistic, academic, or cultural). The basic cognitive categories, thanks to which these activities can be perceived or analyzed, include individuals (such as creators and co-creators of texts, critics, scholars, readers, participants in literary events, publishers, booksellers, journal editors, and employees of various institutions in a literary system), groups of individuals (such as literary associations, research teams), institutions (such as publishing houses, founders, libraries, institutions such as GLAM¹⁹, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations), and events (such as competitions, awards, festivals, meetings, and plays).

Documents describing such a defined literary system include²⁰:

a. textual documents and manuscripts, such as:

- books and journals (together with their segments, which are sometimes extracted for the purpose of documentation, such as chapters, parts, and articles),
- grey literature (such as calls for papers for academic conferences, reports, reports of activities of institutions constituting a literary system, M.A. and PhD dissertations, and library registers),
- documents of social life²¹ (such as brochures and bulletins for institutions promoting reading),
- personal documents (such as letters and notes of writers, literature researchers, and publicists),
- archives (national, social and private resources; resources of institutions relevant for a literary system)²²,

¹⁹*Galleries, libraries, archives, museums.*

²⁰The list is a modified version of the typology of resources used in institutions that collect documents of literary systems (Controlled Vocabulary for Research) by Confederation of Open Access Resources [http://vocabularies.coar-repositories.org/documentation/resource_types/] and Resource Type Scheme Library of Congress [<http://id.loc.gov/vocabulary/resourceTypes.html>]). Examples of documents of a literary system from this typology and their functions within literary systems are provided in brackets. Obviously, these are just examples which refer mostly to modern literary systems. Moreover, obviously the document theory or scientific information is full of other typologies and classifications of documents (for instance, there are approaches based on the contents or formal analysis of documents).

²¹See a paper which compares documents of social life and grey literature: Agnieszka Strojek, "Znaczenie terminu szara literatura", *Zagadnienia Informacji Naukowej* (2000), No 1: 64-76.

²²However, one should also bear in mind that textual documents also include movie and theater scripts, song lyrics, etc. If such textual bases of eventually non-literary documents (i.e. movies, plays, and music compositions) are not printed and subject to bibliographical control, they undergo significant dispersion, although they can be available mostly in archives on a larger scale (national and social, as well as private).

- textual segments of websites (e.g. artistic, journalistic, scientific posts on online literary forums, social media, blogs, and amateur writing),
- b. images:
 - moving (such as TV programs, online resources devoted to literature, adapting literature, and created by writers and literature scholars),
 - statistical (e.g. illustrations for works of literature, images inspired by works of literature, drawings or paintings created by writers, posters, and advertisements)
- c. sound (e.g. radio programs, podcasts on literature, literature adaptations, and music related to literature),
- d. databases and data collections²³,
- e. software (e.g. used for processing literature data),
- f. as well as: artifacts, cartographic and multimedia documents, and musical notations.

Documents of a literary system are dispersed – collected and shared by various institutions (mostly academic and GLAM) - via various services, using different means and according to different rules. They are subject to complex cataloguing, classification and indexation processes which provide their multi-level descriptions. Those processes – although based on international standards, formats, glossaries, authoritative indexes, international persistent identifiers, and semantic ontologies – are also directly related to the logics of the functioning of the institutions governing given resources and can never be fully uniformed.

Apart from the cataloguing, classifying and indexing performed by institutions directly governing a given resource, there is also academic research – both into scientific information and related fields, and humanities studies – which provides additional knowledge of the topic and the form of whole document classes or types. On the one hand, the software used for the automatic classification of documents – both born-digital and digitized – is constantly being upgraded²⁴. On the other hand, projects such as Media Monitoring of the Past (IMPRESSO) rely on methods of analyzing textual data (such as text mining) for (among other things) thematic indexing of texts²⁵. This knowledge can be applied in, for instance, creating research datasets or by services

²³Both the broadly understood datasets prepared and shared for scientific purposes (such as various bibliographic datasets shared by national libraries), and the data registered by various “instruments” and “tools” (see the category of meta-documents: S. R. Ranganathan, *Documentation and its Facets: Being a symposium of seventy papers by thirty-two authors*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963), 39-40), especially digital, i.e. e.g. broadly understood data on the usage metrics, traffic metrics) or digital (e.g. data from e-book readers that monitor the use of online applications).

²⁴Por. Eun Kyung Chung, Shawne Miksa, Samantha K. Hastings, „A Framework of Automatic Subject Term Assignment for Text Categorization: An Indexing Conception-based Approach”, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 61 (2010), No 4: 688–99; Anna Kasprzik, “Putting Research-based Machine Learning Solutions for Subject Indexing into Practice”, w *Proceedings of the Conference on Digital Curation Technologies (Quator 2020)*, ed. A. Paschke et al. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0074-2535-7>

²⁵<https://impresso-project.ch/>

sharing information as supplementing standardized metadata of digital objects (such as supplementing digital resources with links to semantic ontologies, additional subject tags).

Documents of a literary system vs. “scientific edition of a literary system” | An analysis of literary system documents for the purpose of research into literary systems requires an in-depth study into the relationships between various forms of cataloguing, classifying, and indexing documents, versus functionalizing documents within a literary system.

As highlighted by Katherine Bode, “we cannot know the documentary past except through the knowledge infrastructure we create (...) neither the analog nor the digital record offers an unmediated and comprehensive view of the documentary past; both are partial, and not necessarily in complementary ways”²⁶. Thus, the procedure of selecting and functionalizing sources – analog and digital – should include the analysis of the studied literary system and the documentary resources that describe it. Literary empirical studies must be based on “an object capable of representing literary systems (...) while managing the documentary record’s complexity, especially as it is manifested in new digital knowledge infrastructure. The lack of such an object, not the fundamental opposition of data and literature, is the real reason it has proven to be so difficult, in practice if not in theory, to integrate traditional and computational methods for the purposes of historical investigation”²⁷.

One can say that Bode’s research predominantly describes or shapes the studied object in the form a document of a literary system – or a collection of such documents – to subsequently construct research theses on this basis.

Bode calls this form of incorporating a critical analysis of sources into the studied literary system “a scholarly edition of literary system”: “the critical apparatus elaborates the complex relationships between the historical complex explored, the disciplinary infrastructure employed in investigating that context, the decisions and selections implicated in creating and remediating the [data] collection or collections, and the transformations wrought by the editor’s extraction, construction, and analysis of that data”²⁸.

Documents of a literary system and research infrastructures | It should be observed that this tension between the disciplinary expectations and the needs of literary studies, and the infrastructural conditioning is a constitutional characteristic of all empirical studies into a literary system, due to the dispersion and variation of the documents constituting that system.

Bode creates a methodology for conducting research into literary systems in such conditions. However, there remains the question of the opportunity of systematic authorizations in conducting research into literary systems, i.e. adapting the descriptions and organization of documents of a literary system to research requirements, despite their variety and dispersion. It

²⁶Katherine Bode, *A World of Fiction: Digital Collections and the Future of Literary History*, 52.

²⁷Bode, 34-35.

²⁸Bode, 53.

is thus about looking at the issue from the perspective of infrastructures and documentation processes, rather than the research methodology.

This challenge is in fact a question about the extent to which the community involved in conducting research into literary systems is able to create (or develop the existing) sets of meta-data, standards, and the services of connecting and uniforming data, which will be considered in developing major research infrastructures (or using them systematically), such as SSHOC, EOSC, Europeana, or the ecosystem of bibliographic data based on data exchange between libraries.

As evidenced by the experience, recommendations and research currently conducted by major research infrastructures²⁹, the major challenges include: 1) creating controlled dictionaries, thesauruses, and ontologies relevant to the discipline, as well as their implementation in key scientific and cultural services, or creating knowledge aggregation tools based on them, 2) retro-conversion of documentation resources (and not just digital objects), i.e. bibliographies, catalogues, libraries, archives, and museum registers in order to develop digital information resources (which today remains a marginal issue in the digitalization policies), 3) support for services of authoritative control and the development of persistent identifiers both in scientific services, and in services sharing the resources of cultural heritage (extending the scope and quality of control in terms of cultural and artistic events, and textual documents, including literary works).

translated by Paulina Zagórska

²⁹See e.g. Daan Broeder, Thorsten Trippel, Emiliano Degl'Innocenti, Roberta Giacomi, Maurizio Sanesi, Mari Kleemola, Mari, ... Matej Ďurčo, Matej, *SSHOC D3.1 Report on SSHOC (meta)data interoperability problems (Version v1.0)*, (2019). https://zenodo.org/record/3569868#.Xk_BMGhKhPY; Natalie Harrower, Maciej Maryl, Timea Biro, Beat Immenhauser & ALLEA Working Group E-Humanities, *Sustainable and FAIR Data Sharing in the Humanities: Recommendations of the ALLEA Working Group E-Humanities* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.tq582c863>; *Strategy Report on Research Infrastructures: Roadmap 2018*. <http://roadmap2018.esfri.eu/>

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KEYWORDS

literary system

DOCUMENT

ABSTRACT:

The paper identifies the category of “documents of a literary system” as a basis for empirical literary studies research. It presents literature and documentation studies, bibliographical and information-scientific aspects of identifying, processing and using documents in this discipline. Based on the available literature, basic types of such objects and their functions within a literary system are indicated. The paper indicates that the dispersion of descriptive procedures of such objects plays a key role for the success of empirical research in literature studies, and it proposes treating this problem as a challenge in adapting the research infrastructures to the empirical needs of literature analyses.

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Towards Expanding a Set of Functions: How to Read Janusz Sławiński's *O opisie*

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Understandably, one of the most important reasons for searching for methods that oppose (“abandon” or “transgress”) textualism in contemporary literary theory is the need to formulate questions that structuralism cannot answer. When we cannot answer a question by referring to various autonomous theories and schools of linguistics— which ultimately means that we cannot analyze a given phenomenon within the structuralist framework – then we look for answers in the extra-textual reality, most often drawing on various cultural theories.

Toril Moi did exactly that. In her significant and widely discussed book *Revolution of the Ordinary*, she looks for theories and methods of analyzing literary texts that will allow the reader to “closely” understand a given work, while maintaining the ability to formulate valuable critical conclusions. Moi criticizes theories that are associated with the broadly understood hermeneutics of suspicion (Marxist, feminist or postcolonial critics, among others).¹ In the process, she reviews her own methods of textual analysis (as a feminist critic), similarly to how Terry Eagleton criticized the manner in which he used Marxist literary theory.² Moi argues that

¹ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 175–95.

² Terry Eagleton, *How to read literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

analyzing a text from a strictly defined ideological position often results in merely confirming the adopted methods and theories and does not really say anything about the text in question:

To read the text suspiciously is to see it as a symptom of something else. That “something else” usually turns out to be a theoretical or political insight possessed by the critic in advance of the reading. Instead of responding to the text’s concerns, the critic forces it to submit to his or her own theoretical or political schemes. The result is often entirely predictable readings.³

Therefore, Moi argues that we should “return to the text.” Instead of performing linguistic analysis, we should search for answers to the questions which the literary work itself poses. In this way, Moi rejects hermeneutics of suspicion, defined as a systematic set of actions to be performed while working with the text, but it does not mean that she dismisses the possibility of finding in literature arguments or answers to the most important political questions. She only observes that one should not decide in advance, prior to reading the text, whether the reading will focus on the reconstruction of the power dynamics (in terms of class, gender, or ethnicity) hidden in the text. Instead, she proposes asking questions to which the text will give the most interesting answers.⁴

Moi proposes to search for these questions in the text, or rather, to search for pretexts to ask such questions, by first asking the more basic question “Why this?” in reference to selected fragments of the text. While it may sound simple, this question becomes an interesting and complex theoretical problem with which Moi engages throughout her book. It determines that the starting point of analysis and the choice of the text to which this question refers is conditioned by the reader’s emotions and erudition. The reader will only ask “Why this?” if some element of the text draws his or her attention, most often due to its incompatibility with a certain “model.” The fragment in question must challenge reflexive or intuitive expectations of the reader. The immediate reason for asking “Why this?” is therefore, understood in purely psychological terms, surprise. However, the extent to which the reader is surprised by a given text or its fragment depends on his or her erudition and knowledge of conventions – the knowledge of conventions allows him or her to notice that a given element is incongruous. Paradoxically, the entire analysis ultimately depends on the professional and learned “ability to be surprised.”⁵

Moi further rightly points out that neither a “suspicious” critic (because he or she will not be able to ask the right questions) nor a structuralist scholar (regardless of whether he or she draws on European structuralism which, in turn, is based on Russian formalism; New Criticism, or post-structuralism) will be able to find the answers to these questions. Linguistic schools oppose asking questions about the significance of variants in the text (because it seems that the question “Why this?” translates into “Why is this specific element here?”⁶) because they describe and analyze individual components of the literary work in terms of their impact on the entire structure. It was this limitation that made Moi question New Criticism’s dogma of intentional fallacy and strive to understand and reconstruct the meaning of and the intention behind individual elements of the

³ Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, p. 175.

⁴ Moi, p. 191.

⁵ Moi, pp. 185–91.

⁶ Moi, p. 203.

text by analyzing features that are in the text.⁷ Intention, Moi argues, drawing on Stanley Cavell, remains an internal element of the text, because its final form is the outcome of intention:

If we think of a text as something someone has wanted to be precisely the way it is, Cavil argues, there is no difference between “what is intended” and “what is there.” What is there is what is intended. To ask “Why this?” – for example why the author wants *this* word *here*, in this specific position in the line, is not ask about “something anterior” to the poem. It is to ask about what’s *there*, on full display, in the poem, or painting, or film.⁸

However, the danger of this approach lies in the fact that, as I have mentioned earlier, the question “Why this?” also implies the question “... and not something else?” The latter question may make the reader venture into the extratextual reality in his or her analysis. The deficiencies of the structural approach, which is focused on the study of the logical relationships between individual functions and actions in a given work (structure), made Moi accept this risk and reject the linguistic approach in favor of a better and more comprehensive (no longer “suspicious” but still hermeneutic) understanding of the work and its building blocks.

However, it seems that at least some of problems to which Moi points may be resolved by using structuralist methodology (which is linguistic and thus fully autonomous), if we redefine the structuralist approach to one aspect of the text which it has so far almost completely ignored, i.e. description. As long as we pose the question “Why this?” in relation to any action in the text, structuralism is able to come up with an answer (actually this is exactly what it does). However, structuralism almost completely ignores description – it claims that descriptive elements, as variant elements, have no impact on the structure of the work and are thus deemed irrelevant. This could not be further from the truth. Descriptive elements “complete” the narrative structure of the text. Description makes two works with a very similar structure different and at the same time equally noteworthy. No wonder, therefore, that Moi poses the question “Why this?” in relation to descriptive elements – the reading of the text would otherwise be incomplete.

Janusz Sławiński pointed to the same structuralist deficiencies in his 1981 article entitled *O opisie* [On description]. The Polish structuralist wrote the article because he believed that Roland Barthes oversimplified the role of description in his classic essay “Reality Effect.”⁹ The French thinker outlined the differences between the functional elements of the text, which are crucial for its structure (they operate at all three levels of the text defined by Barthes earlier in *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*: function, action and narration¹⁰), and descriptive elements, which, according to Barthes, operate only at the level of narration and thus at the level of *discourse* only. They do not influence *events* and *actions*. Barthes described how different descriptions influence the text differently; however, he nevertheless argued that the primary role of all descriptive elements in the narrative is the production of

⁷ Moi, pp. 200–205.

⁸ Moi, p. 203.

⁹ Janusz Sławiński, „O opisie”, *Teksty: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja* 55, no. 1 (1981): 121–23.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, On Narrative and Narratives (Winter, 1975), pp. 237–272.

the titular “reality effect.” Description visualizes and strengthens the fictional ontology of the represented world, hiding its non-referential character (the absence of the referent).¹¹

Dissatisfied with such a simplified characteristic of descriptive elements, Sławiński tried to systematically order the possible positions they may occupy in the structure of the narrative. In his essay, he distinguishes between three categories of description:

1. based on their physical arrangement in the actual physical (material) text (this category includes: “condensed description,” “dispersed description,” and “developed and integrated description”),
2. based on the way the semantic content of the description is organized (“localization model,” “logical and hierarchical model,” and “operational model”),
3. based on the stylistic attributes of description (the scholar distinguishes between eight opposing pairs of strategies which govern descriptions, the given pair determines the relationship between the reader and the described fictional object; Sławiński lists here, among others, the opposition between compactness and lengthiness of description; using understandable language in opposition to hermetic or professional terminology; or the opposition between description based on metonymy and, respectively, on metaphor).¹²

I would like to focus on the second “semantic” category. Motivations and reasons behind two other categories, which refer, respectively, to composition and style, may in most cases be derived from traditional structuralist analysis. The distribution of individual descriptive elements on the material plane of the text usually depends on the dynamics of a given narrative sequence: the “condensed” and “dispersed” descriptions render the narrative more dynamic, while the “developed and integrated description” slows it down. Of course, this is not always the case and one can probably find texts in which a narrator manages to render the plot more dynamic by means of lengthy and detailed descriptions. Respectively, there are also texts in which descriptions reduced to the bare essentials still render the narrative monotonous. Indeed, one is able to justify the choice behind the compositional distribution of descriptive elements by analyzing how it affects the narrative. However, the manner in which a given style of description (or stylistic elements) influences the work is usually self-evident. Sławiński lists the basic functions of various stylistic solutions in his article. For example: the use of colloquial and literary language in descriptions renders them understandable and clear, while using specialist terminology makes them difficult to understand. Short descriptions direct the reader’s attention to the plot, while lengthy descriptions direct the reader’s attention to the realities of the represented world. Descriptions that are based on metonymy allow the writer, and thus the reader, to construct an easily recognizable and almost tangible fictional space governed by “types,” while metaphorical descriptions render the narrative more poetical and the represented world more indefinite, labile, and oneiric, and so on.¹³

¹¹Roland Barthes, “The reality effect”, in R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), pp. 141-148.

¹²Sławiński, „O opisie”, pp. 123–34.

¹³Sławiński, pp. 132–34.

In the context of the semantics of the story, Sławiński's classification exemplified a novel approach in structuralist theory. It allowed scholars to study the impact of descriptions on the narrative structure not only in terms of formal organization or the very presence of descriptions in the text but also in regards to the impact of the semantics of description on the events and actions presented in the text. If we are able to tell *what* a given element brings to the narrative, then we can ask "*why* this?" and, by extension, "why this and not something else?"

Sławiński distinguishes between the following three description models in terms of their "semantic content:"

1. The "localization model" defines the distribution of individual objects referred to in the narrative in represented world/space:

The names of objects, elements and features are combined in the text mainly with the help of predicates indicating location, distance and direction. This model gives rise to all descriptions which co-constitute the represented world of the text.¹⁴

2. The "logical and hierarchical model" allows one to make the description of some crucial object represented by a given descriptive part more detailed by dividing it into smaller fragments that are then listed in the text. For example, we are dealing with this model when the narrator first refers to a building and then lists all rooms and objects that are in it:

Predicates predominantly establish a relation between the partial meanings of names to the "collective" meaning of the supra-name, which may be actual or potential. The order in which partial names appear in the description is not arbitrary and it may even be completely obligatory.¹⁵

The "operational model" links the described elements of the represented world of the text to the perceptual processes of a character. The description is thus conditioned by the (subjective) narrative perspective adopted:

[...] descriptive predicates are conditioned and limited to words or phrases which refer to perception, observation, recognition, interpretation of the seen, ordering of perceptual data, systematization of knowledge, i.e. operations which involve classifying, typologizing, comparing, etc. – in other words, to words and phrases which denote phases, variations and modes of the cognitive process.¹⁶

What distinguishes Sławiński's classification from earlier structuralist approaches to description is that the Polish scholar endows descriptive elements with relative autonomy with respect to the matrix of functions of events and actions of individual characters in the text. When Barthes analyzes descriptive elements, he calls "indices" "integrative units" and divides them into "indices proper" and "informants." Here cognizes the significance of these elements for the story's structure, but he also further argues that their role is always conditioned by the

¹⁴Sławiński, p. 129.

¹⁵Sławiński, p. 130.

¹⁶Sławiński, p. 130.

narrative structure made of “*nuclei*” and “*catalyses*” (Barthes would say: indices “integrate” the “distribution” of the function).¹⁷ Therefore, descriptive components never have a direct influence on the narrative structure; they shape its specific element, which, in turn, co-shapes the entire structure. Admittedly, descriptive components have their own semantic “surpluses” (i.e. content not related to narrative functions). As such, however, in the opinion of Barthes and most structuralists, structuralist analysis should not be concerned with them.

Sławiński attempted to classify descriptive components and offer theoretical tools that would allow one to determine their role in constituting the represented world of the text, with particular emphasis on space. The classification proposed by Sławiński allows us to ask “why” a given element appeared in the narrative text, even if it is a detail that does not enter into visible relations with any other narrative components of the story.

However, the above tools can only be used to partially address the doubts articulated by Toril Moi. I will illustrate my argument by referring to the following fragment of *Closely watched trains*:

I was drawing near to the curve of the track; already the twelve hoofs of those dead horses were visible in the distance, jutting towards the sky like the columns in the cathedral crypt at Stará Boleslav. I thought of Masha, and of how we met for the first time, when I was still with the track superintendent. He gave us two buckets of red paint and told us to paint the fence round the entire state workshops. Masha began by the railway track, just as I did. We stood facing each other with the tall wire fence between us, at our feet we each had a bucket of cinnabar paint, we each had a brush, and we stippled away with our brushes opposite each other and painted that fence, she from her side and I from mine.

There were four kilometres altogether of this fence; for five months we stood facing each other like this, and there wasn't anything we didn't say to each other, Masha and I, but always there was this fence between us. After we'd painted two kilometres of it, one day I'd done just as high as Masha's mouth with this red color, and I told her that I loved her, and she, from her side, had painted just up to there, too, and she said that she loved me, too... and she looked into my eyes, and, as this was in a ditch and among tall goosefoot plants, I put out my lips, and we kissed through the newly painted fence, and when we opened our eyes she had a sort of tiny red fence-pale striped across her mouth, and so had I, and we burst out laughing, and from that moment on we were happy.

When I came to those dead horses, I sat down on the belly of one of them, and leaned my head against his leg. The head of the second horse was gazing at me with bulging eyes, as though even this dead horse had lived with me through what might very well have happened to me only a few minutes ago.¹⁸

I shall not perform a sequential analysis of the above fragment because that would be a traditional structural approach. Barthes comprehensively described the cognitive values of such an analysis. The hooves of dead horses in the sky correlate with the image of Miloš leaning his head against one of them. There is also a five-unit logical sequence that leads the reader to the pornographic index on Miloš and Masha's lips (characters are given red paint—they spend many weeks together

¹⁷Barthes, “An introduction to the structuralist analysis of narrative”, pp. 245-249.

¹⁸Bohumil Hrabal, *Closely watched trains* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), pp. 30-31.

painting the fence –they develop feelings for one another–they kiss through the painted fence –the paint leaves “fence-pale” marks around their mouths. I consistently refer to paint and painting, because the shortest description of this sequence would read as follows: “the paint the two characters are given to paint the fence is the correlate of the paint on the face of both characters after they kissed”). We can also list “indices proper” (the characters are separated by a fence, which takes five months to paint; apart from temporal and spatial information, this unit also carries additional symbolic meaning: because of war, the characters cannot simply be two happy young people in love – the fence evokes the terror of the camps, etc.) and “informants” (“there were four kilometres altogether of this fence” – this information makes the represented world more real). Indeed, the methods of constructing structures of activities and events have been analyzed for decades. Instead, let us use Sławiński’s classification to analyze descriptive components.

All descriptive elements in the above fragment are governed by the operational principle, which means that their arrangement and form are subordinated to the perception of the narrator, who is also the protagonist. This applies both to the memory of the first kiss with Masha and the narrative frame, the “now” of the novel, in which the protagonist is walking towards the dead horses. Numerous location predicates (hooves “visible in the distance,” the fence round the state workshop, the fact that the characters are on the opposite sides of the fence, etc.) make the scenery of both sequences more tangible and interesting. On the other hand, the choice and the order of elements which further appear in the represented world do not disturb the logical and hierarchical sequence Sławiński distinguishes (bucket-paint-brush, horse-belly-leg-head-eye, etc.). A list of individual descriptive elements made in accordance with this model would give a clear picture of “why” the individual fragments were in exactly that position. Of course, I employed Sławiński’s classification to a limited extent. A full analysis would be much more complicated and at the same time more detailed:

It should be definitely emphasized that the models highlighted above are not separate. Although it is possible to find descriptions almost completely controlled by one of these models [...], they usually coexist in a given description. Rarely does the descriptive representation of space [...] not include categories related to the logical and hierarchical model. People, things or animals are often described in terms of spatial entities, which activates the terminology associated with the localization model. On the other hand, relativization of meaning characteristic for the operational model is not limited at all by the type of the referent described [...]. In a word, the models in question can mix, cross, and interfere within the same description.¹⁹

Toril Moi, however, challenges structuralists still further. If we are able to determine the reasons for why individual components appear in the text, we are also able to reconstruct the logic behind the text or its fragment. However, we are not able to determine why given elements were employed. Neither Barthes’ nor Sławiński’s method, nor, for that matter, any other structuralist theory, will provide us with answers to such questions as: why was the paint in a bucket and not in a can? Why did the fence enclose a workshop and not a warehouse? Why did goosefoot plants and not saltbush plants grow in the ditch? Structuralist analysis not only does not answer such questions, but also *does not seek* answers to them. Structuralist analysis only lists the functions played by the respective elements in the entire structure. It only asks “Why *this*?” but not “Why is *this* here *and not something* else instead?”

¹⁹Sławiński, “O opisie”, p. 131.

For Moi, this signifies the exhaustion of the cognitive possibilities of structuralist, and, in general, textual analysis, so she decides to adopt a non-linguistic approach. However, I would like to argue that the significant shortcoming of structuralism, to which Moi has pointed, is not a result of the excessive rigor and excessive limitation of the structuralist school. On the contrary, structuralist analysis fails because its approach to the text is not strictly linguistic, which gives rise to observations that are based on projections of non-linguistic reality.

Let us consider the following hypothesis: “Miloš dared to tell Masha that he loved her, because the fence they were painting was high. Miloš associated the high fence with reaching high and the ambition to constantly expand his abilities, which strengthened his confidence. This means that if the fence had been low, the protagonist would not have had the courage to confess his love.”

The above statement may be easily discredited as unfounded, naive, cognitively sterile (it significantly reduces the hero's motivations), and finally, to quote Umberto Eco, paranoiac.²⁰

All these accusations can be more or less easily justified, but only insofar as they refer to the criteria of the interpretative essay and not structuralist analysis. The interpretative essay provides the reader with a view of the structure of a literary work from the most convincing or interesting perspective. However, the structure which is supposedly reconstructed in such an analysis is a purely abstract concept. It is a model that predicts every possible configuration of cause-and-effect relations, provided that the links between them actually appear in the text. As such, it also includes the least convincing textual elements, as evidenced by the interpretation proposed above.

I wish to argue that that ignoring such possibilities is a sign of the shortcoming, to which Moi has pointed. William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley have referred as “the intentional fallacy” and, to which Cleanth Brooks has referred as “the heresy of paraphrase.”²¹ If a diagram which illustrates the structure of the work does not account for all possible configurations of the relationship between the elements on the function matrix, it means that the elements in question have been selected arbitrarily. It is, therefore, a poetological variant of “the heresy of paraphrase,” which also implies the existence of an external entity whose intention it was to exclude certain possibilities from the function matrix. We could thus ironically remind Barthes that “the author is very much alive.”

Indeed, it was Barthes who did not account for descriptive elements in the analysis of sequences, arguing that syntagmatic analysis deals with sequence and structure, while paradigmatic analysis deals with description.²² Sławiński did not argue with Barthes in this matter, associating the narrative with the syntactic order and descriptions with the lexical and semantic order.²³

²⁰Umberto Eco *et al.*, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 48-49.

²¹William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The intentional fallacy”, *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1946), pp. 468-488; Cleanth Brooks, “The heresy of paraphrase”, in *The Well-Wrought Urn*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1947, pp. 192-214.

²²Barthes, “Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative”, p. 240.

²³Sławiński, “O opisie”, p. 128.

However, if we refer to the above interpretation, the “height” of the fence which encourages the protagonist to confess his love is a realization of a variant in the same sense as the choice a character has to make is, insofar as his or decision determines the entire structure of the text (the sequence of events would change, depending on the actions of the character).²⁴ In the same way as Miloš could either confess his feelings and kiss Masha or not confess his feelings and (as a result) not kiss Masha, the fence could either be high, indirectly leading to the same narrative result as above, i.e. a kiss, or could be short and thus not lead to a kiss. Thus, the concept of “intention inscribed in the text” Moi proposed is reconciled with the textual analysis of the work: if the alternative within the semantic content of the given element is articulated, one may search for an answer to the question about the cause / intention / function (in this context these expressions become synonymous) of this (and only this) alternative.

Finally, it is important to consider how semantic content (which, as it turns out, can have a functional value) may be incorporated into the schematic model of the structure. In order to find an answer, one should ask the question: What function does it perform within the structure (not in terms of events and actions or any different order)? Since the features of the elements of the world represented in the text by descriptive elements are generally catalysts of further sequences in the narrative structure, I propose that their functions should collectively be referred to as causal functions. I wish to distinguish two subcategories within the category of causality (and there could be other possibilities).

The first subcategory is exemplified by the “height” of the fence discussed above; I propose to call it structural causality, because the choice of a given alternative in the sequences of events to come is determined by a feature, an attribute or an element of one of the objects in the world represented in the text.

In order to illustrate the second subcategory, I have to construct a model example in which the course of events is determined by the perspective from which the object is perceived. Let us assume that we read a story in which a thief does not decide to break into a house, because through a frosted window he sees a cardboard square hanging on a peg, which he mistakes for a circle, which is a sign from the accomplice servant that the owners are at home. However, if the thief moved a little to the side, he would be able to look into the room through a small hole in the window and see, without distortion, that the servant has in fact placed the square on the hanger, which was the agreed signal to break into the house.

In this case, the sequence of events is not determined by the feature of a given object (the shape) in the represented world, but by how the protagonist perceives it. Since this feature must be perceived by a subject but does not necessarily have to be associated with any character or even an impersonal narrator, I refer to Mieke Bal’s category of focalization, which she first introduced in 1985 in her groundbreaking study *Narratology*.²⁵ The category of the “focal-

²⁴Barthes explains how alternative narrative possibilities determine the significance of narrative units in the structure of the text: Barthes, “Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative”, p. 245-247.

²⁵See: Mieke Bal. “Story: Aspects”, in *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*, eds. Mieke Bal and Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 75-143; and Mieke Bal, “Text: Words and other signs”, in *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*, eds. Mieke Bal and Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 15-74.

izer,” which, as Bal observes, is almost synonymous with “perspective,” is convenient, insofar as the act of perception is subjectified. As such, it may be analyzed in isolation from others, as Bal puts it, agents. I propose to refer to the function of descriptive elements which depends on the perception of the described features of a given object as focalizational causality.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

intention

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses the basic concepts of Janusz Sławiński's *O opisie* that are important for Polish literary studies in the wider context of the current discussion on the need to abandon the linguistic approach to literature in search of other ways to better understand the meaning of the work. Doubts expressed by Toril Moi in her book *Revolution of the Ordinary* regarding the analysis of texts from a traditional textual perspective become a pretext for revising some of the assumptions made by the structuralist school regarding the categories of description formulated, among others, by researchers such as Sławiński and Roland Barthes.

focalization

D E S C R I P T I O N

criticism

hermeneutics of suspicion

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When the Servant Becomes the Master:

Czech Attempts at Organizing the Problem of Descriptiveness

c r i t i c s :

Stanislava Fedrová, Alice Jedličková, *Viditelné popisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce*, Akropolis, Praha 2016

O popisu. Red. Alice Jedličková. Akropolis, Praha, 2014

Readers do not particularly enjoy descriptions. It is a rather difficult challenge for their imagination, at the same time defining only the state of things, which attracts attention to a far smaller extent than the plot¹ (J. Bečka, *Úvod do české stylistiky*)²

In 2012, the employees of Ústavu pro českou literaturu AVČR (The Institute for Czech Literature of the) Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts launched a grant project, *Poetika deskripce. Průzkum reprezentačního materiálu v intermediální perspektivě* (The poetics of description. Studies into the literary representation from the intermedium perspective), whose aim, according to its authors, was to:

¹ Translation mine, PZ.

² J. Bečka. *Úvod do české stylistiky*. Praha: Rudolf Mikuta 1948, p. 334. All the translations from Czech (unless stated otherwise) by A.G., and into English by P.Z.

[conduct] an interdisciplinary survey of description in literature and other artistic representations. Literary description will be examined as a parameter of historical poetics of fiction and a projection of the architecture of the period concerned (a set of principles which are manifested in artifacts and techniques of various arts), as well as an aspect of its epistémé. Poetological explication will focus on theorization of description and revisiting its traditional classifications in poetics and stylistics, defining the relation of description and narrative, and on typologization of descriptive forms. The intermedia approach will focus on media transpositions of descriptive schemes, and the cognitive explication will demonstrate to what extent reception of description is influenced by reading competencies, knowledge of other forms of artistic representation, and observation schemes. Analyses will pursue functioning of description as a tool of evoking material reality, a component of story structure and carrier of cultural models.³

Given the problems with funding various humanities projects, which have difficulties “standing out” from others which show more respect for the postulates of economic and/or social usefulness (at least from today’s “institutional” understanding), one should think about the motives behind the committee’s decision to fund a project devoted strictly to specialist issues, hermetically theoretical, and – at first sight – unrelated to any of the practical problems of today’s existence (as can be seen from the aims of the ÚČL AVČR project cited above).

The answer to this question is provided by Alice Jedličková and Stanislava Fedrova, the authors of the 2016 monograph *Viditelné popisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce*⁴, the concluding result of an entire research project. In the final remarks, Jedličková conclusively and decisively, although in a slightly “perversely literary” tone, repeats the thesis, stated numerous times across the monograph, that:

Description has a bigger representative, compositional, and imaginative potential than it is credited with. Genette claims that description is narration’s servant. We argue with that claim because we have a lot to say regarding its emancipation. And it is not in the sense of making the description independent from the plot, but in the sense of its complexity [...] in terms of dosing, organizing, and modifying the plot. However, we have not been happy with this metaphor from the beginning. We are more inclined to another, equally conventional figure, which evokes stronger narrative connotations: the story of Cinderella. The description of Cinderella is neglected mostly because her prince charming is typically at hand – after all, the prince embodies the story about events.[...] Let us assume, however, that the prince is beyond the scope of our interests – instead, we are interested in a timid, ignored girl, who evolves into a beautiful young woman, whom she has been all along. [...] Instead of a dress made of aurora and clouds, we gave her traditional rhetoric and cognitive hypotheses to wear, and in our interpretation, the dialogue between the theory and specific literary texts is the “coach” [...] and spontaneous reading experiences. We are heading back home from the ball, where the broom and the dustpan are waiting for us – we still have so much to do...⁵

³ <https://starfos.tacr.cz/cs/project/GAP406%2F12%2F1711>. Date of access: 22. 02. 2020.

⁴ S. Fedrová, A. Jedličková. *Viditelné popisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce*. Praha: Akropolis 2016.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 351.

The partially familiar, partially “meta-fairy-tale-like” tone should not be taken the wrong way, nor suggest that the authors lack scientific dignity. Both *Viditelné popisy* and the preceding *O popisu* (2014)⁶, incorporated into the realization of the grant project, edited by Jedličková and containing papers by Czech, Slovak, and German scholars (linguists and literature experts) provide a meticulous, in-depth analysis of description, using various methodologies, seeking innovative (or “re-interpreted”) scientific tools, which would allow a more modern perspective on this method of representing reality in literature. The authors assume that descriptiveness has not enjoyed much esteem among readers and is typically associated with boring, or even irrelevant, passages of literary texts; the fact that this contempt is so common means that descriptiveness attracts relatively little scholarly attention compared to a “pure” account of events. They blame this on, first of all, the school curricula, which even today is full of anachronistic claims and analytical strategies. Moreover, they present descriptions as a static interlude, which distracts from the “really” significant dynamic aspects of the order of a story. On the other hand, descriptions are subject to outdated research taxonomies, which place academic considerations regarding descriptiveness within “classical” stylistics, disentangled from methodological and factual commitments to the peculiarities of the world represented in fiction. As a result, Fedrová and Jedličková reveal with a certain dose of irony, that:

Even an attempt at proposing an argumentation whose aim is to show description in a positive light, stemming from honest intentions [...], is questioned in a somewhat interesting textbook, due to a question that in itself suggests the answer: “do you enjoy reading descriptions, or do you skip them altogether?” The conviction that description is unattractive or of secondary importance is thus in various (including subliminal) ways imposed on students also in didactic materials, which in theory are supposed to stop students from assigning a negative value to descriptions.⁷

Thus, the aim of those two publications is to eliminate misunderstandings. They partially stem from “a confusion of notions”, i.e. stylistic and “instructional” normativism (“how to describe properly”) versus demonstrating (culturally accepted and confirmed) model examples of descriptive, international (the shield of Achilles) and Czech (the presentation of a rural chamber in *Babička*, the canonical novel by Božena Němcová) perfection, and partially –from the inert influence of evaluative judgments and a “surplus” of apoetical claims. Among them, a reflection that constitutes a peculiar scientific truism (or rather, a topos) comes to the fore. It gives description a static air (special character), thus situating it not only in an opposite manner, but also (though according to the authors, it is unfair) subjecting it to the dynamic (in a temporary sense) story, which from this perspective, “might do without descriptive interruptions” without affecting the semantic, ideological, or axiological message of a given work of fiction. Similar simplifications of narratologists, especially those frequently quoted in the monograph, attested by the genuine authority of

⁶ *O popisu*. Alice Jedličková (ed). Praha: Akropolis, 2014. Also available in English: *On description*. ed. Alice Jedličková. Praha: Akropolis, 2014.

⁷ S. Fedrová, A. Jedličková. *Viditelné popisy...*, p. 38. The textbook mentioned is one edited by Taťána Polášková *Literatura pro 2. ročník středních škol. Pracovní sešit*. Brno: Didaktis, 2009.

a scholar, the opinion of Gérard Genette, that a description “will forever be a servant to the story”⁸, playing an ornamental role or, in a better case, completing the information transmitted on the *histoire* surface, inspire Fedrova and Jedličková to take “a decisively polemical” position, based on a conception which is key to the concept of descriptiveness proposed in the monograph:

It stems from the comprehensively understood character of a literary work that each extraction of a description from its context – and not only in a syntagmatic sense, i.e. from its closest textual sheath, but also from the macrostructure, i.e. the compositional surface, narrative discourse, and semantic transfer of the whole work of fiction – often leads to its reductive evaluation. The isolated descriptive form, which from the perspective of stylistic parameters seems to be artistically neutral, in a specific context can play a major meaning-creating function. We believe that attuning various elements of a literary work, understood as “sense happening”, often goes beyond the interpretation abilities of a description based on stylistic criteria, and that some of the generalizing theses regarding its nature and ways of existing in the artistic style lose their reliability.⁹

In other words, the authors prefer a functionalistic approach, integrally incorporating descriptions present in the narrative space into constructing a globally sense-creating strategy of a literary work. As they admit, there are some examples of the complete autonomy of descriptive excerpts, constituting an exclusively “redundant textual filler”, which indeed “can be omitted while reading”¹⁰. However, common reading experience shows that most of such excerpts are dispersed in the narrative space in an organic way, and they harmonize with the other components of the fictional world; this harmony results in the intensification (rather than useless repetition of already mentioned contents, manifested in different ways) of the cognitive and esthetic power of the influence of the literary work. In order to prove, document and demonstrate this hypothesis and its analytical-exegetical validity, the two researchers include a range of subtle and brilliant interpretations in their monograph, which show selected works of the Czech literary canon (mostly from the 19th century) in a new light. This selection is obviously not random; it shows the essence of the common belief that it is the realist prose where the classical, model (so to say) formulae of descriptive representations of the world were formed, and that these models still determine (or at least, they should) the research strategies of approaching descriptiveness. This is because all the subsequent modifications (such as the tools of subjectification, dynamization, or dispersion of the view point broadly discussed in the monograph) continue to stem from the need to polemically approach the “original” or “obvious” model, which is additionally suspected of “fossilization” and slave-like deference to normative conventions. Meanwhile, using a modern exegetical instrumentarium, which Fedrová and Jedličková convincingly try to prove, can extract examples of surprisingly innovative descriptive operations (corresponding with the focalization mechanisms or taking into account the subjective character of looking) in historical novels by

⁸ See G. Genette. “Hranice vyprávění”. Translated by Petr Kyloušek. In *Znak, struktura, vyprávění. Výbor z prací francouzského strukturalizmu*. Petr Kyloušek (ed). Brno: Host 2002, pp. 240-256. Original text from 1966.

⁹ S. Fedrová, A. Jedličková. *Viditelné popisy...*, p. 58.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

Alois Jirásek (1851-1930) or the realist prose of Karl Václav Rais (1859-1926). In the former, they find textual evidence of using the so-called pictorial models, i.e. making conditional the representational methods on iconological systems and painting conventions characteristic for specific cultural periods.

The authors decisively assert that the proposals of “updated” reading of texts that have been “read” and “discussed” numerous times, whose interpretation seems to be forever established and – just like themselves – “classicalized”, do not mean any claims of “reinterpreting nor questioning older interpretations”, and that their objectives are motivated mostly by the need to “clarify what the mechanism of «suggestive» influence of a text is”¹¹. In spite of those explicit declarations, it is hard to help but feel that behind those “interpretative etudes” there is, at least implied, a project to “re-edit” the history of literary description, or rather re-work the history of literature so far in such a way as to make the changes of descriptive representation not the dominant factor, but rather one balanced in relation to narration in periodization and classification of narrative paradigms “applicable” in a given period.

In that case, the focus will shift; what used to be considered outdated and anachronistic, functioning at most in the space of literary rubbish or visual tricks (typically due to inert copying literature-studies stereotypes), may turn out to be a signal of literary, perhaps intuitive attempts at an application of innovative descriptive techniques, which are ahead of their time. Such an approach significantly defies the arbitrary correctness of those banal ideas, and justifies the already mentioned, implicitly declared need to “rewrite” the history of (not only) Czech literature.

The final remarks reveal that the considerations regarding (re)defining descriptiveness have just begun, thus *précising, ex post*, the cognitive ambitions of the authors; they propose a “modernized” and synthetic analysis of descriptiveness. For them, they necessarily recapitulate both the Czech and the global state of knowledge, and the competing perspectives on descriptiveness, which all function at the junction of literature studies, linguistics, media studies, history of art, theory of communication, and cognitivism. At this junction (synthesis?) of methodological solutions and ways of defining the basic determinants of prescriptiveness, which belong to numerous fields within humanities, Fedrová and Jedličková seem to find a way of breaking the academic deadlock and finding new paths to explore this topic. These new paths correspond with the requirements which modern literature, free from mimetic delusions yet constantly trying to “reconnect with the world and the reader”, imposes on scholars.

Based on the insightful analyses published in the Czech novels, *Zázemí* by Jana Šrámková (2013) and *Domeček* by Tereza Límanová (2014), Fedrová and Jedličková, through identifying the attempts at recreating the sensual character of experience and the accompanying resignation from oculocentrism, which results in the cognitive support of the remaining senses

¹¹Ibidem, p. 337.

and the sylleptic character of (quasi)autobiographical narration or highlighting the cognitive failure of memorial discourses, conclude that:

Here comes the chance for the physical world and particular objects to regain their former obviousness. Ever since modernism, material objects have been distancing themselves from people further and further. Moreover, as a result of the alienation and epistemic processes of losing faith in the reality of the external world, they cease to be comprehensible. As a result, symbolic meanings start to dominate in prose, which eventually transform themselves into empty symbols. The return to the indirect experience of objects – in which we could find an echo of the realist approach to reality of a kind (we would like to denote this as *postrealism*, as a term following from *post-modernism*) – however, brings about another type of the (non-)obviousness of things.¹²

By referring to the current popularity of “shifts” in humanities (in this case, “a shift towards objects” and a semantic turn) and taking a closer look at various strategies of imposing the illusion of “hard physical concreteness” of the represented world on readers, Fedrová and Jedličková demonstrate what methods and to what extent the transformations in the cognitive domain and the support for the role of sensual/multisensory/sensorimotor experience, which is at the source of the whole complex conglomerate of cognitive processes, which influences the modifications of traditional descriptiveness formulas¹³.

The proposals of Werner Wolf (an active patron of their grant project) are of great help, especially those from the book *Popis jako transmediální modus reprezentace* (2007, 2013 in the Czech Republic):

A description [...] seems to be a phenomenon that goes beyond genres. It is transmedial, since this phenomenon marks its presence in more than one type of medium. The thesis about the transmedial character of description is implied by the fact that it concerns a category that goes beyond verbal media [...]. The fact that this “transmedial character” is some sort of “inter-modality” makes description an interesting subject of research into intermedia phenomena. For it is difficult to deny the claim that pictures are able to describe the world, perhaps even better than literature is. None would disagree with the opinion that movie scenes have a great “descriptive potential”, or that there are musical compositions (especially program music and symphonic poems) that also are able to describe.¹⁴

Fedrová and Jedličková are predominantly interested in literature (in their monograph, they also deal with the problem of descriptiveness in everyday communication, discussing the evocative and identification dimension of describing non-verbal reality from a linguistic perspective¹⁵), typically

¹²Ibidem, p. 313.

¹³Jedličková discusses this question in detail in “Experiencialita: rozděluje, nebo spojuje popis a vyprávění?”. In *O popisu*, pp. 146-162.

¹⁴W. Wolf. *Popis jako transmediální modus reprezentace*. Translated by Olga Richterová. Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2013, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵See J. Hoffmanová. “Nepřítomný popis: kompenzace jeho evokační a identifikační funkce”. In *O popisu*, pp. 9-16; M. Zouhar. “Sémantika určitých deskripcí a identifikací”. In *O popisu*, pp. 17-28.

treated autonomously – as a *stricte* linguistic (arbitrarily semiotic) vehicle of representing the world. They also look into relationships between literature and painting, considering different variants of intersemiotic translation, and tracing ekphrastic techniques – from the earliest, prototypical, antique examples from *Imagines* by Philostratus up until their modern transformations and modernizations filtered through the experience of multimodality and without forgetting about the *ut pictura poesis* topos (together with its demontage by Lessing), *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the idea of the correspondence of art. On the other hand, they do not attach any value to Werner's thesis, worrisome due to its self-confidence and easily objectionable premise, in which he attaches a descriptive value to musical compositions.

A lion's share of the monograph is devoted to summarizing and organizing the most important views and conclusions regarding the concept of descriptiveness. They use both the latest elaborations (compilations, or even name lists of scholars who appear in their book are impossible to cite here due to the limitations of space, nor is it possible to summarize the opinions, hypotheses and observations presented in the book), as well as – a significant advantage of the book – more antique rhetoric traditions. For this reason, the issue of ekphrasis, treated as a sort of prototype for all later forms and types of descriptiveness, takes up so much space in the book. They remind readers that the origins of present-day discussions, the aim of which is to define a set of essential attributes of description (seen as a separate literary genre and/or mimetic tool, or a reality-imaginative tool), should be searched for in the meta-rhetorical reflection of Greek and Roman orators who, due to typically pragmatic motivations (projecting the most effective ways of persuading their audience) scrutinized the tactical effectiveness of description-creating techniques. Thanks to this essentially pragmatic approach, they were able to work out and test a repertoire of descriptive tools, which are still valued and used today in terms of their efficiency and are inspirational for extending the literary studies apparatus which helps to scientifically illuminate the communicative (and receptive) power that linguistic statements have, so that they can evoke almost ocular equivalents of the textual "painting with words". For it is then when the convincingly formulated (and often also solved) dilemmas, which are still problematic to scholars, not only to those who try to return the right to literary existence to descriptiveness, but also to those who have spent years restoring the seemingly secondary, redundant, useless, retardational "descriptive insertions" which interrupt (in the spirit of Barthes's "signs"¹⁶) the consistency of a consecutive order of narrative sequences.

Although *Viditelné popisy* presents an exceptionally rich, impressive, and full (if it is at all possible; the Polish reader will be struck by the almost complete omission of the achievements of our "descriptologists"¹⁷) state of research, considered both in the approving and (more often) polemic mode, the most interesting aspects of the book concern those parts

¹⁶See R. Barthes. "Wstęp do analizy strukturalnej opowiadań". Translated by Wanda Błońska. In *Teorie literatury XX wieku*. Anna Burzyńska and Michał Paweł Markowski (eds). Kraków: Znak, 2006, p. 263.

¹⁷The question of the so-called ocular character of description often returns in the monograph. What is meant by that is the ability to evoke visual imaginative reactions in readers by descriptions. It is especially surprising and difficult to explain scientifically why it is not connected to Ingarden's concept of visual aspects of literary works and the concept of substantiation.

which – although sporadically – resign for a moment from respecting the hermetic rules of strictly academic (post)structuralist discourse and, by exposing the authors' subjectivity, allow insight into the cognitive process behind the interpretative conclusions. Traces of a similar, doubtlessly surprising, "revelation of a technique" can also be seen in, for example, their admittance of problems and difficulties with finding a precise genesis of a descriptive reconstruction of frescos which decorate the walls of the care home where the action of *Harlekýnovy milióny* by Bohumil Hrabal (1981) takes place (as recounted by a fictional protagonist):

And I walked into the corridor and looked up at the ceiling, at a sprawling fresco that showed a young man sitting on the ground, leaning back on one muscular arm with the other wrapped around his knee; he was draped in a thin veil, barefoot, and had his head turned in the direction in which I, too, was slowly walking, his eyes were filled with desire, the whites of his eyes gleamed [...], he had full lips, and never in my life had I seen such a beautiful man, his hair was strewn with flowers and blossoms, they tumbled like ringlets over his forehead, [...] and then I saw a blue gown slipping off the edge of an enormous bed with blue cushions tossed against the headboard and covered with a rumpled golden sheet, in the middle of that bed sat a woman in a long white gown.¹⁸

A comment on those words, which is a part of a broader reflection on Hrabal's ekphrastic passion, apart from a detailed analysis of the ocular techniques used by the author, focuses on the question of the real painting-designatum for this description, and as such relates to the referential character of the novel representation. As a side-note (although a simple "statements of facts" would do), there is a significant declaration:

One of the authors indeed was under a strong impression that this mystery requires an investigation and should be solved. However, it was not that the description reminded her of anything that she had seen before; it was about *the construction of this text*, obviously different from other descriptions of frescos in the novel: an enchanted protagonist is interested in the composition of the scene, spatial relations, figures, colors, and characteristic details.¹⁹

The investigation was unsuccessful, despite consultations with art historians and shifting attention to classical iconographic topoi inspired by myths to which Hrabal, through his protagonist, could refer in a veiled way. Eventually, as the scholar states:

It turned out that there was a specific painting, described in the novel, which was identified thanks to our attempts at finding a potential pictorial model[...]. It is a fresco which dates back to the beginning of our era, traditionally known as *Aldobrandini Wedding*.²⁰

¹⁸B. Hrabal. *Harlequin's Millions: A Novel*. Translated by Stacey Knecht, New York: Archipelago Books, 2014.

¹⁹S. Fedrová. A. Jedličková, *Viditelné popisy...*, p. 289.

²⁰Ibidem, p. 291.



This short “work-style digression” is evidence of firstly, the fact that the academic consideration of description hides various, often unexpected, traps, and somewhat by its very nature forces one to activate interdisciplinary mechanisms, as limiting interests only to the meta-fictional sphere of considerations does not bring satisfactory results. What should be stressed is that those results which are supposed to re-evaluate description, to give it (somewhat lost) justice and to remind readers about its indispensable role in evoking and suggesting the illusion of “tangible concreteness” presented in global literature in the objectives of the authors – which, after all, despite its “bad reputation”, has always been the role of description.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The project *Poetika deskripce. Průzkum reprezentačního materiálu v intermediální perspektivě* was completed in 2017 by Ústavu pro českou literaturu AVČR. The book *Viditelné popisy. Vizualita, sugestivita a intermedialita literární deskripce* by Stanislava Fedrova and Alice Jedličková is the final result, summarizing the project, together with the complementary edited volume *O popisu*. They both constitute a successful attempt at a multi-faceted, diachronic, and synchronic undertaking of the complex issue of literary descriptiveness.

visualization

HISTORY OF DESCRIPTION

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